

peace pledge union

A TALE OF TWO POPPIES

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT REMEMBRANCE: The information and suggestions provided here are intended for use by teachers and parents of children under 11. Michael Foreman's story 'War Game' is recommended as an ideal starter text if needed. The main text and suggestions for projects are for parents and teachers to present as they wish. Ideas for discussion and activities are addressed directly to the children.

PART ONE: 1914-1918

We call it the First World War, but for quarter of a century it was known as The Great War. Not because it was admirable, but because it was immense. It came as a terrible shock to the millions who took part in it, and to the many more whose lives were affected by it at the time and long after it was over. War on such a scale, and involving so many countries, was new. Weapons of such power were new. Killing in such large numbers was new. And in Britain the need to force men as young as 18 (and some younger ones who pretended they were 18) to fight, by law, was new. This new kind of war filled people with awe-struck horror.

SHOCKS AND SURPRISES

Discuss: Talk about shocks and surprises you've had or have learned about. Which were the biggest ones? Discuss what 'awe' means, too.

Think: Think about the way people behave when they are surprised or shocked. For example, some people pretend it's no big deal, some cry or shout or go quiet, some do something practical. What do you do?

Do: Real life drama. With your family or your group decide on an event that's a surprise, and then imagine that you've been told it's happened. Work out, talk about (and maybe act out) what you all might say and do. Now do the same thing with something that's a shock. Did you make any discoveries?

The war officially ended at 11.00am on November 11, 1918 (Armistice Day). As the same date approached in 1919, a recently returned High Commissioner told the British prime minister how during the war people in South Africa had stopped what they were doing for a few minutes at noon every day, to think seriously about the war and what it meant. The prime minister liked the idea of a countrywide silence as a sign of respect. So the newspapers published a request from King George V that 'at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month' people all over the country should pause for two minutes to remember in silence the British soldiers who had been killed in the war. The Daily Express said, 'it is our duty to see that they did not die in vain: there must be a truce in domestic quarrels, an end to industrial strife'. But the Daily Herald said, 'Swear to yourself this day at 11 o'clock that never

again shall the peace and happiness of the world fall into the murderous hands of a few cynical old men'.

DEALING WITH DISASTER

Discuss: Talk about how people behave after something awful has happened to them. Some say they will behave better and try not to quarrel. Some think about how to stop anything like it happening again. If the disaster is war, remember what the Daily Herald newspaper said: wars are planned and arranged by just a few powerful people at the top - maybe we should tell them to stop before someone gets hurt.

Think: After a disaster what would you want to happen? What would you want to do yourself?

Do: When people gather together in silence to think about someone who has died, it isn't always easy to find the right thoughts. Write down some words that people could concentrate on while they are being quiet. They could be your words, or other peoples' words you've found and liked. You could try sharing them with some of your family and friends: they might find the words helpful too. What about some music to go with them?

On the first Armistice anniversary, Tuesday November 11 1919, the country did indeed fall silent for two minutes. At the signal - church bells, flares, even gunfire - traffic stopped, people stood still in the street or stepped away from their work, machinery (and every telephone exchange) was turned off, nobody spoke. In some schools there were special assemblies for the Silence, in others people just sat quietly at their desks. At the Cenotaph in London, one of the first war memorials to be built, an Australian soldier stood in silence imagining 'a phantom army' of the dead, 'silently singing a song of triumph or victory'.

ACTS OF RESPECT

Discuss: Talk about the Silences, for people who are suffering or have died, which you or your family and friends may have taken part in. What other acts of respect do you know about? Are there others which you think might be a good idea?

Think: Think about the first Armistice Day Silence. Imagine yourself in a busy street or on a crowded train when 11.00am came. What else would have to stop? What sounds could not be stopped (birds, for instance), and would it have mattered?

Do: There is almost certainly a war memorial near where you are. With your family or friends, find it and read what is written on it. Find out about the Cenotaph, which is London's chief war memorial; prayers have been said beside it on every Remembrance Day morning since 1921.

The impact of 'the Silence' on the people was enormous. The whole of everyday life could be halted simply by everyone joining together to do it. Most people found that very impressive and moving. Many thought it felt like a religious ceremony. The government almost immediately decided to make it an annual event. In the years that followed a spiritual element was encouraged as an important part of Remembrance ritual. So were ideas of 'victory' and 'glory' and 'sacrifice'.

All these were ways of trying to make sense of so many needless deaths, which had filled people with so much awe and horror. In the midst of mourning, people wanted to keep their awe at the enormity of the Great War, but to distance themselves from the horror. The fate of 'our glorious dead' was desperately sad, but the word 'glorious' gave it grandeur. The idea that these British soldiers had 'given' their lives was sad (and misleading, considering the real events); the word 'sacrifice' gave the idea nobility. But there is nothing characteristically grand or noble about war. War makes everybody, living or dead, its victims. War makes people all over the world bring needless death upon themselves and the people they care about (as well as those they don't). To interpret slaughter as sacrifice is to turn away from what is true and real, in search of a comforting dream.

ORGANISING PEOPLE'S FEELINGS

Discuss: A ritual is a series of actions that are repeated. They can be simple everyday ones, like getting ready for school, but there are also special rituals like birthdays and festivals. Talk about rituals that are familiar to you: are they boring, painful, pleasant, comforting? Have you made up a ritual when a pet animal has died? And after you have shared a special experience with other people, have you looked for your own ritual (personal or shared) to help you remember it?

Think: Think about words that are used to make things special. (Even 'special' is one!) Do these words change things? What about the tone of voice used by the people you know when important things are happening. Do you have one yourself? Do people sometimes use 'special' words and voices to make things special, even when they aren't?

Do: Make sure you know what a ceremony is, and then make a list of the ceremonies you know about. In your family or group choose a special event and together plan a ceremony for it using words, music, actions, pictures and objects. Write the plan down, so that it could be used again and again by other people. Afterwards, talk about what it is that makes ceremonies 'work'.

PART TWO: THE STORY OF THE RED POPPY

Up to 10 million soldiers were killed in the First World War. It's not known how many civilians died as well, but the estimate is 1.4 million. In 1919 the traumatised survivors of the fighting began to find their way home.

Everyone who fought in Belgium and northern France had noticed the extraordinary persistence and profusion of an apparently fragile flower: the cornfield poppy, which splashed its blood-red blooms over the fields every summer. It blooms there to this day, on the fields now returned to the farming they were meant for, and from which the bones of the dead are still collected as the farmers' ploughs uncover them.

The returning American ex-servicemen made the red poppy their emblem. It was particularly associated with a poem written by a Canadian doctor, John McRae (he was killed in battle in 1915). His poem begins:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below...*

So the Americans arranged for artificial poppies to be made by women in war-ravaged northern France. The funds raised from selling the poppies were for children who had suffered because of the war.

In Britain, the weary soldiers came back from the grimness of war to find that life was hard at home too, though in a different way. Many of the men were wounded or disabled or suffering the effects of gas and shell-shock. Many were physically or mentally unable to work; many others found that there were no jobs anyway. The provision made for them by the state was less than adequate. They certainly didn't get the heroes' homecoming that they had been led to expect. So ex-servicemen's societies united in 1921 to form the British Legion. Its purpose was to provide support to ex-servicemen, especially the disabled, and their families, and it was to become one of the most successful British charities ever.

A Frenchwoman who was helping to organise the production of artificial poppies in France suggested that the British Legion might like to sell them to raise money. The British Legion approved of this idea, and ordered at least 1.5 million for November 11, 1921. They sold out almost at once. The first Poppy Appeal made £106,000, a huge sum in those days. The British Legion now decided to set up its own poppy factory, with disabled ex-servicemen making up the workforce. The Remembrance red poppy rapidly became an established part of British life. 'Poppy Day' said the Western Daily News in 1927, was 'the one flag day when every man woman and child with hardly an exception wears an emblem'.

By the end of the 20th century the British Legion were producing annually over 32 million 'lapel' poppies, 100,000 wreaths and 400,000 Remembrance crosses. In the days leading up to Remembrance these poppies can still be seen everywhere, even in the lapels of people normally discouraged (or even barred) from advertising their favourite charities - such as politicians, the police, and newsreaders.

But the poppy has had its problems. Some people who have chosen not to wear it have faced anger and abuse. It's also got involved with politics. In Northern Ireland, for example, it became regarded as a Protestant Loyalist symbol because of its connection with British patriotism. And a growing number of people have been concerned about the poppy's association with military power and the justification of war. Some people have wondered why, with a state welfare system, the services of the British Legion (slogan: 'Honour the dead, care for the living') are still needed; some say it's disgraceful that they were ever needed at all - though the many suffering people who have depended on help from the British Legion are profoundly grateful. (Governments have been grateful too: 'Governments cannot do everything. They cannot introduce the sympathetic touch of a voluntary organisation!') But the question lingers: if the dead are said to have 'sacrificed' their lives, then why weren't the living, who came out of the same danger, being suitably honoured and cared for by the state that sent them into it? The language of Remembrance, in the light of that, looks more like propaganda than passion.

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Discuss: Why do people find it hard to learn from the past? Is it because the present feels so different? Is it because in the present you can't always see how things are heading? Is it because remembering is actually quite hard to do? (It's been said that Remembrance Day, now that so few people are around who can remember the first one, has become 'the memory of a memory'.)

Think: It's not as if we aren't made to remember and learn: the whole of growing up is a process of learning from the past (fire burns, loud noises hurt the ears, smoke harms the eyes, rotten things smell bad and rotting things taste horrible). In our families, groups, communities and societies we can take action to avoid what damages them. Remembrance is a good time to talk with young children about starting to create a peaceful world at their own grassroots.

Do: Talk, write, draw, paint, improvise a play about people working together to get something done. Discuss the different sorts of task that can be achieved, and how people of all kinds, temperaments, nationalities, races and beliefs can be brought together for a shared purpose for everyone's good. What makes working together difficult sometimes? How might these difficulties be tackled?

PART THREE: THE STORY OF THE WHITE POPPY

Though the Great War was called 'the war to end all war', it was not. The terms of its peace treaty were harsh: causes of new wars were blindly enshrined in it. Countries began rebuilding their armies - using men who had been children in 1914 and whose fathers were among the war dead. New weapons factories started work and making profits for their owners. People who wanted peace knew that all this was happening, and that lessons had not been learned from the past.

The Women's Co-operative Guild, founded in 1883, began its life preoccupied with the problems and issues of home and family, but by 1914 attention had turned to the bigger picture: the Guild's Congress declared that 'civilised nations should never again resort to the terrible and ineffectual method of war for the settlement of international disputes'. By the end of the war the guildswomen had learned first hand the extent to which war could profoundly affect and harm their lives. Many of them were the wives, mothers and sisters of men who had been killed. They embarked on an active campaign for peace.

By 1933 they were searching for a symbol which could be worn by guildswomen who wanted to show publicly that they were against war and for nonviolence. Someone came up with the idea of a white poppy. Workers from the Co-operative Wholesale Society began making the poppies almost at once. Money from selling them, after the production costs had been paid for, was sent to help war-resisters and conscientious objectors in Europe.

The wearing of a white poppy on Armistice Day became a focus for the peace movement, and the Peace Pledge Union took it up in 1936 as 'a definite pledge to peace that war must not happen again'. In 1938 'Alternative Remembrance' events began: a pacifist religious service was held in London's Regent's Park, followed by a march to Westminster and the laying of a wreath of white poppies at the Cenotaph. 85,000 white poppies, by then an acknowledged symbol of peace, were sold that year. Many people wore them alone, others wore a red poppy as well.

When an ex-serviceman broke the Armistice Silence at the Cenotaph in 1937, with his loud cry of protest against the hypocrisy of praying for peace while preparing for war, he had made clear what everyone was beginning to realise: the people who shared the Silence were not of one mind about what Remembrance meant.

The Second World War began in September 1939. That November the Armistice Day Silence was cancelled.

During the Second World War religious services for Remembrance continued on the Sunday closest to November 11. In 1945, the government found it hard to decide which day was appropriate for remembering the British dead from what were now two world wars. Ideas suggested but not agreed included D-Day, VE Day, the anniversary of the day war broke out, the date Magna Carta was signed, and American Independence Day. Or should it be November 11 again? As it happened, in 1945 November 11 was a Sunday, and so the long-established religious services and the revived secular ceremonies took place on the same day. From then on, as the easiest option, it was settled that Remembrance Day should fall on the second Sunday in November, with the Silence and an 'act of worship' enshrined in the public proceedings - the Cenotaph service being broadcast live. At the end of the 20th century the British Legion had some success in reviving the Silence on Armistice Day as well.

Four months before the war began a Guild mother had written a letter to the prime minister Neville Chamberlain. In it she told him that she hadn't raised her 20-year-old son to be a good citizen 'for you to claim him now to be a cog in the wheels of a military machine which threatens mankind...I hope I have behind me all the mothers of sons, and the mothers of

sons who have already made the supreme sacrifice to show us that war is not the way to transform the world.'

The white poppy was and is a symbol of grief for all people of all nationalities, armed forces and civilians alike, who are victims of war. It has not always been understood. Some people wearing a white poppy have been accused of disrespect to the war dead; they have been shouted at and abused. Some people have been sacked from their jobs for wearing white poppies, and white poppy wreaths have been removed from war memorials and trampled on. The British Legion strongly objected to the white poppy; for them the red poppy (though associated only with soldiers, and only the British) was a peace symbol, and they felt the white one was in some way competing with it. Some people associated the white poppy with left-wing politics. Many associated it with conscientious objection and the 'conchies' who had been thought of 'cowards and shirkers' in the Great War. There were times when it took strength of mind to go out with a white poppy pinned to one's jacket.

The Second World War was, like the First, a new kind of war. Weapons and machinery were embarking on the hi-tech age, and for the first time civilians as well as soldiers were made their targets. In this war there were up to 17 million military deaths. Up to 30 million civilians were killed, and millions more became refugees. Since 1945 war of some kind has been taking place somewhere in the world, continually, bringing the total of war-related deaths in the 20th century to over 100 million. There was also the Cold War, and the nuclear risks which it increased. The Peace Pledge Union's White Poppy Appeal slogan in the 1990s got it right: 'War cannot create peace'. The will and a way had to be found to abolish war altogether.

On the afternoon of Remembrance Sunday in 1980, a silent procession walked from Trafalgar Square to the Cenotaph and laid a wreath of white poppies. This was the inscription on the wreath:

For all those who have died or are dying in wars

For all those who have died or are dying as resources to feed or house them have gone to war preparations

For all those who will die until we learn to live in peace

When shall we ever learn?

The silent walk became an annual event, and the revived sale of white poppies grew. In 1986 a popular bishop reminded people that the white poppy wasn't a mark of disrespect for dead soldiers: 'there is space for red and white to bloom side by side'. The bishop's MP asked a question about the white poppy in Parliament; in response prime minister Margaret Thatcher forcefully expressed her 'deep distaste' for them. Suddenly the white poppy was a talking point, hotly debated in the press, on radio and television, in pubs and sitting rooms. On Remembrance Day that year veteran soldiers shouted abuse at the 200 anti-war demonstrators laying the white poppy wreath at the Cenotaph.

In recent years the number of white poppies sold by the Peace Pledge Union has continued to grow. Many are sold in schools side by side with red ones. One year, a boy chose a white

poppy and wore it proudly to his Remembrance Sunday church Scouts parade - only to be ordered by the scoutmaster to remove it: 'it's not an appropriate symbol for Remembrance Day!'. The scoutmaster gave the boy a red poppy to wear instead. The boy quietly put the white poppy on again as soon as he left the church.

THINKING ABOUT THE WHITE POPPY

Discuss: The white poppy is a symbol worn by people who want 'no more war'. No-one knows why a white poppy was chosen: it certainly wasn't intended to compete with the red one, only to be different from it. No one knows why, having chosen the poppy, white was the colour selected. What do you think about it? What does the white colour suggest to you? Would another colour be better, and if so, why? What power and associations do different colours have for you?

Think: Some people wear red poppies at Remembrance, some wear white poppies, some wear both together, and some wear none at all. What do you think might be the differences between these people? Imagine what it might be like to be one of each, and explain each choice from each different point of view. You may decide that the differences don't matter; you may think they matter a little, or even a lot. What things and events might unite all these people? (They are all human beings, for a start!)

Do: Sometimes people are made to feel that they are outsiders if they don't wear a red poppy, or if they choose a white one instead. People often do things simply because they want to be like other people and accepted by them. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to be different. We can admire people who are brave, and we can sympathise with the ones who aren't. But sometimes there are things that have to be said, and the courage has to be found to say them. One thing that has to be said is that war and fighting don't actually protect people, but make life more dangerous than it needs to be. (Can you say that yourself?) What other things can you think of that are important and true?

PART FOUR: HERE AND NOW

2001-2011 was the United Nations' International Decade for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. The current UN Sustainable Development Goals "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies" (SDG 16) and aim to "ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills" for the "promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence" (SDG 4). The Peace Pledge Union has focused on the white poppy as part of its campaign for that 'Culture of Peace': the white poppy helps to break the silence which 'perpetuates the delusion that war, and preparing for war, can bring about peace'.

The children of the world have had a raw deal. Their fighting family members have been killed in war for many centuries. In the 20th century millions of children (2 million in the last decade of the century alone) were victims of total war, in which whole families have been bombed, murdered or driven from their homes. They have faced early death from illness and starvation caused by war. They have been maimed by unexploded bombs, landmines and

brutal soldiers. They have even been forced to become soldiers themselves. Some children are encouraged, by the attitudes of adults around them, to join in civilian demonstrations of violence. It is hard for many of us to see how war can ever be justified, for the harm it does to children alone.

For reasons like these, people wear white poppies on Remembrance Day, and work in their different ways for a world in which children learn what war is only from their history lessons.

Discuss: Find out more about what happens on Remembrance Day. Talk about it, and decide what you would like to happen in the future on a day regularly put aside for thinking about how to build peace and get rid of war.

Think: Everyone says they want the world to be peaceful, but there are plenty of places where it isn't. What are we doing wrong? What could we do that is right?

Do: Make a poster for peace. Make up a song for peace (with your own new tune or one you all know), and play and sing it together.