

WHĀNAU THEMES

Mums and whānau told us things need to change

The mums and whānau of pēpi who spoke with us were courageous in sharing their stories. Their experiences were consistent and heart breaking. Mums and whānau shared what happened during and after their involvement with Oranga Tamariki and in some cases Child, Youth and Family, once a Report of Concern had been made regarding their pēpi. They talked about what worked for their whānau during this time and about what got in the way. They also talked about what they would like to see change so that whānau had better support.

The commonalities of the whānau experiences raise concerns about systemic issues facing the statutory care and protection system and current impacts on pēpi, their mums and whānau.

Some of the key themes from our conversations with whānau are summarised below. An overall insight identified was that the experiences of all mums and whānau were similar, whether the threat of removal occurred prior to April 2017 under Child, Youth and Family, or under Oranga Tamariki.

Five key themes from our conversations with whānau are summarised below.

I am a mum first



We heard mostly from mums who said they felt as though they were not seen by their Oranga Tamariki social workers for who they are and for the changes they have made. They didn't feel respected and recognised as the mum of their pēpi. This feeling also existed for those mums who had prior experiences with Child, Youth and Family, and continued to have involvement with Oranga Tamariki.

Often, those who had their pēpi removed had received no follow up care. They were then excluded from the lives of their pēpi and offered no support to both deal with the harm of a removal, but also to make change in order to have their pēpi returned to their care. Despite the lack of support from Child Youth and Family and Oranga Tamariki to make changes and get help, the mums we spoke to had taken action to make changes for their pēpi and tamariki, to get well, and to prove that their child should return to their care. We heard about mums acting despite the hard stuff in their life too. Many of the mums we heard from have experienced violence; they, or people around them, have struggled with drug and alcohol addictions, have mental health challenges and have lost important people in their lives.

*"My whole pregnancy was pretty good, like no issues. Everything was up to date, never missed, did everything possible like parenting courses, the whole shebang. I did everything possible to make sure that I was proving to [CYF] that I'm doing right for my unborn...it wasn't till I was halfway through labour I found out there was already an automatic uplift and then it went to sh** straight up"*

"Cos I just know that if any other mums are treated like that then there's no hope of any reconnection or no hope of I think, they would lose hope and lose who they are as a person and as a mother."

Many of the mums and whānau interviewed told us about the harm they had experienced through their involvement with the statutory care and protection system, and the ongoing impact it is having on them, their whānau and their tamariki. For most whānau, harm was caused during their involvement with Child, Youth and Family, and then continued on under Oranga Tamariki. They talked about the brutality of the removals of their pēpi, and how Child, Youth and Family and Oranga Tamariki have used other agencies, including Police and health professionals, to act under their instruction and carry out removals. Whānau continue to feel as though they are living under constant threat of Oranga Tamariki, even when it has been deemed either by Child, Youth and Family or Oranga Tamariki that no further involvement is necessary.

"When people lose their kids, Oranga Tamariki just goes and takes their new kids straight from the hospital. It's so sad. Like, you go through all that pain in pushing the baby out just to get it taken out of your hands. It's so sad – and the fact, that they take it and they don't even care ay the people and some of them are even Māori and doing that to the people."

"I felt completely helpless. Helpless... We're just dealing with years of trauma that's just grown on top of trauma and you give up, you start to get weak and around that – the whole thing is trauma."

The system is harmful



Statutory social workers have all the power and control



Many of the mums and whānau shared stories of poor treatment and unprofessional practice by Child, Youth and Family and Oranga Tamariki social workers working with them. They said they were not told what was happening, experienced threats and coercion and were lied to. Mums talked about how their statutory social workers did not have any regard for their whānau dynamics and the impact that decisions might have on their relationships. Many of the mums we heard from have experienced violence; they or people around them have struggled with drug and alcohol addictions; have mental health challenges; and, have lost important people in their lives. They talked about their efforts to make positive change for their tamariki, and how those changes have not been recognised, by Oranga Tamariki or their previous Child, Youth and Family social workers, and decisions were not revisited.

They felt watched by their statutory social workers and could not trust them. They talked about how much power their Oranga Tamariki social worker has, about how they make all decisions, often without knowing them, and without finding out about the actual situation. They felt judged by their current Oranga Tamariki social worker and previous Child, Youth and Family social workers, and talked about how the social workers would find out their last name and make their minds up about the outcome. We heard about Oranga Tamariki social workers and previous Child, Youth and Family social workers not respecting tikanga Māori and not getting it because they're not Māori.

"I was like last time I see my kids go with the Oranga Tamariki person they never came back you know and she was, she knew that she had that over me. That she couldn't get me down any other way apart from doing stuff like that to me."

"Once you're involved, you're powerless. This is a department that's got too many powers, and even if they don't have the power, they use the threatening tactics that if you don't do what I say, you'll lose the lot."

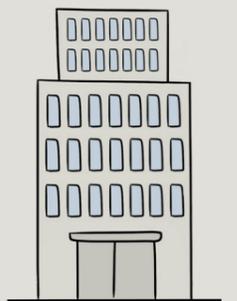
Mums and whānau talked about the immense harm caused by the practice of removal of their pēpi or the risk of removal of their pēpi, to all involved. The impacts on whānau and pēpi described are long-lasting and include feelings of fear and anger. Mums and whānau talked about how Police and the Family Court were involved, but their reflections focused on Oranga Tamariki and its predecessor Child, Youth and Family.

Many whānau members, especially mums and grandmothers talked about the impact on the bond they had with pēpi. As well as the damaging impact on their relationship with the pēpi, they also spoke about the rupturing of whānau relationships because of state processes and practice.

"One, she was an abused wāhine, two, her mana kind of had been taken away from her, I think at this point she stood there with no mana, no confidence in herself. She didn't want to speak to anybody, she didn't trust anybody, everything that she had kind of known with her Mum and her Dad and everything had kind of all pretty much dissipated."

"The Ministry are supporting her to live there for life. I don't think that's fair that I don't get a say. I mean, I've got a little flat and I'm ready to take on my mokopuna, I'm ready to look after them, I'm so ready."

The statutory care and protection system and other agencies have hurt my whānau



We need good support



Mums and whānau said that good support made all the difference and helped them through what is often an unpredictable and profoundly challenging process. Good support to them meant people getting stuff done, being honest, advocating for them, getting to know them, including them in decision-making, and sometimes working around the system to find the right solutions. For most people we spoke to, the right support came from whānau, iwi services, Māori organisations, midwives and community social workers. When asked to provide examples of good statutory social work practice, few whānau were able to do so.

The whānau we spoke with told us about times when Oranga Tamariki and previous Child, Youth and Family services had not helped and had sometimes got in the way of them receiving appropriate support. They spoke about how Oranga Tamariki services and other services didn't get it or understand them, and about how no one was seeing their whole story, which meant services or supports offered were not effective. The whānau we heard from spoke about how hard it was to find or access the right support, and about how sometimes any support was completely lacking. This was especially common for those who had their pēpi removed at birth. They often felt ignored by the system and excluded from the life of their pēpi.

"... that's always been a thing for me if I'm going through this or if this social worker from OT is doing this to me, how many other mum and dads are out there going through the same thing? And only in the last month or so has OT finally kind of stepped up and that's because of the push from all my support and all my lawyers. If I didn't have the support or didn't reach out like I did I wouldn't have [name of pēpi]."