

# Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu —a precious time for our tiniest treasures

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*During our hui, workshops, and wānanga with whānau Māori, we explore mātauranga Māori and lived experiences alongside scientific insights into child development. In He Hikoī Mahara, whānau share positive memories of childhood, parenting, and traditional practices, connecting past and present to empower whānau to recognise the treasures handed down by our tūpuna. Here, our Learning Designer, André Ngāpō, expands on a story shared during one of these wānanga, linking it to the kaupapa of protective factors during kukunetanga (pregnancy).*



*“My Nan always said that all pēpi are a blessing. She was an expert when it came to pēpi—she had heaps of kids, grandkids and whāngai, and was one of twelve herself. Whenever anyone in the family was hapū, Nan would go into kaitiaki mode, making sure both māmā and kukune (unborn child) were nurtured and cared for. She would travel the country and even fly to Australia to help my aunties before her mokopuna were born, and to welcome them into this world. To this day, whenever I see a teapot, I am reminded of my Nan’s aroha for māmā and pēpi—the way she would make sure my aunties and Mum and cousins took time out, had a cuppa, and put their feet up.*

*Nan believed—and taught all of us—that babies are tapu, sacred. She said that one of the most important times to protect that tapu is before birth and when they were just born. She reminded us that mokopuna carry mana and potential and that our job was to nurture it. The truth is, all of us who were born into Nan’s aroha and care feel like we were the ones who received the blessing.”*



The essence of this story is beautifully captured in the whakatauki: *Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu*—although small, it is a treasure. It reminds us that even the smallest among us, our unborn pēpi or kukune, carry a universe of precious potential and need to be protected as the treasures that they are. It also reminds us that pregnancy, though short compared to a lifetime, is a treasured window—a critical time when we can lay down a strong foundation for a child's wellbeing.



*Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu—although small, it is a treasure.*

### ***The beginnings of life—laying foundations in kukunetanga (pregnancy)***

Childhood does not begin at birth. It begins long before—during pregnancy, when the intricate work of life-building takes place. Although small, the unborn baby is filled with possibilities. Alongside their

developing bodies and brains, other parts of them are inherently present, including:

- **Mauri** – Life force or vital essence that animates and sustains all living things.<sup>1</sup>
- **Wairua** – Spiritual essence; the unseen force connecting all things to the spiritual realm.<sup>2</sup>
- **Whakapapa** – Genealogy; the layers of ancestral lineage connecting people to their heritage, including connections beyond people to the natural world and atua.<sup>3</sup>
- **Mana** – Personal power and spiritual authority inherited from atua and tūpuna, reflected in a child's uniqueness, abilities, and potential.<sup>4</sup>
- **Tapu** – Spiritual protection and sacred status of tamariki, inherited from the atua and reflecting their divine connection.<sup>5</sup>

The seeds of who they might become are already planted within them.

While much of the development happening in this early stage of life is guided by inherited genes, the environment surrounding the growing kukune and the experiences mā mā has also matter. This means that our role as whānau, as kaitiaki for kukune and mā mā is an active one. Nurturing environments can protect, support, and nourish the unfolding life within.



## Protective factors—strengthening the tiny treasure

Protective factors are the things that support healthy growth and flourishing.<sup>6</sup> These include such things as:

### *Whanaungatanga and aroha:*

Te ao Māori views pregnancy as a shared journey, where a village supports the growing kukune and māmā. Traditionally, māmā and kukune were nurtured within whānau, community and whakapapa.<sup>7</sup>

Support from whānau and the community can make a huge difference—providing emotional warmth, practical help and guidance, and hononga (connected relationships).<sup>8</sup> It may be small everyday gestures that māmā needs. Like Nan's teapot and tea drinking ritual—a simple act that held layers of care—small, loving gestures can have a great impact.

Across many iwi, the importance of nurturing wāhine during kukunetanga was recognised and upheld through customary practices. Traditionally, a hapū wāhine was considered tapu and treated accordingly.<sup>9</sup> These expressions of care reflected not just practical needs, but a recognition of the wāhine body as a powerful, sacred vessel bringing life from te pō (the spiritual realm of potential) into te ao mārama (the world of light).<sup>10</sup>



### *Safe, low-stress environments:*

Stress is a part of life—but when Māmā experiences overwhelming or prolonged stress during pregnancy, it can also affect the developing kukune. For example, sometimes support and whanaungatanga may not be easily available, perhaps due to living away from whānau, working through mental health struggles, or perhaps due to unsupportive systems.<sup>11</sup> Whānau and community can help to reduce the sources of stress for māmā. This might look like providing emotional reassurance, encouragement to seek professional support, financial aid, safe housing, or advocacy in stressful systems. This support can help to maintain emotional and spiritual safety, supporting the mauri of māmā and kukune to remain settled (mauri tau) and well (mauri ora).

Historically, whānau—especially men and tohunga—actively supported pregnant wāhine by attending to both physical and spiritual needs, including providing kai and surrounding her with care.<sup>12</sup> This collective approach aligns with the view of pregnancy as a sacred phase where tapu must be upheld, reducing stress by offering relational, practical and spiritual support.







### ***Nutritious kai:***

Good nutrition during pregnancy helps māmā maintain her own health and provides essential building blocks for a baby's developing brain and body. Whānau can support this by helping prepare nourishing meals, providing kai when needed, or simply being aware that kai is part of a wider practice of manaakitanga—expressions of generosity, care, and respect for others.

This tradition of prioritising kai for hapū wāhine continues today and reflects longstanding tikanga. Special care was taken to nourish māmā, recognising the connection between kai and mana. The sharing of specific foods was more than nutrition—it was an affirmation of mana and sacredness during a time of transformation.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Connection to culture and identity:***

Even before birth, pēpi are part of their whakapapa and community. Strengthening cultural connections can happen in many forms. Our tūpuna would surround māmā with such experiences as:

- Oriori — chanted songs composed to anchor tamariki in their ancestry and tribal knowledge.
- Pūrākau — storytelling that carries ancestral wisdom and collective memory.
- Karakia — spiritual incantations or prayers used to strengthen the relationship between the growing kukune, whānau, and tūpuna atua, nurturing both individual and collective mauri.

These experiences wrapped both māmā and her child in a protective korowai (cloak) of care, reflecting traditional Māori parenting practices that emphasized the significance of cultural customs and collective wellbeing from pregnancy onwards.<sup>14</sup> Today, it may also include things like strengthening whanaungatanga, connecting, or reconnecting to te reo Māori, learning about family history/whakapapa, and visiting the marae if known.<sup>15</sup> Through these experiences, the connection of māmā and her kukune to whakapapa is strengthened.

***Unborn pēpi rely on the aroha and protection of those around them.***

### ***Being their voice***

Importantly, we must remember: the unborn pēpi has no voice of their own yet, so cannot tell us their needs. They rely on the aroha and protection of those around them, to keep them safe from things that could affect their ōranga (wellbeing) and growth.<sup>16</sup> Our role—as parents, as grandparents, as uncles and aunts, as friends—is to be that voice, to advocate for their mana, protect their tapu, strengthen their mauri, and honour their whakapapa.

*Small acts of care during pregnancy, and big ones when needed, can have ripples that last for generations.*



## Summary

The time before birth is relatively brief, but its impact stretches across their whole lifespan. Protective factors, woven gently but intentionally around kukune and their māmā during pregnancy, can set a foundation that supports development, wellbeing, and strong whanaungatanga.

Just as Nan's teapot was a small thing—but one filled with enormous meaning—small acts of care during pregnancy, and big ones when needed, can have ripples that last for generations.

Ahakoia he iti, he pounamu—although small, it is a treasure. The unborn kukune is a treasure, and the time of pregnancy is a treasure. It is a reminder to all of us to wrap aroha around our hapū māmā, and to honour the tapu life that is unfolding.

Because in the end, it is not just the pēpi who is blessed—we are all blessed by their arrival.

## Endnotes

1. Marsden, 2003; Durie, 2001; Ngawati et al., 2018; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
2. Maclean, 2018, cited in Ngawati et al., 2018; Marsden, 2003; Mataira, 2000, cited by Ngawati et al., 2018; Mead, 2016; Tauroa & Tauroa, 1986
3. Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
4. Durie, 2011; Jenkins & Harte, 2014; Eruera & Ruwhiu, 2015
5. Durie, 2011; Jenkins & Harte, 2014; Eruera & Ruwhiu, 2015
6. Younger, 2020; Edmonds et al., 2022
7. Jenkins and Harte, 2014; Tikao, 2020
8. Stevenson et al., 2016
9. Jenkins and Harte, 2014; Porter, 2019, p. 7
10. Gabel, 2022
11. Stevenson et al., 2016; Makowharemahihī et al., 2019; Tikao, 2020; Edmonds et al., 2022
12. Walker, 2019
13. Porter, 2019
14. Jenkins & Harte, 2011; Tikao, 2020; Taniwha-Paoo, 2024
15. Ngāpō, 2025
16. Edmonds, 2022

## Glossary of Māori words / terms:

**Aroha** – Love, compassion, empathy, and concern for others; a core value in Māori relationships.

**Hapū** – Pregnant; also refers to a sub-tribe or kinship group.

**Hononga** – Connection or relationship; often used to describe meaningful links between people or concepts.

**Kaitiaki** – Guardian or carer; someone who protects and nurtures.

**Karakia** – Spiritual prayer or incantation; used to invoke protection, guidance, and spiritual connection.

**Kukune** – The developing pēpi (baby) in the womb; an unborn child.

**Mana** – Spiritual power, authority, or prestige inherited from atua (deities) and tūpuna (ancestors).

**Manaakitanga** – Hospitality, kindness, generosity, and support shown to others.

**Mauri** – Life force or vital essence that animates and sustains all living things; foundational to wellbeing.

**Mauri ora** – A thriving, vibrant state of wellbeing and life force.

**Mauri tau** – A calm, settled, and balanced state of mauri.

**Mokopuna** – Grandchild or descendant; often used broadly for future generations.

**Oriori** – chant composed to transmit whakapapa and knowledge to kukune and tamariki.

**Pēpi** – Baby or infant.

**Pūrākau** – Creation stories and narratives containing historical, moral, or cultural understandings, wisdom, insights.

**Rohe** – Area, territory

**Tapu** – Sacredness or spiritual restriction; a protective spiritual status.

**Te ao mārama** – The world of light; the physical world of life and understanding.

**Te pō** – The realm of darkness; the spiritual or metaphysical realm, often referenced in creation narratives.

**Tīpuna/Tūpuna** – Ancestors.

**Wairua** – Spiritual essence; the unseen force connecting all things to the spiritual realm.

**Whakapapa** – Genealogy; the layers of ancestral lineage connecting people to their ancestral heritage, including connections beyond people to the natural world and atua.

**Whānau** – Family, including extended family and wider kinship networks. Also means to give birth or to be born.

**Whanaungatanga** – Kinship, relationships, profound sense of collective belonging.

*If you found this article useful, here are others that may be useful:*

### Oriori – A legacy

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/oriori-a-legacy/>

### Getting the Brain You Need for the World You Find Yourself In

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/getting-the-brain-you-need-for-the-world-you-find-yourself-in-why-early-brain-development-matters/>



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