

Our Ancestors

Our tāne ancestors were tender fathers

In pre-European times Māori men played an important nurturing role in the lives of their tamariki and whānau. There was recognition that a strong tāne could have dual roles as a warrior and as a protective father and whānau member – both were important to whānau well-being and survival.

Tāne were tender, loving fathers

There are numerous observations from early European settlers that together help to paint a picture of Māori men who were extremely gentle and affectionate towards their children and for whom childcare was a natural part of their role within the wider whānau. Māori fathers were openly loving and nurturing towards their tamariki and mokopuna.

“The New Zealand father is devotedly fond of his children, they are his pride, his boast, and peculiar delight; he generally bears the burden of carrying them continually within his mat ... The children are seldom or never punished.”

Joel Polack (1807 –1882) – trader, land speculator, writer, artist

“They are kind and hospitable to strangers, and are excessively fond of their children. On a journey, it is more usual to see the father carrying his infant than the mother; and all the little offices of a nurse are performed by him with the tenderest care and good humour.”

Augustus Earle (1793 –1838) – artist, traveller, writer

“One of the finest traits I have noticed in the New Zealanders is that of parental love; the men appear chiefly to nurse their children, and are generally to be seen with one on their back covered up under their mats, the little things appear likewise sensible of their fathers’ love for they seem principally to cling to them.”

Richard Taylor (1805 –1873) – missionary

Men had an important parenting role

The shared parenting of children was also commented on as this would have been surprising to Western men at that time. It is possible that these commentators mistook other whānau members (uncles, aunties) as fathers or mothers because collective child rearing practices were unfamiliar to them. Nevertheless, whether they were fathers, uncles or other whānau members it is clear that men played a significant and loving role in the lives of tamariki. For example, historians suggest that it was common practice for fathers to assume care for baby boys after they were weaned while mothers cared for the girl babies. This is supported by early observers’ accounts.

“The father performs the duty of a nurse; and any foul action the embryo warrior may be guilty of, causes rather a smile than a tear from the devoted parent.”

Joel Polack

“He generally bore the burden of carrying them continually within his mat, whose rugged texture must be very annoying to the tender infant.”

Joel Polack

“Children were suckled until they had teeth and could walk, and their parents carried them around with them or placed them on mats or dog skins on the floor of their houses. Fathers, like mothers, looked after the physical needs of their children.”

Julien Crozet (1728 –1780) Lieutenant to Du Fresne on the French vessel ‘Le Mascarin’

“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”

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

“In the manner of rearing children, and in the remarkable tenderness and solicitous care bestowed upon them by the parents, no partiality on account of sex was in any instance observed. The infant is no sooner weaned than a considerable part of its care devolves upon the father: it is taught to twine its arms round his neck, and in this posture it remains the whole day, asleep or awake.”

Richard Cruise – military man (from 1824 “Journal of a Ten Months’ Residence in New Zealand”)

“The boys are brought up almost entirely by the men; and it is not uncommon to see young children of tender years sitting next to their parents in the war councils, apparently listening with the great attention...”

Joel Polack

The involvement of tāne (and all whānau members) in the lives of children from the time they were born helped to cement the bonds of whakapapa, and to create confidence in their children who felt safe, loved and a strong sense of belonging.

Our tāne ancestors were gentle, caring fathers...

In early days Māori men had an important role in parenting; European observers noted that:

- Tāne were extremely gentle, loving and good humoured with their children
- Childcare was a natural and important part of a tāne’s role within the wider whānau
- Tāne had a key role in the upbringing of the boys, carrying them around as infants and including them in many community activities from an early age
- This parenting style created happy, confident children who had a clear and respected place in family/iwi life.