How the Echidna Got His Spines

(Kaitish / Kaytetye Nation – Central Australia)



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A long time ago, in the Dreaming, Echidna looked very different from the way we see him today. He had no spines at all. His back was smooth, and his skin was soft. He was small and gentle, and though he liked to wander across the sandhills, he had little way to protect himself if trouble came.

Still, Echidna was clever at finding food. He knew where the tastiest grubs hid beneath the bark, and he used his long, sticky tongue to draw them out. He would sit happily in the shade of a mulga tree, licking up one grub after another, his belly growing round.

But one day, other animals began to notice.
“Look at Echidna,” said Crow. “He always finds plenty to eat, yet he does not share with the rest of us.”
Kangaroo twitched his ears. “He hides away with his grubs and keeps them for himself.”

The animals grew jealous and angry. “We shall take the food from him,” they said. “He cannot stop us — he has no claws, no sharp teeth, no armour.”



The animals confront Echidna

The next morning, when Echidna found a hollow log buzzing with fat white grubs, he settled down to feast. But before he could take a bite, Magpie swooped down.“Those are not only for you,” she cried, snatching one in her beak.

Kangaroo bounded close and grabbed another with his paw. “Share, Echidna! You cannot eat them all.”

Poor Echidna curled into a ball, but his smooth back gave no protection. The animals laughed and circled around him, taking his food. “Stop!” Echidna cried. “Leave me at least a little!”
But they only jeered.

Echidna’s idea

When the animals finally left, Echidna sat trembling. “I cannot go on like this,” he whispered. “If I have no way to protect myself, I will always be bullied. I must find something to keep me safe.”

He looked around. Beside him lay broken sticks and sharp little spears left by the people. Slowly, he gathered them. One by one, he pressed them into the skin of his back. They pricked and stung, but he did not stop. Soon his whole back bristled with sharp points.

That night, the ancestral spirits looked down and saw what he had done. “This little one has found his answer,” they said. “He will never be helpless again.”
So they changed the sticks into real spines — strong, sharp, and a part of his body forever.

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The animals return

The next day, the animals came once more. “There he is,” said Crow. “Let us take his grubs again.”

They rushed towards Echidna, but this time he curled into a tight ball. His new spines stuck out in every direction.

“Ouch!” cried Magpie, stabbing her beak on the spikes.

“Ow!” yelped Kangaroo, pulling back his paw.

The animals jumped away quickly. “We cannot touch him now,” they grumbled.

Echidna stayed quiet inside his armour, safe at last.



The lesson of Echidna

From that day forward, Echidna carried his spines wherever he went. When danger comes, he curls into a ball, and no one dares to touch him.

The Kaitish people tell this story to explain how Echidna got his spines — and to remind us of the lesson. Greed and jealousy bring quarrels, but cleverness and resilience can turn weakness into strength.

And when children see an echidna waddling slowly across the red earth, its back covered in sharp spines, they can remember how he once had none, and how the spirits gave him protection that will never leave him.