A study of sixteen adolescent and pre-adolescent firesetters /

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Boston University
A STUDY OF SIXTEEN ADOLESCENT AND
PRE-adolescent FIRESETTERS

A thesis

Submitted by
Samuel O. Miller
(B.A., Dakota Wesleyan University, 1957)

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the Degree of Master of Science in Social Service

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This is an exploratory study of sixteen adolescent and pre-adolescent firesetters and their families seen at the Worcester Youth Guidance Center and the Worcester Court Clinic. The study describes the group and the environment in which they resided, with major emphasis given to the parent-child relationships, the subject of discipline within the sixteen families, and finally on the activity itself.

Unlike other forms of anti-social behavior in adults or juveniles, firesetting is of relatively low incidence. Available statistics indicate that the actual number of arrests for arson reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1951 was 1,003, which is but 0.1 per cent in comparison to other major crimes such as 23 per cent for drunkenness, 7.4 per cent for assault, 2.2 per cent for gambling, 1.1 per cent for rape and 0.8 per cent for criminal homicide.¹

Despite the relatively low incidence this form of anti-social behavior is rather serious. Grave concern has been given to this problem because of the serious loss of life and destruction of both private and public property resulting from firesetting activities.

In an intensive study of firesetters, Lewis and Yarnell found that the highest rate of non-profit arson occurred at the age of seventeen.² As such, pyromania is unmistakably a crime of the

¹U. S. Department of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports, p. 105.
²Lewis, Nolan and Yarnell, Helen, Pathological Firesetting, p. 30.
adolescent or young adult. Because authorities tend to regard as
potential pyromaniacs any child, after about thirteen and one-half
years of age, who sets fires, the incidence of pre-adolescent fire-
setters is probably far greater than any statistics show.

Although most authorities, for example Bakwin and Bakwin, agree
that this form of behavior is a direct expression of serious emotional
disturbance; these same authorities have treated it infrequently in
their writings. It was also found that when it was mentioned in
recently written books, the description of this problem was meager.

The present study is thus undertaken with the hope of adding to
the dearth of material on the subject of firesetting and children who
engage in said activities.

Scope of Study

This study is based on material taken from the case records of
sixteen adolescent and pre-adolescent firesetters. In attempting to
provide as adequate a picture as possible of this group, I wish to
study it from the following viewpoints:

1. A brief individual study of each firesetter to observe
the type of individual who becomes involved in non-profit
arson. This will involve studying such factors as age,
religion, health and intelligence. In addition, attempts
will be made to weigh their school adjustment, peer-
relationships, and their associated symptomatic and delin-
quent behavior to determine any possible relationship
among these factors.

3Bakwin, Harry and Bakwin, Ruth, Behavior Disorders in Children,
p. 428.
2. A study of the family to evaluate the atmosphere surrounding the child. Here I will take into account the parents' physical and emotional health, their marital relationship and socio-economic status as indicated by the father's occupation, and the relationship between siblings.

3. Major emphasis will be given to the intrafamilial relationship to evaluate some aspects and effects of any emotional pathology existing in the home. With regard to this I will focus on the relationships between the mothers and their children and the disciplinary practices as indicated by parental attitude toward limits and practices in limit-setting.

4. The last area of focus will be a brief study of the specific activity of fire-setting. Here I will attempt to evaluate the number and sites of the fires, the extent of damage and the attitudes toward and reasons for the firesetting as given by the mothers and the boys.

Limitations of the Study

This study is based on a review of case records selected from the files of the Worcester Youth Guidance Center and the Worcester Court Clinic. The findings are first of all limited to a rather small sample of cases and, by choice, to a description of factors that were considered by the author to be important. The selection and evaluation of the factors are necessarily based, to some extent, on the author's subjective judgement of the recorded material, further limiting the study.

Based as it is on case records, the study is further limited by the case records themselves and dependent on the material originally recorded. As to be expected, the workers who treated the cases were primarily concerned with treatment and were not recording for research purposes. Thus, the records and type of recording which was fully
adequate for treatment may not have been of great value to research. Another limitation was seen in the varying subjectivity and experience of the different workers, as well as the differences in background and length of establishment of the two settings.

Because of the several limitations noted, primary of which is the comparatively small sample, it is recommended that the results of this study be interpreted with caution. It is not intended that the generalizations be thought to extend to any group other than the one under immediate consideration, except where areas of further concentration or study loom as possibilities.

The Nature of the Settings

The Worcester Youth Guidance Center is a child guidance clinic offering to the children and their parents in the greater Worcester area diagnosis and treatment of emotional problems. It also offers to the community extensive services in preventive mental health in the form of consultation and mental health education. As a joint enterprise between community and State the clinic is partially supported by funds from the Worcester Community Chest. In addition its financial support is enhanced by funds from the National Institute of Mental Health, the Federal Government by grants through the United States Public Health Service and fees from the clients of the clinic.

Applications are received from many segments of the community, for children to the age of seventeen who have behavior disturbances in their development. To fulfill the purpose for which it was created this clinic offers two main types of help: Diagnosis, used by
parents and other community agencies who are helped with an interpretation of the child's behavior and a recommendation for the best possible solution. The second service, that of treatment, is worked out carefully to fit each individual child and almost invariably involves one or both parents. In this area of services rendered, representatives of the disciplines of psychiatry, social work and psychology work closely together to provide the client with the best services available.

Worcester Court Clinic:

Through the combined efforts of the Division of Legal Medicine and the Worcester Youth Guidance Center, the Court Clinic was originally established on November 1, 1956. It was established to fill a definite void created by the difficulties faced by the probation officers to find treatment for clients who were in need of such help—namely, children and parents who come in to contact with the courts because of some delinquent behavior.

To fill the gap for desperately needed facilities, the Clinic attempted to provide consultation and diagnostic services to the probation officers (and judges) in order to help them understand and plan intelligently for individual cases. The Clinic provides treatment services to selected cases and their families. An educational function was also adopted in an attempt to instruct the court as to the dynamic factors in delinquent behavior and the role the court played in the lives of juvenile offenders.
CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Youth is the time to go flashing from one end of the world to another both in mind and body; to try the manners of different nations; to hear the chimes at midnight; to see sunrise in town and country; to be converted at a revival; to circumnavigate the metaphysics; write halting verses; run a mile to see a fire and wait all day in the theatre to applaud "Hernani." Stevenson

This author has unequivocally captured and expressed the irresistible attraction of fire to an age-group which is known for the total zeal and ardor they customarily throw into any area in which they develop an interest. Fire has always been fascinating to men from the earliest civilization when its discovery promoted culture and growth. During the days of the Roman and Greek civilizations, fire was again deified and glorified. Not a few legends originated surrounding the appropriation of fire from the gods. And few have existed without having heard the legend of Nero who gloried in the burning of Rome, while strumming a lyre and chanting a song.

Religious rituals, primitive and modern alike, associated with fire have increased this mysterious fascination that fire had, and continues to have, for people of all ages.

Many authorities have been interested in man's fascination with an agent as destructive as fire and tended to support any attempts to root out this potentially dangerous fascination from the souls of men.

This may well have been one of the motivations of those who stressed the question of responsibility in the cases of arson during the nineteenth century. This period was characterized by severe disagreements between those who considered impulsive firesetting a form of insanity (which made persons committing impulsive arson irresponsible before the law) and those who argued that an incendiary act was either the crime of arson or the symptom of a diseased or ill-developed brain, thus worthy of the death sentence.²

With the shift in psychiatric thinking which developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, greater interest was given to the psychopathology behind the incendiary act.

Dr. Helen Yarnell, after an extensive study of firesetters, reported that, "regardless of what the fire is intended to accomplish the use of fire seems representative of the usual way firesetters meet 'problems.'"³ As such this type of activity is best approached as a symptom and one way of reacting rather than a complete and final act in itself. But this "way of meeting problems" has an irresistible quality about it that has concerned authorities from the earliest beginning. It was this factor that caused pyromania—the irresistible urge to set fires—to be considered as a form of insanity in France and Germany, as early as 1778 and 1804.⁴

²Lewis and Yarnell, op. cit., p. 9.
⁴Lewis and Yarnell, op. cit., p. 9.
Byloff made a distinction between those people setting fires for such purposes as insurance and the real firesetter because the latter was "drawn to the fire, having a hunger to see the excitement of the fire to rid him of an unendurable psychic sensation." Schmid drew the same conclusion regarding the irresistible impulse when he noted that, fires were set when the individuals were faced with important psychological changes to which they were unable to adjust themselves, and seemed to seek through firesetting an explosion to rid themselves of the unbearable situation.

It is worth noting that each individual at one time or another is faced with pressures, both internal and external, and it is when the pressures from both sources exceed the strength of the individual, that the situation is deemed intolerable. The individual at such times feels impelled to take some action to change the situation or reduce the prevailing tensions. Why fire is chosen by firesetters as the means of resolving this situation has been the basic question to all who have expressed interest in firesetting. Lewis and Yarnell, following their study, concluded that this could not be definitely determined. They speculated on the effects of chance suggestion, such as reading about or observing a fire during periods of acute anxiety, and also suggested the possibility of previous associations of an influential nature with fire, such as being frightened in the home by a fire or being praised for heroic behavior during a fire.

5Ibid., p. 17.
6Ibid., p. 21.
7Ibid., p. 397.
Despite the impossibility of supplying a definite answer to such a basic question, the above-mentioned authors made several findings that appear rather significant. In reporting on a group of child-firesetters, Dr. Helen Yarnell noted:

...a mixture of aggression, destructiveness, anxiety and self-punishment. It appeared that some deprivation in the family life made it impossible for the child adequately to resolve his oedipus situation so that he carried over his sadistic impulses with their accompanying anxiety. Bender, Keiser and Schilder have shown that aggressiveness in children is due to a primary aggressiveness toward them and is increased by enforcement of passivity, severe punishment, deprivation of food, love and anything which may threaten discomfort or destruction to the child. All the children of this group had suffered deprivation of love, many of food and security, and many had some social or physical defect which made it impossible to establish themselves in the home circle or school.... In the children coming from their own homes, there was always some serious traumatic factor, such as an unsympathetic step-parent with favoritism shown to step-siblings, an invalid and selfish parent, the absence of a father, or presence of 'boy friends' of the mother. Some children had been placed temporarily in institutions, which to them represents, often correctly, rejection by their parents, which the child can never forgive.8

This formulation made several points. It is well to consider the environmental factors that exist in the lives of the firesetters or any group of anti-social boys, but Dr. Yarnell made reference also to the personal physical or social defects of the boys in her sample. This would imply that in the cases of anti-social behavior, or more specific, firesetting, there are salient factors in the child's own personality or physical make-up, whether existing from birth or inherited from his parents, that go a long way in explaining his behavior. It is of

8Yarnell, op. cit., p. 283.
importance to consider this point because too often in a discussion of causal factors, the environmental situation is stressed over and beyond any other. Gordon Hamilton refers to some children who enjoy their badness—the expression of their impulses. She adds that the phrase, "There are no problem children only problem parents," should be carried a step further to infer that, "the child who has problem parents, unless successfully treated, will continue all his life to have a parental problem." While concerning ourselves with the environmental factors it is of utmost necessity that we also consider the child's reality situation and sense of reality lest we adopt the attitude that merely changing the external focus surrounding the child will solve the difficulty once and for all.

As is usually done in the study of delinquent behavior, Dr. Yarnell made reference to the role of the external environment in creating a delinquent or anti-social pattern, which, in the case of her sample, was expressed by firesetting. In considering the relationship between delinquency and influences from unfavorable environments, Cyril Burt found that: "Crime, or delinquency, is assignable to no one single universal source, nor yet to two or three; it springs from a wide variety and usually a multiplicity of alternative and converging influences." Lurie found the same to be true in his study of environmental influences in the production of behavior and personality disorders.

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10Cyril Burt, The Young Delinquent, p. 575.
It was found to be equally true in the majority of cases in this study that the causative factors operating were plural in number with the socio-psychological ones predominant. Medical factors, primarily the psychiatric condition of family members, were found to be of relative importance, while economic status of the family did not loom as an influential factor.

As in Burt's study, the circumstances observed in the boy's external environment were not peculiar to delinquent families. This observation again raises the question as to why these boys set fires as a way of relieving their tensions, since it is a known fact that children with identical conditions coexisting in their environment are not plunged into a career of firesetting. Burt concluded that "it must, therefore, as a rule, be either the number of factors or the particular combination of them that renders delinquency, (and in the case of this study, firesetting) a probable result."12

Following a thorough examination of all the factors affecting anti-social behavior, Lurie concluded that,

...the home is the bulwark and the chief resistance point in warding off possible harmful effects of vicious and unwholesome environmental factors. In other words the child who is blessed with a home in which both the social and medical conditions are normal or approximately normal can, in the great majority of cases, withstand the impacts of vicious neighborhood environmental influences. This was found to be true irrespective of the type of behavior problem presented by the child.13

12Burt, op. cit., p. 577.
13Lurie, op. cit., p. 158.
The emphasis of these findings is on the relationships existing in the home and the way in which they affect children. In their study, Lewis and Yarnell observed numerous instances of pathological mother-son relationships and maternal rejection.

The mother-son matrix is a very important one in the development of every boy. The total dependency on mother for mere existence during the early developmental stages normally gives way to the development of an increasingly independent personality. Total independence may never be accomplished, but the extent to which a child experiences an increasing physical and psychological separation from his mother will indicate both maternal maturity and the normal development of the child.

As a result, two of the most important happenings in any child's life is the creation of a maternal unity with the child in a harmonious manner and later a dissolution of the unity with equal harmony. A large majority of mothers are able to accomplish the psychological unity with their children, following the physical separation at birth. The major concerns of this study are the proper utilization of the existing unity and the later mastering of the painful process of breaking the unity, both of which appear to be more difficult than establishing the unity.

Difficulty in the utilization of the unity appears to arise out of the neurotic needs of most mothers, which defy sublimation in the dynamic development of motherliness. Mothers who have such pressing needs, whether they be of a dominating, dependent or erotic character, may well attempt to gratify these by the behavior of the child or in
relation to him. It is within this framework that parental neurosis often tends to provide the unconscious impetus to the child's neurosis or acting-out behavior.

Johnson and Szurek\textsuperscript{14} observed the manifestations of this phenomenon in a group of parents who fostered and sanctioned acting-out behavior in their children. This acting out provided a vicarious enjoyment for the parents, of their forbidden impulses. One group of mothers in this study who seemed unable or unwilling to discipline their sons were thought of as experiencing vicarious enjoyment of their son's delinquent behavior. The over-identification seen in one of the mothers also seemed in accordance with this suggestion.

Frieda Kuhlman in a discussion of the relationship between maternal seduction and symptomatic behavior in children, observed that,

While the child's strivings in the oedipal situation are generally recognized, the part adults play in the maintenance and unde liberate kindling of the erotic, aggressive infantile cravings is less familiar. Clinical evidence seems to indicate that reciprocity in such situations occurs rather frequently, especially if one parent is missing from the family unit. The remaining parent may often maintain such an exclusive emotional tie with the child that, as soon as awareness of its intensity occurs, both the adult and the child become acutely distressed.... In order to ward off tension, the child may react with different kinds of defensive and offensive behavior.\textsuperscript{15}

As another causal factor in acting-out behavior, Gordon Hamilton suggests that of maternal rejection.\textsuperscript{16} She observed that with serious


\textsuperscript{15}Frieda Kuhlmann, "Placement Resulting from Psychosexual Disturbance in a Mother-son Relationship," \textit{The Family}, vol. 25 (June, 1944), p. 144.

\textsuperscript{16}Gordon Hamilton, op. cit., p.p. 45-47.
regularity, rejected and unloved children act out any and every impulse and in reaction to every frustration, with little or no appreciation of the results of their actions or the possible repercussions. In the present study, rejection was found to be the characteristic factor in the parent-child relationships of the sixteen firesetters.

The element of resentment and desire for revenge is always suspected when there is a case of arson. This craving for revenge is easily precipitated by a rejection, real or imagined, of some kind by an important person in the child's environment. Lewis and Yarnell indicated that "the simplest forms of firesetting follow this pattern: that is, flagrantly rejected by mother they directly retaliate by setting a fire against her." 17

One other seemingly important factor to which Dr. Yarnell alluded is the punishment, or if we may refer to it as controls, that the child received. Every authority in the field of child psychology has given emphasis to this subject, implying that it is important that the child receive an adequate amount of discipline, neither too much nor too little, and always in a constructive, consistent manner.

Controls are extremely important in the maturation of an individual and the development of his superego, and effective discipline helps the child to direct his impulses into a form that meets with realistic social approval. This is, or should be, the goal of any form of constructive discipline.

17Lewis and Yarnell, op. cit., p. 413.
The factor of sexual perversions in firesetters is a well-publicized and commonly accepted one. As early as 1803, Osciander implied that he had found a physiological explanation for firesetting and based this on arterial blood draining into the genitals.\textsuperscript{18} Other authorities (Bischoff and Reiss) made references to this sexual component, but it was Schmid, in 1914, who, in seeking an explanation for the irresistibility of the drive to light fires, came up with one accepted sexual explanation. He referred to Freud's formulation that when a wish develops which is incompatible with ethical teaching and moral standards, the wish will be repressed (the wish always being associated with some infantile sex drive, incestuous in nature) and may be transformed into an act such as firesetting.\textsuperscript{19}

Ernst Simmel saw one of his patient's "incendiary acts as an unconscious compulsive attempt to find a substitute gratification for his reawakened and again repressed infantile masturbatory impulse,"\textsuperscript{20} while William Stekel stated that pyromania is an expression of blocked sexual drives that are very often on a homosexual level.\textsuperscript{21}

The extent and conclusive meaning of this factor in firesetting has never been decidedly determined. Lewis and Yarnell found that,

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{20}Ernst Simmel, "Incendiaryism," in \textit{Searchlights on Delinquency}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{21}Manfred S. Guttmacher, \textit{Sex Offenses}, p. 56.
...though firesetting may be considered as a form of substitutive perversion, the majority of offenders employed is as a temporary indulgence only during transitional periods and it is very rare to find offenders who continue the indulgence for prolonged periods. They did however, find one small group who had developed a real fire fetish for whom fire had become a sadistic pleasure.

Firesetting, as other forms of anti-social behavior, is a complicated phenomenon. Affected by predisposing factors, some of which have been mentioned in this discussion, it may further be complicated by a single or a plural number of precipitating factors. These factors become even more significant as we consider the prognosis of the boys involved, since it is the psychodynamics in the boys behavior coupled with the potential strengths in the ego and favorable environmental conditions that spell failure or success in our attempts to help him. It is with these considerations in mind that we approach this study of sixteen firesetters.

Summary of Theoretical Considerations

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that in the case of firesetting the influential factors are extremely complex. Of relative importance are the personal physical and social defects inherent in the boys' personalities and the socio-cultural factors in their environment. The factors appearing to exert the most dynamic influence are those connected to the relationship existing in the boys' homes and the type of discipline which they received.

22Lewis and Yarnell, op. cit., p. 262.
CHAPTER III
THE FIRESETERS AND THE AGENCY CONTACTS

This study is based on an intensive examination of the sixteen cases chosen and on the tabulation and classification of data gathered from the case records by means of a schedule. (See Appendix)

The specific questions employed in the schedule are geared to provide answers to the four basic areas of study as given earlier. They were developed on the basis of a critical examination of literature on the subject and a preliminary review of the case records to determine their salient features.

The cases were chosen from the closed files of the Worcester Court Clinic and the current file of the Worcester Youth Guidance Center. One basic criteria was employed for the selection of the cases: that the boy was known to have set a fire. So as to provide an adequate number of cases, it was not specified that the problem be mentioned on referral. For the same reason no time limit was specified. One other criteria was that the recording include at least two interviews—one with the mother or mother surrogate and one with the child.

The study was designed to investigate the type of children who become involved in non-profit arson. The information which evolved from the questions asked in the schedule fell into two categories. The first category is purely descriptive and lends itself quite readily to quantitative portrayal and analysis; as it is concerned with factors, such as age and religion, that can be isolated individually.
The second type of information has to do with the adequacy of functioning of the boys studied. While this information is presented in quantitative form in some instances, it seemed appropriate to identify this distinction as this second type of information is primarily concerned with such factors as personality and relationships experienced by the boys studied.

This chapter, designed to give a broad, over-all picture of the firesetters, will contain both types of information. In addition it will include some information on the contacts with the Youth Guidance Center and the Worcester Court Clinic.

**The Firesetters**

Of the sixteen cases meeting the criteria for this study, fourteen of the boys were white, one was Negro and one was a North American Indian, whose parents had moved to Worcester from Nova Scotia. This racial distribution seems to follow the pattern of the population of Worcester, which was, according to the latest available statistics, 99.1 per cent white, 0.8 per cent Negro and 0.1 per cent other.¹

In four of the cases studied the boys were referred to the agency for reasons other than firesetting. When this occurred it was possible to determine their age at the time they set the fires reported by their mothers to the workers. Table 1 gives the age of the firesetters at the time of their firesetting activities.

The youngest firesetter was six years old and the oldest was fourteen years old. Thirty-one per cent of the cases were from six to eight years of age. Fifty-six per cent were from nine to eleven years of age with the majority of this group being nine years old. The remaining 13 per cent fell in the age range of twelve to fourteen.

The average age of the group was nine years and three months of age.

Table 2 shows that among the sixteen cases studied there was an uneven distribution among the religious groups. Of the group ten, or 62.5 per cent, were Catholic while five, or 31 per cent, were Protestant. In one of the cases it was not indicated which religious faith the boy or his parents adhered to.

It is of interest to note the conspicuous absence of any child from Jewish parentage, although this group represents 4 per cent of the population of Worcester who claims some religious affiliation.

### TABLE 1

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<th>Age Range</th>
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TABLE 2

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF THE BOYS

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<td>Roman Catholic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Not given</td>
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It is of further interest to compare the above-given figures with the religious distribution of the population of Worcester. Available statistics indicate that Roman Catholics form 47 per cent of the population and Protestants rank second, representing 35 per cent of the population of Worcester.\(^2\) Thus, the Catholic group, which represents the largest percentage of the total population, surpassed the other groups by a ratio of almost two to one among the firesetters.

In regard to school attendance, eleven of the group were regularly enrolled in Worcester schools. One of the boys was attending elementary school in Westboro, while information as to the names and addresses of their schools was not available for four of the boys.

Of the group twelve were retarded in school to some extent. One was three grades behind, two were two grades retarded and six were one grade behind their expected grades. Another three of the group were in ungraded classrooms indicating excessive retardation of one form or

\(^2\)Town and City Monographs No. 63., Massachusetts Department of Commerce, 1954.
another in school. Four of the group were in their expected grades while none was ahead of his expected grade. This latter consideration is worth noting since children doing superior work are eligible for double promotion in the Worcester schools.

**TABLE 3**

**COMPARISON OF THE ACTUAL GRADES OF THE BOYS AND THE NUMBER OF GRADES RETARDED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual Grade</th>
<th>Number of Grades Retarded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A factor that may explain the severe retardation in school was the estimated I. Q. which was recorded. In six of the seven cases the estimated I. Q. was under 90. Other factors which could serve as partial explanation were the absences caused by truancy and running away listed in a large percentage of the cases. Added to these were the other manifestations of maladjustment in school as listed in Table 5.
I. Q.'s of the Firesetters

In seven of the sixteen cases where the I. Q. was recorded the number ranged from 72 to 102, six of the seven being below 90 and five of these below 80. These results do not appear to be in accordance with the recent findings, for example Sheldon and Eleanor Gleuck's; however with the absence of information on more than half the group, some questions may be raised as to the validity of conclusions drawn from the seven where the I. Q. was recorded.

In any case it is interesting to note that five of the group fell into the category usually considered below normal. Since the basic mental ability has direct and meaningful influence on the possible intellectual achievement and consequently on the grade placement in school, it is not unreasonable to expect that a sizeable portion of the group may have been retarded.

School Adjustment

Table 3 showed the extent of school retardation noted in each individual boy. Further reflecting the tendency to maladjustment among the sixteen boys was the serious and persistent misconduct in school, as was related by the mother in her interviews with the caseworker. An attempt was made to trace the misconduct or maladjustment in school.

The adjustment in school was divided into three groups: Good, Fair and Poor. Case illustrations are given to show the kind of adjustment that was placed in each group.

Good. Ben's mother said that he was an E student and that he had always been good. Once he got a U paper when his name was on the wrong side.

3Sheldon and Eleanor Gleuck, Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency, p. 207.
Michael's mother: "He does well in school both scholastically and behavior-wise." On another occasion she said, "Michael had done very well in school, getting all 80's and 90's on his report card. In addition he had gotten another four page report apparently having to do with his studies in religion and his citizenship."

Fair. Carl's mother: "He is not doing well in school and has special trouble in arithmetic. On his last report card he got a P in arithmetic, and F in language and his marks were mostly G's. He did get an E in manual training which he likes very much."

Poor. Ralph was originally referred to the agency at four and one-half (he set the fire at seven and one-half) at which time it was recorded, "She mentions to me that Mrs. Y. (the nursery school teacher) had told her that there is something disturbing about Ralph. She mentions some of the things that Ralph had done that caused problems at the nursery school; for example he had thrown sand in a kid's face and he damaged the wall of the nursery school. She said that Ralph pushed a girl in the lake and it was fortunate that someone was around and pulled the girl out. Mrs. MacCovitch said that the girl could easily have drowned and this was the thing that precipitated Mrs. Y. to exclude Ralph from the nursery school. She said that they sent Ralph up to the main house of the nursery school with a note that he was to be punished for pushing the girl into the lake and Ralph refused to give the note to the person up at the main house."

| TABLE 4 |
| SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT COMPARED WITH AGE GROUPING |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Adjustment in School</th>
<th>6 - 8</th>
<th>9 - 11</th>
<th>12 - 14</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No information</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 4, eleven of the boys, or nearly 75 per cent of the group, were classified as poorly-adjusted in school. This percentage coincides closely with the percentage of school retardation, and coupled with the frequency of sub-normal I. Q., strongly supports the suggestion that school difficulties and firesetting may have some relationship to the basic conflicts of children who act impulsively to diminish or solve their problems. Two of the boys were described as well-adjusted in school and a similar number was fairly well-adjusted. There was no available information on one of the boys to categorize his school adjustment.

It is of further interest to note that of those experiencing poor adjustment in school, an overwhelming majority were of the younger boys of the sample. This finding tends to suggest that the difficulties which the boys experienced were of long standing and were appreciable for some time in areas other than the delinquency for which they may have been referred to the agencies. It also coincides with the suggestion that most parents do not tend to feel a need for outside help with problems of young children.

In examining the case material it was apparent that many of the boys concurrently displayed several manifestations of maladjustment. Table 5 compares the number of symptoms with the ages of the boys.
TABLE 5

NUMBER OF SCHOOL MALADJUSTMENTS COMPARED WITH THE AGE OF THE BOYS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of School Problems</th>
<th>6 - 8</th>
<th>9 - 11</th>
<th>12 - 14</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings indicate that ten of the boys presented from three to six different types of misbehavior in school. It also indicates that serious misbehavior in school was prevalent among the younger boys of the sample. This coincides closely with the poor adjustment in school experienced by the younger boys.

Health

Table 6 examines the physical health of the boys under consideration. Good physical health indicates the absence of serious or chronically disabling disease. Fair means occasional periods of serious but non-chronic illness and Poor refers to serious, chronic illness.
### TABLE 6

**HEALTH OF THE FIRESETERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No information</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above information indicated that of the twelve boys on whom information was available six, or exactly 50 per cent, had some form of serious, chronic illness. There were five who were reported to be in fair health and only one could be considered as being in good health.

**Peer Adjustment**

Hazel Fredericksen observed that "boys tend to associate with and form attachments to boys of similar age, size, maturity and level of intelligence." The question was raised as to the type of adjustment each of the firesetters was making to his peer group. The group was divided into three sub-groups: Good, Fair and Poor.

If the boy got on well with other children, was friendly and made an effort to please and hold friends, his relationship was categorized as Good.

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If the boy did not actively seek the companionship of other children but was also not actively antagonistic to any of them, his adjustment to his peers was described as **Fair**.

If, however, he was aggressively unfriendly and other children did not seem to like him, his peer relationship was considered **Poor**.

**TABLE 7**

**PEER ADJUSTMENT OF THE FIRESETTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No information</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information was not available on five of the boys studied. Of the remaining eleven, six, more than 50 per cent, were considered as having made poor adjustment to their peer group. Three were seen as being fairly well-adjusted and only two were considered as being well-adjusted to their peers.

Lewis and Yarnell found that one-half of the cases which they studied critically had been in trouble with the authorities for one or many other types of anti-social activity, ranging from petty stealing to manslaughter. These activities were chiefly against property
(stealing, robbery, mutilating property), were associated with impulsive behavior such as running away, truancy and sexual misadventures.\(^5\)

The sixteen boys studied for this thesis were very similar to those reported by Lewis and Yarnell. Many, although not known to the local authorities, were reported by school, church and similar agencies to their parents as engaging in anti-social activities. In addition the boys were seen as presenting a variety of symptomatic behavior.

The following table, No. 8, lists thirteen individual boys with their reported delinquencies and associated symptoms.

**TABLE 8**

**DISTRIBUTION OF DELINQUENCIES AND SYMPTOMS SEEN IN THE FIRESETTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firesetter*</th>
<th>Delinquencies</th>
<th>Symptomatic Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob Jenkins</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>No bowel control (Seven years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psychosomatic complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Larson</td>
<td>Breaking and entering Vandalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Riley</td>
<td>Wanders away from home</td>
<td>Temper tantrums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Pierce</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Andrews</td>
<td>Destroying property</td>
<td>Uses stupidity as a defense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\)Lewis and Yarnell, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firesetter</th>
<th>Delinquencies</th>
<th>Symptomatic Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frank Leopold</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Homosexual activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Enuretic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Temper tantrums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Head banging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Infantile speech, stammering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy MacDonald</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Excessive fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stuttering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attention-getting behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Peters</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Hyperactive—jumps and wiggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Broke into store (twice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Destroying property</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard Phillips</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Daydreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Temper tantrums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walks and talks in sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Reynolds</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Excessive fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin Wolfe</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Sucks thumb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lisps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph MacCovitch</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>Hyperactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Suicide threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tried to kill peer (two times)</td>
<td>Destructive behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Anderson</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nervous and restless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Demands constant reassurance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names used in this study are fictitious.

Gordon Hamilton writes:

The normal child learns to accept himself and the reality of other persons, builds up constructive defense mechanisms against the crude expression of the drives, and also
sublimates these through the ordinary achievements and satisfactions of growing up. In normal superego development the child's aggression is turned against his own censored impulses and acts. 6

It is customary to consider the normal child as described above as occupying the mid-point between two extremes of a behavior scale. From the middle extends one arm, the extremity of which would be occupied by the passive, withdrawn child. At the other extreme is found the acting-out boy.

Hamilton describes the passive child as one who not having received...

adequate mothering, he is forced back to his own body for pleasure and attention, and the ordinary thumb-sucking, masturbation, and other body play may be prolonged or intensified.... The child thus forced to love himself prolongs his infancy, does not outgrow his infantile habits,.... The child with marked habit-disorders is usually a passive child, self-preoccupied,.... 7

Newman describes the acting-out child as possessing...

a type of behavior where an impulse or fantasy, conscious or unconscious, is immediately acted upon whether or not it be an appropriate or realistic response. The inner controls which serve to inhibit most people from such behavior are undeveloped in these boys. They lack the ability to postpone, regulate, or foresee consequences. Such behavior appears as involuntary as the flare up of a firecracker. 8

6Gordon Hamilton, op. cit., p. 31

7Ibid., p. 27.

It is thus evident from the reported delinquencies and symptomatic behavior in the firesetters that this group of boys tend to congregate at the extremes of the behavior scale or vacillate from one extremity to the other. As such, they fit into the category of primary behavior disorder as described by Gordon Hamilton. They seem to lack the inner controls that characterize the normal child. In addition other findings presented in this study indicate that they have had few achievements and satisfactions during their development, which would help them to learn the value of sublimation.

Summary of the Firesetters

With reference to the firesetters there was no significant findings in regard to their age or race; those of Catholic faith outnumbered those of Protestant faith, two to one. The group was seen as experiencing severe difficulty in school in the forms of retardation and school maladjustment. This related closely to their basic mental ability as indicated by the recorded I. Q.'s. In regard to the health and peer-adjustment, it was found that fewer than half of the group, or 37.5 per cent, was classified as poor. A large majority of the boys were described as presenting serious forms of delinquent and symptomatic behavior.

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9Hamilton, op. cit., p. 69.
Nature of the Agency Contacts

The principal criteria for this study was that the boy be involved in firesetting activities at one time or another. Of the sixteen who met the criteria twelve were referred to the agencies following their firesetting, and in four cases the fires were reported during the process of treatment.

TABLE 9

PROBLEMS NOTED UPON APPLICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firesetting (only)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firesetting plus other problems</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other problems</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two cases where problems in addition to the firesetting were cited included one boy who was running away and stealing and another who was a disciplinary and school problem. The four cases where other problems were cited upon referral involved four different difficulties and are listed below, as they were given on referral:

1. Placement
2. Runaway
3. Tried to drown another child; refuses to do what he is told; excluded from nursery schools and mother needs to work.
4. Behavior problem in school, wiggles, inattentive; over-affectionate with other boys.
Table 8 indicates that in the majority of the cases cited, including those where firesetting was the only problem, there was subsequent description of additional problems in the child's development.

In regard to the referral source an overwhelming majority was referred by the Probation Department. Table 10 compares the referral source with the agency where the boy was seen.

**TABLE 10**

**REFERRAL SOURCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency Where Seen</th>
<th>Referral Source</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probation</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Clinic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Guidance Center</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ten of the cases were referred by the Probation Department, eight to the Court Clinic and two to the Youth Guidance Center. Since firesetting is a problem with such serious social implications, it seems quite appropriate that the Probation Department would be involved in a majority of these cases. In the two cases where the boys were referred to the Youth Guidance Center by the Probation Department one of the boys was formerly known to the Center having treated there at an earlier date. In the other case the Juvenile Division of the Court requested that the mother be processed on an out-of-court basis with the provision that the boy be seen at the Center.
In the three cases referred by the School firesetting was cited upon application in one case in addition to stealing and running away. In the other two cases the boys were referred because of their misbehavior in school which was disturbing their adjustment. In these the fires were later reported by the mothers who were being seen at the Center.

Three of the boys were referred by their mothers. Again in only one of these cases was firesetting cited at the time of application. In addition the boy was described as doing poor work in school and being a discipline problem. In one of the remaining cases placement was requested on referral and in the other the boy was referred for running away.

Of the total cases there were a majority in which the mother was the only parent seen in both agencies.

### TABLE 11

**PARENT SEEN AT THE AGENCIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This pattern seems to be consistent with the general cultural pattern which implied major responsibility on the mother's part for the child's development. The regular practice in most Child Guidance Centers represents an acceptance of this cultural pattern. A review indicates that a majority of cases treated involved only the mother and the child. Recently there has been a greater attempt to include the fathers in treatment whenever this is possible and/or warranted. The three cases in which the fathers were seen in addition to the mothers may be a reflection of this tendency.

In one of the cases the boy was living with an Aunt who had been responsible for him for the major part of his life, dating back to an early desertion by both mother and father. In the other case the boy was placed at the Nazereth Home and no parent was seen.

Summary of the Agency Contact

We have seen that the majority of the boys were referred for fire-setting only, that the group was divided evenly among those seen at the Youth Guidance Center and those seen at the Court Clinic, that the majority of the referral came from the Probation Officer and that in an overwhelming majority of cases it was the mother only who was seen during treatment.
CHAPTER IV

THE FAMILIES OF THE FIRESETTERS

Chapter III gave a broad over-all picture of the individual fire- setters with some information on the contacts with the agencies, including minor references to the boys' parents. This chapter will attempt to consider the family characteristics in order to get an appreciation of the boys' social milieu.

Table 12 examines the occupations of the fathers.

**TABLE 12**

**OCCUPATION OF FATHERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction worker</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional golf player</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hat blocker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not given or father not present</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest single group of fathers was employed in factories, mainly unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Another slightly smaller group were construction workers, one of whom was self-employed. One of the fathers was a professional golf player. One father was employed as a hat blocker, while another who was a semi-invalid did part-time
work, primarily because it was something to do and not for its financial gain. In three cases the occupation of the father was not given while one of the fathers was not in the home.

It should be noted that where an actual father was not in the home and a step-father was present, the information on the latter was tabulated.

Contrary to the frequently quoted suggestion that most delinquents come from broken homes, the findings indicated that in a majority of the cases the boys came from homes in which both natural parents were in the home.

TABLE 13

PARENTS PRESENT IN THE HOME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents Present</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both natural parents</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother and step-father</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One natural parent (mother)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 13, one of the mothers had remarried following a divorce from the boy's father. In the five cases where the mother was the only parent present three of the mothers had been divorced from the boy's father. One of these had remarried and was subsequently divorced and in another the boy was living at Nazareth. In two of these five cases there had been no marriage between the boy's
parents. In one of these cases the father was married to another woman and was in and out of the home maintained for the boy and his mother. The mother in the other case stated that she had never planned to marry the boy's father (who was dead when the case was seen).

Earlier reference was made to the boy who was living with an Aunt and who comprised the category "Other."

**Dominant Parent**

Children in their behavior tend to reflect the attitudes and values of parental figures. The development and inculcation of these values depend, to a large degree, on which parent exerts the most influence in guiding the affairs of the family.

As would be expected in the homes where the father was absent, the mother was the dominant parent. However, in the ten cases where the father or step-father was present the mother was also regarded as the dominant parent. In every case she was described as the one who was the dominant influence in guiding the affairs of the family, assuming leadership in family life—disciplining and supervising the children, controlling expenditures and running the household.

**Maternal Supervision**

Consideration has been given above to legally unbroken homes. Some authorities have taken the view that "there are no or few advantages for the children in quarreling and disunited families over those families that are legally and physically broken."¹

¹F. Ivan Nye, *Family Relationships and Delinquent Behavior*, p. 41.
One of the factors from which the child may receive little benefit during this important developmental stage is the lack of the necessary supervision by a parental figure because of their unavailability.

It appears rather significant to point out that in the ten cases where both parents were present in the home the mother was employed in eight cases. In none of these cases was it possible to determine whether her hours of employment coincided with those of her husband. However, it is highly possible that she would be absent from the home when the child left for or returned from school. A further result of her employment may be that the time required for her to help and supervise the children was lessened considerably, so that a loss of direct control was inevitable. Of the six cases where the father was not present or the boy was living with foster parents, four of the mothers worked. In one case the boy had no responsible adult to supervise him during his mother’s absence. One was seen as being able to take some responsibility for personal needs having reached his fourteenth birthday prior to this period. Two of the boys were supervised by a neighboring adult or an older relative. Two of the mothers remained in the home and took some responsibility for supervising the home and the child.

Marital Status

In studying inter-parental relationships, various investigators have made frequent reference to the fact that there is a connection between the child’s adjustment and his relationship with his mother. This in turn is related to an appreciable degree to the marital adjustment of the mother.
The ten cases in which there were two parents (mother and father or step-father) were studied to evaluate the marital adjustment. The findings divided the ten cases into three categories: Unsatisfactory, Much friction and Neurotic.

Unsatisfactory:

The marital adjustment was classified as unsatisfactory when the mothers seldom spoke warmly of their husbands. In contrast they frequently expressed dissatisfaction about certain traits in their spouses and an appreciable degree of parental quarreling existed, but there was no threat of separation or divorce.

Much friction:

In another group of cases evidence of much friction between husband and wife could be seen. The mothers in all these cases verbalized severe dissatisfaction with their husbands and the marriage in one way or another and there were frequent threats of separation or divorce. The evidence of much friction was demonstrated in the following ways. One mother expressed the feeling of being under pressure but was "unable to break down and walk out on husband and children." Another mother resented her husband's passivity and complained that he was interested in sex only after drinking. She had never had sexual intercourse when he did not have an odor of alcohol on his breath. Mrs. Reynolds described her husband as demanding, unfeeling, selfish. She had started divorce proceedings but dropped them. (She finally divorced Mr. Reynolds during the latter part of her contact with the agency.)
Neurotic:

A neurotic marriage was one in which there was evidence of a masochistic relationship with the husband. In the cases falling into this category the mothers felt extremely unhappy in the relationship with husbands who were alcoholic in one case and psychotic in the other. One of the mothers (wife of the alcoholic husband) had thought of separation but did not follow through for the children's sake and because of financial ties.

Mrs. Phillips described her husband as being very moody; she and the children had to be quiet when he is moody. He was physically abusive and she was afraid of being killed. She felt she should leave him but could not. During the course of treatment he was committed to a psychiatric hospital and following this Mrs. Phillips obtained a divorce.

Of the ten cases studied to evaluate the marital adjustment, four of the mothers were felt to have an unsatisfactory marital adjustment. Another group of four mothers described a marriage in which there was much friction and two mothers were seen as partners in a neurotic marriage.

Health of the Parents

Health of the parents (both physical and emotional), like their mutual presence in the home, can operate in such a manner as to affect the cohesiveness of the family, the supervision of the child and many other facets of the family life. As a result, it was considered worthy to note the health of the parents. Reference to the parents' health was rarely made unless there was a present or past disability.
In the two cases which were considered questionable the mothers discussed actively with their caseworkers their insecure feelings about their emotional health. The case illustrations below indicate some of their concern and account for their position on the scale:

Mrs. Roberts: "She mentioned how she feels like something blowing up and said that every-so-often she just stands in the kitchen and screams. She said that she gets this way because she figures she is trying to manage all this alone."

Mrs. Reynolds: "She feels inadequate and inhibited with regard to talking to other people—particularly when she must do anything by herself in a group. She described running away from a class in modern ballet because she was so frightened of what she could not or would do—she was not sure which. She has known for some time that she is quite inhibited but does not know what to do about it."

In five of the eight cases where there were active complaints it was the mother who was ill. Two of these cases included hospitalization for a psychiatric disorder—one was a confirmed alcoholic. The other two cases involved principally physical disorders—one had been syphilitic and was also hospitalized for other illnesses and the other had three
complaints—pneumonia, anemia and hepatitis. In addition another mother complained of migraine headaches for which she received frequent medications. The family was affected primarily by the father's emotional illness and was counted among the active complainants.

Of the three cases which involved illness of the fathers, one included a hospitalization for psychiatric disorder, one was partially crippled from rheumatoid arthritis and the other had a serious siege of pneumonia.

Family Size and Ordinal Position

The findings indicated that there was no general pattern in the size of the families nor any significant feature regarding the boy's ordinal position in his family.

TABLE 15

FAMILY SIZE AND ORDINAL POSITION OF THE FIRESETTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Size</th>
<th>Only Child</th>
<th>First Born</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Last Born</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In three of the cases the firesetter was the only child in his family. The greatest concentration of cases was of families in which there were three to five children; these categories included nine of the cases. There were three families which could be considered large (six or seven children) and four small families (one or two children).

Two of the boys were first-born in their family and three were the youngest. One-half of the cases involved boys who occupied a middle position among their siblings.

Summary of the Families of the Firesetters

We have seen that there was no general pattern in the size of the families nor any significant finding regarding the boys ordinal position. Information on the father's occupation revealed that the group tended toward non-professional occupations.

It was also indicated that the majority of the boys lived with both natural parents. The mothers were the dominant parent even in the cases when the father was in the home. Three-fourths of the mothers had occupations outside the home. In the ten cases where the marital adjustment was reviewed, it was seen to be unsatisfactory, with much friction or neurotic. One-half of the families were affected by active illness or serious hospitalizations of one of the parents.
CHAPTER V

THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

The classical picture of the primary behavior disorder is an extremely aggressive child who acts out his impulses. However he feels, so he acts. This is because he has a deficient superego or internal moral authority; he is neither restrained from within nor, since he has a poor perception of and adaptation to reality, held back by social controls. The aggression may always be interpreted as reaction to the restrictions and frustrations of the early (usually parental) environment.

Boys who use firesetting as a method of decreasing or solving their difficulties tend to fall into the category of primary behavior disorder. From the formulation made above it is apparent that among the factors contributing to the formation of the primary behavior disorders are the parental child relationships existing in the child's environment and the type of discipline he has received. An attempt will be made to evaluate these two factors in the lives of the sixteen boys studied.

Parent-Child Relationships

In attempting to evaluate the predominant characteristic of the parent-child relationship, each case was closely studied. Table 16 shows the characteristic factor in the mother-child relationships of the boys studied.

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1 Hamilton, op. cit., p. 45.
TABLE 16
MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CASE OF THE SIXTEEN FIRESETTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relationship</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-close—sexualized</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-protective</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-identification</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The material given by the mother in five cases in her discussions with the caseworker indicated the existence of a relationship in which the tie between the mother and son was unusually close with appreciable sexual overtones. In all five cases the marital relationship was described as being unsatisfactory for the mother.

The five mothers described to the worker the meaning their sons had for them and how each seemed to reserve all his love for her to the exclusion of their fathers or other siblings. In two of the cases the mothers slept with the sons during extensive periods when the husband was absent from the home—in one of these latter two the mother described a physical display of erotic behavior between herself and her child.

Selections from two cases are presented below in order to present a clearer picture of the type of descriptive material that was found in
the case records, causing them to be considered as presenting sexualized situations. The case of Ralph MacCovitch, which fell into this category, is presented in Chapter VII.

Mrs. Phillips, mother of Howard:

She doesn't love him and kiss him as she does the other children. This is because Howard means more to her than 'the little children' do.... She says how being hers, she has a strange feeling for him.... It is as though she wants to protect him. She says she doesn't love him any more than the other children, and then says she loves him differently in a protective way. She feels, she thinks, more this way towards Howard than the two girls. She thinks she understands him more because his feelings are so much like hers.

Howard's therapist observed that he is concerned with the seductiveness of his mother and his phantasy of incestuous feelings. "We discussed his feelings when his second half-sister was born. He had the phantasy that he was the father of that particular sister.... In other interviews Howard talked about his mother's frequent kisses that he thoroughly disliked."

Mrs. Larson, mother of Jack:

"Recently Jack has been rather seclusive and hasn't talked much to his parents. The boys have always been closer to her than they have been to Mr. Larson, but she doesn't think this is so unnatural. She knows that Jack and his siblings love their father and respect him, but there is little conversation between them. They do talk a lot to her, but not the things she wants to hear. When worker asked her to explain she became vague, but worker was left with the impression that she wanted to know their ideas, rather than their activities. She did tell of one incident trying to illustrate how she is trying to get closer to Jack. She mentioned that when Jack went to bed early last night, she had asked him to come in bed with her, so that they could talk, but the boy had refused and said he wasn't ill, just tired and wanted to go to sleep.

She discussed how she assumes all the responsibility for the children—does homework with them and goes to Boy Scout meetings with Jack."
It was evident in the psychiatric conference that Jack was reacting to a real seductive mother and her encouraging him to lose control. Especially indicated was her kissing Jack up to the present time despite Mr. Larson's negative reactions to this. She mentioned he would kiss her and go out and set a fire.

In all five cases there seemed to be a conflict centering around the triangle of mother, father and child which had persisted from a very early period in the child's life. As previously indicated, all sixteen mothers were considered as the dominant parent, and in the five cases falling into this category this seemed to be particularly so.

One of the fathers maintained another family with whom most of his time was spent; two of the fathers were physically or emotionally disabled to such a degree that the mothers became the breadwinners. The two remaining fathers were described as unable to express any feelings and not having any backbone. They both brought home the money for expenses and this was the extent of their carrying out their role as fathers.

As is so often the case when the father is passive, the mothers were seen as aggressive, somewhat hostile and extremely seductive. While on the one hand, encouraging the child's overt expression of affection, it was likely that they would appear to the child as capable of being punitive and depriving if the response exceeded a certain degree. This seemed to be especially true in one case where the child constantly accused the mother of wanting to get rid of him. In three other cases the mother displayed over-protective behavior, not wanting the child
to join the Boys Club and keeping him close to her, as if attempting
to defeat any attempt for them to become men, thus in a rather symbolical
fashion, castrating them.

The mother's seductiveness was likely to be considered in the
child's mind as inviting the retaliation of the father, who was seen
by the child as the rightful one to occupy the mother's interest, by
virtue of his size and strength. In addition, as a result of the edu­
cational and maturational process the exclusive possession of the mother
tends to become more and more unacceptable and forbidden. These fea­
tures seemed to create an anxiety, which to the child may have become
so great that he was forces to escape from the situation which fostered
it. It would seem that this was directly related to the running away,
which was recorded in two of the boys, while the others engaged in such
acting-out behavior as breaking and entering and attempts to drown
another child, as if attempting to force some authority figure to remove
them from the situation.

In the five cases in which there seemed to exist an over-close
sexualized situation, it is quite likely that the firesetting activities
may have been unconsciously related to the nature of the parent-child
relationship and represented overt attempts by these children to escape
from the intensity and danger of the relationship with their mothers.

In considering the meaning of the parent-child relationship,
another group of cases was found in which the most significant charac­
teristic appeared to be that of rejection. The material provided through
casework interviews gave evidence of an excessive amount of parental rejection, many times in preference to another child or children of the other sex. It is basically true that in every relationship, of which a parent-child relationship may be an epitome, there are some elements of rejection. However, in the eight cases falling into this category, rejection was reflected to an outstanding degree.

Excerpts from cases are given below to indicate the type of cases falling into this group.

Mrs. Peters, mother of Henry:

She begins the hour almost immediately by saying that she was in the State Hospital three years ago, that the boy is making her so upset and so worried she does not know what to do with him.... She seems in an almost pleading, whining sort of way to emphasize he is more than she can take.... She speaks with some resentment and anger as she emphasizes that he does not seem to mind her, he does not seem to want to do anything she says.... She talks of the anger that she feels toward Henry, and how nervous she gets inside and how jumpy her stomach gets that she does not know what to do. She speaks of the shame that she feels in the neighborhood for everybody knows about Henry.

In discussing possible placement, defensively she indicated that she did not want anyone to think that she wanted to get rid of her children, but if it was going to help Henry, she was certainly willing to go along with this.

Mrs. Schenk, mother of Harvey:

She had no reluctance at all in indicating that Harvey was an illegitimate child and that there was no thought of her marrying the man who was his father, and that altogether she seemed reasonably contented with her life. She has always worked and Harvey was placed in a foster home, which she had secured through an ad in the paper, from the time he was an infant until he was five years old. This placement was terminated by the mother, as the foster mother was not well and she felt that she could manage now that Harvey was of school age.
Mrs. Schenk recently moved away from her sister's although this provided no supervision for Harvey. She left money at a spa and he would buy his lunch usually. Following fire-setting she placed him in another foster home, secured through an ad also. It had not occurred to her that the previous foster home may be available. To meet her finances she secured a night job in a store and when the worker commented on how tired she must be, she replied that although she worked from early morning till ten at night it was just as well since it did not give her any time to think or miss Harvey.

Rejection is as complicated in its etiology and manifestations as in its effects on children. In two of the eight cases which fell into this category the parents had hoped to have girls when the boys were born. It was impossible to distinguish the cause for the rejection in the other six cases, although it would seem quite related to the parents' disappointment in boys. This disappointment appeared to result from the boy's failure to conform to parental demands and his inability to live up to their expectations, as indicated by such statements by the parents: The mother of Bob Jenkins said, "He like all men is no good." The mother of Henry Peters said, "I don't know why he has to be this way; I have done all I can for him."

Parental rejection of their offspring is known to be quite prevalent when there is marital disharmony. The eight cases seemed to be in accordance with this viewpoint, as it was noted that all eight mothers expressed some disappointment in their marital partners or marriages, of which four had ended in separation or divorce. It is felt that the rejection of the boys as was seen in these eight cases may be related to the parents' incompatibility and inability to assume their responsibilities as marital partners.
Three of the mothers were simultaneously described as being over-protective and controlling of the boys, so that the boys were extremely confused and insecure in relation to their position in the family and especially as recipients of their mother's attention. It is quite likely that the two extremely contrasting forms of maladjustment as indicated in Table 8 may be the results of inconsistent parental handling of the child and his need to react with aggressiveness and submissiveness at one and the same time.

The outstanding personality defect in the rejected child, whether the rejection is concealed or overt, is the lack of a feeling of security or of a sense of belonging with an all pervasive anxiety. This anxiety may express itself in the form of self-depreciation as he feels himself worthless and unlovable, reflecting the picture of himself as he feels others see him. On the contrary the rejection may cause a response of anger and resentment at the attitude adopted by his parents and may be expressed by displays of hostile, aggressive behavior. This too would be in accordance with the contrasting type of symptomatic behavior of acting out and withdrawal which the boys expressed. The fires which the boys of this group set may well have been their attempts to punish or destroy the rejecting parent by doing away with them, to destroy the home, source of their frustration, or to secure their parents' attention and love.

Three of the cases did not seem to fit in either of the two categories mentioned. One of them seemed to be characterized by an over-protectiveness on the mother surrogate's part and one with an extreme
identification between mother and son. The other was that of a boy who had a long-standing experience in foster homes. This latter case may well fit into the category of rejection but it was felt that sufficient information to warrant such a classification was not available.

An illustrative excerpt from the case where over-protectiveness was seen as the basic characteristic of the parent-child relationship is given below.

Michael Pierce:

Mrs. Baker was Michael's aunt and had raised him from the time he was deserted by his parents at an early age. She reared him and his two siblings until they had left recently to live with their father who had remarried and was residing in another state. Mrs. Baker had given the children every minor thing they wanted and kept them rather dependent upon her, until with the approaching adolescence they developed other interests, at which time she became distressed. This development of outside interests later was very threatening to Mrs. Baker and she seemed to draw Michael close to her. She gave him several dollars each week, claiming that he might steal if he was deprived of anything he wanted.

Mrs. Baker refused to accept the fact of Michael's fire-setting or stealing when she was told by a police officer. Even when Michael had told her of his participation in these activities, she dismissed this as a mistake or as the fault of Michael's companions. She refused to let Michael work part-time during the summer because he was too young (fourteen years) and sickly. She did not see this as necessary because she and her husband were working and could take care of his needs.

Overprotection can cause a variety of repercussions as the child continues to develop. For a child who remains securely under the care and protection of his mother, reality always remains unknown and when by some unforeseen circumstance the child comes face-to-face with it, it can easily be overwhelming. The ego needs to learn gradually and
does so through trial and error. Ignorance of a situation naturally precludes dealing with it unconstructively, not because of any inherent inadequacy, but resulting from a lack of an opportunity to learn.

Through misunderstanding and occasionally through inflexible adherence to some of the modern theories of child-rearing, some parents feel that a child should be protected from any frustration and guilt. Such practices cripple the development of the inner conscience, or superego, which is of vital necessity if the child is to develop into a sociable adult dealing maturely with frustrations and feeling an appropriate sense of guilt for some impulses and behavior.

It is felt that Michael, who set fires to two trucks merely because he wanted to see an explosion, had failed to build up any constructive defenses against the unbridled expression of his impulses. This was because of the unyielding prevention of independent behavior by his foster parents.

The remaining case presented a picture of an extreme identification of the mother with her son. To illustrate, the following excerpt was selected from the case.

Mrs. Reynolds, mother of Paul:

She said that if she ever has felt that she knows someone well, it is Paul. Then came quite a long and detailed description of how the two of them are so very much alike. They enjoy the same things, have the same interests, they think alike, feel alike and also their reactions are in many ways the same. I explored many of the things Mrs. Reynolds brought forth further and somehow got the feeling as if she was really thinking about Paul in terms of herself. She
finally even said that quite often they do not need to communicate verbally because she understands the boy so well in terms of herself. She said that very often she feels annoyed at her husband because he will question Paul about something, or say something that she feels strongly he should not do because he should know. But then she has to remind herself that, after all, he does not know Paul as well as she does. She ended this part of the discussion by talking about (and actually using the word) their strong identification with each other.

The worker who saw Mrs. Reynolds was impressed with the fact that Mrs. Reynolds used Paul to express and act out her own feelings and impulses, especially when it came to the expression of anger and hostility.

This relationship may be seen as another form of overprotection in which the mother attempts to maintain and reinforce the closeness between herself and the child, as was experienced during her pregnancy and the child's infancy. It is as if the mother sees the child as an extension of herself and treats him as such, preventing his growth into more independent behavior. This type of relationship is most commonly presented by mothers who fit Helene Deutsch's^ description of the masculine or aggressive woman. As such they only partially accept their femininity and express their masculine strivings through their sons, who represent their masculine side, and in some extreme cases their masculine phallus. This coincides rather closely with the worker's impression of Mrs. Reynolds' use of Paul to express her own aggression and hostility.

Paul was reported as having set three fires. The first of these was set following one of the many separations between his parents. The

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other two were set after his male therapist had cancelled two successive appointments. It is quite likely that these fires may have been related to the absence of two significant males who could exert some controls over the expression of his impulses and prevent his mother's castrating him.

Summary on the Parent-Child Relationship

Two major patterns of parent-child relationships were found among the group. One involved the existence of an over-close sexualized situation and included five boys. The other major pattern was that characterized by rejection and involved eight boys.

Three boys were seen in which the pattern of parent-child relationships differed to the above and also between the three. One of the boys lived with an overly-protective aunt and in one case there was a neurotic identification between mother and son. In the remaining case the boy was placed at Nazereth, a parochial home for delinquent boys, so that the parent-child relationship was not evaluated.
Discipline

The techniques required for proper child-rearing involve a balance between encouragement of self-expression and freedom on the one hand and training for conformity on the other. Along with rights, the child has some responsibilities, so that too few restrictions, like too many, are undesirable. The child with his growing curiosity and increasing physical adequacy tends to want to defy rules and regulations and rebel against authority. On the other hand, he finds comfort and satisfaction when some restrictions are enforced or attempts are made to curb some of his activities. Complete failure on the part of his parents to curb some of his enterprises leads to confusion and unhappiness. As a result discipline is an important aspect of any child's growth, and the attitudes and practices which his parents adopt contribute to a child's success or failure to learn to personally suppress his impulses and to forego immediate pleasures in anticipation of desirable future goals.

Of the many conditions listed as causal factors of delinquency, Burt states that "the group showing the closest connection with crime consists of those that may be summed up under the head of defective discipline. Such features are encountered five times as often with delinquents as with non-delinquent children."³

Gleuck, in making a similar comparison, found that the most marked difference was the greater extent to which the parents of delinquents resorted to physical punishment, rather than reason with the boys about their misconduct.⁴

³Cyril Burt, op. cit., p. 92.
⁴Gleuck, op. cit., p. 133.
With an approach similar to that used to evaluate the parent-child relationship, each case was reviewed in order to evaluate the disciplinary attitudes and methods existing in the families of the firesetters.

Of the sixteen cases reviewed for this study, there was available information on the disciplinary attitudes and methods employed in the families of all the boys except one. Table 17 indicates the type of parental discipline that was described in the boys' experience.

**TABLE 17**

**PARENTAL DISCIPLINE OF THE BOYS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Discipline</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permissive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents unable to discipline</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsh and Punitive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 17, there were two prevailing patterns in the group which will be discussed later. Mrs. Baker, parent surrogate, was considered permissive in her approach to discipline while one father was harsh and punitive. Illustrations of these two are given below.

Mrs. Baker, mother of Michael:

Mrs. Baker talked a great deal about the amount of money she and her husband gave Michael each week and it usually totalled several dollars. The worker suggested the possibility of an
allowance which would help Michael to plan his own expenditures and give him the experience of handling money. This Mrs. Baker tended to dismiss as it seems their chief fear was that Michael would steal if he was deprived of anything he wanted. Mrs. Baker continued to 'thank God' that she has her job so that she can give Michael the things he wants. They live simply and they have all they want. It is important, she feels, for their children also to have what they want.

Mrs. Roberts, mother of Jerry:

Jerry was seen as receiving little attention from his father other than in matters relating to discipline. Mr. Roberts was described by Mrs. Roberts as being very severe with Jerry and his siblings, beating them for minor misdemeanors. At one time, when visited by a worker, the children were observed sitting motionless while in the same room with their father. Mr. Roberts was not at home often and paid little or no attention to his family.

Extreme permissiveness with children tends to provide a false freedom in which the child grows up uncontrolled and unsure of himself, uncertain of what to do and what not to do. Children reared in this type of atmosphere sometimes fail to develop an adequate superego. As a result, they may become so frightened by any responsibility that they are unable to express themselves and their impulses in any way, desirable or otherwise. On the other hand, the individual may accept the freedom as tacit permission to act out his impulses without any concern for the consequences of his acts.

It was felt that Michael was severely lacking in inner controls. His firesetting was seen as one of his attempts to gain or have some controls imposed on him. It is quite possible that he may have been provoking some official restraints, such as one available from the Police Department, so that he would not be allowed to lose his control over his impulses.
As implied above, punishment or controls used with discretion can be of value to a child because of the lessons in reality perception he can learn from them. Most authorities suggest that punishment should fit the crime, or in other words, should be a logical consequence of the child's misbehavior. A child who receives excessive punishment may develop an overly-rigid or punitive superego which restricts any free activity. Conversely he may react with indifference to any form of disapproval or punishment, which is another form of superego malformation. Another result from harsh and punitive discipline comes when punishment is the only form of attention a child receives from his parents. It is possible that the child may prefer punishment rather than be ignored. He may then invite punishment in order to convince himself that he is loved or at least noticed.

Sufficient information to support any speculation as to the effect of excessive punishment on Jerry was felt to be lacking. The author, however, would wonder if the voices which Jerry heard telling him to light the fires may not be the expression of an over-developed or rigid superego and his firesetting activities geared to check and expiate some form of imaginary guilt.

In further evaluating the disciplinary techniques and approaches, eight cases were found in which the attitudes and techniques were inconsistent or erratic. While we assume that parents have to vary their controls and permissiveness under certain circumstances, the inconsistency in nine of the cases was appreciable to an outstanding degree. This inconsistency included not only a confused mixture of permission
and refusal regarding certain activities, but also extreme differences of opinion between the parents on the matters of discipline. To illustrate the nature of these cases, excerpts from a few records will be presented.

Mrs. Andrews, mother of Peter:

In a very quiet manner, yet with some feeling, she began to bring out the fact that the boys (Peter and a ten year old sibling) will not listen to Mr. Andrews when he tells them to do anything. She feels this is so because he will not and never has 'beat them.' She feels that he should because this is the reason why they will not listen. She expressed the feeling that her husband never stands up to them and is never able to be very strong and determined in his control of the children. She feels this has always been the case, that he has always 'pampered' them and that at times she has to step in and holler at her husband to be stronger and more affirmative with the children.

On another occasion she mentioned that Peter had committed some misdemeanor at home. She added that she 'punished' Peter by putting him in bed but did not keep him there for more than half an hour.

Mrs. Phillips, mother of Howard:

Mrs. Phillips discussed the matter of discipline considerably with the caseworker. She described her husband as being very moody and severe in his punishment of the children. On one occasion she described how severely he beat Howard and added, "I didn't know a man could beat his own child that way." She said another time, "He won't let the children cry and when I am home I let them cry and be children."

With regard to herself she told, "When my husband is working, Howard will jump on the furniture and will deliberately throw things around the room. I think he wants me to come after him. I do not get angry with him but just do not like him to do this."

One of the major influences in the development of the superego is the definition parents give to acceptable behavior as they permit and forbid various acts and responses. When there are inconsistencies in
discipline stemming from one parent or a wide difference between the methods of the two parents, the child perceives a confused picture of acceptable behavior.

The child feels secure if the demands and privileges available are predictable. If this is not so, the child tends to guide his behavior according to his evaluation of parental tolerance at the given moment. Away from parent in a world that is strange and indistinguishable because of his inadequate conception and faced with a situation that requires certain behavior, the child has no yardstick and is unable to respond freely. In such cases the superego tends to be inadequate, as it usually takes shape from requirements which are consistently imposed on the child. A parental attitude that is perceived in a confused pattern does not readily become a part of the superego structure.

Of all the types of defective discipline, Burt considers as "the most frequent of all and the most disastrous, the union of license and severity with the same home." Any effects this form of defective discipline had on the nine boys falling into this category and its relationship to their firesetting was difficult to distinguish and beyond the scope of this study.

The other major pattern that evolved when the cases were reviewed with an attempt to evaluate the discipline was that of five cases in which the parents were unable or unwilling to provide any type of discipline for the boys. In three of the five cases the mothers described a complete bewilderment on their parts as to what to do with their sons. They had tried all forms of disciplinary techniques but had been unable
to find any one that worked successfully. So complete was their discouragement that they had considered placement as the ultimate solution. Ralph MacCovitch is a good example of a case falling into this category. His case will be presented in more detailed summary forms in Chapter VII.

One of the mothers indicated that she was afraid of her eleven year old son and had been very reluctant to question some of his activities about which she had received complaints from the school and neighbors. On one occasion when she had suspected him of smoking, she was unable to ask him about this until he became sick and subsequently told her of his smoking.

The remaining mother, Mrs. Leopold, denied any anxiety or worry about any of her children. When told about Frank's firesetting activities, she was surprised but did not think he would repeat these. When she asked him why he had done it, he said that he had just felt like doing it and "did it on his own." Mrs. Leopold accepted this without any further concern. She expressed a similar lack of concern for Frank's bedwetting and his failure to continue his activities at the Boys Club. The case was eventually terminated when neglect proceedings were brought about by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and Frank was permanently committed to the Division of Child Guardianship.

Irene Josselyn refers to a group of parents who become ineffectual in their discipline because they vicariously derive some unconscious gratification from the child's particular behavior. 6 The unfortunate

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6Irene Josselyn, The Happy Child, p. 278.
consequences resulting every time the parent gains some satisfaction through serious violations by the child can be numerous and far-reaching. The parent's vicarious enjoyment is postulated as a possible cause for the inability and unwillingness to provide discipline for the five boys in this category.

**Summary on Discipline**

The major pattern of discipline was an inconsistent or erratic one which affected eight of the boys. Five of the boys lived with mothers who were observed as unwilling or incapable of providing any discipline for their sons.

One of the boys was seen as recipient of harsh and punitive discipline while another resided with his aunt who was permissive.
CHAPTER VI

THE NATURE OF THE FIRESETTING

It was in this area that informative details were most lacking. As would be expected, the workers were concerned primarily with treatment and not with recording for research purposes. However, the information in some cases was ample and is presented here to provide a picture of the fires set and the repercussions.

Of the group it was found that twelve of the boys had set either one, two, three or four fires with three in each category. There was one case involving five episodes, one in which there were "many" episodes and one involving seventeen episodes. The latter case was reported by the probation officer as entailing three cases of arson and fourteen cases of attempts to commit arson.

There was wide-spread variety in the sites of the fires. The largest number of fires, or nine cases, was set in the boys' own homes and there were seven cases in which the fires were set in the homes of strangers, relatives or neighbors. Two fires were lit in schools. Further information indicated that six fires were set in factories and warehouses and five in automobiles (this included two trucks, two cars and a train coach). Three brush fires were reported as set by the boys studied.

The site of the fires, the largest number of these being in the boys' own homes, seems to be directly related to the sources of the boys' stress of difficulties. As a result it is not surprising to see the boys' own homes and schools reported in this list. The reason for
the boys' selections of the other sites may be as varied and complex as were the sites themselves and are beyond the scope of this study.

Firesetting is an act of serious social implications and the damage caused by these activities can be severe. The potential, incalculable threat of destruction is what always makes fires so dangerous. The fires set by the boys in this study seem to have been set impulsively with little thought as to the potential danger involving possible hazard to people trapped within the house, the direction of the wind and the possible destruction of property. With the exception of four cases, the boys did not seem primarily interested in destroying property but through an irresistible impulse merely applied a match and lit a fire.

In the four cases mentioned above the boys seemed to have done some calculated planning prior to setting the fires. As such, their activities may be considered as motivating firesetting. Excerpts from these four cases follow:

Peter Andrews:

Peter appeared before the Juvenile Court on complaints of fourteen cases of attempted arson and three cases of arson. Among his acts were included setting fire to a three-family tenement house at the rear of which he had placed a mattress. An attempt to burn papers which were wrapped around a chair was made and an automobile was badly burned after he had thrown lighter fluid into the glove compartment and ignited it. A further attempt entailed setting a fire to a paper carton in the boiler room of a hotel which he entered through an open bulkhead.

Michael Pierce:

It was reported that Michael had observed the trucks earlier in the week and planned to set fire to them later. On the night in question he left the house about 1:00 A.M. with the definite purpose in mind of setting a fire in the vehicles.
Jack Larson:

He had intended to go to a teacher's house but got into the wrong house. Earlier he had worked out some complicated system involving clothespins and rubber bands with which he could set one roof on fire from a neighboring roof.

Ralph MacCovitch:

He had set fire to an abandoned house and later indicated that he had done this because he "wanted to call the fire trucks and be a hero."

In the cases reviewed none of the reported fires caused any loss of life, although in one case three families were driven out of their tenement house which was totally destroyed. The information available on damage caused by the fires indicated that three caused "small" damage, while one was reported as causing "considerable" damage. In five cases where the damage was reported in monetary figures, one was listed as causing $600 damage. Two fires resulted in a damage of $3,000 and one fire caused $4,000 damage while the largest figure reported was $8,000 worth of damage.

A definite attitude toward or reason for his fire-setting activities was available from only nine of the cases. These were given by the child when he was later interviewed by a psychiatrist. The only significant difference in the reasons given was present among those who accepted the blame and those who projected the blame to some degree.

Of the latter, there were three boys who gave reasons similar to the one following:

Frank Leopold:

He said he had set several fires, and although he knew this was wrong, it was because of his association with the wrong kind of kids.
Among those six who tended to accept the blame, the reasons given varied considerably with no two citing similar reasons. In one instance the boy said that he "wanted to see an explosion," (having set fire to two parked trucks), while another indicated that he lit the fire in an abandoned house "so he could call the fire trucks and be a hero." One boy told about his fascination with fires indicating that frequently he would burn trash around the home while imagining it was a house burning down. On occasions he would stand as close as possible while watching. After lighting three fires in his own home, he said that it was a Halloween prank.

One boy who lit two fires cited his anger at school and subsequently his father's departure from the home. He added that on both occasions he had heard a voice within his head saying that he should take some matches and light the fires. He was unable to identify the owner of the voice but was certain that it was not a voice from outside but one within his head.

It was originally thought that it would be helpful to determine the mother's view of the firesetting. However, this was found to be impractical because the information was sparse as a result of incomplete exploration. It was, however, noted that of the nine cases where the mother answered a question relating to her view of the boy's firesetting, there were five who projected the blame onto environmental factors. Among the factors cited was a recent move to a new neighborhood, several changes in school and his association with the "wrong companions."
One mother suggested that his activities had a physical basis resulting from her previous syphilitic infection. Another mother indicated that his fire-setting was due to idleness and boredom during the boy's lunch hour. One mother surrogate had difficulty believing that it was her nephew who lit the fires and suggested that it must have been a mistake, even though the boy admitted that he had lit the fires. In one case the mother suggested that the boy had lit the fires in order to bring his parents back together. They had been separated for one month when the fires were lit.

Summary on the Nature of the Fire-setting

It was found that twelve of the boys had set from one to four fires, while the largest number of fires set was seventeen episodes which included fourteen attempts and three actual cases of arson.

The largest number of fires were set in the boys' own homes; other sites included the homes of strangers, schools, automobiles, factories and brush fires. The damage resulting from the fires was reported as being from small to considerable, while the greatest damage reported in monetary figures was $8,000.

Of the group some of the boys projected the blame for their activities, while others accepted the blame, citing a variety of reasons. Most of the mothers projected the blame on environmental factors.

This was an area where the findings were rather sparse but the information has been presented to give some picture of the activities in which the boys had been engaged.
CHAPTER VII
CASE PRESENTATIONS

As described in Chapter V, there were two major classifications
of the parent-child relationship among the sixteen cases of this sample—
an over-close sexualized situation and rejection—and two major classi-
fications of discipline—erratic and nonexistent.

The two following cases have been chosen to illustrate examples
of these categories.

Ralph MacCovitch: A case in which there was an over-close sexual-
lized situation existing and where the mother was unable to discipline
him.

Peter Andrews: A case in which the boy was rejected and the dis-
cipline was erratic.

THE CASE OF RALPH MACCOVITCH

Ralph is a five-year-old boy who was referred to the agency
following an expulsion from nursery school where he had been
overly aggressive and had pushed a girl into the lake. He
had been expelled from various schools because of a serious
inability to adjust and his mother had complained of her own
difficulty in controlling him at home. Mrs. MacCovitch is a
forty-four year old Italian, Catholic divorcee who was living,
unmarried, with the father of her son, Ralph, for the last
twelve years. Mr. MacCovitch still maintains his marriage
and has three children with his wife, whom he abandons and
returns to on occasions. When the case was originally seen,
he had returned to his wife, supposedly on a non-support
charge. However, he later returned to Mrs. MacCovitch,
spending a couple nights a week with her.

Ralph was born by caesarean section. He had been a sickly
child, characterized by a bronchial condition present all
his life and a recurrent fever which was never clearly
diagnosed to the mother's knowledge. This condition
required numerous hospitalizations—at one month, four months, nine months, ten months and again at twelve months. In all he had been hospitalized sixteen times. During his third year he was hospitalized for a partially paralyzed leg. The condition cleared and although they requested clinic visits every six months, the mother failed to continue. Ralph was placed in foster homes a number of times and his mother dates the onset of the problem to his first placement. He felt at the time that she was trying to get rid of him and continues to fear this. Mother admits that she had threatened to give him away.

Ralph saw little of his father who was occasionally in and out of the home. When he was there he was rather indifferent to Ralph. Ralph has constantly slept with his mother when his father was out of the home. His mother said that he often had an erection while she was bathing him, even at six or seven years of age. In addition she indicated that she made little attempts to prevent his seeing her in the nude.

Ralph was in the first grade when seen and the teacher reported that he was making an average adjustment in class. He was poorest in activities demanding motor coordination. She also reported that he got along well with her and the girls in his class but fought a good deal with the boys, outside the classroom.

In the early phase of treatment, Mrs. MacCovitch told that she was one of eight children, all of whom were born with syphilis (four of them had died of it). Mrs. MacCovitch’s mother and father both died of syphilis also. Mrs. MacCovitch was placed in an institution when she was seven years old because of continued truancy in the company of boys. While there her syphilitic condition was discovered, unknown to her, and cured. She first knew about it during her marriage to Mr. Newman; she became terrified and checked on it at which time she was told that she no longer had the disease. Mr. Newman was involved with the police several times on serious charges which led to their divorce.

Mrs. MacCovitch started living with Mr. MacCovitch twelve years ago. Their first child was born dead and she ordered an autopsy as she was afraid that syphilis had caused the death, but this was ruled out. When she was pregnant with Ralph, she was afraid of the same thing and had him examined several times, each time being assured that he did not have the disease.

It was felt that her self-esteem was so low that Mrs. MacCovitch was unable to set limits for Ralph. He was able to control her by telling her that she was a mean mother and no good. This struck so close to home that she continually gave in to him which made him more anxious and provocative. She attempted to
control him by threatening to get rid of him which struck at his greatest fear. This he has seen as a possible reality in the many nursery homes, schools and orphanages she attempted. Her feelings of guilt over what she feels has caused his behavior—not having married his father and her past syphilitic condition—made her take him back each time but kept her from being firm enough to control him.

Ralph was described as a boy who continuously acted out and was extremely cruel and destructive. She said he would paint the eyes of cats and had thrown one out of a window. He opened the doors of parked cars and rummaged through the glove compartments. On one occasion he and a friend were playing in an abandoned barn and the other boy was reported as having fallen down the shaft. Ralph later confessed to his mother that he had pushed the boy. At the same time there was some withdrawn behavior noted as he sucked his thumb and lisped.

When he was four years, his mother noticed his fascination with fire. He stole matches and finally did set fire to a piece of paper on the stove and burned a place in front of the stove. Mrs. MacCovitch put his fingers on the stove and he got several blisters, after which she felt very guilty. She said that this did not curb his fascination with fire and whenever he saw one, he wanted to go and poke in it. When Ralph was seven and a half he was reported by the Police Department as having set a fire in an empty building. Ralph confessed to this activity to both a Priest and a police officer. When this was discussed by his therapist, he originally refused to talk about it. Later he said that he had set the fire in order to call the fire truck and thereby be a hero.

The last entry in the record was made in July, 1958, exactly three years after the initial application to the Guidance Center. At that time consideration was being given to arrangements for placement for Ralph which was to be done through the Court.

THE CASE OF PETER ANDREWS

Peter, nine years old, was referred to the Court Clinic by a Probation Officer who wrote that Peter had recently appeared before the Special Juvenile Session of the Court. Complaints had been lodged against him for firesetting activities, which included fourteen attempts to commit arson and three actual cases of arson. His testimony indicated that he and an eleven-year old companion were responsible for the mentioned delinquent acts, all of which occurred in dwellings or buildings with the exception of two fires in automobiles. The letter of referral
further informed the Clinic that the fires were extinguished before considerable damage was done, although two families were driven out of their three-tenement home. In one case Peter and his companion had placed a mattress against the rear of a building and ignited it, burning a portion of the building. In another episode, one of the automobiles was badly burned on the inside when Peter and his companion had thrown lighter fluid into the glove compartment and ignited it. Another of his fire-setting activity involved entering a hotel through an open bulk-head, setting fire to a paper carton in the boiler room and opening a drain cock on the boiler.

Peter was the second of three children, the last of which was a girl nine years his junior. Mrs. Andrews indicated that there had been two other boys in between, both of which had died in Nova Scotia. The older of the two had been killed when he was run over by a car at the age of five, and the other child had died at the age of four months of pneumonia. Attending a public school in the city, Peter was in an ungraded class. He was described by his mother as being able to read only a few words and was only now learning to add and subtract. Conversely she also said that he had been doing well in school in Nova Scotia, so that she was surprised when he and his sibling were placed in ungraded classes in Worcester. When tested at the agency, Peter scored seventy-nine in the Verbal portion of the Wechsler. The psychologist, however, felt that he was potentially of normal intelligence, but because of gross social pathology and a defensive pretense of stupidity, he was not functioning at a normal level.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were full-blooded Indians, he fourteen years her senior. They had moved from an Indian reservation in Nova Scotia to Worcester a year prior to the time seen. This migration had followed that of several other members of the family who had moved to this area to secure better jobs. Mr. Andrews, when seen, was employed as a laborer in a construction firm, having previously worked in a garage and with the family had migrated to Maine in the summer where they picked blueberries and dug potatoes. Mrs. Andrews had also been employed sporadically in the garage but was now giving her entire attention to being a housewife and mother.

Mrs. Andrews felt that Peter got along well with the children in the neighborhood. She and her husband had always felt that Peter was well-behaved and the fact that he had gotten into trouble was still something that she could not quite believe. Later, however, she told about his being kicked out of the Boys' Club for smoking and later still, an episode in which he was caught breaking the light bulbs on the street. When describing these incidents, Mrs. Andrews was seen as not being angry or upset, but feeling that other boys had participated in these "normal" acts and her son had been punished for them.
In her earliest contacts with the agency the worker felt that Mrs. Andrews was expressing no concern about Peter’s activities. Instead she was convinced that he had been pushed into committing his delinquencies by his companion, whom she described as a “stranger”. She presented Peter as a normal, wholesome child who was unfortunate to get caught while carrying out a mischievous act. She had no reluctance in telling the worker that she could not discuss any problems whatsoever with him and that her only reason for coming was to report on Peter’s current behavior.

In discussing the family Mrs. Andrews was noticed to be showing tenderness only when she was talking about her daughter. She had indicated in the very first contact that she had been very happy to have had a girl. Very frequently the conversation revolved around this youngest child, Carol. Mrs. Andrews talked about how cute she was and how much the family enjoyed her. She and her husband had so wanted to have a girl that they enjoyed her more than they had the other children. Mrs. Andrews saw her husband as being very devoted to the baby. Mrs. Andrews said that the boys were also very fond of Carol and that neither would leave the house without kissing her goodbye, although each might forget to kiss their parents. On another occasion she talked about Carol’s being doubly precious to her because she had come following the loss of the other two children.

On many occasions, and in some detail, Mrs. Andrews discussed with the case worker Peter’s inability to go to the Boys’ Club as a result of his delinquent behavior. She had previously discussed Peter’s interest and enjoyment of the activities there, but when asked if she had gone to discuss the situation with the director, she replied negatively. She said that she had not cared to go down to discuss it with him, although her husband was interested in having the boys go back and the boys themselves were interested in returning. She described a fear of being told what to do with her boys. This same reluctance was seen in Mrs. Andrews when she discussed the possibilities of her sons’ being able to transfer to regular classes from their ungraded classes. She said that she had not spoken to the teachers about this possibility, despite some interest on their parts in having her do so. She commented that she did not have the time to go to the school or perhaps she “didn’t make time”. When the worker wondered if she felt it was important to find out about the possibilities she simply shrugged her shoulders, saying that she felt that perhaps it would be helpful. She continuously said that the boys did not like the ungraded class, but consistently refused to make any efforts to inquire about the possibilities of a change.

A discussion of the marital relationship indicated that Mrs. Andrews was the dominant member of the household, taking responsibility for making all the major decisions affecting the family. Mr. Andrews was seen as being only the breadwinner, a situation
with which Mrs. Andrews expressed considerable dissatisfaction. He was being left out of the family life entirely and Mrs. Andrews gave the impression that this was his own decision and choice. In addition to his role as breadwinner, his only participation in the family life were infrequent checker games he played with Peter and his sibling. In these Peter rarely beat his father and Mr. Andrews was described as frequently saying that one had to be very smart to beat him.

In discussing her husband's attitude toward her contacts with the clinic, Mrs. Andrews indicated that he felt the boys were only mischievous and the contacts with the Clinic highly unnecessary. This was followed by a discussion of discipline in which Mrs. Andrews indicated that the boys did not listen to Mr. Andrews when he told them to do anything. She felt that this was so because he would not beat them and had never done so. She indicated in further discussions that her reference to "beating them" did not involve violent physical abuse. Instead she was attempting to express the fact that her husband never stands up to them and is never able to be very strong and determined in his control of the children. She felt that this was always the case and that he has always pampered them and that at times she has to step in and holler at her husband to be stronger and more affirmative with the children. She continued that the boys will listen to her but that at times she had to hit them to enforce discipline. However, this did not happen frequently and she repeatedly pointed out the fact that they will listen to her and obey her, but not her husband. She commented about not knowing why the boys should be afraid of her. Mrs. Andrews expressed the fact that it was quite upsetting to her when the boys were fresh and Mr. Andrews did not answer or do anything about it. When they made a request of him, such as to go to the movies, he never gave them a direct answer but would suggest that they ask their mother. On one occasion, later in the therapeutic situation, Mrs. Andrews indicated that Peter had committed some misdemeanor at home and she had punished him by putting him to bed. However, she had not kept him there for any period of time.

This case continued with the agency for a period of six months. Mrs. Andrews was extremely difficult to involve in any type of relationship and it was never learned whether her cultural background was of extreme importance in her difficulty to relate to the worker. Peter also experienced some initial difficulty, but when the case was closed, it was apparent that the Clinic was becoming more agreeable to him than his own home. The case was closed when it was learned that the Andrews were no living at their former address and had probably returned to Maine.
CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This was a study of sixteen firesetters, their families and the nature of their firesetting activities. Prior to proceeding with the summary of the findings it may be well to review the areas considered. The study sought to provide information on the following areas:

1. The type of individuals who become involved in non-profit arson. This included such factors as age, religion, health and intelligence. In addition, an attempt was made to weigh their school adjustment and peer relationships, along with an observation and analysis of presenting symptomatic and delinquent behavior.

2. The families of the sixteen boys to evaluate the atmosphere surrounding the boys. Among the factors taken into account were the parents' physical and emotional health, their marital relationship and socio-economic status and the relationship between siblings.

3. The intra-familial relationships with an effort to evaluate some aspects and effects of any existing emotional pathology. Major emphasis was placed on the mother-son relationship and the disciplinary attitudes and practices.

4. The specific activities of firesetting to note the number and sites of the fires, the extent of damage and the attitudes toward and reasons given for the firesetting by the boys and their mothers.

In the sample of sixteen cases the ages of the boys ranged from six to fourteen, with the average age of the entire group being nine years. One of the boys was Negro, another was a North American Indian, born in Nova Scotia, while the remaining fourteen were white. Of the group, ten were Catholic and five, Protestant. The findings revealed that a large majority of the boys were retarded to some extent in school, a third of the group was in their expected grade and none was ahead of
his expected grade. Further information on the school adjustment of the boys indicated that a small number were considered well-adjusted, an equally small number were fairly well-adjusted while the greatest number were described as being poorly adjusted in school. Simultaneously many of the group were displaying several manifestations of maladjustment or misbehavior in school.

Of those for whom intelligence ratings were obtained, almost all were found to possess ratings below 90. It was found that one-half of those on whom health information was recorded were considered in poor health, having severe, chronic illnesses. Almost half were considered as having fair health while only one was described as being in good health. In terms of peer adjustment, less than one-half on whom information was available were experiencing poor adjustment with their peers, one-fourth had a fair adjustment and two were well-adjusted to their peer groups.

A large number of the boys were described as presenting concurrently various forms of delinquent and symptomatic behavior. The variety in their behavior tended to distribute the boys at the two extremes of a scale represented by withdrawal and overt acting out.

In terms of the nature of the agency contact, it was seen that almost two-thirds of the group was referred for firesetting only. The group was divided evenly between those seen at the Court Clinic and the Youth Guidance Center, while ten, or sixty-two and one-half per cent, were referred by the probation officer. The school and parents were
the other sources of referral with each referring three members of the group. In an overwhelming majority of the cases, the mother was the only parent seen during treatment.

With regard to the families themselves, the majority of these were composed of three to five children. The largest families recorded had seven children. In three cases the boys were the only child in their families. Two major groupings, factory workers and construction workers, represented the fathers' occupations. In more than half of the cases, the two natural parents were present in the home, and in one there was a mother and step-father present. It was indicated by information from the case records that in all sixteen cases, including the ten mentioned above where two parents were present, the mother was the dominant parent.

In the same ten cases where there was an existing union between the parents or step-parents of the boys, the marital status was evaluated. None of these marriages was considered to be totally or largely satisfactory. It was found that one group of mothers described an unsatisfactory union, another group described a union in which there was much friction and the remaining mothers were partners in marital unions which were considered neurotic because of the masochistic ties binding the wives to their husbands.

One-half of the families were affected by active illnesses or serious hospitalizations of at least one of the parents.

In terms of the predominant characteristic in the mother-son relationship, it was revealed that a number of cases presented a picture
of a persistently close, sexualized relationship. It was felt that much of the child's acting-out behavior, which included running away and related activities likely to bring them into conflict with law-enforcing agencies and persons, as well as his firesetting were all part of his attempts to escape the dangerous and intense relationship with his mother. In one-half of the cases the tenor of the relationship revolved around a pronounced rejection of the boys, in preference of other siblings or of siblings of the other sex. It was suggested that this rejection was apt to affect the child's conception of himself causing him to react either in a self-depreciatory way or with anger and resentment toward his parents. It was further suggested that either of these patterns could culminate in firesetting as the child attempted to destroy his parents or home, the source of his frustration, or to secure his parents love, attention and concern. Of the boys not falling into these two major categories, one resided with an aunt who was extremely over-protective; one was seen as being neurotically identified with his mother and the other boy had a long history of foster home placements so that he was merely described.

In analyzing the disciplinary attitudes and practices in the families, in one-half of the cases the discipline was inconsistent or erratic and in slightly less than one-half of the cases the parents were incapable of or unwilling to provide any discipline for their sons. It was suggested that in the former cases the inconsistency would lead to the development of a defective superego, but it was difficult to determine in a conclusive manner what effects this had on the boys involved.
In the latter cases, it was felt that the parents may have been vicari-
ously enjoying their son's acting-out behavior, encouraging it to a
large extent.

In the remaining cases, one of the boys was seen as recipient of
harsh and punitive discipline while the other resided with an over-
permissive aunt.

In terms of the nature of the firesetting, it was found that three-
fourths of the boys had lit from one to four fires while the largest
number of fires set by any one boy was seventeen. The boys' homes were
the site of the largest number of fires. Other sites chosen by the
boys for their activities were the homes of strangers and relatives,
schools, automobiles, factories and brush. It was found that the
greatest damage recorded in monetary figures was $8,000, while other
estimated damages ranged from small to considerable.

Four of the boys were seen to have definite motives for their fires
they lit and these were either revenge motives or desire to see some
excitement or to be a hero. Some of the boys projected the blame for
their activities and others accepted the responsibility. The mothers
were seen as principally projecting the blame on to environmental factors.

Inherent in the expectations of the author when this study was
initiated, and indicated in the introduction, was the hope of shedding
some light on why these boys chose firesetting as their particular way
of acting out. Designed as it was to be a descriptive study, it depicted
a group of boys and their background that is quite similar to other
delinquents and their development, such as described by Glueck1

1Glueck, op. cit.
and Burt. Similarly this group displayed a variety of delinquent behavior in addition to their firesetting episodes, so that it may seem reasonable to conclude that firesetting is merely another form of delinquency.

Helen Yarnell, faced with an identical conclusion following her study, indicated that the boys "who set fires have suffered even more severely than the average neurotic child and find it necessary to use the magical power of fire to assist themselves." This may be further borne out by the impressive amount of serious social and emotional pathology which surrounded many of the boys included in this present study. While it was impossible to prove that the boys aggressive, anti-social behavior was a direct result of the existing pathology, it is highly probable that this may be so.

Despite this high probability it was noted that the external circumstances observed in the boys' environments were not particularly peculiar to families of delinquents. The findings revealing the relatively intact or cohesive homes from which most of the boys came tend to negate the suggestion that serious acting out is exclusively sociologically determined. This factor is further negated by the evidence indicating that some of the boys had made adequate adjustment to identical backgrounds.

The major emphasis in the study was given to the mother-son relationship. Indicative as the findings were of serious pathology in

\(^2\)Burt, op. cit.

\(^3\)Yarnell, op. cit., p. 283.
the mothers, it is not surprising that their relationship with their sons would be defective. It seemed logical, therefore, to seek some possible links between the parent-child relationship and the behavior of the child. It is felt that this faulty relationship may have so deprived the boys of satisfaction for many of their needs, creating at the same time such anxiety and frustration that they felt forced to assert themselves by aggression against an intolerable situation.

It is further felt that the defective relationships created such difficulties as to prevent the boy from developing a positive and satisfactory masculine identification, which helped to create the severe anxiety in the boy that was acted out in conflict with society.

The evidence therefore seems to point to the existence of causal factors that are neither exclusively biological nor exclusively sociocultural, but rather a dynamic interplay of internal forces.

One of the most serious implications of this study for casework is related to the findings which demonstrate the close interplay between the acting-out behavior of the child and the relationship he has with his mother. This factor implies that any therapeutic endeavor geared to the treatment of the child should of necessity involve the significant parent, which in these cases was the mother. In addition, since the findings revealed the importance of unconscious internalized motivations, it appears that the most successful form of treatment would provide for a process of re-education of the parent and re-identification in the child.
The question of why this group resorted to a weapon as primitive as firesetting remains partially unanswered. However, the findings indicated that an approach to this problem in terms of its psychodynamics is an area where further study seems warranted.

In the instances of the two case presentations, the relationship between the agencies and the boys and their families were terminated abruptly and with results contrary to the most desirable therapeutic planning and decision. The author was quite aware of its significance but because it was considered out of the realm of this study, the outcome of treatment in the case of the remaining fourteen was not recorded. Thus, the dynamics, focus and outcome of treatment in the case of firesetters is another area where a conclusive study would prove interesting and beneficial in attempting to understand this phenomenon more fully.

Acceptable.

Manuel Schlicker
5/59
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Composite Picture of Parent-Child Relationships

Affectional Relationships Between Parents and Son

Disciplinary Attitudes, Practices and Methods

Problem
   Number of Fires
   Location of Fires
   Extent of Damage

Reason for Firesetting
   As Given by Mother
   As Given by Boy
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Guttmacher, Manford S. Sex Offenses—The Problem, Causes and Prevention. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1951


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Massachusetts Department of Commerce. Town and City Monographs, No. 63, 1954.
