

# Adolescents Need Adults



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*Adolescence is a time of growth and change. There is a lot to learn in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Parents, whānau and other adults play a vital role in the lives of tamariki, influencing their development. Research shows us that adults continue to be just as important throughout adolescence, and that their support can make a huge difference to the lives of taiohi/adolescents.*



*Many studies show the importance of young people being connected to competent and caring adults in their whānau and community.*

The relationships with the adults in their lives provide the foundations for young people's health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> Despite spending more time with their peers in adolescence, the idea that taiohi do not need adults has been described as "one of the greatest misconceptions of this period."<sup>2</sup>

Many studies show the importance of young people being connected to competent and caring adults in their whānau and community.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, taiohi have parents who are unable to provide the type of support they need. For these young people it's particularly important that they have other adults in their lives who provide this support.<sup>4</sup>

Taiohi need the adults in their lives to encourage their learning of life-skills and to welcome the changes this

time of development brings.<sup>5</sup> Grandparents can be an important positive support.<sup>6</sup>

Some have used the analogy of a spider's web to describe these relationships:

"[Just as] a spider depends on its web for sustenance, a young person depends on a web of relationships to shape and guide virtually every aspect of life. A web of relationships does not have to be perfect to be life sustaining. But it does need to be strong and flexible, adapting to the world around it, and to the needs and strengths of the people in those relationships."<sup>7</sup>

This article explores what we've learned from research about the role that adults play, and the many areas of taiohi health and development that their support affects.

## Changing relationships

Adolescence is a time of many changes.<sup>8</sup> These changes begin from early in adolescence, leading to renegotiation of relationships between taiohi and their parents or whānau.<sup>9</sup>

A young person's sense of autonomy (control or governance over their own selves) and their connectedness to their parents are both important.<sup>10</sup> Taiohi often want greater autonomy before their ability to self-regulate has developed.<sup>11</sup>

There are wide-ranging differences in the relationships between taiohi and their parents. Some experience more conflict and less closeness, but many do not.<sup>12</sup> Parents and taiohi who have "a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and with high-quality relationships in childhood tend to experience temporary and minor relationship difficulties, whereas those in relationships of lower quality tend to experience more severe relationship difficulties."<sup>13</sup> Those who've developed trust in their parents as tamariki are likely to be more open to their parent's influence during adolescence.<sup>14</sup>

How conflicts are handled makes a difference. Being able to express a range of emotions is helpful as taiohi and parents renegotiate their relationship. Both getting stuck in expressing anger, for example, or conversely being afraid to express anger and only sharing positive emotions can make renegotiating their growing relationship more difficult.<sup>15</sup>

During adolescence the relationships between taiohi and their parents tend to become more "equal, interdependent, and reciprocal."<sup>16</sup>



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## What taiohi need from adults

Adults in the lives of taiohi have different strengths, and there's no one 'right way' to support taiohi through this stage of development. However, research sheds some light on elements of adult support that have been found to support taiohi well.

(1) **Authoritative parenting** has been associated with a number of positive outcomes for taiohi. This style of parenting balances warmth with clear, firm boundaries. Such parents are accepting of their taiohi, supportive and involved in their life. But they also encourage autonomy suited to their age and maturity, and have clear, consistent boundaries.<sup>17</sup> This approach applies to other adults in the lives of taiohi too – teachers, coaches, etc.<sup>18</sup>

Having a balance is crucial. It looks like this:

- Being accepting of taiohi, while also having clear boundaries<sup>19</sup>
- Encouraging autonomy but within limits, and suited to the individual taiohi<sup>20</sup>
- Being connected, emotionally available and responsive to taiohi, while holding high expectations of their behaviour<sup>21</sup>
- Enough control through limit-setting and monitoring; both too little and too much are linked to poorer outcomes.<sup>22</sup>


A key ingredient is the sense taiohi have of being connected to their parents, whānau and other adults, including “feeling loved, cared for, valued and respected.”<sup>23</sup> Other things that affect how taiohi perceive the quality of their relationships with their parents include spending time together, the sense that parents are interested in their views and “feeling close to their parents.”<sup>24</sup>

(2) Another way of understanding what taiohi need from adults was developed by The Search Institute. Their framework has five key elements that support taiohi development, these are:

- to express care
- challenge growth
- provide support
- share power
- expand possibilities.<sup>25</sup>

A positive whānau environment provides somewhere taiohi can feel supported, develop their social skills, and increase their ability to manage their emotions and behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Taiohi need adult guidance and support as they learn to regulate their emotions, which supports their wellbeing.<sup>27</sup>

The Growing Up in New Zealand study recently explored a number of factors influencing school engagement when the cohort were twelve years of age.



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They found the factor most strongly associated with school engagement was how the young person felt about their relationship with their teacher. “The student teacher relationship included whether the student feels their teacher listens to them, helps them, respects them and is fair to them.”<sup>28</sup>

### *The impacts of supportive adults*

Strong and positive relationships with parents and other adults support taiohi and protect them from a range of poor outcomes.<sup>29</sup> The more connected taiohi are to individual adults or social institutions such as schools the better adjusted they are.<sup>30</sup> Taiohi may

spend less time with their family as they get older nevertheless their family relationships continue to have a strong influence on their development.<sup>31</sup>

Healthy connections with their parents support positive taiohi development, enhancing their health and wellbeing and promoting better outcomes as adults.<sup>32</sup> The impacts can be seen in many areas, some of these are listed below:

- Better mental health, including fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and less emotional problems<sup>33</sup>
- Less self-harm, less suicidal thinking, and fewer suicide attempts<sup>34</sup>
- Improved overall general health, including better sexual health and lower cardiovascular risk<sup>35</sup>
- Improved school performance and greater academic success<sup>36</sup>
- Fewer conduct problems and less involvement in violence<sup>37</sup>
- Higher quality romantic relationships as young adults (including effective problem-solving skills, and less violence), and stronger bonds between parents and young person<sup>38</sup>
- Higher self-esteem, better emotion regulation and more pro-social behaviour<sup>39</sup>
- Lower rates of nicotine dependence, and substance abuse, including high-risk drinking.<sup>40</sup>

*Despite strong, supportive relationships with adults, some taiohi will still experience major challenges.*

*Positive relationships lessen the likelihood of that, and, importantly, provide much-needed support for taiohi as they navigate any challenges.*



*Parental love and support is vital to rainbow youth.*

## Rainbow youth

“Caring and loving family relationships are central to young people’s wellbeing.”<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, some taiohi are less likely to have this support, in particular, those who identify as LGBTQIA+.

One study reports that rainbow youth experience much higher rates of family conflict, and almost half the levels of parental acceptance of their non-rainbow peers. These family-related issues contribute to the increased suicide risk for rainbow youth.<sup>42</sup> Aotearoa research found a lower proportion of rainbow youth felt “that their families care about them a lot” compared with their non-rainbow peers.<sup>43</sup>

Parental love and support is vital to rainbow youth. In the words of the Youth19 study “Even if there are, or have been challenges, maintaining or re-establishing relationships is one of the most

important things for your young person’s wellbeing, now and in the future.”<sup>44</sup>

Rainbow youth are at increased risk of depression during adolescence “due to a combination of universal risk factors as well as stigma and discrimination specific to being LGBTQ.”<sup>45</sup> However, positive relationships with their parents, including “acceptance and support of an adolescent’s sexual and gender identity are associated with better social and emotional outcomes.”<sup>46</sup>

Positive parenting practices mentioned earlier, such as the quality of the parent-child relationship, parental warmth and support, and parental monitoring are associated with improved mental health for rainbow taiohi.<sup>47</sup> For rainbow youth having their parents accept their sexual and gender identity has a profound effect on their health and well-being.<sup>48</sup> Acceptance is linked to improved outcomes in a number of areas, including

general health, sexual risk behaviour, self-esteem, substance use and mental health.<sup>49</sup>

## *Taiohi facing adversity*

The role of adults in the lives of taiohi is particularly important for those facing adversity. The more taiohi have been exposed to adversity, the greater their need for adult support to foster their resilience and wellbeing.<sup>50</sup>

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) have a dose-response relationship to adult mental health. In other words, those with more of the positive experiences studied were more likely to enjoy good mental health in adulthood, despite also experiencing adversity.<sup>51</sup> The positive childhood experiences studied were:

- being able to talk to family about their feelings
- feeling that family stood by them in difficult times
- feeling safe and protected by an adult in their home
- having had at least two non-parent adults who took a genuine interest in them
- feeling supported by friends
- a sense of belonging at high school
- enjoyed participating in community traditions.<sup>52</sup>

The aspects of adult support mentioned earlier are also important for those facing additional challenges. Furthermore, research has found that for taiohi growing up in higher risk environments, additional protective factors are associated with improved mental health and fewer health risk behaviours (e.g. smoking and drinking to excess).

These protective factors included more vigilant parenting, including having parents:

- who knew who their friends were
- who set limits around how late they stayed out at night
- who knew what was going on in their lives.<sup>53</sup>

Among adolescents “who grew up in a higher risk environment, those who also reported greater parental limit-setting throughout adolescence had fewer health limitations relative to those who reported lower levels of parental limit-setting.”<sup>54</sup>

Recent research indicates that positive parenting can buffer the effects of stressful experiences on adolescents’ neurobiology and behaviour, for example, worrying less about the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>55</sup>



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## *Impact on brain*

A growing body of research has linked parental behaviour with both the developing structure and function of the adolescent brain, particularly in brain regions that process social and emotional information, including the ability to regulate emotions.<sup>56</sup> While earlier research tended to focus on the effects of extreme environments (such as institutionalisation) and their impacts on tamariki brain development, more recent research suggests that more normative variations in parenting style are also linked to differences in the emotional regulation of tamariki and taiohi.<sup>57</sup> Adolescence is a time of greater neural plasticity and heightened sensitivity to social relationships.<sup>58</sup>

The brain circuits that process emotions undergo a lot of development during adolescence, making them sensitive to their experiences during this time.<sup>59</sup> Behavioural research has found parenting impacts emotional regulation, and one of the ways this happens is through parents’ influence on taiohi brain function.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusions

Adolescent development is influenced by many factors, including an individual's genes and wider societal influences beyond the whānau. Strong relationships with adults do not guarantee a smooth ride for taiohi, but they do make it more likely. Importantly, when taiohi do face challenges, having committed adults supporting them increases their chance of coming through that challenge well.



## Endnotes

- 1 Sieving et al., 2017
- 2 Osher et al., 2020, p. 19
- 3 Masten, 2001
- 4 Bowers et al., 2014
- 5 Osher et al., 2020
- 6 Osher et al., 2020
- 7 Roehlkepartain et al., 2017, p. 16
- 8 Branje, 2018
- 9 Morris et al., 2021; Salgado et al., 2021
- 10 Morris et al., 2021
- 11 Branje, 2018
- 12 Branje, 2018
- 13 Laursen et al., 2010, and, Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2010, cited by Branje, 2018, p. 172
- 14 Morris et al., 2021
- 15 Branje, 2018
- 16 Branje, 2018, p. 171
- 17 Morris et al., 2021; Steinberg, 2014
- 18 Steinberg, 2014
- 19 Morris et al., 2021
- 20 Morris et al., 2021
- 21 Blum et al., 2022
- 22 Morris et al., 2021
- 23 Foster et al., 2017, p. 322
- 24 Salgado et al., 2021, p. 2
- 25 Roehlkepartain et al., 2017
- 26 Kahhalé et al., 2023
- 27 Morris et al., 2017; Ratliff et al., 2021
- 28 Tait et al., 2023, p. 10
- 29 Sieving et al., 2017
- 30 Ford et al., 2023; Foster et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2021
- 31 Dahl et al., 2018; Jose & Pryor, 2010
- 32 Blum et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021
- 33 Blum et al., 2022; Fletcher et al., 2023; Ford et al., 2023; Foster et al., 2017; Jose & Pryor, 2010; Morris et al., 2021
- 34 Blum et al., 2022; Foster et al., 2017
- 35 Ford et al., 2023
- 36 Blum et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021
- 37 Blum et al., 2022; Foster et al., 2017
- 38 Ford et al., 2023; Koepke & Denissen, 2012, cited by Fang et al., 2022
- 39 Blum et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021
- 40 Ball et al., 2022; Blum et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2023
- 41 Fenaughty, Sutcliffe, Fleming, et al., 2021, p. 4
- 42 Klein et al., 2022
- 43 Fenaughty, Sutcliffe, Clark, et al., 2021, p. 4
- 44 Fenaughty, Sutcliffe, Clark, et al., 2021, p. 6
- 45 Russell & Fish, 2016, cited by McCurdy & Russell, 2023, p. 1
- 46 Morris et al., 2021, p. 875
- 47 McCurdy & Russell, 2023
- 48 Katz-Wise et al., 2016, and, Mills-Koonce et al., 2018, cited by Klein et al., 2022
- 49 McCurdy & Russell, 2023
- 50 Ungar et al., 2013
- 51 Bethell et al., 2019
- 52 Bethell et al., 2019
- 53 Corallo et al., 2023
- 54 Corallo et al., 2023, p. 8
- 55 Kahhalé et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023
- 56 Butterfield et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2021; Ratliff et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2020
- 57 Tan et al., 2020
- 58 Brody et al., 2019
- 59 Morris et al., 2007, cited by Butterfield et al., 2021
- 60 Butterfield et al., 2021

### If you enjoyed this article, these may also be of interest:

Understanding Adolescent Risk-taking

Supporting the Well-being of our Rangatahi

Why Sleep Matters for Rangatahi

### Glossary of Māori terms:

Taiohi

*young person, adolescent*

Tamariki

*children*

Whānau

*extended family*



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