



the wonders of nature

Written by Keryn O'Neill MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager



Well-being of tamariki is important to us all. One of the things that supports this is time in nature. Māori have always recognised the importance of hononga ki te taiao (connection to the environment). It is vital to health and well-being.¹ A growing body of research also shows the benefits to tamariki of time spent in nature; benefits for many areas of their lives.²

Nature is full of rich sensory experiences that are so vital for healthy brain development.³ The feel of the wind, the texture of grass, the sounds of a stream or the scent of fresh manure, provide rich stimulation of the senses that can only be found out of doors.

The mental health of tamariki and rangatahi benefits from spending time in nature.

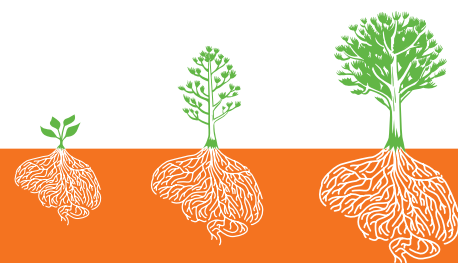
We are fortunate in Aotearoa to have beautiful beaches, maunga, bush and other natural areas to enjoy. Nature experiences will differ for different tamariki. They might include helping grow veges at home or in a community garden, exploring rock pools at the beach, caring for animals, family bush walks, and more. What these all share is a lot of "natural features such as water, grass or trees".⁴

Hauora tinana/ Physical health

When tamariki are climbing trees, jumping in the waves, or rolling down a grassy hill, not only are they having fun (important in itself!), they are also looking after their physical health.

When outside, tamariki tend to move more and play for longer than when they are inside. Researchers have also seen that children move more in green spaces than in paved areas.⁵ This helps in many ways such as improving cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and fitness.⁶ More time outside protects against vision problems too.⁷ Other benefits include increased physical activity and better sleep.⁸

1. McLachlan et al., 2021
2. Chawla, 2020
3. Kuo et al., 2019
4. Weeland et al., 2019, p. 1
5. Raney et al., 2019
6. Tremblay et al., 2015
7. Lingham et al., 2020
8. Moore et al., 2020



Hauora hinengaro/ Mental health

The mental health of tamariki and rangatahi benefits from spending time in nature. Examples include fewer symptoms of ADHD, lower rates of depression, less anger and fewer difficulties with behaviour.¹⁰ Simply put, enjoying nature makes tamariki feel happier.

Time spent with trees and grass and water supports children's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour.¹¹ The more frequently tamariki experience nature, the better.¹²

The past two years have been particularly challenging as we deal with the Covid pandemic. Tamariki lost their planned activities and their routines, and spent far less time socializing. Many wonder about the impact of this on the mental health of our tamariki.

Tamariki who had an increased connection with nature during lockdown were less likely to have emotional or behavioural difficulties.¹³ Of course, tamariki enjoy it too: for example, hearing and seeing more birds during their time in lockdown.¹⁴



Learning

Tamariki show greater curiosity in natural areas than they do in manufactured play structures, such as playgrounds.¹⁵ Nature is constantly changing, providing ongoing discoveries for tamariki.¹⁶ The open-endedness of the natural world is part of its magic. This requires tamariki to use their creativity, imagination, and problem solving. Tamariki with lots of these experiences tend to do better at school.¹⁷

Natural settings provide a wide variety of objects, encouraging tamariki to use their imagination in choosing how they will use them.¹⁸ Sticks, rocks, pinecones and shells provide endless possibilities.

Time to play in nature as tamariki is an important way to grow the kaitiaki of the future.

The whole whānau benefits

It isn't only tamariki who gain from spending time outside and in nature. There are advantages for people of all ages. Being in the natural environment can lower stress levels and improve well-being.¹⁹ It is also linked to lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system and recovery from stress, as well as less anxiety and depression.²⁰

When we join tamariki in their nature play and exploration, everyone gains.



Growing future kaitiaki

As awareness of the need to care for te taiao (the environment) becomes more widespread, raising tamariki with an appreciation of the earth increases the chance they will look after it, now and in the future. When tamariki have had plenty of opportunities to enjoy time in nature and form an emotional connection to nature, they are more likely to take care of the environment.²¹ Time to play in nature as tamariki is an important way to grow the kaitiaki of the future.

Conclusions

The early years of a child's life lay the foundation for their later development. Supporting their well-being through lots of time with nature when they are young helps set them up well for their future.

Just know that the time you spend encouraging (or patiently waiting) while your tamariki are climbing rocks, collecting shells, or making a tree hut, is providing them with priceless opportunities that support their development. The extra washing afterwards, is well worth it!

*Mā te huruhuru, ka rere te manu.
Feathers enable the bird to take flight.*

9. Tillmann et al., 2018
10. Chawla et al., 2014
11. Chawla, 2020; Weeland et al., 2019
12. Razani et al., 2019
13. Friedman et al., 2022
14. Smith et al., 2022
15. Tremblay et al., 2015
16. Dowdell et al., 2011
17. Weeland et al., 2019
18. Chawla et al., 2014
19. Razani et al., 2018
20. Chawla et al., 2014; O'Malley, 2020
21. Chawla, 2020; Friedman et al., 2022; Kuo et al., 2019

Glossary of te reo Māori words

Kaitiaki	guardian, caregiver, steward
Maunga	mountain
Rangatahi	youth, younger generation
Tamariki	children
Tamaiti	child
Te taiao	the environment
Whānau	extended family

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