



# Tamariki Need Loving Limits

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*Many factors influence tamariki development, one of these is the parenting tamariki receive. There is no one 'right' way to parent, however research has repeatedly found some aspects of parenting that increase the chance of tamariki developing well. This article explores the importance of love and warmth alongside limits and boundaries.*



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Parents have many hopes and dreams for their children's future. These might include - getting on well with others; doing well at school; being able to cope with life's challenges; contributing to the community; being a good parent; and being mentally and physically healthy.

How can we nurture our tamariki to increase the chance of them realising their potential? Many factors influence tamariki development, one of these is the parenting tamariki receive. There is no one 'right' way to parent, however research has repeatedly found some aspects of parenting that increase the chance of tamariki developing well. This article explores the importance of love and warmth alongside limits and boundaries.

### ***What's love got to do with it?***

Pēpi need adults to meet their physical needs, such as being fed, and kept warm and clean. Importantly, pēpi also depend on adults to meet their emotional needs, such as feeling secure, comforted, and safe.<sup>1</sup>

While almost all parents have loving feelings towards their pēpi, it is the baby's sense of feeling loved that's important for their development. This 'feeling loved' comes about through the many interactions parent and pēpi have over time and is helped when adults can see the world from their baby's point of view.<sup>2</sup> Every bath, every nappy change, and every cuddle are opportunities to help a tamaiti feel loved.

A parent's love needs to be unconditional: in other words, it doesn't depend upon the tamaiti behaving in certain ways. It's about the child's needs, not the parent's.<sup>3</sup> (Parent's needs are very important too, but our tamariki are not responsible for meeting them).

Gentle touch, including hugging, rocking and holding is a crucial aspect of parent-child interactions.<sup>4</sup> This affects many areas, including more activity and connections in the brain regions related to getting on with others.<sup>5</sup> These brain regions - developed in infancy through loving interaction with parents - can help children when they are older to relate well to extended family and friends.

For tamariki to thrive, both the quality and quantity of parental time and attention are important.<sup>6</sup> It's the quality of the interaction between parent and child that is most important, not the type of activity they're doing. In other words, it's not so much what you're doing, but how you're doing it that matters most. A seemingly boring job, like hanging out the washing, or preparing kai, can provide opportunities for precious interactions between parent and tamaiti.

It doesn't have to be a 'special' (read, expensive) outing or activity, but a time when the parent's attention is fully with their tamaiti, listening to them, having fun together. Examples include - Mum reading a bedtime story, having a cuddle with her tamaiti, and talking about the day; or Dad looking into his baby's eyes, smiling, and chatting, whilst gently washing pēpi. It helps if phones are far enough away, so they don't become a distraction.

### *Effects of love and warmth*

The relationships tamariki have with their parents and whānau affect their development in many ways.

These include:

- Social-emotional development<sup>7</sup>
- Language, cognitive and academic outcomes<sup>8</sup>
- Emotion regulation<sup>9</sup>
- Resilience to later stress<sup>10</sup>
- Mental health in adulthood.<sup>11</sup>

When pēpi know that their parents will be there when they need them, they are likely to feel secure. This enables them to explore the world, which is important for their learning.<sup>12</sup>

A lot of research over recent decades shows the importance of this, but it's not a new concept. Early European settlers noticed the loving care Māori tamariki received from their parents and other pakeke, as well as the bravery and confidence this care gave the tamariki.<sup>13</sup>

When parents provide warm, loving relationships other aspects of parenting are likely to go better. These relationships provide the foundation for the child's development. This is very important but as

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tamariki grow there is another part of loving relationship that supports healthy development. The other side of the “loving” equation is that of setting limits—with the loving relationship providing a strong foundation for this.

## What is limit setting?

Loving tamariki does not mean ‘indulging’ them all the time and letting them do whatever they wish. To be caring, successful members of communities, tamariki also need rules or limits that are clearly communicated and explained to them.<sup>14</sup> That means knowing what is ok to say and do in different situations, and what is not. Clear, consistent limits add to a child’s sense of security.<sup>15</sup> They are not born knowing how to behave, and it will take lots of practise and support for them to learn.

A positive combination of love and limits is known as authoritative parenting (sometimes called, backbone or tree parenting) – an approach that combines warmth with boundaries. Authoritative parents set reasonable boundaries based on their understanding of their individual child’s needs, their stage of development, and what can be expected at that stage.

Research show limits are more effective when the reasons behind them are explained to the child.<sup>16</sup> These might include – “We wear seatbelts to keep safe in the car” for example. When our tamariki are very young, short and simple explanations are best, keeping in mind the age and understanding of the tamaiti. As tamariki grow towards adolescence, more explanation and negotiation may be necessary. It helps if tamariki understand the reasons behind a limit, but this does not necessarily mean they will like it!

Expectations work better when they focus on what parents want tamariki to do, rather than what they don’t want.<sup>17</sup> For example saying, “Here’s some paper to draw on,” rather than, “Don’t draw on the walls,” helps guide tamariki towards appropriate behaviour while keeping communication positive.

Although most parents will react negatively to their child’s behaviour sometimes – especially when it comes to keeping them safe – a mostly positive approach to applying limits is likely to work better.<sup>18</sup> This means giving guidance that is both firm and nurturing, helping children understand expectations while feeling supported – focusing on teaching rather than punishing.



Looking ahead and trying to prevent difficulties before they happen is easier – on everyone – and more effective. An important part of this is parents catching their tamaiti “doing things right” and letting their child know this.<sup>19</sup> Comments such as, “It looks like Rufus is really enjoying your gentle patting,” are likely to be more effective than endless repetitions of “Don’t hurt the dog!” (If you’ve done the latter, don’t despair, you’re in good company!). Supervising and monitoring children’s behaviour is an important component of limit setting and helps lessen unwanted behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Other important aspects of maintaining limits and boundaries include:

- giving the reason for the rules,
- reminding children of what’s expected (this may need to be repeated, possibly many times!), and
- helping them to see how their behaviour affects others.<sup>21</sup> For example, “John was upset when you knocked over his blocks.”

Firm but fair limits, suited to the child’s age and abilities work best.<sup>22</sup> It’s helpful to check out what tamariki are capable of at different ages, so that expectations

are realistic. This developmental understanding of each child is important in guiding the way parents respond.

For young tamariki, creating a safe physical environment is an important part of establishing boundaries. Given their natural and desirable curiosity and drive to explore, it's up to whānau to ensure the environment is as safe as possible for the tamaiti, by removing hazards and keeping precious objects out of reach. While we can't remove every hazard from their lives, minimising risks allows tamariki to freely play. They learn over time what they can and cannot do in certain situations—for instance, they might not initially know the danger of a fireplace when it's in use, but with guidance and experience, they come to understand the need to keep a safe distance. Having adults nearby and available as needed provides them with the reassurance and support to confidently explore their world.

Setting limits is an important way in which tamariki learn what is ok, both within their whānau and wider community.<sup>23</sup> While the nature of the limits will change as tamariki grow, rangatahi still need these to be in place too.<sup>24</sup>

While it can be challenging for parents, it's an important part of their role to set appropriate limits.<sup>25</sup> Tamariki tend to feel more secure when there's an adult making the adult decisions. This doesn't mean they will always like those decisions at the time!

Helping tamariki learn to manage their emotions is another key. When parents model calm and patient responses, tamariki are more likely to develop similar emotional skills.<sup>26</sup> This means explaining the reasons behind limits and responding with understanding



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when tamariki feel upset or frustrated. Over time, this approach not only helps tamariki regulate their emotions but also allows them to adapt more effectively to challenges.

### **Individual differences**

Tamariki differ in how they react to their world, including to the parenting they receive.<sup>27</sup> A balance between warmth and boundaries is important for all tamariki yet what this looks like will differ for individual tamaiti. For example, some tamariki need and enjoy a lot of physical closeness, such as cuddles, while others prefer less. In terms of limit setting, this too may look different, even among siblings – some tamariki may need gentler guidance and more reassurance, while others respond better to clear, firm boundaries. Being aware of these differences helps parents provide the support that their tamaiti needs.





## *Too much of a good thing?*

Firm and fair limits are helpful, but a focus on obedience, strict rules with punitive discipline, and failure to explain the reasons for rules are all associated with poorer child outcomes, such as increased aggression, difficulty managing emotions, and struggles with social interactions.<sup>28</sup> Physical punishment also tends to make tamariki behaviour worse and is linked to increased aggression among tamariki.<sup>29</sup>

Helpful limits aim to protect rather than control the tamaiti and are generally the same from one day to the next.<sup>30</sup>

## *Consistency between parents/ caregivers*

When two or more adults are raising a tamaiti, it helps to have a shared view of their parenting goals. This is likely to involve discussion, negotiation and compromise from everyone. It's best if these discussions happen away from the tamariki.<sup>31</sup>

Maintaining consistency between parents provides tamariki with clear guidelines, which can help them feel secure and know what to expect. When both parents have an authoritative parenting style—like a

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backbone that provides firm support with flexibility—it can create a stable environment where core values and boundaries are clear. Parents don't have to be identical in their approaches—we are all individuals after all – but aligning on key principles can make parenting smoother and more effective.

Research shows that when at least one parent practices authoritative parenting—combining warmth, responsiveness, clear limits, and flexibility—it can have a positive effect on a child's development, even if the other parent does things differently. However, having both parents on board with authoritative parenting is ideal, as it provides a more consistent and supportive environment for the tamaiti.<sup>32</sup>

### ***What can get in the way of meeting our children's needs?***

We all bring different strengths and experiences to our parenting role. Sometimes these are helpful. At other times they can get in the way of providing what our tamaiti needs.

How parents think and feel about their own childhood has a strong influence on their ability to meet their baby's needs.<sup>33</sup> It's not just what happened to

parents that's important, but how they have made sense of it that most matters.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes, parents can benefit from professional help in making sense of their own history, both for their own sake and for their tamariki.

Some parents worry that setting firm limits means their tamaiti won't like them but as the adult, it's our job to meet our child's needs, it's not our child's job to make us feel liked or loved (although, it is a lovely bonus when they do!).

Our own upbringing has a big influence on how we in turn parent our own tamariki. If a parent's upbringing was very strict, or involved a lot of punishment, they may promise never to be like that with their own tamariki, and risk swinging to the opposite extreme,<sup>35</sup> not providing enough limits to support their tamaiti. Or they may parent in the same way they were raised,<sup>36</sup> perhaps with too many or unrealistic expectations.

### ***It's a marathon, not a sprint***

We all like to see our tamariki happy, but if keeping our tamariki happy is the main goal, it may be harder to have appropriate limits that will serve our tamaiti better in the long-term. As the metaphor goes

“Parenting is marathon not a sprint.” In the short-term maintaining limits can be hard work—exhausting even. (“It’s time to put the tablet away and play outside”; “Yes, you do need to go to school athletics day”). While there are days when the easiest option may be the wisest course of action, if this is the norm, it won’t help our tamariki in the long run.

On the other hand, our default setting may lean towards the limit side of the equation. Have mealtimes become battlegrounds about menus and manners rather than about spending time together? Thinking about warm and loving limits is a good place to start. Limits that benefit the child and their whānau.

Love, loving limits, and eventually understanding those limits, that’s what’s needed.

### Endnotes

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2. Parsons, Young, Murray, Stein, & Kringelbach, 2010
3. Sunderland, 2006
4. Cascio, Moore & McGlone, 2019, cited by Mariani Wigley, Mascheroni, Pastore, Bonichini, & Montiroso, 2024
5. Brauer, Xiao, Poulain, Friederici, & Schirmer, 2016
6. Bowlby, cited by Schore, 2000
7. Groh, Fearon, Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Roisman, 2017
8. Checa, Abundis-Gutierrez, Perez-Duenas, & Fernandez-Parra, 2019; Deneault et al., 2023
9. Goagoses et al., 2023
10. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015
11. Maselko, Kubzansky, Lipsitt, & Buka, 2011
12. Sroufe, 2005, cited by Parsons et al., 2010
13. Jenkins & Harte, 2011
14. Smith, 2005
15. Ginsburg, Ginsburg, & Ginsburg, 2015
16. Baumrind, 1973, cited by Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, Van Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011
17. Honig & Wittmer, 1991, cited by Smith, 2005
18. Brooks, 2013
19. Brooks, 2013, p. 456
20. Barber et al., 2005, cited by Luyckx et al., 2011
21. Kerr, Lopez, Olson, & Sameroff, 2004
22. Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010
23. Siegel & Hartzell, 2003
24. Steinberg, 2016
25. Möller et al., 2017
26. Eisenberg et al., 1998, and, Grusec, 1994, cited by Cooke et al., 2022
27. Cooke et al., 2022
28. Kawabata et al., 2011
29. D’Souza et al., 2019
30. Ginsburg et al., 2015
31. Brooks, 2013
32. Steinberg, 2001
33. Steele, 2013
34. Siegel & Hartzell, 2003
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36. Ginsburg, 2007

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## Glossary of Māori words:

**Pakeke** – adult

**Pēpi** – baby, babies

**Tamaiti** – child

**Tamariki** – children

**Rangatahi** – youth, younger generation

**Whānau** – extended family

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