

How do we cope with children's questions, asks Virginia Ironside, when many of us find it difficult to cope with the ones we ask ourselves?

But mum, will there be a nuclear war?

RECENT international events have brought anxiety about nuclear war to the forefront of most people's minds. But for those of us with children, the problem is compounded by guilt. We feel guilty about their worries, the fact we brought them into the world, that we can't properly reassure them — and, often, we feel irritated that they keep bringing the subject up when all we want to do is try not to think about it ourselves. If the phrase: "But mum, when can we have a video/hamster/dog?" drives most of us to distraction, the question: "But mum, will there be a nuclear war?" is enough to break our hearts.

Most of us just don't want to think about it, even though it turns out that a large percentage of us do think that a nuclear war will occur sometime. In 1983, research showed that 52 per cent of young people aged between 15 and 18 thought it was likely that nuclear war would occur in their lifetime, and the level of anxiety is increasing, particularly among the young.

As Professor Barbara Tizard, of the Thomas Coram Foundation, points out, it's not true that children don't worry about international events. If anything, she says, they worry about them even more than adults. One American study showed that ten-year-olds were far more upset than adults by the assassination of President Kennedy, for example; many of them suffered headaches, lack of appetite and insomnia. And the figures that measure anxiety about nuclear war in Russia are virtually the same as the rest of the world, so it doesn't seem to have anything to do with how the media puts nuclear war across in the West.

In the UK as many as 70 per cent of young people believe it's inevitable one day. And in Finland, a non-nuclear country, 79 per cent of 12-year-olds and 48 per cent of 18-year-olds named a probable nuclear war as their major fear. Professor Tizard says: "Some psychiatrists have suggested that growing up in the shadow of a nuclear threat may not simply arouse anxiety in young people but have serious and far-reaching effects on personality development. Uncertainty and pessimism can lead to cynicism, feelings of futility, failure to adopt long-term goals, recourse to drugs and so on."

So how do we cope with the questions our children ask us, when many of us find it difficult to cope with the questions about nuclear war that we ask ourselves?

Dr James Thompson, senior lecturer at the Middlesex Hospital in London and author of *Psychological Aspects of Nuclear War*, says: "Despite evidence of anxiety in many people, the most consistent reaction to the idea of nuclear war appears to be some sort of denial. Some people avoid the subject totally. Others are resigned, helpless, fatalistic and display unquestioning trust."

Although denial can be quite a useful way of coping in some situations, nuclear war is not one of them. It certainly won't help parents to reassure children. And although a parent may feel worried but helpless at the same time, the child won't be reassured if he senses the feeling of helplessness.

When my own son asks, as he has often done: "But mum, will there be a nuclear war?" it's tempting to tell him to go to sleep and not think about it. Or distract him by remind-

ing him of something he might be doing the following day. But the problem only comes up again the next night. It cannot be avoided for ever.

"Parents may want to avoid creating or increasing anxiety in their children," says Prof. Tizard, "They may feel they can't discuss the issue honestly because they can't truthfully reassure their children. But to young people, the silence of adults often looks like lack of concern. Between a half and two-thirds of parents have never discussed nuclear war with their children. Films like *The Day After* extend young people's knowledge of the effects of nuclear war but not their knowledge of the political context nor their attitudes to the freeze and deterrence.

"Encouraging young people to take collective action about any issue on which they feel strongly is an important way to help overcome their feelings of powerlessness.

"As far as very young children are concerned, they're more adept than adolescents at constructing solutions. They may think they'll stop the arms race when they grow up. Or they may write to the Queen. Solutions of these kinds, whether fantasy or not, are an important and positive way in which young children defend themselves against anxiety and we need to respond to them with encouragement rather than pointing out their inadequacies.

"Because of young children's need for security it's not appropriate to tell them the whole truth as we see it. For example, to tell them we think a nuclear war may well occur or not is too terrifying and negative a message. It's both more reassuring and more likely to encourage positive action, to say that millions of people all over the world are working to see that nuclear war won't happen."

Dr James Thompson sees nuclear war as another barrier between parents and children. "If children in the past worried about the holocaust or hell you could always reassure them and tell them it was irrational. But since 1945 there's grown up a generation which sees that a nuclear war is a real possibility. They've even seen nuclear weapons travelling along the roads. You can't reassure a child about it. You're just as powerless as he is."

"The only way to help a child is to help yourself. And that depends on what sort of person you are. Some people feel reassured by wanting more nuclear weapons; some by wanting less. We tend to be told there are only three attitudes we can have, either wanting more nuclear weapons, or wanting multi- or unilateral disarmament.

"In fact, there are many more possibilities. You can be anti-war generally. You can be anti-nuclear weapons but not anti-war. You can be in favour of nuclear weapons but also in favour of a freeze, like 80 per cent of people.

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There are so many options. It's important not to feel boxed-in about all this. Get government pamphlets, contact both CND and Families for Defence and make up your own mind. It will help both you and your children. Otherwise you're just taking orders, either from governments or disarmament groups."

CND, 22-24 Underwood Street, London N1 7JG. Tel.: 01-250 4010. Families for Defence, 45 Bloomsbury Square, London WC1. Tel.: 01-831 0180.