

Teaching Children to Play With Fire



KAIN KARAWAHN

Workshops in Germany aim to prevent tragedies caused by children lighting fires in secret.

By SARA ZASKE

At a Berlin day care center, a little boy lights a match and touches it to another, making a sudden flare. The girl sitting next to him shouts a word that is the same in German and English: "Cool!"

The two children, both under 6, aren't breaking any rules. They are taking part in a fire workshop designed by Kain Karawahn, an artist who, as part of a performance piece about freedom in 1987, once set a blaze at the Berlin Wall. No one was hurt.

Now Mr. Karawahn teaches young children how to set safe fires. "The success is not 'Hooray, it's burning!'" he said. "The success is that after my fire, the place looks the same as before, and I look the same as before."

Mr. Karawahn's workshops aim to prevent tragedies caused by children playing with fire in secret. Young children who make a fire alone often won't tell adults for fear of punishment. Even worse, they sometimes hide after setting a fire and end up dying from smoke inhalation.

So Mr. Karawahn teaches children how to burn things properly — how to hold a match, use a lighter, light candles and build small bonfires. He lets them play with fire openly, under adult supervision, so they can indulge their curiosity and learn about fire without feeling the need to do so in secret.

Mr. Karawahn has trained nearly 2,000 educators in Germany in his method and earned the support of fire officials, insurance companies and safety organizations in that country. His approach stands in stark

contrast to the "Learn Not to Burn" message promoted by the National Fire Protection Association in the United States, which urges children never to touch matches or lighters, let alone explore their use.

No formal studies have been done on Mr. Karawahn's approach. Yet he has been teaching his workshops for more than a decade, without any reports of his fire-trained children setting structures on fire, he said.

The alternative strategy, the avoidance approach long used by the fire protection association in the United States, likewise has little evidence on its effectiveness. Most research on fires and children has focused on young people who have already been caught setting illicit fires.

The prohibition around children and fire is so ingrained in American culture that I, as an American, never thought to question its wisdom until I moved with my family to Berlin in 2009. There, my 7-year-old daughter came home from school one day, excited to show us what she had learned. She struck a match, carefully pointing it away from her body, and lit a candle. Then, she waved the match out and watched the candle flame intently, her face glowing with pride.

Our fascination with fire runs deep. "It's very clear we have been dependent on fire for a long, long time, and it has been integral to our evolution as a highly intelligent, information using species," said Daniel Fessler, an evolutionary anthropologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. Fire served as protection, warmth and a means to a higher quality diet, which may have allowed our pre-human ancestors to develop bigger brains, he said.

Natural selection may even have favored individuals who learned how to master fire early, he speculates. In other words, our children may come preprogrammed to play with fire, and if so, it's an impulse extremely

difficult to suppress.

This may be why, despite 40 years of prohibition, on average more than 49,000 fires reported to fire departments in the United States each year are caused by children playing with fire — with 43 percent of house fires caused by children under the age of 6, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

In Germany, the shift in thinking about fire safety is widely credited to Günter and Gryta Julga, a married couple in Hamburg. He was a fire chief and she was a teacher. In the 1980s, they combined their expertise to develop an educational program for school-age children that removed the prohibitions against fire. Many German fire departments now embrace the Julgas' ideas.

"All the things you prohibit are interesting for young children, and the more you prohibit them, the more interesting they are," said Frieder Kircher, a deputy assistant chief with the Berlin Fire Department.

Mr. Karawahn, the artist, has taken fire training to a new level, giving weeklong workshops to 5- and 6-year-olds in kindergartens and day care centers for over a decade. More recently, he has had these older children serve as "fire experts" to teach other children as young as 3.

"That's a serious mistake," said Paul Schwartzman, an American mental health counselor who's worked with the fire protection association for 20 years. Children at age 3 or 4 "are just not developmentally able to handle that responsibility," he said. "They don't have the intellectual ability to understand what's going to happen or how quickly it can get out of control." Even supervised training for 6-year-olds sends the wrong message, Mr. Schwartzman believes, giving children false confidence that they can handle fires on their own.

In cultures where making fires is still central to cooking and everyday chores, children do learn to manage fire at a young age. Dr. Fessler found that in 19 societies, ranging from the Yanomami in Venezuela to the Kipsigis in Kenya, children start learning about fire as young as toddlers and master its use between 5 and 8. That's not the case in most Western societies, where fire competency is delayed until adolescence or later. Mr. Schwartzman maintains that without the constant managed learning found in fire-using cultures, it's dangerous to allow children to use fire.

As a family with two children who have lived in Germany and are now back in the United States, we were left with something of a disconnect. While my daughter had some fire training in Berlin, her younger brother, now 7, lacks formal classroom experience with fire. Ultimately, we chose the philosophy that views our child as capable rather than trying to stifle his innate curiosity.

"Would you like to light some candles?" I asked my son.

"Yes!" he said with surprising enthusiasm.

So I sat him down and showed him how to strike a match.

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Teaching Children to Play With Fire SECTION D - PAGE 4

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