

## PSYCHOLOGY

# Nuclear Threat Harms Children

The fallout shelter program may be a source of conflict and anxiety for young people, some psychologists believe. Other manifestations of the nuclear threat are taking their toll.

By JUDITH VIORST

► AMERICA'S fallout shelter program may be damaging the mental health of our children.

Psychologists studying the effects of shelter building and school shelter drills have expressed concern about their impact on young people. Some of them conclude that the net result of these efforts may be a serious increase in anxiety.

Dr. Isidore Ziferstein, a California psychiatrist, recently presented this view of the shelter program to a Los Angeles PTA group. He pointed out that any preparations for war have a harmful effect on the population, especially on children. And, he said, when children start questioning whether hiding under desks can really guard them from 100-megaton bombs, they also start questioning the figures of authority who have recommended this dubious salvation. The result is a loss of confidence which could lead to insecurity feelings and rebellious, delinquent behavior.

## Dream About Falling Bombs

Dr. Ziferstein said that many children today dream of bombs dropping on them. In the past, he said, these dreams could be analyzed as a child's expression of fear that he had done something wrong and must be punished.

Today the dreams can no longer be interpreted in that way. They express a more literal anxiety which, for some children, may be beyond tolerable psychological limits.

A Washington, D. C., psychiatrist observed that for most young people thermonuclear war is past comprehension. Instead, they carry within them a vague and subtle feeling of anxiety which often takes the form of a cynical or bitter attitude toward the future.

The school shelter program, he said, frequently sets up a serious conflict. Many students are convinced, from the evidence of their senses, that the school shelter is an inadequate defense against multimegaton bombs.

The authoritative adult, however, tells them to rely on it. These students can either deny their own senses and join with the adults, or come into conflict with the authorities. Either way, said the psychiatrist, these young people must experience anxiety and mistrust which will carry over into other phases of their relationship with the adult world.

The ethical problems stirred up by the shelter program are also a source of conflict for young people.

Dr. Milton Schwebel of New York University conducted a survey of student opinions of war and fallout shelters during the 1961 Berlin Crisis. His findings, presented at a meeting of the American Psychological Association, showed that "with rare exceptions, the students have condemned the idea of excluding others from shelters and have been horrified at the suggestion to shoot neighbors who tried to gain admittance." Many children said that shelters must be available to everyone, not only to those who could afford them.

Among the senior high school sample queried by Dr. Schwebel, 69% were opposed to shelters, 21% favored them and 10% were ambivalent. Dr. Schwebel concluded that the older, brighter students consider the shelter program irrational, and will be shaken by such irrationality on the part of responsible adults.

"To many of them," he said, ". . . adults are people who cheat you of your future and talk about human values out of both sides of their mouth."

Some educators, concerned about the negative effects of the school shelter program, have publicly expressed their disapproval.

James Council, a teacher in New York City, was dismissed for refusing to participate in school drills.

"The Wichita Public School system is in no position to guarantee physical protection

The Superintendent of Schools in Wichita, Kan., issued this statement: to adults or pupils from a thermonuclear explosion or radioactive fallout. . . . It is therefore useless for the school system to conduct Civil Defense drills for an outmoded system of protection against a possible thermonuclear attack."

A Washington, D. C., school teacher characterized the school shelter program as a "dead-end hoax." She described her efforts to prepare her students for a drill, telling them calmly that, "Of course we all hope that a bomb will not be dropped." Nevertheless, she said, there was fear in many faces.

## School Drills Upsetting

Mothers have reported their children returning home from school drills in a highly distraught state. One 14-year-old announced grimly, "I guess I'm not going to grow up after all." Two teen-age best friends made plans for dying together in the same school shelter.

Psychiatrists point out that fear and horror are perfectly natural reactions to the danger of nuclear war. But, some of them suggest, shelter-directed efforts to escape this danger may generate anxieties capable of penetrating even the deepest underground retreat.

Fear and distress may also be caused by other aspects of the nuclear war danger,



Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization

**FAMILY SHELTER**—Recommended by the Office of Civil Defense, this home shelter is designed to afford protection from fallout. But some psychologists wonder whether such mobilization for the possibility of war is not also mobilizing serious anxieties in children.

writes Sibylle Escalona of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. In a pamphlet entitled "Children and the Threat of Nuclear War," produced in cooperation with the National Institute of Mental Health, Dr. Escalona presents some observations of the impact of this threat on 4-to-18-year-olds, and suggests some ways of dealing with their concern.

### Very Young Aware of Danger

According to Dr. Escalona, children as young as four are "aware of a danger to life. . . . Fallout, Russia, radiation, H-bomb are all part of their vocabulary." Some youngsters have been afraid that falling snow and rain carried fallout. Others have expressed the fear that planes flying overhead might drop bombs. Confusion over the difference between testing and warfare bombing has been another source of anxiety.

Dr. Escalona writes that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the nuclear threat. She points out that adolescence can be a stormy period, with wide swings from joy to sorrow, frivolity to seriousness. A stabilizing factor in the adolescent's struggle toward maturity is the promise of a satisfying future. The possibility that this future might be destroyed can cause serious disturbance.

Some youngsters respond with great pessimism, concluding that the world is doomed. They may become careless about their school work and unwilling to take on responsibilities.

For others, the response is a rejection of adult values and authority. Dr. Escalona quotes one adolescent saying to his 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."

Even teenagers who attempt to avoid anxiety by ignoring or laughing at the possibility of nuclear war do not escape damage. Helpless and fatalistic feelings are still disturbingly present, says Dr. Escalona, and they are undermining to basic security.

Dr. Escalona emphasizes the role of parents in helping children deal with the nuclear threat.

For the 4-to-6-year-olds she suggests protectiveness, reassurance, limited explanations and an attempt to clear up misunderstandings.

Parents of 6-to-12-year-olds should encourage discussion, answer questions and let them know that efforts are being made to combat the danger. Children in this age group, says Dr. Escalona, tend to rely on the adult world and to borrow strength from it.

Parents of adolescents can "take them into partnership" and discuss this important world issue with them as equals. Or they can guide them to articles, authorities and outside discussions that will enable them to learn the facts of the nuclear age.

Dr. Escalona concludes:

"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. . . . 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."

• Science News Letter, 83:106 February 16, 1963

### PSYCHOLOGY

## Expedition Depression

► DEPRESSION is expected to be the most frequently occurring psychological problem on the U.S. expedition to Mt. Everest, SCIENCE SERVICE learned in Berkeley, Calif.

Dr. James T. Lester Jr., who is chief investigator of the expedition's psychology project, said this depression manifests itself by lack of interest in what is going on, as well as loss of energy.

The 20-man expedition arrived in India at Katmandu.

The expedition was aided by 800 porters to the base camp. From this point on, the equipment is being carried by 40 Sherpa guides.

Dr. Gilbert Roberts of Berkeley is serving as expedition physician.

Dr. William E. Siri, University of California physicist and scientific director of the expedition, said the expedition is not only to climb the mountain but also to conduct a research program on how men, breathing air of low oxygen content, function under stress. (Mt. Everest, the world's highest, stands at 29,028 feet.) The scientific program also includes obtaining ice samples of the last 40 years for research on natural tritium and measuring solar radiation.

Laboratory camps at 17,800 and 21,500

feet equipped with heat, electricity and oxygen are planned. Observations on climate are expected to be taken up to 26,000 feet.

Equipment includes a new kind of oxygen mask believed to be the best ever devised. Extremely efficient, it does not have the valves usually troublesome in other types and has no back-pressures as in previous designs.

A U.S. designed tent, called "draw-type," in four and 16 men sizes, is being used. Tested in fall rehearsals during a climb on Mt. Rainier, this tent was the only type not blown down by strong winds.

Dr. Siri said this is probably the best equipped expedition ever to go to the Himalayas. He believes other expeditions starved because they did not bring enough of the right kind of food, especially proteins, to sustain a climber. Climbers often lose 40 to 50 pounds on a trip.

The current expedition emphasizes palatable, nourishing foods, especially meat and orange juice. Each climber is provided with 5,200 calories per day.

The expedition is in contact with amateur radio operators in Livermore, Calif. No air drops have been planned.

• Science News Letter, 83:107 February 16, 1963

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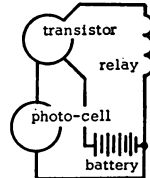
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