

Assembly kit

Prisoners of conflict



Welcome to the latest in a series of assembly kits intended for educational use with young people. It provides pretty much all you need to start planning a school assembly. It is also intended more broadly for any session with young people, particularly informal education outside the classroom or in citizenship education lessons.

Summary

The kit is not a rigid set of instructions. It is intended more as a menu plan. You can pick and mix, adapt and omit to suit the group and your situation.

The core of the kit is a performance, to be acted by young people for other young people. The core dialogue is presented in the kit. At minimum, all you need to do is photocopy the scripts, assign the cast, work out the direction and staging, and then rehearse before your big event.

However, both you and the young people will get much more out of the performance if you involve them in planning, and in developing it further. Here are a few suggestions:

- > Involve young people in all aspects of the performance – direction, casting, costume, lighting, sound effects and music. Debate why you are doing it and what effects you want to achieve. You can add to or delete the text of the speeches – though make sure you

research any changes thoroughly and take the information you present from reliable sources.

- > Enhance the core performance with ideas stemming from one or more of the add-ons, indicated in the kit. These are not pre-set, in the way that the core performance is. You will have to do some additional preparation, thinking, research and talking. The more you do, the more young people will feel ownership of the performance and the more they will learn.
- > Engage the audience. There is little point in raising awareness in one concentrated blast then just forgetting about it. Give young people a chance to think, ask questions and find out what, if anything, they would like to do next. Plan a follow-up session for some future time. But before you do any of this, spend a little bit of time thinking about your aims as an educator.

Age group

Seven to 14 year olds, and older children.

Aims

You need to decide what your aims are in running a session on prisoners and war. Here are some thoughts. Choose some that seem closest to your educational purpose. Print them out or make a note of them – and then use them to guide your choices through the rest of the assembly kit process. Obviously, there are more than can be achieved in a single short session.

- > To help children and young people understand a little of what being a prisoner of war might be like.
- > To help children and young people think about the laws that govern prisoners in conflict and why they are important.
- > To help children and young people understand the different perspectives of all those involved in detaining prisoners.
- > To help children and young people develop a general awareness of International Humanitarian Law and the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross.
- > To increase children and young people's awareness of the actual provisions of the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, particularly Convention III which relates to the treatment of prisoners of war.

Performance

The script here presents statements from characters involved in the detention of prisoners of war. They are suitable for young people to read out – as part of a school assembly or as a youth group drama performance. Talk about them first and let young people explore what they think of them. Make sure they are comfortable with the words and the ideas behind them. Adapt them if you wish to suit the age, maturity and interests of the young people.

The dramatic effects you can use to enhance the performance will depend on your venue and equipment. Lighting can be good. You can use music, faded in and out as appropriate. Drums might give a suitably military tone.

The overall setting is any prison, any war, anywhere. The idea is to convey the universal experiences of prisoners in times of conflict. It is not to select any particular country or conflict from news or history. These are the common experiences of people at any time.

Narrator

Wars have been fought for thousands of years. Wherever there are wars, there are prisoners. Different ages and different cultures have treated them in different ways. Sometimes prisoners of war have been enslaved. Sometimes they have been bartered for other prisoners. Sometimes they have been ransomed. All these practices are illegal now, under international law.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has a special role to play. It has the legal right to visit prisoners in certain types of conflict – though in practice it can only carry out visits with the consent of the authorities. In 2005, it visited more than 500,000 prisoners and detainees held in 80 countries.

The voices you hear next represent those of ordinary people caught up in prison or detention situations.

Prisoner

I speak for prisoners of war. We are held captive, but we are not criminals. We have done no wrong. We just fought for our country or cause, as anyone else would have done. We had no choice.

Now we are just waiting. When the war is over, we are supposed to be released and returned home immediately. But we know this does not always happen. In any case, wars can drag on for years and years. Some prisoners have been detained for decades.

Sometimes we are protected by international law – the Geneva Conventions. These say that we are entitled to humane treatment and respect for our person and our honour. Does this always happen? What do you think?

Woman

I speak for women – for mothers, wives, sisters and daughters everywhere. Often marginalised in our communities, we are even more powerless during conflicts. Our role is often to visit our men in prison, often travelling long distances in the hope that we can bring them food, clothing or medicine. Sometimes those trips are wasted.

Worst of all is when we do not know anything about our men. That happens when we lose contact with our partners, sons or fathers. They may be in prison. They may not have survived the fighting. To us, they have just disappeared, and no one will tell us where they are or why.

We are less likely to be detained than men are. But when we are, conditions for us are often worse than for men. Our living quarters are small, and do not have proper sanitary and cleaning facilities. And of course, we tend to be on our own, for there are no women to visit us, or even to know where we are.

Guard

I speak for the guards. We keep order in the detention camp. People think that because I am not a prisoner everything is OK for me. But conditions here are not good for anyone. I never know what is going to happen next. We never have enough food or equipment. The war is still going on and we do not know how it is going or how long we will have to be here. I am a long way from home and my family.

Following the rules is a big problem. We get orders, and are supposed to follow them, but sometimes they would mean breaking the rules. That is bad for prisoners and also bad for us. We have guns and the prisoners do not. But there are more of them than us. We have heard of riots, where guards no longer have control of the camp. That could happen.

Every day, there is talk of the Geneva Conventions. The prisoners tell us that we can be held responsible if we mistreat them. But we are not properly trained and there are no lawyers here. We do not always know what we can do and what we cannot.

Child

I speak for children. We are supposed to be protected during wars but this does not always happen. Sometimes we are captured and treated as prisoners. The law says that we should not be held alongside adult prisoners. We should be allowed to continue our education. We should

have a chance to play and to exercise. Sometimes the authorities try to make this happen, but conditions are often against it.

Children of prisoners suffer very badly. We may not know where our fathers or mothers are. No one thinks to explain to us what is going on – perhaps they do not want to worry us, or do not think we will understand. But we understand that our families are not with us and that we don't know if we will ever see them again.

Voice of humanity

I speak for all humanity. I cannot fully understand all the feelings being expressed. I have not experienced the pain. I do not know the suffering of prisoners and their families, or the hard decisions taken by the guards.

But through listening to these accounts – and seeing photographs in newspapers and images on television – I know that war creates great pain, both physical and emotional. Some of that we can do nothing about. But some of it we can change.

We change it by acting with humanity. In prisoner of war camps, that means acting within the rules of humanitarian law – such as those set out in the Geneva Conventions. It means treating prisoners humanely, giving them food and clothing, shelter and medicines. It means paying them for any work they do. It means advising their next of kin of their whereabouts and allowing them to correspond regularly. It means allowing them access to ministers of their own religion.

These things do not solve the problems of war. However, they do make a difference to ordinary men, women and children who have been caught up in them.

Add-ons

To enhance your assembly, choose from these add-on activities.

Music add-on

Music can add an important extra dimension to any assembly kit performance. Talk to young people about what kind of music might suit the dialogues.

How important is music to prisoners in providing comfort and camaraderie? Think about how the prison authorities are likely to regard songs by prisoners. Will they tolerate “enemy” songs? How might they stop them?

You could seek out music and songs used by prisoners. What characteristics do they have? Do the songs have things in common, even if they are from opposing sides in a conflict?

Young people could write and perform their own song based on what they have discovered about prisoners in times of conflict.

Picture add-on

You could use pictures to enhance your discussion or performance in a number of ways. Select topical images from magazines, newspapers or from the internet to discuss. If you have the technology, you might scan and project them as a backdrop to the performance. A succession of shots following the first speech by the prisoner might be particularly effective.

Young people might create their own art works – posters or montages – to demonstrate their feelings and understanding of the issues.

Reflection add-on

The Geneva Conventions say that once active hostilities have ended, prisoners must be released and repatriated without delay. Continuing to imprison enemy soldiers after a war is over is a grave breach of international humanitarian law – a war crime.

Yet it happens. Some 600 Moroccan prisoners held by the Polisario Front during fighting in what is now Western Sahara were held until 2005, even though the fighting stopped when a ceasefire was agreed in September 1991.

The war between Morocco and the Polisario Front had lasted for 15 years. That means some of the prisoners had been held for over twenty years. They were captured as young men and were approaching middle age when they were released.

Talk about “forgotten prisoners”. What can and should the international community do to ensure their release and return to their families? What might it be like to be held for so long? How would you feel if you were still a prisoner being held illegally?

Talk about other conflicts in other parts of the world. What do young people know about prisoners being held without proper legal authority? What should be done about it? Who is working on their behalf?

Follow-ups

These follow-up activities can be used after the assembly to explore some of the issues in more depth.

Speaker follow-up

Is there a local speaker likely to be available to meet your group and talk about the situation of prisoners of war? Of course, who is available will depend on your local community. Ideas might include:

- > Someone from a local group, perhaps a refugee group, who may have been imprisoned during a conflict or know people who have been
- > An academic from a university who has studied war
- > A representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, who has worked with prisoners
- > A journalist who has visited prison camps during conflicts.

Making local links is a good way of enriching young people's experience – what's more, any valuable information they gain could be used in the assembly performance. If no one is available to come to your group, you could perhaps suggest an email or telephone interview, which could then be discussed by everyone.

Follow-up event

Plan for a follow-up event after a suitable interval. You might pick up on themes that emerged during or after the performance. Revisit aspects of the performance that have moved on or changed because of events since. Have you done any extra work since the performance? Feed what young people have done and learned into the follow-up event. If it works, don't stop with one follow-up. Make it a regular series.

Curriculum links

England

Key stage 2 Citizenship

- > 2a research, discuss and debate topical issues, problems and events
- > 2b why and how rules and laws are made and enforced, why different rules are needed in different situations and how to take part in making and changing rules
- > 2h recognise the role of voluntary, community and pressure groups

Key stage 3 Citizenship

- > 1a the legal and human rights and responsibilities underpinning society, basic aspects of the criminal justice system, and how both relate to young people
- > 1f the work of community-based, national and international voluntary groups
- > 2c contribute to group and exploratory class discussions, and take part in debates

Northern Ireland

Key stage 2 Citizenship

- > become aware of some of the issues and problems in society

Key stage 3 Local and Global Citizenship

- > Investigate why it is important to uphold human rights standards in modern democratic societies, including meeting basic needs, protecting individuals and groups of people
- > Explore the work of inter-governmental, governmental and non governmental organisations (NGO) which aim to promote equality and social justice

- > Investigate why rules and laws are needed, how they are enforced and how breaches of the law affect the community
- > investigate citizenship issues, explore problems, undertake action projects and make informed decisions

Scotland

Education for citizenship

- > contemporary local and global issues, paying regard to available evidence, and to a range of ideas and interpretations of their significance
- > the rights and responsibilities underpinning democratic and other societies
- > opportunities for individuals and voluntary groups to bring about social and environmental change, and the values on which such endeavours are based
- > develop informed and reasoned opinions about political, economic, social and environmental issues

Wales

Key stage 2 PSE

- > Take an active interest in the life of the community and be concerned about the wider environment

Key stage 3 PSE

- > Community aspect – understand the nature of local, national and international communities with reference to cultural diversity, justice, law and order and interdependence

This assembly kit is part of the humanitarian education programme produced by the British Red Cross. Teachers and other educators are free to use it, copy it and circulate it for their work. Please always include this notice and the contact details below.

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Registered Charity Number 220949