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He Tikanga Aroha, He Aroha Tuku Iho – Aroha Across Generations

What do our tūpuna teach us about raising children? In this article, André Ngāpō shares pūrākau (stories) from whānau – stories of grandparents whose everyday acts of aroha left a lasting mark.



Introduction


In Te Ao Māori, the relationship between tūpuna (ancestors/grandparents) and mokopuna (grandchildren/descendants) is special. Grounded in deep whakapapa relationships that echo the love that has passed down through generations, the bond between tūpuna and mokopuna can create a powerful foundation for the child's wellbeing, sustained by aroha.

Aroha – commonly translated as love – is deep and multi-layered. It is an emotion, a way of thinking, and an energy flowing with compassion, empathy, kindness, sympathy and care.¹

Aroha combines aro (to focus) and hā (breath), representing the act of turning to share breath with

another. It invites us to stand in the aroaro (presence) of the divine breath (te hā o te Atua) within the child, while offering oha (generosity). These are tikanga aroha – intentional and active practices of love. Tikanga aroha flow with hau aroha (nurturing energy) and wairua (spiritual essence). Tikanga aroha can nourish the child's mauri (life force), holding them in safety, understanding, and unconditional regard.²

The following pūrākau (stories), shared by whānau during our Brainwave Trust Aotearoa He Hīkoi Mahara workshops, bring this concept to life. Supported by insights from our articles, these stories illustrate how simple interactions between mokopuna and their grandparents can become profound opportunities to honour mana, strengthen tuakiri (identity), and protect the mauri of the next generation through tikanga practices infused with aroha.



The Sensory Memory of Whakapapa

“Raised and nurtured by my grandmother with the utmost love, I realise later in life I had always been immersed in the pou of tūpuna parenting, later to continue with whakapapa. The pāua shell triggers a deep-seated heavenly memory. A piece of pāua shell was used for teething babies (like a rusk biscuit). My memory is my subconscious, it is strong, it is permanent and unforgettable.

At 0–5 years, I remember it not by sight, not by smell, not by sound, but by the nurturing comfort and texture and relief it gave me. I remember the ravenous pressure I applied to my gums to manoeuvre the piece of pāua around my mouth. And the mess I must have made definitely soothed my soul.”

In this pūrākau, the storyteller expresses the power of being “immersed” as a child in loving tūpuna practices. Our tūpuna knew that tamariki exist within a delicate web of relationships, where the energy of

one person directly affects the mauri and wairua (spiritual essence) of another.³ The kuia in the story drew from the wisdom of her ancestors – ngā taonga tuku iho; cultural practices handed down. Taonga tuku iho are living expressions of whakapapa – the layers of connections between people, places, and the spiritual world, linking past, present, and future.

The “utmost love” from the kuia is aroha in action, tikanga aroha – a shield that protects the tapu, sacred nature of the child. Turning her full attention to the needs of pēpi (baby), the kuia used the pāua shell to help soothe and balance the child’s tinana (body), mauri and wairua, creating a deep, lasting memory of relief and comfort. The kuia helped the mokopuna to self-regulate – to process, recognise and manage their sensations, feelings, and behaviours. This kind of responsive, loving care brings mauri tau (a settled, balanced life force), creating a foundation for mauri ora (flourishing wellness).⁴

The storyteller’s memory of the pāua shell’s texture highlights the power of experiences and physical touch. Traditional practices for pēpi, such as miri-miri (massage), hikihiki pēpi (carrying babies) and tākaro (play) nurture bonds through loving interactions, calming and balancing the child’s mauri and developing nervous system. Treating children with deep ngākau aroha (empathy, compassion, understanding) – by really paying attention and responding to their individual needs for growth, safety and learning, including limits and boundaries as needed – respects their uniqueness, nurtures their gifts, and honours their role as the future carriers of our culture. This glimpse into the kuia’s care reminds us that our children are tapu and filled with mana, and that they should be honoured, supported, and protected.⁵ Through stories like this one, we see how the simplest acts of aroha can nourish the hauora (wellbeing) of tamariki.



Tūpuna as a Foundation

“Nanny and Koro would build playing card towers/pyramids with me when I would stay with them as a little girl. These towers/pyramids represented what looked like a whare, and I was building foundations with Nanny and Koro. Without them, I wouldn’t be here. These times represented their position as the foundation of our whānau. Their home was our home.”

This story captures the essence of a stable tūāpapa – a strong foundation for wellbeing. Like the card tower, a child needs a steady base to build upon. Here, we can imagine the grandparents as kaitiaki

(guardians) within a Pā Tū Rangatira⁶ – a village of caring adults acting in matua rautia – a community of protection around the mokopuna, safeguarding their potential.

The aroha passed from these tūpuna to their moko is like a strong and stable pou (pillar, post) for the child to lean into as they need. Through the simple act of playing together, the positive relationship between the mokopuna and their grandparents nourishes the child’s mauri – mauri tangata⁷ – helping wairua to flow freely between them.⁸

“Without them, I wouldn’t be here” acknowledges the truth of whakapapa; each person is a living link to the past, present, and future. Through our own tuakiri (identity), we carry forward the legacy of our tūpuna, grounded by the safety and aroha they provide – ā tinana (physically) and ā wairua (spiritually). By providing a home grounded in safety and aroha, whānau provide a base which helps the tamaiti to draw strength from all these parts of themselves. Their whakapapa can help them remain grounded through ngā piki me ngā heke (the ups and downs of life), nurturing resilience and supporting them to stand tall in their own mana motuhake (autonomy).⁹



The Joy of Reclaiming Knowledge

“My Nana and her children learned to weave mats and baskets from their parents. They found so much joy in weaving and passing this skill on to their family and others. Weaving has taught me that joy comes from the simplest of things and doesn’t cost anything. It is a skill we can all learn, and if forgotten we can relearn, just like parenting.”

This pūrākau emphasises “joy” – the joy of learning, of connecting in a common activity and the joy that can be found in our traditional practices. This joy is grounded in the ways of our ancestors and is a clear sign of mauri ora – a vibrant and flourishing life force.

Like any emotion, joy signals the movement of hau – a vital essence and current of energy that flows

within and between all things. When flowing between people with kindness, compassion and understanding, this is hau tūhonohono – an energy of loving connection – giving and receiving with love.¹⁰

Practices like raranga (weaving) can sustain our wairua and enliven our hau. In this story, through raranga Nana connected with the energy of the ancestors and the wairua of those who came before – hau tūpuna. This energy flowed from Nana to mokopuna, wrapping the child in ancestral strength and aroha.

The insight that skills “if forgotten... can be relearned” speaks to the deep resilience of Māori knowledge. Even though ngā āwhā – the “storms” brought by colonisation and marginalisation – have disrupted the transmission of Māori practices across our communities, the “blueprint” for parenting is still held within our whakapapa, our mātauranga (wisdom), and tikanga. Reclaiming these treasures handed down by our ancestors is a powerful form of rongoā (healing), breathing life back into our whare and pā, restoring mana. By sharing her ancestral knowledge and practices so naturally and generously, Nana ensures that the energy continues to flow, vibrant and restorative to the next generation.¹¹



Connection to the Rhythms of the Whenua

“My Gramps used to go out in the garden and dig over the garden going by the moon and stars. He planted peruperu and kumara every season to sustain and feed our whānau. I remember sitting out in the garden with him while he did this and picking veg and eating fruit off the trees.”

In this story, Gramps and his mokopuna work together in the māra (garden), planting in time with the seasons, the moon, and the stars. Watching and listening to the natural rhythms of the land, sky, and stars is an important part of Te Ao Māori. This reflects our connection to Ngā Hau o te Taiao – the environmental energies that sustain us.

Following the seasons and the maramataka (lunar calendar), our tūpuna moved with the natural ebb

and flow of energy. The māra was a place to grow a deep connection to the whenua – nurturing the land with aroha as it nurtures us and our hauora (wellbeing). Connecting tamariki to the taiao helps to ground them, bringing their physical bodies and wairua into rhythm with the earth’s cycles.¹² Ko au te taiao, ko te taiao ko au. I am the environment and the environment is me.

Through the māra, our tūpuna naturally honoured their connections to the atua. Choosing peruperu (potatoes) and kūmara to plant was special as they represent Rongomātāne, the atua of cultivation and peace. By following these rhythms, Gramps teaches his mokopuna to observe tohu (signs). As well as learning to observe the environment, we can also learn to observe tohu within ourselves, finding ways to settle our mauri – mauri tau.¹³

Through his mahi in the garden, Gramps passes on to his mokopuna another form of understanding whakapapa; the whakapapa of connections to all things – earth and sky, creatures and stars. His mahi in the garden was about more than sharing knowledge; it was an act of aroha that helped the mokopuna to connect to environmental energies – hau o te taiao – forging deep bonds with the world around him.¹⁴



Weaving Identity and Connection

“My Nan was the matriarch of our whānau. She loved all her children (13 of them), and all her mokos. Weaved putiputi made from harakeke reminds me of her journey through raranga. She inspires me to connect to my whakapapa, whenua, whānau and to gain the knowledge to teach the next generation. Love you Nan xo.”

This story highlights whanaungatanga as the “glue” of the collective. Whanaungatanga is our foundation – kinship, reciprocity, and connected relationships.¹⁵ Nan’s weaving is the perfect symbol of this: just as she wove strands of harakeke to create a strong kete (basket), whānau members are woven together by aroha to create a resilient support system. This is matua rautia – the understanding that raising a child is a collective responsibility.¹⁶

The inspiration to “connect to my whakapapa... and gain the knowledge” shows the link between identity and wellbeing. A secure cultural identity acts as a protective cloak for our mauri and helps nourish our wairua, helping young people navigate their world with increased confidence.¹⁷ By holding the mana of the family, the matriarch helps preserve and strengthen the whāriki of whakapapa for those who follow.



The Voice of the Ancestors

“I remember sitting with my great grandmother while she would tell stories about her life. There was a beautiful clock on the mantel piece that would slowly tick by as she told her tales. My grandmother now has the clock, and I hope that one day I will tell her stories to my grandchildren with that clock nearby.”

The great-grandmother in this story was doing something simple, yet powerful – passing on learning and wisdom through stories; stories that touched the heart of her mokopuna.

This follows in the footsteps of our tūpuna Māori who traditionally passed on knowledge in many different ways, such as pūrākau (stories), waiata (songs), mōteatea (chanted laments), whakairo (carving), tā moko (traditional skin markings) and karakia (ritual chants). Another was oriori – a chant for kukune (unborn babies) and tamariki, composed as a “sacred curriculum”, transmitting mana and identity and information about their whakapapa, ancestral achievements, and messages of inspiration and aroha.¹⁸ This transmission is a “language of love” that reinforces the child’s place within the whānau.¹⁹

Our tūpuna knew that passing on the lessons of the past through story can help our mokopuna to grow and learn. Like the clock that ticks on, this legacy of aroha continues. The wairua of stories flows into the future, ready to share with the generations to come.



Conclusion

These pūrākau show us that powerful and loving tikanga for bringing up tamariki can be found in simple acts and practices, such as storytelling, weaving, gardening, and play.

These stories affirm that a child's wellbeing can thrive within supportive relationships. When grandparents and other whānau connect with mokopuna through tikanga aroha – intentional practices of love – they can help to settle mauri, transmit whakapapa,²⁰ nurture wairua, and affirm them in who they are and where they belong.

A pathway for raising resilient, flourishing tamariki exists within our tikanga. By practising these taonga tuku iho, the loving legacy of our ancestors continues to nourish the potential of generations to come.

Endnotes

1. Elder, 2020; Moorfield, 2012; Ngāpō, 2025a.
2. Ngāpō, 2025a
3. Ngāpō, 2024
4. Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
5. enkins & Harte, 2011
6. Ngāpō, 2025a
7. Ngāpō, 2024
8. Ngāpō, 2025a
9. Ngāpō, 2025a
10. Ngāpō, 2025a
11. Ngāpō, 2025b
12. Ngāpō, 2025a
13. Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
14. Ngāpō, 2025a
15. Ngāpō, 2025b
16. Ngāpō, 2025a
17. Ngāpō, 2025b
18. Taniwha-Paoa, 2024
19. Pihama & Lee, 2022, cited by Taniwha-Paoa, 2024
20. Taniwha-Paoa, 2024

Glossary of Māori words / terms

Aroha – Love, compassion, empathy, sympathy, affection. An energy, an emotion and a way of thinking.

Atua – Ancestor of continuing influence; deities or spiritual beings that have control over particular domains of the world.

Hapori – Community, group, society.

Hau – An unseen current of energy that passes between all things, binding them in a constant flow of reciprocity. When flowing from a space of aroha (loving action), this energy allows the mauri and wairua of one person to positively affect another.

Hauora – A holistic state of wellbeing and vitality, encompassing the balance of body, mind, spirit, and whānau. In this framework, it is the direct expression of a healthy, flowing hau.

Hau oranga wairua – Life-giving spiritual energies and breaths; the unseen currents that nourish and sustain wellbeing.

Hau o te taiao – The energetic breaths of the environment; currents of hau carrying the vitality of the natural world to enrich mauri and wairua.

Hau tūhonohono – Relational, human energies; the spiritual essence of connection and relationships.

Hau tūpuna – Ancestral energies and breaths; the spiritual connection to ancestors and their wisdom.

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

Kaumātua – Elder, a person of status within the whānau.

Koro – Grandfather, male elder.

Kukune – Conception, the unborn; refers to babies in the womb.

Mana – Spiritual authority, influence, status, and dignity inherited from atua and tūpuna.

Mana motuhake – Autonomy, independence, personal authority.

Māra – Garden; a cultivated plot of land for growing food and maintaining connection to the whenua.

Maramataka – The Māori lunar calendar, used to guide daily activities such as planting, fishing, gathering, and ceremony. It reflects the interconnected rhythms of people, the environment, and the wider cosmos.

Mātauranga Māori – A holistic Māori way of knowing, encompassing knowledge, understandings,

and cultural practices that originate from past, present, and future Māori experience. It reflects Indigenous ways of engaging with the world, guided by te reo, tikanga, whakapapa, and relationships with land, ancestors, and communities.

Matua rautia – A collective approach to raising children where the entire community contributes.

Mauri – Life force or vital essence that animates and sustains all living things.

Mauri ora – State of optimal health and vitality, with a balanced and flourishing mauri.

Mauri tau – Balanced and settled life force; a state of harmony and peace.

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

Mōteatea – Traditional chanted laments or poetry; a form of transmitting ancestral knowledge, history, and emotion

Ngā Āwhā – The harmful storms; a metaphor for the destructive forces affecting Māori wellbeing.

Ngā piki me ngā heke – The ups and downs of life; life's challenges.

Ngākau aroha – Empathy, compassion, kindness, and love; a deep and genuine care for others.

Oriori – Traditional lullabies or chants composed for children, containing whakapapa and ancestral knowledge.

Pā – A fortified village; a symbol of community, belonging, and protection.

Papatūānuku – The Earth mother, Earth.

Pou – Post, pillar; a symbolic marker or foundational principle.

Pūrākau – Stories, often used to convey traditional knowledge or lessons.

Raranga – Weaving; the practice of creating woven items such as kete (kits) and whāriki (floor mats) from harakeke (flax) and other natural materials.

Rongoā – Remedy, healing; practices and medicines that restore balance, wholeness, and wellness.

Tā moko – Traditional Māori skin markings; a form of identity, whakapapa, and ancestral connection.

Taiao – Environment, nature, Earth, natural world.

Tamariki – Children.

Taonga Tuku Iho – In this context, treasured practices and mātauranga passed down by our tūpuna.

Glossary of Māori words / terms

Tapu – Sacredness and spiritual restriction; something set apart due to its sacred nature.

Te Ao Māori – The Māori world; encompassing Māori worldviews, values, beliefs, customs, and traditions.

Tikanga – Correct procedure, custom, rule, code, practice, convention, protocol – the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context.

Tohu – Signs, symbols, or indicators that provide insight into a person's state or the environment.

Tūāpapa – Foundations, base. In this framework, it refers to the protective factors (such as whanaungatanga and aroha) that form the foundation of the pā.

Tūpuna / Tipuna – Ancestors.

Waiata – Song, chant.

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

Whakairo – Carving; a traditional art form used to record and transmit whakapapa, history, and identity.

Whakapapa – The foundation of te ao Māori; a living map of a person's place within a deep web of interconnected relationships and responsibilities, linking the past, present, and future. This principle extends to all things – animate and inanimate, physical and spiritual.

Whānau – Family, inclusive of extended, fluid, and kin-like bonds.

Whānau Whānui – Extended family, the wider kinship network beyond the immediate family.

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

Whare – House, building.

Whāriki – Floor mat, carpet.

Whenua – Land; also refers to the placenta, symbolising the connection to Papatūānuku (Earth mother).

If you found this article useful, these might also be of interest:

Oriori—A Legacy

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

Ahakoā he Iti, he Pounamu—a Precious Time for Our Tiniest Treasures

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/ahakoā-he-iti-he-pounamu-a-precious-time-for-our-tiniest-treasures/>

Mauri Tangata: The Importance of Relationships for the Mauri of Tamariki

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/mauri-tangata-the-importance-of-relationships-for-the-mauri-of-tamariki/>

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