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CONSPICUOUS FIRESETTING IN CHILDREN

DEAR SIR,

In his article 'Conspicuous Firesetting in Children', (*Journal*, January 1981, **138**, 26-9), Strachan defined firesetting as "an event in which any type of property, however small, was consumed by fire as a result of action by the child". By investigating the records of 79 children referred to the East Edinburgh Hearing (similar to Juvenile Court in England and Wales) he has provided an important contribution to a meagre area of literature. His survey shows that in the age range studied the firesetting child who not only destroys property but also comes to the notice of the authorities is almost always a disturbed male with educational and generalized relationship difficulties from a disrupted, disturbed family (78 boys, 1 girl).

Between 1961 and 1963 I carried out a survey of 105 consecutive admissions to the Children's Burns Unit at Guys Hospital which is reported elsewhere in full (Benians, 1973) and in summary (Benians, 1974). My survey included details of eighteen firesetting children, fourteen who injured themselves and four who injured their siblings, none of whom appeared before a court for firesetting. A very different picture emerged with regard to the sex of younger firesetting children, as the majority were girls (see Table).

Details of the family backgrounds of the children in my survey showed similar disadvantages to those described by Strachan: a high proportion of one parent families, longstanding behaviour disorders, a

normal distribution of intelligence in the children and a wide variety of disorders in the parents. However six boys among the firesetting children in my survey were especially interesting. All had sustained facial burns when they peered into the petrol tanks of abandoned cars into which they had just put lighted matches. Five of these boys had both parents in the home. Four had mothers with marked obsessional, phobic personalities. Amongst all the mothers in my survey (103) six had this type of personality which reflects the usual incidence (Hare, 1965). It seemed to me that these mothers constantly spoke of danger to their families in such a way that the children were repeatedly attracted to experiment with dangerous situations, including firesetting.

TABLE

Years old	Girls	Boys	Total
0-10	7	3	10
Over 10	-	8	8
Total	7	11	18

We need to know and consider how children learn about the appropriate use and dangers of fire in normal and disturbed families.

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