

Instructions for Using the Comprehensive FireRisk Forms

The Child Fire FireRisk Interview Form, the Family FireRisk Interview Form, and the Parent FireRisk Questionnaire

United States Fire Administration-FEMA

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Fire Service Professional, Version 3.0

General Instructions

The original FEMA manuals for interviewing and assessing juveniles who set fires provided three forms for each age range (under 7, 7-13, and 14-18). The present version of these assessment tools is more concise and consists of only three forms. The general format is still the same. The fire service professional makes a determination of **risk** by establishing the degree of concern that one should have for the juvenile continuing to set fires. He/she determines the level of risk by establishing whether we should have little concern, definite concern, or extreme concern for the child's continued firesetting, based on his recent firesetting behavior as well as many of his behavioral characteristics. The more concern that we have, based on the information that we obtain from the juvenile as well as his parents, the greater degree of risk we assign to him for future firesetting, and especially dangerous firesetting.

In order to adequately assess risk, and thereafter refer the juvenile for an appropriate intervention, it is necessary to talk with the juvenile as well as his/her parents. The format is simple. A variety of questions are asked to the juvenile, and/or parent(s). A response is scored in terms of whether it is primarily an issue that involves the child him/herself—a C response, or whether the issue is primarily a parent or family issue—a P response. Each C or P response is placed in column 1, 2, or 3 on the assessment forms. Placing a C or P in Column 1 suggests that the behavior is relatively normal and probably not correlated with and/or not predictive of pathological, or problem firesetting. It is more likely correlated with curiosity firesetting. When a response is placed in Column 2, Definite Concern, or Column 3, Extreme Concern, one is assuming that the behavior being categorized is problematic, and probably predictive of continued firesetting.

It is assumed that a C-1 (a C placed in Column 1) or a P-1 (a P placed in Column 1) score is indicative of curiosity firesetting, and not correlated with recidivist firesetting. As a general rule, one would assume that children whose responses are primarily in Column 1 are curiosity or accidental firesetters, and that their firesetting activity can be addressed primarily through educational intervention. Those children and families whose responses fall primarily in Columns 2 and 3 are usually problem children and/or problem families, and the firesetting is likely to need more intensive investigation and intervention by a mental health professional.

Some questions are for general information only and are not scored. Though most questions require only one response to be circled, there are some questions that allow for many responses to be circled. When this happens, mark all responses that apply. However, when it comes time to score the item in question, only score (i.e., give credit for) the most severe response. When narrative information is required and you run out of room, use the back of the form.

On occasion, you will be given the option of choosing whether a response is to be placed in Column 1, 2, or 3. Use your best professional judgment in making that decision. One can

generally think of a C-1 or P-1 response as signifying appropriate behavior, and a C-2 or C-3, or P-2 or P-3 response as signifying inappropriateness. This means that when you choose one response over the other, you should be thinking of the overall context in which the child lives and functions. If the behavior is a problem in general, or if it is correlated with repeat firesetting, it should be placed in Column 2, signifying that it is a response of definite concern. If it is highly abnormal or inappropriate, considering the overall context in which the child lives, then it should be placed in Column 3 and considered a response of extreme concern.

Common Issues

Sometimes it is difficult to determine if a parent's form of discipline is P-1, essentially normal, or whether the parent has crossed the line and the response should be scored as P-2. After talking with the child and/or family for awhile, you can usually come to a decision as to whether or not a parent's response to the child's firesetting was within the expected norm, or whether it was not. Choose your column accordingly. Be sensitive to cross cultural issues and differences.

Another situation which is often difficult to evaluate has to do with the child's response to a fire. Is attempting to extinguish a fire an appropriate response? It probably depends on the size of the fire, the age of the child, and the level of experience that the child has had with fire related issues, amongst a variety of other variables. Again, you must use your best judgment in making this decision. There are times that a child should run away from a fire (to protect himself), and at other times running away would be considered an attempt to avoid taking responsibility for one's act. More extensive conversation with the child and the family can help you make these types of determinations.

Is a child staying to watch a fire scored a C-2 or C-3. The answer to this also has to do with the context of the situation. Talk to the child, as well as other witnesses, about his/her fire related behavior. When it is determined that the length of time that the child watches a fire is extensive, that his facial expression was transfixed, and that he was manifesting extreme fascination with the fire (perhaps photographing or videotaping it), one may consider a C-3 score.

If a child sees fire as having special, miraculous, or spiritual powers, how do we know if this should be C-2, or C-3? The evaluation that you are conducting, though yielding an eventual numerical result, is still very much of a qualitative assessment. Thus, one must consider all aspects of the child and parent's circumstances. When you believe that the answer to a question deviates in the extreme relative to fire related issues, it might be scored C-3. The most important determination to make is not usually the differentiation between when an item is a C-2 or C-3. It is the determination of whether the item is a C-1, as opposed to whether it is C-2 or C-3. Thus, the most important determination is whether the item falls into the "problematic" categories or the "normal" category. Spend more time making the determination of whether the response is to be placed in Column 2 or 3 versus Column 1, rather than trying to discern whether an answer is really a Column 2 or a Column 3 response.

There may be times when you are given a choice of a C or P response. What we are asking is whether the behavior is directly attributable to family dynamics/family pressures, or whether the

problem is directly attributable, in your view, to the juvenile. Oftentimes there is a thin line of difference. Don't ponder the issue, just use your judgment, based on your experience, and we will have more information than we had at the start. If you are not sure, make a decision and write some notes so that another evaluator, or mental health provider, will be aware of the difficulties associated with that decision.

Many items require you to circle everything that applies. However, only the most severe and problematic response is scored. An item may provide a variety of answers, some of which can be scored C, and some of which can be scored P. The scoring requests that you circle all that apply, but only score the most severe. However, which one should be scored if you circle both a C-2 and a P-2. If this were to happen, score both. We don't want to lose the data that suggests that there might be a significant problem with the child as well as with the parent or the family.

On one item you are asked to identify how the child feels after the fireset. You can well ask the same questions about the firesetter's feelings before or during the fire to obtain additional information. What you ask depends on the amount of time that you have for an interview. With regard to the specifics of the item as it is printed, you are asked to make determinations as to whether or not the child felt sexually aroused or sensually aroused by the fire. This is a difficult subject to deal with it, and at times it can be embarrassing. Issues of sexual or sensual arousal are included for completeness. However, some firesetters who may obtain this type of excitement from a fireset will not admit it very easily. Do not expend extensive time in trying to ask questions concerning this issue. If it is an uncomfortable issue to deal with, ignore those items.

Clarifying Your Choices

As an interviewer, you have the option to obtain more information on any question when you feel it is necessary to help you make your C-1/2/3 and/or P-1/2/3 decisions. Within the limits of the time you can allow for an interview, the more information you get the better. When no responses apply other than the "other" category, and you select it, please clarify what "other" means.

When you answer questions that deal with whether a structure was or was not occupied at the time of the fire, score the question in terms of what was actually set on fire as opposed to what the juvenile says he intended. An occupied structure is one that had people in it at the time of the firestart. An unoccupied structure is unoccupied if it had no one in it at the time of the firestart, even if it sometimes does. A vacant structure is one that not only did not have occupation at the time of the fire, but also is generally believed not to, such as a structure in the process of being built. Feel free to include some narrative that differentiates between what a child intended to set on fire, and what he did set on fire, especially if that is an important issue. However, what was set on fire should be the issue that is ultimately scored.

When answering questions concerning where a child got his firesetting material, use the sequence of the child's story, as related to you by the child himself, or other reports that are available in making the ultimate determination. It may appear initially that the child simply found

the material, or was given it by another when in fact the firesetter went out of his way to acquire the match or lighter.

Be sure to ask a reasonable number of questions concerning whether a trauma or crisis preceded the firestart. Since we would not expect a curiosity firesetter to set fire after a crisis or trauma, it is important that we acquire that information.

Clarifying the Child's or Family's Choices

In the course of your interview, it may become apparent that the child or parent does not understand a question, either because of the way it is phrased or because they don't understand some of your terminology. You have the option to change the way a question is worded to make it clear to the child or parent. You can substitute a word, or phrase, in order to be more clearly understood.

In order that the questionnaires be applicable to all ages, it has been necessary to insert optional language. As an example, you might want to talk to a younger child about his *teacher*, but to an older child about his *classes*, or *subjects*. Whether or not a question gives you a choice of words, you still have the option to substitute words to clarify meaning. Though many of the phrases refer to the male gender, please substitute *she*, for *he*, when applicable.

The Format of the FireRisk Interview Forms and the Parent FireRisk Questionnaire

Both the original assessment tools in the FEMA manuals as well as the present updated assessment tools are based on the dynamic-behavioral theory of firesetting (Fineman, 1980, 1995, 1997). The original forms were less structured and less complex. The present forms have greater structure and at the same time provide wider latitude for the fire service professional to explore the factors that lead to higher risk for future firesetting. The dynamic-behavioral model suggests that past history of dysfunctional behavior coupled with poor supervision and training in fire safety generates an at risk child. Add to this a traumatic event, or alcohol to lessen an adolescent's inhibitions and increase his impulsiveness, and we are poised for a fireset. Because there are many combinations of problems and issues within a child's or a family's life, it is necessary to obtain as much information from the various content areas in the interview forms as possible.

The dynamic-behavioral model further suggests that thoughts and feelings that occur before, during and after the fire should be investigated, as that information will help us understand the motivation and/or reinforcement for the firesetting and provide very specific information for the referral source who will provide the therapy for those assessed as definite or extreme risk. The present assessment instruments are constructed in such a manner as to allow the fire service professional to more clearly understand the sequence of thoughts, feelings and behavior that lead to and maintain firesetting.

The final summary of all the information gathered occurs on the Comprehensive FireRisk Analysis Form. One can look at the numbers in the columns on this form, to help understand the sequence or chain of behaviors that has occurred. The form also helps us assess risk. The

easiest method would be to calculate the various percentages on the forms, to be discussed below. There are cut-off scores available to determine when a child should be given fire education under the auspices of the fire department, or a diversion program, and when a child should be referred to a mental health professional.

In 1997, the author obtained 143 completed FEMA assessment forms from Indianapolis, Indiana and 79 completed FEMA assessment forms from Portland, Oregon and surrounding areas. The data was analyzed statistically to establish cut-off points for the 222 protocols obtained. The following table shows the cut-off scores established by the analysis of the data.

	Juv. Interview			Fam. Interview			Par. Questionnaire			Combined FireRisk		
	Lit	Def	Ext	Lit	Def	Ext	Lit	Def	Ext	Lit	Def	Ext
Child Risk	<16		>74	<22		>78	<26		>56	<21		>75
Family Risk	<16		>56	<16		>59	<34		>76	<21		>56
Total Risk	<16		>62	<19		>69	<27		>56	<21		>66

The above table suggests cut-off scores for estimating “Little,” “Definite,” or “Extreme” concern on the Juvenile, and Family Interviews and on the Parent Questionnaire. As an example, if we look at the total risk that is determined after all three forms are averaged, we see a range from 22% to 67% (see the grayed in area above). That suggests that any score less than 21% is of “little concern” and any score at 67% or higher is of “extreme concern.” Scores between 21% and 66% suggest “definite concern.”

The simplest method is to determine if 20% or more of the available, and scored, responses are pathological, or problem responses (i.e., that they were placed in Columns 2 or 3). If so, a mental health referral is appropriate. Remember, these scores are not the final answer to the perplexing questions about the risk of future firesetting. They are just one more piece of information to use in making a decision. Depend more on your experience-based judgment than on the numbers.

On some occasions, you may not be able to interview the family, as only the child will be available for the interview. In those situations, use the first sheet of the Family Interview Form with the child in order to get as much information about the family’s living arrangements as possible and then conduct your interview using the Child FireRisk Interview Form.

The Child FireRisk Interview Form

This interview form is divided into eight content sections plus demographics. As you interview, circle C or P responses and write in narrative information that you want to remember. When the interview has been completed, count up all C-1 responses and enter that number in the appropriate square on the small summary box that is included at the end of each of the eight sections. Repeat this process for C-2 responses through P-3 responses. When complete, transfer that information to the large summary box at the end of the interview form. Then, total each column and record that sum in the appropriate square. Once you have all totals recorded, use the total score for each of the columns to calculate the percentage of risk for child, family, and total risk according to the following formulae:

Child Risk	Family Risk	Total Risk
$\frac{C-2 + C-3}{C-1 + C-2 + C-3} = __\%$	$\frac{P-2 + P-3}{P-1 + P-2 + P-3} = __\%$	$\frac{C-2 + P-2 + C-3 + P-3}{C-1 + P-1 + C-2 + P-2 + C-3 + P-3} = __\%$

The Family FireRisk Interview Form

This interview form is divided into nine content sections plus demographics. When the interview is completed, count all C-1 responses and enter that number in the appropriate square on the Family Interview Form summary sheet. Repeat this process for C-2 through P-3 responses. When complete, total each column and record that sum in the appropriate square. Once you have totals recorded, use the total score for each of the columns to calculate the percentage of risk for child, family, and total risk according to the formulae in the above section.

The observation section of the questionnaire is filled out when you observe the family at their home, or at the fire station. It is possible that you will choose not to interview in the home. If you are unable to make determinations regarding the items in the observation section, skip that section.

The Parent FireRisk Questionnaire

This questionnaire form is divided into eight sections. When the interview is completed, using a transparency scoring sheet or scoring key, count up all C-1 responses and enter that number in the appropriate square on the Parent Questionnaire summary sheet. Repeat this process for C-2 through P-3. When complete, total each column and record the sum in the appropriate square. Once you have all totals recorded, use the total score for each of the columns to calculate the percentage of risk for a child, family, and total risk according to the above formulae.

A parent may ask for clarification on certain questions. Have the parent assess the appropriateness of a child's reaction to a fire, within the overall context of family life. Thus, watching the fire, running, away, panicking or not may all be C-1 responses in the sense that those responses may provide for the safety of the child as well as for others. When helping a parent evaluate eye contact, consider whether that behavior is appropriate to the child's culture. Severe behavior difficulties refer to extraordinary problems which a parent admits are beyond his or her ability to control. Chewing odd things has to do with those children who put things in their mouth or suck on, or chew objects that are inappropriate, considering the age of the child. Phobias refer to specific or severe fears such as heights, spiders, closed places, or snakes. A general fear is a non-specific fear.

A parent may ask you what you consider to be excessive parental absences. This is a subjective judgment and depends on what is normal, not so much in one family, but what is accepted in society in general, and especially in the culture to which the family belongs. There may be a discrepancy between the family's culture and society in general. One may ask the parents whether they are absent from their children more than other parents in the

neighborhood. This might be helpful in assessing whether they themselves see their behavior as discrepant from their culture.

The Comprehensive FireRisk Analysis Form

At the conclusion of the interviews, transfer all individual and total scores from the questionnaire and the two interview forms to the Comprehensive FireRisk Analysis Form. The total scores from the summary sheets are placed in their respective columns and squares on the form. When complete, add all three subtotals and place the total in the total column at the bottom of the page. Next, transfer the three percentage scores from the two interview forms and the parent questionnaire to the analysis form. To obtain an average for all information transferred, add the three percentage scores in each column and divide each by three. The Comprehensive Analysis Form at a glance will allow one to assess most factors that produced the fire.

Some Final Thoughts

It is important to consider the purpose for which the above interviews are being conducted. Our goal is to assess the degree of concern that we have for a juvenile setting more fires. Juveniles assessed to be curiosity firesetters (the majority of scores falling into the first column) will likely be referred for educational intervention. For juveniles whose scores fall primarily in the second and third column, we will likely refer for further mental health assessment and psychotherapeutic intervention. However, it is important to understand that the interview forms are not psychological tests, they are interview aids. Their purpose is to help us acquire information so we can make preliminary decisions and thereafter, based on our degree of concern, make appropriate referrals for relevant intervention. Juveniles should not be placed in a program based on the scores obtained using these assessment instruments. When mental health professionals deal with diagnosis, placement, and the specifics of treatment, additional interview techniques and many psychological tests will likely be used before a final recommendation is made for those determined to be problem firesetters. The above forms are a first step in the assessment of a firesetter, and should never be used exclusively to make final recommendations concerning diagnostic issues, the specific type of psychological treatment that the firesetter is to obtain, or the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given placement setting for a firesetter.

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