Understanding FASD and its Role in Firesetting Behaviors: An Introduction to a Complex Topic

By Jerrod Brown, Kathi Osmonson, Julie Martindale, and Don Porth

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) as it relates to firesetting has been neither researched adequately by scholars nor discussed frequently enough by public safety professionals. The purpose of this article is to initiate a conversation that needs to take place regarding the intersection of FASD and firesetting behaviors.

FASD is a lifelong condition that can cause significant deficits in adaptive and executive functioning, cognition, behavior, intellect, reasoning and other abilities. The disorder is believed to affect between 2% and 5% of the U.S. population. Significantly higher rates of FASD have been observed in criminal justice and forensic mental health populations. This prevalence rate, along with the common deficits that are identified among individuals with FASD, means that it is likely that fire professionals will encounter individuals with FASD.

While the topic of FASD and firesetting has not been well-researched, it has been shown that the symptoms associated with FASD have been observed among some youth who set fires. Fire service professionals can increase their awareness of FASD by becoming familiar with the characteristics. This awareness on the part of professionals may lead to a child or an adult being referred to services that stop the firesetting behavior before it results in tragic consequences.
Behavioral characteristics associated with FASD that may contribute to firesetting behavior include:

- Poor socialization skills
- Low resistance to negative influence by peer groups
- Difficulty with impulse control
- Difficulty foreseeing consequences of one’s own actions
- Learning challenges; poor memory; inability to understand cause-and-effect
- Poor problem-solving skills
- Behavioral problems including hyperactivity, lack of ability to focus on tasks, social withdrawal, stubbornness, and lashing out

Most individuals with FASD go undiagnosed, untreated, or simply remain misunderstood and will most likely experience many difficulties in life. Children with FASD may score well on intelligence tests, but their behavioral deficits often impact them well into adulthood, especially when supports and services are not in place. People with FASD may have additional diagnoses that include: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Bipolar Disorder, Conduct Disorder (CD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), and others. While there is no cure for FASD, secondary symptoms can be managed through adequate mental health care, support, and services.

Behavioral areas in which individuals with FASD may suffer deficiencies include:

- Attachment problems
- Infrequent or superficial relationships due to lack of social skills
- Problematic coping skills
- Emotional regulation; impulse control
- Memory
- Inappropriate displays of sexual behavior
- Organization
- Problem-solving
- Substance misuse
- Vulnerability to victimization

FASD symptoms often intensify as children become adults—especially in the absence of proper identification, support, and services. Interactions with law enforcement professionals are quite common as adults with FASD attempts to navigate their way through the challenges of adult responsibilities. With this intensification in mind, it is imperative to refer children suspected of having FASD to a qualified mental health professional. This is especially true if the youth exhibits firesetting behaviors.
Utilizing a variety of sources, including a multidisciplinary team of experts in the field, scholarly literature, case law, and media reports, we found multiple incidents where people with FASD were involved in firesetting. One of the most destructive cases involved a wildfire that was intentionally started by an individual with FASD. The fire consumed many land acres, destroyed multiple homes, and resulted in substantial dollars in damage. In a separate case, a young adult believed to have FASD set multiple individual fires that destroyed many structures over the course of one year.

Many caregivers and mental health professionals interviewed by the first author reported having contact with individuals with FASD who engaged in firesetting behaviors. Behavioral motivations put forth by those professionals included curiosity, poor anger control, and obsessional interest. These motivations are likely the result of a lack of ability to understand the consequences of their actions and some forward-thinking deficiency that is believed to be caused by impaired cognitive functioning.

When fire professionals encounter an individual with FASD, the associated deficits may not be initially apparent. But with some conversation, the deficits in social interaction and the illogical thinking often becomes clear. For instance, individuals may show their fascination with fire as well as their lack of understanding of the dangers involved. They may show an unrealistic perception of their ability to stop a fire that may get out of control. These behaviors are often red flags and can provide an opportunity to offer mental health interventions to help the individual from engaging in further potentially destructive behaviors.

At present, not enough is known about FASD as it relates to firesetting. The documentation that does exist on the topic stems from case studies and caregiver accounts. In spite of this lack of research, fire professionals would benefit from a basic understanding of FASD symptoms and its effects. It is hoped that this article generates discussion about FASD and helps facilitate further research regarding its impact on firesetting behavior.

Biographies

Jerrod Brown, M.A., M.S., M.S., M.S., is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Jerrod is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS), and the Editor-in-Chief of Forensic Scholars Today (FST). Jerrod is currently in the dissertation phase of his doctorate degree program in psychology.
Kathi Osmonson is deputy state fire marshal and runs the Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention (YFPI) program for the State of Minnesota. She partners with law enforcement, mental health, justice and social agencies to sustain a network of professionals who collaborate to provide prevention and intervention for young firesetters. Osmonson’s career includes volunteer and career firefighting with specialties in fire prevention education and youth firesetting intervention. She is a member of the NFPA 1035 Committee and the Minnesota Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC), an adjunct instructor for the FEMA National Fire Academy and the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities System, a stakeholder in the Youth Fire Intervention Repository and Evaluation System, and a presenter at national and international conferences. Osmonson is the creator of the Minnesota Youth Firesetting Prevention & Intervention Certification through the Minnesota Fire Service Certification Board.

Julie Martindale, B.A., has spent 25 years working in the field of foster care and adoption and has worked extensively with individuals who have FASD. As a mental health advocate and disability educator, she has worked with many families and professionals to better understand the impact of FASD on our communities. In addition, she is currently working toward a national certification as a Peer Support Specialist. She and her husband are parents to 11 children, most adopted through the foster care system, five of whom live with FASD and its challenges.

Don Porth holds a B.S. degree in Fire Command Administration. He began his career in the fire service in 1980 as a volunteer firefighter in a rural Oregon community. He became a full-time firefighter/EMT in 1983 and served 28 years in the uniformed fire service, with 27 years at Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue. The majority of the time was spent as a public education officer, providing public outreach and education on fire and life safety prevention issues. Don served on various committees and organizations related to youth firesetting behaviors, including 21 years as President of SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs, a nonprofit specializing in support for firesetting intervention programs. Don now works as a consultant on fire and life safety issues and has participated on the executive team of an effort known as YFIRES (Youth Firesetting Information Repository and Evaluation System), which has created and will manage a national data system for youth firesetting behaviors.