Solution Focused Empathy Training Groups for Students With

Fire-setting Behaviors

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Abstract

Fire-setting students are those who intentionally or unintentionally set one or more fires due to curiosity, stress, a need for attention, or due to criminal delinquency. This article describes the nature of fire-setting behaviors, discusses the profile and risk factors associated with the behavior, and outlines a group program using empathy training and solution focused brief therapy. The benefits of using solution focused brief therapy and empathy training are discussed along with specific techniques involved in using each component.

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School counselors are challenged to find strategies to prevent injuries, deaths, and damage caused by an increasing number of students who set fires on and off school property (Lambie, McCardle, & Coleman, 2002). Given the fact that approximately one third of all children within the general population report some type of "fire play", (Grolnick, Cole, Laurenitis, & Schwartzman, 1990; Kafry, 1980; Lambie et al., 2002), almost half of all youth admitted for burn treatment set the fire that caused the injury (Burned Children Recovery Foundation, n.d.; Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1988), and over 67,000 fires are set annually by juveniles (New Hampshire Department of Safety, 2006) school counselors must handle both victims and perpetrators such that they can focus on academic issues and socially coexist while preventing injuries, deaths, and damage.

In the United States, 60% of arson crimes are committed by those under the age of 18 (New Hampshire Department of Safety, 2006; Snyder, 1998), burn injuries are the second leading cause of accidental death for children age 5 and younger (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1988), around 230 people are killed, and 1800 injured by fires set by juveniles each year (New Hampshire Department of Safety, 2006). Treatment of burn victims costs society millions of dollars each year, many individuals are severely burned and disfigured, and emotional trauma often results as a consequence to both fire-setters and other victims (Pollinger, Samuels, & Stadolnik, 2005).

Definition

The term, fire-setting, may imply behavior beyond the norm. Despite the dangerous consequences of fire-setting, an interest in fire may be part of a child's natural psychosocial development (Lambie et al., 2002). The motivation behind setting the fire is an important factor in distinguishing between normal and severe fire-setting behavior (Kolko, 1999).

Nichtern (1979) (cited in Sakheim & Osborn, 1999) refers to a fire-setter as one who possesses an impulse to set fires for socially unacceptable reasons while "pyromania" refers to one who feels an excitement or arousal before setting a fire and a sense of gratification from the ensuing destruction (Doley, 2003; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). For the purpose of this article, the term "fire-setting" refers to those who intentionally or unintentionally set one or more fires due to curiosity, stress, a need for attention, or due to criminal delinquency.

Gender Differences

In the 1800's, fire-setting was believed to be a female phenomenon caused by sexual frustration (Raines & Foy, 1994). Despite these early beliefs, research indicates that most juvenile fires are set by males (Lambie et al., 2002; Pfeffer, Plutchik, & Mizruchi, 1983; Raines & Foy, 1994; Showers & Pickrell, 1987; Strachan, 1981). This is particularly true when dealing with delinquent fire-setters (those who set fires due to antisocial behaviors in the company of peers) (Lambie et al., 2002). Nonetheless, fire-setting among adolescent females may be on the rise (Fineman, 1980; Lambie et al., 2002).

Age Differences

Age distinctions exist between children and adolescents with regard to fire-setting behaviors (Lambie et al., 2002; Sakheim & Osburn, 1999). Thirty-eight percent of children under age 14 reported playing with fire in the past (Lambie et al., 2002). Many of these children set fires due to simple curiosity or boredom while others use fire to express anger or seek attention (Lambie et al., 2002). Many children set fires in connection with a concurrent diagnosis of conduct disorder (Doley, 2003; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). Such children may have suffered much loss, abuse, or neglectful parenting (Slavkin, 2001) and possess a powerful need for love and security (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). Upon denial of this love or security, it is believed these children use fire as an agent to destroy authoritarian adults and get even (Lambie et al., 2002; Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999).

Adolescents report setting more fires than younger children (Lambie et al., 2002). While some believe adolescents set fires due to sexual motivation (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999; Slavkin, 2001), others disagree (Doley, 2003; Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). Rice & Harris (1991) found few male fire-setters who indicated sexual stimulation when setting or watching fires. Other researchers have suggested a correlation between juvenile fire-setting behaviors and enuresis and cruelty to animals (Doley, 2003; Slavkin, 2001; Yarnell, 1940). Adolescent fire-setters are more aggressive and exhibit social problems more often than older or younger arsonists (Virginia Commission on Youth, 2003). Much information on fire-setting behavior is contradictory, and therefore, more studies are needed to understand the phenomenon when dealing with various age groups (Doley, 2003).

Types of Fire-setting Behavior

A continuum exists that distinguishes severe behaviors from normal curiosity with fire. Kolko (1999) described 4 levels of fire-setting behaviors: curiosity fire-setters, pathological fire-setters, cry for help fire-setters, and delinquent fire-setters. While inquisitiveness about fire often results in an unintentional fire with curiosity fire-setters, pathological fire-setters plan to set destructive, frequent fires (Lambie et al., 2002). Cry for help fire-setters intentionally set a blaze to attract attention (Lambie et al., 2002; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999) and the most severe types of fire-setters, delinquent fire-setters, set criminal fires to fulfill the need to commit a criminal act (Lambie et al., 2002). Such criminal fires have been compared with "acts of physical violence such as rape, vandalism, breaking and entering, and assault" (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999, p. 413.)

Sakheim & Osburn (1999) described three additional types of severe fire-setting behaviors. The sexually motivated adolescent fire-setter becomes stimulated by watching flames (Turco, 2002) while the severely disturbed individual is typically psychotic and/or paranoid. The latter may complain of hallucinations and is usually placed in a psychiatric hospital for personal protection. The final group (as described in the following paragraph) consists of the rare patient with pyromania.

Pyromania is a rare type of fire-setting behavior not accounted for by antisocial personality disorders, manic episodes, or conduct disorders. This repetitive and deliberate act of fire-setting is characterized by an attraction to fire and pleasure when setting fires or witnessing the consequential destruction. Further, this type of fire-setting is not committed to handle anger, for political reasons, as a result of hallucinations or

impaired judgment (Doley, 2003). Rather, these individuals have an "irresistible urge to set fires, and are unable to resist such an impulse" (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999, p. 428).

Risk Factors

The literature indicates several risk factors that are common among severe juvenile fire-setters. Students who set fires may have strong feelings of parental rejection, may have suffered abuse or abandonment, show noncompliance when dealing with authority, convey an interest and obsession with fire, a history of exposure to fire prior to age 8 (including exposure to an acceptable attitude toward fires and reinforcement of fire setting behaviors from peers), often come from dysfunctional families (Lambie et al., 2002; Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999) and demonstrate a lack of fire safety skills (Lambie et al., 2002). Further, these individuals have often suffered as a result of "limited parental supervision" (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999, p. 425) and may not have the ability to foresee the consequences of their actions as exhibited through both fire-setting and poor school behavior (Lambie et al, 2002; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999).

Precipitants

Fire-setting behavior may be cued by trauma, crises, misleading cognitions, and internal and external reinforcements from family or peers (Lambie et al., 2002). Those with pyromania or severe fire-setting behavior may experience a sense of tension or arousal prior to setting a fire followed by pleasure or a sense of relief after the fact (Doley, 2003). Further, these students may possess paraphernalia such as lighters, matches, or other fire setting devices before committing the act (Doley, 2003).

Intervention

Programs for fire-setting children and adults should include affective, behavioral, and social components. The program described in this article uses behavioral (via solution focused brief therapy), affective, experiential, and cognitive domains (via empathy training and solution focused brief therapy [SFBT]) as addressed through school counseling groups.

Severe fire-setters demonstrate poor identity formation, a feeling of alienation, poor social interaction (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999), physical aggression, poor school performance, anger and rejection toward parents, and a lack of empathy (National Fire Prevention Association, 2001; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). Programs that address these needs require learning techniques that teach empathy and identification with others' feelings, fire safety skills, consequences of unsafe practices, and social skills. Such programs should also take into consideration cultural and individual considerations while addressing anger and feelings of alienation.

The SFBT Empathy Training Program is intended for use with students in grades five through eight and consists of two distinct parts, classroom guidance lessons and small group counseling. The first part of the program involves classroom guidance lessons. All students are exposed to information on fire safety and the negative consequences of setting fires (death, injury, property damage, and fire escape methods). The local fire department should be asked to collaborate with schools and assist with student and staff fire safety trainings when possible (Lambie et al., 2002).

Guidance lessons also contain information intended to teach empathic statements and reactions. Students are taught empathic statements such as, "You feel

angry (or appropriate emotion) because your parents ignore you" (or whatever response is appropriate to the individual in question). As students say the preceding message, they are taught to match facial expressions such that they match emotions stated. By using the aforementioned statement, students are taught to identify and restate feelings in an empathic manner. Finally, students are exposed to social stories and plays. After exposure to a plot involving people and feelings, participants are asked questions that evoke empathy such as; "What do you think the character feels? Why does he feel that way? How would you feel in this situation? Do you think the character acted in the best way?" Students listen to stories and both observe and participate in role plays using appropriate facial and vocal responses. Freedom of responses allows students the opportunity for direct application to actual situations (Moynahan, 2003).

The second part of the program involves group solution focused brief therapy for fire-setting students. Weekly counselor led solution focused brief therapy sessions are conducted for 7-8 students per group. During the first session, students are asked to talk about their positive qualities. Following this discussion, participants are asked the miracle question. The miracle question might be phrased as follows: If I waved a magic wand and made everything perfect for you, what would be different? This question requires the student to immediately consider how their world will be different and focus on interventions that will lead to individualized success. Exceptions to problems (including those mentioned previously) can be obtained as students consider their perfect world (de Shazer, 1985; 1994). Scaling is used to determine both levels of motivation as well as severity of concerns. Students are asked to create personal goals using exceptions. The second and subsequent sessions begin with the question, "What

is better this week?" (Metcalf, 1995). The session continues as students again discuss exceptions.

Counseling sessions are culminated with the implementation of a community project. Such programs have been shown to enhance personal satisfaction and fill a need for positive attention (Parsons, 2006). Participants should actively participate in selecting the project in order that it is personally meaningful. Examples of projects might include: helping the elderly, cleaning up graffiti, Habitat for Humanity, tutoring younger students, or an endless number of student suggested events. Positive behaviors exhibited through this program are recognized, praised, and continually reinforced.

Justification for SFBT, empathy training, and education

Since prevention strategies have shown promise when working with youth exhibiting antisocial behavior (Parsons, 2006) and fire-setters exhibit a large number of social problems (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999), fire safety education, empathy training, and small group counseling are major components of this prevention/intervention program.

Low risk fire setters can be treated effectively through training on fire safety and social skills (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999) while other more severe cases may require hospitalization (Raines & Foy, 1994). As a result, the guidance portion of this program involves a combination of lessons disseminating information on fire prevention, escape, and social skills in conjunction with referrals to appropriate agencies.

Counseling strategies are important methods of teaching social skills to students (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). As a result, small group counseling is also an integral part of the program. The *ASCA National Model* states that

small groups be used in order that students "…identify problems, causes, alternatives and possible consequences so they can take appropriate action" (American School Counseling Association, 2003, p. 42). Since many students who set fires do not foresee the consequences of their actions (Sakheim & Osborn, 1999), the formation of small groups utilizing solution focused brief therapy offers a forum where students can express pent up aggression and learn to cope with social issues (Raines & Foy, 1994).

Solution focused brief therapy is effective when working with adolescents in the school setting (Davis & Osborn, 2000; Froeschle, Smith & Ricard, in press; La Fountain Garner & Eliason, 1996; Metcalf, 1995). The open nature of discussions leads to topics that meet the individual and cultural nature of each group member (Berg, 1994; Froeschle et al., in press). Further, solution focused brief therapy is conducive to the school setting because it requires little preparation for school counselors whose time is scarce (Froeschle et al., in press; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002).

Solution focused brief therapy may be beneficial for fire-setting students because of its emphasis on positive events. Students classified as fire-setters may exhibit intense anger toward parents for rejection, abuse, or death (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). Further, minors who set fires are often crying for help from crises such as abuse or other stressful life experiences (National Fire Prevention Association, 2001). This constant focus on negative events may lead students to seek revenge or exhibit aggression through fire-setting (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). In contrast, solution focused brief therapy focuses on positives and may alleviate feelings of anger through empowerment. Solution focused brief therapy offers

the opportunity to construct personally meaningful strategies while nesting within a

supportive environment (Berg & Reuss, 1998).

Empathy training addresses the lack of empathy, poor social skills, and

aggressive tendencies expressed by fire-setting students (Raines & Foy, 1994;

Sakheim & Osborn, 1999). Reinforcement of proper social responses (as exhibited

through empathy training) has been shown to reduce negative behaviors and enhance

social skills (Parsons, 2006). Further, empathy training has been advocated as an

effective method of reducing aggression (Moynahan, 2003; Salmon, 2003). Finally, this

program's specific use of role plays and story interpretations through empathy training

offers a realistic rehearsal for the development and practice of social skills and empathic

reflections.

Solution Focused Brief Therapy Techniques

Techniques in solution focused brief therapy appear to be appropriate for

students with fire-setting behaviors. Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and others at the

Brief Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin originally developed solution focused

brief therapy in the 1980's as a family counseling theory (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).

Many of the concepts evolved in response to the work of Milton Erikson at the Brief

Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (de Shazer, 1985; Miller, 2002).

The first session is considered the most crucial (Miller, 2002) and uses "solution

talk" to transform cognitions from focusing on problems and weaknesses to that of

expressing optimism and strengths (de Shazer, 1985; 1994). This focus on strengths is

especially conducive to fire-setting students as it may fulfill their powerful need for love

and security (Sakheim & Osborn, 1994).

Techniques used during the first session include; presuppositional questions, questions to elicit exceptions (often termed the coping sequence), the miracle question, scaling, complimenting, goal setting, and homework assignments. Interviewing strategies using cognitive and cognitive-behavioral techniques allow fire-setting individuals the opportunity to freely express anger, ascertain the direction of goals (de Shazer, 1985; de Shazer, 1994), and focus on his or her own strengths (Miller, 2002). Exceptions are examined to help the student understand times when problems are not present and to utilize strengths (Berg & Reuss, 1998; de Shazer, 1985). Since many fire-setting students use fire as a method of gaining control through revenge (Raines & Foy, 1994; Sakheim & Osborn, 1999), the emphasis on personal empowerment is an important component toward preventing future episodes.

Empathy Training Techniques

Empathy training methods in this program include two separate components. The first component involves helping students read emotional clues exhibited by others and in turn, teaching them to be more sensitive to their own personal nonverbal messages. Students are taught active listening techniques, feeling assessment, and nonverbal, feeling, and language congruence. Students act as both speakers and listeners. Listeners are taught to make appropriate eye contact and use correct posture as speakers tell about an event. Next, listeners are asked to identify feeling words congruent with messages heard and confirm thoughts with speakers. Finally, listeners reflect feelings back to the speaker using a sentence frame (You feel ___ because ___). Nonverbal language is assessed to correct mixed messages found between nonverbal and verbal language.

The second empathy training component involves observing and acting out realistic social situations. First, students read a story containing a social dilemma and are asked questions intended to evoke the characters' feelings. Second, students are given realistic social issues and asked to role play responses. After this role play, students are asked to switch roles. Participants then discuss feelings related to each character. Questions such as, "How did it feel to be in character A's position? How did it feel to be in character B's position?" are discussed. Finally, events involving the consequences of fire-setting are enacted and discussed. For fire-setting students, these techniques can set the foundation for empathic communication and develop an understanding of the consequences of fire-setting behavior on others.

<center>Implications for Practice</center>

The number of fire-setting students is increasing (Lambie et al, 2002). Approximately one in three children report playing with fire and are not fully aware of the consequences danger (Kafry, 1980; Lambie et al., 2002; Grolnick et al., 1990). School counselors can play a vital role in preventing harm through education, counseling, and appropriate community referrals. Through fire safety education, empathy training, collaboration with community agencies, and the implementation of small groups using solution focused brief therapy; school counselors can create positive changes for those with fire-setting behaviors and society in general.

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