

The link between maltreatment and juvenile firesetting: Correlates and underlying mechanisms[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: Despite the widely held belief that abuse is a risk factor for childhood firesetting, the role of maltreatment in firesetting is largely unexplored. This study reports on a sample of children and adolescents referred to a brief assessment and intervention program for juvenile firesetters. Firesetting histories of maltreated youth were compared to a group of firesetting youth with no maltreatment history.

Methods: Participants included 205 children and youth aged 4–17 years and their caregivers. Assessments were completed with a standardized protocol. Forty-eight percent of the sample had a history of maltreatment as reported by caregivers; 26% of the sample had experienced more than one type of maltreatment.

Results: When compared to the non-maltreated group, children with histories of maltreatment demonstrated more frequent fire involvement, more versatility regarding ignition sources and targets, and a greater likelihood of an immediate family stressor as a motive for firesetting (all $p < .05$). Maltreated children were more likely to become involved with fire out of anger ($p = .001$), and there was also a trend towards higher rates of recidivism ($p = .07$). Children's externalizing behavior partially mediated the influence of maltreatment on specific fire-related outcomes of children (OR = 1.10; 95% CI = 1.04–1.17; $p = .001$).

Conclusions: Within a juvenile firesetting population, the presence of maltreatment is a risk factor for a more severe course of firesetting. The findings also suggest that the link between maltreatment and firesetting is operating partially through heightened emotional and behavioral difficulties.

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Practice implications: This study demonstrates that maltreatment is a risk factor that contributes to a more severe course of juvenile fire involvement, and that the link between maltreatment and firesetting operates largely through heightened behavioral and emotional difficulties. These findings highlight the need for mental health clinicians to (a) be aware that these two serious clinical issues frequently co-occur, (b) screen for fire-related behaviors and maltreatment during general assessments, and (c) consider maltreatment status when thinking about the risk of firesetting.

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Introduction

Juvenile firesetting is a significant and widespread problem involving responses from the health, justice, and mental health systems. In North America, juvenile fire involvement is responsible for billions of dollars of property loss and hundreds of deaths, and roughly half of all arson arrests since 1994 have been the result of juvenile firesetting (Hall, 2005). There has been increased recognition of this problem over the past decade, largely due to the burgeoning research literature describing the correlates, risk factors, and treatment outcomes of different populations of youth who have been involved with fire (e.g., Cole, Grolnick, & Schwartzman, 1993; Fineman, 1980; Glancy, Spiers, Pitt, & Dvoskin, 2003; Kolko, Day, Bridge, & Kazdin, 2001; Kolko & Kazdin, 1988, 1991a; Martin, Bergen, Richardson, Roeger, & Allison, 2004; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999; Stickle & Blechman, 2002). As part of a multifactorial risk model of fire-specific and general psychosocial factors, children's maltreatment histories have been hypothesized to play an etiological role in fire involvement (e.g., Fineman, 1995; Gaynor, 1991; Sakheim & Osborn, 1986; Saunders & Awad, 1991). Yet, despite this widely held belief that abuse is a risk factor for childhood firesetting, the role of maltreatment in firesetting remains largely unexplored.

While youth referred to clinical programs due to firesetting are a heterogeneous group, previous studies have demonstrated that a disproportionately high number of firesetting youth come from homes characterized by instability, harsh or inconsistent discipline, and/or parental psychopathology (e.g., Bailey, Smith, & Dolan, 2001; Gruber, Heck, & Mintzer, 1981; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986; Puri, Baxter, & Cordess, 1995; Showers & Pickrell, 1987). References to child maltreatment in particular can be traced back to very early studies of firesetting youth, such as Yarnell's (1940) seminal study of psychiatrically referred firesetting youth in which he highlighted parental neglect as a prevalent family background characteristic. Similarly, children and youth with histories of fire involvement have been found to experience significantly more emotional neglect and physical abuse (Showers & Pickrell, 1987), and, more recently, sexual abuse (Moore, Thompson-Pope, & Whited, 1996) than non-firesetting youth. The high rate of maltreatment among firesetting youth is not particularly surprising given that maltreatment is a general risk factor that can predispose children to many difficulties, including problems with attachment, affect and behavioral regulation, academic achievement, and social skill development (e.g., Cicchetti, Toth, & Bush, 1988; Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989; Main & George, 1985). Long-term sequelae of maltreatment include interpersonal, psychiatric, and legal difficulties (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1993; McCord, 1983). For instance, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that maltreatment is associated with higher rates of conduct disorder in youth (Pelcovitz, Kaplan, DeRosa, Mandel, & Salzinger, 2000), earlier mean age at first

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