

*Children and  
the threat  
of nuclear war*

by SIBYLLE ESCALONA,  
Albert Einstein College of Medicine



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# Children and the threat of nuclear war

## INTRODUCTION

WE PREPARED THIS PAMPHLET because parents and educators asked for it. They said that children ask about nuclear weapons and the danger of war—and that it is difficult to respond in ways that are truthful as well as helpful.

Until some years ago, deep concern over survival was limited to scientists and political leaders who knew the full extent of the danger. But signs of the nuclear crisis are now all around us—in the daily newspapers, TV debates, peace rallies, shelter drills, public declarations by eminent scientists. No one escapes awareness of the frightening possibilities. For the first time in history, human beings have the power to destroy, not portions of humanity, but the entire human race.

Until the present, the history of nations has been a history of wars. This being so, the existence of nuclear weapons is a critical threat to all people everywhere. As President Kennedy has said: "Today every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation or madness."

To parents and all who are concerned with the young, the situation poses specific and immediate problems. In an emergency, every

instinct tells us to protect the young. This means much more than protection against final disaster. It means protecting children from fear and anxiety, and from confusion and distrust.

In presenting material which may help parents to meet this challenge, we offer no easy solutions and no ready answers. Primarily, we report our observations on the impact of nuclear threat upon children. Drawing on general knowledge about the manner in which children of various ages cope with fears and difficulties, we suggest some ways of dealing with children's questions that seem suited to the special nature of the problem, and to the special characteristics of children at different points in their development.

It is impossible to think dispassionately about so large and vital an issue as the danger of nuclear war. We owe the reader a statement of how we ourselves see the problem. Like all others who have chosen to speak on the topic, we consider that accident or failure of political wisdom can lead to nuclear disaster, and can destroy civilization as we know it. We further believe that responsibility for the future of mankind is not limited to experts and leaders—survival is everybody's business. The difficult dilemmas posed by nuclear threat are beyond the scope of this pamphlet. Sound information on the political, medical and technical aspects of nuclear arms and of defense is nonetheless vitally important. On page 27 we have listed some reliable sources of information and we hope that parents and older children will make use of them.

The basic facts in terms of what might happen to human beings are not difficult to understand. One can face the situation that confronts us and our children without knowledge of technical detail. This leads us to a second major point of view, which underlies all that we have to say about children and how to fortify them against the

frightening ideas of nuclear threat. Namely, children of all ages learn their basic orientation from the important adults in their life. What we value they will value, what we fear will be feared by them. Therefore, children will perceive nuclear danger not only in terms of what is said to them, but in terms of how adults think and feel about the matter. If we want to help children to grow in confidence and trust despite an element of deep uncertainty about the future, we must take steps ourselves in the direction of achieving a reasonably clear view of where we stand and what we stand for. For some, this may mean action; for others, not. For all there must be a willingness to face facts and to think about them, and inner certainty as to important values. Parents, like many other people, may have widely different convictions. They may believe that certain definite steps must be taken, or they may feel that solutions have to be found gradually, over many years of experience with living in an altered world. What matters to children is their sense that adults have positive goals for the future, and are willing to respond to danger as a challenge.

A. D. BUCHMUELLER  
*Executive Director*  
*The Child Study Association*  
*of America*

# what is different about nuclear danger?

*"Are we going to have a shelter?"*

*"What does fallout mean?"*

FOR MOST OF US, it seems to be harder to answer children's questions about the dangers of nuclear war than to talk with them about other difficult facts of life. As parents, we learn to talk with our youngsters about a great many real dangers — accidents, fire, crime, earthquake. We discuss with them sickness, old age, the eventual certainty of death. Why, then, do we have so much trouble explaining fallout, shelters or drills?

To understand our predicament, we will need to take a look at the actual nature of the threat. What are we dealing with? What makes nuclear danger somehow different from all other hazards?

## **HOW ADULTS PERCEIVE THE DANGER**

Nuclear danger is hard to talk about and hard to think about because there is so much that we do not know and cannot imagine.

A child may ask, "*Could* there be a war?", and we know the *possibility* exists. A child may ask, "*Will* there be a war?", and no one can be certain. One cannot tell how *probable* war is. And this is the heart of our problem. Human beings are able to meet with courage dangers and hardships of all sorts. But they can hardly tolerate suspended doubt about whether or not, or to what degree, there *is* a danger.

We have another difficulty: nuclear danger is *unimaginable*. When a child asks, "How big are the bombs?" or "If it happens, where will we go?", nothing in our previous experience suggests an adequate reply. Our imagination cannot grasp what nuclear war might be like. A child wants a simple explanation. But a parent trying to find the answer has disturbing background thoughts like these: After nuclear bombing what

kind of world would it be? Who would be in it? What happens to people who stay underground for a long period of time? What would it be like upon emerging? Would food and water be polluted? What would grow? What would be left of community life, law enforcement, the workings of government—and so much else that has regulated the only way of life that we have known?

Lastly, *nuclear threat is all-encompassing*. Most dangers apply only in certain circumstances (Drowning, for example, is ordinarily a danger only in deep water). Even major disasters, overwhelming as they are, apply only to a limited number of people or exist for a limited time. But nuclear war threatens us and our children and our children's children. Its effects would be felt by the entire human race for countless future generations. No wonder, then, that a child's questions about war often arouse in us a sense of helpless anxiousness.

What we have said about the difficulties adults encounter in dealing with an overwhelming problem is only half the story. Day in and day out, parents and those who care for children manage somehow to answer their children's

questions and to meet their needs. In the following pages, we shall turn to children, to the ways they are affected by an uneasy world, and to some ways adults can strengthen and support their children in the face of much that is distressing.

### **HOW CHILDREN PERCEIVE THE DANGER**

IN PLAY: *"Bang, bang. The Russians are going to kill you!"*

FOR REAL: *"What do you do on the bridge if the alarm sounds?"*

### **how much do children know?**

Apparently a great deal more than we sometimes give them credit for. Children seem so absorbed with their games, their friends, their life at school, that it is hard to believe they pay much attention to grownup problems. Yet even a young child nearly always seems to know when something really matters to his elders. As soon as American families became concerned over issues of fallout, testing and shelter building, children also knew about these issues. Signs of their awareness turned up in the questions they asked and even in the games they played.

For example: at times of particularly tense Soviet-American relations, pre-school children went right on playing their usual war games. But often the "bad guys" became Russians, and were endowed with all the powers of evil the children could imagine. Again, in October 1961, when renewed nuclear testing aroused world-wide concern, fourth- and fifth-graders in a New York City school were given a routine assignment. Asked to write one question each about themselves, their school and the world, ninety-eight percent of these ten- and eleven-year-olds mentioned war or bombs or the possibility that there might not *be* a world.

In short, American children four years old and up are aware of a danger to life. With greater or lesser understanding, they connect this danger with the language of nuclear war: fallout, Russia, radiation, H-bomb are all part of their vocabulary.

### **are children afraid?**

It is one thing to know about a danger, and quite a different thing to feel afraid. Although a city child knows that carelessness in traffic can lead to serious accidents, he is seldom afraid of cars or of cross-

ing the street. The same is often true of a child's knowledge of nuclear dangers. Children may play at war games or ask about shelters and radiation without a sign of fear.

But this is not the whole story. Last winter and spring many youngsters were frightened by the thought that falling rain and snow contained fallout. Some anxiously followed the weather reports; others told bewildered playmates that the snow was "poisoned" or "bad." Recently some four- and five-year-olds have shown fears of ordinary passenger planes, believing that they might drop bombs. Still others have had nightmares about vague but dreadful images of war.

Why does a child become afraid? As we shall see, a child's awareness of danger may change to fear for many different reasons. The most important one is heightened tension and anxiety among adults. Each time some world event raises the level of concern among grownups there is an increase in the fears of children.

### **how do they see their world?**

There is another and more subtle way in which children are affected by the threat to survival.

Knowing that terrible weapons exist, knowing that shelters and drills are sometimes talked about as dubious protection, even observing that each successful Russian exploration of space is greeted with dismay—all these together may suggest to children an image of

the world as an evil, dangerous place. Perhaps the most important challenge to parents lies in this: how can we help our children to achieve a trusting and confident view of life and the future in spite of some dreadful aspects of present-day existence?

# how children cope with their thoughts about nuclear danger and how parents can help

CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGES ask different questions and of course need different kinds of answers. At each stage of development, a child responds to danger in ways typical for his age group. More important, at each stage, children have particular ways of protecting them-

selves from fear and of feeling safe. When parents can fit their answers about nuclear dangers to the ways of thinking most natural to the child they are likely to be most successful in helping their youngsters to deal effectively with frightening ideas.

## children from about four to six years

*"Are they bad men who are dropping the bomb?"*

Parents know that young children are apt to be afraid of quite a lot of things. They are not usually worried if for a while, children are afraid of imaginary monsters, of darkness, of dogs or of thunderstorms. Yet it is not always easy to feel quite so calm when a child is having nightmares about H-bombs or seems to be afraid of something "bad" in the milk.

Yet it is important to under-

stand that these fears are not at all like our own fears of nuclear danger. They are, in fact, much like the pre-schooler's other fears—an expression of inner emotions. At this stage in his development, a young child is easily frightened by almost anything that is noisy, violent or suggestive of destruction. This is because, as part of growing up, he is struggling to control very similar feelings within himself. A terrifying TV show or a thunderstorm may evoke in him an echo of his own feelings. If this is more

than he can handle, it may then lead to fearfulness.

When a little one is afraid of nuclear danger, it is usually because something has suggested the idea as a symbol for general feelings of uncontrolled violence. Few young children have been frightened by bombs or fallout unless older children have threatened them with the idea ("They'll blow you up!" or "Don't drink the milk."), or unless they have overheard excited grown-up conversations on these topics.

#### **how parents can help**

Protect and reassure: Wise parents know that some fearfulness is normal for the pre-school age. They also know that young children have a built-in safety device that makes it possible to calm these terrors. In their heart of hearts, young children believe that their parents are all powerful and can protect them against all evil. This firm belief is what ordinarily enables them to push aside fearful things—death or accidents, even nuclear danger. Reassurance of our love and protection does most to keep a pre-schooler feeling safe. For no matter what a pre-schooler's fear is about on the surface, his real fear is that he may be hurt

or lose the protective closeness of his parents.

Limit explanations: The young child who asks if fallout hurts or if the bomb is going to drop needs a listening ear and an honest answer. But the answer will be much more satisfying if it is brief and to the point. Detailed explanations are apt to perplex and burden a pre-schooler. In essence he wants to feel that his parents know all about the problem and will take care of him.

Avoid overstimulation: It is a good idea to protect young children from too much talk about nuclear danger. Family discussions on fallout or testing are best conducted when the youngest members are otherwise occupied. High-powered TV programs on such subjects might be watched in a room where they won't distress children much too young to understand the nature of the problem. A child shielded from such overly exciting situations is much less likely to choose nuclear weapons as symbols for frightening emotions from within.

Clear up misunderstandings: When a child is having nightmares or is otherwise upset by thoughts of fall-

out or of war, two things—explanation and reassurance—very often help.

Almost always, pre-school fears are based on misunderstanding. The children are confused and are afraid that something is going to hurt them here-and-now, though in reality the danger is remote. The pre-schooler needs to be told the simple facts—that the planes don't carry bombs or that the snow is really safe. But reasoning alone seldom really comforts a pre-school child. Just as a momentarily terrified five-year-old is not calmed by being told "there are no ghosts," so it is not enough to say "Don't be foolish, this is a drill, not an air-raid." What seems to help is a bedtime story, an extra cookie, a night-light and the knowledge that mother is not far away.

Support a basic sense of reason and dignity in human affairs: Even small children understand that nuclear weapons might really be

used, on purpose, and by people with intent to hurt. In this respect their fearful thoughts about nuclear war are quite different from fears about monsters or about thunderstorms.

One way parents can help their children is to make it clear that they believe that nations must settle their quarrels peacefully. In general, parents teach children to control their anger, to avoid destruction, and to respect the rights of others. Even a pre-schooler will sense a "double standard" if we teach one idea for family living and another for life among nations. He will be better fortified against fear and confusion if we can tell him that among nations, too, reason and fairness work better than blind anger. It is not hard for young children to understand that those on the "good" side have to try to convince others who do not share their views, for they feel the 'good' and 'bad' impulses in themselves and know it is a struggle.

### **children from about six to twelve years**

*"Will there be a war? What would happen?"*

*"If it happens when I'm at school, where will you be?"*

*"Don't you love me enough to build a shelter?"*

By and large, school-age children are less given to fearfulness

than younger ones. They seem well equipped to deal with inner feelings and with outer dangers. Yet, curiously enough, it is just among the eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds that questions and worries over nuclear danger have often been reported.

To explain this seeming paradox, it is useful to take a look at the underlying sources of fear in middle childhood, and at the ways in which children of this age usually deal with fearful thoughts.

#### **new dimensions of experience**

One of the things each child learns as he enters school age is that he must rely on himself. He learns there are many things that even the most loving parent cannot do for him. In school and on the street, he finds that it is he—the child—who must meet the competition, who has to be strong enough to play baseball, and smart enough to learn reading. One underlying fear in school-age children is that they may not be able and strong enough to do all that is required. Even A students worry about schoolwork; even splendid little athletes wonder if they can hold their own among the other children.

The second basic source of fear-

fulness in school-age children is a result of learning about the world beyond the family. Children come to see themselves, their family, their town and even their country as small parts of a complex universe, subject to large forces. It is no wonder then that children of this age feel threatened by the idea that the world is so big that any one small person can feel lost and of no account.

#### **coping with threat**

A school-age child still relies heavily on his parents' love and protection for safety. But by now he has some important new methods of his own to help him feel secure.

*Anticipating and acquiring know-how:* School-agers place enormous faith on knowing exactly what lies ahead of them and what they will be expected to do. In encountering something new and possibly painful, often their first reaction is to try to find out all about it in advance. They ask many questions, and by imagining events before they happen, they often can forestall fears. Take, for example, the questions a child asks when he faces an operation. The more he inquires, the more he can antici-

pate the room, the anesthetic, the stitches, the better are his chances of meeting the experience without undue fear. Similarly, many a school-age youngster tries to find out all about next year's teacher, or about teenagers and their doings or any other thing that lies ahead. Children's questions about nuclear war are of the same kind. They ask us about the size of the bombs, the depth of the shelters, about who will be with them, about the speed of missiles and such questions as, "What do you find when you come out of the shelter?"

It is easy to see why this device of "forewarned is forearmed" fails to work when it comes to nuclear threat. We do not really know the answers, and the child feels his helplessness—even as we do—just because he does not know what to expect.

*Living on borrowed strength:*

School-age children learn that confidence comes with knowing how to do a thing, and having the tools to do it with. They are impressed by parents, teachers, older children, public heroes and all those who seem to them to embody the strength that they themselves still lack. Often they try to be as much

as possible like those who most impress them. When children strive to become like the important people in their lives, they feel that they somehow share in the strength and safety of the adult model.

It is entirely healthy and fitting that children, who are not yet ready to find their way without guidance, should rely on the ability and trustworthiness of older persons, and thus on borrowed strength. In children's response to the nuclear threat, we see the same tendency. They admire space heroes, they ask if the President will stop the Russians from making war, and they like to hear about any new and powerful invention by Americans. But they have also asked their parents, "What will *you* do?" or "Will Daddy have to go away?"

This is one of the reasons why a child is helped by knowing that his parents are thinking about these issues and have some definite ideas about them. School-age children cannot judge for themselves the shelter question or the issue of nuclear testing. But they draw strength from an adult who does not shrink from questions and who communicates the feeling that human life and human values are important and worth working for.

## how parents can help

Each parent or teacher has his own personal style of talking with children. The suggestions below are not intended as rigid rules. They are offered as general principles that parents may find useful in adapting their answers to a child's level of understanding, and to his typical methods of coping with upsetting thoughts. They are followed, in the next section, by some further guides to specific situations parents sometimes face with their school-age children.

Encourage open conversation: In the minds of children, something you must not talk about is easily felt to be something that is bad and frightening. On the other hand, the experience of hearing something spoken of calmly and reasonably is reassuring. It helps to relieve the child from a sense of hidden worry.

Clear up misunderstandings: School-age children do not fully understand all that they hear. Many of their fears rest on partial misunderstanding. For instance, some children believe that rain and snow are dangerous to touch, others are confused about the difference between testing and actual

bombings, and there are a host of other ways in which children misinterpret the information they hear and read. It is important to listen closely to what children say for, at this age particularly, youngsters are apt to take for literal fact expressions that may be general or figurative.

Gauge information to children's understanding: School-age children want more information than do little ones. Yet even ten-year-olds cannot keep in mind all the many sides of complex, controversial issues, such as testing or shelter building. Parents who go into more detail than a child can keep in mind and understand, may unwittingly suggest new dangers of which the child had never thought. With children up to eleven years or so, it is probably best to limit information to those aspects of the situation of which the children are already aware. Youngsters who are encouraged to speak their mind can be trusted to ask further questions, should the first answer fail to satisfy.

Emphasize activities, skills and resources that exist to combat nuclear danger: Children's own answer to a frightening prospect is to learn

the "right way," the proper skill for meeting each situation. Once children know that a danger exists they need to have a concrete picture of what adults are doing for protection.

Parents have different viewpoints about the most effective measures against nuclear danger. Each will select for emphasis those national and civic actions that seem to him most promising. These may include emphasis on government negotiations (and to most children government means the President), the United Nations, civil defense or the work of civic peace groups.

Let children know about the attitudes and values that support friendly regulations among nations:

School-age children are interested in other lands and other people. Parents can do a great deal to

break down the stereotypes about 'foreigners' as hostile and strange beings. Given a chance, children can understand that people in other countries have the same needs and the same human qualities, and they can draw strength from learning that millions of families all over the world are like themselves in that they wish to live in peace.

In school and at home, school-age children can be taught something of the American tradition. They can feel a sense of pride in knowing that we have stood for freedom and equal rights for all human beings. Ten-year-olds are not too young to comprehend the notion that it is possible to stand by one's ideals and to work for them in ways that fit our basic belief in the dignity of every kind of person.

## special circumstances affecting the schoolchild's response to nuclear danger

SO FAR we have spoken in general terms and have suggested general principles. But we know that our description of children's response

does not always apply. Parents may encounter problems quite different from those we have already mentioned. Below we discuss some

of the special circumstances that have a direct bearing on the way in which families experience nuclear danger.

#### **WHEN FAMILY MEMBERS DISAGREE**

*"How come the governor doesn't agree with the President on shelters?"*

School-age children know quite well that adults disagree on shelters, drills, testing and on basic attitudes to building military strength. Very often children's questions come about as they hear teachers disagree with parents, or find that the family next door have different attitudes from their own.

Things become more critical when disagreement exists within the family. For example, in some homes father wants to build a shelter and mother is opposed to it. Or, mother has joined a women's group to protest testing, while father does not share her view. Under these circumstances, children will be more concerned than otherwise and may therefore also be more anxious. As in any other family dilemma, children are made uneasy when their belief in one parent seems to imply that they must disbelieve the other.

*Explain that parents have a common aim:* One thing that grownups take for granted needs to be explained to school-age children. Namely, in disagreements of this sort, both parents are equally concerned about the welfare of the child and of all people. Both want their children to be safe. They differ on what is the *best* way of achieving a secure future.

*Recognize differences of opinion:* Children know when parents are at odds. Although parents will naturally try not to involve the child too deeply, it does not help to act as though there were no difficulty. When parents try to hide their differences, a child will sense concealment. Not knowing the facts, he is apt to imagine something more distressing than a difference of opinion. He may worry (as many children do) that his parents do not love each other any more. It is much easier for him to know that his parents disagree on whether shelters are useful (as they might about bedtime or about discipline), than to worry about the cause of hidden tension in the home. A school-age child will not lose confidence in a mother who says, "Such and such is my opinion, but Daddy thinks differently. We

have to talk about it." Because this is something he can understand, it will not make him anxious. And the more secure he feels about his family, the less likely he is to have fearful thoughts about the possible danger of nuclear destruction.

### **FAMILIES WHO ARE ACTIVE IN CIVIC AFFAIRS**

*"Is it true we will all be blown up and killed?"*

*"I may not be alive when I'm 18."*

Some families are deeply involved in the social and political issues connected with peace and with international affairs. They may belong to peace groups; they may be active in civil defense; they may take part in any of the organized efforts to better the world situation. No matter what these families' views, to a greater or lesser degree their daily life is permeated by the conviction that danger of war is imminent and real. Children hear a great deal of conversation on the topic; their parents go to meetings and rallies; pamphlets and banners are apt to be in sight.

Children in such homes are keenly aware of public danger. But, more importantly, they are

apt to feel parents' tension and concern. It is not surprising that fear and open worry over the possibility of harm and destruction are more common among children whose parents are most engaged in the struggle for a solution of the world crisis.

This poses a dilemma. The very parents who are most willing to recognize the threat to survival, and who take it as seriously as do scientific and political leaders everywhere, thereby also commit their children to a style of life that brings a greater likelihood of fearfulness. On the other hand, as we suggest later on, the very fact that parents are taking an active role in world affairs can also instill in children a more confident view of the future. In the long run, this may prove of greater basic importance.

We cannot offer easy and complete solutions. We can, however, suggest some ways of preventing *unnecessary* fears.

*Do not expose children to overly intense adult emotion:* Parents who give much of their time and energy to this issue are people who feel the threat of nuclear danger in an intense and personal way. The problem is so overwhelming that at times adults may feel moved to

profound distress, to anxiety and to a sort of helpless anger. If children bring their questions at such times, it is not easy to navigate between the need for emotional honesty on the one hand, and the danger of overwhelming children by the intensity of our feeling on the other.

School-age children cannot reasonably be expected to cope with adult moods of desperation, or with any other very strong emotion. Even as we say of grownups that strong feeling can be 'overwhelming,' so children are flooded and distressed by an emotional intensity that is too much for them.

We do not suggest that parents try to conceal their feelings. When questions are met with answers that are belied by the very tone of voice in which they are given, children will draw their own conclusions and be more troubled than they were before. But it is possible to express honest feeling in a way that is somewhat controlled and modulated.

There are other situations in which parents have occasion to hold in check their feelings in a similar manner—when there has been a death in the family, for instance. At such times children observe their parents' grief and

may share in it; yet they are shielded from the most intense moments of feeling among adults.

*Be deliberate in the choice of words and examples:* In discussing peace and war, adults speaking to one another are apt to use the most graphic phrases they can find, and to use the most telling examples of the horror they wish to guard against. The same is often true of civil defense brochures, and of the literature put out by various peace groups. Parents often report that children who listen to such conversations, and who also read what is in sight, have been disturbed by such graphic language. In one instance, an angry eight-year-old was heard to tease his sister, "Radiation will get you and your fingers will drop off." When she burst into tears, he cited in defense a pamphlet he had read.

It is well to remember that children have a much more vivid imagination than do adults. When we hear a phrase, they often see a vivid inner picture. School-age children also are very literal minded. If someone says, "There is no hope, life on earth will be impossible," a child is apt to envisage total devastation, and at once. Unnecessary fears can be avoided if

parents will use care not only in *what* is said in children's hearing but in *how* it is expressed.

*Explain what you are doing and why:* Children who know that their own parents are taking personal responsibility in relation to nuclear danger may experience this as a source of strength and reassurance. The younger ones especially are apt to feel that if their parents are taking steps to solve a problem, the chances are it *will* be solved, for it is in good hands. Children of all ages are helped by knowing that large numbers of adults are actively engaged in efforts to deal with the nuclear threat. When parents engage in such activity, children come to see the possibility of war less as a shadowy and fright-

ening background terror than as something that can be solved through action, for that is what they see their parents doing.

In this respect, as in some others we have mentioned, what may seem self-evident to parents needs careful explanation to the children. Adults write to Congressmen and go to meetings and take other steps only because they hope and believe that these steps will be effective and really make a difference. But children may be more aware of their parents' concern and anxiety than of the positive meaning of these actions. A good way of supporting children against the fear-arousing aspects of the situation is to explain in some detail the positive goals for which their parents work.

### **children from twelve to eighteen years**

*"What do we have to look forward to?"*

*"Our children will be freaks."*

Adolescence can be a stormy period of development. It is not easy to have outgrown childhood and yet not be adult in body or in mind. The concerns and interests of the teenage set all have to do

with the future. They think about jobs and professions, about sex and marriage, about the kind of people they want to become.

Even at the best of times, the future does not seem a bed of roses to young people. Everyone knows the swings from cheerful optimism to acute discouragement, from silliness to utmost serious-

ness, and from defiance to harsh morality, that are typical of the age. These reflect a kind of tug-of-war that normally goes on in every adolescent. Deep down he wants to grow up, to enjoy adult freedoms, and to find a worthwhile place for himself in the community. But he is also loath to give up the pleasures and protection that go with childhood. He is a bit afraid of being independent, and he wonders if the things he wants from life are there for the taking.

In time, most young people settle down, gaining stability and perspective. The single most important force that helps them in their struggle for maturity is the real opportunities for satisfaction that the social environment does offer. It is the promise which the future holds that makes it worthwhile to grow up.

#### **NUCLEAR DANGER HAS SPECIAL IMPACT ON ADOLESCENTS**

An atmosphere of doubt and dread about the future threatens adolescents at their most vulnerable point. Adolescent conversation shows—and so do many of the essays written for school—that they are not primarily afraid of hardships. Rather it is the thought that there may not be continuity

and sense in the life that lies ahead. One high school senior put it thus: "I and my friends know that we cannot live forever, everybody has to die. The only way in which there can be something like reincarnation is in society. I mean, that it would make a difference that we had been alive. If you don't have that, you have nothing."

Adolescents have many different ways of responding to nuclear danger. It seems that *what* it is that causes their distress is much the same for all—it is the fact that nuclear weapons might destroy much of the future they are counting on. But *how* they deal with it will vary widely. Below we describe some of the most typical ways of responding.

#### **make hay while the sun shines**

*"I'll enjoy myself while I can."*

*"What the h——, I might as well live it up."*

Some teenage youngsters claim that there is no point in studying or in taking responsibility, because "the future looks grim." These young people take a very pessimistic view. It is natural for adolescents to see the world as either all good or all bad. The knowledge that there is a threat to survival

can so strengthen the "all bad" kind of expectation as to make hard work at studies or care and circumspection seem quite meaningless.

In other cases, parents have the impression that these seemingly defeated youngsters may not entirely believe all of the things they say. Taking chances with exams, with cars and with dates is what many a teenage boy and girl would like to do in any case. It is as though the harsh reality gave these young people a ready-made excuse for behaving as they do, and as they might have done in any case. Yet it makes a difference that adolescent pessimism is supported by the facts.

### **rejecting adult values and authority**

*"How can you tell us what to do?*

*You are the ones who made the world what it is."*

Now as always, adolescents freely criticize the adult world. High school and college students hold long debates about what is wrong with adult values. Since society is far from perfect, they can find much that is disappointing. Many young people take a jaun-

diced view of anything supported by adult authority, be it religion, politics or practical advice.

Such healthy youthful skepticism can be greatly exaggerated and distorted as a result of the nuclear crisis. Some teenagers have come to feel that they cannot trust even the most positive of adult attitudes. It is as though the beliefs of older generations were discredited, for after all they brought us close to world destruction. A scornful adolescent told his exasperated father: "If we stay up all night and do the twist, whom do we hurt? It's you who made the bomb that's going to blow us up in the end."

Here again, young people's very personal conflicts get mixed up with broader social issues. No matter how absurd the youngsters' way of putting it may be, there is some truth in what these adolescents say. Adults, too, have reason to question some of the established values. It would not be easy—nor honest—to meet adolescent indignation with untroubled confidence in what we have to offer.

### **the ostrich attitude**

*"What's the hysteria about? Science can find a way to live underground."*

Many teenagers act as though they neither knew nor cared about a threat to their future. When nuclear issues are mentioned, they turn them into a joke, or pay no attention, or become impatient. Some parents are concerned not because their adolescents worry too much about the danger of war, but because they seem to show callous indifference.

At first glance it seems as though these youngsters had found an easy way of avoiding fear and discouragement. A closer look at what is happening beneath the surface shows that these youngsters have adopted a somewhat cynical ostrich attitude. In one way or another they express an attitude that could be put like this: "If all these awful things are true, I do not want to know about them."

Whenever people deliberately close their eyes to facts, it means that they feel helpless and fatalistic. As one 15-year-old said, "Nothing can change things, no matter what you do."

Refusal to acknowledge something unpleasant does not do away with it. Disturbing feelings still exist and undermine basic security, even when the adolescent does not admit these feelings to himself. Moreover, we know that a sense of

being powerless over one's own fate is one of the most painful feelings in human experience. Somehow, the expressions of unconcern and disinterest do not ring true. They mask the underlying sense of apprehension.

### **the world crisis as a spur to maturity**

A 14-YEAR-OLD: *"We asked the civics teacher, could we have time each week to talk about disarmament, and about what we can do."*

Adolescents are ready to take an interest in world affairs. Some teenagers have responded to nuclear threat by a greater eagerness to learn and to act on their convictions. There are now more student groups (both high school and college) dedicated to discussion and to action than there have been in many years.

In adults, emergencies often bring into the open a strength and energy unlike anything seen at other times. For adolescents, too, the experience of being roused to action can be strengthening and an important push to forward development. When young people feel—and many older adolescents do—that grownups need the support of youth in a good cause, it

can change their feelings about the future. We have seen in many teenagers instead of a sense of discouragement, a sense of purpose that makes the future seem exciting and important.

### **how parents can help**

In one way or another adolescents must react to the fact that survival is at stake. It is all the more important then that in relation to this crucial issue parents support positive experiences and be sensitive to the special needs of the young people in their charge. Once again we offer some suggestions that may be helpful:

*Take young people into partnership:* Conversations between adolescents and their parents are a tricky business. Teenagers tend to be overly critical of their parents—and to demand a lot of them. Temporarily they may choose to believe and think almost anything—so long as it is different from what their parents stand for. At the same time, they watch their parents closely. If what they see is disappointing, they may react with serious dismay. It is almost as though they feel betrayed when parents do not always meet their highest expectations. The truth of the matter

is that anything parents say and do carries special weight with adolescents, even when youngsters act as though their parents' opinions mattered not at all.

Whether a conversation concerns the nuclear crisis or anything else, adolescents are not only overly sensitive to what their parents say but find it hard to accept their parents' ideas or advice. Young people bridle at being told what to think. Above all, they want to be taken seriously as people who can be trusted to form their own opinion.

We cannot always meet the adolescent's need to be treated as an equal, but when it comes to exploring and discussing important world issues, there is every reason to affirm young people's budding sense of independence, and to take them into partnership.

In talking with young people, it is especially important to let them know just what the grownup thinks and feels. Teenagers feel the strength of a parent who "sticks by his guns." When parents hesitate to share their own point of view, a teenager can easily misunderstand. He may feel that his parents are indifferent to him and *his* opinion, or indifferent to issues that vitally affect his life. Strangely

enough, this is just as true for boys and girls who reject their parents' point of view as it is for those who want to share it.

*Provide opportunities for exploration away from home:* Young people often can learn from relative strangers, or from their fellows, what they cannot accept at home. This is so because any interchange between parents and their adolescent children is charged with the very personal emotion that each has for the other.

Parents and teachers can see to it that adolescents have a chance to discuss nuclear threat and the various ways of combatting it, and to do so in ways that are congenial to the age group.

This means debates at school. A youngster scheduled to debate disarmament will "bone up" on his subject. And when it is a contest among peers, the young audience will listen with absorption to what would seem "dry facts" at other times.

It also means encouraging young people to see and hear authorities express their views. Adolescents are especially responsive to direct contact with individuals who can serve as symbols of maturity. Scientists, political leaders, re-

nowned scholars—they all represent positive adult models. Adolescents can view such figures on TV, but that is a poor second best. The experience of being addressed as part of an adult audience, sensing the interest and excitement aroused in people in the room—all this conveys a sense of sharing the life of the community. This is what adolescents need. It strengthens the ties that bind them to the world about, and lends excitement to the prospect of maturity.

Parents can also encourage youngsters to make their own discoveries and explorations. Articles and books can be put where they are hard to overlook. They have a good chance of being read if others in the family have already found them exciting. Parents can clip newspapers for notices of lectures, special TV programs and meetings to which they themselves might like to go.

In most of this, the parents' role in helping teenagers come to grips with the world they live in is partly indirect. Through the PTA and local school boards, through churches and neighborhood centers and through public channels, parents can provide the opportunities we have mentioned. In general, an attitude of inviting participation

without urging it will be the most helpful.

Parents' attitudes are important even when youngsters do not seem interested: We know that it is easier to make suggestions than to carry them out. We have said, for example, that it is important for parents to share their point of view with adolescent children. Yet often enough, young people will cut short their elder's explanations. Or, discussion groups may be organized, and many a youngster would rather spend his time on something else. Books and lectures

may be plentiful, yet the young hopeful in the house may studiously ignore them.

And yet it makes a difference if parents can maintain a readiness to involve their children in the adult concern with the nuclear danger. It feels very much better to turn down an invitation than never to have been asked. At the very least, parental attitudes of the kind we have described will make adolescents feel that they are not excluded from adult affairs. Rather, they will see that parents expect and welcome a sharing of responsibility.

## *the sum and substance*

IN THIS SMALL PAMPHLET we have put together what is known about children's reactions to nuclear danger. Based upon our understanding of child development, and of parent-child relationships, we have pointed to some ways in which parents can help children of different ages deal with a threat that is entirely new to human experience.

Children are influenced first and foremost by the attitudes of adults. This is one reason why, throughout the pamphlet, we have stressed how important it is for children to know that the adults whom they trust have thought about the nuclear threat and what it implies.

We believe that what parents and educators think and do at the present time can play a vital role in determining the future. Whenever a species or a civilization is confronted by a change in circumstances which threatens survival, one of two things must happen. Either patterns of behavior unsuited to the new conditions of life do not change in basic ways, and the particular civilization disappears from the face of the earth.

Or the civilization has the resourcefulness to adapt to altered circumstance, to change itself in such a way as to survive under new conditions. The existence of nuclear power within a pattern of social life that has always led to warfare, is nothing less than such a threat to the survival of human civilization as we know it. Our children must learn to develop attitudes and beliefs and patterns of living that make possible some sort of peaceful regulation and control of human affairs.

We, ourselves, learned our basic attitudes from our parents. And what we learned is not in all respects adapted to survival in the nuclear age. If our children are to make the vital shift toward new patterns of existence, parents and all concerned with children must be the ones to point the way. We must be willing to give up some familiar patterns of thought and action. This is a difficult and painful task. We have not tried to minimize the difficulty, but we think the challenge can be met.

We are the first generation to hold a veto power over continuing

human life on earth; but we are also the first to be so fully capable of deciding our future. We have knowledge, experience, technological skills, communication systems and resources never before available. We can know people in other countries, and learn to understand them as our ancestors could not

dream of doing.

What we are saying is that child rearing and education are not an entirely private matter. At this time especially, *child rearing is a way of making history*. Helping children to help themselves may require of us that we come to terms with broader social issues.

## *where to find further information*

The following suggestions are by no means inclusive and refer, with one exception, only to official sources of information. Your local librarian, civil defense office, public health department, and various community discussion groups may have further information.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND CATALOGS**

**Atomic Energy and Civil Defense.** Price List 84. Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D.C.

**Books in Print (catalog)** United Nations Bookshop, United Nations, New York.

**A Basic Bibliography: Disarmament, Arms Control and National Security.** U. S. Disarmament Administration. Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D. C.

**International Atomic Energy Agency Catalog.** United Nations Bookshop, United Nations, New York.

**An International Bibliography on Atomic Energy.** Vol. I, Political, Economic and Social Aspects. United Nations Bookshop, United Nations, New York.

**Foreign Affairs Bibliography: A Selected and Annotated List of Books on International Relations** (3 volumes). Published for the Council on Foreign Relations by Harper Brothers, New York.

### **SELECTED U. S. GOVERNMENT REPORTS**

(available from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D. C.)

**Biological and Environmental Effects of Nuclear War** (Hearings Before Special Subcommittee of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Congress of the United States, 86th Congress, June 22-26, 1959.)

**Civil Defense—1960;** 1961 (Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives.)

**The Effects of Nuclear Weapons.** Revised, 1962.

**Disarmament and Security: A Collection of Documents: 1919-1955.** Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. (Includes bibliography)

**Health Implications of Fall-out from Nuclear Weapons Testing Through 1961.** Federal Radiation Council. (Also published in New York Times, Saturday, June 2, 1962.)

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*a word about*

**THE CHILD STUDY ASSOCIATION  
OF AMERICA**

The Child Study Association of America is a non-profit membership organization which has served the interests of parents and parent educators since its inception in 1888. The Association's program of preventive mental health education is carried out through parent discussion groups, the training of leaders for such groups, individual counseling of parents, research, and an advisory service for community groups and agencies planning or conducting parent education programs.

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