

## Please can we keep her Dad?

Today we'll be thinking about wild animals and pets. We'll be doing lots of thinking in question time, and we'll be hearing from other children, too.

Let's start by thinking about a koala.

Sometimes people who live in the country find a koala in their backyard or in the playground at school - perhaps sitting high up in a gum tree.



Sometimes this happens in the city too, in areas where there are lots of trees. And sometimes, the koala has a baby on its back. The koala usually stays around for a while and then moves on to find new trees with lots of tasty leaves to eat.



*Now, imagine you found a koala in your backyard, and she stayed around for a while and then moved on. Would you call the koala your pet? Why or why not?*



**Ben:** I wouldn't call it my pet, because it's a wild animal and they're not meant to be kept as pets.

**Olive:** I agree. And you can't play with the koala or pat it.

**Edward:** But you can't really pat a goldfish either.

**Max:** It depends. If I was leaving food and water out for the koala, then I'd call it my pet.



*Is a koala a wild animal?*



**Sarah:** Yes, because it can find its own food and somewhere to live – it doesn't need people.

**Edward:** A koala lives outside, so it is a wild animal.

**Max:** My dog Cindy lives outside in a kennel but she's not wild.

**Sarah:** But a kennel is like a tiny house that people make for dogs. Koalas live in trees without any help from humans.

**Olive:** I think a koala is a wild animal. You wouldn't play with a koala – or talk to it like you do with pets.

**Ben:** I agree. Dogs make good pets because they like hanging out with people. A koala is a wild animal and would be much happier being free.



*Let's imagine you did find a koala in your garden and suppose you wanted to keep the koala. So, you put it in a cage. And you fed it and talked to it every day. Do you think the koala would be happy?*



**Max:** Yes, because it wouldn't have to look for food. You would feed it every day.

**Sarah:** But maybe it wouldn't like the food you bring? It would be happier in the wild where it could search for whatever food it likes.

**Ben:** I don't think a koala would be happy, mostly because it's not in a natural habitat. It's used to being free and in trees and having eucalyptus but in a cage it has none of those qualities.

**Max:** But you could talk to it and play with it. Then it would be happy.

**Olive:** Do koalas like being played with? It might get really scared if you are always making noises and trying to touch it.

**Ben:** I've thought of another reason. It would be all alone in the cage and would probably really miss its family.

**Olive:** I don't think I could tell if it was happy or not. What does a happy koala even look like?

And now I have a story to help us think about these questions some more. It's about a boy your age named Gus, and a blackbird.

At the back of Gus's house is a big garden. Lots of creatures live there. There are little lizards called skinks that hide under bits of old wood and beetles that scurry about under leaves that have fallen from the trees. There are fat worms in the soil and black ants that scurry back and forth collecting food. When Gus was small, he and his dad would spend hours exploring the garden.

Right now, there are baby blackbirds in the nest outside Gus's bedroom window.

Every summer, the blackbirds build a nest in the same bush in Gus's garden. And every year, the mother bird lays three eggs in the nest and sits on them until they are ready to hatch.

Once the baby birds have pecked their way out of the eggs, the nest becomes their home – for a while, anyway.

The mother and father birds spend all day in the garden, scratching around for worms and other kinds of food that they take back for their babies to eat.

The baby birds grow so quickly that soon the nest is barely big enough to hold them all. But they're still too young to leave the nest. Their tail feathers haven't grown yet, and without tail feathers they can't fly.

Today it's been windy, and branches of the trees have been bending and swaying. Gus hopes the baby birds are safe. The next morning, he wakes up early and looks out. Phew - the nest is still there, but it's moved in the night and looks like it might fall! Gus races outside to check the nest. He sees two babies.

But wait – there should be three!

Gus looks down, and there on the ground is a little bird covered with fluffy feathers. It's making a very soft cheeping sound, and as Gus picks it up, he sees that one of its wings looks different to the other – it's hanging down.

'We have to do something!' he says to his dad, 'or it'll never be able to fly.' His dad takes the bird and very gently he feels its wing. 'We can fix it,' he says, but we'll have to bandage it up and look after her until her wing has healed.'

'How do you know it's a girl?' Gus asks.

'Just a guess,' his dad says. 'Let's get the old cage from the shed and then we can find out what we should feed her.'

And so they do. And after three weeks, Gus's dad takes the bandage off. The wing looks perfect – just like the other one. And the bird now has beautiful long tail feathers as well.

'Let's take her outside,' Gus's dad says. 'It's time to see if she can fly.'

'But Dad,' Gus says, 'if she can fly, she might fly away.'

'I think that's just what she should do,' says his dad.

'But why?' says Gus. 'Why can't we keep her in the cage as a pet?'

'That's a good question, Gus,' his dad says. 'If she can't fly ... well ... then perhaps we could keep her. But if she can fly, we'll need to think very carefully about it.'

But Gus can't think – he's too upset.



*If you were Gus, would you be upset too?*



**Sarah:** Yes. If I were Gus I'd be upset – if I'd spent weeks looking after her, I would really miss her.

**Max:** I'd be upset because I'd be worried she might get lost or attacked by a bigger bird. I'd want to keep her safe inside.

**Ben:** I'd be a little upset because I'd miss her – but I'd also be happy that she's better and can be free again.

**Olive:** Yeh, maybe she could find her family again. That would be nice.



*If Gus decides to keep the blackbird in a cage, will he be changing her life? What would be different?*



**Ben:** Well, she wouldn't get to fly around much.

**Olive:** And she wouldn't get to see her family again.

**Max:** But she would also get food every day – so she'd never have to hunt for things.

**Sarah:** And Gus might give her lots of cool toys – like mirrors and bells to play with.

**Olive:** She wouldn't be able to have babies of her own – or do things like make a nest.



*Gus's dad thinks that they should set the blackbird free. Why would he think that?*



**Ben:** He thinks that if the blackbird can fly okay, they should set it free because she'd be happier.

**Olive:** I agree. The blackbird won't be happy living all alone in a cage. Gus's dad is right – they should let the blackbird go.

**Edward:** If my budgie got out, it wouldn't be able to find food or a safe place to live – because it's always lived in a cage. But maybe Gus's dad thinks the blackbird wouldn't be happy living in a cage because she's a wild animal.



*Do you think it would be okay for Gus to keep the blackbird as a pet?*



**Edward:** No, I don't think she'd be very happy living in a cage.

**Max:** I think it would be okay, because Gus would take good care of her.

**Sarah:** If they let her go, but she keeps coming back to her cage, then I think it would be good to keep her as a pet.

**Olive:** No. Gus should let her go free, because she should live in the wild like other blackbirds. That's what we said about the koala.

**Max:** But the koala was raised in the wild. What if the blackbird doesn't know how to look after herself? She might not remember her family and has no one to show her how to find worms in the garden.

**Olive:** I think birds just know how to do that. They don't need someone to teach them.

We heard some really interesting ideas today! Thank you for taking part. You might like to keep thinking about wild animals and pets. You can talk to your family and friends about what they think, too.

*Photo credit: bernswaelz from Pixabay*

*Thank you to our wonderful actors Ben, Edward, Max, Olive and Sarah who helped us to hear different points of view. While sometimes these points of view might have reflected their own opinions, at other times they were asked to express an opposing view in order to help us think more deeply about the topic.*