

PLAYING WITH FIRE

It is very common for six year old boys to be fascinated with fires. Their interest pulls together many developmental trends. These include more mundane matters such as a wish for power in the world and curiosity about how things work, together with less conscious concerns about bodily, especially sexual prowess. Sometimes the fascination becomes complicated by extra meanings that families attribute to it such as being dangerous or being uncontrollable. A rare child may indeed feel an uncontrollable urge to set fires. Such a child will usually be very troubled by this very inability to control himself. A very very rare child will assimilate to his personality this drive to set fires, and become driven to outsmart all the adults around him and will do anything to get the stimulation of setting fires. Such a child will usually be grossly disturbed in a variety of very obvious ways.

So you probably don't want to confuse your very usual young man with a very rare disturbed one. The fact that your son takes your scolding to heart, and overcomes his embarrassment and owns up to his deeds suggests that he is not in great trouble, even if his actions could be dangerous.

I think the best approach is one that respects his developmental interest in fires and channels it to a safe and interactive context. This would mean one parent, very often the father, will take a serious interest in the boy's interest. The two can spend times learning about matches and watching all kinds of small and safe combustibles go up in smoke. The boy can learn all about safety and control together with his parent, and accept that fires are great but never when he is alone outside. He can learn that his interest is normal and above all understandable and appreciated by his parents. Your little Prometheus will do better than his mythological forerunner if he is not left all alone with his interests.