Māori and Pasifika cultural perspectives on infant-toddler care

ECE resources

Traditional Māori and Pasifika beliefs and caregiving practices for infants and toddlers offer an alternative to dominant theories and practices in early childhood education. An understanding of Māori and Pasifika caregiving practices can support early childhood teachers to reconsider some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about effective care, and help them to engage in more culturally responsive practices that support infants, toddlers and their families with a strong sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Effective education needs to value, embrace and incorporate children's culture, as having a strong cultural identity is crucial to children's wellbeing as a foundation for academic success and lifelong learning[1]. Children's culture is a heritage but also something that needs to be learned through a process of inculcation, so children need to be immersed in contexts rich in the practice, knowledge and values of the (often two) cultures within which they live. Their experiences need to reinforce who they are and where they are from, what they know and what is valued in their family and community. Language is also an important aspect of children's positive identity development, supporting their sense of belonging and building self-esteem and confidence[2].

Research exploring Māori and Pasifika cultural knowledge, practices and pedagogies for infants and toddlers aims to reclaim this knowledge and reframe it for an early childhood educational context[3]. However, specific practices and principles for infant and toddler care must be locally constructed and responsive to local customs and beliefs, making it essential that teachers seek expertise from their centre community for designing culturally responsive practices.

Developing appropriate pedagogies for Māori and Pasifika infants and toddlers

Early childhood provision for Māori and Pasifika infants and toddlers needs to reflect children's cultural identities and recognise the cultural worldviews, protocols and behaviours that make up their experience as Māori or Pasifika[4].

An important first step in developing more culturally responsive pedagogies is for teachers to **develop awareness of their own cultural lenses and how these affect their practice** with infants and toddlers, as well as their assumptions about the practices of culturally diverse families[5]. This is because without this awareness, teachers might ignore, misunderstand or undervalue other lenses and practices, and view only their own experience as normal and natural.

Next, teachers need to **solicit the contributions of families, whānau and communities** to find out about culturally appropriate practices for their context. Teachers might seek to learn about how the child is valued, or they might inquire into how the child's parents were brought up themselves and the values they were taught. It is important that teachers develop a deep knowledge of community practices, and try to understand the values and beliefs underpinning these, rather than indiscriminately resurrecting historical or generalised practices assumed to be relevant.

As they develop their cultural understanding of children and their families, teachers might be able to **connect some of these values, practices and knowledge with their early childhood context**. Not all practices shared by families will be able to be adopted in the early childhood context, and it might be that

teachers need look deeply at the values that underpin family practices and find ways to ethically engage in and reinterpret them for the early childhood setting. Research shows that teachers who engage families in the sharing of stories around the child-rearing practices that they experienced and that they use with their own children, and then take time reflecting on what these what might mean for their early childhood practices, are able to develop valuable culturally-responsive caregiving practices[6].

It is important that **Māori and Pasifika cultural tools are respectfully and authentically integrated and implemented** across activities and practices, rather than positioned as a superficial gloss to practice. As beliefs and practices are extremely varied across and within Māori and Pasifika cultural groups, it is impossible to generalise a particular set of understandings and approaches as Māori or as Pasifika. However, constructions of infant-toddler care within Māori and Pasifika perspectives may include:

- An image of the infant or toddler as competent regardless of their age
- An emphasis on culture and cultural identity
- A focus on relationships with the whānau/iwi, aiga/village and ancestry
- Communal approaches to caregiving

An image of the infant or toddler as competent regardless of their age

Children are highly valued in Pasifika and Māori culture. They are loved, respected and valued, even before birth[7]. For example, from a Samoan perspective, an infant is seen as a gift, and is treasured for the hope that he or she brings and the way that he or she links families and genealogies together in stronger bonds and connections[8]. Similarly, in traditional Māori culture, children are cherished and provided with plentiful attention, respect and opportunities to learn. Caregiving practices demonstrate ways of showing love, care and respect, including wrapping babies, carrying babies, and massage.

Within Māori and Pasifika worldviews, children are seen as competent regardless of their age, with innate capabilities and mana. As a living embodiment of their ancestors, children are born gifted with specific skills. Samoan families believe that their children have inherited ancestral strengths and abilities and are tied to the collective even before conception[9]. Traditionally, young children were seen as highly competent and trusted with responsibility for tasks, including caring for babies. The very young infant was seen as the rangatira (leader) and allowed to set the pace with regard to such things as sleeping and eating, for example.

Implications for practice

Teachers might find ways to recognise that infants and toddlers come to the centre with their parents, families and ancestors' respect and love. For many Māori and Pasifika children, their ancestral lineage provides a sense of status, pedigree or position, and so teachers might seek ways to honour this - for example, in their portfolios. Teachers might show trust in children's inherent abilities, inherited from their ancestors and learn about and promote culturally valued competencies, behaviours and traits such as alofa, mana, and rangatiratanga. Infants might be empowered to take leadership in choosing their preferred teacher for care moments, or teachers might emulate the practice of holding or rocking the baby to sleep as a way of cherishing and showing love towards infants.

An emphasis on culture and cultural identity

Maintaining national, regional and village or tribal connections, and ensuring that children have a strong cultural identity and gain knowledge of their culture and language through stories, songs and dance are important to Māori and Pasifika families[10]. Knowledge of tribal connections enables infants and toddlers to understand who they are culturally and where and how they belong to a group, while much of

Māori and Pasifika culture is passed on through waiata (song), oriori (lullabies), mōteatea (laments), and karakia (prayer). Children may learn mōteatea, waiata, and pepehā (tribal sayings), and become familiar with pūrākau (stories) and pakiwaitara (legends). Waiata and cultural songs that allude to cultural items and cultural perspectives teach children cultural concepts and values. Many cultural activities also focus on spirituality and religious practices, such as involving children in karakia, talking about spiritual links to land and people, sharing bible readings and attending church.

Implications for practice

Māori and Pasifika cultural views and values can be incorporated across the early childhood setting by supporting Māori and Pasifika infants and toddlers' connections to the physical and spiritual worlds. For example, this could be through developing an affinity with wai or with Papatūānuku. Cultural artefacts might be used in multiple ways across a range of play activities.Teachers might use pareu/lavalava (fabric wraps) to nurture infants and toddlers as well as to support children's sense of identity with their specific Pacific nations. Children might have their own individual pareu/lavalava, or might participate in making them.

Teachers might also develop ways to promote and support children's learning of their first language. They might intentionally seek out and use waiata and cultural songs that support children to develop understanding of cultural concepts and values, working together with the local community to determine appropriate choices. They might use waiata, oriori, mōteatea and karakia, for example, to calm and soothe children. Families may have personal lullabies for children which might be used to soothe them when they are upset or tired, or teachers might carefully select lullabies for children as a way of demonstrating alofa and aroha. The words of mōteatea might be woven into positive behaviour strategies or used as an assessment tool to help realise the aspirations for Māori infants and toddlers.

A focus on relationships with the whānau/iwi, aiga/village and ancestry

Children's positioning within their family and their ancestry are often important to Māori and Pasifika families. Whakapapa, and in particular the continuation of genealogical descent lines, make Māori children important within their whānau, tribal group or village. Children's whakapapa relationships with other people in the group influence the way they are treated and how others interact with them. Traditionally whakapapa not only established the child's place within the group, but also helped to form their worldview[11]. Likewise, Samoan children have ancestral rights to titles, name, and genealogy which demarcates their place and role in the family and in the Samoan culture as a whole, its systems of relationships, codes of behaviour and use of language[12].

Tuākana-tēina relationships were an important part of the traditional kinship model in many Polynesian cultures, referring to the pairing of older and younger siblings and cousins of the same gender[13]. This partnership between older and younger children provided an important means of socialisation in which cultural learning, understandings and practices were transmitted. Māori adults shared responsibilities for caring for, nurturing, protecting, and even chastising children with tuākana, demonstrating their confidence in the tuākana's competencies to care for their tēina. In Samoan culture, the relationship between a sister and brother, feagaiga, in which each has their own sense of power and authority, is important.

In contemporary contexts, tuākana-tēina relationships involve older, more capable children taking care of, teaching and being responsible for younger or less capable children. Recent research in New Zealand shows that when tuākana-tēina relationships are fostered in early childhood settings, tuākana can play a signifcant role in infants' and toddlers' learning, initiating activities and providing support and guidance,

scaffolding, modelling, consoling and even reprimanding[14]. Tuākana also benefit from the relationship, learning to care, share, support others, and take leadership and responsibility.

Implications for practice

Teachers might think about the ways in which they can embed children's connections and relationships with their families and communities into their programmes. They might encourage tuākana-tēina interactions, foregrounding learning through relationships with older children, and backgrounding themselves to allow the relationship to develop. Tuākana can be offered opportunities to take responsibility for helping others, or can be encouraged to show manaakitanga (hospitality), and tiaki (guardianship/stewardship). Older toddlers might take the lead as tuākana in tikanga Māori, routines and rituals, including pepeha, karakia and waiata. Teachers might see what flexibility can be provided for enabling children to have sustained contact with older children across a day, or develop strategies for mixed-age provision. They might try to honour and support sibling relationships, which might be particularly strong in the context of family tuākana-tēina practices.

Communal approaches to caregiving

Traditional caregiving practices for Māori and Pasifika groups tended to encompass ideas of intergenerational and communal caregiving, with all the whānau/aiga/extended family involved in children's upbringing, and a particularly strong role for grandparents but also other elders, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins. Because of the importance placed on whakapapa, many different individuals had familial connections to a child and shared a collective interest in raising them. Intergenerational caregiving and learning involving grandparents and other elders were considered important for cultural knowledge and traditions to be passed on to future generations.

The Māori concept ūkaipō refers to the traditional practice of the infant being returned to the maternal breast at night, whilst during the day being cared for by multiple others. Ūkaipo enabled a practice of communal caregiving that was seen as supportive of the mother and child – the child has a safe place of connection, initially focused on the breast, that was then extended to rich relationships within the wider group[15]. The word for mother, whaea, was used by children for any woman of their mother's generation, and children might even have been breastfed by another woman in the whānau, a practice that some Māori continue today[16].

Implications for practice

While there is much literature emphasising the importance of infants being cared for by one familiar adult, the concept of primary caregiving or key teaching as an exclusive relationship between one teacher and an infant can be seen as culturally inappropriate for bicultural New Zealand. Teachers might review and perhaps consider ways to de-centre the role of the teacher to permit a more collective approach to caregiving. This might include devolving some responsibility to children as part of a more collaborative tuākana-tēina approach, or adapting and being flexible in order to accept the infant or toddler's preferences for caregiver choice.

Early childhood settings may choose to align their caregiving practices with a whānau philosophy and encourage collective caregiving roles. If a key teacher is identified for a child, this relationship might only be important for settling the child and whānau as they transition into the centre, maintaining communication with whānau and updating the child's portfolio, rather than being seen as exclusive. In other words, the relationship with a key teacher might be intense during transition, but would quickly make way for relationships with other adults and peers over time.

The Education Hub would like to thank Dr Lesley Rameka and Dr Jacoba Matapo for reviewing this guide.

References & further reading

Amituanai-Toloa, M. (2015). Do you hear what these children are saying? From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise. Paper presented at the SAASIA annual conference 2015, 'O Leo o Fanau – Children's voices', Apia and Salelologa, Savai'i, Samoa, 28 September – 2 October.

Gabel, K. (2013). Poipoia te tamaiti ki te ūkaipō (Thesis, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)). University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10289/7986.

Glover, M., & Cunningham, C. (2011). Hoki Ki Te Ukaipo: Reinstating Māori infant care practices to increase breastfeeding rates. In. P. Liamputtong (Ed.), Infant Feeding Practices. Springer, New York, NY.

Rameka, L., Puru, T., & Rikihana, T. A. (2021). Wai Koiora: Reclaiming, reframing and realising Māori knowings in Early Childhood Education. The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, Ngā Tau Tuatahi, 23(1).

Rameka, L., & Glasgow, A. (2017). Tuakana/teina agency in early childhood education. Early Childhood Folio, 21 (1), 27-32.

Rameka, L., Glasgow, A., Howarth, P., Rikihana, T., Wills, C., Mansell, T., Burgess, F., Fiti, S., Kauraka, B., & Iosefo, R. (2017). Te whātu kete mātauranga: Weaving Māori and Pasifika infant and toddler theory and practice in early childhood education. Summary Report. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative. TLRI Summary_Rameka.pdf

Tagoilelagi-Leota, F. (2018). Suli, Tofi, Feagaiga, Gafa, and Faalupega: Nurturing and protectorate role of faasamoa for Samoan children The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, Ngā Tau Tuatahi, 20(1).

Toso, V. M., & Matapo, J. (2018). O le tātou itulagi i totonu o Aotearoa: Our lifeworlds within New Zealand. The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, Ngā Tau Tuatahi, 20(1), 3-5.

White, J., Hansen, K., Hawkes, K., Redder, B., Lord, W., & Perks, N. (2018). Key teaching (primary caregiving?) practices during infant transitions to ECEC in Aotearoa New Zealand. The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, Ngā Tau Tuatahi, 20 (2), 5-14.

Endnotes

1 Rameka et al., 2017; Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2018.

2 Amituanai-Toloa, 2015.

3 Rameka & Glasgow, 2017.

4 Rameka & Glasgow, 2017.

5 Rameka & Glasgow, 2017.

6 Rameka et al., 2021.

7 Amituanai-Toloa, 2015; Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2018.

8 Amituanai-Toloa, 2015.

9 Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2018.

10 Rameka et al., 2021.

11 Gabel, 2013.

12 Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2018.

13 Rameka & Glasgow, 2017.

14 Rameka & Galsgow, 2017.

15 White et al., 2018.

16 Glover & Cunningham, 2011.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.