Firesetting Behaviour in Children and Adolescents

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Introduction

Lens and Context

Language Matters

Fire bugs

Firesetters

Fire starters

Arsonists

Murderers

Children

Please mind your language.

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The Pendulum Swing

- Boys will be boys

- Just ignore it, he'll grow out of it

- It's what's always happened around here

- We don't know what to do, so we don't do anything

- Contain and manage

- Life imprisonment

'Ambivalence' by Anu John

Causes and Characteristics

No single profile of a child who sets fires

Boys feature 2-3 times more than girls in referrals

(Chen et al., 2003; Dadds & Fraser, 2006; Del Bove et al. 2008; Martin et al., 2004)

A range of motives for the behaviour, with curiosity the most common factor mentioned by children

(Kolko & Vernberg 2017)

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Common Characteristics

- **An interest in fire and involvement in past firesetting behaviour**

- Often have multiple, complex problems

- History of complex trauma and adverse life experiences

- Impulsivity

- Aggression

It's a Family Affair

A number of parental and family functioning variables are associated with juvenile firesetting including:

- Harsh discipline

- Lack of supervision

- Poor understanding of fire safety

- Multiple stressors

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Risk Factors for Firesetting Behaviour

Three broad domains identified in the literature:

1. Fire exposure, access and interest

2. Child's individual functioning, especially with regard to cognitive and behavioural limitations, and history of trauma and adverse life experiences

3. Family functioning, with emphasis upon supervision, discipline and significant stressful life events
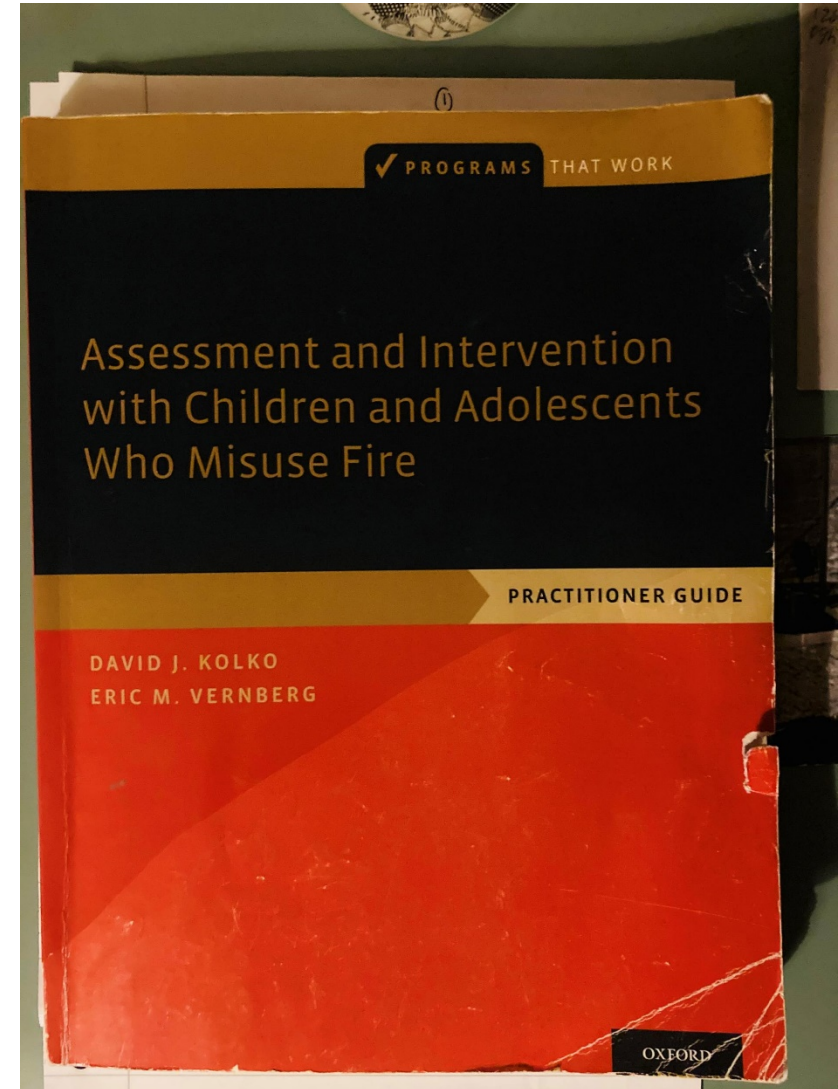
(Kolko and Kazdin 1986; Kolko and Kazdin 1989; Stadolnik 2000; Perks et al. 2019)

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Contributory Factors for Firesetting Behaviour

- Interest in or attraction to fire

- Exposure to inappropriate materials

- Poor supervision and monitoring of child/ adolescent

- Harsh parenting practices

- Coercive family interactions

- Heightened stressful life events
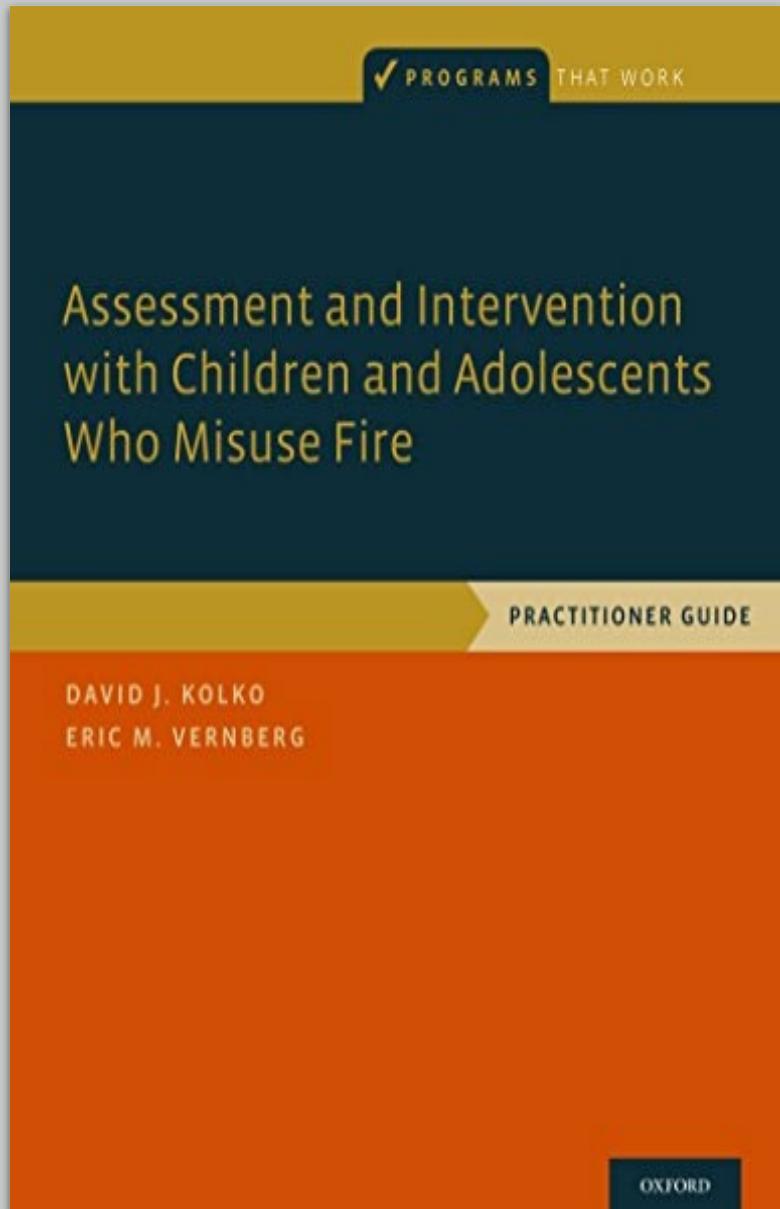
(Kolko and Vernberg 2017)

Typologies

Curiosity

Cry for help / Expressive

Delinquent

Pathological / Severely disturbed

Hierarchy of Interventions and Strategies

1. Consideration of environmental exposure to fire

2. Providing fire safety education and skills

3. Addressing child's behavioural needs

4. Addressing parenting and family problems

5. Involvement of youth justice

6. Removal of child from home to prevent harm

(Kolko and Vernberg 2017)

UK Study

An Exploratory Study of How Practitioners in UK Fire and Rescue Services Working with Children and Young People who Set Fires Identify Clients Requiring Psychosocial Interventions

(Foster 2020)

Three Main Themes

The study identified three main themes:

1. Inconsistency in service provision

2. Lack of staff self-legitimacy

3. Invisibility of emotional labour

Also:

- Little evidence of defensible decision-making
- Absence of adherence to the principles of risk, need and responsivity (RNR)
- Absence of recommendations made in 2005 ODPM evaluation, including lack of formal referral pathways between agencies

An International Public Health Issue

"Despite its serious impact on health and wellbeing, deliberate firesetting is typically considered a criminal justice issue…given the striking effect that it has on human health and wellbeing, we argue that deliberate firesetting is also a key cause of concern for public health services."

(Tyler et al. 2019)

BBC NEWS

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Q&A

Be curious

Thank You

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'Talking About Firesetting' group on LinkedIn

This international group of practitioners represents the fields of criminology, psychology, child and adult safeguarding, mental health, education, youth justice, probation, restorative practice, youth work, and the emergency services.

It aims to provide a safe, open and nurturing space for the sharing of ideas and reflections on how best to support children, teenagers and families affected by firesetting behaviour.

https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8937075/

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