

## Teachers' resource

# Cassie the upside down koala

Cassie  
the  
upside  
down  
koala



story by Amaryll Perlesz  
illustrations by Mina Shafer

*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.

## How to use the book

In the classroom *Cassie* can be used in the following ways.

- To explore resilience and having a strong sense of self. In the face of peer group pressure to conform, *Cassie's* respectful strong position of staying true to what she likes doing is admirable.
- The book is a lovely example of a child's capacity to see the world differently, and the worth of that perspective. You can begin a conversation about each child's heroism by saying
- "Tell us about a time where your cleverness saved the day, or saved a life"
- "Tell us about a time where you did something different to everybody else, and others in your family learnt from you."
- "Tell us about a time where your friends learnt from you."
- "Tell us about your individual uniqueness."

- To inspire children to be a writer, or illustrator, or to share a time of triumphing over adversity, of being a hero, or of being strong and resilient. *Cassie* can also be a prompt for class journaling.

- To encourage thinking, reflection, clarity, pride, and storytelling.

The story can be used as a starting point for a series of activities, or to create a story or draw a picture.

Follow-up activities can include

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

**Important note:** If you become aware of domestic violence or abuse in the child's life, report it to the appropriate authorities. If you think a child is struggling with peer relationships, talk to your colleagues, a school counsellor, and parents, to ensure the child gets support that they need.

*Narrative has to do with the fundamental preoccupations of education—with words, representations, ideas, forms, structures, quantities, qualities, and judgments. It is, among other things, an exercise in critical thinking. Our narratives are means through which we imagine ourselves into the persons we become.*

- Richard L. Hopkins, *Narrative Schooling, Experiential Learning and the Transformation of American Education*, 1994

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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](http://www.rav.org.au/goodships)



## 1. Exploring what happened

This concept helps to check:

- children's understanding of the story
- how much children were engaged by the story
- what the children took away from the story.

It helps children to share the experience of the story.

### Questions

- Is this a good book?
- What was your favourite part?
- Were all the koalas the same or were they different from each other?
- How were they different?
- 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?
- How do pictures help us to understand what is happening in the story, and how the characters are feeling?

### Ways of responding

- Support the idea that each child can have a different take on the book.
- Explore the idea that we often see a part of ourselves in the characters in books.

- Show that you've heard what a child says by adopting their language or description. Ask a follow-up question to help a child explain their view.

### Activities

- Ask the class: what do you think the family did next? Ask them to draw a picture.
- Ask the children in the class to put their head between their legs to look at the world upside down.
- 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.

## 2. Exploring identity and difference

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

- being different
- belonging
- being mocked or bullied
- staying true to yourself
- being helpful
- tolerating differences in others
- experiences of family
- experiences of peer groups.

### Questions

- Were all the koalas the same or 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?
- Think about how you are different.
- How do you think I'm different?

- Did *Cassie* keep hanging upside down even when others made fun of her?
- What do you think of that?
- Do you think she should have stopped hanging upside down?

### Activities

1. Write, draw or make a play about how one of *Cassie's* siblings supports *Cassie* when she is teased by the other siblings.
2. Draw a line and ask students to write 'free will' (or doing what you want) at one end, and 'rules' at the other end.

Ask students:

- 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?
3. Role play: *Cassie* doesn't shout at or accuse her family, or defend her actions. She simply says "I just like hanging upside down" and continues to do so. With another student, practice keeping your point of view without arguing.

### Ways of responding

- Reflect on the ways each child responds.
- Ensure that discussions around bullying are appropriately linked to any whole of school approaches, policies and procedures.
- Ask: how does it feel to hold a point of view without fighting?
- Reflect and celebrate the children's views.
- Do not judge, moralise or preach.

## Teachers' resource

### 3. Fostering creative solutions

This concept helps to check:

- that there is more than one way of responding to a dilemma or problem: solutions can be different but equally valuable.
- how to think outside the square
- that often it's not the problem that is the real problem, but the way we manage the problem.

#### Questions

- Do you think *Cassie* was clever or silly?
- 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.

#### Activities

- Ask the children to draw or write something about an everyday problem they have experienced and how they have found solutions to the problem.
- As a group, ask children to come up with a solution to a problem (can be real or imaginary).
- Ask children where they would seek help if they had a difficult problem.

#### Ways of responding

- Congratulate each child for their creativity and strength.
- Ask where and how they learnt to be strong and creative.
- Reflect on each child's statements.
- Ask: what happened next?
- Ask: now that they have read *Cassie*, would they do anything differently in their own lives?

- Explain that not all problems have solutions, but that we can all develop ways of coping, such as asking for help, talking to helpful people, being positive, doing things we enjoy, helping others, and using humour.

### 4. Developing awareness of coping skills and resilience

This story allows different themes to be explored, such as the following.

- How the definition of a champion or hero is broad, and can be applied to everyday life, including being brave about asking for help.
- Getting through tough times: we are stronger than what we think we are, and that others will eventually see how clever or talented we are
- The meaning of courage: being true to yourself and not stopping what you enjoy even if others judge you. *Cassie* was also brave because calling out might have made the eagle notice her.

#### Questions

- Do you think *Cassie* was a hero? Why?

#### Activities

- Write a story or draw a picture about a time when you solved a problem, or were a hero or brave.
- Write a story or draw a picture about a time when someone helped you, or when you asked for help.
- Learn to sing the *Cassie* song (or the chorus).

#### Ways of responding

- Reflect back on child's responses to show you've understood.
- Congratulate the child for their creativity and strength.

- Ask where and how they learnt to be strong and creative.
- Tell children it's often the bravest thing to do to ask for help.
- Ask the children to think of someone they know (either in real life, or in a movie or book) who has triumphed over adversity. Ask them to write or draw about that.
- Congratulate and celebrate the child's awareness of resilience.
- Explain that we can't solve all problems on our own, and that it's important to ask for help and solve problems together.

### 5. Celebrating strengths

Use the stickers provided to celebrate children's strengths, and to normalise feelings and situations that can bring up feelings of shame. Some stickers represent relationship skills and can be used for group exercises.

#### Questions

- Which stickers show how you feel?
- Are there stickers that show your strengths?
- Choose a sticker that you like and tell a story about the sticker.
- Choose a sticker that celebrates something about your friend, sibling or parent.
- Randomly pick a sticker. What does it mean to you? Who does it remind you of? Does it remind you of a particular time or event?
- Choose a sticker about something that you have never experienced.

#### Activities

- Ask children to draw their own stickers about the things they like to do.