

Preventing children and young people lighting bushfires in Australia



JANET STANLEY explores the association between child abuse and neglect and the significant problems and costs created by young people who currently light bushfires in Australia.

Last summer, and again already this summer, Australia is experiencing extensive bushfires. On 27 December 2001 it was reported that there were at least 100 separate fires burning in New South Wales (Ellicott and Pryor 2001: 1), many of which were lit by young people. This article explores what is known about children and young people who light fires, with the aim of understanding approaches which are, and could be, taken to prevent this happening. The article refers to young people as those who are 18 years of age and under, and uses the term “fire-lighter” as a universal term for people who illegally light fires.

Newspaper reports of the NSW fires

The costs of bushfire can be measured in terms of loss of life and injury, psychological trauma (immediate and longer term), environmental destruction and degradation, physical loss of buildings and other possessions, personal dislocation, and the consumption of personal and community resources. While media coverage was extensive during the peak of the fire destruction, there does not appear to have been a final tally, or review, of the costs once the emergency and subsequent clean-up was over. Some indications of the extensive costs of the New South Wales bushfires can be gleaned from the newspapers and internet reports at the time, for example:

- On 26 December 2001, 19 vehicles and 40 other structures, including a school, were destroyed (Bushfire Information Update 2002 – the information source, unless otherwise stated). A report on the 5 January 2002 stated that 170 homes had been burned (Brown 2002);
- On 29 December, 7,000 fire-fighters, with a support crew of 3,000 people, were involved, the numbers rising to 20,000 fire-fighters “at the height of the bushfire crisis” (p. 8). New South Wales fire-fighters were joined by fire-fighters from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory;
- On 8 January, 518 tankers, 35 aircraft and two helitankers were employed in fighting the 53 fires alight on that day;
- 4,500 people were evacuated from fire areas on 8 January 2002;
- Emergency accommodation and relief, and emotional support, were provided where needed by the Department of Community Services, St Vincent de Paul, Red Cross, Anglicare, Adracare (Seventh Day Adventists) and the Salvation Army; and,
- On 30 December, the smoke haze over Sydney led to advice that asthma sufferers should “remain indoors and monitor their breathing” (p. 14). The report also stated that smoke set off many false alarms and forced aircraft to divert from Sydney to Melbourne.



Picture: Rick Stevens. Photo obtained from The Age Photo Sales.

from the media that could be found (Chulov 2002: 1 & 4). He was described as a “loner”, as having “good parents”, liking “action games and risk-taking”, as being “smarter than most”, as a person with “pyromania – an immature, attention-seeking drifter” who was “raised on a diet of action movies”. The article said that he had a “longstanding desire to emulate the feats of firemen”, which became “a lust after watching TV images of firefighters hauling people from the wreckage of the World Trade Centre”. He wanted “the same accolades and recognition”. The article stated that his method of starting fires was the same technique used in the war film, “Stalag 17”, but police were unsure if he “had drawn inspiration from the movie”.

The few comments made in the newspapers about what should be done about fire-lighters commonly called for tougher penalties (Findlay 2002). The Premier, Bob Carr, is reported as saying that young offenders needed to be “taught a lesson”, and the New South Wales Government would “force juvenile arsonists to tour fire-ravaged areas and make them face fire victims in hospital burns wards” (Ellicott and Stock 2002: 2). New laws “would make offenders also meet those who lost houses and help regenerate burnt-out bushland” (Brown 2002: 3). However, the complexity of the problem was at least partially recognised by Bone (2002) who recommended that responses needed to be targeted to individual offenders. She concluded that a “return to a harsher, less compassionate, shaming and punitive society would be worse for everybody” (2002: 7).

While few conclusions can be drawn from these press reports, it would appear that these New South Wales bushfires proved to be very expensive; that many were deliberately lit, often by young people; that the response to offenders was largely punitive; and, that there was little consideration about what could be done to prevent fire-lighting behaviour in the future.

The extent of loss to the environment, and personal emotional traumas of the fire-fighters, support staff and victims, did not seem to be reported.

Many of the fires were thought to have been deliberately lit – a figure of 40 of the 100 fires burning on 28 December 2001, was suggested (Chulov 2001). Included in the fire-lighters were young people, although again, a complete picture is not available. The media reported that:

- A Rural Fire Service volunteer, aged 20 years, pleaded guilty to lighting 25 fires from January to December 2001 (Chulov 2002);
- A 13-year-old boy was allegedly caught lighting fires and three “teenagers” were accused of lighting fires (reported on 2 January) (Wainwright 2002: 1);
- Six adults and 14 young people (aged 9 to 16) were arrested for lighting bushfires after 27 December (reported on 3 January 2002) (Ellicott and Stock 2002);
- A 16-year-old girl was charged with lighting a fire (reported on 5 January) (Brown 2002); and,
- The Australian reported that by 8 January 2002, 25 people had been arrested in connection with deliberately lighting fires (Findlay 2002).

While one media article described fire-lighters as “thoughtless and irresponsible juveniles”, almost no information was given about these people (Findlay 2002: 11). An exception was a description of the 20-year-old Rural Fire Service volunteer, reproduced in part here. Although he is above the age limit under consideration, the description offered the only insight

An exploration of the research literature

The research literature was explored in the hope that this would reveal more information about the reasons why young people light fires, with a view to understanding the processes needed to prevent this behaviour.

The state of the literature

Before an overview of the literature is given, the state of this literature needs to be understood. Many terms are used to describe the actions of young people who light fires, such as: fire-setting, match-play, fire-play, arson and pyromania. Often these labels carry assumptions about the intent, and mental state, of the young person, and sometimes even their age. Although some authors define how they are using these terms, there is rarely consistency in use. While some authors describe the mental condition and behaviour of some children who light fires in terms which are never used in an adult context (such as Attention Deficit Disorder), other authors offer no differentiation between the child, young person, and adult fire-lighter. There is no clear answer in the literature as to whether fire-lighting is seen as a distinct disorder, or as a symptom of another disorder, or even part of a package of delinquent behaviour.

In part, the context in which a person seeks to understand fire-lighting behaviour will strongly influence the conclusions they draw. The history of seeking to understand fire-lighting in young people pre-dates present-day understanding of child development and child maltreatment. Thus, there is a need to sort out ideology from empirical data, as well as historical

positioning of information. Often, those studied are young people who are in residential care due to severe, and often multiple forms of behavioural problems, one of which may be fire-lighting. Unfortunately there is a tendency to generalise about all young fire-lighters from these often small, unrepresentative samples.

Size of the problem

It is not known how many young people light fires, as United States researchers say that not only are the majority of small, deliberately lit fires usually undetected (Epps and Hollin 2000) but the offender is not known in 80 per cent to 85 per cent of "suspicious" fires (Stadolnik 2000: 13). However, it is believed that in the United States, 60 per cent to 75 per cent of fire-lighters are young people (Dittmar 1991).

Characteristics of young people who light fires

The literature consistently reports that it is mostly males who light fires, in the order of nine males to one female (Sakheim and Osborn 1999). While children may be as young as three when they light fires (Slavkin 2001), there is controversy about the intent of these very young fire-lighters. Some research suggests that it may be relatively normal for boys to play with fire out of curiosity (Federal Emergency Management Agency and United States Fire Administration 1994, Kafry 1980, reported by Epps and Hollin 2000). On the other hand, it is also reported that older children who light fires started doing this at quite a young age. An Australian study of 134 young people who light fires found that the average age for first playing with fire was 5.3 years, the age range being one to 14

years (Adler et al. 1994). This study also showed that young people who light fires often light multiple fires, those studied lighting an average of 7.1 fires in the 12 months prior to referral to an intervention service (Adler et al. 1994).

As noted previously, much of the research on young people who light fires use a sample of those who have come to the notice of authorities because of either the severity of their fire-lighting behaviour or because of other behavioural problems. Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, a review of these studies found that young people who light fires commonly had a range of problems, including mental illness, suicidal intentions, other criminal histories, a history of sexual disturbance, as well as a history of upbringing problems (Lowenstein 2001). Young fire-lighters in an in-patient psychiatric setting were found to have greater problems than non-fire-lighting in-patients, with a greater likelihood of having a major mental disorder, as well as alienation, thought disorder and poor reality testing (Sakheim and Osborn 1999 reporting Moore et al. 1996). It has also been shown that some young people who light fires may also suffer from a Personality Disorder (Raesaenen et al. 1995), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Raines and Foy 1994), a Conduct Disorder (Sakheim and Osborn 1999), and they may engage in animal cruelty (Slavkin 2001) and frequently commit other crimes (Raesaenen et al. 1995).

Why young people light fires

Given the lack of clear understanding in the literature of the characteristics of young children who light fires, it is not hard to understand why the literature is not clear why particular young people light fires. A range of broad



By Sasha Kiessling

In 1993 the Australian Association of Young People In Care (AAYPIC) was established as the first-ever voice of children and young people in care. AAYPIC became CREATE Foundation in July 1999, and since that time has gone from strength to strength establishing offices in every capital city, delivering innovative services and programs to children and young people in rural and regional Australia and effecting changes in the care system as a whole.

CREATE Foundation exists to provide opportunities for the 20,000 children and young people in foster and out of home care in Australia. CREATE is an organisation with and for children and young people, and is their voice in the child welfare sector. CREATE works with all stakeholders in the child and family welfare system – Federal and all State governments, service providers, foster carers, community organisations, indigenous groups, church agencies and others to achieve *participation of young people* – in their lives and in their communities.

CREATE works to build community– to fulfil its purpose:

- to ensure all young people in care are respected, listened to and as early as possible in their lives actively participating in all decisions which affect their lives
- to provide all young people in care with opportunities to expand and enhance their life outcomes
- to empower all young people in care through a range of original programs and services to be their best and grow and develop to fulfil their individual talents and potential
- to effect on-going comprehensive changes to State care systems of Australia for the benefit of all young people in care into the future.

Earlier this year, CREATE delivered **mission:be** – a powerful personal development and leadership program in Victoria's Gippsland Region. A program with a difference, **mission:be** was last year awarded an Australian Drug Foundation award for Excellence in Community Initiatives. **mission:be** is a 3 month journey for 14 -18 year olds in care that allows participants to discover their true potential, gain new skills in areas they are passionate about, build motivation and self esteem, and develop lasting relationships within their lives and their local communities. **mission:be** achieves this through focusing on leadership, self advocacy, goal setting, presentation skills and building a sense of self through taking community action. All achieved while having an extreme dose of fun and adventure!

"mission:be is about creating a fun and friendly environment in which young people in care can really shine, a space that reflects their strengths, a place that inspires, supports and encourages them to achieve amazing things."

Sasha
mission:be facilitator
CREATE Victoria

motivations are suggested. These include the need to express intense personal feelings, particularly anger and hatred (Epps and Hollin 2000, referring to Regehr and Glancy 1991). There also may be a need to attract adult attention to feelings of loneliness, distress and unhappiness, a general cry for help, and/or a need to be seen as important or a hero by discovering the fire, or assisting in putting the fire out (Epps and Hollin 2000, Sakheim and Osborn 1999).



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Child maltreatment and fire-lighting

The problems described above would appear to be very similar to problems experienced by many young people who come from a severely child abusive background. These are summarised as, “developmental delay, low self-esteem, learning problems, behavioural problems and psychiatric symptoms” (Jones et al. 1987, reported by Goddard, 1996: 62). These similarities have been noted in the fire-lighting literature. Epps and Hollin (2000: 45) say that children who suffer from abuse and neglect, and those who light fires, may come from a similar background of “high levels of parental absence, family breakdown and disorganisation, parental psychopathology, erratic styles of parental monitoring and discipline, and low levels of parental involvement with their children”.

Early studies found a higher incidence of physical abuse in children who light fires than in children who don’t light fires (Jayaprakash, Jung and Panitch 1984; Gruber, Heck and Mintzer 1981). A later study found young people who light

fires to have been both physically abused and emotionally neglected (Raines and Foy 1994). A few studies make a link with child sexual abuse and fire-lighting, particularly in relation

to female fire-lighters. A small study of children in residential care found that 14 per cent of males, and 50 per cent of females, who light fires, showed “undisputed evidence of sexual abuse” (Epps, Swaffer and Hollin 1996: 46). Examination of adult female fire-lighters found that 44 per cent had a history of sexual abuse (Puri et al. 1995).

Looking at this issue from the perspective of child abuse and neglect researchers, there is very little said about fire-lighting as an outcome of child maltreatment. This is not surprising because, again, the literature is small, beset with definitional confusions and ideological complications, and findings are often based on small, unrepresented samples. However, the connection between fire-lighting and child sexual abuse is directly made in writing based on clinical work on child sexual abuse in the 1980s (Giarretto 1989), and another author describes lighting fires as one of nine indicators of male child sexual abuse (Sebold 1987).

The child abuse literature reveals that there may be associated characteristics between the outcomes of child maltreatment and

mission:be is a 7-module strengths-based program that has been delivered in rural and urban communities right across Australia over the past 3 years. The program includes a series of weekend camps, one day workshops and a period where participants work with the support of mentors to achieve a personal goal or project. A celebration and evaluation signify the end of **mission:be** but not their journey!

“Not everyday normal stuff – they were different experiences to keep you cool”

Natalie
mission:be participant
Gippsland, Victoria

A strong sense of community ownership is important to the success of **mission:be** and contributes to the long term sustainability of the program’s outcomes – to empower young people in care to make decisions and create opportunities in their own lives.

“Stronger networks and relationships with community and agencies, and most importantly the young people – the feedback from young people was most valuable”.

Cindy
mission:be Community Action Team
Gippsland, Victoria

This is achieved through CREATE facilitating community stakeholders to resource, promote, develop and deliver the program. The training and participation of local volunteers and youth workers in delivering **mission:be** also serves to strengthen relationships and promote positive representation of young people in care within the local community.

“She has changed so much in the past month, a lot more positive, confident, open to hugs and showing affection, and more aware of others”

Jenna
Youth Worker
Gippsland, Victoria

CREATE works with and for children and young people in care in all states and territories, building pathways for the future through offering opportunities both within CREATE and the wider community. CREATE’s Young Consultants program is an opportunity for young people in or ex care to share their experiences and help improve the care system from the inside out. All services and programs delivered by CREATE (including **mission:be**) are developed and delivered by Young Consultants with the support of CREATE staff.

mission:be and the range of services and programs offered by CREATE Foundation successfully connect, empower and create change in the lives of children and young people in care – arguably the most vulnerable and disempowered young people in our society. CREATE works with optimism, vision, creativity and fun alongside all stakeholders to ensure that children and young people in state care are afforded the same life opportunities as all young Australians.



CREATE is a highly participatory, strengths-based learning organisation. For more information call your local CREATE Centre on 1800 655 105 or check us out in cyberspace www.create.org.au !!

the needs/actions of children who light fires (see above). For example, like children who light fires, children who have been severely abused suffer from altered cognitive processing (Perry 2002). Links can be seen between the desire to be a hero found in some young people who light fires, and the low self-esteem found in many children who have been sexually abused (Conte and Schuerman 1988). As with children who light fires, children who have been severely abused are described as lonely and distressed (Dominguez, Nelke and Perry 2002).

Similar findings come from the juvenile delinquency literature. A ten year study of the developmental outcomes of 182 children in the United States reported that child maltreatment was a significant predictor of delinquency, accidents, injuries and



There may be associated characteristics between the outcomes of child maltreatment and the needs/actions of children who light fires.

illness, arrests for violent crime, and physical aggression to a partner (Bank and Burraston 2001). Without providing clear definitions, a link is made between “neglect”, “child maltreatment”, and “delinquency” where fire-lighting is “part of the spectrum of anti-social behaviour” (Epps and Hollin 2000: 45).

Conclusions about the characteristics of young people who light fires

It would seem that while few conclusions can be drawn from the literature on the characteristics of young people who light fires, there would appear to be considerable overlap between those who have been severely abused, those who have a severe mental health problem, those who engage in delinquent behaviour, and some young people who light fires. Certainly, almost no research is available on the young people who light fires who do not come to the attention of mental health or juvenile justice authorities. The size of this population and the extent of their fire-lighting, is unclear.

Prevention and intervention responses

An adequate response to fire-lighting by young people requires a full range of services. This includes primary prevention programs which encompass the whole community, secondary prevention programs aimed at young people known to be a fire risk, and tertiary prevention programs aimed at preventing re-offences. Gaining an understanding of current prevention services is difficult, as it would seem that information on this is often held within the fire-fighting and emergency personnel professional interest groups.

In the United States it is reported that primary prevention programs involve schools, law enforcement agencies and fire-fighters providing fire safety and education to young people (Epps and Hollin 2000; Federal Emergency Management Agency/ United States Fire Administration 1994). These comprise both media campaigns to increase knowledge and hopefully improve parental referrals to services, and teaching packages included in the school curriculum, usually around fire safety awareness messages.

In Australia, considerable importance is given to primary prevention programs that relate to removal of potential fuel sources from around rural properties, as well as the householder having a plan in place for a response, should a fire occur (Webster 2001). Some education on fire-awareness takes place

in schools but this seems not widely funded, nor comprehensive. The rationale for these programs seems to be that they will prevent fires being lit out of curiosity or by accident, and perhaps make disturbed offenders more aware of the consequences of their actions and therefore less likely to light a fire.

No specific secondary prevention programs could be identified in the literature, that is those targeting the young people who may have the predilection for lighting fires. The few services which could be identified appear to be directed towards young people who have started fire-lighting, and they combine both tertiary prevention and intervention services. Literature from the United States recommends that the “minor” fire-lighters need child and parent counselling, fire-safety education and social skills training (Sakheim and Osborn 1999: 432). On the other hand, “severe” fire-lighters need a comprehensive intervention program in an in-patient setting encompassing long term psychotherapy and behaviour modification, augmented by case work with parents (Sakheim and Osborn 1999: 432).

It proved difficult to find Australian literature comprehensively reporting on tertiary prevention/intervention for young fire-lighters. An exception was the previously reported study on young people, aged five to 16 years, in the Melbourne metropolitan area, who had engaged in “at least three incidents of fireplay within the previous 12 months or at least one episode of firesetting which either caused or threatened to cause significant injury or property damage” (Adler et al. 1994: 1196). The young people were divided into three groups receiving: education about fire danger only; home directed treatment in the form of behaviour modification; and, professional intervention. While fire-lighting was reduced in all three groups, the 28 per cent of young people who were lost to the study represented those with the greatest problems and those who had set the most number of fires prior to intervention (Adler et al. 1994).

In South Australia, the Fire Brigade is reported as participating in a scheme where young offenders are presented with factual material about the consequences of their offence (Putnins 1995). While this particular scheme needs to be reviewed, the US literature recommends against use of “scare tactics” and having the offender visit burn victims in hospital. This is viewed as being neither fair to the burn victim nor an effective educational tool for the fire-lighter (Federal Emergency Management Agency/ United States Fire Administration 1994: 26).

Preventing child abuse and neglect is likely to assist in preventing bushfires

This article explores what is known and being done in relation to preventing young people from lighting bushfires in Australia, a problem clearly identified last summer, in New South Wales. Unfortunately, it would appear that the literature on fire-lighting is “confusing and contradictory at best” (Raines and Foy 1994: 595). Fire-lighting is poorly understood, the field being “hampered by a lack of empirical research and an excess of arm-chair theorising and speculation” (Epps and Hollin 2000: 54) resulting in many knowledge gaps. Current knowledge is predominantly from researchers in United States, with a little from the United Kingdom. The literature almost exclusively relates to the problem of fire-lighting in an urban environment

– no literature being found specifically on fire-lighting in an Australian bush setting. Thus the research literature has proved to be little more enlightening than the written media.

From the literature it is not clear who are the young people who light many of the bushfires, how many engage in this behaviour, and why they do it. Neither the personal history of fire-lighting, nor why the behaviour would appear to diminish into adulthood, is understood. It would be interesting to consider whether, when the country is very dry and there is a high risk of bushfire, more young people take the opportunity to light fires or whether the numbers of fire-lighters remain constant, but more fires become problem fires due to the adverse conditions. It may also be that, as with the problem of suicide, publicity generates copycat events, or media reporting of high risk conditions invites opportunities for fire-lighting for some young people.

While a fire crisis may lead to a knee-jerk type response to “punish” young people who light fires, what is needed is clear guidance by research if effective prevention programs are to be put in place. Research needs to be funded in Australia, as well as the establishment of bridging conversations between fire authorities and child protection services. Knowledge should be followed by the translation of these findings into policy, and comprehensive and effective programs.

However, while the research evidence is sought, there would appear to be sufficient indicators to suggest that children who have been severely abused and neglected are likely to engage in disturbed behaviour, one manifestation of which may be lighting fires. Thus, it is likely that another consequence of a failure to provide sufficient services to prevent child abuse and neglect is the high cost to the community of bushfires. “There has never been a time in the history of humankind that we have asked a single adult to provide the ongoing and continuous needs of multiple children with so little support” (Perry 2002). Australian society needs to move to a position where all children are cared-for, valued and loved, and those parents who are having difficulties in raising children are offered assistance through a range of high quality service options aiming at preventing child abuse and neglect. The cost to the community of such pre-emptive responses is likely to be significantly less than the cost of putting out bushfires.

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