

To discuss fears of nuclear war.

OVERVIEW

Children become aware of the threat of nuclear war at an early age. The presence of such fears may depend upon the fears and attitudes of their parents, friends, and teachers. Such fears can produce effects such as nightmares and personality changes.

Children must address these fears. Children are aware of the problem and cannot be sheltered from it. They are aware that there is a danger about which adults do not talk. Children who adopt the denying or "self-numbing" attitudes of adults often become insensitive in other areas of their lives. If one tries to shelter children from the reality of war, the effect of a terrifying image or deadly bit of information leaping out of a television set may have a more negative effect.

By junior high, children may say, "I try not to think about it" or "I wish I did not have to think about it." Younger children may just think and worry about it.

Many children feel they have no one with whom they can discuss the nuclear problem. They feel alone with their fears—abandoned and unprotected by the adult generation. Children need to be assured that they are not alone and they must be given opportunities to talk about their fears. One child said, "I never talked to anyone about it. I thought everyone would think I was weird."

Appropriate and helpful responses to children's fears vary according to the child's age and understanding. Very young children should be reassured and told not to worry. That is all they can handle. From mid-elementary grades, it is important not to misinform them. Adolescents find reassurance when it is admitted that teachers and parents also feel afraid—although not helpless. Those who have studied children's fears agree that when young people learn that adults—particularly their parents—do care and are working to prevent nuclear destruction, they are significantly reassured.

Let the child set the pace. It is important to answer the children's questions on their level. For very young children, be careful not to unwittingly increase their fear by providing more information than they can handle. Keep on the right track by asking, "Does that answer your question?" or "Is that what you wanted to know?" Always leave the opportunity for further discussion. By naming what frightens them, children gain control over their strong, but often vague and unidentified, feelings. Truth is less frightening than mystery.

Listen to them and watch their behavior. Children's thoughts are often best revealed in their playing, drawing, and writing.

Many children have inaccurate images, disjointed bits of information, and confused ideas. They may find comfort in responses to questions such as, "What does a bomb look like?" or "What is it made of?" Keep a positive tone and attitude even while acknowledging to children that it is a difficult issue for you. Acknowledge the experts. Children do not expect you to have all the answers to their questions. Learn together by watching experts on television and in educational films; by reading books, newspapers, and magazines; and by attending public lectures and meetings.

Encourage adolescents to explore differing points of view and develop their own conclusions. Affirm

possible solutions. Provide opportunities for learning about leaders and organizations as well as world problems and tensions. Knowing about worldwide efforts for peace will increase child's confidence that solutions can be found.

Action helps eliminate fear. Encourage young people to participate in efforts to avert war through school, community, or church functions. Drawing posters, writing letters, and participating in conferences can help children gain control over fears. Even symbolic action—such as plays, dances, or "peace exercises"—relieves feelings of terror and helplessness. The key is hope. It is crucial to give children hope.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Either of the two options is effective:

- * Initiate a brief discussion of animal fear: what makes animals afraid, how they show their fear, and how they respond. Then, on four sheets of paper, or on four quadrants of a single sheet, have participants sketch a childhood fear, a current fear, a family fear, and a world fear. Then, in pairs, small groups, or together, let participants share one or two of the fears they drew. Move from the personal to the global. In this way you can discuss feelings about nuclear destruction. Finally, talk about how they can respond to these fears, perhaps distinguishing healthy and unhealthy ways of handling fear.

- * Another idea is to show some brief video excerpts of the Hiroshima bombing and a movie or TV show depicting the effects of nuclear war. Focus the discussion of how the Japanese handled their disaster and how the U.S. would respond in a similar situation. Conclude the session by describing current or brainstorming possible efforts to prevent nuclear destruction.

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