

# Children's Nuclear Fears: Myth and Reality

by Susan Goldberg, Parents for Peace Coordinating Committee

Those who oppose peace education wrongly assume that its purpose is to tell children about nuclear war. Peace educators take a much broader view, considering an understanding of the causes of war only one part of a more extensive subject. However, the purpose of this fact sheet is to demonstrate that *even if we take the narrow view of our opponents*, children are less likely to be "psychologically damaged" by information about nuclear war than opponents insist. All information that follows comes from systematic research studies of Canadian children.

**MYTH: Children Only Think Of Nuclear War If Adults Raise The Issue.**

**FACT:** In interviews with 60 grade school children in Toronto where no mention of war or peace was made, 20% of children in Grade 2, 50% in Grade 4, and 85% in Grade 6 spontaneously mentioned war or nuclear war. The question that elicited the most such mentions was: If you were in charge of the world and had three wishes to change anything you wanted, what would you wish for?<sup>1</sup>

**MYTH: Peace Education In School Would Be Children's Main Source of Information About Nuclear War.**

**FACT:** Every existing survey, including two Canadian studies, shows that children themselves report that their main source of information about nuclear war is television. In Burnaby, B.C. 85% of children in grades 5-9 thought they should be learning about nuclear issues in school.<sup>2</sup>

**MYTH: Children Only Worry About Nuclear War If Their Parents Are Peace Activists.**

**FACT:** Worried youngsters outnumber

peace activist parents. In the Canadian national survey, 50-60% of 12-18 year olds mentioned nuclear war as one of their three main worries about the future. Only 8-11% said their parents had done anything to prevent nuclear war.<sup>3</sup>

**MYTH: Only Middle Class Children Worry About Nuclear War.**

**FACT:** In the Canadian national surveys, answers to 9 questions about nuclear war were analysed to see whether either mother's or father's occupation was related to the pattern of replies. 17 of 18 such analyses showed no effect of social class. The one pattern of association showed that the lowest social class (by father's occupation) reported the most discussion of nuclear issues in the home.<sup>4</sup>

**MYTH: More Information About Nuclear War Will Make Children More Fearful.**

**FACT:** Youngsters who report more discussion about nuclear issues at home, at school or with friends do report that they worry more frequently than others about the nuclear threat, but they are also more optimistic that they and others can do something to stop it.<sup>5</sup>

**MYTH: Worry About Nuclear War Is Damaging To Children's Mental Health.**

**FACT:** In surveys conducted in Toronto and Hamilton, 12-18 year olds who worried about nuclear war most often were a) most likely to feel they and others could do something to stop it; b) more involved than other students in their personal/job/career plans. Those who said they had not worried about nuclear war at all in the last month expressed the most helplessness and lack of interest in their personal fu-

ture.<sup>6</sup>

**REALITY:** Our children from grade 5 onward want and need information and opportunities to discuss nuclear issues. If our schools do not do the job, our children will continue to learn mainly from television, from inappropriate material, and without sensitive and caring adults to help them.

<sup>1</sup>S. Goldberg *et al*, *Report to the Toronto Board of Education* (1987).

<sup>2</sup>S. Hargreaves. Master's thesis in Education, Simon Fraser University, 1984; S. Goldberg *et al*. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (October 1985). This issue of the journal also includes a survey comparing U.S. and Soviet children's attitudes and knowledge about the threat of nuclear war; and K.R. Parker *et al*, Canadian Children's Concerns About their Future. Preliminary Report of the national survey. Faculty of Medicine, McMaster University, 1986.

<sup>3</sup>Parker.

<sup>4</sup>Parker.

<sup>5</sup>Goldberg, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*.

<sup>6</sup>Goldberg, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*.

Also of interest for an overview of the international studies on this topic: a review in the Appendix of *GROWING UP SCARED?*, Gould, Moon & Van Hoorn (eds.), (Berkeley, CA: Open Books, 1986).

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