

Beyond Psychic Numbing: Child Art Therapy and the Nuclear Taboo

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Abstract

The existence of nuclear weapons and its effect on the psychological development of children present art therapists, and indeed all those who have any contact with the young, with an unprecedented challenge. Do we as mental health professionals explore openly and sensitively this frightening issue (as we have been trained to do with other previously held taboos such as sexuality) or do we retreat, ignoring the signs, misinterpreting the graphic message, remaining focused only on more tangible distress? This article presents the school age child's dilemma: being aware of the risk of nuclear annihilation but lacking the psychological defenses with which to protect him/herself. Studies are cited demonstrating this knowledge and a framework is presented in which to view the psychological and behavioral ramifications. Art therapy is presented as a preventative intervention and the inclusion of examples of children's art work illustrates both early awareness and concern. The author concludes by addressing the implications for the therapist in meeting this societal taboo both professionally and personally.

"This nuclear vision may overwhelm the imagination but the subconscious cannot block it out. And the young, with their higher degree of susceptibility, their more active imagination, also have more fragile defenses. Some begin to believe it's easier not to grow up . . . the future seems too terrifying, too negative, too black."

HELEN CALDICOTT, MD
President of Physicians for
Social Responsibility

Our society is becoming increasingly aware of the sensitivity and concern with which children view the world situation and the threat to survival posed by the existence of nuclear weapons. Yet because of the immensity of the situation and the lack of existing guidelines on how to address these issues, most adults have chosen the path of least resistance: numbing themselves to this awareness, keeping busy, addressing more immediate or tangible issues. Perhaps it is as Joanna Macy (1983) contends in *Despair and Power in the Nuclear Age*, that our society frowns on raising a problem without a solution. We as art psychotherapists are not in the business of providing solutions. Rather, we are the providers of a frame inside which individuals can enact the creative struggle, regardless of the question raised or the problem explored. Do we by our own avoidance of issues without answers, our own fear of confronting not individual death but global death, sidestep an issue which is subtly brought into the art therapy session? Perhaps we contribute to our young clients' sense of isolation and despair by our own "psychic numbing." This is a term Robert Lifton (1982) coined to describe the denial of reality in order to protect oneself from what would otherwise be too overwhelming.

Developmental Theory

A brief citing of developmental perspective will provide the framework through which to view elementary school children's art and to understand the research studies list-

ed. The way children meet the challenges of growing up is greatly influenced by the physical and emotional environment in which they find themselves. Placing this in the context of Erikson's "Ages of Man," one can look at the two primary developmental tasks. The first is "Industry vs. Inferiority" in which the child either becomes absorbed in creative involvement with peers and environment, or withdraws, giving up in such endeavors. The second stage, "Ego Identity vs. Identity Confusion," hinges on the existence of viable adult role models: adults who supply strong, reliable examples for the child to emulate. Are these two tasks being compromised? Does the knowledge of adult responsibility for the nuclear crisis we face interfere with the child's desire to identify with these adults?

Another framework within which to view child development is object relations theory. Mahlher and Kernberg write of the need to integrate the good/bad in the emerging sense of self and others (p. 30, Greenwald and Zeitlin). In order for the child to develop as a separate and individual human, possessing a sense of empathy, this split must be integrated. How does our society, with its rhet-

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oric posing the United States as all good and "God fearing" and the Soviets as the "evil empire," affect this psychological development? This posing of enemies may inadvertently exacerbate the good/bad split.

As the following research demonstrates, beginning at a very early age children possess both awareness and deep emotional response to the nuclear issue. The studies are listed here beginning with high school seniors and descending in age down to the final study of pre-schoolers.

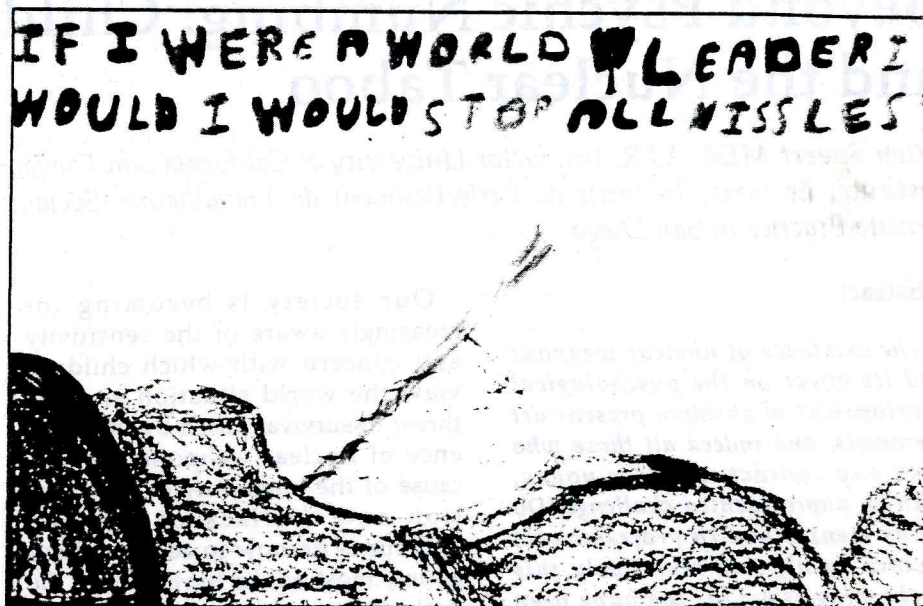
Research Findings

Bachman (1983), at the University of Michigan, conducted a ten-year nation-wide study of 17,000 high school seniors, finding with each successive year an increase in the number of students worrying about the nuclear threat (p. 86-104).

Goldenring and Doctor (1985) studied children in the seventh through twelfth grades. Presenting a list of twenty fearful situations, they asked each child to rank in order the five that worried them the most. These children responded that nuclear war was second only to the death of a parent as the most frightening (p. 112-133).

Escalona (1965) conducted a study of children ranging from ten to seventeen years old, asking them to describe "What will the world be like ten years from now?" In their response 70% spontaneously mentioned nuclear weapons or destructive war (p. 23).

Educators for Social Responsibility (1982) interviewed 2,000 high school students and found that 80% thought that there would be a nuclear war within the next twenty years. Further, 90% of those who



predicted nuclear war felt that the world would not survive it (p. 8, Mack, J. E. 1982).

Snow and Chivian (1983) interviewed first graders and reached the conclusion in their research that "The word 'nuclear' makes first graders think about dying," according to their report delivered at the sixtieth annual meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association.

Friedman (1984) studied four year old pre-schoolers, presenting them with children's stories including conflict. Then, through the use of associative techniques, he observed their responses. He found that 12% of these pre-schoolers spontaneously included references to nuclear weapons in their play and verbal responses (p. 2).

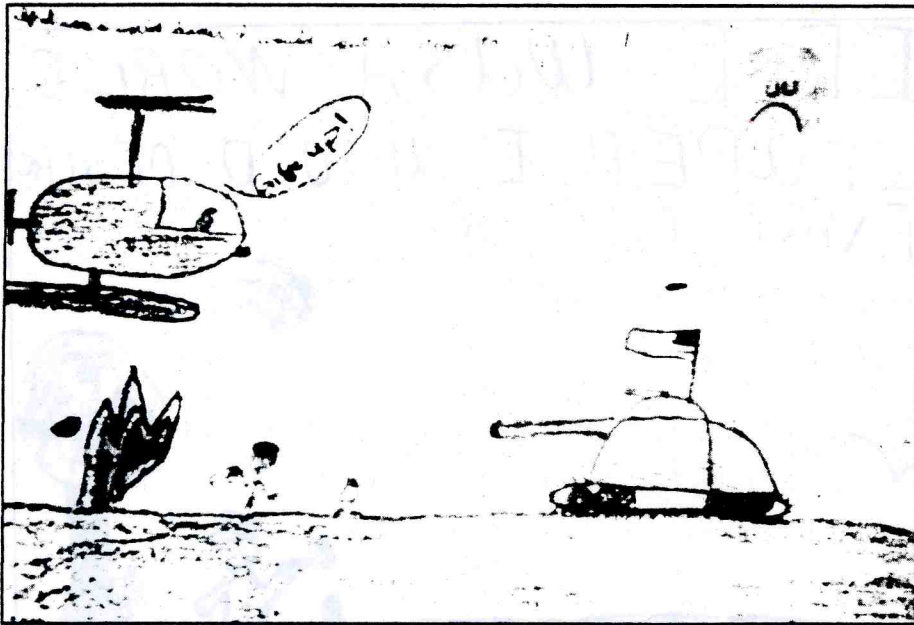
Goldenring and Doctor, as well as other researchers found that students who worried more about nuclear war had better scores with respect to adjustment and self-esteem

than the less worried students (Greenwald and Zeitlin, p. 26). These were children who, as a result of their concerns, talked more with their parents and other adults thus gaining hope as they broke through the veil of silence.

Let us now look at the effects on personality development of growing up under the nuclear threat. Beardslee and Mack (1981), researchers at the Harvard Medical School, in their report to the American Psychiatric Association, describe the effect a sense of futurelessness has on children:

Within themselves, children carry an 'ego ideal', an image of their best selves or of what they would wish to be like. This image, often reflected in hero worship, gives children a vision to mitigate disappointments and to sustain them into adulthood as they experience their childhood limitations. To build a healthy ego ideal and grow toward maturity, children must perceive life as stable and the future as reliable. The building of enduring values within an individual depends upon the delay of present satisfactions in favor of future goals and satisfactions. But the formation of the psychic structures upon which such development depends is compromised

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tality in order to forge an identity. If the young person is repeatedly assaulted by death, that sense of immortality is destroyed" (p. 123).

Art Therapy in Nuclear Education

This author contends that we must now address the emotional needs of the "normal" child in order to prevent the trends which Beardslee and Mack are observing. Art therapy has primarily been utilized reactively, in the treatment of childhood dysfunction, in an effort to undo the pathology created by the environment. But now we must begin to think in terms of pro-active treatment, addressing the psychological climate created by the threat of nuclear extinction. Judith Rubin (1978) has referred to art therapy as a natural discipline for primary prevention, pointing to the public schools as a logical place for its implementation. Rubin writes of the use of art in this way to serve as a vehicle for increasing self-esteem, feelings of competence and coping skills. It is the lack of these very attributes which leads to the behavioral changes Lifton describes (p. 85-86).

The need for information about nuclear weapons and technology has been recognized by educators and parents on a national level already. In 1985, the National PTA published a resolution which states in part that:

Psychological studies have shown that the threat of nuclear war and its possible consequences may have a destructive effect on the well-being and emotional health of some children and youth; . . . be it resolved that the National PTA use studies, forums, educational materials and programs and work with community organizations to inform its membership about nuclear age education . . . to effectively address children's fears concerning perceived nuclear dangers (p. 13, Beyond War Resource Packet).

when the possibility of a future appears to have been destroyed by the adults to whom its preservation was ostensibly entrusted.

It is the contention of Dr. Robert Lifton of Yale University School of Medicine that childhood behavior is also being affected by nuclear fears. Meeting with psychiatrists from around the country in 1982 he drew up the following list of significant behavioral changes.

1. A sense of futurelessness
—nothing lasts so all is meaningless.
2. Space and technology as escapes
—escapism through the use of video and computer games and movies. This world is unsafe, therefore the need to move to space.
3. The turning to religious cults

—reassurance and power come from having "the answers."

4. Increased use of drugs and alcohol
—substance abuse as self medication for stress.
5. Increased suicide rate
—teens are the only age group in the United States with an increasing death rate.

Early adolescents (age twelve to fourteen) appear to be the most at risk psychologically. They possess more factual information on the nuclear issue than their younger schoolmates, but they lack the coping skills, the mechanisms with which to protect themselves. Unlike older adolescents and adults, they have not yet developed the tools of abstraction and psychic numbing. As Maxine Junge (1987) writes, "Typically the adolescent needs to retain the sense of personal immor-

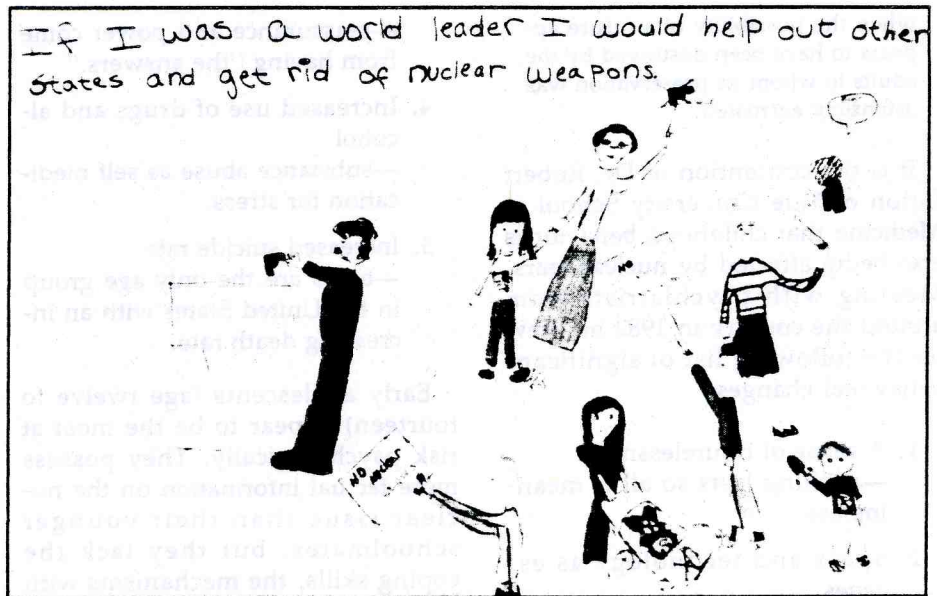
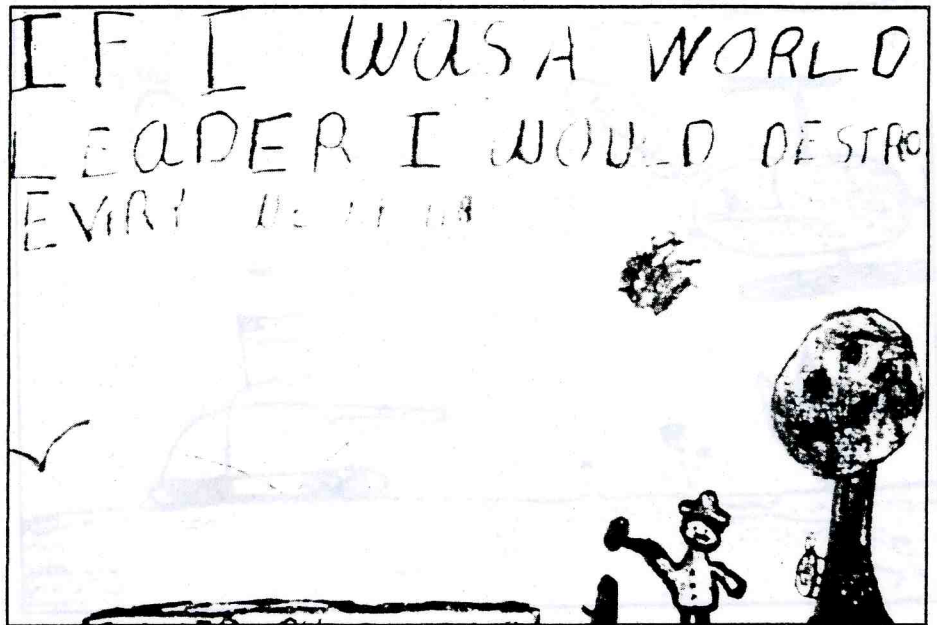
"... childhood behavior is also being affected by nuclear fears."

Following this statement, the California State Assembly went further to mandate curriculum in nuclear education by passing Assembly Bill #3848. This legislation acknowledges the needs of young students by addressing "... the inherent right of our children to pursue their educational objectives free from the immobilizing threat of nuclear war and their own annihilation" (p. 15-17, Beyond War Resource Packet). In cities around California, committees are working to develop a Social Studies curriculum on nuclear education to respond to this mandate.

As the information is introduced and the veil of silence is lifted on this subject a vital first step is taken. Removal of the taboo against discussion of the nuclear issue will begin to break through adult psychic numbing and release children from their sense of isolation. Yet there remains the emotional component to be addressed, and it is here that art therapy may serve a valuable function. This writer prepared a proposal for the San Diego city schools to add art therapy into the kindergarten through sixth grade curriculum in order to facilitate the communication and processing of this emotional material.

Guilda Grossman (1979), a Toronto art therapist, speaks of sensitizing parents and teachers, within the school context, to the needs of children as expressed through their art. This author feels that nowhere in the public school curriculum is it more important to include an expressive

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arts component than in the teaching of such an anxiety-provoking topic.

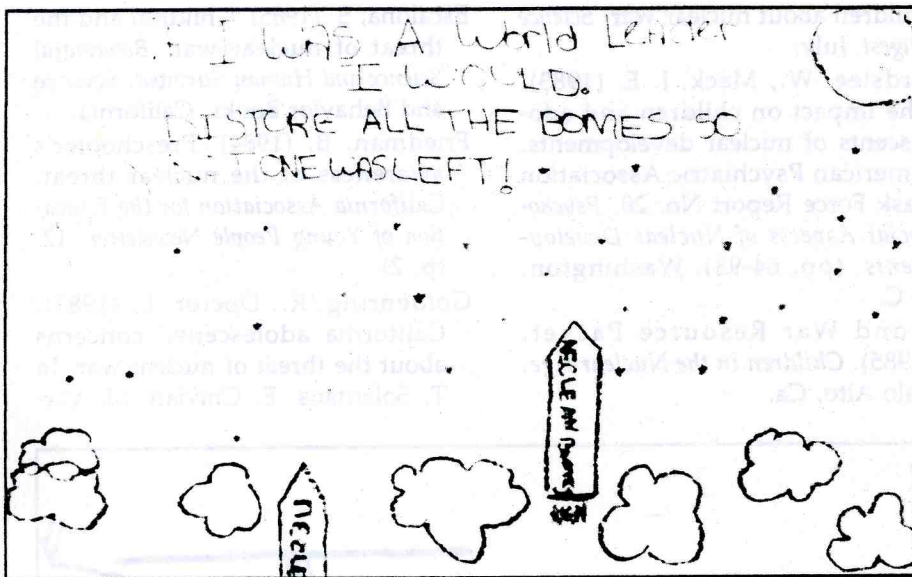
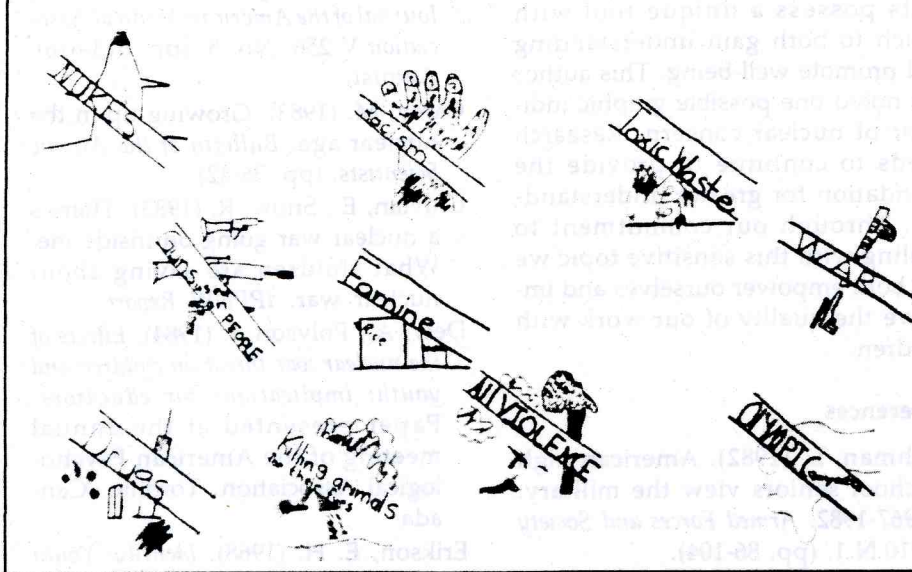
The following hypotheses are the foundation of the program which was presented to the San Diego schools.

- 1) Children are aware of the crisis we face in living in the nuclear age and are deeply troubled by it.
- 2) Children benefit emotionally and psychologically by having an outlet for unspoken fears.

3) Children can teach each other, and adults, a new way of viewing present problems and the future, offering fresh insights and perspectives.

- 4) Art provides benefits to both educators and students.
 - a) There is a reduced sense of isolation as children see they are not alone in their feelings, even though few adults openly talk with them about the nuclear crisis.

IF I was a world leader I would protest to create world peace.



available for review so exact percentages cannot be provided.) This first observation, the choice of nuclear imagery, supports the research findings cited earlier of widespread awareness and concern by young children.

A second finding in the artwork was the inclusion of imminent danger to the head of the person in the drawing in almost every picture. (See photos.) It is all the more striking considering the neutral nature of the directive given, that these children responded with a sense of impending personal threat. While much more research needs to be done before generalizations can be drawn, this is a possible indicator for art therapists to be aware of. As Myra Levick (1986) states, "As society continues to change, it will be more and more common to see these changes reflected in children's drawings." Being sensitized to these signals will aid in appropriate therapeutic interventions.

Implications for Therapists

Those of us who choose to be truly open to the concerns of young clients must first look within ourselves, to assess the degree of psychic numbing. We must attempt to free ourselves of denial, openly exploring the personal implications, so that these blind spots may be at least somewhat reduced, allowing us to be more fully available to deal with the nuclear crisis we all face. As Bert Shacter (1986), a social worker, so clearly writes:

... we can safely say that the matter of the nuclear arms race—and its effects on the perceptions, hopes, aspirations, identities and relationships between human beings—can no longer be ignored. As mental health clinicians, we will need to become attuned to clues from our clients related to nuclear anxieties and despair. We will need to understand better the interplay between developmental experience, intrapsychic life, and family process

b) Art increases a sense of mastery as children draw or map out ideas, graphically solving problems.

c) Teachers gain a sensitive tool in understanding the level of concern of each student.

5) Self-concept is enhanced as children take action on issues and feel that their concerns are appreciated by adults. This leads to an increased sense of social responsibility.

Although art therapy has not yet been formally included in the curric-

ulum, some teachers and counselors in the schools are using drawings to both assess children's concerns and provide the students with a productive, problem-solving orientation. The children in several San Diego elementary schools were presented with the directive "If you could teach the world leaders something, what would it be?" These drawings were done before any nuclear curriculum had been introduced and yet a striking number spontaneously included images of war and nuclear weapons. (Not all the drawings were

on the one hand, and a potentially catastrophic nuclear confrontation that threatens human existence on the other. We will need to translate our understandings into relevant interventive strategies and techniques. . . . Finally, those of us who might help calm the fears of the younger generation and demonstrate some measure of empowerment and realistic reassurance must become more aware of how our own perceptions of nuclear matters influence our clinical work (p. 191).

Once we begin taking action, going beyond our psychic numbing and breaking through the conspiracy of silence surrounding this, the taboo topic of our time, we become empowered, less isolated. These feelings are then subtly passed on to our clients. Erik Erickson (1968) states that "children gain hope when they see adults take action." What specifically can we do?

—Educate ourselves: read the paper, follow the news

—Respond by writing letters or phoning our congressperson or the White House (every letter or call is counted as the opinion of 100 people)

—Write letters to the editor

—Vote

—Join with others to discuss ideas

—Act on our beliefs

Summary

This paper has presented a basis for the position that children are undated with the emotionally laden awareness of the nuclear threat but lack the defense of psychic numbing for self protection. By perpetuating the taboo against dealing with this sensitive topic, we as art therapists are subtly reinforcing the sense of isolation and despair which children carry. It is therefore our task to confront our own denial, sensitize ourselves and take action in whatever way we can in order that we may in-

still trust and renew our children's faith in the future. We as art therapists possess a unique tool with which to both gain understanding and promote well-being. This author has noted one possible graphic indicator of nuclear concern. Research needs to continue to provide the foundation for greater understanding. Through our commitment to dealing with this sensitive topic we can both empower ourselves and improve the quality of our work with children.

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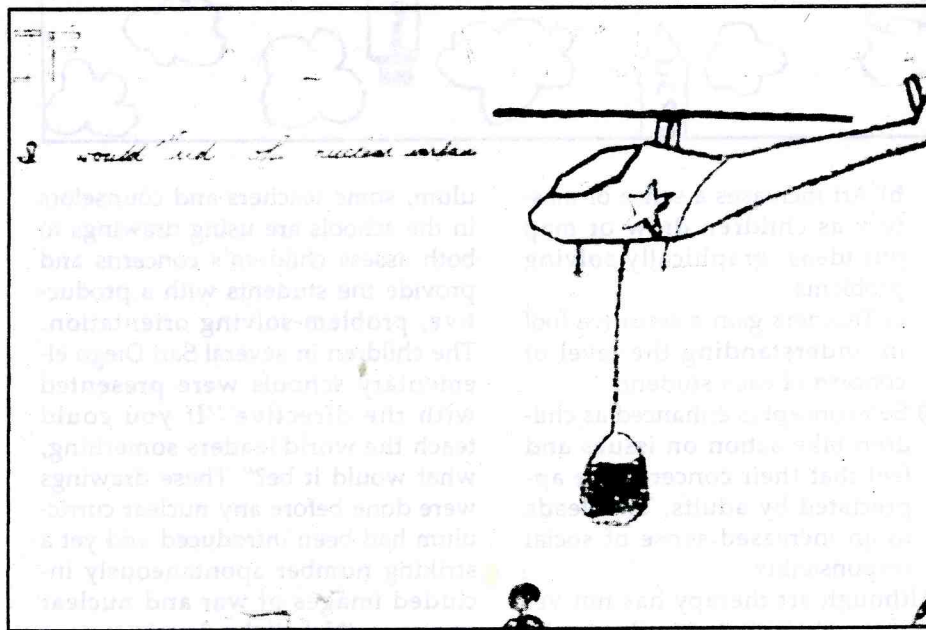
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