

WHEN CHILDREN ASK ABOUT THE WAR

A Problem For Parents

(By K.S.)

THE searchlights weaving across the sky could be seen through the nursery window, and kept distracting Richard from the story I was trying to read him. "What are they doing, Daddy?" he asked at last. "Practising," said I. "What are they practising for?" "So that if aeroplanes come they will know how to find them," I told him. "But why will aeroplanes come here?" "Because we are at war," I parried.

What does one say to young children about the war? It is one of my ever-present worries these days. If we listen to the Daventry news, the children hear it also and pick up odd phrases and want to know about places like Tobruk, Keren and Salonika. If we comment to one another on the news in the papers, or say good-bye to a friend on final leave, or in fact when we do or say almost anything in these war years, the children pick up their little ears and ask questions. I have done my best to shelter them from the war's worst aspects, not discussing hatred, violent death, or explosions in their presence, but occasionally it breaks out.

The First He Knew

The first that Richard knew about the war was a thoughtless remark 18 months ago, when I saw him snugly in bed in his warm bedroom, and said how lucky he was compared with the little boys of Poland, who had no beds and no roofs to their houses. His interest was so aroused that I simply had to explain that wicked men in aeroplanes broke their roofs, and he went off to school burning with indignation—he was going to tell the teacher about it and have them stopped.

But it wasn't long before he picked up plenty from other school children. One day, out on a walk, he picked up two large stones, and gave one to his two-year-old sister with the remark: "Here's your bomb, Bubba." And there was little Ruth, not much more than a toddler, dumbly learning from Richard how to throw it down with a "bang."

And what is the right and proper thing to do when Richard comes home from school enormously proud of the fact that the teacher asked him to bring back some aluminium to make aeroplanes? To refuse would make the child feel an outcast without in the least understanding why; to give him an old pot makes him feel he has a part in the war, but it does seem a pity to make a tender six-year-old mind identify itself with a war which will surely be over long before he reaches man's estate.

Advice from America

America is in the same situation as New Zealand in this matter. A Miss Edna Dean Baker, president of an American teachers' training college, has been studying children who are highly emotional about the war, who defy their mothers by saying they are Hitler, or who invent in their games new ways to

kill people, and she has published her advice on what parents should do with war-excited children. She says:

Children under six: Reassure them frequently that Hitler will not get them; avoid talking about war in their presence; keep them busy with pleasant things.

Six to eight: (the most difficult group): Discuss the war freely, but avoid talking about destruction, brutality, suffering or war guilt; take their minds off war by playing family games, singing old songs, etc.

Nine to fourteen: (generally unemotional and well-informed): Let them listen to the radio; play up stories of gallantry and cheerfulness among war-stricken peoples; discuss with them the background of war, the peace-to-come.

All I can say is that, while this information is valuable, it is patent that Miss Baker is not a mother.

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