

# My brother and my sister

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**Whakapapa Research  
Project series: Whāngai**



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**Whakapapa Research Project series**

This is part of a series of writings from eight whānau researchers on nine kaupapa. This kaupapa is about whāngai.

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Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) and whakapapa

Kai

Matriarch

Research methodology and methods

Whānau event

**Whāngai**

Whenua

Taonga



## He kupu whakaūpoko: Introduction

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Manaakitanga is to nourish and nurture; a word that can be used to describe the act of whāngai. It is a term, often referred to in Māori custom, where a child is raised by extended whānau other than his or her birth parents.

## The custom and process of whāngai

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Within te ao Māori, the customary practice in which a child is raised by whānau other than their birth parents is termed whāngai, atawhai, or tamaiti whāngai. The cultural concept of whāngai has changed over time; so too have the thoughts of those who have experienced whāngai over the generations. The term whāngai literally means to feed or nourish (Mead, 1997).

The meaning of whāngai implies that the child is being nurtured and nourished affectionately, culturally, physically, mentally, and spiritually, as well as with kai. Taken as one's own under whāngai custom does not require the child to relinquish all claims to their birth right or identity. Whāngai occurs within the child's own whānau, and their whakapapa is acknowledged and maintained to affirm their lineage. Therefore, those placements or links are secured and strengthened through whānau (Bradley, 1997).

New Zealand's first Adoption Act 1881 did not impinge on whāngai. This was not the case when the subsequent Native Land Court Claims and Adjustment and Amendment Act 1901 was introduced. Through this Act, it became essential to register whāngai

placements in the Native Land Court to qualify the child to succeed to lands of the whāngai parents. The Act also established the legally recognised adoption of children. The Native Land Court Act 1909 brought further change by providing for the practice of whāngai in its customary form. Māori were forced to legally adopt through the Native Land Court, although Māori continued to whāngai children. This was done at the risk of the whāngai not being able to succeed to the land.

## My sister: An experience of being whāngai'd/adopted out

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Validation is what she always craved; she was quite fascinated when her own daughter was born. For the very first time ever, she looked like someone—and that was a lovely feeling for her to belong. She is proud of who she is, despite the struggles of her identity as a Māori adopted whāngai child. Her whakapapa links are to Ngā Wairiki-Ngāti Apa and Taranaki.

She was born to Māori parents in the 1960s and formally whāngai'd, then legally adopted by a couple who were desperate to have children. Her whāngai-adoptive dad was of Māori descent with links to Taranaki, and her adoptive mother was of Pākehā descent. A year later, they adopted another daughter of Māori descent, who has links to Taranaki. Her family was blessed with the arrival of a biological son and brother many years later. His birth cemented the family as a whole and today they are a close unit. She remembers feeling totally part of the family and received the same love and affection as her younger siblings.

In her formative teenage years she met her biological



father whom had a family of three daughters and two sons. She struggled with that fact for many years and questioned 'why me?'. The answer came to light years later; she shares the same father as her siblings, but was born to a different mother. End of story.

I was 13 years old when we were introduced. The initial shock threw me, not because we have another sister, but because of the dynamics of her birth right. I had so many questions: how did this happen and why was she adopted out? Why was she not a part of our whānau? The truth was hard to swallow. I felt for her. For us, it was soul destroying. How could they do that to us as siblings or half-siblings? Not long after that meeting, my parents separated. It was a struggle to comprehend the reality that was happening in our world.

We got to know our sister in a different light. Her adoptive parents encouraged us to reconnect, as the ties that had been severed were no fault of our own. We are truly grateful for their love and support through this transition. My sister has a relationship with all her siblings from both sides—her biological siblings and her adoptive siblings—a blended whānau, a place of belonging. We are now a blended whānau with many children, many mokopuna, and many whāngai between us. We are whānau. Our bloodline connects us, and binds us together.

## **My brother: An experience of being whāngai'd/adopted in**

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He loves his whānau who have surrounded him with much love and support—a place of belonging. He was born in the early 1970s. His elderly biological parents are of Māori and Pākehā descent. His adoptive-

whāngai parents are both of Māori descent. At an age of understanding, it was explained to him that he was left at the hospital for three months, waiting for someone to adopt him. Sadly, no one came for him, so he was returned to his elderly parents.

His now adoptive parents heard of his plight. They arrived one day to visit him. He was laying in his cot in a back room, looking around, talking and smiling to himself, with the biggest beautiful grey-blue coloured eyes. His adoptive dad fell in love the moment he laid eyes on him. He reached out to grasp his hand and he wouldn't let go, thus confirming his love for his son. After talking to his elderly parents asking them if they could take him home as their child, it was agreed between both parties to commence the process of adoption and, following the Court's approval, he became their legally-adopted son.

He always knew he was legally adopted by his whānau. There was no hidden agenda. He was blessed with three sisters, and later on, one brother. He grew up knowing that his birth mother was of Māori descent from Taranaki. She raised eight children and he was her ninth child. However, the love and support from his adoptive whānau has made the process of integrating his Māori identity into a positive experience through the learning of his whakapapa.

At the age of two, his elderly parents wanted him back, as they regretted leaving him at the hospital and later giving him up for adoption. They asked to have him returned, however, it was too late; the adoption had been finalised before his first birthday, and there was no returning him to his biological whānau. This caused a slight disagreement between the two whānau at the time, but time has allowed for healing and all has been forgiven.

Growing up with his adoptive whānau gave him all the opportunities that his siblings received. He loved



sports; he played softball, as well as rugby at school, and rugby league as a teenager. At secondary school, he participated in a work experience option and worked in a local community business. His chosen field was to become a butcher, and he gained much whilst on work experience at a local butcher shop.

He travelled to Australia with his rugby team playing at different places and visiting many sites. He loved life's fast pace in Australia, and he called home to tell us that he was staying a while longer. His experience as a butcher secured him a job to work at one of the biggest hotel franchises, at The Hilton in Sydney. He started working from the bottom up, learning many skills. Over the years he secured the manager's position catering for various restaurants in and around Sydney. He lived in Australia for over ten years and saved hard to eventually buy his own business—a butcher shop.

He travelled extensively before getting married, and also gained a whāngai step-daughter, as well as three beautiful grand-daughters and a son-in-law. He and his wife do not have any biological children of their own; he believes his whāngai daughter and her whānau are his own to love.

He has been nurtured and loved by all our whānau.

## Abuse of the practice of whāngai

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My whānau experiences of whāngai and adoption are different to others' realities. In one such case, the birth parents agreed to whāngai their baby to a paternal aunt who was unable to have children. Everyone agreed to the transition and care of the baby. However, sometime later, the birth mother decided she wanted her child

back for whatever reason. She was determined to have the child returned. This did not eventuate, so the biological mother made allegations to Oranga Tamariki, stating the child was being physically and sexually abused. The agency investigated those allegations with social workers and other specialists, who interviewed the child between 2014 and 2016. The investigation found no signs of abuse during the time specified, and the manager from the child's pre-school noted that there were no signs of abuse. The main outcome with regards to this case is one child and two parents who do not get along.

Those dynamics did not change the mind of the judge, who presided over this case. He found no cause for abuse by the child's whāngai parents, therefore, the case is now closed and the child remains with her whāngai parents. Interestingly, her whāngai mother remains in the system as a 'child abuser'. To date, the agency has not removed or amended their database regardless of the judge's ruling.

## He kupu whakakapi: Conclusion

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The practices of whāngai met with some resistance with legal adoption processes and impacted our whāngai practices. Indeed, the process does not always go according to plan, but when all of the whānau involved have open communication, this in turn, certainly aids the process. Here, we see that whāngai challenges the notion that blood is thicker than water—we get to determine the strength of those relationships and the 'thickness' of them, that binds us ever closer to one another.



## Kuputaka: Glossary

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Use of tuhutō (macrons): the introduction of macrons over some Māori vowels, have (1) clarified definitions and (2) made it easier to pronounce Māori words (i.e., knowing where to place the emphasis as you are saying the words). When we quote sources from earlier periods where macrons have not been used, we have not included the macron to remain true to the original text. In the glossary, we have included both versions of the word (with and without macrons).

<b>atawhai</b>	Māori customary practice in which a child is raised by whānau other than their birth parents
<b>kai</b>	food
<b>manaakitanga</b>	nourish and nurture
<b>mokopuna</b>	grandchild; grandchildren
<b>Ngā Wairiki-Ngāti Apa</b>	tribe in the Rangitīkei region
<b>tamaiti whānagai</b>	Māori customary practice in which a child is raised by whānau other than their birth parents
<b>whakapapa</b>	genealogy
<b>whānau</b>	family
<b>whāngai</b>	Māori customary practice in which a child is raised by whānau other than their birth parents

## He rāranga rauemi: References

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