

Treatment interventions: part 2 – evaluating interventions

Issue 14 of the *BushFIRE arson bulletin* focused on a new report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in the UK (Palmer, Caulfield & Hollin 2005) examining interventions used with arsonists and young firesetters. This issue looks at the types of interventions discussed in the report. Palmer et al. identified two basic approaches used in intervention programs: educational and psychosocial. Educational approaches are the most widely used and involve teaching young people about aspects of fire such as safety skills and awareness, the dangers and consequences of firesetting, and how to get help in an emergency. Psychosocial approaches address psychological and social issues, often involving cognitive-behavioural treatments and enhancing social skills.

The *Fire awareness child education (FACE)* program is an example of the kind of educational program used in the UK and in Australia. A version for four- to 12-year-olds who play with fire is used by 16 per cent of fire services in the UK. A 'fire friend' from the fire and rescue service visits the young person at home, using education and awareness to change their attitudes about fire. It is typically run with assistance from other organisations to which the child can be referred if behaviour persists. FACE-UP, a version of the program for 10- to 17-year-olds convicted of arson offences, is provided as an alternative to custody. Through 13 weekly two-hour sessions the program confronts and challenges the offender's attitudes and cognitions about firesetting. Psychosocial approaches may look at the cause and effect relationships involved in firesetting and aim to help the firesetter find ways of coping with conflict, anger and emotional arousal other than by lighting fires. Counselling may be used to address deficits in self-control, social and interpersonal skills that have been identified as contributing to arson behaviours.

While many programs exist for young people, there are very few interventions for adult arsonists. A version of FACE-UP, modified for adults, was implemented in Her Majesty's Prison Liverpool in 1998, but its success in reducing reoffending has not been evaluated. Most interventions with adults are delivered individually in psychiatric populations with little research on their effectiveness.

From the literature, Palmer et al. identified a range of factors needed for effective implementation of firesetting interventions. Foremost is the need for collaboration between agencies such as the fire service, juvenile justice, mental health and family support, together with appropriate referral procedures. Assessment to identify individual needs is vital as well as training and materials to develop the skills of workers and standardise program delivery. Finally, sound evaluation is the key to determining whether programs work, are cost-effective and what elements of the program determine success. While many of the programs reviewed had informally reported great success, the lack of formal evaluation left the authors unable to draw any real conclusions about what works. This remains fertile ground for future research.

For more information:

Palmer EJ, Caulfield LS & Hollin CR 1995. *Evaluation of interventions with arsonists and young firesetters*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: London. http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_fire/documents/page/odpm_fire_036943.pdf