

Teaching about refugees with the Moomin stories

The world feels extraordinarily bleak right now – more people than ever have been displaced from their homes by war, conflict and persecution, new crises emerge, and the old ones never seem to end. How can we communicate with young people about an uncertain future without succumbing to hopelessness?

Tove Jansson, the artist and author and the creator of the Moomins, wrote a significant portion of her work during the Second World War. The shadow of war is palpable in many of the stories about the Moomin family, their friends, and adventures.

From the psychological impact and existentialism of impending catastrophe to being forced to flee from natural disasters, Moomin stories continue to be relevant and highlight the importance of humanity and solidarity in a world that is not always easy or understandable to the Moomins. The Moomin family – with the Moominhouse door always open, always ready to host a pancake party – **reminds us to be curious, kind and courageous in times of adversity and fear.**

The world has always been challenging, but today we live in a time where our fear is being exploited. You cannot meet fear with mere facts. Emotions are powerful, both negative and strong. Through art, culture, and emotion, we can meet fear and move people toward positive action for our world and each other.

This package is intended to assist you in teaching about the world with empathy, and creating a Moominous antidote of hope to a world that can seem increasingly hostile and full of injustice and conflict.



How to use this toolkit

These materials combine critical thinking and independent research in with creative exercises, intended to foster **a sense of agency and empathy** among secondary school students. By the end, they should be able to **reflect on their own role** as global citizens and **think about the actions they can take** to bring about meaningful change.

Before starting:

We encourage you to first read UNHCR's [Guidance for teachers on stress and trauma](#), particularly if you have displaced learners in the classroom.

For a series of lessons:

1. Start with **watching UNHCR's videos on terminology** related to forced displacement and the accompanying class debate sheets. Accurate facts and figures from reliable sources are provided to increase understanding of the topic of refugees, asylum and migration.
2. **The School Activities sheet** below contains ideas for writing, research, and discussion-based exercises to bring the complex subject of refugees, asylum and migration closer to the daily life of 15-to-18-year-olds and to move them into action. The activities vary in length and can be integrated into many teaching settings and locations in and around your school.
3. Continuing with **reading the first Moomin book**, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, students are encouraged to place the story in the contexts of the time of its writing during the Second World War, as well as the global refugee situation today.
4. The following **creative writing** exercises encourage students to explore and reflect on their experiences and emotions conjured up by UNHCR's exercises and the Moomin story.

For a shorter lesson:

1. We recommend students **read the first Moomin book**, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, in their own time before the lesson.
2. In class, **watch UNHCR's videos on terminology** related to forced displacement together with students, answering any questions and clarifying common misconceptions with the help of the materials provided.
3. Continue with the **creative writing** exercises and a shared moment for reflection.

Definitions

Click the
image for
videos!



Refugees

Refugees are people fleeing conflict or persecution.



Migrants

Migrants are people moving to another country for other reasons beyond conflict and persecution.



Internally displaced persons

Internally displaced people are seeking safety in other parts of their country.



Asylum-seekers

Asylum-seekers are people seeking international protection from conflict and persecution.



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

**AGES
15-18**

School activity guide

This school activity guide contains ideas and suggestions for class activities and activities involving the whole school, parents and other stakeholders to contribute to a welcoming and inclusive environment.

This whole-school approach is very important. Displaced children not only acquire knowledge in a school, they build important social connections and relationships that connect them to their host community, parents, teachers, school leadership and community organizations.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A note about inclusion of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in lesson-planning.



Before undertaking any teaching activities on the topic of refugees, asylum, nationality and migrants please take some time to think about the students in your class.

Are some of them refugees, in the process of seeking asylum, or are they stateless? If so, think about talking to them and their parents depending on their age.

If possible include ideas and feedback from parents and the children in your teaching sessions and refer to them to answer questions if and only if they have expressly explained that they are interested in answering questions or speaking about these issues.

Stateless persons do not have the nationality of any country. Statelessness can occur in many different situations.

For example, certain ethnic or religious groups may be not recognized under national laws as citizens of that country, some children are born outside of the country of their parents' citizenship and are not able to obtain citizenship from their parents' country or the one they were born in.

A number of countries globally have laws which do not allow mothers to pass their nationality to their children. Stateless persons may have difficulty accessing basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, freedom of movement and others. Without these things, they often face obstacles and disappointment.

Be careful while using words such as 'country' and 'nationality' if you have any stateless children in your class. Instead you can consider using the words 'your home' or 'your culture'.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Here are some activities that you can undertake with your classes to move their learning about refugees into taking action.

LEARNING OUTCOME

Understanding how information can be presented in different ways and how misleading and wrong information is sometimes used in the media. Fostering critical thinking.

Fact, fiction and somewhere in between?

Step 1: Put the students in small groups. Choose a conflict that has produced refugees, asylum seekers or stateless persons featured in newspapers at the moment. Ask the students to work in groups and take one media source or political source of news and have them research the conflict from that perspective.

Step 2: The groups should put together a folder with ideas, facts, numbers of refugees and other pieces of information from the perspective of their chosen source.

Step 3: Organize a debate by allowing each group three minutes to present their understanding of the conflict and allocate additional time for each group to ask the other groups questions.

Step 4: After the session, ask each group to go back and find out as much as they can about how their source found its information.

Step 5: In the next session, bring the whole group into a further discussion about the validity of their sources. Each group can write a reflection of what they learned about fact-finding, reading articles and understanding the world from this exercise.

Suggested closing statement – should include whether there are sources that are more trustworthy than others and why.

A reference to UNHCR Data website data2.unhcr.org/en/situations and other UNHCR statistics could be useful with the understanding that UNHCR monitors situations all over the world and is involved in the registering of refugees.

LEARNING OUTCOME

Learning how to work together to create something participative. Understanding that everyone's contribution is important.

Undertake a collaborative creative activity with the theme of refugees or statelessness and share it with the community, by inviting parents or doing a show for the school or other classes.

If there is an opportunity to team up and work with an organization that helps refugees or stateless people and even refugees and stateless people themselves, this would be an advantage.

Finally, if they are unavailable to join in on the creative process, inviting them to the final recital, show or fair and offering them an opportunity to speak could be informative for the students.

Example 1: Creating and holding an exhibition

Example 2: Dance recital or play

Example 3: Holding a poetry recital

Example 4: Writing a story book

Suggested closing statement for discussion –

“This has been a wonderful activity and everyone has contributed. It is a valuable way for us to learn how important everyone's contribution is.”

LEARNING OUTCOME

Providing an opportunity for children and families to learn how to be together in a community.

Hold a welcoming evening or monthly breakfast for new arrivals in the school at the beginning of the school year with games providing opportunities for the whole community to interact with each other.

Students can cook dishes from their country and make a presentation of how the school functions.

LEARNING OUTCOME

Understanding the economics of seeking asylum.

Step 1: Ask the class to split into groups and research how much money asylum seekers may access while they are waiting for their process.

Step 2: Take a field trip to a local grocery store to see how they would spend the money. Remember that many refugees use their mobile phones to keep in touch with their family and to keep track of events. Money for phones should be accounted for in the budget.

Step 3: Think about what additional material or financial support would help a family with school-aged children and see if it is available. Are there allowances for winter clothes and are they adequate?

Step 4: After learning this, ask the students how they feel and whether they have any ideas about projects or activities to impact this situation, like fundraising, donating mobile phone vouchers, writing to politicians, or offering service or help to groups.

LEARNING OUTCOME

Understanding how we as individuals can impact society and the lives of others.

Source some articles for students and ask them to do some research with local media, local community groups, reception centres and organizations that help refugees and stateless people. Are there any areas where refugees or stateless people could be helped more in legislation or in practice?

If students are interested and passionate about an issue, see if they can write letters to a local or national politician to ask for more action on whatever activity they feel should be undertaken.

Suggested closing statement for discussion –

should include an opportunity for students to think about other ways they could impact their society. It should also include a recognition of what it might be like to live in a society where one might not be able to undertake such actions or what it might be like if one is not recognized as a member of that society and does not have the rights to engage in these activities at all (as is often the case for stateless persons).

LEARNING OUTCOME

Understanding the reality of life as a stateless person or as a migrant who may not have legal status in that country.

Step 1: Students will split up into groups and make phone calls or find information online about how to gain a membership, open an account or to take part in a variety of activities at different facilities.

Step 2: You could think of getting children to contact a local library to get a membership card, to contact a bank to open an account, to get a membership of a local swimming pool or a sports centre, to contact a different school to see what they need to do to enrol, how to get care at a health clinic, how to book at a travel centre, how to participate in municipal elections and other ideas. The students could even take part in a brainstorming session of such facilities beforehand.

Step 3: The students will then need to list the documents that are needed to gain access to, obtain a membership of or take part in the various activities or facilities. They will look up whether stateless people, or migrants who may not have a legal status in the country, would be able to do this.

Some questions to make students understand better may be:

Q 1: "Who would have a birth certificate?"

Q 2: "Who might have a passport?"

Q 3: "How could either of these documents help in accessing the services we are talking about?"

Step 4: Open a discussion and allow students to think of how they could potentially help stateless children or migrants without legal status gain access to these facilities.

Suggested closing statement for discussion – *"Not having the correct papers and being stateless is a complex situation that can affect many facets of one's life, some of which we have talked about here."*

LEARNING OUTCOME

Understanding the situation of refugees in my country.

First check if there are any parents of children who are refugees in the class.

Scenario 1: If so, ask them if they would be willing to share their experiences of being a refugee or what their life was like back home.

Scenario 2: If not, contact a local community organization that helps refugees and ask if there is a refugee or staff member that would be able to visit the class.

Encourage the children to ask as many questions as they can. Ask the students to ask about how they could help and then, as a class, design a project that incorporates the feedback from the refugees or from the community organization.

Suggested closing statement for discussion –

should include an opportunity for students to think about other ways they could impact their society. It should also include a recognition of what it might be like to live in a society where one might not be able to undertake such actions or what it might be like if one is not recognized as a member of that society and does not have the rights to engage in these activities at all (as is often the case for stateless persons).

**Invite a
Refugee
Speaker!**



Find more materials at: unhcr.org/teaching-about-refugees

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Dear teacher

Welcome to join the Moomin 80 celebrations together with your class, and thank you for bringing the Moomins and the values they live by to young world citizens.

This is a material developed for schools, where you dig deeper into the first Moomin story *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, and the themes of the story; courage, solidarity, hope and the feeling of belonging.

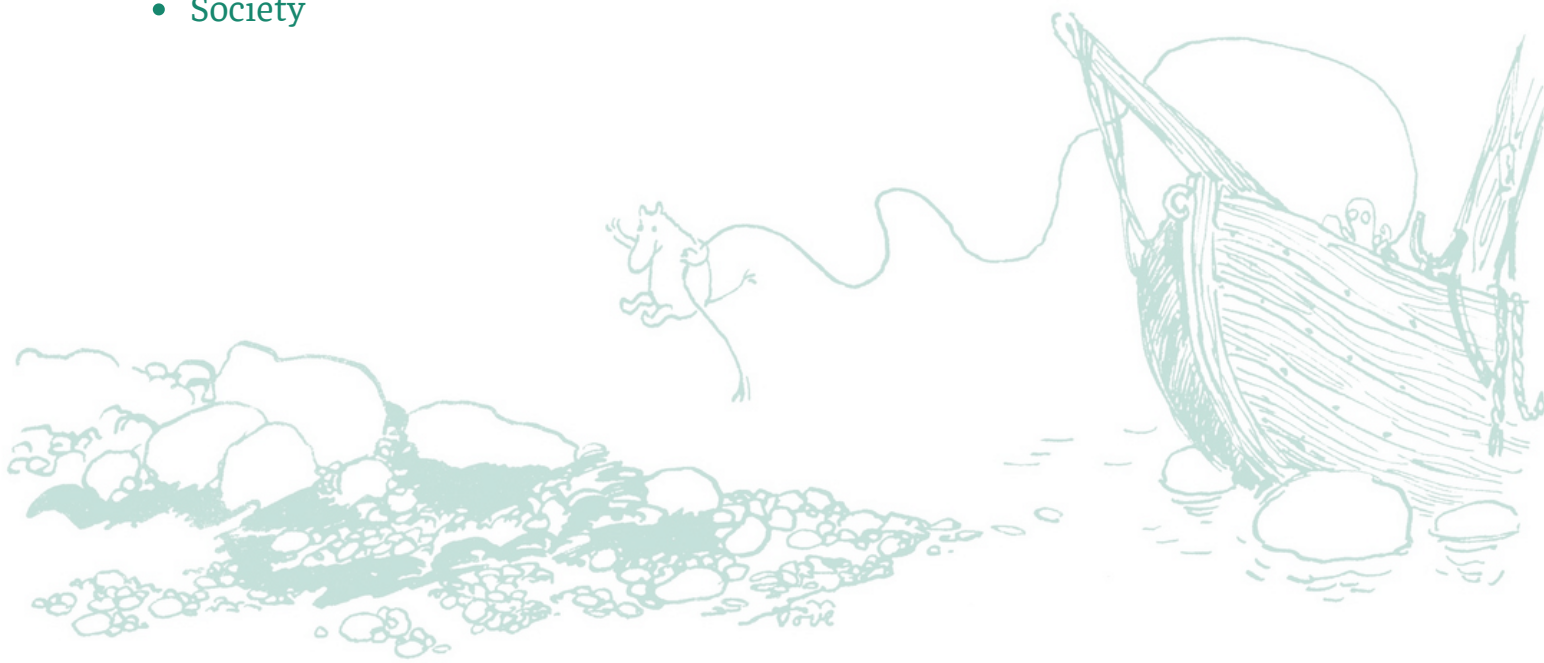
When working with this material you need the book. *The Moomins and the Great Flood* has been translated into over 35 languages, look for a copy in your language from a book store, or a library. It is an illustrated chapter book of 45 pages.

For younger pupils, the reading and reflecting takes approximately five sessions à 20-30 minutes, depending on the length of the discussions. You can take several sessions in a row if that suits you better.

The reading and the writing exercises for older pupils can be organized however you, as a teacher, find it best for your group.

The material is well-suited for the following classes and themes:

- Art
- Literature
- Environment
- Community
- Society





Background

Tove Jansson, creator of the Moomin stories, and much more

Tove Jansson (1914-2001) was a Finnish writer and artist whose illustrated books for children, and fiction for adults, have become loved around the world. She is best known as the creator of the Moomin stories – as well as the Moomin comic strips and picture books that followed – and for *The Summer Book*, a novel widely considered a classic of Nordic fiction. She excelled in many different literary and artistic forms, achieving early fame as a promising young painter and cartoonist, and, later as the author of novels and short stories, poems, and plays for radio and theatre.

In the 1960s Tove Jansson together with her partner Tuulikki Pietilä and their friend Pentti Eistola built a set of dioramas depicting different scenes from the Moomin stories as well as most famously a massive Moominhouse. These models embody the spirit of play and lifelong creativity that are hallmarks of Tove Jansson's life and work.

If you are interested in learning more about Tove Jansson's work and life, please visit tovejansson.com.

The first Moomin story and the anniversary

Tove Jansson wrote the first Moomin story, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, during WWII to comfort herself in dark times, creating a world built on inclusivity and adventure. It is a tale about troubled times and a scattered family. It is also a story about hope, a story about the importance of belonging and having a safe place to call home.

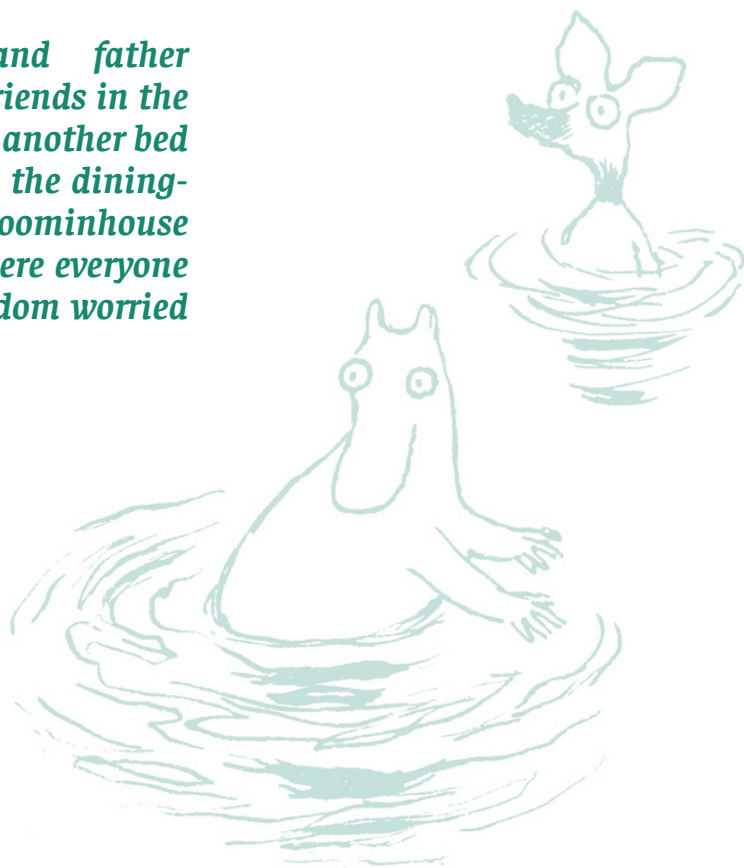
The Moomins and the Great Flood follows Moominmamma and Moomintroll who are looking for the lost Moominpappa and a new home. They encounter countless dangers and meet other displaced creatures fleeing the rising flood. Finally reunited with Moominpappa, they come upon a house, tall as a tree, elegant and painted blue – the Moominhouse.

The year 2025 marks 80 years of Moomin stories. The central theme of the anniversary year is the Moominhouse and what it stands for – a sense of belonging, a place where the door is always open.

Standing as a beacon in the middle of Moominvalley, the Moominhouse is a place for respite and celebration. A place where you can be yourself. The Moominhouse offers shelter, comfort and security to all that seek it – and it is in essence this that enables the Moomins and their extended family to courageously venture out into the world on all of their adventures, to take risks and to be free – safe in the knowledge that at the end of the journey they have a place to return to, a place they can call home, a place where they belong and where the door is always open.

“Moomintroll’s mother and father always welcomed all their friends in the same quiet way, just adding another bed and putting another leaf in the dining-room table. And so the Moominhouse was rather full – a place where everyone did what they liked and seldom worried about tomorrow”

- Finn Family Moomintroll



Material for older pupils

Writing can serve as a safe outlet for experiences, feelings, memories and ideas, and preserves them. Writing fosters our ability to explain and refine our ideas to others and ourselves. Writing allows us to understand our lives. Read *The Moomins and the Great Flood* aloud in the class, or individually. Divided into given sections, or each at their own pace.

Background for the pupils

Tove Jansson's words about writing *The Moomins and the Great Flood*:

"It was the winter of war, in 1939. One's work stood still; it felt completely pointless to try to create pictures. Perhaps it was understandable that I suddenly felt an urge to write down something that was to begin with "Once upon a time." What followed had to be a fairytale – that was inevitable – but I excused myself with avoiding princes, princesses and small children and chose instead my angry signature character from the cartoons), and called him the Moomintroll."*

*) Tove Jansson's satirical comic strips were published in the Finnish political magazine Garm.





Writing exercises

Inspired by the themes in *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, choose one or several of the following writing exercises:

Write a story about an adventure with a happy ending

- What is the challenge in the story?
- Why do/does the character(s) in your story need to go on a quest?
- What problems do they meet on the way?
- How do they find a solution to the problems and what makes the story finish in a happy way?

Write an essay about solidarity

In *The Moomins and the Great Flood* we see solidarity in how Moomintroll and Moominmamma help others and are helped by others along the way. Solidarity is about supporting, sharing, helping and showing empathy. Why are these values important in the world today?

Write a poem about courage

- About a time that you were courageous.
- About someone else showing courage.
- About what courage means to you.
- Or something else you want to picture in a poem about courage.

Write an essay about family

Traditionally, 'family' has been quite a narrow concept, but nowadays we talk about not only nuclear families but also extended families, chosen families, step-families etc. In Moominvalley, family has always been a flexible concept, where friends become family and the door is always open.

What makes a family?

Who are members of a family?

How are families created?