

AN IMPORTANT LESSON

Who will save Joey?

BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEP! BEEP BEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP! The alarm went off. Chloe opened her eyes and looked at the clock. It was 7am – time to get ready for school. But this wasn't an ordinary school day. It was a special day. Today, her teacher, Mrs Little-Higgins, was going to show the students in her class a film all about kangaroos. She couldn't wait!

“Breakfast is ready Chloe, come and eat” her mother called. Chloe could smell burning toast drifting through the house followed by the piercing sound of the smoke alarm. Her sister Brooke yelled out from her room, “Mum when are we going to get a smoke alarm that doesn't go off when the toast burns?” as her mother reached up to switch it off. “They work better anyway,” Brooke added.

Quickly Chloe got dressed in her school uniform, and went to the kitchen to eat her cereal. Brooke was sitting at the table not looking happy. Her mother had scraped the burned char off the toast and slathered raspberry jam all over the top to hide the burned part but Brooke could taste it.

“Mum, this toast is too dry and crumbs are sticking to my teeth. Couldn’t you make a new piece of toast for me?”

“All right, Brooke,” her mother replied as she threw the secretly burnt toast into the compost bin. The toast was so hard that when it hit the side of the bin it made a ‘ding.’

Chloe was very excited about her day “Mum, our teacher is going to show us a film all about kangaroos, how they live, what they eat, how long they live and all that. I can’t wait!”

“That’s good, Chloe. Tell me everything you learned when you get home OK?” her mother replied, smiling at her daughter. At least one of her daughters was in a good mood!

When it was time to go, her mother gave Chloe a kiss on the top of the head and said “Be good, see you when you get home” and waved her out of the front door.

“I love you, mum!” shouted Chloe as she walked out of the front gate carrying her favourite blue bag with her school books in it.

Chloe walked a few blocks down the road, humming happily all the way, and waited for the bus. She timed it so she always arrived a few minutes before the bus, so she didn’t have to wait too long. She hated waiting. She got on the bus, said hello to her friends, sat down and looked out of the window. The bus stopped a few more times to let more students on.

For the last six months Chloe and her school mates had noticed a mob of several dozen kangaroos standing by the road every day on their way to school. Sometimes they would hop across the road, sometimes they would hop into the shopping centre car park. Everybody could see them. They particularly noticed several of them who had little joeys in their pouches. They looked so cute with their soft black eyes and little heads poking out of their mothers' pouches!

Chloe and her friends gave them names. Funny names like Star Trek for the one who hopped the fastest, 007 for the one who was always seen hiding behind a parked car and peering out cautiously and Daddy-O for the biggest male, who seemed to be protecting them.

Because of this, the children all wanted to learn more about kangaroos. What do they like to eat? What do they do for fun? How do they talk to each other? How long do they live? Already they could see that the kangaroos had feelings just like their

cats and dogs who lived with them at home. It was common to see the kangaroos grooming each other and kissing each other's faces. Sometimes they practised kick-boxing with each other, but nobody died, it was just a way to see who was strongest, and mainly to have fun playing. So the children thought anyway.

It was a beautiful day, the sky was blue and everything was perfect. They were just a few blocks from the school when suddenly the school bus screeched to a halt as the driver slammed on the brakes. He yelled out "Damn!" and jumped out of the bus.

The children peered out of the windows wondering what was wrong. Some of their bags went flying down the aisle because the bus had stopped so fast. The children were horrified to see a kangaroo lying on the side of the road. It looked dead. The bus driver dragged it over to the footpath and inspected the bus. There was just a small dent in the bumper – fortunately he hadn't been going too fast. He sat back in the seat

and started up the bus. Already a number of cars were behind him honking their horns.

In horror Chloe suddenly noticed a tiny little face appear from the dead mother's pouch, followed by two tiny delicate claws which clutched at the mother's fur – it was alive! It looked very scared. Oh no! We have to help the joey she thought. She ran up to the driver who told her not to worry, sit back down, someone else would stop and help the joey, but right now he had to keep to his schedule and get going. She was devastated as she watched the dead kangaroo and joey recede into the distance as the bus lurched forward, picking up speed. Chloe was worried about the joey. What a terrible experience for a little baby to have its mother die! “How would I feel if that was me?” she wondered.

When she got to the classroom she tried hard to get it out of her mind, telling herself that everything would be all right and someone would stop to help the joey.

Mrs Little-Higgins greeted them and started the movie. They learned a lot about kangaroos. Things like they can live up to 25 or 30 years in the wild. They like to eat native grasses and don't need very much to drink. They are very strong and can travel at speeds of up to 70 kilometres per hour.

The movie showed scenes of how extremely affectionate kangaroos are to each other and how protective they are of each other, especially the mothers and the joeys. The children loved that part the best. They could understand how the joeys felt because the children all had mothers who loved them more than anything else in the world, and they loved their mothers back.

They also loved the way the little joeys would play with each other and pretend to fight. They looked so funny! Everyone laughed, especially the boys.

The movie showed all the different species of kangaroos – Red Kangaroos, Eastern and Western Grey Kangaroos, Wallaroos, Euros, Wallabies, Forrester Kangaroos,

Pademelons and so on. It explained their history from their first ancestors up to 40 million years ago. The children were sad to learn that kangaroos have now become rare in many areas where there used to be so many of them.

Mrs Little-Higgins then told them something that really worried Chloe. She said “Kangaroos are very nervous animals. If they get too afraid while they are running away from danger and they run too hard for too long, they can die. It might take a few weeks but their muscles get very weak and then they just die.”

It was just getting too much for poor Chloe. She put up her hand. “Mrs Little-Higgins I really need to tell you something,” she said.

“Of course Chloe what is it?” said the teacher.

“On the way here the bus killed a kangaroo on the road and there was a little joey in her pouch that was still alive. Will it be all right? I’m worried about it.”

The teacher looked very concerned, took a deep breath, then quickly left the room. A few minutes later she came back and told the students that she had called a wildlife carer who was on the way to check the joey and that they would do everything they could, so not to worry.

Chloe was relieved. It is very hard being seven years old and not always knowing what to do. At least now she knew that somebody was trying to help the joey.

LETTERS TO THE MEAN MINISTER

Will he listen to the children?

“How many of you have seen kangaroos at the supermarket or in the car park?” asked Mrs Little-Higgins. All the children shot up their hands.

“How many of you think it’s very dangerous for them to be living so close to cars on the roads? Most of them yelled out “Me!” Chloe wasn’t the only one who was upset by the incident that morning.

“You are all right. It is especially dangerous for them because more and more shopping centres are being built, and the bush where the kangaroos now live will be chopped down and bulldozed, meaning the kangaroos will no longer have anywhere safe to live. Like the kangaroo hit by the school bus this morning, more and more will

end up dead on the side of the road, hit by cars or attacked by dogs. What do you all think?"

"I don't think it is fair for the kangaroos at all. I wouldn't like to come home from school and find that we no longer had a house to live in," said Makayla, looking very sad. "And I wouldn't like it if my mother died either. Who would make dinner? My dad is a terrible cook. Last week he made pasta and he put so much garlic in the sauce it burned my tongue off!" The children laughed.

"Do you think kangaroos have feelings like we do? asked the teacher.

Stefan said, "That kangaroo in the movie reminded me of my dog Frisky who comes up to my face and sniffs me! That means he likes me. It tickles my nose and makes me laugh. Those kangaroos were sniffing each other's faces so that means they like each other."

Rachel said “The kangaroo mother cuddling her joey reminds me of my mother who always kisses and cuddles me, especially at night before I go to sleep.”

It was easy for them to understand that the kangaroos had feelings. “I see you all want to help,” suggested the teacher. “Would you like to write a letter to the local council and the Minister for the Environment? The minister is supposed to be helping the environment and kangaroos are part of the environment aren’t they? So let’s ask him to please move the kangaroos to a safe area where they can live in peace because staying in the shopping centre is not safe for them,” the teacher said, looking at the children.

All the children cheered loudly, clapping their hands above their heads. The biggest boy jumped out of his seat, pretended to be a kangaroo and hopped down the aisle before falling flat on his face on the floor with a thud. It is very hard to hop like a kangaroo if you are human. Then they all started hopping around the room like

kangaroos, falling and crashing into everything while laughing their heads off. What a funny sight they were!

“All right children, back in your seats please. Time to write letters!” said the teacher in a serious tone.

The children poured their hearts into the letters. One of them said “Please can you move the kangaroos in our town? I don’t want them to be run over” and “I am sad, I like kangaroos, they need a nice forest to live in.” And “We need to help the kangaroos. I want them all saved”. And “I feel like I’m going to cry. Why doesn’t someone help them?”

The teacher put all their letters in one big envelope, stamped it, and posted to the Minister for the Environment, with copies to the local council. Weeks went by but there was no answer. The children were getting very puzzled. “Why hasn’t the

minister or the council replied to our letters? It is taking too long!” they complained. Every day that passed was another day that more kangaroos could be killed.

Mrs Little-Higgins called the minister and the council to ask them if they had received the children’s letters. She explained that the children were very anxious and wanted to know that the council would find a solution quickly before any more kangaroos were killed. However, there was still no reply. The children became increasingly upset and wanted to try new ways to solve the problem besides writing letters. What else could they do? The teacher was unsure what to do next.

Weeks went by and finally Mrs Little-Higgins received a reply from the minister which said “We aren’t going to relocate them. We will leave them where they are and put signs up asking people to drive slowly so they don’t hit kangaroos on the road.”

The teacher read the letter to the children. They were horrified. What a mean minister! Why doesn’t he care about helping kangaroos? Putting signs on the road

won't stop people driving too fast and killing the kangaroos. Besides they will have no more bush to live in because a new shopping centre is being built there. The kangaroos will have no place to go except onto the road, where there is no grass to eat and no water to drink and nothing but thousands of cars. Doesn't he know that kangaroos want to have a proper home? They love their families and don't want to suffer or be killed by cars or attacked by dogs. Not only that but he doesn't care what the children feel!

Mrs Little-Higgins was pondering all this in the staff room and wondered if there was someone who could help the mean minister understand. The earthy smell of coffee percolating in the pot awakened her brain. She suddenly remembered she had a friend in New Zealand whose father was the Minister for the Environment. He was a very kind minister who really loved animals. She knew that because he was helping kiwis. Kiwis are native animals in New Zealand and are their country's icon, just like

kangaroos are Australia's icon. They are odd-looking birds that walk on the ground a lot but do not fly. Kiwis are endangered, which means there are not many left and they could easily become extinct.

So this kind minister was the one making sure everyone in New Zealand was being very careful to protect kiwis so they did not become extinct. The reason why they were endangered was because there were not enough safe places for them to live because people had been chopping down trees and building too many houses and shopping centres – exactly the same problems the kangaroos had in Chloe's town.

Would the kind minister be willing to talk to the mean minister and try to persuade him to help the kangaroos? It was worth a try.

She would call her friend in New Zealand tomorrow.