

# A p a r t m e n t

## SAFETY NOTES

SPOKANE FIRE DEPARTMENT

MARCH 2011

### KIDS USING FIRE

Children can be curious about fire, fascinated by the flicker of flames or the shape of a lighter.

According to The Burn Institute in San Diego, children cause nearly 80,000 structure fires each year in the U.S. These fires cost an estimated \$1.2 billion in property losses.

A new report from FEMA indicates that children 9 years of age or younger account for 93% of the fire fatalities that result from kids playing with matches or lighters. In Spokane, we have seen children under the age of 3 start significant house and apartment

fires. Toddlers can get some lighters to work by running them over an upholstered chair or carpeting, in a manner similar to playing with a small car.

Children use fire for a variety of reasons. Preschoolers may just be pushing the buttons on a lighter or copying the actions of a parent. Boys making a fort may just want a more realistic campfire. Girls may want to impress their friends with a special candle display. Teens may copy an aerosol trick with Axe body spray that they found on the Internet. Whatever the specific reason, most kids totally underestimate the power of fire: they falsely believe that they can always control it.

Human beings cannot comprehend fire until at least age 8. For younger children, it is therefore so important for parents (and babysitters) to understand how critical it is to keep matches and lighters "out of reach and out of sight". In addition, caregivers need to be constantly aware that children are closely watching the behaviors modeled for them by the adults and the media in their lives.

Age-appropriate education, adequate parental supervision and secured fire-setting tools will solve the problem for about 50% of the children who misuse fire. For the other half, there is need to help the family find additional resources from counselors, teachers, or associations that can provide alternate direction or activities for the child. Child fire-setting is not just a fire department issue: it involves the entire community.

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Approximately one in every four fires in the U.S. is intentionally set. About 50% of these fires are set by youth under the age of 18. Fire and burns are the leading cause of unintentional home injury death for children between the ages of 1 and 14.



What do these statistics mean for a property manager? (1) If you have children in your properties, you are well advised to include smoke detectors inside bedrooms as well as in the hallways. Young children often experiment with fire in their bedroom and the first items ignited in such incidents are typically mattresses, bedding or clothing. The sooner a fire is detected, the smaller the amount of damage will be. (2) Make it clear to all tenants that lighters are never to be left unattended in outdoor smoking or barbecue spaces. Kids know where the lighters are kept! (3) Keep bushes trimmed back to eliminate hiding places near buildings and the property cleared so that simple combustibles such as dried grass, pine needles, or cardboard containers can't become quick ignition targets.

If you notice signs of even small burns on the property, alert all tenants immediately. Let parents also know that Spokane Fire Department offers an educational intervention through FIRE-STOPPERS. This is a free class individualized for the parent and child that can be arranged by calling 625-7058.

You can sign up for this monthly newsletter, ask a fire-related question or suggest a specific safety topic by contacting Jan Doherty at [jdoherly@spokanefire.org](mailto:jdoherly@spokanefire.org) or by calling 625-7058.

Access this edition of Apartment Safety Notes as well as back issues at [www.spokanefire.org](http://www.spokanefire.org) under "Prevention".

## Toy or Lighter?

Washington is one of 14 States that has outlawed the sale of novelty cigarette lighters. These devices often look like toys. Novelty lighters have not been sold in WA since October 2009. Unfortunately, thousands of them are still in circulation. While the most common lighters are likely the most dangerous because there are so many of them in circulation, it takes no imagination to see how enticing a novelty lighter is to a young child.

You may remember local media coverage of a Spokane preschooler who came "within a minute" of losing his life last summer because of using a novelty lighter. With no working smoke detectors, there was no time before the smoke was too deadly for parents and neighbors to rescue the boy before firefighters arrived on scene. The family and our community were lucky this time: usually when there are no smoke detectors, firefighters do a body recovery rather than a child rescue.

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### DAYLIGHT SAVINGS time begins on March 13.

- Turn clocks ahead one hour.
- Check the back label of all smoke detectors to make sure they are less than 10 years old.
- Replace alkaline batteries. Test long-lasting lithium batteries.

Try to have a mix of PHOTOELECTRIC and ionization detectors in each household. Why? See [www.wthr.com/global/Story.asp?s=6552929](http://www.wthr.com/global/Story.asp?s=6552929)



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