

Cassie the upside down koala

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Cassie the upside down koala is a story about difference: Cassie chooses to be different but she is mocked by her family for being different. Cassie sticks to her guns, however, and in the end Cassie helps her family to come together and learn to value her differences. Whilst the story is told in the context of the koala family, it is evocative of similar group dynamics in peer and school settings.

Bibliotherapy

Whilst the therapeutic usefulness of storytelling has long been understood, neuroscience is offering new insights into the role stories play in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Stories help children make sense of the world, and provide safe ways for children to talk about challenges and trauma in their lives. Stories engage the whole of a child's brain. They offer a healing medium that allows children the ability to learn, feel and know through the assistance of their imagination. Stories help children develop empathy. They can be used to prepare children for coming events, to bring healing to a difficult situation by offering another more helpful way of looking at it; and to help change difficult behaviour patterns by modelling through the medium of a story. For more information see the accompanying resources: *The Power of Stories* and *About Good Ships*.

In general the key to bibliotherapy is to use the story as a way to begin a discussion of issues and as an alternative to dealing with problems head on. It allows the child to step back from his or her problem and to experience it from an objective viewpoint.

It offers the child a safe avenue to investigate feelings. The story can be used to trigger a series of activities or to be incorporated into play therapy, helping free the child up to verbalise, act out, or draw pictures describing their own thoughts and feelings in their own way.

Follow-up activities can include:

- asking open-ended question
- re-telling the story
- acting out roles
- using puppets
- writing down reactions
- tape recording thoughts
- using art materials to help a child explore themes and feelings triggered by the story.

Further information on book and play therapy is provided in the accompanying *Good Ships Bibliotherapy Resource*.

Using Cassie in therapy

Sharing a story book is a non-threatening, developmentally-sensitive way of opening up a conversation and helps build and maintain rapport, and a warm friendly relationship between the therapist and child.

A story book like *Cassie* can be used to help children to:

- identify and validate their feelings;
- realise that other children have problems similar to their own;
- stimulate discussion;
- foster thought and self-awareness;
- discover possible coping skills and solutions; and
- decide on a constructive course of action.

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Good Ships is an initiative of Relationships Australia Victoria to produce a series of engaging, beautifully illustrated story-books for children, with accompanying resources for parents, teachers and counsellors. The books can be read simply for pleasure, but each is also focused on a challenge or difficulty children commonly face. The idea behind the series is a simple one: stories help us connect, grow, learn, and heal. For more information visit www.rav.org.au/goodships



In particular, *Cassie* can be used in the following ways.

- To explore universal feelings of being different, not fitting in, being made fun of, being frightened, and pressure to conform.
- To explore other sets of feelings, experiences, or narrative that sit beside the above, such as inner strength, resilience, staying true to yourself while respecting others, the value in being different and unique.
- To reframe behaviour that has been viewed as negative or 'silly', as positive and clever.
- To explore a child's view of their family and the relationships in their family, including how they see themselves and how they see other family members.
- As a prelude to a drawing:
 - of the child and their family;
 - of what the child perceives is the same and what is different about his or her family.
- As a visual tool that can help children find the words to describe their feelings and experiences in a non-threatening way.
- As a wonderful way to explore how to manage feelings and experiences. *Cassie* is a role model of holding a solid position with strength and clarity. She doesn't shout at or accuse her family, or defend her behaviour. She just says "I just like hanging upside down" and continues to do so.
- As a way to think together and digest experiences and feelings, such as:
 - "let's think about a time when..."
 - or "how can we think about it differently?"

How you could use *Cassie* in session

There are no rules or set instructions for using *Cassie* in a therapeutic setting. We have provided, however, a few ideas for the sort of questions and enquiries you might use to start and structure a conversation during a session, once the book has been read. These can help to explore specific themes or therapeutic goals, depending on the focus of your work with a particular child. We have also included suggested ways of responding, and useful activities.

Questions

- Can you pick a picture where *Cassie* felt
sad... good... bad... clever...
strong...frightened...
- What is different about *Cassie* in each picture?
- Can you draw a picture of you and your family?
 - How do others see you?
 - How do you see you?
- What is something about you that you don't want to change?
- What's something about each member of your family that you would like to change?
- What's something about you or a family member that you would like to change?
- Can you talk about a time when you felt different to everyone else?
 - Was it good to feel different or bad to feel different?
 - What did they do or say?
 - What did you do or say?
- Can you tell me about a time when you were really clever but others didn't know at first?

- Who noticed it first?
- Who noticed it second?
- What do you really admire or love about yourself?
- How are you clever?
- Can you tell me about a time when you thought or did something that was really creative?
- What's one thing that you love or admire about your
Mum...Dad...brother...sister...?
- Tell me about a time when someone else wanted you to act in a way that didn't fit for you?
- How does it feel when you have made fun of someone or haven't been caring?
 - How do you manage it?
 - What do you tell yourself in your head?
 - How can you fix it?
- Invite the child to share an experience of triumphing over adversity, of being a hero, or being strong and resilient.
- Have you ever been a hero?
- Have you ever been clever?

Gain insight into how the child experiences the world through his/her responses to the story.

Counsellors' resource

The "What Happened" Story

This concept helps to check:

- a child's understanding of the story
- how much a child was engaged by the story
- what the child took from the story.

It helps you to share the experience of the story.

Questions

- Is this a good book?
- What was your favourite part?
- In the beginning, did *Cassie's* family make fun of her or think she was wonderful?
- Why did they make fun of her?
- Did they make fun of her at the end?
- Why do you think *Cassie's* family changed?
- What was that eagle doing?
- When the eagle swooped down, why didn't it catch any of the koalas?

Ways of responding

- Listen and reflect back the thoughts and feelings of the child.
- Share and reflect back the child's enjoyment of the story
- Congratulate and appreciate the child's contributions.
- Reflect back the child's statements.
- Ask what happened next?
- Go back to a picture and ask: "what's happening here?"

The "Identity" Story

This story allows different themes to be explored, such as:

- being different
- belonging
- being mocked or bullied
- staying true to yourself
- being helpful
- finding creative solutions
- saving the day
- self-efficacy
- tolerating differences in others
- experiences of family.

Questions

- Do you think *Cassie* was clever or silly?
- Were all the koalas the same or were they different from each other?
- Is it good to be different or be the same?
 - What's hard about being the same?
 - What's hard about being different?
- Do you think *Cassie* was a hero? Why?
- Think about how you are different.
- How do you think I'm different (or your Mum, Dad, brother or sister is different)?
- Is it good to be part of a family? Why/why not?
- Did *Cassie* keep hanging upside down even when the others made fun of her?
 - What do you think about that?
 - Do you think she should have stopped hanging upside down?
- Tell me about a time when you helped solve a problem.

- Tell me about a time when you did something different and others learnt from you.
- Tell me about a time you learnt something from a friend or sibling.
- Tell me about a time when you felt like *Cassie*, and when you felt like one of the other family members.
- What is gained by teasing someone who is different?
- What is gained by not teasing someone who is different?
- If you saw someone making fun of someone else, what would you do?

Ways of responding

- Reflect on the ways the child responded.
- Congratulate the child for their creativity and strength.
- Ask where and how they learnt to be strong and creative.
- If the child says they have not been able to triumph over adversity:
 - ask who they know that has triumphed over adversity in real life, or in a movie or book.
 - congratulate and celebrate the child's awareness of resilience.
- If the child is not aware of someone else who has triumphed over adversity:
 - tell a story of a child's triumph over adversity.
 - explain that not all problems have solutions, but that we can all develop ways of coping, like asking for help.

Counsellors' resource

The "Feelings" Story

This story allows different themes or therapeutic goals to be explored, such as:

- identifying and understanding feelings
- empathy
- managing feelings
- coping
- sharing experiences.

Questions

- After reading *Cassie*, do you feel happy or sad or something else?
- Why do you feel happy/sad/other feeling?
- When her family made fun of her how do you think *Cassie* felt?
- Has anyone ever made fun of you?
- How did that make you feel?
- What did you do? What did you tell yourself?
- Have you ever made fun of someone?
- How do you think they felt?
- When you feel bad, what do you do?

Ways of responding

- Reflect back and acknowledge the child's feelings.
- Explore how the child copes with these feelings, incorporating their words and thoughts.
- Focus on coping and ask who and what helps the child to cope with these feelings?"
- Ask if the child would do anything different next time this happens?

- If the child's coping skills are unproductive suggest that asking a safe and responsible adult for help is a productive way of coping.

Activities

1. Ask the child: what do you think the family did next? Ask them to draw a picture of what they say.
2. Ask the child to put their head between their legs to look at the world upside down.
3. Choose a page in the book, hide the words, and reflect on what the picture is telling us about the story, and how the characters are thinking and feeling.
4. Draw a line and ask the child to write 'free will' (or doing what you want) at one end, and 'rules' at the other end. Ask them:
 - where do you stand on this line?
 - where do you want to stand?
 - when do we need to have more rules?
 - when do we need more free will?
5. Ask the child to draw a picture, write down or tell you about an everyday problem they have experienced and how they have found solutions to the problem.
6. Ask the child where they would seek help if they had a difficult problem.
7. Ask the child to write a story, draw a picture or tell you about a time they solved a problem, when they were a hero and did something brave.
8. Ask the child to write a story, draw a picture or tell you about a time someone helped them or when they asked for help, and what happened next.

9. Help the child to learn to sing the *Cassie* song (or the chorus).