

Lesson plan

Child soldier



How is it that children end up as soldiers? This lesson plan looks at the way some armies and militias "press gang" children and young people into fighting – forcibly recruiting those who otherwise would have no intention of fighting.

As with other lesson plans, you will take students through a series of discussions and activities, getting deeper into the story as you go. You need no prior knowledge – just the ability to guide students as they explore what it feels like to be someone else.

Age group

11-16 year olds

Learning outcomes

- > Students will develop the ability to consider other points of views by exploring the thoughts and feelings of another young person
- > Students will recognise how an individual's options might be severely restricted in certain circumstances and require balancing of one evil against another
- > Students will become aware of some of the techniques used to coerce young people into militias, and of the existence of child soldiers.

Phase 1

Ask students to imagine this situation:

You are 16 years old. You live in an area where different armed groups are fighting. Your father receives a tip-off from a neighbour. One of the groups is looking for new recruits and they plan to come to your house during the night. They want to take you or your younger brother.

Listen to their initial reaction. Then ask them to choose one adjective that best describes how they might feel. If they need help, they could pick from a list: angry, afraid, excited, unsure, tearful, confused, powerless, defiant.

Ask students to think about what the word they have chosen means. Can they explain it? Are there situations in their lives when they have felt like that? Write down other words they associate with their adjective.

Keeping the feeling in mind, invite students to consider how they will react as the 16 year old. What will you say, and how? Compare different

reactions. What might a tearful person do that is different from a defiant person? What would be the difference between someone who is excited and a terrified person?

Quickly repeat the adjective exercise for each character in the story – the father, the neighbour and the brother. How do students imagine each person feels? Ask them to write a sentence explaining why, using the adjective they have chosen.

Invite students to imagine they are the 16 year old again. Read the situation again and tell them:

Dusk is fast approaching and you have to make a decision. What will you do?

Ask students what their feelings and decision are based on. What do they know about being in an army? Where does their knowledge come from? How accurate might it be? Talk about how often things are as we expect them to be, and how often they are quite different?

Phase 2

Tell students that the situation as described is not fictional but true. It happened to an Ethiopian boy during the conflict that lasted from 1974 to 1992. It was then common practice for armed groups to abduct children, forcing them to fight or take part in dangerous activities.

This is what happened to him next:

Your father decides you and your brother must go into hiding. He takes you both to a remote place where you can't be found, and returns home alone.

Ask students how they feel about that decision. What might have gone through the parents' minds? Would you argue against it?

Invite students to think about how they might feel once their father leaves. Encourage students to work on a dialogue, orally or as a script.

Imagine the conversation you have with your brother. What do you talk about once you're alone? Think about your worries. Is there a difference between your feelings and your younger brother's?

Now, focus on the parents. What are they talking about? Imagine they feel relieved. How might they prepare for the visit from the militia? Give students the first line of a conversation between them, and ask them to finish it as a writing activity, or encourage them to develop a dialogue to perform.

"It was a tough decision, and we'll miss them but it's best to know they are safe."

Read out the boy's account to students to let them know what happened.

"On the third or the fourth day, my younger brother urged me that he should go back home and find out what has happened..."

"When he reached home, he found out that our house was searched at the said night and the people's militia trying to find either of us,

have detained both of our parents as hostages.

"He went straight to the police station, where they were detained, submitted himself for recruitment, and demanded the release of our parents. Upon their release, my parents came to take me home because they have got an assurance that not more than one person will be recruited from a single family."

Are students surprised, or did they think something like this would happen? How does it change things?

Who of all the characters would you prefer to be now? Is it worse to be the brother with the soldiers or the brother at home? What might be going through the younger brother's mind?

What new feelings might the 16 year old have now? Talk about guilt and responsibility. Does he feel guilty? Does he feel it should have been him taking responsibility, and does he think his brother was irresponsible? Discuss the worry and relief he might be feeling about the people in the family. What does he say to his parents?

How would the parents feel – about their two sons, and about themselves? What would they want to do?

Talk about the younger brother's actions. Do students think he was impulsive? Discuss impulsive actions. Are they usually the best? Can you trust your first feelings because you know what is right? Is it a weakness to hesitate? Or is it better to think things through carefully? Does it depend, and if so, on what? Invite students' thoughts on their own experiences, and in this case.

Ask students if they think that is the end of the story? What options do the elder brother and the parents have? Is it best to keep a low profile and avoid making a bad situation worse? Encourage students to discuss, but don't tell them what happened next until you are ready to begin phase 3.

Phase 3

Read the last phase of the story to students.

“When I learned the fate of my brother I felt like crying. It felt as if I was guilty of betraying my younger brother. What is more, I could not bear the sight of my mother and sisters crying, and the thought of my younger brother being recruited to spare me, made me restless. In short I hated myself...

“In the evening I somehow managed to sneak out of the house and went to the recruiting officials with the intention of substituting my younger brother. They did not show him to me then. It was several months later, at the training camp, that I learned my brother was not released and was in fact placed in a different training centre. He died a year later while in combat.”

Ask for immediate reactions. Has it made students look differently at what being a child soldier is? Had they heard about children being forced to fight? Did they have any idea how it might happen? In what other ways might children be “press ganged”?

Some people think they could never be forced into an army. They say they would just run away. Ask the class if anyone thought that before they heard this story. Do they still think it now? Talk about the options for these two brothers. Running away from an army is harder than you think. But if they managed it, what might happen? Would the soldiers just shrug and say,

“pity, we lost one”? Or would they come looking? If they didn't find the boys, what might they do to the parents? Or to the sisters?

Contrast the two experiences of the two boys in handing themselves over. The soldiers kept their bargain in the first case, and released the parents. But not in the second case. Was this predictable? If the older boy had known what would happen might he have stayed away? How would he have felt? How would his parents and sisters have felt?

Talk about how your decisions affect others. Think of other situations where what is best for you personally might make others suffer. Go through this story and identify these decisions. Talk about how there are no easy answers, no right and wrong – just hard choices.

Ask students to pick a character and a point in the story and write the best argument they can to persuade someone not to do something they did do. Try it as a drama or role play. Choose from the following list or decide on your own angle:

- > The mother arguing with the father not to try to hide the boys, saying there will be reprisals.
- > One of the sisters trying to persuade the younger brother not to hand himself over, saying you cannot trust the soldiers.
- > The parents arguing with the elder brother not to try to substitute himself for his younger brother.

Writing extension

To conclude, set a piece of creative writing. Choose from these two ideas:

- > Talk about how the surviving boy might have felt when he discovered that his brother had died fighting. Imagine he kept a diary. Write his diary entry for the day he found out.

- > Imagine you are the best friend of the surviving brother. What might you say to him. Write a conversation dialogue or a letter designed to help him comfort him and reassure him that he did the best he could.

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This lesson plan was written by Jenifer Smith, based on an original idea by PJ White. It was produced in September 2007. The testimony from a former child soldier in Ethiopia is quoted in Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The invisible soldiers*, Rädda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children), Stockholm, 1996, p87-8. For more information contact:

The British Red Cross would like to thank Amanda Bailey, David Berry, Robert Bristow, Kate Brown, Carine Carson, Jenny Cassy, Maggie Faulkner, Jon Gregory, Patricia Hannam, Gary James, Eve Mason, Joanna Perkins, Judy Robinson, Maureen Turner and Paul Williams for their help reviewing and trialling the resource.

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