

Why Terrify the Children?

by Irene Petteys

Young children lack the knowledge, experience and emotional sophistication to deal effectively with a problem like nuclear war. They cannot be expected to grasp the technical details, the sociopolitical questions or the historical perspectives which have brought the world to a place where a problem like this does exist. Supposed experts like Dr. Helen Caldicott, founder of Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament, don't help the situation. She recently spoke before a group of junior-high-school students in Maine. Her assertion that if the nuclear arms race doesn't stop ". . . you aren't going to grow up" is typical of the emotional harangue that only induces fear without hope in children and adults.

How sad! In childhood we should be concerned with life and the myriad joys to be found therein. Heaven only knows, it's tough enough being a kid today without having your parents or teachers confront you with issues that even they have difficulty comprehending. Young children have enough fears to deal with without their parents supplying them with more. Most parents know the difficulty of consoling a child who fears the "witch under the bed" or the "bogyman in the closet" or other nocturnal terrors. All children must learn to deal with imagined fears such as these, as well as the real-life bully at the playground. What must it be like for the child who fears going to bed without a light, if his parents are telling him that all the lights may go out forever?

I am not advocating a "head in the sand" approach to so important an issue. I only urge parents and educators to understand and accept the child's mind and its capabilities and limitations. A child develops intellectually and emotionally as he grows physically. We don't encourage hang gliding by two-year-olds or teach calculus in the first grade, nor should we tell a six-year-old that his uncertain future includes the possibility of the death of everyone dear to him and the end of his own short life as well. Children should not be subjected to activities, information or problems that are beyond their comprehension.

Exposing children to the pressure of trying to cope with the enormity of nuclear war will not mold them into the leaders of the next generation. It is more likely to cause crippling anxiety. Rather than preparing them to deal with problems effectively, and perhaps become the generation that will actually solve the questions of the nuclear age, these doomsday parents are raising their offspring to be anxious, maladjusted adults. More likely than not, these frightened children will stand out as a group for their lack of accomplishment as adults. They will have trouble dealing with their own personal lives, let alone confronting and overcoming major national and international problems.

If we raise our children to have respect for one another, and genuine concern for life in all its forms, they will recognize the important issues as they grow and mature. If we teach them to deal with the problems and fears that are normal, natural and appropriate at each stage of their development, they will be better able to deal effectively with the more complex concerns that confront them in succeeding years. If we show them that the true spice of life is humor and fun, they will learn to view things from a healthy perspective. If we raise them to feel loved, protected and secure, they will become adults who can approach problems with confidence and make decisions with intelligence. If our children aren't paralyzed by fear, they can hug a puppy out of pure joy and play in the autumn leaves with the abandon of youth. And the memory of these simple pleasures will lead them to revere life far more than will a childhood of hopeless fear.

Write on one of the following:

1. Petteys argues that children should not be exposed "to the pressure of trying to cope with the enormity of nuclear war." How persuasive is she in her arguments? Do her arguments seem to make sense, or do you find yourself disagreeing with them? (Do not merely repeat or summarize Petteys' arguments.)
2. Should young children be exposed to all issues, conflicts, and problems, or is there some knowledge or information that children should not have until they are older? Support your point of view with specific examples and reasoned arguments.

