

# MENTAL HEALTH

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## Observed Effects of Wartime Conditions on Children\*

### I. Children living under various types of war conditions

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The views expressed in this paper are the summation of personal impressions gained from children since war began. The paper is not an accurate survey, and the findings have no statistical validity. The opinion and conclusions are necessarily only of a tentative nature.

The sources of the data will give some idea of the conditions under which the children studied were living. They are as follows:

1. The Manchester Child Guidance Clinic.  
Manchester has not suffered such continuous air raids as London, Bristol or Liverpool but has had three nights of very severe blitz and numerous other minor raids, with for some periods almost nightly alerts and deafening anti-aircraft barrage.
2. The Bradford Child Guidance Clinic and in the Bradford schools.  
Bradford has had only one severe raid and a few alerts, and normal life has been comparatively little disturbed.
3. The evacuated children from Bradford, housed in remote country districts and in neighbouring small towns.
4. The North-East Lancashire Child Guidance Clinic which serves a district where there has been practically no enemy action. In this Clinic there have also been a number of evacuees from south country heavily blitzed areas.
5. Work in the schools with maladjusted children in Chester, which at the time the children were seen had suffered no air raid damage, and where

\* Papers read at a meeting of the Child Guidance Council held on May 27th, 1941.

the war consciousness of the children was expressed in appreciation of the pageantry of war rather than its dangers.

6. Work in the schools at Salford where they have suffered heavily and fairly continuously.

In addition to these sources, data has also been drawn from detailed observation of six young children evacuated to a remote cottage in Wales, living under the freest conditions. And, in contradistinction to this group, observations have also been made of so-called unbilleteable children living under Emergency Hostel conditions.

It is the aim of this paper to discuss the different ways in which the war situation seems to have modified the experience and behaviour of children and to indicate what seem to be their methods of dealing with it.

The general thesis is that experience of air raids and even actual bombing has caused less emotional disturbance in children, and that evacuation, on the other hand, has given rise to more emotional disturbance than was anticipated before war began. This does not mean that evacuation has not been necessary or advisable, nor is it supporting a policy of keeping children under blitz conditions; but there is evidence that there was and possibly still is an underestimation of the disturbances caused in the emotional development of the child by evacuation, and an over-estimation of the fear of raids.

In January 1940, *Mental Health* published an account of a detailed investigation into the problems of maladjusted evacuees. From case histories of these children it was evident that they had previously shown similar maladjustments in normal life. From these and from observation of children who were apparently well adjusted in their new foster homes, the tentative conclusion was drawn that evacuation as it was then being carried out, into the homes of country householders, was a success in the normal child but almost impossible with the neurotic child. It was evident that the problem child needed the freedom, the homely security and the affection which, although often so generously given by householders, can usually only be consistently relied on in the child's own home. From further investigation since that time it seems that this conclusion should be extended even to the normal well-adjusted child, and that evacuation even under the best conditions is seldom a satisfactory solution for any length of time. One of the reasons for this is the difficulty which is experienced not only by children but also by the adult population in making any stable adjustment to a situation which everyone hopes is only to be of short duration.

Even after three months of war, it was evident that the indefiniteness of period was an important contributory factor in many of the difficulties that arose. "Parents who parted willingly with their children, householders who willingly received children and the children themselves had not contemplated enduring the new regime for any length of time".\* If, for example, a child is sent to Boarding School he knows that the arrangement is for a termly length definitely to be continued for a number of years. It is worth while to make friends, to make himself a stable and important member of his new society. There is no way out if he indulges in anti-social behaviour or

\* "Some Psychological Difficulties of Evacuation" (*Mental Health*, January 1940).

sinks back upon himself. The child running from the carefully selected Boarding School is sure of a speedy return or deep disapproval. The evacuee returning home with stories of the cruel foster parents is only too often greeted as a hero. There is no doubt, however, that evacuation has been an experience of immense social value to the country as a whole. In addition to its stated function, it has provided invaluable evidence of the realities of social stratification. For many children, evacuation has held dreams of romance and adventure, of new vision and of fresh air. That these opportunities were fully realized and eagerly grasped was only too well illustrated by the long list of children who applied for overseas evacuation, and in a less degree by the town children who dream of the fields and of the trees and cows only a few miles from their own doorstep.

The drawbacks of the break-up of the family are expressed in the child's loss of emotional security. In particular he loses a legitimate outlet for his feelings of love and aggression, particularly his feelings of aggression. Only too familiar are the enthusiasms of householders, sometimes of their servants, for perfectly behaved children who are showing them affection, and the readiness with which this changes into a desire to get rid of the child at all costs as soon as the good behaviour shows signs of breaking. The noticeable after-effects of evacuation on a family of children, who were evacuated successfully for some time, was a regression to a much more infantile level of behaviour on returning home. This was consciously admitted by them to be the result of being denied the opportunity of expressing their feeling of aggression for such a long period. In their more honest moments, they realized how minor environmental stimulæ were merely seized upon as excuses for their outbursts. In this connection attention should be drawn to the very difficult conditions under which children in Emergency Hostels are living. Not only in most of them have they no one person to rely upon for love and affection, but in addition they are cruelly starved of all play material. Opportunities for expression in some of these Hostels are completely lacking. This is more than eighteen months after the first of them were set up. Knowledge which is common to all teachers working with young children, which is common to all interested parents, and certainly to all child guidance workers, that elementary play materials and opportunities for expression are essential for the development of the child has in some way failed to permeate to those responsible for the organization of Emergency Hostels for difficult children.\*

Detailed observation of the six evacuated children previously mentioned living under the freest possible conditions, and of others, showed that one of the consequences of evacuation was an increase of concentrated fantasy play. The removal from home seemed to result in the creation of home comforts for the dolls. All sorts of odd materials were cut up to make clothes, bedclothes, bandages. Boxes, odd corners inside and out, became houses and were on occasion bombed. Terrific satisfaction was shown in these performances. In this play no adult supervision was required, merely a free atmosphere, unlimited amounts of inexpensive equipment, a normal outside environment, a number of children together, and above all freedom to make

\* "Emergency Hostels for Difficult Children—Survey done by Educational Psychologist of twenty-two Hostels," by Miss E. Fox (*Mental Health*, October 1940).

a mess. It is this last concession which the Emergency Hostel, when not run by a skilled worker, finds so difficult to allow.

It would be interesting to investigate in detail the reasons given by parents and householders for children returning from evacuation, and to investigate in detail the various neurotic symptoms of evacuees of which so much has been heard. For example, it is well known that there was a higher incidence of enuresis in all ages of children than had previously been expected. Detailed follow-ups of some cases indicate, however, that the new anxiety of evacuation was conditioning a recurrence of a symptom, rather than the creation of a new symptom. Incidentally, in spite of the publicity given to the psychological aspects of enuresis this symptom is still being treated through the medium of fear.

A disturbing factor often overlooked in evacuees is the actual fear of war. The child realizes that he is being sent to the country because there is danger at home, and he is afraid of the creation of air raid damage which his fantasy makes for him. One quite acute anxiety of this type completely disappeared when the child was brought home, even to noisy air raid conditions. Fear of the known was nothing in comparison to fear of the unknown but imagined. In a considerable number of cases return home is only after a number of changes of billet have been made. It is possible that some of these may be accounted for by a real effort, not always conscious, on the part of the child to change his present billet not for another but for his own home. This seems to be the case even where there are known to be air raids at home.

What, then, are the effects of actual war dangers on children? What damage is caused to them by living under air raid conditions? Figures which are shortly to be published from the Manchester Child Guidance Clinic show that even in a neurotic group of Clinic patients only in a comparatively small percentage of cases was any overt fear in raids shown, or any direct effect of them evident. On the other hand, a number of children have been sent to clinics specifically for war fears, or for symptoms resulting from air raids. For example, a child who had a permanent squint, seen three months after a serious blitz, said in explanation, "You see, I went cross-eyed in the Sunday blitz". He was not apparently upset by his symptom but he knew the cause from which it had originated. An adolescent who had had a serious return of enuretic habits was desperately afraid and developed a severe tremor under air raid conditions. A small evacuee of six suffered from regular night terrors after experience in the East End of London. A small girl of nine from Bristol was afraid to go to sleep at night. A high-grade defective girl was sent to a Clinic because she was afraid to put on a gas mask and therefore could not be admitted to school. All these and many others are cases where direct evidence of the mal-effects of war conditions on the City child can be seen, but the great majority even of clinic children, and almost 100 per cent. of the children seen under normal school conditions, show no overt symptoms through the mal-effects of enemy action. The question, then, arises, what are the factors which enable the child to adjust himself so satisfactorily? May it not be that the continual ventilation of the dangers and the excitement of war bring the subject sufficiently into the child's consciousness for him to be able in some measure to understand it? Children are more accustomed

to dealing with fear than adults. Fear is a natural response which they admit, but only when this is of some situation which they do not understand and which they do not face does it become an anxiety and does it cause serious maladjustment. Children seem to deal with the dangers of air raids in the long accepted way of the traditional fairy story; the shelter is the den or the magic carpet, the gas mask is the magic wand or ring which gives security over overwhelming odds. Hitler is a bogey, like the giant or the dragon. It is interesting to note here that parents accustomed to use this form of disciplinary weapon now as often refer to Hitler as "the man who will get you" as they do to the police. Children in Rest Centres whose homes have been destroyed are heard saying with triumph, "He thought he'd get us in the house but we were in the shelter, so you see he didn't". He, Hitler, the giant or the dragon in the fairy story, whose one aim was to destroy or devour the child in question, is thwarted. This point is further illustrated by a child of ten who was asked to return home early after going out to tea, being given the reason that there might be an alert. She replied in all seriousness, "Wouldn't it be better if I waited until after dark 'cos then he won't be able to see me?" The same feeling is illustrated by a primitive yokel who replies triumphantly when asked whether he is afraid in air raids, that he has three shelters, "The first night I go to No. 1, the second night I go to No. 2 and then the third night maybe I dodges back to No. 1." The feeling of mattering as an individual gives the child his security. It seems that so long as this is maintained and so long as the adults themselves are able to remain apparently quiet and confident, that even severe dangers of air raids hold no horrors. Even, in fact, where parents do show fear children have been known to say, "Mother is afraid, but I am not", but there is evidence that where war conditions have given rise to real anxiety in a child, that anxiety can nearly always be traced back to the fear shown by the adults concerned. The world only crumbles when those on whom the children rely as having confidence fail them in a lack of confidence. This, incidentally, is a very real argument in favour of evacuation. The strain of continual air raids on the adult population is very much increased by having to maintain a continual appearance of false confidence and security, quite apart from the natural anxiety for their children's safety.

A study of children's drawings taken at random from an elementary school in a Northern town illustrates what seems to be an interesting difference in the attitude of boys and girls to war conditions. Practically without exception every boy who is given the opportunity for free drawing now draws pictures of war, guns, ships, aeroplanes, submarines and parachutes. Often these pictures depict actual scenes of destruction. Practically without exception they show the swastika being beaten. The girls' free drawings, on the other hand, seldom bring in any war element. They are drawings of houses and homes of people in security. When a class of girls was asked specifically to draw a picture illustrating an air raid, the important elements were the house, the air raid shelter, searchlights, the children walking with gas masks and in siren suits, and only in some cases aeroplanes and fires. Even these, in comparison with the boys' pictures, were in small dimension in relation to the other elements in the picture.

It is interesting here to note how very quickly children respond to new forms of regulation, the gas mask must be carried, the children must go into a shelter when there is an alert sounded. These rules are responded to just as readily and appear to seem to the children no more unreasonable than the ordinary school rules, for example, that you walk out of school in a line.

The drawings seem to be a confirmation that the child has largely coped with the war situation. Free play and observation of children during play therapy confirm this, and in some ways the legalized aggression of war seems to be a relief to the children, particularly to well brought up children who, in some cases, normally have little outlet. An interesting commercial sidelight on this is that whereas in pre-war days far more toy wild animals were obtainable, now all the available material is used for the implements of war, soldiers, tanks, aeroplanes, and these in the children's play often take the place of the wild animals in pre-war play.

It is not within the scope of this paper to touch on the effects on children of the break-up of the family through their fathers joining the Forces. Delinquency figures indicated that the absence of the father has in many cases resulted in a deterioration of social behaviour and discipline in the child. Particularly this is accentuated by the economic necessity for the mother leaving the home to go to work, which the father being in the Forces so often implies. This condition is now being alarmingly extended by the growing demand for women labour and its conscription. There is, however, in a certain section of the population one aspect which should not be overlooked. The child who has had for years a father unemployed has gained much in pride and prestige with his father joining the Forces.

It appears that the ill-effects of wartime conditions on children are chiefly those caused through the break-up of the family, and particularly through the unavoidable lack of parental discipline, and that congratulations are due for the way in which children have actually stood up to direct enemy action. Through evacuation children have been put to the test of leaving home and security much earlier than is normal, and their behaviour has necessarily been less mature. The aftermath of this in post-war years will doubtless swell the waiting lists of child guidance clinics.

## **II. Impressions of Children in a Heavily Bombed Area**

By Miss H. E. HOWARTH

(Regional Representative (Region No. 7) Mental Health Emergency Committee)

The conditions prevailing in the two cities in which I have been working, where devastation by air raids has been concentrated and almost all areas have suffered wholesale destruction of homes, schools and shopping centres, make detailed observation of individual children nearly impossible. The normal groups of children in school, play centre and club have been dispersed and, more than ever, one has to rely on collected evidence from adults. Information from the latter, unless they are trained in child psychology, tends to be inaccurate and at these times the evidence is

unduly influenced by the disturbance registered by the adults themselves. The newspapers bear ample witness to this. Local officials will on one day broadcast the fact that children are wonderful and seem rather to enjoy than to fear intense air bombardment, but later, in order to encourage evacuation, they are stressing the terrible strain put upon the children. In one school I visited a teacher had noticed no sign of nervous strain at all among the senior girls. A few had been gathered together for lessons in a school which was half destroyed, and when I asked whether the girls had talked about their experiences I was assured that they were never encouraged to discuss the raids. Another teacher tended to leap at every leading question, until I could only suspect that she wanted to see the symptoms which I expected she might find. So many adults are faced with the difficult task of finding their own personal adjustment that one must suspect what may appear on the surface as objective observation.

The difficulty of obtaining accurate observations should not deter the Child Guidance experts. Almost more than the stark tragedy of homes destroyed and people torn up by the roots from all their old associations, I have been impressed by the loss of all consideration for the individual. Hasty plans for rebilleting and evacuating homeless people by officials who themselves have lost their bearings have buried the individual's claim to act or think for himself as deeply as though a ten-storey building had buried him. The current expressions "these people must be made to do this or the other", "we have *got rid* of so many families" and many others all indicate the confusion and fear which prevails. After a few weeks in Rest Centres one sees a sort of despair upon the faces of the people, and this must make a profound impression on the growing children.

Quite the most general observation about the children is that they stand up extraordinarily well to a life of disturbed nights and even to the extreme emergency of being bombed out, buried or having to leave a burning home. Teachers, parents and ambulance drivers all remark upon it. The children at first are dazed, but soon adjust to a new life. If one measures this by the experience of Child Guidance one is not surprised, since one has learned already a healthy respect for the adaptability of the average child. One is reminded of the small boy who, when asked what he did on a Saturday afternoon, replied that he either went to the pictures or father might take him to see the ruins.

This is borne out by some figures based on information collected from schools by Miss Dunsdon. An inquiry was sent out to schools and the returns covered a school population of approximately eight thousand. Of these, rather over 4 per cent. appeared to show signs of strain either purely nervous or psycho-somatic.

It is interesting and suggestive to study these figures in some detail, although for the reasons which I have stated I do not think that they are conclusive, or even entirely reliable. Of the 4 per cent. of children showing symptoms of strain, 25 per cent. were in the age group 11-14 years, 35 per cent. 8-10 years, and 40 per cent. 5-7 years. This may be interpreted as showing that the older children, having gained a certain independence from parental ties, feel less helpless and they are also more immune from the contagious anxiety of parents. In most families of any size these

older children have certain small responsibilities such as helping the younger ones down to the shelter. The largest and youngest age group are still sufficiently dependent upon the mother quickly to reflect her fear, and they also have a greater feeling of helplessness. General observation of children of nursery school age indicates that they soon show the effects of fatigue from broken rest and noise, losing weight and becoming difficult to manage, but they equally quickly adjust to a quiet period and begin to make normal progress. In the winter months there was among these children a high incidence of bronchitis from sleeping in clothes and in damp shelters. Here one sees most strongly the latent power of adaptation of the very young child. Interesting light is shed by this upon the controversial subject as to whether the evacuation of unaccompanied two to fives is psychologically damaging to them. Is it wise to wait until the 5-7 period when they may show the maximum strain from their experiences ?

Miss Dunsdon has divided the children under observation into two further groups, those showing psychological strain and those showing physical symptoms, probably psychogenic in origin. By far the largest proportion of psycho-somatic symptoms was in the 11-14 group in whom the conflict of primitive fear and the fear of being afraid would be greatest, a thing which has been remarked among adults.

The general inference is two-fold. There is no doubt that a small proportion of children is seriously affected by air raids, as much by prolonged periods of disturbance as by severe shock in blitzes, and many of these cases are not being recognized and have little chance of being treated unless child guidance becomes more generally a part of the services of the reception area. The second inference is that, generally speaking, the effects of wartime conditions will not be obvious for some time to come. Much preventive work may be done if a long view be taken. Quite the most interesting remark came from a school teacher of a junior boys' department. He noticed that the boys who had experienced the most severe shocks did not seem able to talk about it. Even the most extravert types were unwilling to talk of what had happened to them. This suggests that only in the study of children's phantasy are we likely to discover the real clues to their reactions. I would like to see some intensive research undertaken with individual play or drawings in play groups in the reception areas, where perhaps conditions might be suitable for such an investigation.

I do not feel that, even in the records of a certain child guidance clinic, where, at least until the end of March, the majority of cases might be said to be problems pre-dating severe air raids, there would be much material to aid us. Conditions do, of course, shape the structure of the interview. Such questions as "Do you feel frightened when the siren goes?" or "Where do you sleep, in the shelter or under the stairs?" become commonplace. Quite definitely a number of the graver psychological problems seemed unaffected—in one case where the situation between the parents had entirely defeated treatment, one might have expected a further breakdown in a boy of ten years, yet once more it was proved that external danger cannot compare with the paralysing effect of unconscious fears. Some problems of sleeplessness are condoned or eased by the necessity of broken nights and crowded sleeping conditions. A boy of a particularly hysterical type who at first refused to

go to school and panicked if he heard an air-raid siren continued to improve after treatment ceased, continued to attend school normally and continued to adjust in spite of much more severe raids. Some highly nervous, anxious children showed definite signs of relief and less fear once bombs had fallen near them. None of these things seems yet to fit into a definite pattern.

Everything points to the fact that this must be a long-term investigation. The psychological needs of the child are deep-seated. Security depends upon the assurance of love both consciously and unconsciously, rather than upon the material environment. The first thing to suffer is consistency of environment and perhaps the great danger at the moment is the general disintegration of the child's daily life. This must be a big factor in the increase in juvenile delinquency about which so much is now being heard, and it is undoubtedly the most important argument in the case for evacuation. Another danger with psychological results, must be the cumulative effect of fatigue. So far the health of the children has been good—in spite of the almost universal breakdown of asthmatic children—but the shorter summer nights and more consecutive raids are having their effect. Children in rest centres are not getting more than half their normal amount of sleep, nor are those who trek out of the cities on lorries and so forth, leaving the country again often at five or six in the morning. At first the child adjusts to these things far more easily than the adults. A camp-like existence brings excitement and in some instances positive benefits to a child. He is learning to use his independence and his own initiative, but this is counteracted by a restlessness and a lack of concentration when he does appear in school. His new-found independence is being wasted for lack of opportunities for constructive effort.

The real work is still waiting to be done. While one is in the midst of the struggle for the barest recognition of individual needs and claims, one cannot pretend to anything more than a superficial impression of what these wartime conditions mean to the child. He is often being bereft of everyday routine, the very monotony of which provides a useful counterbalance to the tragedies of internal conflict. The outer world must often appear to fulfil the child's most primitive phantasy perhaps rendering him helpless—or perhaps bringing emotional relief. It is very easy to theorize, but only the most careful and painstaking research can produce valid conclusion. Meanwhile there are more practical jobs awaiting the field worker—the problems arising from broken homes are only too familiar—yet evacuation can be a deliberate fostering of these conditions. Therefore social welfare schemes and well-built plans for liaison between the evacuation and reception areas—plans to ease the problem of conflicting loyalties, for the provision of constructive use of leisure time, for guarding against unnecessary fatigue, for parent guidance, for the instruction of billeting committees and a hundred other ways and means, are necessary to enable the child to grow rather than to exist through the present and immediate future. Conventions are a psychological necessity, the old ones are disappearing, new ones must come into being, and in the future child guidance clinics must be prepared to adjust some preconceived ideas about what may constitute the normal and the stable. No doubt if we wish it, it can do us all good to be forcibly pulled up by the roots.