

CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENTS' FEARS AND THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR: AN AUSTRALIAN STUDY

PHILLIP T. SLEE AND DARRYL G. GROSS

Phillip T. Slee (Ph.D.), Lecturer in Human Development, South Australian College of Advanced Education, Sturt Campus, Sturt Road, Bedford Park, 5042, Adelaide, S.A.

Darryl G. Cross (Ph.D.), Superintendent, Child and Family Centre, Adelaide Children's Hospital, 271 Melbourne Street, Adelaide, S.A.

INTRODUCTION

As adults, it is tempting to dismiss children's fears of such things as animals, the supernatural and physical events as vivid aspects of their imagination and to reassure ourselves that such fears are relatively minor or of limited concern. To this extent adults fail to realise children's fears reflect something of their understanding of the world and their place in it. To date, there has been very little research conducted in Australia on the nature and extent of children's fears. However, research conducted in the United States and Europe has identified a number of features of fears including sex differences and age trends.

Sex Differences. There exists a certain amount of evidence (Ollendick, Matson & Helsel, 1985) which suggests that females have more fears than males. However there is a paucity of studies which have examined sex differences in the fears of children as young as junior primary school.

Developmental Changes. There is strong evidence from overseas research to suggest that specific objects and situations that evoke fear change as children get older. Research (Ollendick, Matson & Helsel, 1985) indicates a lessening of fears concerning imaginary creatures and personal safety and a greater concern with school and social relationships as children grow older. Evidence concerning the number of fears children have at different ages is conflicting. Hagman (1936) and Pratt (1943) report that the number of fears people have increase with age, while Lapouse & Monk (1953) found no relationship between the number of fears and age.

Fears: A Contemporary Outlook. Given the current world situation, adults are now more than ever aware of the risks of war and nuclear war. In relation to children, there is also a small amount of research evidence that from as early as 10 years of age young people are thinking about nuclear war and its consequences (Tizard, 1984). Findings from research conducted in the United States, Europe and Australia for example, are summarised in Table 1.

From the figures in Table 1, it is evident that irrespective of the country, well over 50% of children surveyed fear nuclear war. In most of the studies cited, females were also more pessimistic than males. However as Tizard (1984) has noted, research to date has focussed mainly on the adolescent years and virtually no research has been done with comparative research concerning Australian children's fears of nuclear war.

Overall, the purpose of the present study was to examine children's fears with a particular focus on young children and on fears of war.

Current Study: The 1987 survey of children's fears was conducted by education students at The South Australian College of Advanced Education, Adelaide, South Australia. A total of 1243 children were interviewed ranging in age from 4-19 years. There were equal numbers of

TABLE 1
Summary of Studies from Various Countries on the Threat of Nuclear War for Children and Adolescents

Country	Author	Year Group	Age	Results
U.S.A.	Schwebel	1982	High School students	50% expect a nuclear war in their lifetime.
U.S.S.R.	Chivian et al	1985 (N=201)	Grades 7-9	Items that caused most concern included: parent dying, nuclear war (72%), bad grades, being sick or crippled and their own death.
Finland	Solantaus, Rimpela, & Taipale	1984	12-18 yrs. (N=5572)	Fear of war exceeds all other fears in each age group: 12 yr. - 79% 14 yr. - 72% 16 yr. - 57% 18 yr. - 48%
West Germany	Richter	1982	18-24 yrs.	About 50% expect the world to be destroyed by nuclear war.
Australia	Griffin, Prior	1987	8-10 yrs. (N=238)	50% thought about war often. 50% thought there would be a war in their lifetime. 78% thought a nuclear war would end with human extinction.

males and females and the sample encompassed a full range of socio-economic groups. Children from over 30 metropolitan schools participated in the study.

Questionnaire: From a review of the literature on children's fears a questionnaire was devised consisting of 37 separate fears categorized under six headings, i.e. "animal (dogs, spiders)" people (burglars, dentists), supernatural (ghosts, monsters), social (not being liked, the way I look), natural (thunder, lightning), physical (getting hurt, getting lost) and other (war/nuclear war, school). Children were required to circle a "yes" or "no" response in relation to each item and then were asked to write or draw a picture of what frightened them most.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the survey were analysed in terms of three age groups: (i) 4-7 years = junior primary, (ii) 8-12 years = primary and (iii) 13-19 years = secondary school. The top five frequently listed fears for each of these three age groups is presented in Table 2.

The most striking feature in Table 2 concerns the high percentage of 8-19 years olds who mentioned nuclear war as their primary fear.

Sex Differences. For the total sample, females had an average of 11.0 fears and males 7.6 fears which was a significant difference ($t = 12.83, p < .01$). Females had significantly more fears than males in all three age groups. Overall, this finding is consistent with other research (Ollendick, Matson & Helsel, 1985). It is also interesting that children of both sexes had multiple fears (Ollendick, Matson & Helsel, 1985). It remains to be established however, why girls have more fears than boys. Possible explanations include the effects of socialisation such that in western society it is permissible for girls to have more fears than boys. Another possible explanation is that girls are reporting more fears without actually having them.

Developmental Trends. It was found that there was a significant decline in the number of fears from 4-19 years such that younger children had more fears than older children ($t = 6.96, p < .01$). Moreover, examination of the fears listed in Table 2 shows that across the age range, animal and supernatural fears indicative of the younger age group gave way to fears of war and social fears for the older age bracket. Such a trend probably reflects a growing sophistication in the way children think, understand and relate to the world around them. As children get older and mature, their fears become less irrational and are replaced by more social concerns such as dating, finding a job, and considering the impact of war.

What seems especially alarming in the present study is the extent of the fear of war in young children, even as young as 4 years. Girls were

TABLE 2
The most frequently occurring fears for children aged 4-19 years (N=1243)

4-7 years (N=379)	8-12 years (N=540)	13-19 years (N=324)
Snakes (74.9%)	War (77.4%)	War (76.5%)
Burglars (66.8%)	Burglars (76.9%)	Snakes (68.0%)
Falling from heights (66.8%)	Snakes (76.3%)	Burglars (65.4%)
Left alone at night (55.4%)	Falling from heights (63.7%)	Falling from heights (63.0%)
Wild animals (53%)	Getting lost (56%)	Not being liked (53.1%)

significantly more afraid of war than males ($t = 5.83, p < .01$). One explanation for this finding arising from drawings completed by children in the study is that girls may perceive war more in terms of death and suffering and the disruption of family and personal relationships while boys are more prone to view war in terms of glory and achievements. The following sample responses to the question "what frightens you most of all?" provides some insight into how children view the prospect of war.

- "War and people shooting each other" (5 year old)
- "War because people die in wars" (8 year old)
- "World war three frightens me most of all" (10 year old)
- "Nuclear war. I'm scared that one day somebody will push the button by accident and the world will be blown up" (13 year old)

As reflected by these children's comments, the prospect of war is frightening, creating images of global destruction and feelings of powerlessness. The question remains however, as to what can be done to help children counter such fears.

Treatment

The following guidelines are based upon the direct clinical experience of the two authors together with current writing about the issue. Dealing with fear of nuclear war is not the same as dealing with other fears where traditional psychological approaches have proven effective in eliminating fear, e.g., systematic desensitisation. Firstly, it is not a natural phenomena (e.g., flood, plague) and is directly caused by human intervention (e.g., political or military leaders). Secondly, it is different because the fear of war is global in its implication.

I'm scared of nuclear war because with bombs they could blow up the world (11 year old).

Thirdly, the event generates feelings of powerlessness.

"Being shot or blown up because I don't want to be" (6 year old).

Fourthly, nuclear war has an obvious finality.

"A nuclear war will mean the end of everything" (13 year old)-

Finally, it affects planning for the future.

"The bomb. The unknown - future - life" (15 year old).

To this end the following steps to assist children could serve as guidelines for both parents and educators.

1. Adults need to be well informed.

Adults need to be aware of their own reactions to the threat of war and be informed about its possible consequences. The global and catastrophic nature of war can easily lead to avoidance and denial as a means of coping.

2. Be prepared to discuss the possibility of war.

The influence of television and the media means that children know about the possibility of war. Many adults feel they cannot discuss the issue because they cannot truthfully reassure their children. The best way though to cope with the issue is not to try and shield children from awareness, but to give them knowledge and understanding in a supportive, positive way.

In terms of their emotional and cognitive development preschoolers (4-5 years) just want to know basically that parents are aware of the threat and will take care of them. Answers should not be detailed and should be supportive. It is important to be optimistic that nations and political leaders will learn how to settle conflicts peacefully. School-age children want more information than younger children and so adults need to be prepared to discuss it in more depth. Again, it is critical to be hopeful: hope is important in life and some older children may wish to start thinking of solutions and actively try to do something about it.

3. Be Prepared to Act.

Action works against feelings of

powerlessness and helplessness and generates feelings of self worth and confidence. Action can be on a personal level (to be more peaceful within oneself), a family level (to learn peaceful methods for resolving conflict) or a community level (letter writing to politicians).

SUMMARY

What seems especially alarming in the present study is the emergence of nuclear war as a primary fear even among young children. This finding highlights the very real need for adults to address the issue themselves and to be prepared to assist children in dealing with this fear.

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THE OPINIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE
(What frightens you most of all?)

<p>5 Years "War and people shooting each other."</p> <p>6 Years "Being shot or blown up because I don't want to be".</p> <p>8 Years "War because people die in wars., "Probably nuclear war because I don't like seeing blood or people being hurt." "War because people die in wars."</p> <p>9 Years "Most of all I am scared of wars and if I will die." "A nuclear war frightens me most." "I'm afraid most of all about the war and if it will ever come back."</p> <p>10 Years "Nuclear war scares me the most." "The bombs and radiation of the bombs." "I'm afraid of being blown up in a future nuclear war., "World war three frightens me most of all."</p> <p>11 Years "I am mostly frightened about nuclear war because today with all the bombs" missiles etc.. they could blow up the world." "I'm scared of nuclear war because today with the bombs they could blow up the world."</p>	<p>12 Years I am scared mostly of war because that is the easiest way of dying." "The thing that I am most frightened of is nuclear war.,</p> <p>13 Years "Nuclear war. I'm scared that one day somebody will push the button by accident and the world will be blown up." "War. War is really scary. The Iran and Iraq war will bring in the super powers like U.S.A. and Russia. A nuclear war will mean the end of everything."</p> <p>14 Years Violence and getting hurt by anyone." "Nuclear war. I'm frightened that if a nuclear war happens then everybody will die."</p> <p>15 Years "The bomb. The unknown - future - life."</p> <p>16 Years "War! Nuclear or otherwise." "Nuclear war frightens me."</p> <p>17 Years "Getting hurt by war and accidents."</p>
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P.O. Box 629
Cheltenham,
Vic. 3192

PHONE:
(03) 553 4511