

SELF-CONTROL

Australian Supplement to the Character First Education Curriculum

I Will:

- Not act impulsively
- Not equate desires with rights
- Set my own limits
- See anger as a sign that something is wrong
- Walk away from things that aren't right



Definition

Rejecting wrong desires and doing what is right

Illustration

Small, yet agile and a skilful climber, the honey possum resides in a small corner of south-west Western Australia. While they don't actually eat honey, these possum's use their long prehensile tails to latch onto twigs and reach out to blossoms and flowers. Self-control is vital in every area of the honey possum's life – whether eating, sleeping or watching out for predators. The nature story tells about these tiny possums of the forest and how they survive through self-control.

Emma Withnell, her husband John and their two small children left their Avon Valley farm to become one of first white settlers in the rugged Pilbara of Western Australia. Their endeavour by sailing ship was marked with tests and trials, yet Emma chose not to complain. The history story will leave you amazed at the hardships the Withnell's faced, and the self-control Emma used to overcome them.

Self-Control in Nature

Honey Possum



Dusk was settling over the quiet banksias and wattles of south-west Western Australia. Hardly a breath of wind stirred the leaves, and the clear chirping of birds resonated through the mild air. All seemed ready to settle down for the night – all, that is, except a tiny creature that scurried through the leaf litter. Against the carpet of undergrowth, it was perfectly camouflaged.

This small mammal is called a honey possum. Looking more like a mouse with its beady, black eyes, coat of grey hair and long, thin tail, the honey possum is actually a marsupial. It makes its home in the fields and woodlands of the south-west corner of Western Australia.

The little honey possum darted like a gunshot across the ground, barely stirring a leaf, it was so small and light. Although it had its destination in mind, the honey possum remembered to stop every few moments to glance cautiously about and sniff the air. It couldn't risk being spotted by a preying cat or fox. Scampering a bit, it stopped and sniffed, scampered on, and stopped and sniffed some more.

You see, honey possums depend upon their own self-control for survival. If that little possum had

not taken a moment to check its surroundings, it could land itself in big trouble, even death.

The honey possum darted across the ground to the base of a sturdy Banksia tree. Although it can climb almost any tree with ease, the knobbly bark of the Banksia made a superb grip for the possum as it scuttled up the tree. Honey possums are renowned for their speed and dexterity with which they climb trees. Their grasping hands, feet and tail all work together to help it to seemingly “fly” up the branches.

Up towards the top of the Banksia grew beautiful, brilliant reddish-pink flowers that look like tongues licking into the air. These flowers bloom for a few months of the year, and they stand out in stark contrast to the drab browns and dull greens of the native bush. The Banksia flowers are also rich in pollen and nectar, which make up a honey possum's entire diet!

The name ‘honey’ possum can be a bit misleading. Honey possum's don't actually eat honey – they feast on the nectar and pollen of native flowers.

As the honey possum neared some of the most distant reaching Banksia flowers, the branches became thinner and thinner. Honey possums are tiny creatures – their body size ranging from 6 to 9 centimetres and their weight between 8 and 16 grams. Despite its agility, the possum wasn't hasty as it eased its way out towards a flower. It would take a few steps, then stop, making sure it could continue safely.

You and I can be like that too. We need to test each “branch” we decide to walk along, using self-control and not being hasty or impulsive. There may even come a point when we realise that what we're doing could be wrong, or it could hurt somebody else. In times like that we need to stop and have self-control, turning away from that which is harmful or wrong.

The rich Banksia flower loomed ever closer as the honey possum strained to the edge of the twig. However, the tiny possum couldn't quite get its nimble paws around the flower! It eased forward, forward... but it couldn't reach.

This is when the honey possum's tail comes into action! The thin tail is longer than the head and body combined, and it acts like an extra arm. The tail is *prehensile*, which means it is capable of grasping. The possum wrapped its tail around the slender twig like an anchor, then kept reaching for the flower before it. Never once did the possum's tail falter as it securely supported the creature in its attempt to grasp its meal.

A honey possum knows its limitations; it won't take risks it knows could harm it.

Never failing, the honey possum's tail held it steady until its front paws latched onto the plant and it sank its long tongue into the rich nectar inside. Throughout its life of about two years, a honey possum lives entirely off nectar and pollen. It will feed on whatever flowers are available at different times of the year. It doesn't complain when it has to eat gum blossoms instead of wattle flowers; it will use self-control and contently eat whatever there is on hand.

After a busy night of feasting on flowers the honey possum retires to its home in a tree cavity. Honey possums are mostly nocturnal, feeding at night and sleeping in the daytime. They will sleep almost anywhere – a crack in a rock, a hollow in a tree, even inside grass trees!

During the winter months, when the south-west can become very cold and food is scarce, honey possums enter a temporary state like short-term hibernation. Their

body temperature drops and their metabolic rate is reduced to conserve energy. For weeks, sometimes months, the possum will remain still and silent. No matter how long it has to stay that way, it will stay self-controlled as it waits peacefully for the warmer weather to arrive.

A honey possum's breeding depends on the availability of nectar, which can appear at any time of year. December is usually the least active month for breeding, since few plants are in flower. January and February are peak months for births.

The honey possum delivers litters of two to four young. Like wallabies and kangaroos, honey possums can keep their productive cells in a dormant state, so that the first litter can be out of the pouch and weaned. Female possums can control the amount of babies they have. Self-control is vital, since her body would deteriorate with the strain put on her by having so many babies to care for at once.

Gestation lasts for 28 days, and the baby honey possums weigh no more than five milligrams when they're born – no bigger than a grain of rice! Somehow they navigate their way to their mother's teat in the protective pouch to suckle. The litter will stay in the pouch for about 60 days, before they emerge covered in fur and with open eyes. By 11 weeks of age, the baby honey possums will be mature enough to make homes for themselves.

Self-control is everything for the honey possum. Whether in running along the ground, climbing trees, feeding on flowers, sleeping in its nest or rearing young, it uses restraint and makes wise choices.

The challenge is for you to be like the honey possum and show self-control. Make wise decisions, use words with restraint and be an example by demonstrating self-control.

Self-Control in Australian History

THE LONG SEA VOYAGE

A salty breeze whistled over the blue-green ocean, as Emma Withnell watched the coast of Western Australia fade into the distance. Waves gently lapped at the side of the boat and gulls called gleefully as they circled overhead in the balmy summer air. Emma, her husband, John, and two small children were beginning a 1,200km voyage north to the new pastoral lands in the Pilbara region.

Emma pushed some loose strands of dark hair away from her face. She remembered a few years ago how she had heard of the grazing lands in the north-west. There was plenty of water and fertile soil up there, not like Emma and John's Avon Valley farm had long been suffering from lack of water.

"We could sell our farm," she told John, "and use the money to buy sheep to transport to the new grazing land. There's land aplenty for anyone willing to work hard and establish a farm."

John took off his felt hat and

scratched his head; he looked uncertain.

"I think this may be the answer to our problems," Emma said slowly. "But as you are in charge, the decision is yours."



Did you spot the "I will"? Emma didn't equate desires (wanting to sell the farm) with rights (her desire to go up north.)

John decided to go ahead with Emma's plan. They sold their farm and bought 650 head of sheep, as well as cows, poultry, sheepdogs, horses and enough foodstuffs to last them six months. John hired a three-masted schooner *Sea Ripple*, which would sail them to the De Grey River plains.

On the 24th March 1864, the Withnell's and all their stock set sail from Perth. The boat made swift progress up the coast, until, ten days after

departure, the *Sea Ripple* was becalmed near the port of Tsin Tien (later to be named Cossack). For days, the vessel sat dormant in the wide, open sea. In the scorching heat, the cramped animal holds began to reek of waste.

Emma knew that the food and water supplies weren't going to last forever, so she ate only as much food as she needed to curb her hunger. "I'm not going to complain," she thought. "Whining never helps anything."

Did you spot the "I will"? Emma chose not to become frustrated, but set her own limits.

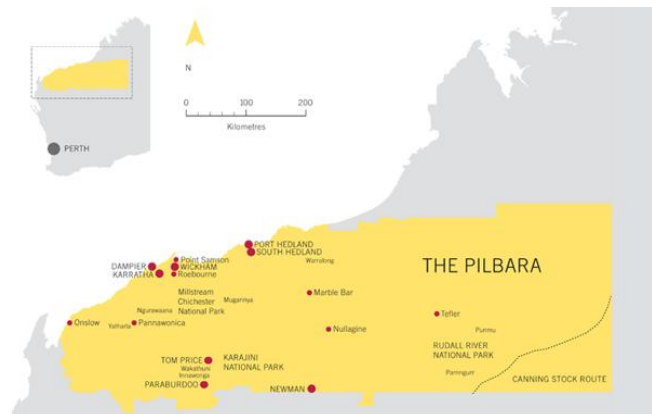
Finally, the wind filled the sails and the boat began to make headway once again. However, the trouble wasn't over yet. Menacing clouds brimmed on the horizon and a fierce gale screamed over the churning ocean.

"Quick, everyone into the hold!" John cried, as the rain pelted down in sheets. Enormous waves crashed over the deck. The ship pitched and rolled as Emma and her children huddled in the hold. Suddenly, the flickering lamp hanging from the roof crashed to the floor and went out. Darkness enveloped the cabin, the children wailed in terror.

Suddenly, John burst through the door, his clothes soaked and his hair drenched.

A three-masted schooner, like the *Sea Ripple*.





Emma sighed. “I guess we’ll have to wait until further arrangements can be made.”

Did you spot the “I will”? Emma didn’t act impulsively.

“What’s happened?” Emma shouted above the stormy rage.

“It’s gone,” John said. “Most of our cargo has been swept overboard.”

Emma bit her lip and fought the urge to cry. “Maybe the storm will die down soon,” she thought, trying to think on the bright side. But for hours, the gale whipped the sea into foaming peaks.

Finally, they got the dreaded news that the helmsmen had lost control of the rudder. John and Emma watched in horror as the *Sea Ripple* drifted towards a reef. With an almighty CRASH!, the ship struck the reef. The animals panicked and many were trampled to death.

As the gale abated and, with the low tide, the ship began to lean to one side until it became impossible to walk on the deck. More sheep were suffocated. Now seven months pregnant, Emma climbed off the ship and was rowed to an island in the middle of the mud flats. Black, sticky mud oozed into Emma’s boots and weighed down her dress. She was exhausted by the time she reached the island, but as she looked, the shore still lay hundreds of metres past more mangroves and slimy mud flats.

“Can’t we possibly reach the shore?” Emma asked, dismayed.

“Nope,” answered one of the seamen. “Not unless you wanna tramp over all that mud.”

Emma helped erect a tent, but as night fell, hundreds of tiny sandflies descended on the weary travellers. Emma received little sleep as she fought to keep the bugs at bay.

The next day didn’t prove any better when the remaining livestock were taken from the ship. Many of the sheep became stuck in the mud or drowned in the tide. Emma watched heartbroken as the animals perished before her eyes.

Suddenly, the captain of the *Sea Ripple* stormed up. “I’ve had enough!” he shouted. “I’ve tried to fix my ship, but it won’t survive the trip back to Perth!” His eyes blazed at Emma and John. “This is all your fault! You are the ones to blame for this predicament!”

Emma wanted to respond with some fiery comment, but biting her lip, she turned away.

Did you spot the “I will”? Emma walked away from an argument, instead of retaliating.

Living on the mud island in a rickety tent became unbearable

as the days dragged by. The water in the wooden keg became too hot to drink. The stench rising from the dead sheep made Emma cough and splutter.

“Why is all this

happening?” she thought bitterly. “Our careful plans are ruined. Our animals are dead, our provisions are meagre and we’re stranded on this island!” Emma wanted to clench her fists and yell. However, she knew that getting angry wasn’t going to help the situation, so she took a deep breath and calmly went on with her work.

Did you spot the “I will”? Emma chose not to give in to her anger and frustration.

Finally, Emma and the children were loaded into a dinghy and taken ashore. As she stepped onto the beach, she couldn’t help but sigh with relief. Finally, after so many trials, her family had reached the Pilbara to start a new pioneering life. Finally, the long sea voyage was over.

References:

Great Pioneer Women of the Outback
Susanna de Vries
HarperCollins Publishers

The Pilbara region is now one of the richest areas in the world, with iron ore mining the lead industry.



Project Ideas

Language

Write an acrostic poem for self-control. Incorporate your ideas and/or the I wills, Emma Withnell, honey possum's etc.

Maths

The temptation to overspend our money can lead down wrong paths. Discuss the importance of recognising the value of a dollar and saving, instead of squandering money on frivolous items.

Science and Technology

Fire is useful for a lot of things – heat, cooking, energy production, etc. However, fire out of control is disastrous. Study the impact of large Australian bushfires, such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Link this to how we need to set boundaries in life and be self-controlled.



Write a summary of the honey possum shows self-control.

Society and Environment

Study Emma Withnell's journey to the Pilbara. Trace her travels on a map of Western Australia. Make a model of a charter like the *Sea Ripple*.

Have a 'Pioneer Day'. Dress up like pioneers, play pioneer games and cook pioneer food, like damper.

Visit a local historical house to learn more about how pioneers lived.

Health

Over-eating is a big problem in today's society. Lack of self-control in a diet can result in severe health issues such as obesity. Discuss the importance of a balanced diet. Get students to write down foods that damage their health if eaten in excess. Encourage them to have self-control when eating.

The Arts

Make a traffic light, an excellent analogy of self-control – red, STOP, orange, THINK, green, ACT.

Make a placemat illustrating self-control, with the definition, I wills and picture of the animal, etc.



Emma Withnell

To what region of Western Australia did the Withnell's move to?

What was the name of the ship? _____

What happened to the ship? _____

How did Emma Withnell show SELF-CONTROL?

List two things:

1. _____

2. _____



How can YOU demonstrate Self-Control...

On the playground? _____

At home? _____

The Long Sea Voyage

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Rejecting wrong desires and doing what is right.



Draw your own picture of a honey possum sucking nectar from a flower. Use colourful crepe paper to decorate the flower.