

## Understanding Children and Fire

# Why Are Children Attracted to Fire?

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Children and adults alike are fascinated by fire's color, warmth and responsiveness. The glow of the fire provides a soft light. The fire dances in a gentle breeze. And fire is an enjoyable part of our family life, whether roasting marshmallows by the campfire, grilling on the perfect summer day, or sitting by a warm fireplace on a cold winter night.



Children, from their very first birthday, witness the small flames from candles on their birthday cakes, right on the table in front of them. They get to make a wish, take a deep breath and blow out the candles—which they do with great ease and much pride.

Children come to see small flames as benign, unlikely to hurt them. Small flames are fragile and easy to extinguish. Lighters and matches often go out in a mild breeze, and in one breath, a candle is once again dark.

It's no wonder children see fire as unthreatening: They may think, *"why would my family let me hold the candles, put them on my cake, let me get so close, if they could really truly hurt me?"* or *"When I blow out my birthday candles, the flame goes out so easily, sometimes many at one time!"* In most children's experience, in the absence of a terrible event, they see these small flames as nonthreatening and controllable.

### **What do young children understand about fire?**

Preschool children (and some children as old as seven) have a very limited understanding of complex chains of cause and effect. They might understand simple things: If I push this over it will fall. But they are at an early stage of cognitive development and do not have the intellectual capability to understand how the small flame might become a big fire. Even if we carefully explain it to them, they can't grasp a complex sequence of events like a candle falling on a napkin, igniting a table cloth that is close to the drapes, causing fire to spread to the ceiling.

### **What can elementary school age children understand about fire?**

Elementary school children (from about 7 to 11 years old) have attained a higher degree of cognitive development and have a much better understanding of these basic principles. Many do understand and can follow even complex sequences of instructions with great skill.

But the level of development elementary school children have attained does not equip them for abstract thinking. They have trouble imagining what they have not yet experienced, or the range of things that might go wrong. Because they can't imagine it, they are unprepared when something does go unexpectedly wrong.

Most parents have an intuitive understanding of these limitations in elementary school children. Parents of even the most intelligent, competent and responsible elementary school children won't leave them home alone for an extended time. Why not? Because, they say, "What if something bad happened?" They know their children can't handle the unexpected. So, they have a babysitter – usually someone older than 11, and most often 13 or older – just to be certain. In fact, the American Red Cross offers its babysitting training classes for young people 11 and older.

Telling elementary children what to do if something unexpected happens is tempting because they do understand so much. They often have a very clear understanding of the world they live in and manage it quite well – often better than their parents, especially when it comes to technology and social media! But in spite of their understanding of the world they live in and what they have been exposed to, they cannot truly develop a picture of what they haven't experienced.

### **So we suggest you do not:**

- Leave elementary school age children unsupervised for extended periods of time.
- Assign elementary school age children responsibility for activities involving fire or flame.

### **Why do so many children play with fire?**

Children see the small lighter, match, or candle flame as benign, easily extinguishable, and a fun and important part of family activities. They have watched their family ignite matches, lighters and candles over and over, so they have a sense of how these tools work. And they are driven to demonstrate their own skill, to test their own competence. It makes sense that, given the opportunity, children will try to light them on their own.

In three large surveys\* of a total of more than 7,500 children, done over a decade in both the US and Canada, more than 50% of all children reported that they played with matches or lighters by the time they are out of elementary school. The most common ages of children who start home fires reported to fire departments are ages 4 and 5 years old, accounting for 30% of home fires started by children. 82% are started by children 10 and under.

### **So, how do we teach children not to play with fire?**

#### **• Remove the temptation.**

Put lighters and matches safely out of sight and reach. Most young children do not actively search for ignition materials like lighters and matches. They do not climb up on the kitchen counter to get the matches from the top shelf. Most often when children are found with matches or lighters, these tools have been left out on the kitchen counter, a coffee table or a night stand. Just putting them out of sight and out of reach greatly reduces the risk children will find and play with them. Putting matches and lighters out of sight and out of reach is easy to say but not always easy to do. Most families have several lighters, multiple packs of matches, or both. The first step in safe storage is to collect all matches and lighters, put them in one place, and then work hard to always put them back after each use. For maximum safety, use only lighters with a child-resistant mechanism. While not child-proof, they greatly reduce the chance that a young child will be able to ignite them. Read more on safe storage of lighters and matches.

#### **• Make children part of family fire safety.**

Talk to your children, including preschool children, and tell them that everyone in the family has an important job to do.

- As a parent, your job is to use matches, lighters and candles safely and to put them away when you are finished. Matches and lighters are useful tools, but tools for grown-ups only. It's also part of the parents' job never to leave a candle burning when they leave the room or go to sleep.
- The children's important job is to make sure parents do their jobs. If children find a match or a lighter, or a burning candle left alone, teach them to come and tell a grown-up. This helps the children understand they can make an important contribution, which supports their drive to take on a big responsibility of their own. If children are rewarded for reminding

you to put lighters away or extinguish a burning candle, they will do that rather than feel tempted to play with matches, lighters or candles. Given an opportunity to demonstrate their competence and being praised is far more rewarding than being able to light a lighter.

Several activities are offered online to help you communicate this message and teach this technique to your children or grandchildren:

- *Mikey Makes a Mess*: <http://prevention1st.org/programs/mikey-makes-a-mess/>, a children's storybook, is available online in English and Spanish. You can read it to them or have them read it to you.
- *play safe! be safe!*<sup>®</sup> has two activities that teach children that matches, lighters and other household appliances are adult tools, very different from children's toys, and that the parents and children both have important jobs to do to make sure matches and lighters are put away. Both activities can be found under safe for play! keep away!

### **Be aware of how you use fire around your children.**

While it is critically important to tell your children that matches and lighters are adult tools only, just telling them is not enough. You must model safe behavior. Leaving a stove, campfire, grill or candles unattended not only creates an immediate hazard, but suggests that fire and these fire tools do not need to be treated with great care. So please, treat everything associated with fire, matches, lighters, candles, cooking and campfires, with care and respect. Use them as they were intended to be used and safely store tools when you are finished.

### **Supervise children at home as well as outside.**

It's not possible for you to be in the same room with your children, or even to watch what they are doing, every waking minute of every day. What most of us do at home is check in periodically, and in-between those check-ins, we listen. We listen to the tapping, humming, strumming and chatter that usually accompanies children's play. And when it gets quiet, we know something has changed. We wonder if they are "up to something" and we check on them again. This is an effective and appropriate way to make sure your children are not playing with lighters or matches that may have been left out, especially if you only use lighters with child-resistant mechanisms. The child-resistant mechanism can slow down children's experimentation long enough for an adult to intervene.

Unfortunately, this effective "listening link" can be forgotten. We can become too involved in talking on the phone, doing the laundry, cooking or other activities to notice that children have become very quiet or that too much time has passed since the last check-in. Sadly, many home fires that are started by children are started when an adult is home. Appropriate adult supervision is more than just being home with children, it's being aware of what they are doing at all times.