

MANA WHĀNAU

Intensive in-home parenting support

Mana Whānau is an intensive in-home parenting support programme designed to keep tamariki who are on the edge of care, or about to be removed by Oranga Tamariki, safely living within their own whānau and in their own communities. It is inspired by evidence that tamariki generally do better in the care of their whānau and by the conviction that there are safe alternatives to removing tamariki from their whānau.

“The best thing about Mana Whānau is that that it gave us a new outlook. It came into the picture to say there is still hope.”

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ABOUT MANA WHĀNAU

Mana Whānau is based on the understanding that:

- Being separated from whānau has a detrimental effect on both tamariki and their whānau. It is in the best interest of the tamariki to remain safely in the care of their whānau, wherever this is possible.
- Change is possible. With the right support and resources most whānau have the ability to care for their tamariki safely.
- Toxic stressors must be reduced or removed for parents to be able to build their capabilities.
- Change is more likely and sustainable when whānau determine and drive the changes they want to make.

Whānau

Specifically, the Mana Whānau programme supports:

- Whānau who are at imminent risk of having their tamariki removed by Oranga Tamariki.
- Whānau with tamariki already in Oranga Tamariki care who need support to have their tamariki return home from foster care.

The programme focuses on reducing the risk of harm to tamariki instead of removing tamariki from their homes. It is designed to create better outcomes for tamariki and their whānau. If it is not possible to keep the whānau together and the children safe, Mana Whānau is not an appropriate programme.



Approach

Mana Whānau is different from most services and requires a very different approach. The key differences are:

- The number of hours that staff work with whānau. Staff work intensively with whānau in their homes—for up to 65 hours a week. The times and the number of hours worked are those that suit whānau. This can include early mornings, evenings and weekends.
- It is an authentically whānau-led process. Although the initial three-way agreement identifying the concerns and overarching goal is agreed by Oranga Tamariki, Mana Whānau and the whānau, the identification of stressors, goals, pathways, work, priorities and pace are determined by whānau.
- There is recognition that stressors need to be reduced or removed in order that whānau have the bandwidth to build on their skills and capabilities.
- The programme is flexible and tailored to the needs of each whānau.

The aim is to:

- Work with whānau whose core capabilities are challenged by toxic levels of stress and trauma, to identify and reduce the stressors;
- Support strong and responsive relationships between children and adults;
- Work alongside whānau providing positive opportunities to develop and practice the skills they need to care for and parent their tamariki effectively and safely;
- Build natural whānau and community supports for long-term resilience.

Evidence Base

Mana Whānau is grounded in the latest neuroscientific research, developed in a New Zealand context and driven by a ‘whatever it takes’ and ‘what works’ approach. Although the programme sounds simple and practical, it has a strong theoretical and evidence base plus a well-researched theory of change. As the support required by each whānau is so different, the theoretical base and implementation of the programme needs to be fully understood and mastered, with skilled supervision, if whānau are to be supported by, in their words, ‘helpful help’.

Neuroscientific research shows that adults need a core set of capabilities to parent effectively. These fall under the umbrella of self-regulation and executive function. Stressors, in particular the cumulative weight of multiple stressors, are not only overwhelming to whānau, but rob parents and caregivers of executive function, i.e. the ability to plan, strategise and problem-solve. Toxic levels of stress also rob whānau of the bandwidth required to learn new skills. This is why initiatives such as parenting courses can have limited efficacy. For whānau experiencing sustained and toxic levels of stress, rather than helping, these initiatives can become an additional stressor.

There is compelling evidence demonstrating that prolonged exposure to stressful, adverse conditions or multiple risk factors, is not only toxic to tamariki and their whānau, but can undermine even the best initiatives. Fresh thinking and new strategies are required if programmes working with whānau facing trauma and adversity are to become more effective.

MANA WHANAU HAS A STRONGLY DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

The programme has been underpinned by a rigorous developmental evaluation where aspects of the programme and practice are reflected upon at weekly meetings, and in regular Community of Practice meetings. The programme, including the principles, framework, key components, and the way it has been implemented, has been developed and adapted in response to these regular evaluative findings and discussions.

The programme was initially developed by Lifewise in Auckland in 2015, and subsequently adopted by Wesley in Porirua in early 2019. Due to the successful outcomes for whānau, the programme is being scaled up, with a second Lifewise team starting in October 2019.

Theory of Change

In brief, the Mana Whānau theory of change (pictured right) contends that there is an opportunity to prevent tamariki from entering or remaining in foster care by providing intensive in-home support, reducing immediate risk, addressing and removing stressors, and building parenting capability and capacity.

HOW THE PROGRAMME WORKS

Referral

Oranga Tamariki makes a referral based on agreed criteria. While referrals to the programme can only be made by Oranga Tamariki, acceptance is based on choices made by whānau.

The most important factors are that the whānau want to work with Mana Whānau, are open to kaimahi (staff) working with them in their home, and that the home is safe enough for tamariki to be parented when the Mana Whānau kaimahi are not present.

Mana Whānau has worked successfully with whānau with AOD and family violence issues, and those that Oranga Tamariki staff were concerned might not have the cognitive ability to learn new skills.

Risk and safety statements

Mana Whānau uses risk and safety statements, from the Signs of Safety framework, as the basis of their agreement with Oranga Tamariki.

The risk statement outlines the concerns that Oranga Tamariki, and possibly others, have in a clear and simple form. The safety statement articulates what needs to be happening for Oranga Tamariki to be confident in closing the case and this helps the whānau form the overarching goal or picture of the future.

These statements enable the whānau to be very clear about the concerns, but more importantly what 'good' or 'better' looks like. These become the 'goal posts', which previously many whānau have felt shift each time they complete an agreed action. As the safety statement is an outcome rather than a set of actions, the whānau can then become the key lead in what needs to happen to achieve this.

Recently Lifewise whānau have begun writing their own safety statements and these are now used to form the basis of the three-way agreement between Lifewise, Oranga Tamariki and the whānau.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Alleviating risk factors, reducing toxic stress levels and building up executive function will free up the bandwidth required to parent more effectively and to learn new skills and capabilities.

THE BROAD GOAL IS THAT TAMARIKI ARE SAFE AND THEY ARE LIVING WITHIN THEIR OWN WHĀNAU AND THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES.

IF WE

- Support whānau with intensive cultural, practical, spiritual, emotional, whānau-led and tamariki centred practice, and
- Support whānau to reduce or remove toxic stressors such as financial hardship, housing issues and mental distress, and
- Support and build on parents and whānau protective factors, and
- Support parents to build on their parenting capability and executive functioning

BY

- Introducing a dedicated worker to whānau for up to 65 per hours per week (initially) in their home
- Listening to whānau and providing practical empathetic responses to address the immediate stressors as identified by them, and
- Identifying, connecting and strengthening resources within whānau and their community and valuing the role and contribution of whakapapa to restorative healing processes
- Encouraging self-determination and affirming active skill-building and responsive parenting in their home.

THEN THIS EVENTUALLY WILL RESULT IN THE FOLLOWING OUTCOMES:

- Tamariki living within their whānau/family will feel safe and have their needs met
- Whānau will be confident and resilient parents and able to protect their tamariki
- Whānau will be more connected to their community and able to identify support networks.

Mana Whānau takes the lead

Oranga Tamariki and Mana Whānau staff work closely and in partnership in the early stages. Once the safety and risk statements are agreed by all parties, including the whānau, Mana Whānau takes the lead and can focus on the safety statement. Typically, whānau have an average of nine agencies working with them at the time Mana Whānau becomes involved. This in itself can be stressful and overwhelming. Whānau are asked to identify the agencies they wish to continue with and Mana Whānau asks other agencies, including Oranga Tamariki, to step back while Mana Whānau works with them.

Home based

The programme takes place in the home of whānau and in their community. As the kaimahi and whānau spend intensive amounts of time together in the home of the whānau, the relationship with the whānau needs to be respectful, warm and compassionate.

Staff

Kaimahi are at the heart of the programme. Kaimahi:

- Work on building a trusting, supportive relationship with whānau
- Listen carefully and non-judgmentally to the needs of the whānau
- Work with the whānau to identify their toxic stressors
- Work with whānau to reduce the cumulative weight of those stressors
- Work together on parenting, homemaking and safety improvements identified in the safety goal/statement
- Help the whānau to build their natural social and community supports, and importantly
- Hold the hope that keeping whānau together and change is possible.

Supervision

Working so intensively with whānau in their homes can be challenging. As the whānau often have immediate and presenting issues, kaimahi may become immersed in responding to these and need support to also stay focussed on the underlying issues, stressors and long-term goals. Regular supervision and reflective practice are required to support staff and to help keep them focused on implementing the theory of change. Mana Whānau supervisors are also actively involved directly with each whānau to support the initial goal-setting and agreements, and regular progress reviews.

Whānau Rangatiratanga

Although whānau are working towards the safety goal agreed by Oranga Tamariki, the programme is authentically whānau-led with the pathway to safety led by whānau. Whānau identify the stressors, which ones they want to work on, their priorities, how and when they will work on these, who they want to work with, and the pace at which they will work. Kaimahi follow the lead of whānau. Whānau are recognised as experts in their own lives and determine the priorities and pathways they wish to take. Kaimahi are partners who bring their experience, skills and knowledge to support the changes.

Post-programme support

At the end of the programme whānau are offered the choice of some further support from kaimahi who can check in over an agreed period by phone or visiting. Family Start, or other community-based services can also be put in place if the whānau want some longer-term service support.



OUTCOMES

Evaluation outcomes show that **85 percent of whānau accepted onto the programme have safely retained their tamariki or had them returned.** All whānau who have graduated from the programme have safely retained their tamariki, and, in the case of our first prototype whānau, four years later.

Toxic stressors have been reduced

All whānau on the programme have had their stressors reduced.

Common stressors identified by whānau include: financial hardship from debt or living on benefits; housing issues such as living in a motel unit, having too few beds and bedrooms, hoarding; and mental health issues including undiagnosed and untreated depression, anxiety and mental distress. Some whānau were dealing with the undiagnosed behavioural issues of their tamariki, such as ADHD, or behaviours that saw them fully or partially excluded from daycare or school. For many whānau, involvement from Oranga Tamariki, and the power it has to remove their children or keep them in care, was a primary stressor.

Many of these issues were successfully addressed, with whānau rehoused, debts consolidated, benefit entitlements claimed, hoarding issues addressed, counselling organised, and behavioural issues diagnosed and addressed.

While not all the issues were eliminated, all whānau interviewed reported a decrease in the cumulative weight of stress in their lives. Almost all acknowledged the reduction in stress had been a relief, improved the quality of their lives and their ability to focus and grow.

Reducing stressors appears to have had a positive impact on the behaviour of tamariki. The parents attribute this to being less stressed themselves.

"I felt stressed all the time. I had no patience for the kids at all. I had neglected them and I felt really guilty, I couldn't cope with their behaviour. When I felt less stressed the stress levels in our whole household reduced. I now set up activities for the kids and play with them. The whole tone of home has got better."

Improving parenting capabilities

Once the stressors have been reduced, parents are supported to build their parenting capability and executive functioning. Some whānau need a little coaching support, others, particularly with a care background, need more intensive support.

"My own upbringing did not give me the skills to look after my children. I knew what was missing and wanted the best for my children, but I did not know how to do this. I needed someone who could help, give me pointers and who wouldn't judge me. I just needed help."

Whānau, kaimahi and Oranga Tamariki staff interviewed agree that the programme has supported whānau to improve their capabilities. Reported changes include whānau providing a safe and clean home environment for their tamariki, establishing mealtime and sleep routines, making sure their tamariki are up in the morning, dressed, and attending childcare or school regularly, and ensuring they are taken to their health and specialist appointments. In addition to caring for children, there have been reported changes in the time whānau spend reading, storytelling and playing with their tamariki. Whānau believe the changes they have introduced to manage the behaviour of tamariki have resulted in a calmer household.

Some whānau described having very low confidence in their parenting. Several said that the programme had helped them to find their voice, become more assertive and to advocate on behalf of their children.

Whānau who have graduated from the programme say that the changes they have made have been sustained since the programme ended.

"Every time I struggled, she would say – you've got this Kayla, you've got this. And now every time I struggle, I hear my kaimahi saying "You've got this Kayla, you've got this". And do you know what – I can do it – I have got this."

Outcomes for tamariki have improved

There have been improvements in outcomes for tamariki. Tamariki with unmet or undiagnosed health needs are now receiving treatment. There have also been increases in early childhood education and school attendance, along with a decrease in truancy. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the police involved with two whānau have reported a marked reduction in the criminal offending of the children. One police officer said in the year previous he spent around one-third of his time dealing with incidents relating to the whānau, but with no reported crimes during the programme, he now visited the whānau weekly to play chess with the children. A police officer involved with the second whānau assumed they had shifted from the area due to the decrease in reported crimes.

Many of the parents have reported improvements in the emotional regulation and behavior of their tamariki.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Whānau attribute the success of the programme to:

- **The relationship between kaimahi and whānau.** Building trust is critically important and it takes time. Most whānau find it difficult at the start to have someone in their home. Despite reassurances, some whānau feel watched, and are concerned if they make a parenting 'mistake' their children will be removed from their care. Kaimahi are in the whānau home. They are aware of and respect the whānau values, their ways of doing things, and their culture. Almost all whānau have built a strong relationship with their kaimahi, finding them helpful, warm and compassionate.

"She (the kaimahi) proved to me we could trust her – she has done nothing but back us 100 percent. She has supported me and my family. She doesn't judge."

- **Having a safety goal and clarity about the changes required of them.** Whānau say having Oranga Tamariki clearly document their concerns and developing safety goals is helpful as they were not always clear about the concerns of Oranga Tamariki, and what they needed to do to keep their whānau together or have their tamariki returned.

- **The programme being authentically whānau-led.** The whānau have choices, options and drive the work. It is the whānau who identify their stressors, decide how they want to address them, what they want to work on and at what pace. The kaimahi are there to support them to make it happen.

"I'd say what I wanted to do and they'd see it through. It is all me, this is the support I have been looking for, for a very long time."

- **Having their tamariki at the heart of the programme.** The primary goal of almost every whānau interviewed is to keep their tamariki in their care or have their tamariki returned. The work of the programme was centered on providing every support to make that happen safely.

- **Working with the wider whānau.**

"A lot of services ignore the dad. They don't include the dad, especially when you are not living together. It has been the whole family. Respect."

- **The structure of the programme which focuses on removing stressors before expecting whānau to be able to focus on building their parenting skills.** Whānau acknowledge that this approach was helpful as they did not have the bandwidth to make changes and learn new parenting strategies while under so much stress.

- **Being in-home.** Providing support in the home allows stressors and issues to be identified and addressed, sources of support strengthened, and for kamahi to thoroughly understand any parenting and safety issues. This enables the kamahi to help the whānau reduce the risk of harm.

"There is a big difference between sitting in a room being told things and shown things and seeing it on a video, with other parents there and getting their feedback, than when it is in play and happening at home in your living room."

- **Showing not telling.** Whānau find the modelling, coaching and support helpful.

- **The kaimahi having faith in their ability to parent and holding the hope, even when the whānau did not.**

"The best thing about the programme is that that it gave us a new outlook. It gave us hope. There is still hope. It came into the picture to say there is hope. It was fresh eyes on our family and it gave us fresh eyes."

- **The help being 'helpful' help.** The kaimahi have a 'do what it takes' attitude and help out with whatever is needed at the time, whether it is helping to fold washing, make school lunches, or run them to the shops. They provide practical and emotional support. Some parents describe the kaimahi as like having a helpful Aunty or as whānau themselves.

"She helped me pack up the house and move. She would help me hang out washing, help with the kids. All of it really helped. It was help that helped me."

- **Staff being available when needed.** Sessions are scheduled for times of the day when issues are most likely to arise for the whānau such as early morning, mealtimes, and bedtimes. This means support is available at the times whānau need it.

CONCLUSION

The early evaluation findings show that it is possible to support whānau with children in care, or on the edge of care, to retain their children safely and improve whānau outcomes for both parents and their tamariki.

To do this responsibly requires careful planning. It requires a process to identify and refer whānau suitable for the programme. This relies on a strong, collaborative partnership between the Mana Whānau agency and the Oranga Tamariki site with information being fully shared by all parties. The whānau need to be willing to having kaimahi work with them in their home up to 65 hours a week, and open to make the changes required to reach their over-arching goal.

It requires a step by step approach in which the stressors are identified, and practical measures are undertaken to reduce or eliminate them. For whānau to open up about the challenges they face and accept support requires trust. The relationship between kaimahi and whānau is critical and takes time to build. For some whānau, reducing the stressors has been sufficient for the parents to provide the care their tamariki need. For others, it has allowed them the space and bandwidth to learn new skills and capabilities.

The safety of tamariki drives the work. To date, 85 percent of whānau accepted onto the programme have safely retained or had their tamariki returned. All those who have graduated from the programme have safely retained their tamariki.

Based on the outcomes to date, the evaluation finds that **if implemented with fidelity**, Mana Whānau provides a safe and highly successful alternative option to foster care.