

How Youth fears nuclear war

PARENTS in the peace movement have long been telling us that the young minds of today are troubled by the threat of nuclear war.

And now, from the British Association for the Advancement of Science, we have the figures to prove that this is true.

Pam Gillies, of Nottingham Hospital Medical School, delivered a paper based on the findings of a questionnaire designed to find out what young people (aged 15-16) worried about.

One in three teenagers indicated spontaneously that they worried about the threat of nuclear war when they thought about their future.

Those who were really worried were more likely than those who were not to feel optimistic that nuclear war could be averted. If collective action were taken to "ban the bomb."

Other main worries expressed were fear of pain in childbirth and of unemployment among teenage girls.

Ms. Gillies gave the figures for "bomb anxiety" worldwide.

"In response to open questions about their worries or fears for the future, 12 per cent of 11-19-year-olds from the US, 32 per cent of 11-16-year-olds from England, 53 per cent of 12-18-year-olds from Canada and a staggering 84 per cent of 12-18-year-old Finnish children said they were worried about the possibility of nuclear war.

"Concern about this issue," she went on, "has not only been expressed by young people living in

ANN DOUGLAS looks at a survey presented to British Association for the Advancement of Science, which shows how worried today's teenagers are by the threat of nuclear war.

the West. A study of Soviet teenagers revealed that almost all of those in the sample (99 per cent) found the prospect of nuclear war worrying."

In the British survey, different strategies for coping with the nuclear war threat were given and the majority of boys opted for nuclear disarmament as the solution.

So did a large proportion of the girls, but the majority of them said "there was nothing you could do about it."

The following are extracts from Ms. Gillies' discussion of the problem from a psychologist's point of view.

Only a small proportion of the 15-16 year olds (15 per cent) said at interview that they simply "did not think about" the prospect of nuclear war.

It has also been suggested that people in countries which have nuclear weapons may exhibit less concern about the threat they pose since they perceive the weapons as deterrents to nuclear war.

It is feasible that government orientation in terms of arms control policy, public opinion with respect

to peace issues and the way this is reflected in the media in different countries, contribute toward increasing the level of awareness of the threat in youth. . . .

There is no doubt that the media probably play a key role in the development of anxieties in teenagers. . . .

Considerable proportions of teenagers were positive in the way they coped with the thought of nuclear war and approximately one-third felt that the situation could be improved through nuclear disarmament. . . .

By increasing anxiety through, for example, media exposure to the horrors of nuclear war, the proportion of young people who are concerned to promote positive collective strategies for coping with the problem may therefore be increased.

An American study has argued that unless the next generation of young people feel they do have the power to control the occurrence of nuclear war, they will be less well-equipped to avert the threat.

A substantial proportion of the young people in this study felt either helpless or fatalistic about the prospect of nuclear war: "Some moron will press the red button and we'll be blown to smithereens and there's nothing we can do about it."

Some denied that it would ever happen or avoided thinking about it altogether.

It is feasible that exposure to too much "horror" may have caused youngsters to minimise the likelihood of its occurrence or to become fatalistic, strategies that the above study perceives to be potentially dangerous to the continued survival of the human race.

Positive, collective action to control nuclear war may be encouraged by increasing anxiety in young people, but in such a way that the "fear" tactic does not result in adolescents becoming "helpless."

Prospective investigations of the psychological influence of various styles of peace education are therefore also needed.

There is no doubt, that in view of the prevalence of such anxieties, the relatively small proportion of teenagers who hope for world peace in the future, the likely influence of media exposure and the evidence which suggests that young peoples' knowledge of nuclear war is limited, the World Health Organisation's commitment to peace education in young people is appropriate.

The impact such education might have upon adolescents' views of nuclear war and disarmament is, however, unknown.