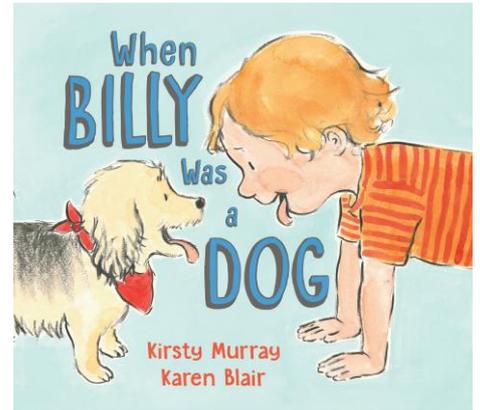


# When Billy was a Dog

By Kirsty Murray,  
illustrated by Karen Blair



June 2019 ISBN 9781760631826  
Hardback picture book  
Recommended for 3-6-year-olds

## Summary

If you can't have a puppy, maybe the next best thing is to be a puppy.

*'Can I please, please, please have a dog?'* asked Billy.

*'Would you walk it every day and wash it if it got dirty?'*

*'I would, I promise!'* said Billy.

Billy wants a dog. He really, really, really wants one.

Billy's parents aren't so sure. So, one morning, Billy takes matters into his own paws.



Words and illustrations combine to create a timeless picture book about the deep connection small children can feel for animals. But *When Billy Was a Dog* is not only about the adorably cheeky Billy, it's also about puppies, families, neighbours, being playful and using your imagination to achieve what might seem an impossible dream.

## Use in the curriculum

Within the Australian Curriculum, *When Billy was a Dog* lends itself to acting and interpretive movement and is suitable for integrated activities in the Health & Physical Education, Arts and English curricula for Foundation Year to Year 2. Class pets, visits to animal shelters or visiting 'petting farms' are common school activities that can be springboards into the book.

The language level makes this a read-aloud and act-out book for younger students. The extremely expressive illustrations allow students to interpret mood and emotion and find stories beyond the words.

For older students, it is an engaging text for establishing readers, with lots of white space to help focus on the words. Words are placed strategically in relation to the illustrations such that the illustrations can cue reading.

## Themes

- family
- dogs & puppies
- neighbours
- imagination
- responsibility

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Contact Carolyn Walsh, Education Marketing Manager,  
Ph: +02 8425 0150 Email: [education@allenandunwin.com](mailto:education@allenandunwin.com)

## Discussion questions

### 1. Pre-reading activity

Before reading *When Billy Was a Dog*, look at the title and cover design. Discuss what students think the story might be about and the clues in the picture that make them think that. Ask questions such as:

- What is the boy doing with the dog?
- What do you think the boy's name will be?
- Why do you think Billy might be acting this way?
- Do you think this is going to be a funny or sad story?

### 2. Front Endpaper

- Name as many different types of dogs you can see here.
- What sort of book is on the front endpaper and what do we usually keep in this type of book?
- How many dogs can you count on the front endpaper?

### 3. Blurb

Turn the book over, read the blurb on the back cover, then discuss the following:

- What information did the blurb give you?
- Does it make you want to read the story?
- What do you think Billy and the dog are doing in the illustration?
- Why is it funny when the blurb says, 'Billy takes matters into his own paws'?

### 4. Post-reading comprehension and activities

After reading the story ask the following comprehension questions:

- Billy loves dogs, but which dog does he especially love?
- Why do Billy's mum and dad think he needs to wait before he can have a dog?
- Name three chores involved in looking after a dog.
- What sort of things does Billy do when he is pretending to be a dog?
- Why do you think Billy's dad said, 'Don't you dare,' when passing Fluff's fence?
- What does Mrs Banerjee mean when she says, 'I think it is her time'?
- Look carefully at the picture of Fluff and her puppies and explain why Billy names them Snow, Chocolate and Boots.
- What sort of a 'trick' do Mrs Banerjee and Billy's parents play on Billy when they say that Boots has gone to a new home?
- What does Billy promise to do for Boots forever and ever at the end of the story?

5. Return to the beginning of the book and look at the pictures of Billy with Fluff on the first two-page spread. The words on the page *tell* us that Billy loves Fluff, but can you find things in the illustrations that *show* us how he feels?  
Now look at Billy and his parents sitting on the couch. There are no words to tell us they love each other but the illustration shows us they do. Look closely and discuss what in the illustration tells us that?

6. Look at the pictures of Billy's mum when Billy is pretending to be a dog. Find one picture where she is a bit anxious and concerned, and one where she thinks he is being very funny. How did you know she was feeling like that in each illustration?
7. What sort of things do you think Billy would have done if he had really, really wanted a cat?
8. Choose any animal and pretend to be that animal in front of your classmates. Think about the noises that animal makes, how it moves around, how it eats and how it shows it is happy or angry.
9. Draw a picture of the animal you chose and colour it in.
10. Do you think Billy will look after Boots well after the story ends here?
11. Do you have a pet? What sort of things do you do for your pet to make sure it stays happy and healthy?
12. **Back Endpapers**

Why do you think the illustrator decided to end the story with a photo of Billy hugging Boots for a photo album?

## Author's inspiration

'When my son, Billy, was a small boy he longed for a dog. When I said he had to wait until he was older, he decided to be a dog, just like Billy in the book. Every playful puppy moment in *When Billy Was a Dog* is based on things Billy did during his "dog phase".

'We had an elderly neighbour at the time who owned a very gentle Great Dane called Tiny. Billy went as far as to steal Tiny's dog biscuits and was often found sleeping in Tiny's bed. Billy also insisted on wearing a collar and wanted to be led around on a leash but as eating out of dog bowls and dragging a leash present safety hazards I left them out of the picture book.

'I know many other children who have impersonated the animals they'd like to have as pets—kids who pretend to be cats, dogs and even birds and bunnies. I wanted to be a rabbit when I was small and practiced hopping on all fours quite often. A young friend resorted to writing an anonymous letter to his parents urging them to get a puppy for their son or the neighbours would think they were negligent.

'I revisited the story after watching my five-year-old neighbour, Tommy, playing with his new puppy. That puppy, Jett, was the inspiration for Boots. Watching the affection between Tommy and Jett made me dig out the old draft of the story and begin to rework it into a picture book.'

— Kirsty Murray

## The author and illustrator

**Kirsty Murray** is a multi-award-winning author of more than 20 books for children and young adults. Her works include eleven novels as well as non-fiction, junior fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction and picture books. Kirsty is an ambassador and advocate for many reading and writing initiatives and has been a writer-in-residence in schools and universities around the world. She loves books, libraries, bookshops, readers, writers, puddles, puppies, and stories – especially stories about kids. <https://kirstymurray.com/>

**Karen Blair** is an award-winning illustrator of twelve picture books. She has collaborated with some of Australia's leading children's authors. Karen is also a primary school art teacher and her characters are often inspired by her students and her own two children. She loves to help tell stories that explore the joy of discovery and play in the outdoors and the special relationships in children's lives. <https://www.karenblair.com.au/>