

PLAYING WITH FIRE

If you find it hard not to stare at a flame feeding on a log, you aren't alone. Yet, according to a recent article on the Web site *Life's Little Mysteries*, although this attraction is typical in this culture, it is not universal among adults worldwide.

However, it is natural for young children to be drawn to fire, regardless of where they live. Kids want to master it. And—as the Web site and a new evolutionary anthropology argument explain—in societies where fire is an everyday tool, children are given opportunities to do so. By age 3, they start experimenting with fire. (These kids really do cook their mud pies.) They are gradually given more responsibility with larger fires as they age, and by 7 they're able to control a blaze. That's about the age when they become less interested in it.

In the industrialized world, most of us never get to that point. UCLA's Daniel Fessler, an evolutionary anthropologist, told *Life's Little Mysteries*, "The motives that drive fire learning are only incompletely satisfied, with the result that, throughout life, fire retains greater allure or fascination than would normally be the case."

This doesn't mean it's a good idea to toss your kiddo a Zippo: Fire fascination has serious and deadly consequences in our world. And half of the cases of arson in this country are attributed to children. Pitt's David Kolko, PhD professor of psychiatry, psychology, and pediatrics, says that in a study he conducted of children between the ages of 6 and 13, 31 percent of nonpatients and 51 percent of psychiatric outpatients had set a fire before the initial study interview. What can a parent do to keep things cool? First and foremost, Kolko says, control access to lighters and matches. And make sure you have smoke detectors and fire extinguishers around, just in case. *—Erica Lloyd*

***When kids have an unusually strong attraction to fire, Kolko's SAFETY team can help. To find out more*: www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/safety/**

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