Caring for children and families in indigenous communities
By Māori for Māori: The Pā Harakeke (Flax Bush) Model
Te Whānau o Waipareira, Aotearoa New Zealand

MODEL

Te Whānau o Waipareira is an organisation that provides a range of services for Māori of all ages, from babies to older people, in West Auckland in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Its services are rooted in the Te Ao Māori view of whānau (family) care and wellbeing. This is the belief that children, families, ancestors and the wider community are all interconnected, just like the layers of the harakeke or flax bush. Tamariki (children) sit at the centre of the harakeke, surrounded by their wider whānau and wrapped around by their whakapapa (genealogy). The model emphasises the importance of tamariki being connected to their whānau, whakapapa and whenua (land). The wellbeing of each aspect of the Pā Harakeke ecosystem, relies on the wellness of the others. Working in this way means the entire Pā Harakeke ecosystem is considered, resulting in a holistic, sustainable and community-led approach to wellbeing.

One of the key aspects of the model is addressing the intergenerational trauma that many Māori whānau experience as a result of the history and impacts of colonialism and marginalisation in New Zealand society. Waipareira supports whānau to visit their ancestral lands, accompanied by clinicians and social workers, to reconnect with the history and culture of their ancestors.

This helps whānau to regain a sense of pride in their heritage and acts as a counterpoint to the negative narratives about Māori that they have absorbed from mainstream media and society. Waipareira believes that people who have a strong sense of their identity and feel part of a community, have better outcomes in terms of health, employment and relationships.

IMPLEMENTATION

With its goal of seeing Māori thrive and flourish, Waipareira is an agile organisation that is led by the needs of the community it serves. Recognising that mental health issues, addiction and domestic violence are often exacerbated by poverty, Waipareira offers whānau food and basic material resources. It also runs positive parenting programmes, counselling services for addictions, as well as peer support groups and mentoring for children and young people at risk of truancy.

When whānau first come to Waipareira, they are assigned a Kaiārahi or Navigator who walks alongside them, sometimes in front and sometimes behind, depending on what is right for that whānau. Navigators work across the mainstream and Māori contexts and with different government agencies to help whānau access the support they need, whether that relates to health, education, employment, housing, managing debt or legal advice. Navigators advocate on whānau’s behalf and with their support, whānau are encouraged to become independent and self-managing.

IMPACT

During 2021/22, Waipareira supported 39,959 whānau through its services.

1. Waipareira sees parents who had previously lost their agency now have the confidence to stand up and speak their truth, making sure their voices are heard by Children’s Services.

2. Waipareira is part of a national network of approximately 90 Māori providers who work collaboratively and learn from each other. Together they have a collective strength, which enables them to influence government policy and practice and ensure the needs of Māori communities are catered for.

CHALLENGES FACED

1. Sometimes whānau need time to process their feelings and emotions before they are ready to re-engage with their culture and traditions through Waipareira’s support.

2. There remains a lack of awareness of Māori culture and traditions in wider New Zealand society. As such, the Māori approach to caring for children and families is undervalued and underfunded.

3. Institutional racism is ever-present; in general, Māori providers have higher accountabilities and increased reporting requirements compared to mainstream organisations and access to funding is inequitable as a result of decades of underfunding.

As an organisation that is ‘By Māori, For Māori’, relationship building through trust and respect is the key to Waipareira’s successful model.”

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Māori were the first inhabitants of Aotearoa, New Zealand, over 1,000 years ago. Since the arrival of Europeans in the 1800s, Māori have experienced significant levels of marginalisation and oppression. When work became available in cities in the 1960s, huge numbers of Māori migrated from rural to urban areas. Over time, these Māori stopped going home and lost connections to their ancestral lands. A lot of the social ills that came from living in cities, including poverty, alcohol and drugs impacted Māori and caused many negative health and social issues.

After decades of Māori culture being systematically targeted in government legislation, including the suppression of the Māori language and traditional practices, in the past 30 years there has been a big push to revitalise the Māori language with several Māori-medium schools now in existence. Today Māori make up 16.5% of Aotearoa, New Zealand’s population of 5 million people.

ABOUT TE WHĀNAU O WAIPAREIRA

For over 30 years, Waipareira has provided free services and support for urban Māori of all ages living in West Auckland in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Through a range of health, legal, housing and education services, Waipareira helps Māori to lead happy, healthy lives and stay connected to their whānau, community and culture.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Family for Every Child is a diverse membership network of civil society organisations based around the world.

How We Care is an initiative for those working with children and families, across the globe, to share their practice. Our vision is that through the exchange and learning facilitated by How We Care, organisations’ family care practice and programming will be strengthened, with improved outcomes for the children they support.

www.howwecare.community