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Can children face the future?

There is widespread anxiety among children about the threat of nuclear war. How real are their fears, and how do they cope with them?

Concern about the arms race naturally centres on the terrible consequences of nuclear war. But there is another area of concern, recently much discussed—the psychological impact on children of growing up in a society that is preparing for nuclear war. Within most families in the west children are carefully tended, protected, even over-indulged. We read them stories with happy endings, and assure them that people only die when they are very old.

But almost from the start this fairy-tale picture of the world has to contend with disturbing images, brought by television into the living room, of children dying from starvation, of wars, assassinations and nuclear explosions. Gradually, children learn that at the touch of a button “advanced” countries could destroy life on this planet.

Surveys of adolescents in a number of countries, including Britain, have shown that between a third and a half believe it likely that a nuclear war will occur in their lifetime. The proportions vary with the country (west Europeans more often think it likely than Soviet children), and with the current situation, or, at least, the way in which the current situation is inter-

mankind within my lifetime.” Two thirds of a Swedish sample of adolescents, and four fifths of a Soviet sample, said that if there was a nuclear war they expected to die.

It is difficult to assess the impact of these beliefs on young people’s development. A number of American psychiatrists have argued that they have resulted in a widespread feeling of helplessness and incompetence. Young people’s trust in adults has been undermined, leading to cynicism, unhappiness, drug taking and heavy drinking. A sense of futurelessness has led to a reckless orientation in the “here and now,” to impulsive problem behaviour and a failure to adopt long-term goals.

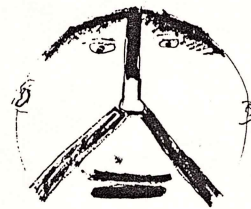
These assumptions seem reasonable, but they are extremely difficult to validate. It is true that several studies have shown that many young people say the nuclear threat affects their plans. For example, in the 1984 US Gallup Youth Survey, 49 per cent of 13-18 year olds said that the possibility of nuclear war had at least some influence on the way they think or plan for the future. But in the UK there is little convincing evidence of the behavioural consequences that would

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preted. For example, most experts agree that the risk of nuclear war has increased in the past three years, but Van Hoorn, interviewing American college students in 1983 and 1986, found that almost all thought the risk had decreased during this period. According to the students, this was because there is now greater awareness of the dangers of nuclear war and so “they won’t let it happen.” Van Hoorn suggests that the changed assessment of risk reflects the more moderate tone of Reagan’s recent pronouncements, compared with his earlier statements that nuclear war was both survivable and winnable. The virtual disappearance of the “Freeze” movement from the US media may also have helped to lower anxiety. The students’ comments, incidentally, indicate a degree of trust in government that has been found much less often amongst British youth.

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STOP BIG
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BLOWING UP THE
WORLD

Unsolicited contributions sent in by children to *Sanity*, the CND magazine, show their concern about the nuclear threat.

be expected to accompany such attitudes. Figures on trends in alcohol usage amongst under 18 year olds are not available, but amongst 18-24 year olds heavy drinking has decreased since 1978. Also, while adolescent suicide rates have risen steeply in the us this is not the case in the UK, where a rise has occurred in adults over the age of 24 but not in younger people.

On some indices the trend is the reverse of what might be predicted. Smoking among 16-19 year olds has fallen steadily since 1978. There has been a steady increase since 1979 in the level of examination successes amongst school leavers, and in the number of young people entering further education. This could be explained as a positive response to the current high youth unemployment, at least while they are still at school. Egglestone's recent interview study with 16 year olds in British inner cities found that the majority had definite, and realistic, aspirations about jobs, marriage, and children, and planned to remain in school or college to improve their educational qualifications.

On the other hand, crime and illegal drug taking have almost certainly increased in recent years. However, it is difficult to attribute this specifically to the impact of the nuclear threat, given the co-existence for other adverse aspects of society, for example, youth unemployment, the media presentation of violence, the cheapness of hard drugs, and the ease with which they can be obtained.

It does not, of course, follow that because most young people are working for their examinations and planning for the future, they are unaffected by the nuclear threat. Some of the effects may be subtle and emerge mainly in their dreams, but one well-documented effect is the presence of widespread anxiety about nuclear war.

The best evidence about this comes from a recent survey of health habits in adolescents, carried out in several countries, which included the open-ended question: "When you think about the future, what are your three main hopes? And the three things you worry about most?" The answers varied considerably

from one country to another. In Finland and Canada the most frequent source of anxiety was nuclear war; in England, unemployment; and in Austria, examinations. In England and Austria, worries about nuclear war came second, mentioned by 37 per cent and 31 per cent of adolescents respectively. The most frequent hope for the future in all countries and for both sexes was a good job. In both England and Finland the second most frequent hope was for a happy marriage, but in Austria doing well at school came second.

What kind of young people worry about nuclear war? Almost all studies have found that more girls worry—and worry more intensely—than boys. This may be because, as several studies have shown, from an early age boys tend to see war in terms of military battles and achievements, girls in terms of death and suffering. It is also the case that girls express more worries in general than boys, perhaps because stronger pressure is put on boys to overcome or conceal their fears.

Apart from gender, a number of studies have looked at other characteristics of those young people who worry about nuclear war. On personality scales they do not show up as more maladjusted, and most studies in the us and Scandinavia have found that they do not come from any particular social class, but they are more likely to worry about social and environmental concerns than other young people, and to have parents who share these worries.

Is it of any concern that over a third of British secondary school age children (and 80 per cent of Finnish) are seriously worried about nuclear war? It could be argued that if they do not worry about one thing, they will worry about another. It is certainly true that objects of fear change from one decade to another. Croake has shown that in the us the most often-cited fears of eight and nine year olds from the thirties to the fifties were of being lost or kidnapped, of animals, witches, thunder and lightning, and of the dark. By the late sixties and seventies, fears of war and of communists taking over were most common

am very concerned about the possibility of peace in our world today. I am 12 years old and I am very much interested in politics and I have decided for myself that the threat of nuclear war is not the best way to keep peace between nations. After considering what is happening in some parts of the world, Libya, Nicaragua, Afganistan and Lebanon the caption for my poster came to my mind. With the recent nuclear disaster at chernobyl I realized even more what a calculated nuclear attack would mean to all life on earth. I would be very grateful if you were to publish my poster so that everyone can think about my question.
Yours faithfully ANWYN BEIER.



WHAT MAKES MANKIND, MAN NASTY ?

for eight to ten year olds and for 15 year olds, probably because of the television coverage of the Vietnam war. Nightmares about nuclear war could therefore be regarded merely as substituting for nightmares about communists.

However, the prospect of nuclear war is uniquely frightening, and contemplating its effects can be almost unbearable. This is because of the images of global destruction, and the feeling of helplessness that accompanies such thoughts. Many children have a particular fear of being the sole survivor in a devastated world. There is no way in which parents can protect their children against the consequences of nuclear war, or teach them to protect themselves, nor can they dismiss the fears as unrealistic. For these reasons, there must be concern that anxiety aroused in children on this issue will overwhelm them.

In fact, the evidence suggests that expressing anxiety about nuclear war tends to be associated in adolescents with positive rather than negative aspects of psychology. In the US and Canada, those who name nuclear war as a major anxiety have been found to have better school achievement and higher self-esteem than others; a Canadian study found that they gave more thought to their future career and job plans. In Finland, Solantaus found that the expression of this fear was not related to signs of distress, such as psychosomatic symptoms or the use of alcohol or tobacco. In all three countries, young people who said they worried about the nuclear threat were more likely to discuss the subject with others, and also to believe that nuclear war can be prevented, and that they themselves could do something to help prevent it. In contrast, those who did not express anxiety were more likely to feel pessimistic and helpless about the possibility of preventing war.

No systematic investigation has been made of how much children under ten are aware, and afraid, of the nuclear threat. Yet like adult phobias, these fears often seem to be out of all proportion to the danger, and beyond voluntary control. Parents are rarely aware of their intensity, or even their existence. Com-

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pared with what their children say, mothers have been shown to under-report the fears of eight to twelve year olds by 40 per cent. It seems likely that the intensity of these early fears is in part grounded in children's awareness of their powerlessness, and also their uncertainty about what is a realistic possibility—whether monsters really exist, or whether lions might appear and attack them. Adults may, indeed, help to create these fears, by telling frightening stories, making mock threats and real displays of frightening anger. They also frequently help to create fears by their deliberate or unintentional ambiguity about the reality of witches, monsters, ghosts and so on.

Thus it is likely that young children who are aware of the nuclear threat will be more anxious and confused about it than older children or adults. This difference certainly comes through in a series of videotapes of groups of children from six to 16 discussing the nuclear threat with a Boston child psychiatrist, Eric Chivian. The younger groups display a great deal

of emotion, while the oldest ones are composed and cool. A US study also showed that ten year olds were much more disturbed than 18 year olds by the assassination of President Kennedy; many of them developed headaches, lack of appetite and insomnia. For American children, to whom the president is portrayed as a supremely powerful and benevolent father figure, his assassination must have been devastating, especially because they could not understand the possible antecedents or consequences.

Similarly, an adolescent will appreciate, for example, that nuclear war is unlikely to start without a build-up of international tension and precipitating international events, while a younger child does not. One six year old was terrified when he heard that Cruise missiles had come to Britain; it turned out that he thought that “Cruise missiles have come to Britain” meant that the missile had been used on Britain. Again, an older child would have realised that such an event could not have occurred without tremendous repercussions. It is my impression from studying the Chivian videotapes that the six and seven year olds had little understanding of the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. They may therefore have their fears reinforced by media presentation of conventional warfare.

On the other hand, young children seem to be more adept than adolescents and adults at constructing ways of mastering their fears. They may use fantasy, as when an eight year old described an escape route from the nuclear threat: “I'll make a spaceship when I grow up—a satellite station. It would be like another world, with streams and forests.” Or their solutions may be more mundane, if still unrealistic, such as when children believe that writing to the Queen will stop the arms race.

In the case of older children, several recent studies show that most cope with the threat of nuclear war by what psychologists have called avoidant or non-vigilant strategies. These strategies involve the denial or suppression of relevant information, by denying a threatened danger, minimising it, ignoring warning signals, or seeking distractions from it. In contrast, approach or vigilant strategies involve searching for and considering information relevant to the threat. The child remains alert to the danger, assesses its nature, and plans how to deal with it. Research has shown that most people have a strong preference for one or other type of strategy, but on occasion make use of both types; even consistent “approachers” tend to use avoidant strategies to cope with the nuclear threat. Van Hoorn has documented the difference in the way in which US college students said that they dealt with their everyday problems (“confront it,” “analyse possible solutions”; “talk it out”; “think it through”), and with the threat of nuclear war (“avoid thinking about it”; “try to block it out”). A minority of adolescents do use an approach strategy—usually by support for anti-nuclear groups.

Avoidant strategies reduce pain and stress, and may be appropriate and protective when the danger is unavoidable, as in terminal illness. Since the majority of people believe the nuclear threat falls into this category, it seems best to them not to think about it. But if there is any possibility that the threat can be averted, the use of avoidant strategies can be literally fatal—for instance when people ignore or minimise early warning signs of malignant disease or natural disasters. In the case of the nuclear threat, an approach strategy would require young people to be kept well informed and involved in discussion about it. This strategy is effectively discouraged in Britain by government, most schools, and many parents. The government, in fact, has actively encouraged avoid-

ant strategies in the whole population by attempts to downplay the consequences of nuclear war, and objections to the showing of films such as *The War Game* on television.

However, US research suggests that these government moves were unnecessary; diffusing knowledge about the effects of nuclear war without proposals to prevent it may lead to an increase in the use of avoidant strategies. Zweigenhaft found that between 1982 and 1984, the period when *The Day After* was widely shown on American tv, knowledge about the effects of nuclear war increased. For example, the proportion of high school pupils in North Carolina who could name three medical effects of a heavy dose of radiation rose from 26 per cent to 66 per cent, and the proportion who thought food and medical help would be available after a major nuclear attack fell from 60 per cent to less than 30 per cent. But the only accompanying change in attitude was a greater degree of pessimism about the chances of surviving nuclear war; anxiety about the possibility of war and views on policy did not change.

An approach strategy would involve not only awareness of the dangers, but also realistic and constructive thinking about countering the nuclear threat. This requires knowledge of a different kind; that is, some understanding of the political and international context in which the threat has developed, and the ways in which international conflict might be resolved. These topics are discussed in all Finnish schools, but British schools often fail to provide chil-

dren with even the most basic knowledge for this kind of discussion. For example, a British market research survey in 1983 found that 42 per cent of 15-18 year olds did not know that nuclear weapons had been used in the second world war.

Parents, too, encourage avoidant strategies by failing to provide children with opportunities for discussion. In several countries, surveys have found that between a half and two thirds of teenagers say that they have never discussed the nuclear threat with their parents. Parental silence not only colludes with school and government silence, but may be interpreted by children as a lack of concern. Over half of a Swedish adolescent sample thought that adults were indifferent to, or very little concerned about the nuclear threat, although a survey of Swedish adults carried out at about the same time found that 78 per cent named nuclear war as one of their three greatest worries.

Faced with the greatest threat in our history, I would argue that adults have a responsibility to encourage an approach strategy in the young, by providing appropriate information and opportunities for discussion, including talking about possible action they could take. We may believe that no action of ours can counter the threat, but as long as there is a possibility that it might do so, the case for avoiding the topic is not defensible. The evidence suggests that, even though such discussion may increase anxiety, it is likely to increase optimism, and lessen feelings of helplessness.

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