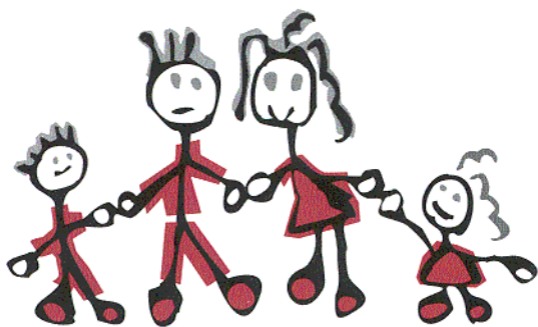


# Fire...

It's no game  
for Children  
to play



Protect, teach and train  
your children!

**A fire safety guide for parents /  
caregivers.**

# Fire – it's no game for children to play

Fires started by children playing with fire are a leading cause of fire deaths and injuries in Alberta. Many families are left homeless, and millions of dollars in property go up in flames. Alberta fire statistics show that about 20% of child fire victims died in fires they started themselves. And matches and lighters were used in 80% of the destructive fires started by children. Many of these fires could have been prevented.

By understanding what circumstances lead children to start fires and by following a few basic fire safety practices, you can reduce the chances of children starting destructive fires.

This pamphlet contains the following valuable fire safety information for you to use with children:

- children and fire
- fire safety precautions with younger children
- fire safety education and training of older children
- correction of fireplay behaviours in children.

## Children and Fire

Children are fascinated by fire: the warm glow of a fireplace, flames flickering in a camp fire, blowing out birthday candles, watching the repetitive habit of an adult lighting up a cigarette.

Children as young as two years may show an interest in fire.

With this natural fascination and curiosity comes the task for parents/caregivers to take fire safety precautions with younger children and to educate and train older children in fire safety.



## Younger Children (five years and under)

- Keep matches and lighters out of sight and out of children's reach.
- Teach children that if they find matches or lighters to take them to an adult. Reward or praise them when they do.
- If a child is seen with matches or a lighter, use an emphatic "NO" followed by a simple explanation such as "No, matches/lighters are hot; they can burn/hurt you."
- Supervise children at all times when they are in a room where there is a fireplace, lit candle, space heater or other open flame or hot surface. Forbid children to play in furnace/water heater area.
- Never use a cigarette lighter as a "toy" to pacify a child who is crying or causing a disturbance.

When teaching young children, use simple words they can understand, and remember that they are often unable to separate two or more ideas presented at the same time.



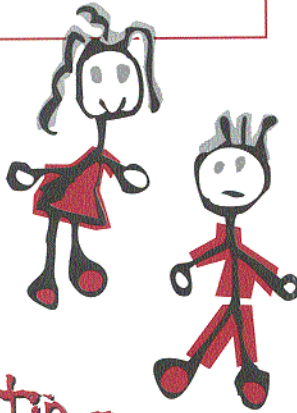
## Older Children (six years and older)

Fire safety should be one of the essential survival skills taught to children, along with swimming and road safety. Your local fire department can provide you with pamphlets and other educational materials on fire safety to use in the home.

- Teach older children both the usefulness and the destructive force of fire, as well as fire safe behaviours. Older children can understand that fire is dangerous. However, most of these children do not realize that clothes can burn or that the carpet, bedding or furniture can catch fire and set the whole house on fire.
- Teach children how to prevent fire in the home: recognize the sound of smoke alarms; respond in case of a fire emergency; STOP, DROP and ROLL if their clothes catch on fire; cool a burn; and crawl low under smoke.

- Set a good example. Children often imitate adults, so make sure that you are following fire safety rules when you use a match, light a fireplace, use candles, cook, smoke, etc.
- If there are smokers in the house, or if visitors or babysitters smoke, ensure that matches and lighters are kept out of reach.
- Encourage the school to provide fire safety and prevention instruction in the school curriculum.
- Teach and train the message that “a match is a tool, not a toy.” The statement “don’t play with matches” gives no positive information and does not explain the safe use of matches or fire.
- Encourage older children to participate in normal fire activities (e.g. lighting birthday candles, fireplaces, etc.) in a manner suitable for their age.

Remember — teaching fire safe behaviours and helping children overcome fear and curiosity about fire is a gradual process that occurs under proper adult supervision and guidance.



## Fireplay & Firesetting

Unless guided by parents or a caregiver towards fire safe behaviours, what begins as a natural curiosity about fire may lead a child to fire-risk behaviours. There are two types of fire-risk behaviours in children: “fireplay” and “firesetting.”

## What is Fireplay?

Fireplay happens when a child, curious and unsupervised, plays with matches, lighters, an open flame or a hot stove. This playing accidentally starts a fire that may result in death, injury and/or property damage.



The most common circumstances that lead children to play with fire include:

- matches, lighters or open flames within easy reach
- lack of parental or adult supervision
- natural curiosity about fire and a desire to experiment
- boredom and searching for something to play with
- previous fireplay activity (the fire was easily extinguished and not discovered by an adult).

Fireplay is usually done alone when parents are elsewhere in the home and the child is left unsupervised. A common scenario is a weekend morning when parents wake up late but the child is up early and looking for something to play with.

The fear of being “caught” playing with fire causes many children to choose places where they think they will not be noticed. These areas include: bedrooms, basements, storage rooms, closets or outside areas such as sheds, trees, grass or trash.

## Correcting Fireplay Behaviour

- Remove or correct the circumstances (as listed above) which led the child to fireplay.
- Talk to the child in a non-threatening way. Allow them to express personal feelings. Explain that matches and lighters are not toys and emphasize the risks involved in fireplay.
- If six years or older, have the child promise to use matches or fire ONLY under supervision of adults. Also have the child tell you why they are

not going to play with matches/fire again. This serves to reinforce the child's understanding.

- Rather than forcing strict rules about fire-related activity, encourage the child (six years and older) to engage in normal fire uses such as lighting birthday candles, the fireplace or a campfire under adult supervision.
- Encourage the child to get involved in fire safety contests.
- Teach fire safe practices to follow at home.
- Take advantage of programs and materials available through the local fire department.
- Check if the child continues to play with fire. (Look for great curiosity and experimentation with fire, matches in pockets, burns or smoky odour to clothing).

Most children who get involved in fireplay can be successfully taught by parents or caregivers to channel their fire interest to competent fire safe behaviours and avoid this extremely dangerous behaviour.



## Tips for Parents/Caregivers

Follow these fire safety tips if your child has “played” with fire:

- Remove all matches and lighters from the home.
- Smokers should keep any lighters on their person at all times and use only child-resistant lighters. Keep ashtrays cleaned out.
- Ensure there are working smoke alarms in the home and that fire escape routes are planned and practised.
- Increase supervision for children with a tendency for fireplay. Do not let them play alone or play unsupervised in other children's homes.
- Set firm rules that children are not to touch matches, lighters, and other heat sources or open flames that could potentially set a fire. Discuss the rules and consequences with your child to check for understanding.



- Instruct children to tell you immediately if they find matches or lighters or someone playing with fire.
- Inform children that you will randomly search their pockets, backpacks and room (between the mattress and box spring and in the closet) to search for hidden matches and lighters.
- Teach children basic fire safety behaviours such as: STOP, DROP, and ROLL; crawl low in smoke and how to call 911.
- Provide fire education, what fire is, how fast it spreads, appropriate and inappropriate uses. This instruction should be non-judgemental. Never threaten to punish a child with fire as a way to demonstrate the dangers of fire. Your local fire department can help you provide basic fire education to your family.
- Acknowledge and reward the child who has abstained from fireplay or firesetting activity for a predetermined period of time. A monthly contract works well.

## When to Seek Help

If your child has “played” with fire on more than one occasion or has deliberately started a fire, or if you are unsure about educating your child about fire safety, you should seek help through your local fire department.

Fire department personnel can help the curious child to understand that playing with fire is very dangerous. Deliberate firesetting is a serious matter. Children who have deliberately started a fire may be indirectly indicating that they are having problems. The fire department can help you with a referral to someone specially trained to provide assessment and help with this behaviour. You could also contact your local mental health services and confidentially discuss and try to solve the problem.





For further information contact:

Alberta Municipal Affairs  
Fire Commissioner's Office  
Room 601, 10808 99 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 0G5

Telephone (780) 427-8392

Call toll-free by dialing 310-0000  
to contact a RITE operator.  
Your local fire department can also  
provide information.

Visit the Alberta Municipal Affairs  
website at:

<http://www.gov.ab.ca/ma>



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