

Our Ancestors

Our ancestors were loving parents

The information we have about our ancestors tells us that a child's place in the world was secure and celebrated and it was central to the wellbeing of whānau, hapū and iwi. Children were raised to feel loved, confident and safe.

Tamariki were cherished and celebrated as precious additions to whānau, hapū and iwi

Traditions, legends, whakapapa and karakia helped to establish and nurture the role and place of children. A range of rituals and ceremonies marked the birth of a child, symbolising their importance within the whānau and binding them together.

Waiata oriori (lullabies) were composed (often by the child's grandparents or parents) and sung to babies to help reinforce the whakapapa, spiritual connections, expectations and importance of this new life.

"It was sung repeatedly so that all listeners learned it and knew the whakapapa and qualities of the child and thus, the special treatment they required. They were a poetic and repetitive way to fix personal, whānau and cultural messages in the minds of the listeners."

Helen M Harte and K Jenkins (2012 Traditional Māori Parenting – Literature Review).

These lullabies were often inspirational and also instructional – highlighting desired behaviours and reinforcing whakapapa and identity to the children and also to the adults listening.

Parents nurtured tamariki to feel safe, secure and confident

The loving care given to babies and children by parents (and all adults) is reflected in a number of observations by early European settlers.

"The children here appear to be treated with a great degree of parental affection. They are robust, lively, and possess, in general, pleasing countenances; their actions are totally unrestrained by clothing, or bandage, which must undoubtedly lay the foundation of their future hardihood and healthy constitution."

John Savage (1770 –?) surgeon, traveller, writer

"The children are generally very easy, open and familiar at the first interview, and show an anxiety to pay every little attention in their power to the strangers. There can be no finer children than those of the New Zealanders in any part of the world. Their parents are very indulgent, and they appear always happy and playful and very active."

Reverent Samuel Marsden (1765-1838) chaplain, magistrate, agriculturalist, missionary

“Both parents are almost idolatrously fond of their children; and the father frequently spends a considerable portion of his time in nursing his infant, who nestles in his blanket, and is lulled to rest by some native song...The children are cheerful and lively little creatures, full of vivacity and intelligence. They pass their early years almost without restraint, amusing themselves with the various games of the country”

George French Angas (1822 –1886) Artist, naturalist, writer

Tamariki were included in public life and encouraged to learn, to question and participate. Their connection and importance to the past and the future was acknowledged and respected. This was a very different parenting approach to the prevailing Western viewpoint at that time – that ‘good’ children were ‘seen but not heard’ – and so was surprising to these observers.

“The chiefs take their children from their mother’s breast to all their public assemblies, where they hear all that is said upon politics, religion, war etc., by the oldest men. Children will frequently ask questions in public conversation and are answered by the chiefs. I have often been surprised to see children sitting amongst the chiefs and paying close attention to what was said. The children never appear under any embarrassment when they address a stranger whom they never saw. In every village the children, as soon as they learned any of our names, came up to us and spake to us with the greatest familiarity.”

Reverend Samuel Marsden

“The chief aim, therefore in the education of children being to make them bold, brave, and independent in thought and act, a parent is seldom seen to chastise his child...”

Edward Shortland (1812? –1893) Doctor, administrator, scholar, linguist

Violence against children was not condoned

Violence against children was not condoned or sanctioned, and any violence against an individual was experienced as violence against the whānau and the hapū. Violence also harmed the atua (spiritual world).

“... the pre-contact socialisation methods of children were based on philosophical beliefs which begin in the spiritual world. All Māori whakapapa to Io Matua and nga atua. This relationship meant that, for children, they were ata ahua – they were the face of Io, of the supreme being. Children therefore were perfect underneath everything. This belief was what stopped any maltreatment of the child. To harm the child was to harm the atua. Fundamentally, the child was considered tapu, the more closely and directly he or she was linked to the atua. The child represented the atua, the tipuna who have gone before and the children who are to come. This meant that the kaumatua treated them with respect and consideration.”

Harte and Jenkins

Early observers remarked on the gentle and loving care given to the babies and children by mothers, fathers and all adults and the lack of physical or any type of punishment.

“I saw no quarrelling while I was there. They are kind to their women and children. I never observed either with a mark of violence upon them, nor did I ever see a see a child struck.”

Samuel Marsden

“The children are seldom or never punished; which, consequently, causes them to commit so many annoying tricks, that continually renders them deserving of a sound, wholesome castigation”

Joel Polack (1807 –1882) author, artist, trader and cosmopolitan

Tamariki were raised and educated collectively to be independent, knowledgeable and actively involved in their whānau

In traditional society, tamariki were raised and educated in a collective manner. The communal living arrangements meant that children had easy access to parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and others who all contributed to their upbringing and education. Children were included in whānau matters from a young age. This ensured that they accumulated a lot of knowledge about their whakapapa, values and belief systems and all of the things that sustained Māori society. It instilled confidence, identity and a sense of pride in tamariki.

Our ancestors were gentle nurturing parents...

Our ancestors recognised the special place of tamariki – their whakapapa connections and role in the future prosperity of the whānau, hapū and iwi:

- Māori children were raised and nurtured to feel loved, confident and safe
- Parents and grandparents composed and sang special waiata to tamariki from an early age to cement their bonds and whakapapa
- Tamariki were involved in whānau matters from an early age which encouraged them to feel a sense of belonging and to develop their social and intellectual skills
- Many in the whānau had a part to play in the upbringing of tamariki – this ensured that children received a broad education and knowledge making them smart, confident and inquisitive, and helping to strengthen and sustain the whānau, hapū, iwi.

Although times have changed there is a great deal of wisdom within these traditional practices that can guide our parenting today.