



Fire building is an outdoor skill that is a part of the Scouting program. Millions of youth through the years have enjoyed cooking, eating together, and skits around a campfire, or building a bond with others around a ceremonial fire.

President Theodore Roosevelt said, “Risk is like fire: If controlled it will help you; if uncontrolled it will rise up and destroy you.” These reviews look at incidents where something went wrong involving fire. As you read and discuss them, focus on lessons that can be learned to prevent similar occurrences.

## Incident Review #1

A 28-year-old camp staffer received second- and third-degree burns to his body while lighting a brush pile for an ad hoc, end-of-summer staff campfire. White gas was being used as an accelerant, the staff said, because they “were out of propane” for the torch. Witnesses reported seeing the staff member attempt to start the fire with his lighter before the fireball shot out.

### Key Points

- Even an ad hoc event requires a thoughtful approach. Use a checklist or the safety PAUSE method—Pause, Assess, Understand, Share, Execute—as part of the preparation (see Resources).
- In this incident, several issues came together that may have contributed to the injuries:
  - The traditional method at this camp for lighting a fire (a propane torch) was not available.
  - Use of a flammable liquid (Coleman fuel or white gas) to start a fire is not part of the Scouting program.
  - The staffer used a personal lighter, putting himself close to the resulting fireball.

## Incident Review #2

A 20-year-old camp staffer, who wanted to “amp up the themed skits,” sustained first- and second-degree burns to his face and arm when he ignited one-fourth of a cup of black powder.

### Key Points

- The use of pyrotechnics (commercial or homemade fireworks) is *not part of Scouting*. Only displays by certified or licensed experts are excluded from this policy: [www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss](http://www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss)
- Post-incident discussions revealed the staffer had seen this stunt before, but this was the first time he had tried it.
- Black powder is an explosive, and does not need a container to be dangerous. Staff members should follow a hazard communication program to ensure that they understand the risks and know how to deal with hazardous materials before using them.

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## Incident Review #3

Adults and youth were using Pyrodex® (a black powder substitute) and coffee creamer to create a fire starter for an Order of the Arrow ceremonial fire. After the first attempt, they cleaned the can and added a new mixture. Then, while the can was being transported back out of the leader's house, it detonated and burned six individuals. Charges were filed against the adult leader in this incident.

### Key Points

- The use of pyrotechnics or accelerants for starting fires is not a part of Scouting.
- Mixing chemicals to produce fire or explosions (homemade fireworks) is not a part of Scouting.

### Discussion Questions

- What risks or hazards are common to fires and the starting of fires?
- All of the incidents involved adults who had wanted to do something “special” using techniques or devices outside the Scouting program.
  - What techniques that are in the Scouting program could have been used in these scenarios?
  - What supervisory concerns or traditions may have contributed to the burn incidents?
- How does the BSA's Chemical Fuel and Equipment policy help to prevent burns?
- How does implementing the Unit Fireguard Plan contain fires?
- What are the lessons you have learned in this incident review?
- How would you apply the lessons you have learned the next time you start a fire?



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## Resources

Chemical Fuels and Equipment,  
[www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss06](http://www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss06)

Unit Fireguard Chart, No. 33691

*Boy Scout Handbook*—Tools chapter