ORANGA TAMARIKI
Ministry for Children

EVIDENCE CENTRE
TE POKAPŪ TAUNAKITANGA
New Zealand Government

Making sense of being in care, adopted, or whāngai: Perspectives of rangatahi, young people, and those who are raising them

Qualitative study

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The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre works to build the evidence base that helps us better understand wellbeing and what works to improve outcomes for New Zealand's children, young people and their whānau.

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Executive summary

Background

There are many children in New Zealand who were not raised by their birth parents. In this qualitative study, we talk to three groups of young people and their caregivers/parents: young people in care, young people who are whāngai, and adopted young people. We explore how young people make sense of their situations when they are in these arrangements.

In particular, we focus on how they learn about it and how they understood it, what meaning it has for them, how it affects a child's identity and sense of belonging with whānau and how they talk about it. For context, we also explore current practices of informing children in care about their care status through a document review and interviews with social workers.

This is a foundational piece of research that can inform social work practice within Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children. A particular interest was also to inform the conduct of research that considers out-of-home care status of children and young people.

This report shares the views of 33 young people and caregivers and parents gathered through in-depth interviews. While the focus of the project is on young people in care, it also includes whāngai rangatahi and adopted young people as comparison groups.

Findings

Social work policy and practice

- Children in care have the right to be informed about their care status and supported over time to develop understanding of their situation.
- Children are always informed to some extent, but social workers said they need to spend more time with children to support their understanding and that currently they don't have enough time to do that due to high workloads.
- Social workers are guided by a child's age and needs when talking about being in care and use language that the child can understand.
- When explaining, social workers focused on the story of what led the child into coming to care, rather than their status of being 'in care'.
- Social workers emphasised that sharing information with caregivers about a child's background needs to be improved, so caregivers can support the child better.

Awareness and understanding

- Children and young people mostly learn about their situations when they are young or early in the process.
- They are mostly given age-appropriate information, although some young people felt they could be told earlier and could be given more honest explanations.
- These conversations happen over time as a child builds their understanding.

- It was challenging to give explanations when caregivers didn't have enough information about child's background or when the placements were uncertain.
- Children's understanding is supported by being able to have honest conversations with significant people in their lives, and by being able to ask questions.
- Children in the care of family members might struggle to understand that they have been 'in care', instead they see it as living with family.
- Being told conflicting information and not having someone to talk to hinders children's understanding.

Meaning

- There are a range of meanings associated with being raised by people other than birth parents, with young people usually experiencing a mix of positive and negative meanings
- Positive meanings for the young people included: they had a better life with more opportunities and support, they were part of a whānau or family, they felt loved and special.
- Negative meanings for the young people included: feeling unwanted by birth parents, feeling that they are to blame, struggling with being separated from birth family and worrying about them, feeling different to others, not knowing their stories, being disconnected from whakapapa and culture, not feeling loved by caregivers and feeling as a burden, fearing their caregivers or parents might die because of their older age, dealing with stigma, being moved and not having a sense of home, and in some cases, being abused.
- Caregivers and parents also talked about range of meanings it has for them. They said it means raising children and young people to feel loved and wanted, keeping them safe and giving them a good life – and supporting them with any additional needs. Alongside these meanings, there were particular meanings depending on their situation. Overall, whāngai and adoptive parents experienced more of the positives and less of the challenges.

Identity

- Children and young people in care said they don't use the term 'in care' and use other terms instead to avoid the stigma associated with it, as do their caregivers.
- Those who are adopted are mostly comfortable with the term 'adopted', and so are their adoptive parents.
- 'Whānau' is mostly used instead of 'whāngai' as whāngai is a normal part of what makes a whānau.
- Most young people talk about their situation only with those they are close to, and some don't tell others at all.
- Pākehā caregivers and adoptive parents often keep things private too to protect children from any stigma. Māori caregivers and whāngai parents are generally more open and most use kōrero rather than privacy to manage any stigma.

Belonging

- While many children and young people have close relationships and feel a sense of belonging with their caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents, some don't.
- Many children and young people's relationships with their birth parents are complex, whether they are close or not.
- Relationships with birth siblings are especially important to children and young people's sense of belonging to their birth whānau or families.
- Whakapapa connections are an important source of belonging for many tamariki and rangatahi Māori – both to their whānau and to their hapū and iwi.
- Some children and young people have relationships of belonging with both sets of parents and with their whānau or families, where these multiple connections give them a greater sense of belonging.

What helps children to make sense of their situation

- Knowing their whole story and the story being strengths-based.
- Seeing their situation with the perspective of what would have happened if they stayed with birth parents.
- Being given realistic explanations.
- Talking with and being affirmed by whānau or family and friends.
- Having access to social workers and counsellors where needed.
- When their experiences of what makes a family or whānau are normalised.

Conclusions and implications

This exploratory study has touched on several complex interconnected topics, providing us with initial understanding in these areas. It has shown that making sense of being in these care arrangements can be highly complex and a difficult task for children and young people.

Consequently, making sense of being in these arrangements is a process that takes time, as children's understanding builds as they grow and develop abilities to process more complex information and child's age of processing this information is highly variable.

We identified the following implications and considerations that could both inform social work practice within Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children, in particular the way how we communicate with and support children and caregivers and also provide insights into how to bring the voice of the children and their whānau and families to the fore in operational practice and decision making:

Language

1. Some children and young people in care would not identify themselves as being in care – they either don't see it that way, because they live with family; they don't know or use this language; or they want to avoid stigma.

Informing children of their situations

2. Inform younger children with realistic and honest explanations and encourage their participation in the child protection process earlier.

3. Improve information sharing with caregivers and keep the adults in a child's life on the same page about what information is provided to children.

Supporting children's understanding of their situation

4. Current New Zealand law and policy around informing children about their care status is set up right and reflected the needs of our study participants. However, social workers need more time to spend with children, to be able to describe the situation to them and answer their questions and to build a trusting relationship that would allow further conversations, supporting children's understanding as they grow and develop. To ensure social workers have more time, high workload needs to be addressed – suggestions included lowering caseloads, and reducing administrative burdens.

5. Ensure children have someone to talk to and are able to access mental health support. Being able to talk to someone about their situation, asking questions and having them answered, and being affirmed by trusted people supports children's understanding. Mental health support is also beneficial, as working through emotional challenges that some children may experience (e.g. feeling unwanted), can lead to more nuanced understanding of their situations.

6. Ensure support for children with disabilities, as they face additional challenges in making sense of their situations. Many children and young people in care have disabilities, such as FASD, autism, ADHD, hearing, speech and language difficulties. Many caregivers struggled with access to disability support, that would help them to work with children and better support their understanding.

Supporting children's sense of identity and belonging

7. Support children to have access to written records that relate to their personal history and also support them to create 'life story books'. Policy for creating life story records is already in place together with resources to support this effort.

8. Social work support could be more flexible to accommodate the different needs of caregivers – for example some wanted more involvement and support from Oranga Tamariki than others. Support could also be more forthcoming from Oranga Tamariki, where it's actively offered rather than waiting for caregivers to ask for it. Some caregivers can be hesitant to ask for support, and especially whānau and family caregivers who feel it's their responsibility to care for their children and can feel embarrassed about asking for support. Supporting whānau caregivers better enables children to stay with whānau, which is beneficial to supporting their understanding, identity and belonging.

9. Support whānau rangatiratanga in child protection matters, when possible. When whānau are supported to make decisions about their children it leads to less disruption for the child and whānau, making it easier for children to make sense of their situation and preserving their sense of identity and belonging.

Oranga Tamariki currently has the 'Hui a whānau' process in place which can assist with this.

10. Better enable the building and/or maintenance of cultural and whakapapa connections to improve a sense of belonging for tamariki and rangatahi Māori.

11. Support children to make many connections and create a network of relationships. We found that many children and young people had relationships and felt they belonged with both their caregiver and birth whānau. Children and young people felt this was a positive and led to a sense of extended whānau and wider social networks, giving them a greater sense of belonging. Having an opportunity to know birth family members was an important sense making mechanism for children, helping them make sense of their life story.

12. Anti-stigma work is needed to normalise various forms of whānau and family. This stigma is prevalent in wider society as well as amongst other agencies and professionals.

Introduction

There are many children in New Zealand, who were not raised by their birth parents. Some of these children are adopted, some were raised as whāngai, which refers to the Māori customary practice where children are raised by people other than their birth parents; and some were in the custody of the state and were cared for and raised by caregivers.

In this qualitative study, we explore how children make sense of their situation when they are in these arrangements. Particularly, how they learn about it and how they understand it, what meaning it has for them, how it affects a child's identity and sense of belonging with whānau and how they talk about it. This report shares the views of 33 young people, caregivers and parents, who took part in this project through in-depth interviews.

This qualitative study is the second part of the *Making sense of being in care, adopted, or whāngai* project, following the literature review exploring the same questions.

It is a foundational piece of research, that can inform social work practice within Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children, especially the way we communicate with and support children and caregivers. It can also be useful for other parts of the Ministry and wider social sector, bringing the voice of the children and their whānau and families to the forefront. A particular interest was to inform the conduct of research that considers out-of-home care status of children and young people.

It is exploratory in nature, with the potential to follow up on emerging topics with future studies.

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the project scope, the research questions that guided the project, methods we used to answer the research questions, including how we engaged with young people, caregivers and social workers and how we analysed what we heard.

Who were the groups we were interested in

We wanted to explore experiences of young people who were not raised by their birth parents. We chose to initially focus on three groups: young people with experience of being in care of Oranga Tamariki (state care), adopted young people and whāngai young people. Detailed description of these groups can be found in the literature review.

In summary:

Young people in care

When children are not safe, New Zealand's care and protection legislation allows for them to be removed from their parents' care and placed in the **custody of another party**. A child who is placed in statutory custody for this reason is referred to as **being 'in care'**. Most custody orders are made in favour of the Chief Executive (CE) of Oranga Tamariki— Ministry for Children (Oranga Tamariki) – this is sometimes referred to as being **in state care**.

However, custody orders can also be made in favour an individual person. When children in state care are unable to return into care of their birth parents, they can transition from state care into a **permanent care** of a caregiver, where the permanent caregiver has the custody of the child. Often children transition into permanent care of the caregiver they have been living with while in state care.

The living arrangement made for a child in care is known as a **placement**. When a child is in an 'out-of-home placement', they can be placed with family or whānau caregivers, with non-whānau caregivers (foster care), with Child and Family Support Services (CFSS), iwi social services, residential placement, boarding school, etc.

In this study, we focused on young people with experience of being in care including state and permanent care and placed in 'family-like' types of placements – living with a whānau or non-whānau caregiver for a long period of time. We interviewed young people who were between 15 and 25 years old.

Adopted young people

Adoption is the legal transfer of parenting rights and responsibilities from birth parents to adoptive parents. Legally, adoption replaces all the child's birth family relationships with those of the adoptive family. We interviewed young people who were between 17 and 21 years old.

Young people raised as whāngai

Whāngai is a customary Māori practice where a tamaiti (child) is raised and nurtured usually by another relative, rather than their birth parents, either permanently or temporarily. From a Māori worldview, tamariki are carriers of their whakapapa and cultural knowledge, making them precious taonga (treasures) that need to be protected by their whānau and hapū. The practice of whāngai protects the cultural rights of tamariki as it is the whānau who raise them. We interviewed young people who were between 15 and 25 years old.

Caregivers, adoptive parents and matua whāngai

In this study we also listened to the experiences of caregivers, adoptive parents and matua whāngai (whāngai parents). We focused on exploring their knowledge and perspectives, including experiences of raising younger children.

Some of the caregivers we interviewed were caring for children who were in state care. Others were caring for children who were in their permanent care. Some of the caregivers were members of a child's family or whanau (whanau or family caregivers), and others were unrelated (non-whanau or non-family caregivers). Of the whanau caregivers we talked with, all were grandparents of the children. In terms of ethnicity, almost all of the rangatahi Māori we interviewed were cared for by Māori caregivers. All of the Pakeha young people we interviewed were with Pakeha caregivers.

Social workers

We were also interested in social workers' experiences, including both social workers for the child and social workers for the caregiver. Their perspective was explored for only a small part of this study.

Research questions

The following research questions guided our study:

1. What is the requirement in legislation and policy to inform children about their care status? What role do social workers and caregivers play in informing children and supporting them over time to make sense of their situation?
2. Are children aware of being in these arrangements? How do children learn about being in these care arrangements and how do they understand it over time?
3. How do caregivers, social workers and families talk about this with children? What language is used to discuss being in care, adopted or whāngai?
4. What meanings are associated with being in these arrangements?
5. How does it affect a child's identity? Where do children and young people feel they belong in relation to their birth and caregiver/parent whānau, hapū and iwi?

Methods

The majority of this study is based on **qualitative methods**, with a complementary document review. **Document review** was used to answer a part of the first research question about policy and practice requirements to inform children of their care status and support them over time. **Interviews** were used to gather experiences of young people, caregivers, adoptive parents, whāngai parents and social workers.

This table shows the number of participants grouped by whether they were young people, caregivers/parents or social workers, no matter what care arrangement they were in:

Participant group	Māori	Non-Māori	Total
Young people	7	6	13
Caregivers, adoptive parents and whāngai parents	9	11	20
Social workers	1	3	4

This table shows the number of participants by type of care arrangement. This table includes young people and caregivers/parents, and excludes social workers.

Participant group	Māori	Non-Māori	Total
In care	10	13	23
Adopted	0	4	4
Whāngai	6	0	6

The majority of the interviews were done kanohi-ki-te kanohi, face-to-face, with a few exceptions which were online interviews, where this was preferred by the participant. Researchers were experienced in engagement with young people and interviews with Māori were done by a Māori researcher.

Information gathered in the one-to-one and group interviews was analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis method and the Bridging Cultural Perspectives approach,[1] which allows collaboration between Māori and non-Māori researchers and bringing Māori and non-Māori streams of knowledge together. This collaboration included a series of sense-making workshops and conversations and a collaborative writing process. In the report, we used quotes extensively to preserve the authentic voice of participants.

Limitations

This study did not gather views of young people who were not aware of their care status. This was due to ethical considerations around unnecessarily exposing young people to distress that might be caused by revealing this information.

[1] https://thehub.swa.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Bridging-Cultural-Perspectives-FINAL-0.pdf

The study also excluded other young people who were not raised by their birth parents, such as orphans, or those whose caregivers receive the Unsupported Child benefit. As this study is exploratory in nature, we accept this limitation of the scope and note the potential of exploring other groups' perspectives in future studies.

Since the establishment of Oranga Tamariki in 2017, there have been a number of law, policy and practice changes regarding support of children in state care and their caregivers. The young people and caregivers we interviewed often reflected on their experience before these changes came into effect. This is reflected in the use of the former name of CYFS (Child, Youth and Family Services) by some participants.

Finally, due to difficulty with finding participants for this study, participants were recruited using a snowball technique – some of them were recruited using Oranga Tamariki social workers, caregivers, others were recruited via researchers' personal networks.

Overview of social work policy and practice

Children in care have the right to be informed about their care status

In New Zealand, children who are in care have the right to be informed about their care status, as is stated in ***Oranga Tamariki (National Care Standards and Related Matters) Regulations 2018 legislation, Statements of rights***.[2] Specifically, children have the right to have explained:

- Reasons that have led to the child being brought into care
- Information about the prospective placement and an opportunity to visit the placement, if possible
- Explanation about the ways things should happen while the child is in care
- How they should be treated by their caregiver
- How often will they see their support worker and who they can contact if they have any questions

This information must be explained in a way that is appropriate to the child's age, development, language and/or disability. The information is held in an *All about me plan*. Whenever the child's care plan is reviewed, relevant information needs to be shared with the child so they have an opportunity to gain greater understanding as they grow and develop. If the child doesn't have the capacity to understand the information, the information should be given to the child's advocate.

These principles are further developed in the ***Participation of tamariki – providing information, ensuring understanding and incorporating their views*** policy. This policy goes into further detail, specifying what information needs to be provided and explained and stating this needs to be provided as soon as reasonably possible and in a way that respects the child's mana. Additionally, this policy explains how children and young people should be supported to participate in and express their views on any action or decision that affects them, and these views must be taken into account, alongside other considerations such as their welfare and best interests.

Furthermore, children in care need to be informed about their rights and entitlements and this information must be provided on an ongoing basis to ensure their understanding. They need to be informed about their *All About Me plan (care plan)*, about how their family, whānau, hapū and iwi will be involved, how they can access an independent advocacy service, their record of important life events and how they can participate in their care decisions.

Another policy ***Transitions within care*** applies to tamariki transitioning into care, between care placements, out of care or into permanent care. This policy states that tamariki need to be prepared for the transitions, and informed about the reasons for this transition, timing, and have information about their new home and caregivers, and how they will be supported and visited after the transition.

[2] Oranga Tamariki (National Care Standards and Related Matters) Regulations 2018 (LI 2018/111) (as at 13 August 2020) – New Zealand Legislation

This policy also specifies that the new caregiver for the child needs to be informed about te tamaiti and their plan needs to be shared with them.

These legislation and policy requirements are accompanied by guidance for social workers about how to approach these conversations and also by some child-friendly printed booklets, such as *All about me plan* where children keep records of important information and their care plan, or a *Child-friendly statement of rights*.

How social workers approach these conversations in practice

To understand how these policies are applied in practice and how social workers approach these conversations with children in care, we asked Oranga Tamariki social workers to share their experience in one individual and one group interview. A mix of social workers for the child and social workers for the caregiver shared their views with us and the following themes emerged from these conversations.

Informing children and supporting their understanding is best practice

Most of the social workers were aware that informing a child about their care status and supporting their understanding over time was the child's right and all of them considered it the best practice and all were making sure children they were working with were informed and supported.

Social workers agreed that all children were involved in some kind of conversation about their care status, but the extent and depth of these conversations varied. When informing the child, they would explore child's views and feelings and support their wellbeing. All made sure to check with children over time and, depending on the child's development and need, would support them in making sense of their situation. Social workers saw this as an ongoing conversation over a long period of time, as opposed to a one-off conversation.

Social workers reflected that it works well when children can be given some easily accessible information such as booklet, that they can engage with when they need it. For example, the *Welcome home* is a booklet created by a caregiver family with information about the family members, family home environment and photos. A child can be given this booklet before going to care with a caregiver and it helps them to have some idea about where they are going and people they are going to stay with. Also providing child with some written information about their care status and history is helpful.

Admission into care is often stressful and is not the best time to talk to children

Some social workers reflected that often when children are brought into care from their parents' home, it is a very stressful situation for everyone. Parents can be upset and there can be threats and violence, sometimes police need to be involved. Children are often upset by the situation too and so are social workers. It is hard for social workers to have this conversation with a child at the time. They may have a

brief conversation in a car when travelling to a caregiver's place, but this conversation may be more focused on managing child's emotions, depending on child's state. More in-depth conversation can then happen in the next few days when the child is settled in caregiver's place.

The following comment illustrates how coming to care can be explained to a child by a social worker:

"These are the things that are going on, and I'm worried about all this stuff – I'm worried about your safety; so what we were thinking was to let you stay with your uncle, or a specific caregiver, for this long, until the whole family can come together and make a decision. You can still see your parents. You can see them at the office, or during x this many times every week." Social worker

Social workers commented that ideally, they would already have some conversations with the child prior to going into care, which is really helpful for easing the child's stress and supporting their understanding of their situation. Also, it helps when a whānau or family member, such as grandparents, can be present and explain to the child what is happening.

Social workers reflected that they need enhanced support, training and induction so that they may better manage and support children through these stressful situations.

A trusting relationship with the child is essential to supporting their understanding

Establishing a relationship with the child before the conversation about coming into care is helpful. Social workers also reflected the importance of developing a relationship with the child over time, so the child trusts them and feels safe having these conversations with them. This takes a long time and a lot of work, first making sure that children can trust them with little things, before they can trust them with big things. Being honest, reliable, doing what you said you will do, being truly present for the children, caring and listening to them are some of the ways social workers build relationships with children.

"I think doing what you say you're going to do. That's a huge thing for kids…for me it's those little things, and really being present when you're with the kids. If you say, "I'm going to pick you up tomorrow at three o'clock." Be there at three o'clock, or be there at 2:55. They just need that consistency. And so, those little things of, "How was your day?" Building that relationship, and getting them to trust you before you dive into that real deep painful stuff." Social worker

Developing trusting relationship and spending time with children allows social workers to get to know the child better and understand their character, needs and development level and they can then tailor the conversation about being in care to be appropriate to the specific child.

Social workers need more time than they currently have to build those relationships

All social workers agreed that they don't have enough time to build relationships that are needed for conversations with children about being in care. All social workers stressed that high workload is a barrier to spending quality time with children, inhibiting their ability to truly connect and get to know tamariki. Social workers reflected, that the high workload was caused by a combination of factors: high caseload; some high needs families requiring more of social workers' time; some families being large with many children; administrative burden; reactive nature of work such as responding to emergencies or requests from courts and schools; families being geographically spread across the region with long commuting times; having to adjust to changing social work policies and practice. All these factors can contribute to high workload, leaving social workers feeling that there are not enough hours in the day to do their work and to spend enough time with children.

Also, social workers reflected that they can often be focused on addressing urgent needs of some children, while other children get less attention.

"Time; the amount of time it takes to actually connect with a young person is not your half an hour, an hour, it's longer than that. It's the time taken to truly understand what is currently happening for them…And when you're sort of spreading yourself really thin across a caseload of upwards of 20, that gets lost, because there's not enough hours in the day to be able to commit to every kid." Social worker

"They need you to be present. I mean, you can come into the office and you can plan your day, you can sit there and plan your week, but that all goes out the window with a phone call, "So and so's been hurt." Or there's a placement breakdown… Kids need time, and they need you to be present when you're with them; and sometimes that's hard when you know that you've got five other visits to get done, or in the back of your head you're sitting there visiting a child, but you're freaking out about the fact that you don't have placement for Joey tonight. It's being present I think is the hardest bit for our kids, is to making sure that they feel that you are there to give them their time, and that they feel that awhi from you, because that's going to then impact on your relationship with them." Social worker

Social workers also reflected that assigned social workers for the child are often changing, due to process and high staff turnover reasons. One social worker gave an example of one child having six social workers in a year. It is then harder for the child to form a relationship with the social worker and there is also a loss of information when social workers change.

Social workers are guided by the child's age and needs when talking about being in care

A strong theme throughout the interviews was that the conversation with the child needs to be age appropriate, so the child can understand. Older children would get more detail and explanation than younger children.

"If I am a teenager, and I am 16 years old and if I ask why I'm in care, and if they tell me, "Your mum is unwell," that is not good enough answer for me. I need to know more. I need to know why exactly. What do you mean by mum is unwell?" Social worker

Social workers also tailor the conversation towards the developmental and comprehension levels of the child and to the child's interest in the topic. One of the factors in whether the child is interested in this topic is whether they feel ready and safe to talk about it.

"I've got a little boy who's nine; He's been in care for a year, and is only just starting to ask a lot of questions about that because he feels safe to do so. Whereas, a year ago, and even though we had those conversations he didn't want to unpack it to what he does now." Social worker

Consequently, the age when child's interest in this topic starts to grow can be very variable depending on child's individual circumstances, and some children may never be interested in talking about it. This is where getting to know the child is really useful to have the conversations most appropriate to their needs.

"It really is case by case, in my experience, with younger kids. Some kids are okay with talking about that sooner. Some you have to wait until 16. Some just out of curiosity ask one day, and you're like, 'okay, that's the path we're going down', and others don't ask at all." Social worker

"There is no set procedure, process or anything in terms of explaining it to the child. But, depending on the child's pace, we will do it on the child's pace. Whenever the child is ready and whenever the child is asking questions." Social worker

Creating space for these conversations and questions and coming back to them

Social workers emphasised that it was important to give children opportunities for exploring this topic. Social workers may ask some probing questions and allow space for children to ask questions too.

"I think it's about understanding the kids and having the kids long enough, on your caseload, to know when that's right to pitch that conversation. I have and would just be asking probing questions around that like, "Has anyone told you?" "Has anyone invited you to this?" "Have you seen this before?" Sort of as a starting point." Social worker

These conversations need to be revisited as children's understanding develops, or there are changes in a child's circumstances. Some children might need more repetition due to their developmental needs, for example children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) or ADHD.

Social workers commented that children are naturally curious and ask questions that help them make sense of their situation over time. Common questions were: *"Why can't I be with mum? When can I go back to mum? When am I going to see mum? Why am I with my Aunty rather than my mum? Why am I different? Why do all the*

kids at school stay with their dad and mum, and I stay with Aunty and Uncle? Why can't I be with my own siblings? Why does mum not like me, or dad doesn't like me? Do they not want me?" Why do my siblings get to stay with mum and I don't get to?", in cases where the parent has other children still in their care. And then, less often, when children have experiences with abusive parents, children can ask *"We don't have to see mum eh? We're not going to get hurt by dad eh?".*

"So, there's a whole lot of questions. It's very complicated dynamics for a child to be in and understand. If you think from the child's perspective, it is very unclear and it's not normal like other kids." Social worker

Some children might need different ways of exploring these topics, such as through counselling, play therapy or a story book using narrative therapy approach. This is where social workers refer children to specialist services.

"For our littlies we do a lot play therapy referrals. I've got a couple of children who are non-verbal; and so, they go into play therapy, and through their play they are acting out what happened to them in the home. I've got a little boy who wouldn't go into the session without the caregiver. And so, they went in, and one day, they were dragons I think, were flying above the house where he got hurt, but he took his caregiver, with him, to protect him as he went past that stuff. That kind of sticks with me, you know, that this little boy is above what's happening to him down here in his trauma, but his caregiver is his protector, that he's ready to go into that stuff." Social worker

"I had a young boy with FASD, and he was 11. I worked with a narrative therapist. He did a life story book, and it was in the young boy's voice. He recorded his voice to it over a period of time; his understanding of his FASD, as well as his experience of trauma with his parents, and then also his experience within care. That was pictures alongside verbal, and him going through his understanding. There was an ownership of it being his, and he'd identify who he wanted to share it with, so they could understand him." Social worker

Child's participation supports understanding

Some social workers reflected that they make a conscious effort to invite children and young people to participate in their court reviews and various hui, so their voice can be included in the plan. As part of that, children ask questions that help them understand their situation. The age when they would participate is variable, depending on their development and interest, but mostly starts in teenage years.

Informed caregivers can support children's understanding better

Social workers emphasised that it is important to keep caregivers informed about a child's circumstances, so the caregivers can then consider these when caring for the child and answer questions that the child is asking of them. Social workers reflected that caregivers are often not well informed about a child's circumstances.

When caregivers are well informed, it leads to everyone being on the same page and everyone giving the child the same information, supporting the child's understanding

better. To do this well, social workers need to build a good relationship with caregivers which can be useful when challenging discussions are needed. An example would be when a caregiver gives information to a child that is not in their best interests, as in cases where caregivers vilify parents.

"If you're building that relationship with the caregiver as well as the child, then some of those conversations are a lot easier to have and there's the same message, and you can set the boundaries with the caregiver of what conversations they can and can't have, and what conversations you're both having, in terms of we're delivering the same message to the child about mum, or about their placement, or about what's happening for them. I think when we leave caregivers in the dark it has an impact on the children as well, if we're leaving them in the dark of, 'what's happening with my placement; what's happening with my status?', You're going back court, 'why did no-one tell me?'." Social worker

When explaining about care social workers prioritise language that the child can understand

When social workers talk to children about being in care, they use language that the child can understand and **focus on the story** such as that they are worried about them and that they are going to stay with caregivers, etc., **rather than on status** of being 'in care'. Social workers simply prioritise language that child can understand. With younger children, social workers wouldn't use the phrase 'in care', but they may use it with older children.

"The 'in care' I think it is an age and stage, and dependant on the child's ability to understand, and all those other things that we've been talking about. I don't tend to use 'in care' with a lot of my kids, like my littlies. The teenagers I will because they kinda understand it, but the younger ones, it's like live with stay with, and look after. That kind of stuff." Social worker

Awareness and understanding

This section reports on what we learned about how children and young people became aware of being in care, being adopted or whāngai and how they developed an understanding of their situations.

We heard that children and young people mostly learn about their situations when they are young or early on in the process, and are told by a range of key adults in their lives. They are mostly given age-appropriate information, although some are ready for more information and fuller explanations at a younger age or earlier on in the process than when the adults in their lives think they are. These conversations often happen numerous times as children process what has happened and why. Non-whānau caregivers in particular find it challenging to give children and young people adequate explanations when they don't have background information to share with them. Caregivers also find it challenging to give explanations when placements are temporary or uncertain.

We heard that children and young people's understanding of their situations builds over time as information is shared and things are explained more fully. This understanding is facilitated when children and young people are able to ask questions and have them answered openly and honestly, and when they have other significant people in their lives who can also share information and offer explanations. Developing an understanding is challenging when children and young people are told conflicting stories, and when they don't have a constant or reliable someone to talk with – including social workers. Understanding being 'in care' can take time where children and young people are with whānau. Understanding also takes more time to build if children or young people have hearing, speech and learning difficulties.

Becoming aware of their situations

Children mostly learn about their situations when they are young or early on in the process

Most of the young people we talked with who had gone into care or who had been adopted or raised as whāngai from a young age, had been told when they were young (usually by around 6 years of age). Because of being young, some said they didn't specifically remember being told and had simply "always known". Similarly, most of the whāngai and young people we talked to who had gone into care at an older age were told early on in the process. Some of these young people also said they didn't remember being told despite being a bit older.

"I don't remember being freaked out which is a weird thing, because I know that a lot of children would be like, you know, 'Ahh, I'm not with Mum' sort of thing. But I don't remember having that sense of anxiety which is weird. I think it's 'cause … someone must have explained it to me in a way that I think this is the best situation, or something like that. Like I said it's just gone. I can't remember it….I felt comfortable and I can't remember anyone explaining it to me." Young person in non-family care

One young person said that while she knew she was being raised by her grandparents, she was unaware of the involvement of Oranga Tamariki until she was older.

"It was an Oranga Tamariki lunch… and they were giving out these bags that were for kids in care and I got one, and I was like, 'Why did I get one? I'm not in care.' And Nana's like, 'Well you basically are, you are in care', and I was like, 'Eh?" Young person in family care

The caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents we talked with said they'd told children at a young age or early on in the process for a number of reasons. Their view was that telling children early on would help normalise things for them and lessen any trauma – including the trauma of finding out from others. Caregivers of children who had been removed from their birth parents by Oranga Tamariki talked of the importance of honesty in building trust and how this was especially important for children who had been traumatised by the process.

"It's better to be open because they get it at school anyway. Other kids know, neighbours' children know, so they go to school and then they repeat what's going on. You can't hold things back from the neighbours and the school forever." Whānau caregiver

"Look, the only thing I believe is you've got to be honest. Be straight up and honest, because these kids are so traumatised that they trust nobody. They trust nobody. The minute they feel you're going to be honest with them, the minute they think that you're straight up, then you're starting… then it can expand." Family caregiver

Children are told by a range of key people

Children and young people had mostly been told about their care arrangements by key adults in their lives.

Where children have been adopted or placed with whāngai parents, they were told by their adoptive or whāngai parents.

The situation was more varied for children and young people who had been removed from the care of their birth parents and placed with whānau or non-whānau caregivers. Some were first told by their birth parents or other whānau or family members prior to being removed, and others were told by social workers or by their caregivers after being removed.

In a few instances, children had been told by other children in care.

Children are mostly given age-appropriate explanations

Most of the young people we talked with said they had been told more about their situations as they got older.

"It wasn't pushed on us like, 'oh this is what happened blah blah blah' and we're like six years old and freaking out. It wasn't anything like that… what had happened was slowly explained to us as we got older." Rangatahi in whānau care

"I can't remember the exact age but it was more of an unfolding process. So we'd get a little bit of information about this, and then we'd get information about that." Rangatahi in whānau care

This was consistent with what we were told by caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents. They said they explained things bit by bit as children got older, tailoring their explanations to what they think children can understand without overwhelming or traumatising them. For example, caregivers and whāngai and adopted parents used terms like 'tummy mum' to explain things in simple terms to younger children.

"It's taken me a good seven months to try and work in with my mokos. I don't discuss a heck of a lot with them at the moment because they're still going through why is nana here and everything." Whānau caregiver

"You get to know them and their characters. You sort of have a tendency to know how much they need to know, and how much they could handle knowing. It just varies on the different situations." Family caregiver

"They know they're here because their mum can't look after them at the moment. I've answered their questions, but I only tell them what they need to know because there's no point in getting them all worried about something that might not even be, or exaggerating the situation, because you don't know if they might go back." Family caregiver

"I don't think there's any one conversation. If you have kids you have a hundred million conversations…. You talk about it in this context but as they get older you can go up a few levels and you have more conversations." Non-whānau caregiver

Children sometimes need more information earlier on in the process

Some young people told us that key adults in their lives had made assumptions they wouldn't understand things "because of being kids" and that they'd wanted and been ready for more detailed information and fuller explanations at a younger age or earlier on in the process. They said they didn't want things to be "sugar coated" or to be "treated like little kids".

"It would have helped me a lot of talking a lot earlier." Young person, non-family care

"What's best for people is actually knowing what is happening as opposed to living in a fairy tale." Young person in family care

"I was not informed of things which is one of the issues I find with OT; they don't inform children of things and they can be quite patronising…They would leave you in the dark for almost anything unless it became particularly relevant. Like you need to pack up your stuff because you are moving to a different place. Things that directly involve you. Anything else it's like the grownups are talking even if you're fully capable of understanding. If they're fully capable of trying to explain something to you and they just don't that is really frustrating because it also involves you… I was pissed off." Young person in non-family care

Some caregivers too talked of how children and young people sometimes need to be given more information and explanations at a younger age or earlier on in the transition to care process to help them adjust to their changed circumstances.

For example, one talked of the importance of informing and preparing children about the next steps in the process and gave an example of photos being used to introduce them as caregivers prior to the children being placed with them.

Children need to be told of their situations numerous times

Some young people talked of needing to be told about their situations more than once as it had taken time to adjust to such a huge change in their lives.

"Well the first time it was kind of sudden. There was definitely probably a shock value for most people. I'm just assuming because people usually aren't told either at all or very much before. Maybe having a full-on discussion with small children about where they're going, why they're going there may not be viable at the time but definitely try to fill them in with as much information as they need or want at the time and then have a time after that where you can kind of just sit down and explain things after they've kind of settled in a little bit to their new place. Because that way they've had

time to adjust to the shock of having to move away from most likely the people that you've lived with all your life." Young person in non-family care

Caregivers and adoptive and whāngai parents also said children sometimes need to be told of their situations numerous times as they may not always remember everything they're told and need time to process what's being shared with them. This is especially so when things have been or are traumatic or difficult to comprehend.

"It's repeat, repeat, repeat." Non-whānau caregiver

"I asked her, 'do you know actually why?' Because I've always talked to them about it, and she said, 'well, not really.' But that's what I'm saying is you can tell a child but they're only going to take in what they can." Family caregiver

It's challenging for non-whānau caregivers when they don't have information to share with children

Non-whānau caregivers talked of the challenges they face in explaining things to the children and young people in their care when they don't have information to share with them and are unable to answer their questions sufficiently, especially as they get older and want and need to know more.

"Oranga Tamariki has still never given me his history after six years of him being with us and us going Home for Life. I've never had it so I don't know and I think that's stink…. I know it's probably like a whole privacy thing but they're trusting us with him but not equipping us with the information so we can honour him and address those gaps." Non-whānau caregiver

Giving explanations to children is harder when placements are uncertain

Caregivers talked of the challenges in trying to explain things to children and young people when they didn't know how long they'd be staying with them or what the plans might be for them in the longer term. Some said they'd told children their placements were temporary but they'd ended up staying with them for longer periods. Conversely, others talked of situations where children who had been with them for some time and were settled but were then removed with little notice or explanation.

Developing understanding

Children's understanding develops over time

Most of the young people we talked with said their understanding of their situations developed over time as they were told more and were able to put the pieces of the puzzle in place and build a more comprehensive picture of their lives.

"I think us just asking those little questions when we had questions and explanations being given to us in a certain way to help us understand it all – and we eventually

figured out the balance for ourselves as kids on the whole situation and why we're here and not there." Rangatahi in whānau care

"Everything what we've been through has unfolded as I've got older. Like, oh that's why this is happening now because this happened then, but the reason that happened then is because of that." Rangatahi in whānau care

Caregivers and adoptive and whāngai parents also talked of how children and young people's understanding builds as they get older.

"He was in the car he said, 'Dad the lady that born me is my mother isn't she? And this lady in the car here with us is my mum?' So one of us was mum and one of us was mother." Adoptive parent

"We just kept it simple and infrequent. It wasn't something that we talked about every day and she didn't ask too many questions even as she got older. She just sort of seemed to understand over time, that there was that connection, but we were her family; we were her mum and dad. And I guess just the simplicity and the infrequency of it, but it just built a picture over time." Adoptive parent

Social workers too said that understanding builds as children get older and are told and want to know more. They said that some are interested in knowing more earlier and some later, that some don't want to know much at all, and others only want to know when they're ready and feel safe. As such, they said there is quite a bit of age variability in the development of understanding although one ventured that children usually have a good understanding when they're about 12 or 13 years old.

Asking questions and having conversations with significant people helps understanding

Young people told us that a key factor in helping them build their understanding over time was being able to ask questions when they arose and having them answered – and answered openly and honestly.

Young people wanted to know things like – who their 'real' parents are, why they weren't with them and what had happened. Where young people were taken from their birth parents at an older age they sometimes wanted to know if and when they could go back to live with them. Where their parents had other children they were raising, they wanted to know why they weren't with them as well. And where their birth fathers weren't in their lives, they had questions about who and where they were.

"I asked a few questions about it when I was younger, where I'd say to Nana, 'Why do I live with you instead of Mum?' And then they just kind of said the story about how it all happened and why I do. And I just kind of was like, 'Oh okay… I guess I'm better here'." Young person in family care

"If I want to know anything I'll just ask Nan…. Some questions are a bit odd. Like sometimes I'll go, 'where's my dad?' and stuff like that." Rangatahi whāngai

Many of the caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents we spoke with also talked about the importance of responding openly and honestly to children and young people's questions to help build their understanding – and making room for them to feel comfortable to do so. Oftentimes this means leaving it up to children and young people to initiate their own questions. At other times caregivers and parents take the initiative themselves as different situations arise, especially as children get older. Some also make time for regular sit-down kōrero, for example, over afternoon tea when kids come home from school, at the table after dinner or by having whānau hui.

"You've got to create space that it's okay to question things. We have open discussions all the time and whenever there's questions, we just answer them. Questions like, 'whose tummy did I grow in?.... So, I have two mums and two dads?.... For me, the biggest thing is transparency and being open and honest." Whāngai parent

"For me, it's more about answering questions as they come up, rather than sparking up a conversation…. He is getting to that level now of understanding more and we do need to start having some of those conversations with him." Non-whānau caregiver

"Lockdown was actually really good for us; we had lots of good conversations, and at the dinner table where lots of layers would come off. He'd say, 'when I was at blah blah's house, this happened' and you'd be like your heart breaks but you'd just say, 'oh, tell me about that'." Non-whānau caregiver

They said that while younger children are often satisfied with simple explanations and generally don't question things much, especially if they've lived with them from a young age, they do question things more as they get older.

Children and young people usually have these conversations with significant people in their lives.

For some, these significant people have been whānau or family members such as grandparents or birth or whāngai siblings, especially older siblings, who've helped explain things more fully or helped them piece things together more.

For others, these significant people have also been close whānau friends.

"And it did help too that the kuia of our kōhanga reo, who knows our whānau inside and out, helped explain things…. She'd speak to her in Māori, and they'd talk about it too." Whāngai parent

For one caregiver, a significant person has been their son's former respite caregiver who's known him since he was young and who's been able to share parts of his story with him that he doesn't know or remember.

Developing understanding is challenging when children are told different stories

A number of young people said that developing an understanding of their situations had been challenging because of the different stories they'd been told by some of the adults in their lives.

"I was told lies until I turned like ten and then that's when my mum came and then ended up telling me the whole story. Before that I didn't know anything." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Reflecting children's perspectives, some caregivers and whāngai parents talked of the challenges they'd also faced in facilitating children and young people's understanding of their situations when they're told different stories by whānau or family members.

"She knew why she was with Mum because Mum explained it to her – but she also got told by her own grandmother, 'you're not wanted', in that abrupt way. She was told that at a young age… and it wasn't the full story. It was because the mother was going through trauma from a relationship breakdown" Whāngai sister/caregiver

"From time to time we have contact times and he came back from one a couple of months ago really agitated. I asked him to share what it was and he just erupted and it took until 11 o'clock at night for him to calm down. He blurted out this statement which was really hard and that statement was, 'I love you and I know you wouldn't lie to me and I love my grandmother and she wouldn't lie to me but you're saying different stuff'." Non-whānau caregiver

"We put a lot of attention and care around our whāngai daughter to explain the complexity of her relationships [with her birth parents and siblings] – but we need to be more mindful of our birth daughter because sometimes she can feel a bit excluded from that process. Like she'll ask, 'how come they're not my brothers and sister?.... In my whānau we'd just say they're all siblings because they've all got that connectedness but they're [whāngai daughter's birth whānau] a bit more, 'these are her siblings and your cousins'…. We're still trying to navigate that." Whāngai parent

"I keep telling my girl, 'don't conflict the kids' you know? 'You're mucking them up and you're just making them confused'." Whānau caregiver

Not having someone to talk to hinders understanding

Some of the young people we talked with who were with non-whānau caregivers said they hadn't had a constant someone in their lives they could talk to and ask questions of which had made understanding their situations more challenging.

"I was moved around a lot and I never had someone I could just talk to." Young person in non-family care

While some of these young people did have social workers, some said their social workers hadn't checked in with them regularly or didn't have the time to have the kinds of talks where they could ask their questions and develop an understanding of what was happening and why. For others, the challenges they've faced in understanding their situations has been compounded by having an ever-changing stream of social workers.

"He's lived in lots of different places… There's been lots of different social workers over the years, they keep changing… So there's a lot of missing gaps for him because nobody has really said, 'this is your story, this is how it adds up'." Non-whānau caregiver

Some also talked about the impacts of when that constant person passed away. One interviewee had become the caregiver of her whāngai sister after the death of their mother, and said that had been especially difficult as she was often unable to get her sister to open up to her.

"It was hard for everyone losing Mum. It was bad enough for me trying to deal with it let alone her losing Mum. Mum was her soulmate; Mum was her everything…She wouldn't talk to me, even though I'd sit on her bed and ask her things or take her out shopping or to the beach. She'd just sit there in silence." Whāngai sister/caregiver

Children in the care of whānau or family may struggle to understand that they have been in care

Some whānau caregivers said it can be confusing for children and adults alike to understand being in care when they are with whānau or family.

"Yeah, they do know but it's weird for them, and me, to understand they're in care when they're at grandma's. It just does everybody's head in." Family caregiver

We were also told this by social workers. In their experience, where children are placed with whānau, the change in their status as children 'in care' is not so obvious and it can take longer for them to understand their situations.

Developing understanding takes longer if children have hearing, speech and learning difficulties

A few of the caregivers we talked with said that developing understanding takes longer if children have impaired hearing and speech, and if they have learning difficulties due to, for example, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or FASD. In these instances, they talked of the need to take extra special care to take things at the child's own pace.

"He hasn't really questioned a lot and I don't know if that's just 'cause he feels safe and happy. He's never really had the vocab either but I've always thought it's something that will come…. We've always said that at some stage he's gonna need some form of play therapy but as yet I've just not felt he's been in a position to benefit from it or understand it. And I'm sure he must have those questions but to me it's been a waiting game; waiting for the understanding." Non-whānau caregiver

Meaning

This section reports on what being in care, adopted or whāngai means to the young people we interviewed, and what it means to those who are raising them.

For many of the young people we talked with, being raised by people other than their birth parents has been a positive because it means they've had a better start in life. The adopted young people and rangatahi whāngai we talked with said it also means they've felt special and extra loved and wanted. Despite the positives, these young people said it's still been challenging across at least a few different fronts depending on their situations. For other young people we talked with, all of whom have been raised or predominantly raised by non-whānau caregivers, it's been a negative and traumatising experience.

Some of what it means to caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents was common across the different groups. They said it means raising children and young people to feel loved and wanted, keeping them safe and giving them a good life – and supporting them with any additional needs. Alongside these meanings, there were particular meanings for each of them, some of which were positive and some of which were challenging. Overall, whāngai and adoptive parents experienced more of the positives and less of the challenges.

What it means to young people

Many young people see the positives

Many of the young people we interviewed talked of the positives of being raised by people other than their birth parents.

They've had a better life with more opportunities and support

Of these who see the positives, all said it's meant they've had the opportunity to have a better life. This included: being well cared for; having a safe and settled home; learning key life skills like self-discipline and setting and achieving goals; overseas travel; having interesting and rewarding careers and having a sense of hope about their futures.

"Yeah, it probably just meant that people were actually looking out for me, and wanting to make sure that I had a good life. It means a lot knowing that people were looking out for me, which is good." Adopted young person

"It meant a lot because I knew that I had someone in my family that actually cared about me. Because if I was living with my Mum I knew that I wouldn't be where I was now living with my grandparents and no doubt I'd probably be out on the street with Mum, 'cause she just was doing drugs and I knew that I'd probably turn into a druggie myself at a young age. But I think that I'm doing good here and it made me happy because I know that I'm supported and I'm cared about and I have a roof over my head." Young person in family care

"With them, if I were to look back at it, like they were there for everything; I had a roof over my head, the routine, the discipline to be better. They pushed for mahi, like if you want to get somewhere in life, you've got to work. All that stuff, and I know that if I hadn't got that strictness from them, that I wouldn't be where I am today." Rangatahi in whānau care

"I've got a sense of hope from my whāngai whānau, and definitely a big change in role modelling with everything…. I've seen a whole other side to life and how we look forward…. I never imagined being a teacher but now I'm a teacher." Rangatahi whāngai

Some also said it's meant they've been better supported at important times in their lives.

"I look back and it means a lot because I wouldn't be where I am now if I didn't have that, and I got a lot of support when I got pregnant at 18 with my son. My parents were really supportive, and I know that probably wouldn't have come from someone else, if they hadn't adopted me. So yeah, growing up, you look back and you think, 'I'm where I am now because of my parents'." Adopted young person

They see themselves as normal because they're part of a whānau or family

Some told us it's meant they haven't been "part of the system". Instead, they've been able to feel "normal" or more normal over time because they're "just part of the family". This is especially so for those who've been raised in the same home as (some of) their biological siblings.

"I'm glad I wasn't in the OT system – not going from foster home to foster home. Not having plastic bags. It's sad, it's like a life in a bag." Adopted young person

"I knew I was not related biologically, but I had family…. I get to be an aunt. I have a big family on both sides." Adopted young person

"So it was me and my little brother. I made sure that we never got split up and then we went through like eight different homes before we got settled down with our whāngai family [non-whānau caregivers]. So yeah, we're like a home, probably even more than that." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

"They call us, 'our kids'." Young person in non-family care

For the rangatahi Māori who were interviewed, and who had been raised with whānau caregivers or whāngai parents, it had meant maintaining their whakapapa connections which had helped normalise their lives as members of whānau.

"Even though we were raised by Mum and Dad [whānau caregivers], like every holidays we were at Nanny and Koro's. That whole connection was kept open… that whole big whānau picture all still came into play because of them. We literally got to meet everybody and know them and we know them still, it's really cool. We're just all one big whānau." Rangatahi in whānau care

"In some kind of way we've all related, not closely but we're related within whakapapa, in the same hapū…. We're all whānau here." Rangatahi whāngai

Feeling loved, wanted and special

Some also said it's meant feeling loved and wanted. Those being raised by whānau caregivers said it was an extension of the love they'd always felt from them. Those being raised by non-whānau caregivers talked of being treated "like their own kids".

"And then that's when my life got pretty easy, kind of, 'cause it was a good house…. My whāngai nan, her son, he's pretty much been like my dad. He's looked after me my whole life since then. And for him to do that at the age of 18; he dropped his whole life just to look after us… yeah, so I had that real feeling of being loved and wanted." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Adoptees said that being adopted means feeling special and chosen and extra loved and wanted as a result.

"I guess the key thing is children understanding that they've been picked, and they're wanted. That's a positive way to look at it for me, personally, rather than looking at

the side of, 'my parents didn't want me', it's more, 'better people, good people want me'." Adopted young person

"Kids at school thought it was so cool, 'Oh my god you're adopted'. Yeah, and I'd be like, 'Well yeah, because I was picked. Your parents just got what they were given, I was chosen'. They're all like, 'That's so cool'. When kids said that it definitely helped me have an even more positive outlook on being adopted and made me feel even more special!" Adopted young person

Consistent with the special status that whāngai have traditionally had within whānau, the rangatahi whāngai we spoke with also said being whāngai means feeling extra special and extra loved and wanted.

"I'm definitely extra special in this family…. I was definitely spoilt; just having that extra love. I remember a couple of times wanting to move back with my mum's sister because I was wanting my mum. But my aunty said, 'no, you can go visit but you're not staying'. Just that you know, it just shows how much they love and want you and want for you. I love that." Rangatahi whāngai

"Where am I in mum's list of priorities? At the top!" Rangatahi whāngai

Young people also face numerous and significant challenges

Feeling unwanted, unloved and abandoned by their birth parents

Almost all said it's meant they've struggled in some way with feeling unwanted, unloved and abandoned by their birth parents. This happened across the board – whether they were adopted, whāngai or being raised by whānau or non-whānau caregivers.

"She said I was a tumour in her stomach. She was not feeding me. She was drinking. She didn't show up for the adoption meeting, that said it all." Adopted young person

"I was definitely a mum's girl and my mum had left me. It was hard. When your best friend leaves you, you just don't understand…. You want to be loved and feel loved from the people you thought loved you but at times I haven't felt that. I felt that love from my whāngai whānau, and it was just hard you know – people that weren't my own whānau loved me more than my own." Rangatahi whāngai

*"The way that we've been brought up, it just felt like we've had to look after ourselves the whole time until the age that we were actually meant to and that's when our family was just like trying to be round talking sh*t. Like why couldn't our parents have been there when we were young and we had to look after ourselves?"* Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents also talked about how children and young people sometimes struggle with these feelings, and that such feelings are often exacerbated when their birth parents have other children they're raising.

"There's been a few traumas with his mother along the way… with each new relationship, she'd just disappear so it was like no one else existed. He'd ask, 'where is she, what's she doing? She doesn't care about me'…. He'd see her with a new baby and it'd be like, 'she cares about that baby, why doesn't she care about me like that?'." Whāngai parent

Feeling they are somehow to blame

Some young people told us they'd sometimes felt they'd done something wrong and were to blame for their birth parents not raising them or loving them, or were somehow responsible for the difficulties their parents had gone through. Some caregivers and whāngai parents also told us that children and young people will often blame themselves.

Struggling with being separated from their birth parents and siblings

For some children and young people who are in care, it's meant struggling with being separated from their birth parents and missing and wanting to see them. Whānau and non-whānau caregivers told us they'll sometimes get extremely upset when their parents leave after visits, kicking and screaming, or will come back from visits with them angry and churned up.

"My granddaughter is going through this time where she sat there three weeks ago, and she looked at me and she was crying... She said, "Your girls have got you as a mum, and (her cousin) has got her mum, where's my mum?" Now, absolutely we haven't covered anything up. The children know their mother and what's gone on, and they know the reasons. She wrote a letter, and gave it to her teacher, all about how much she loves her mum, and how she misses all her cuddles and things." Family caregiver

"They love their mum…. I said to their mother the other day when she rang, 'Look, pull your head out of your backside. These kids miss you. They want you to look after them, not us.' They keep asking for their mother, even their father, and they get all upset. But they come right." Whānau caregiver

One caregiver with over 30 years' experience said:

"*… the whole didn't want to be in care thing. I mean most kids don't want to be in care. Who does? I wouldn't. That's a hard sort of thing."* Non-family caregiver

Some of the rangatahi whāngai said it's meant they sometimes miss their birth parents too and want to see them or be with them. Whāngai parents also talked about this.

"I'll never forget the time when she was nine; it was some photo on Facebook or something. She saw her other siblings having fun with their mum, some trip somewhere and she felt like she was missing out and just cried and cried." Whāngai parent

Where young people had other siblings who were not being raised in the same home as them (or all of them), some said it's meant they've struggled with being separated from them. For others, it's meant missing out on having close relationships with them.

"It was like traumatising. I used to think about it by myself, and just remember it, it just made me cry every time, every time 'cause that was my little brother. We'd never been separated." Rangatahi in whānau care

"I wanted to have my family around. There's nine of us kids from my mum and…our whole family's only been together once in the whole 19 years. I've only seen them four times." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Some caregivers and whāngai parents also talked about the struggles children and young people go through from being separated from their birth siblings and the longing they have to be with them.

"This year we've talked at different times about whether he'd rather be living with his siblings. He'll often say his brother he was with before he came to us, 'he's my closest blood person' is what he'll say." Non-whānau caregiver

For those who were taken from their birth parents by Oranga Tamariki (or CYFS), it's sometimes meant ongoing challenges in dealing with the trauma of the uplift itself.

"I know Mum was distraught about us having to leave and she didn't like that, a lot. She kept mentioned CYFS and we were going to be picked up and she was just distraught about it, so I'm like it's obviously not a good thing, that's what I understood of the situation, just picking up from that unmistakable body language and actual language and stuff." Young person in non-family care

Worrying about the wellbeing of their birth parents and siblings

For some, it's meant they worry about the wellbeing of their parents.

"Sometimes we have a lot of conversations more so around their parents. They'll ask me, 'Nana, do you think they're ever going to come right?'…. They worry about them; they get themselves all worked up over it which means they've lost their concentration on what they're meant to be concentrating on." Whānau caregiver

Where young people have other siblings who've remained with their birth parents, some young people said it's meant worrying about their wellbeing.

"With my younger biological siblings that stayed with our mum, that made me hurt growing up because I felt like I got a good start. I wished they were with me too. If they did they would have got that grounding, those life skills and sense that you should get growing up compared to what they've had to grow up and see. You see them come into being teenagers and you just start to see the cycle unfold and it's really hard." Rangatahi in whānau care

Feeling different to others

Some said it's meant feeling different to other children and young people around them because they didn't have a mum and dad. Young people who'd grown up with non-whānau caregivers in particular wondered what it would have been like to grow up with their families.

"I mean I know my situation was different to other people, obviously. Like different from my friends and it was different, like I did think about it, I did think, what would it have been like to grow up with your family and stuff like that…I still think about it." Young person in non-family care

Some caregivers talked about this too and the importance of making children and young people's lives normal and 'equal' to others.

"They go to school with what we call normal situations; mummies, daddies, they go bike riding, they do this, they do that... The thing that was most important was to make them feel they were equal to the normal, because their lives weren't normal, and everything about what happened to them was not normal. So they've got Netflix, they've got computers…" Family caregiver

Not knowing their stories

Some young people in non-whānau care also said it's meant having gaps in their stories from living in multiple places prior to being placed with their current caregivers. Some caregivers also talked about this.

"She used to say things like, 'I don't know what's real and what's imagination; it feels like it's a story but not mine' – she has all these tiny snippets but not a whole story." Non-whānau caregiver

For some young people, it had also meant not having an understanding of what had happened and why or having significant gaps in what they know and what they're able to understand about their situations.

"These questions are difficult for him to answer because he doesn't know a lot of his story and why he's gone to live in certain places and why different placements haven't worked out." Non-whānau caregiver

Disconnection from whakapapa and culture

Some of the rangatahi Māori who were raised by whānau and non-whānau caregivers said it's meant they hadn't known or been able to easily piece together their whakapapa relationships as they were growing up. This disconnection had made them feel fragmented or invisible.

"I felt I was all over the place and my biggest thing in school was trying to work on my family tree; that whole whakapapa thing. I literally used to cry about it." Rangatahi in whānau care

"I didn't really know any of my family growing up – just my mum and her kids and that…. I didn't like that; moving around so much, not to be known. You were just a non-person. Who are you?" Rangatahi in non-whānau care

For one it's meant having no knowledge of his whakapapa relationships at all. As explained by his caregiver:

"I've been asking, right from the beginning, 'What is their whakapapa? What marae do they belong to, what iwi? Can you give me anything?', because I've got nothing. I've had one of his brothers since he was five months old and he's now eight. Nothing. So as far as helping them to know, I can't because I don't know. I don't even know the names of their grandparents so I can't tell them anything." Non-whānau caregiver

For other rangatahi Māori, it's meant disconnection from culture. For example, one said that being in care had meant little connection with anything Māori as a result of having little connection with her whānau beyond her siblings, and as a result of being raised by a Pākehā caregiver.

Not feeling loved by their caregivers

Some young people in whānau and non-whānau care said being in care meant not feeling loved by their caregivers.

"They just did their duty in my eyes…. I see where they were coming from raising me and trying to be the best person I could be but to me there's a balance. You've got to learn to show a little love now and again. I didn't feel loved which was a huge thing growing up for me, like it used to bring me down a lot mentally. It still does today but I just try to brush it off." Rangatahi in whānau care

Others said that being in care meant not even being cared for adequately by their caregivers, let alone loved. Some also said it meant they hadn't been able to learn important things like empathy for others.

"There was no feeling of love in the house which I don't think OT knows about. I have not really ever been to a house where I felt cared for… [and] the feeling was mutual. They didn't show me any kind of affection so I didn't feel the need to show them any form of affection. We were largely just like almost flatmates except I was not an adult. It was kind of that feeling of just being a resident in the same house. That was where your relationship ended. I just thought that was normal because I didn't have a normal." Young person in non-family care

"She practically got us for the money." Rangatahi in non-family care

"That is not a good environment to grow up in because it doesn't teach you empathy – especially considering that a lot of people who go into care they may have issues with empathy especially if they were neglected or something like that." Young person in non-family care

Feeling they are a burden

Others said it meant they've sometimes felt they're a burden on their new whānau and families and that they're in the way, particularly in relation to their birth children.

"I felt at one stage my sister could have been a bit pūhaehae because she was the only girl and I felt stink and kind of angry, but as I got older I understood, well, this is her mum showing a bit more love than she's showing to her own daughter kind of thing." Rangatahi whāngai

Fearing their caregivers or parents might die

For some it's meant having fears their caregivers or whāngai or adoptive parents might die. This is particularly so for those being raised by grandparents. Caregivers and parents talked of this too.

"He keeps saying to me, "Oh, grandma I don't want you to die." He's sort of aware of how precarious his situation could be." Family caregiver

"His grandfather passed away last year…. One of the things I have to keep reassuring him about is when I get sick, even it's a 'flu. You can see his behaviour change, 'who's going to look after me when you die nanny?', that kind of stuff." Whānau caregiver

Dealing with the stigma of 'being in care'

Some of these young people who were in care said it meant having to deal with the stigma of 'being in care' and the judgements they felt others had of them and which they also worried about for themselves – things like, it means they'll drop out of school, become an addict and end up in prison. The stigma associated with being in care meant they sometimes felt worthless and ashamed.

"People think you're damaged goods… It becomes your label. You're not a person, you're someone in foster care." Young person in non-family care

Whānau and non-whānau caregivers also talked about the stigma that being in care carries for children as they get older and understand more about their situations.

"Kids say stuff at school about them being CYFS' kids. It upsets the older one because … he's at the age where he's starting to understand what other kids are saying." Whānau caregiver

"They've been teased at school, especially my moko girl…. 'Your mum smokes drugs and that's why you don't live with her', 'you're not living with your mum 'cause she's dumb'. Those are the sorts of things they've told her; she gets very upset by it." Whānau caregiver

"They hate the label because of the stigma…. She'll tell you it means she isn't going to do well – she's going to drop out of school, she'll be in alternative education, she'll probably offend, she'll be doing wrong stuff. There's all these headings that make up a kid in care in her mind and they're all negative." Non-whānau caregiver

Some young people said that because of the stigma of being in care, they haven't wanted to do anything associated with it such as attending Oranga Tamariki events or having social workers involved in their lives. Caregivers too said that older children and teenagers in particular will actively avoid situations which mark them out as being in care.

Social workers also talked of the stigma that children and young people sometimes face. This includes the stigma they face from other professionals across education and health settings such as from teachers, or from principals and NGO staff who won't accept them into schools or programmes because of being 'in care' or who set additional requirements.

Adoption can also carry stigma

One caregiver said adoption can also carry stigma and talked of how the children in their care had been teased at school about being adopted.

Being moved from place to place and not having a sense of home

Some said being in care had meant being moved from place to place, from caregiver to caregiver, and not having a place to call home or people to call family and who they could count on and be open with and talk to.

Being abused

Some said being in care had meant being mentally, physically and/or sexually abused by their caregivers or by their caregivers' older birth children. One said the abuse amplified after the caregivers gained permanent care of them and they were no longer visited by a social worker.

"I did tell her [foster mother] when it [sexual abuse] first happened. She used the 'no don't tell the Police because your sister will get taken away'; she used that against me so I never went and reported it." Rangatahi in non-family care

"It wasn't the best situation for me because she was mentally abusing us and stuff…. A little bit of it started while I was getting those check-ins from the social worker and then it got ten times worse after we went 'Home for Life' and they were stopped." Rangatahi in non-family care

What it means to caregivers and parents

Some meanings ran across the different groups of caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents. Alongside these meanings, each of the different groups of parents and caregivers also talked of the additional and particular meanings it has for them.

Children and young people are loved and wanted, safe and are getting a good life

The caregivers and whāngai and adopted parents we talked with said raising the children and young people in their care meant raising them to feel loved and wanted, keeping them safe and giving them a good life.

"We say goodnight and we love him every night." Non-whānau caregiver

"My mokos are my main priority now … showing them my love, showing them that they're safe." Whānau caregiver

"*Their koro takes them fishing and hunting when the time's right, and they're in sports. They've just finished rugby and today they start swimming club and the older one's in touch…. Every holidays, I take them away somewhere."* Whānau caregiver

"Affirmations are really important; I think just building good memories full stop. It's a really tricky one because I know the scenarios that can happen for kids…. I do think some things are better forgotten. If a child can build new memories and forget them, great." Whāngai parent

Children and young people are extra special and extra loved

Many caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents said it means these children and young people are extra special to them and extra loved.

"This is probably a weird thing, but I love my kids, my biological kids and my grandkids…. But you love these kids differently and it's almost more if that makes sense. Everything you do is an action of love for them. It's for your own kids in that sense too, but… it's just different." Non-whānau caregiver

"…yet I was really surprised how he was mine. I've always thought that if we had a baby I might not have felt quite that same kind of feelings towards him. Like that it was more because he was adopted and not less." Adoptive parent

"Once we adopted him they [grandparents] actually treated him as more special than their other two grandchildren who were born to them, to the point of it being slightly embarrassing." Adoptive parent

Supporting children and young people with their additional needs

Where children and young people have additional needs such as health issues and developmental and learning difficulties, caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents said it also means getting them the support they need to have them addressed. For example, they talked of getting children and young people to appointments with doctors and specialists, getting hearing aids and diagnoses for things like ADHD and FASD and learning how to best support them.

"Grandparents are really good at the nurturing, the loving, the providing the good kai and the regular routines, good sleep, all those things – but very often our kids have additional needs, it's all the extra things they need. With my moko a huge one is he's got special needs with his FASD which needs support at all these different levels." Whāngai parent

"He had so much anger in him; he was really angry all the time. So I thought, 'what can he hit? We got him a drum kit and I looked into it and it's a form of therapy, so we did that and he's really good at it…. For our other boy, he was stealing, shoplifting. I asked him what he gets out of it and he said adrenaline, it makes him feel excited. So then it was like, right, what else can we find that will have that impact, so he does hip-hop dancing and he's in love with it." Non-whānau caregiver

Additional meanings for whānau and family caregivers

All of the whānau and family caregivers we talked with are grandparents raising their grandchildren.

Keeping children and young people within the family or whānau

The non-Māori grandparents who were interviewed said raising their grandchildren had meant keeping them within the family where they would be better cared for than if they were part of the state system.

"Yeah, these were our grandchildren, we had to just do something. Instead of going into care with other people, I just nah, it didn't fit right with me, and it never has. While I'm still walking they'll be, it'll be alright. That's the way I looked at it." Family caregiver

"We initially didn't want to take her because it would be a handful, but we didn't like the alternative. She wouldn't get enough attention from a state caregiver, so we took her." Family caregiver

For the Māori grandparents who were interviewed, raising their mokopuna meant a continuance of the tikanga of whāngai and maintaining whānau and cultural connectedness, which they themselves had been raised with and which has continued to be practiced in their whānau as a normal part of whānau life.

"We've always shared our kids." Daughter of whānau caregiver

Maintaining cultural connectedness and sharing cultural knowledge

Māori grandparents also said it meant their mokopuna have remained connected to their culture by being raised with them – spending time with their wider whānau knowing their whakapapa relationships, going to their marae and to tangihanga, speaking te reo and maintaining their connections with whenua and so on. It's also meant they've been able to share important cultural knowledge with their mokopuna.

"And I frequently tell him when he says, 'that's my cousin', I tell him how they are his cousin, how they're related so he knows the relationship." Whānau caregiver

"I was a kaiako in kōhanga reo for many years. My granddaughter and I we speak fluent Māori and her and I can have conversations in Māori." Whānau caregiver

"We've just got some whenua back and we're wanting to do some projects there with the mokos – like building a papakāinga and maara kai; that's the plan. They love it." Whānau caregiver

Supporting the wellbeing of their adult children

Some grandparents said raising their grandchildren had also meant supporting the wellbeing of their adult children by giving them time and space to address their issues and be better equipped to be parents again in the future, or to other children they had or might have.

Changed lives and changed plans

Many of the grandparents we talked with said that taking on their grandchildren had meant their daily lives and their plans for the future had changed quite significantly.

"You know the days when you could actually one, sleep in; two, make your own arrangements to go say to the movies at night without having to get a babysitter. Three, planning your whole day, etc., etc., etc. It's our lives… you lose your freedom." Family caregiver

"When we made the decision to have him permanently, my husband gave up his job and stayed home with him and I became the main breadwinner. He said, 'if we're making a commitment to this moko, we have to make a proper one'." Whānau caregiver

For some it's been a relatively easy transition; for others it's taken time to adjust to. For some, the change has been more challenging.

"…because see, we got (our older grandchild) when our girls had moved out of home … not that I'd ever change that. She's at that age where, 'yes, we're free', because she's so much more independent, and then we've got two more now…Yeah, little ones, back to the beginning. It's thinking of them instead of ourselves." Family caregiver

"I had to really think about it, am I going to put my life back on hold again for my mokos and leave my job and move back to the area? … It's been a very hard road since I've had them back in my care; there's a huge shortage of housing so I haven't been able to find us a place to stay. We've been living with my ex-mother-in-law." Whānau caregiver

"This child is amazing. There is never a time that I could get bored with this child in my life; he makes me laugh." Whānau caregiver

Some struggled with getting older and having less energy

Some grandparents talked of their concerns about getting older. For some, getting older meant they didn't have the energy they used to have and that they sometimes found it a challenge to keep going.

"She's one of these real sparky lively little girls, but she leaves you feeling pretty exhausted by the end of the day." Family caregiver

This was especially so for those who didn't have the support of others including whānau or family or respite caregivers who could help share the role.

For some, it means they're making plans for their grandchildren to be raised by other whānau or family members instead.

"We're getting older now and don't want to do this forever; it's not getting any easier for us – we don't want to go through the teenage years again…. The plan is for my other daughter to take them when she's settled. I think it'll be better on both sides because they love their aunty and get on well with her kids." Whānau caregiver

Some said it meant worrying about what will happen to their grandchildren if they die – and some have put plans in place to deal with this.

"I've made sure the links between him and all my kids are strong and I guess that's why I've started the connection with him and his mother and father as well – because I don't ever want him to be without a home." Whānau caregiver

Friction with their children who are the parents of their grandchildren

A number of grandparents said that raising their grandchildren had meant friction in their relationships with their children who are the parents of their grandchildren. They said the friction arose for a number of reasons. Where parents are fighting the system to get their children back, they said it often means fighting with them too. They talked of sometimes having to intervene and manage the contact between parents and children to protect their grandchildren from being disappointed by unfilled promises, such as by monitoring texts and phone calls.

"I stopped the mother from ringing him without me being there because she would make promises to him and not follow through…. He'd get really, really excited and then it doesn't happen…and I'd have to pick up the pieces." Whānau caregiver

Some also talked of sometimes needing to set boundaries to keep them and their grandchildren safe when parents are struggling with addiction or mental health issues. For example, one grandparent said they'd had to resort to getting a trespass order to get through a particularly rough patch. Some said parents sometimes struggle with feelings of jealousy about the close relationship they have with their grandchildren which they're missing out on. And some grandparents also talked of the friction caused by the rules set by Oranga Tamariki which they as caregivers are required to uphold. Regarding these rules, grandparents said some 'help give

boundaries' to keep their grandchildren safe, such as those around visitations and phone contact, but that other rules made little sense and make things more difficult.

"Our daughter found it really tough coming out of prison and looking for a place to stay. We were asked if we could put her up, or what about a cabin out back? We were gonna go through with it but then we were told no…. She wasn't allowed to stay with us and we've gotta go by their rules." Whānau caregiver

It's harder for whānau and families to ask for support from Oranga Tamariki

Some grandparents said it meant not always feeling comfortable to ask Oranga Tamariki for support, such as for things like beds and bedding, because their grandchildren are "my moko before they're anything to do with CYFS". They said things would work better if social workers asked what they needed, instead of it having to be initiated by them.

Additional meanings for whāngai parents

While there are overlaps in meaning between the Māori grandparent caregivers and whāngai parents we talked with, whāngai parents also raised a number of additional and unique meanings.

Whāngai as a normalised practice to maintain whānau and cultural wellbeing

As with the Māori grandparents raising their mokopuna as whānau caregivers, all of the whāngai parents we talked with were also part of whānau where whāngai was a common and normalised practice.

"In our whānau the notion of whāngai is something that was normalised right from when we were born because with Dad being a whāngai it meant we had three sets of grandparents which was always something that was celebrated…. He's so connected to his wider whānau because of that and we're still so connected to them all because of it too." Whāngai parent

"My parents were strong believers in keeping our whānau together at all times, i ngā wā katoa, ko te aha, no matter what really…. And the sharing of kids, there was always that." Whāngai parent

As such, many of the meanings talked about by whāngai parents were the same as those talked about by grandparent caregivers: that it meant maintaining whānau connections for the wellbeing of children and adults alike; that being whāngai parents had changed their lives and homes for the better; and that it enabled the transfer of important cultural knowledge.

One whāngai parent was also a grandparent, and said they too had thought about what would happen to their mokopuna if they were to die and had put plans in place including taking care of their own health and making sure there are "solid go-to places for him". One had already planned for and dealt with this eventuality, stepping forward to care for her whāngai sister when their mother passed away.

"*I'd already said I'd be caregiver for her if anything happened to Mum, and that's what happened. It was written into Mum's will."* Whāngai sister/caregiver

A broader range of meanings

Because there were a broader range of reasons involved in becoming whāngai parents than becoming whānau caregivers, it had a broader range of meanings for them.

For some of the whāngai parents we spoke to, the decision to whāngai had meant supporting the wellbeing of the children involved because their birth parents were struggling or in crisis. For others, the decision to whāngai had meant supporting the wellbeing of the adults involved by enabling young parents to be free to pursue their lives and enabling others who were unable to have children to become parents.

"My niece knew she had my mum and dad's full support to look after that moko if that was her choice… they were willing to do that for her because she needed time to grow up…. And then they were getting sick so I said, 'Nah Mum, I'll take this baby over'…. Then I go, 'remember that time the doctor said I'd never have kids? Well, it's come today!' Then she just smiled at me and goes, 'Thank you'. I was so excited; I'd always wanted to be a mummy." Whāngai parent

Whānau rangatiratanga means less trauma and disruption for children and in whānau relationships

In those instances where birth parents were struggling or in crisis, whāngai parents said that because whānau had been able to step in and make the decision to whāngai it had meant children hadn't had to go through the trauma of removal by CYFS/Oranga Tamariki and hadn't had to deal with the disruption and stigma of being in care.

Similarly, because whānau had been in charge of making decisions and had been able to set at least some of their own tikanga, whāngai parents said that on the whole their relationships with their children's birth parents were positive. In some instances, this had taken time as they'd worked through the process and what it would all mean.

"I said to my niece, 'remember what nan and koro told you – we help each other to keep each other strong…. She'll always be yours but I'm here to whāngai her and look after her and yourself, and when you're ready to come back to her, you can come back and see her or get her'. She just cried, we both cried, but it was a magical moment. I'll never forget it. So yeah, we've always had that understanding." Whāngai parent

"We're in a space where things are okay and that's reassuring – but it wasn't like that all the time because her biological father's mother was unhappy with the decision and wanted baby to go to her whānau…. So we're all legal guardians of her, all four of us, but her whāngai dad and I have the day-to-day parenting order." Whāngai parent

Additional meanings for non-whānau and non-family caregivers

An alternative to adoption that has enabled them to be parents or extend their whānau

Many non-whānau and non-family caregivers talked of how raising children in care has meant they've been able to become parents or extend their whānau and families, with these children and young people being or becoming "like one of our own" and "part of the family". Many talked of the gratitude they have for the opportunity.

Some non-family caregivers said they'd initially wanted to adopt but because there were no children to adopt, becoming permanent caregivers was the best alternative available to them. While it had meant becoming parents and feeling they were a family unit, some said they'd found the process difficult.

"The boys were coming to us, 'family for life', and when you can't have your own children and all you want is to have a family and have children – this is your pathway to do that. Until we got permanency, CYFS treated us as foster parents, which was really awful.... Our social worker dropped the foster parent manual around to our house, and when she left I put it in the wheelie bin because I thought, 'how rude!'. I found that process quite difficult. I know they're following their process, but we never signed up to be foster parents ever, so don't hand me a foster parent manual, hand me the manual for permanency." Non-family caregiver

Making a difference

Non-family caregivers who are Pākehā said it meant making a difference in the lives of the children they raise, and that they'd have raised more if they could have.

As with the whānau Māori caregivers and whāngai parents who were interviewed, the non-whānau Māori caregivers we talked with also came from whānau where whāngai was a normalised practice to promote and enhance wellbeing which had helped frame their role as caregivers.

"My husband's parents whāngai-ed children throughout his life.... That always happened in the whānau." Non-whānau caregiver

Navigating relationships with birth parents and/or their whānau and families

Non-whānau and non-family caregivers said it means having to navigate relationships with birth parents and/or their whānau or families which can sometimes be challenging. As with grandparent caregivers, this means sometimes having to manage unfilled promises made by birth parents, their struggles with addiction and mental health or birth parents' absences when they move away or are incarcerated. Some said it means having to deal with birth parents' or grandparents' jealousies about the bonds that form between their children and caregivers. For some non-

whānau and non-family caregivers, however, it also means having to deal with their own feelings of insecurity and jealousies about the relationships between children and their birth parents too.

Some permanent caregivers need support from Oranga Tamariki, some don't want any involvement

Some permanent caregivers said they very much wanted and needed ongoing support, including social work support, from Oranga Tamariki to help them support their children's wellbeing.

"We were very reluctant to go Home for Life, not because we didn't love him or want him to stay, but because of the uncertainty around his medical needs and schooling needs and what would visitations look like. We asked for OT to stay in the picture to help organise those sorts of things for us…. We had meetings all about it and they guaranteed they'd stay involved and put all this pressure on, like if you don't go Home for Life you're gonna lose him. So we did it … and we haven't heard from them since. They don't wanna know. They dropped us like a cup of cold sick." Non-whānau caregiver

Others had a different view. For them, becoming permanent caregivers had been a positive and especially for the children and young people they were raising. This was because it meant Oranga Tamariki had stepped out of their lives, making things more normal for them. For others it was a positive because it meant the children were more theirs.

"We knew from his file that he'd had abandonment his whole life…. We really wanted him to belong somewhere and to know he was chosen and wanted…. And it's meant he can say, 'I'm not in care; I'm not in Oranga Tamariki …' 'cause he hated that – it was a stigma for him." Non-whānau caregiver

"Once the boys were with us, the social worker left us – out of sight, out of mind….[But] I was happy for OT to wash their hands of us because I didn't want any part of them. As far as we were concerned the kids were with us permanently." Non-family caregiver

Difficulties in accessing support from Oranga Tamariki

Building on what grandparent caregivers told us, non-whānau caregivers said being caregivers meant experiencing difficulties in accessing what they needed to support the children and young people they were raising and that support from Oranga Tamariki needs to be much more forthcoming.

This ranged from having more comprehensive care plans and knowledge of children's backgrounds and histories, including whakapapa details, to being informed early on of things like respite care and having simple and efficient processes to access support for things like their health and learning.

"Everything's been a fight. It's like, I'm not doing this for me, these kids need this. So my experience has been every single thing has required lots of emails. The system has worn me out." Non-whānau caregiver

Additional meanings for adoptive parents

While there are some overlaps in meaning between the non-whānau and non-family caregivers and adoptive parents we talked with, adoptive parents also raised a number of additional meanings it has for them.

Being able to be parents or extend their family

As with non-whānau caregivers, adoptive parents also talked of how adopting children has meant they've been able to become parents or give their birth children siblings. They too talked of the gratitude they have and how "lucky" they feel.

Navigating relationships with birth parents

As with whānau and non-whānau caregivers, adoptive parents with open adoption arrangements also said it means navigating relationships with birth parents that can sometimes be challenging, and which sometimes require them to step in and intervene to protect children and young people's wellbeing.

"I was quite protective of her…because her birth mother would flit in and out, which she got used to, is her flitting in an out, but she let her down on a couple of occasions." Adoptive parent

Widespread support

Some adoptive parents said they'd worried about judgements from others but had found adoption had a positive meaning to others too, and had subsequently been widely supported by their families, friends and colleagues.

"I was very anxious about work because people are so anti-adoption…. I was utterly amazed that every day for about three months we got a gift in the post or delivered for him from all of these people from work and people I hardly knew. It's like everybody was so overjoyed." Adoptive parent

Being in a determining role

Some adoptive parents also said that adoption meant they were able to be in a determining role in the care of their children.

"We wanted her to be ours. We wanted to be able to give her the life that we wanted to give her, we didn't want to have be consulting with people, or anything like that, and we were capable of doing that." Adoptive parent

Identity

This section reports on what we learned about the ways in which children and young people who are in care, adopted or whāngai articulate their identities and what is told to others about their situations.

Children and young people in care said they don't use the term 'in care' and use other terms instead to avoid the stigma associated with it, as do their caregivers. Those who are adopted are mostly comfortable with the term 'adopted', and so are their adoptive parents. 'Whānau' is mostly used instead of 'whāngai' as whāngai is a normal part of what makes a whānau. While some young people are open about their situations, most only tell those they are close with. Some prefer not to tell others at all. Pākehā caregivers and adoptive parents often keep things private too to normalise children and young people's lives and protect them from any stigma. Māori caregivers and whāngai parents are generally more open because raising the children of others is a normalised practice in many whānau and most use kōrero rather than privacy to manage any stigma.

Articulating identity

Young people in care don't use the term 'in care'

All of the young people being raised by whānau or non-whānau caregivers said they don't use the term 'in care'. Instead, they use other terms for a range of reasons, such as: they better describe their situations, they help normalise their lives and they enable them to avoid the stigma associated with being in care. Some said they're not familiar with the term because it hasn't really been used around them.

Young people in whānau or family care said they use terms such as "I live with my grandparents" or 'I live with my aunty".

"Yeah, I don't really look at it as being in care. I just look at it as living with my grandparents." Young person in family care

For young people in non-whānau or non-family care, the situation is more complex and some talked of the difficulties they have in articulating who they are to other people in simple terms, and how they're connected to their caregivers.

"You can't say caregivers because then people have questions." Young person in non-family care

Some young people said they say they're foster kids and some say they're adopted because it's easier to explain and others know what adoption is. Others talked of experimenting with different terms such as being a step-child. One said since going to live with a caregiver who also has his brothers, he's now able to say, "I stay with my brothers".

Many of the rangatahi Māori we talked with, whether they were with whānau or non-whānau caregivers, said they use the term whāngai.

"I've always used whāngai because it makes me feel better about the situation. It's just like family member. It's not just someone else that you're staying with." Rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care

Whānau and non-whānau caregivers said they don't use the term 'in care' either.

For grandparent caregivers, their grandchildren are simply that; "we're just whānau". Some non-whānau caregivers felt the same way, that they're whānau or family too. Some said they deliberately don't use the term because they know "kids don't like the label".

Some non-whānau caregivers said they use the term foster child or don't use any term at all. Some said they'll often say adopted instead to "avoid tricky situations" and protect children and young people from stigma or because it's easier to explain.

"This was a tricky thing for us, but we talked about adoption with people because it's no-one's business what happened with our children, and what their circumstances were. When we'd meet people and people might look sideways at you, we'd go, 'Oh yeah we adopted the boys'." Non-family caregiver

"We used adoption when they were little. I don't know if that was right thing or wrong thing. If a stranger said to me, … 'Oh, your kids are different ethnically to you?" I mean, I could go, 'Yes, they are' and walk away …. Or do you have that, 'Oh yeah, because we adopted the boy' or 'Oh yeah, because their mother couldn't look after them, and they were put under care and protection?" Non-family caregiver

*"I just feel there's so much going on in their wee minds that you think, 'oh my god now you've got a bloody label that says you're in care', and then people make assumptions, 'oh yeah they're in care because their mother's probably a druggie'. It's part of society that people make assumptions about things they know nothing about, and they'll just assume that the child's had a real sh*t life and their parents are awful – and ...it might not be the case."* Non-family caregiver

Young people who are adopted use the term 'adopted'

Some adopted young people are comfortable to use the term 'adopted' because of the positive meanings associated with it. Some felt it was a more contentious term.

"I like the word adoption. I have a connection to that word because you have a name for that I went to a court and became someone else's child." Adopted young person

"I related to Superman, he was adopted and I was adopted. I remember it from cartoon shows. He said it and I made a connection with it. I wrote it down. Superman was adopted and so was I." Adopted young person

"She was comfortable with it…. I think it made her feel a bit special because it was a point of difference for her as well. She was proud of it…I think we normalised it…she had a very secure home; she had loving parents. She had lots of opportunities. She had friends; she had a nice home. She had all that security and safety. There was absolutely no need for her to feel that it separated her or made her any different, or something that she should guard or be not proud of, or secretive about. I think that's why she was comfortable with it." Adoptive parent

"Adopted is quite an abrupt word and it's very in your face. It's always been you don't talk about it, even though that's not how it is, but people feel like it's such an edgy topic." Adopted young person

Adoptive parents said they're comfortable to use the term adopted.

Rangatahi whāngai sometimes use the term 'whāngai'

Of the two rangatahi whāngai interviewed for this project, one said they use the term 'whāngai' because "it's a positive for me". The other said that while he "doesn't mind it", he prefers to say, "I live with my nan."

Because whāngai is a normal part of what a whānau is, whāngai parents said they don't really use the term either: "we just say whānau". They mostly only use the term

'whāngai' when explaining things to others, and one said she includes it when doing mihimihi.

Telling others

Most young people are only open with those they feel close to

Some young people said they're open about their situations with others, but most said they're only open with and "tell the whole story" to those they feel close to, such as friends and partners. When talking about why they don't tell people they're not close to, they said things like "it's personal" or "it's too lengthy and I can't be bothered".

"I just say I was taken off my mum and that's why I'm here. That's about it. I don't go into it much with people I don't know well because I just feel they don't really need to know." Rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care

"When it comes to our experiences and our lives it's like only certain people need to know." Rangatahi Māori in whānau care

Some said they're also comfortable to be open with others who've had similar experiences and that it "becomes a bond" between them.

Some who were in whānau or non-whānau care said they'd been more open about it when they were younger but this had changed to just close friends as they'd gotten older because they'd become more aware of the stigma of being in care and didn't want people to judge them or treat them differently.

Caregivers and adoptive and whāngai parents too said that, in the main, children and young people will only tell the fuller story to those who are close to them to protect themselves from stigma.

"It depends on the level of friendship in terms of what they'll tell friends…. If they have a good friendship, they're able to have those discussions." Non-whānau caregiver

Some young people prefer not to tell others

Some young people said they prefer not to tell others about their situations. For example, some said they avoid talking about their families or don't correct people's assumptions. Young people being raised by non-whānau caregivers, in particular, said they don't tell others they're in care because of the stigma that comes with it.

"Some people ask, and it's like, 'what's there to tell!'. Like, so many people are adopted, so many; you just don't know because it's not something that people talk about really." Adopted young person

"I'm not ashamed, it's just people view you as weird – trouble child…. I don't want people to have that reaction when they see me." Young person in non-family care

Pākehā caregivers and adoptive parents often keep things private

Many Pākehā caregivers and adoptive parents said they don't really tell others unless it comes up or people ask as they want to normalise children and young people's lives and not have them "feel any different". They also want to protect them from any stigma and judgements.

"People just don't know, because we didn't want to tell people because we want her to be our daughter lock, stock and barrel with no label attached… I didn't want the label, and I didn't want her to feel segregated, or different." Adoptive parent

Some also said they're sometimes uncomfortable when the children themselves are open with others and worry about what people will think or say in response.

"It affected me more than her when she told people, I thought it should be private." Adoptive parent

Māori caregivers and whāngai parents are more open and often use kōrero to manage any stigma

Māori caregivers and whāngai parents said that because raising the children of others is a normalised and common practice in their whānau and communities, they're generally open about things and most people already know their situations. They too want to protect children and young people from stigma and judgement but will often use kōrero with others as the means to do so rather than privacy, such as by encouraging children and young people to be open with their friends.

"That kōrero is integrated in everything because in my whānau it's normal…. Why would people hide those things because then it becomes something that's not okay or it's something that's shameful. I'm like, it doesn't have to be a secret because it's actually something beautiful." Whāngai parent

"All her friends would come home for a kai. We knew all her friends…. One was brought up with her koro when her mum passed away, and when he passed away she moved in with the aunty. But yeah, she'd come and share her stories." Whāngai parent

"My moko boy doesn't say anything, he won't say anything about the situation to any of the kids at his school…. He hasn't got to that point yet but I say to him 'You know the more you talk about it baby, the better it gets. You'll see where a lot of people will love you for who you are." Whānau caregiver

This was consistent with what we were told by one rangatahi whāngai.

"It's never been an issue explaining it to others and I'm really open anyway…. And because we're all whānau here, a lot of people already know." Rangatahi whāngai

Belonging

This section reports on what we learned about the relationships of belonging children and young people have with those who are raising them and with their birth parents and whānau and families.

While many children and young people have close relationships of belonging with their caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents, some don't. Some relationships change over time, and sometimes there are different expectations. Grandparents said having grandchildren in their care brings new dimensions to their relationships. Forming relationships of belonging with caregivers and whāngai parents can be challenging when children and young people have conflicted loyalties or are told different stories. Māori cultural connections are an important source of belonging for Māori in non-whānau care and help draw them together as a whānau. Children and young people call their caregivers or whāngai or adopted parents by different names depending on their relationships and circumstances, and many like to have the same surname as them.

Some children and young people have close relationships of belonging with their birth parents. This is strengthened by spending time together, knowing whakapapa and knowing whānau stories, and when supported and encouraged by caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents. Some children and young people have more distant relationships with their birth parents. Many children and young people's relationships with their birth parents are complex, whether they are close or not. Despite these complexities, most children and young people in care or who are whāngai call their birth parents 'mum' and 'dad'.

Relationships with birth siblings are especially important to children and young people's sense of belonging to their birth whānau or families, and whakapapa connections are an important source of belonging for many tamariki and rangatahi Māori – both to their whānau and to their hapū and iwi.

Some children and young people have relationships of belonging with both sets of parents and with their whānau or families, where these multiple connections give them a greater sense of belonging. For some tamariki and rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care, whakapapa is an inclusive framework for connection and belonging to both sets of parents as one whānau.

Relationships of belonging with caregivers and adoptive and whāngai parents

Many young people have close relationships with their caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents and feel a sense of belonging

Many of the young people we talked with said they have close relationships with the people who are raising them and feel a sense of belonging in their whānau and families.

This is especially so for rangatahi whāngai and for those raised by whānau caregivers. Some adopted young people said they have a close relationship and a sense of belonging with their adoptive parents and siblings – although some said this didn't always extend to their wider adoptive family. Some of the young people being raised by non-whānau caregivers also said they're close to and feel like they belong with their caregivers and their whānau and families. Relationships with caregivers' children or whāngai or adopted siblings have been especially important in creating a sense of belonging.

"I call them aunty and uncle but I love them like a mum and dad … and I tell people they're my mum and dad…. My whāngai brothers, they call me sister and I love it. I call them brother too, every time." Rangatahi whāngai

"Their other children, they were really cool, and then as we got older they were like the biggest role models I think we could have – having that big sister, that big brother when you're going through stuff…. I'm still really close with them, like really, really close… and they're like, 'This is my baby sister' which is really cool." Rangatahi whāngai in whānau care

"I'm close to my siblings, close to Mum and Dad. I see them as mum and dad, they basically raised me.... One of the sisters said she wanted me when she saw me as a baby." Adopted young person

"They were very happy to have me around. Because I mean they actually didn't want any more foster children at all, because the husband was, 'No we're not having any more kids'... 'cause they have seven kids. But I guess he warmed up to me after having us around and stuff like that, so I was sort of an honorary eighth child. Not officially adopted but might as well have been." Young person in non-family care

What also helped them to feel close and like they belonged was: being loved, wanted, cared for, kept safe, having their time and attention, having fun, doing things together, being encouraged, being made a fuss of and being part of a positive whānau or family environment.

The whāngai and adoptive parents, grandparent caregivers and many of the non-whānau caregivers we interviewed also talked of the closeness of their relationships: the love, affection, sharing, openness, spending time together, the acceptance by their other children and/or wider whānau and the sense of belonging it created.

"I've always been open with her. She can talk to us about anything, and she knows that. She can come to me, and it's not a problem." Grandparent, family caregiver

"We take them everywhere with us, birthdays, 50ths." Grandparent, whānau caregiver

"All my kids always made her feel welcome and loved; in a way they're her siblings. She looks up to them and my eldest daughter has always looked after her." Whāngai caregiver/sister

"If there's birthdays, my kids will send these kids presents and do birthday phone calls.... My three kids and the grandkids, they just love them... they'll have them out for visits, they love having an extended family.... They call each other sisters and brothers. It's all hugs." Non-whānau caregiver

"This is home for him." Non-whānau caregiver

Some young people don't have close relationships with their caregivers and don't feel a sense of belonging

Some young people who were raised by non-whānau caregivers said they hadn't developed close relationships with their caregivers and didn't feel they belonged with them. This happened for a range of reasons, such as when there were personality mismatches, or they continued to feel a strong bond with their birth parents. For others it was because there had been a lack of love and nurturing, they had moved around a lot or because there had been mistreatment and abuse.

"For the first couple of years I called her by her first name, and then she turned around one day and was like, 'You can call me 'mum' now', so we were made to call her mum. I didn't really want to because she wasn't that mum-type figure to me." Rangatahi in non-family care

Some young people's relationships with their caregivers and sense of belonging have changed over time

Some young people in non-whānau care said they got closer to their caregivers and developed a sense of belonging over time as they learned to trust them.

"For a long time when I first moved in I didn't want it 'cause I didn't trust it.... It took ages for me to settle… but then I kept seeing it and seeing it." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Some of the non-whānau caregivers we interviewed also talked of how relationships and a sense of belonging had developed over time.

"It took a long time for him to call me mum. My husband was dad from day one, from the moment he arrived. I think in his mind he already had a mum but didn't have a

dad…. In the last year I've been more 'mum' than [first name]." Non-whānau caregiver

"I'm a hugger so I'll hug and say, 'Have a good day, I love you' or 'Goodnight, I love you'. It really struck me this day where I didn't offer that to him because I didn't think we were there. You can't press that on somebody, and he said, 'I love you'. I was like, 'Oh cool, I love you too man'. I dropped him off to school the other day and he came back to the car and goes, 'Oh sorry, I love you' because he hadn't said it…. Those moments are really cool." Non-whānau caregiver

Conversely, some young people said their relationships became more distant over time and that they no longer felt they belonged. For example, one adoptive parent said that while their adopted son had been close to them when he was younger, they'd become more distant during his teenage years and that this had now widened further to the point where he no longer calls them mum and dad and calls them by their first names instead.

Others talked of how relationships and belonging had broken down when they were younger but had come back together as they'd gotten older. For example, one young person talked of how she'd "run away" from her whānau caregivers to her grandparents when she was 16 because they'd failed to show her love and that they'd recently come back into her life.

"It's something I'm sort of struggling to deal with… to accept them back in after all the hurt but I'm trying and they're trying too." Rangatahi Māori in whānau care

Children and non-whānau caregivers may have different expectations of their relationship

Some young people and non-whānau caregivers talked of the different expectations they had of their relationships with each other.

Some caregivers said they'd expected the relationships with the children in their care to develop over time and bring a sense of belonging together as a family. In contrast to this, some young people don't have expectations of being close or developing a sense of belonging with their caregivers.

"We were expecting them to be with us forever and getting a stronger and stronger bond over time. I just made the assumption when we first met them that that was what they wanted as well…. I think they wanted a pathway out of the situation they were in when they initially came to us." Non-family caregiver

Having a grandchild in care brings new dimensions to grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren

Grandparents talked of the ways in which being both a grandparent and parent to their grandchildren brings new dimensions to their relationships with their grandchildren.

Some said they're not like "typical" grandparents who can simply spoil their grandchildren and instead have to provide them with structure and routine as a parent would.

"These grandchildren I mother, the others I grandmother." Family caregiver

As a result, some children and young people think of their grandparents more as mum and dad, with some referring to them as such and giving them gifts on Mother's Day and Father's Day.

"Yeah, well I've been with her for 14 years…. When she raised me I just went from calling her Nan to Mum, so it just automatically happened. You see her every day and you learn, 'oh, Mum'." Rangatahi whāngai

One grandmother also talked of the implications of this in terms of making her will. Because her grandson is "effectively another child", she's arranged for him to inherit an equal share of her estate alongside her children.

Relationships of belonging can be challenging when children and young people have conflicted loyalties

A number of non-whānau caregivers talked of the conflicted loyalties that children and young people sometimes have between caregivers and birth parents or birth families which can impact negatively on their relationships of belonging with their caregivers.

"We call him our son but he can't call us mum and dad, he just can't. It's something his grandmother has instructed him he's not to do. She's told him he wasn't to ever love us or call us that so he struggles. He loves us and he tells us that, every day, but he can't do the mum thing." Non-whānau caregiver

Some grandparents too talked of the conflicted loyalties their grandchildren can sometimes have as a result of the tensions between grandparents and parents and how this sometimes impacts on the closeness and sense of belonging their grandchildren have with them.

"Our daughter's partner doesn't say very nice things to the kids about us…. And the older kids get angry with us when we go on about the parents…. My eldest grandson sometimes won't talk to me because of it." Whāngai caregiver

"If she got jealous of our relationship, she'd do things. One time he wouldn't let me hug him for two days after his mother had looked after him. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Finally, one night he just cried his eyes out and said, 'She told me you don't love me'. I can't remember how it was put… she's not your real mother so she doesn't really love you, something like that. And that hit really hard…. I just kind of nursed him back from that and said, 'Well there's a difference between what people say and what is true…. It was the first time I'd really seen him devastated by anything." Whāngai parent

Māori cultural connections are an important source of belonging for tamariki and rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care

Non-whānau Māori caregivers also talked of the ways in which Māori cultural connections are an important source of belonging for the tamariki and rangatahi Māori they're raising and help draw them together as a whānau.

"Whenever there's anything happening at the marae, my husband will say to him, 'Do you want to come' and he always says, 'yeah!'…. He connects with the wider whānau there too, he seems to be more comfortable in a whānau environment…I see him gliding in." Non-whānau caregiver

Children and young people call their caregivers or whāngai or adopted parents different names depending on their relationships

As shown above, children and young people call their caregivers or adoptive or whāngai parents by different names depending on their relationships and circumstances.

Grandparent caregivers mostly continue to be called 'nana', 'granddad', 'koro' and so forth and sometimes they're called 'mum' and 'dad' – especially when raising their grandchildren from a young age. Other caregivers are also sometimes called 'mum' and 'dad', and again, including when children and young people have been with them from a young age, when close relationships have formed or when caregivers have required them to do so. Some caregivers are called by their first names which may be because close relationships haven't formed, because of children being older when going to live with them or because children and young people continue to have relationships with or loyalties to their birth parents or to their whānau or families. Even when not being called 'mum' and 'dad', some are still referred to as such when children and young people are introducing them or talking about them or their situation to others.

Adoptive parents are called 'mum' and 'dad' although one young person now calls their adoptive parents by their first names because of their relationship breakdown.

Whāngai parents are also often called 'mum' and 'dad' or 'mama' and 'papa', even when they are the grandparents – especially when they've raised their mokopuna from a young age. Other times they're called 'aunty' and 'uncle', such as when they already have their own biological children, but are still referred to as 'mum' and 'dad' when their whāngai children are talking about them or explaining their situation to others.

In general, things are much more consistent across all groups of children and young people when it comes to the other children of their caregivers or adoptive or whāngai parents where almost all young people said they simply called each other 'brother' and 'sister'.

Many children and young people like to have the same surname as their caregivers

Adopted children have the same surnames as their adoptive parents, and some children and young people being raised by their grandparents or by whāngai parents also have the same surnames as them because it's their shared whānau or family name. Where they don't have the same legal surname, some children and young people still opt to use their grandparents' or whāngai parents' surnames or add them to their own as a marker of belonging with them. In some instances, it has been or also been motivated by wanting to have the same surname as their siblings.

Having the same surname as their caregivers is also important to some children and young people in non-whānau care, and they too sometimes use their caregivers' surnames or add them to their own.

"His name was quite important to him and then just in the last six months probably, whenever he introduces himself to people he says his name and adds our surname at the end. He came up with that himself." Non-whānau caregiver

Some non-whānau and non-family caregivers too have wanted the children and young people in their care to have the same surnames as them – and have sometimes been challenged for doing so.

"I said something about enrolling him at kindergarten, and said, 'I enrolled him under our name'. In my mind it was the whole family thing like, 'I want him to feel he belongs to us so why would I enrol him as anything else'. Well, the lawyer went quite mad at me... 'that was the name given to him by his birth family. You shouldn't be changing it, and blah blah blah'.... I completely understand but I also saw that, 'what, so now he's different? What would he see himself as if he's got a different name?'." Non-family caregiver

Conversely, some young people in non-whānau care have wanted to keep their birth surnames. In all of these cases, these young people have maintained close bonds with their birth siblings.

Relationships of belonging with birth parents

Some children and young people have close relationships with their birth parents and feel a sense of belonging

Some of the young people we talked with have close relationships with their birth parents and feel a sense of belonging with them, and some are in the process of rebuilding this with them.

"Then recently again she [birth mother] has turned back into a person who is both coherent and is actually back to how she was before our parents split up. Back to

when things were like I guess normal. Which is kind of cool but instead of me being five I am an adult. The relationship is slightly different but it's almost the same." Young person in non-family care

Some caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents too talked of the closeness between children and their birth parents – where some will sometimes ask if they can live with their birth parents or will likely do so in the future. Some also said they'd be open to it if their relationships with each other were strong and the birth parents were "in a good place". One whāngai parent talked of how her daughter had lived with her birth mother for a few stints when younger but how she'd limited it to holidays after she started secondary school so she'd be settled in one place.

For some children and young people being raised by people outside of their birth whānau, their relationships and connections to their birth whānau are maintained through people other than their birth parents, such as through grandparents, aunties or uncles or through siblings who live with their parents or other whānau or family members.

Some children and young people have more distant relationships with their birth parents

Some of the young people we talked with said they don't have close relationships with their birth parents. Some caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents also talked about this. When explaining why, some said it was because they haven't spent much time with them or haven't been allowed to see them so they don't really know them. Others said it was because they feel their birth parents don't really care about them or want to know them.

"He hasn't always got to see his parents so he doesn't really know them.... Now it's really awkward for him because they're his mum and dad but they're also strangers." Non-whānau caregiver

"Yeah I don't ever hear from him (dad) unless I text him. And he never comes around here, and I never see him. If I see him in public he'll just give me a wave.... Last time I saw him would have been probably mid last year. I saw him in the Burger King drive through ... and I waved, and he was like, 'Oh hi', just didn't really pay any attention." Young person in family care

"You can see there's definitely a distance there. Definitely a distance and very unsure because they don't know them. They love them but they don't know them." Family caregiver

Some said it's because they don't see their birth parents as parents and vice versa.

"When I'm around her I don't have that Mum and daughter feeling. I have that more like a friendship feeling than an actual mother and daughter bond." Young person in family care

"Her birth mother would be there, and honestly she could have just been a cousin. She didn't see her as her baby. She didn't try to be a quasi-mother, or anything like

that. She didn't really have a closer relationship with her than any of the other family." Adoptive parent

Some said it's because the label of parent is not given but earned.

I'm just not interested. She can't try to call herself my mum, or my son's nana, because you have to earn that label.... It's like my parents; I call them mum and dad because they raised me, and they're my parents, they earned that name. They put the effort in, and loved and cared for me. That's where that comes from." Adopted young person

Others said it's because of their lifestyle choices.

"I don't really speak to my biological mother just because she's obviously gone down a bit of a bad path. She's not really the type of person that I'd want to involve myself with anyway and she's not the greatest influence. But because we're all family... I still see all of that family at Christmas time and stuff." Adopted young person

For some, their relationships with their birth parents are not just distant but absent as they've cut them out of their lives as a way to push away the hurt they've gone through. After making contact with a long absent father, one young person told us that:

"Over time I sort of pushed myself away because I was like... 'I don't need you to come in and try to play daddy now, like I've got my parents'... and when he did try to engage and be a dad it was really irritating to me and I would just get so angry.... It got too much and I couldn't handle it so I just cut it all off." Rangatahi in whānau care

Some of the young people we interviewed also talked about their experiences of supervised access and how it "felt like a chore" and didn't help them build their relationships with their birth parents.

"It almost feels like it's out of your control. You're forced to be in a room with someone you don't want to be in a room with or you don't have enough time to fully chat with someone you do want to be in a room with." Young person in non-family care

Some caregivers agreed, saying supervised visits were too short and didn't provide quality time and were "not natural" because of the restrictions around what can take place and because of being confined to one room.

Relationships with birth parents can be complex

Almost all of the young people we interviewed talked of the complexities of their relationships with their birth parents, whether they feel close to them or distant or somewhere in between.

Many talked of having love for their birth parents but not being able to trust or rely on them or feel safe.

*"Like, we're always comfortable around our old lady and love her forever and love her hard as well, it's just we can't control what she does.... So, we've got to be able to trust ourselves to be able to remove ourselves from that before getting hooked into it and that sh*t happening all over again."* Rangatahi in whānau care

Some said it's complicated because they find it difficult to move on from the traumas of the past.

"I always have that question of I don't know how parents can put their kids in some situations.... Obviously, as you get older you realise some things just need to be left there but I struggle to move forwards sometimes, so yeah, me and my mum are still working on our relationship." Rangatahi whāngai

Others said they felt they needed to take care of their birth parents rather than the other way around. For example, one young person talked of doing things for his birth mother "so she's not sad" which is very emotional for him. Some also talked of feeling embarrassed of their birth parents.

Caregivers and whāngai and adopted parents too talked of the many complexities of children and young people's relationships with their birth parents, including the way in which young children in particular often love and idolise their birth parents even when birth parents are not particularly engaged or present.

"Well, this is the strange thing. They absolutely love him but we don't see him.... Their parents are like water; they flow in and flow out." Family caregiver

"What's happened is this child has this thing in her mind of how a mother should be, and that is her mum, and that's what she's missing out on. And the boys are the same with their father. They think he's a god, and he's never there, but it's what they have." Family caregiver

Some young people being raised by non-family caregivers said their relationships with their birth parents have also been made more complex by their caregivers. For example, some talked of how their caregivers get jealous when they prioritise visits with their birth parents and how they have to be careful not to call their birth mother's 'mum' in front of their caregivers because it would upset them. One rangatahi Māori said of her Pākehā caregiver:

"My foster mum always manipulated us to thinking in a certain way…. Like she'd get us to think of our birth mum in a nasty way and she's not entirely a bad person our birth mum." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

Relationships with birth parents are strengthened by spending time together, knowing whakapapa and whānau stories

We were told that children and young people's relationships and sense of belonging with their birth parents and/or whānau is strengthened by spending time together and building a store of shared memories, knowing whakapapa and who is who and how everyone is connected and knowing whānau or family stories.

"His mother dotes on him…she'll do the tik tok with him and left him her bible. He can't even read but he'll sit there and open it and look at it, and he likes that fact." Whānau caregiver

"I actually answered most of her questions about who's who through photos – of my mum and dad, who she only remembers through photos, my aunties and uncles, other mokopuna from generations gone by sort of thing….of her mother and we'd talk about those things…. She'd talk to them like she's having a whānau hui sort of thing. Photos keep us strong." Whāngai parent

"There's a lot of things I can't tell them but there's a lot I can... about their mum when she was a little girl, and the things she got up to. Just the things that are handed down. The stories that are handed down are really important in kin-care. Stories of whānau, stories of what their uncles and aunties did, because it's all about that anchor." Family caregiver

Caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents play a key role in shaping children and young people's relationships with their birth parents

Caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents also play a key role in keeping children and young people connected to their birth parents and whānau or families. They talked of supporting and encouraging the children and young people they raise to build their relationships and sense of belonging with their birth parents and see the value in doing so for all involved, children and parents and whānau and caregivers alike.

"When we asked him if he wanted to see his dad he said, no he didn't. We were like, 'That's cool but just for interest's sake, why not?' And he didn't have a reason. I was like… 'What about if we give it a try and you see what dad's like and then maybe you can have something to base your decision on'. He was like, 'Oh yeah, that's fair enough'. He's been going ever since and he enjoys it. I think he really values his dad and they've become close." Non-whānau caregiver

"Over time I definitely want to strengthen her connections to her biological papa's family because they're not really involved…. The important thing for me right now is to talk about them to her so that when those opportunities arise, it's not a foreign thing." Whāngai parent

"I have a good relationship with his mum and I always encourage visits…. I don't want him getting to 12 and 13 and thinking, 'I don't know who my parents are?', What's my mum like?'…. I don't want him to have that unknown and all of those questions." Non-whānau caregiver

Relationships with siblings are especially important to a sense of belonging

Many of the young people we talked with said their relationships with their birth siblings are especially important to them and their sense of belonging.

Some talked of the close relationships that had formed between them prior to being removed from their birth parents' care.

"Yeah, 'cause we were sort of a memory bond, like one of us would say something and that would trigger another thing as well, so it's sort of like a domino effect if that makes sense, it was quite cool." Young person in non-family care

"My older two siblings had to look after me which was definitely not good for their development, 'cause they were having to mature so quickly so young. Still respect them a lot but. They were having to look after us, so we were close….just 'cause I knew I could rely on my siblings." Young person in non-family care

For those who were raised with their birth siblings, having their siblings alongside them had been key to normalising being in care and "making it okay".

For those who were raised or are being raised without their birth siblings in the same homes, many said they still feel close to them because they have regular contact and enjoy spending time together when they do.

"I see my little brother pretty much every day because he's with our mum and she lives like right over the fence…. The older sister, I don't get to see her as much as our baby brother but I talk to her on Instagram too. Then there's two others that live away… and they come down pretty much most holidays…. We have fun, have birthdays together." Rangatahi whāngai

Some of these young people talked of being "split up a lot" from their siblings, the hurt it has caused them and the time they've missed out on from not being together. Others talked of how being raised apart from their siblings has also meant missing out on developing close relationships with them, and that they often seek to rebuild their relationships with them when opportunities arise to do so.

For some, their relationships with their siblings are their strongest connection to their birth whānau or family. For example, one rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care talked of how her and her seven siblings keep in regular contact either in person or on-line but have minimal contact with their birth mother and their wider whānau.

Most of the caregivers and whāngai parents also talked about the importance of sibling relationships to children and young people's sense of belonging and outlined the efforts they went to to make sure their relationships are close and strong.

"She's the eldest, the tuakana, the mātāmua of the whānau – and that's meaningful to her, very much so…. So it's been very important for her to see those siblings." Whāngai parent

"Our youngest grandson's world was turned upside down when his brothers came in. It's taken him time, but he won't go anywhere without them now." Whānau caregiver

"He has contact with his nan and brothers…. It's a real challenge to say the least because of his grandmother. His siblings don't come here because she won't let them. But it's important to him he has contact with his siblings, so it's important to me." Non-whānau caregiver

"My priority has been to keep the children connected, no matter what…. I'm probably the only person that speaks to everybody…. It doesn't matter how rude people are to me or whatever the scenario is, I'll go back to ensure we keep these kids connected…. None of us could ever know what it would be like for them to grow up in this, but their siblings would know. So for me, that's been key – to keep them knowing each other…. And when we do, that bond is completely solid." Whāngai parent

Whakapapa connections are an important source of belonging for tamariki and rangatahi Māori

Many of the rangatahi Māori we interviewed talked of how whakapapa is a source of identity and belonging within their birth whānau.

"When you're whāngai-ed, you don't really know where you come from, especially when your biological mum's like not in the picture, or in the picture but elsewhere, and your biological dad's not there at all…. It wasn't until I got older and I started thinking, 'Where do I even base whakapapa from?' And then I just thought, 'Well where's my heart?' and it was always with my grandfather. He was my heart. So yeah, Parihaka, that's where my koro is from and where his heart was…. Yep, that's where I whakapapa to, for my koro. That's where it all begins for me." Rangatahi in whānau care

Others talked of how knowing whakapapa enables them to find their connections with others they're related to and see themselves as part of a bigger whole which deepens their sense of identity and belonging – both in their whānau and in their hapū and iwi.

"For Māori kids in general, we need to know where we're from and who we belong to, which maunga are ours and this and that.... It's a sense of self-belief. You know who you are and you get more understanding about who you are – and it opens you up to more opportunities, straight up. It's buzzy 'cause most of these guys round here... when we actually get in-depth about who we are, we find out that everyone's connected in some way." Rangatahi in whānau care

Relationships of belonging with both

Some young people have a sense of belonging with both sets of parents and whānau

Some of the young people we talked with said they feel like they belong with both sets of parents and their whānau or families – and that these multiple connections give them a greater sense of belonging. For some, they feel part of both because of the close relationships they have with key people in each who keep them connected in such as grandparents, aunties and uncles, siblings and cousins.

"I had my nephew stay with me for a while and then my dad took him in. My sister wasn't on the right track and my dad was trying to I guess be a better grandfather. I was definitely grateful for that, and so the connection between him and my nephew helps; the way I connect with my dad is through my nephew." Rangatahi whāngai

For many children and young people raised by grandparents and whāngai parents, this is because they are part of the same family or whānau or hapū, giving them opportunities to spend time together and build their relationships and sense of belonging with each other.

"Her mum would bring her other kids down, and yeah, we'd go up the maunga, go and have fun, fishing, getting kaimoana for them to take home, photoshoots, that sort of stuff. That was very important, always taking photos for memories and keeping the whānau together." Whāngai parent

Some of the young people raised by non-whānau caregivers said they too felt they were part of "one big, blended family" with double the parents and multiple siblings.

"Belonging is really with both families. I mean you can't really compare the two. It's like having an extended family essentially. I'm just so lucky, like seriously." Young person in non-whānau care

Whakapapa as an inclusive framework for connection and belonging to both sets of parents

Some of the rangatahi Māori in non-whānau care said that through "talking whakapapa", they'd found they have whakapapa connections with their caregivers and with others around them. Some non-whānau caregivers also said they've been able to make whakapapa connections with the rangatahi in their care.

Making these connections helped tamariki and rangatahi Māori feel they were part of one "massive whānau" that was inclusive of all.

"Just from talking. We just talk…. Yeah, like just a familiar name and then you just ask someone and it just pops up. That's why I love New Zealand eh. That's literally it. Like, 'G, where you from?' and bang you're cousins with someone.... Literally all our mates are just family." Rangatahi in non-whānau care

A critical element in this happening had been that children and young people had been placed with whānau who resided within the rohe of the iwi they whakapapa to.

Making sense

This section reports on what we learned about what helps children and young people make sense of their situations.

Children and young people are better able to make sense of their situations when they know their whole story and when that story is strengths-based. Non-whānau caregivers in particular said that gaps in the stories of children and young people in care could be addressed by the production of 'life story books' which would give them ready access to information and images about their lives.

Making sense is also facilitated when children and young people are affirmed and supported by important others around them, when they're able to see the bigger picture of their lives and reflect on what it would have been like if they'd stayed with their birth parents – and when they're given realistic explanations to better understand and accept what the situation is.

Children and young people also make sense of their situations by talking with trusted whānau members and friends, and by talking with their social workers and with counsellors. We were told too that children and young people are better able to make sense of their situations when their experience of what makes a family or whānau is normalised and they become aware that many others live with people other than their birth parents.

What helps children and young people make sense of their situations

Knowing their whole story and the story being strengths-based

Many of the young people we interviewed talked of how they were better able to make sense of their situations when they knew their whole story.

"There was a box with all of the CYFS letters in it and all those court documents with the reasons. All of that stuff. That was always kept in a box with our name on it and it was given to me when I hit a certain age, when they knew I was ready to carry it – when I was 16 or 17. When they gave it to me, it was my choice to do what I wanted with it. In it was all the letters my dad had sent to us from jail when we were young and certificates from school – like the whole of everything from growing up and it was really wicked. I got rid of the court documents from our past because I'm not into carrying the past… and just kept the sentimental things like the letters from our dad. In those letters carries a lot, his conversations to us at the time. It was his way of having a relationship with us. I kept those and they'll go to my sister when she's ready." Rangatahi in whānau care

Many of the caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents we spoke with also talked about the need for children and young people to know their stories, and the importance of having things like photographs from their infancies and childhoods to help them piece things together. Non-whānau and non-family caregivers lamented the fact they often didn't have such things, and the holes their absence leave in children and young people's stories and their ability to make sense of their lives.

"She's been given photos of when she was a baby from her sister… and for her that's like gold. It's like, 'Who am I? I was this baby, I remember that high chair. They need to know." Non-whānau caregiver

"I even showed her photos of when she was in hospital in the incubator when she was born right up until the day she came home about 3 months later…. I explained about the karakia and who was in the room, so she got an understanding of, 'Yes, your mum was there and she did care and she still cares for you and loves you very dearly, it's just she wasn't ready to be a mummy for you at that time because she was still a young kid'… and she was very grateful for that. She still talks about it today." Whāngai parent

"Quite often he'll walk around the walls and look at the baby photos of the other kids and he'll say, 'Where am I as a baby?' That started a little while ago…. He's got lots of photos of him growing up but they're all since he's been here…. I'd love to give him that. I just say things like, 'You didn't live here as a baby but here's a photo of when we did this and here's a photo of when you did that'…. I've asked his mum, several times but she might not have one." Non-whānau caregiver

More than just photos, some non-whānau and non-family caregivers talked about major gaps in the information and histories they're provided with about the children and young people in their care, including those in permanent care. This means

they're unable to fill these gaps in their stories or answer many of their questions. As a result, some non-whānau caregivers talked of the efforts they're going through to help them piece things together and gain a sense of their stories – and stressed the need for 'life story books' to be prepared for children and young people in care so they're able to have ready access to information and images about their lives.

Another point made by some caregivers and whāngai parents was that these stories need to be strengths-based so that children and young people not only know their complete story but also "gain an understanding of the strengths they have" because of it. Some of the young people we interviewed talked of how their lives had meant they had "more empathy" and could "relate better" to others or that they were "more grounded" and "more appreciative" of their lives because of their experiences of "living in two worlds".

Some of the young people we spoke with also talked of the need for strengths-based stories to be part of what is recorded about them.

*"The system takes records of all the bad things we've done... but they've got f**k all records of all the good. Do you know what I mean? They know about your bad deeds. Like the bad habits you've got. But they don't know that the bro goes for runs. Like he runs every morning. They don't know that the bro provides... takes care of his little brothers."* Rangatahi in whānau care

Seeing the bigger picture

Children and young people make sense of their lives as they get older and take stock of the bigger picture and are able to reflect on what life would have been like if they had stayed with their birth parents.

Sometimes children and young people's understanding of their situations begins to develop while still in the care of their birth parents because they see for themselves that their parents are struggling.

"Before we finally picked him up for good, he could see that his mum wasn't right, because she would be so sick….. She would wander out the front door and lose her geography and not know how to find her way back and all those things. He became aware she wasn't a suitable adult for him to live with." Family caregiver

It also develops or continues to develop when children and young people remain in contact with their birth parents as they grow up. Some young people said it was especially apparent when they compared their lives to those of their siblings who'd been raised by their birth parents. Some caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents also talked of this as an important sense-making process.

"When we did grow up and sort of seen the picture ourselves of what our real mum's like and the situation and the path she's gone down; yeah, it all just pieced itself together in its own little way." Rangatahi in whānau care

"Seeing the world my siblings were in compared to the world I was in, helped me to stay and realise the positives – and that's what switched me to the whole positive

side of it compared to the negative side. That's what changed my life around I think is seeing that." Rangatahi in whānau care

"We were never derogatory about her birth mother or made any judgements, but ... she just intuitively worked out, 'I'm not sure that there's really much in this relationship for me'." Adoptive parent

"I've always encouraged him having a relationship with his birth parents... I'm hoping that as he gets older it will also mean he'll see the situation for what it is and his eyes will be open." Non-whānau caregiver

Being given realistic explanations

A number of caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents said that one important step in helping children make sense of their situations as they get older has been to give them realistic explanations to shift their perception of their birth parents from fantasy to reality. They said the shift helped young people to better understand and accept what their birth parents are like and what the situation is.

"... I'm honest with her and say, "She's not here; she isn't here." I tell her she loves them, but she's not here." Family caregiver

"Yesterday we hopped in the car and my music was on really loud from the day before. He goes, 'I loved it when me and dad used to go for drives and listen to music'.... After school I asked him, 'how often did you do that with dad?', and he goes, 'It only happened once'. So the kids' memories that they carry in their heads are sometimes different to what the reality was." Non-whānau caregiver

"When she sees them, I hear her saying to them, 'Youse can come and live by mum when mum finishes this and finishes that'. I think they've given up on that.... We say to them, 'You know what your mum is like'." Whānau caregiver

"I started off with the 'of course she loves and cares about you' and then I changed tack because I could see he was getting emotionally upset over what she was doing and the inconsistencies…. I switched to, 'this is how she is; it doesn't mean we can't love her, it's just how she is'. It felt like pouring a bucket of cold water on him every time but I actually think it was helpful for him 'cause it shifted him off a fantasy mum." Whāngai parent

Talking with and being affirmed by whānau or family and friends

Young people talked of being better able to make sense of their situations by talking with trusted whānau or family members and/or their friends – including older siblings and older trusted family friends or friends who'd had similar upbringings to theirs, even when aspects of their lives had differed. Talking to these people has helped them to better understand what are often complex, confusing and deeply hurtful situations and emotions. Some of these trusted confidantes have also helped teach young people new ways of healing and settling themselves.

"Just talking about it a lot with my friends and that, that definitely helped me a lot. They were always curious about my life and I'd always explain it to them and explaining it would help me, yeah." Rangatahi in non-family care

"That understanding has always came from brotherhood and having friends and talking and being able to relate to others and other people's lives. Even not being able to relate to other people's lives helps. For example, not being able to relate to some of the things that the bro's been through, it's like, sort of makes me, helps me in my own ways. Helps me when I need it." Rangatahi in whānau care

"When it comes to dealing with emotions and trying to overcome them, I ask my whāngai brother to help me. For me, he's my example and with him it's a-wairua; we get out into te taiao and go to the river or into the bush. I think connecting with Tāne Mahuta, Tangaroa, it all helps. The river helps me clear and just wash things away or going for a walk up on a hill and getting fresh air. So things like that – a lot of karakia and talking about your emotions or having a bit of a cry, so that's what I do now if I feel heavy and emotional. I do what makes me feel good and carry on.... I'm very grateful for my brother and what he continues to teach me because I now have tools to give to my cousins and friends who battle with stuff." Rangatahi whāngai

A number of caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents also said that children and young people are better able to make sense of their situations when they're affirmed and supported by important others around them. This includes affirming their stories and their strengths, helping to love and nurture them and helping to create a store of good memories.

"I've found it really helpful too, to have that wider whānau network so I know they're getting the same message consistently across a number of places." Whāngai parent

Talking with social workers or counsellors

For some young people, talking with social workers had helped them make sense of their situation. For example, one young person talked of how much it had helped when their social worker had told them "over and over" that the situation wasn't their fault.

For others, it had been talking with counsellors and getting help for things like their feelings of abandonment, anger issues and thoughts of or attempts at suicide that are part of the trauma they carry.

"It's certain ones eh? Like if you've got a good connection with the counsellor then yeah, like that's when it comes. Like for example I had one who was gangsta because her kids went through it… and her brothers, so she had that understanding of it." Rangatahi in whānau care

Some of the young people we talked with reflected back on their growing up years and said that having a social worker who "actively checked up on us and asked how we are" would have been beneficial because they hadn't had someone to talk to and ask if they were okay. Some also said that greater access to mental health support from counsellors would have also been helpful.

"If someone had been like, 'Hey you don't actually have to like your situation that you're in.... You don't have to like it but we can take steps to make you feel more comfortable;, to make you less embarrassed." Young person in non-family care

A few talked of the stigma around seeking support for mental health, and suggested that counsellors be seen more as someone to "go to have a chat to" rather than for therapy.

Some caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents too talked of the usefulness of counsellors in helping children and young people deal with trauma and make sense of their lives. Some also talked of YMCA mentors and organisations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"She ended up telling the counsellor at high school.... I asked her about it, I had to – 'what can you tell them that you can't tell me?' That's what it felt like. Maybe I'm just too abrupt with her. She said, 'I just needed someone to talk to'. I told her I was here if she needed someone to talk to but she was like, 'oh sister, I'll just talk to the counsellor'. And I was okay with it, at least she had someone to talk to and help her through the questions she must have had – that was the main thing." Whāngai sister/caregiver

"I got him counselling because I wanted him to be able to voice his feelings in a way that he didn't feel compromised between me and his grandmother. I wanted him to be free to express himself.... I don't want to add to the war in his mind. It's horrible watching him be conflicted like that.... It's been pretty easy breezy so far. He can go in and just be himself so I'm happy with that." Non-whānau caregiver

Some also talked of the need for greater access to mental health support for young people as part of a wider need to improve access and address "the huge extent of unaddressed trauma in people's lives".

Normalising their experiences of what makes a whānau or family

Some caregivers and whāngai and adoptive parents said that children and young people are better able to make sense of their situations when their experience of what makes a whānau or family is normalised. They said that this happens when children and young people gain an awareness that others too are part of "non-nuclear" or "non-standard" families and live with people other their birth parents.

"She's got friends who are in care, who are fostered out and adopted. She says, 'They're just as normal as me'. Nah, they've never had any problems with that." Non-family caregiver

"He's now learning that there are other kids who don't live with their parents too … and so he can talk about it." Non-whānau caregiver

"With school I'd always say to him, 'Are there other kids being raised by their grandparents in the class?' And he'd go, 'Yep'. Pretty much every class. It was so he could see it was normal." Whāngai parent

"I think how people define family is critical…. If you're saying family is only this – mum, dad and biological children, then you've immediately created a deficit in the child." Whāngai parent

Instead, they talked of the importance of affirming to children and young people that the norm of what constitutes a whānau or family is varied and multiple.

Conclusion and implications

This exploratory study has touched on several complex interconnected topics, providing us with initial understanding in these areas. These topics relate to each other and are also influenced by individual circumstances and characteristics of each child.

This study has shown that making sense of being in these care arrangements can be highly complex and a difficult task for children and young people. It requires grasping some complex information about their own history and history of their family or whānau, navigating multiple relationships with birth and caregiver / adoptive / whāngai family or whānau and with others around them, dealing with stigma and sometimes with hurt and trauma.

Consequently, making sense of being in these arrangements is a process that takes time, as children's understanding builds as they grow and develop abilities to process more complex information. A child's age of processing this information is highly variable.

Drawing on findings of this study and the related literature review, we identified the following implications and considerations, that have the potential to make it easier for children to make sense of their situations and improve their wellbeing:

Language

Some children in care would not identify themselves as being in care

We found that language used to describe children's situations and relationships to various people in their lives such as caregivers and birth parents was variable and reflected relationships that these children and young people had with people around them and their individual situations. This was also supported by the literature review findings.

While children in care are mostly aware of their situations from early on in the process of coming into care, they might not identify themselves as being in care. This is for several reasons:

1. They are raised by family or whānau caregivers and their situation is viewed just as "being raised by grandparents", rather than being in care. They do not know they have been "in care" or they know but they don't identify themselves with that language.
2. They are raised by non-family or non-whānau caregivers and they know they have been in care but wouldn't identify themselves with that language because it is not usually used to talk about their situation.
3. There is a significant stigma associated with being in care and young people want to avoid it.
4. Younger children might not know they have been in care because other words are used when explaining their situation that are easier to understand, and the explanation is a story rather than a status.

This has implications for use of words in survey questions where children are asked whether they have been in care. In surveys, questions could focus on whether child had a social worker as this is an observable phenomena. The wording used would

need to be further tested with children and young people to ensure that the question intent was realised. The questions used in the What About Me survey start point for wording that is concrete about living with foster parents and contact with Oranga Tamariki.[3]

Informing children of their situations

Consider informing younger children with more realistic and honest explanations and encourage participation earlier

Social workers emphasised the need to give children age-appropriate information. However, many of the young people interviewed felt that they could have been provided with more realistic and honest explanations earlier in the process, that they felt patronised by too simplistic explanations or explanations being sugar coated, and this didn't help them to make sense of what was happening in their lives. Some caregivers also felt that it would be beneficial for their relationship with children they had in care, if the children were given more honest explanations.

It is difficult to balance information being age-appropriate and honest at the same time, however, it would be beneficial to consider starting these conversations earlier. The literature review findings concluded that early conversations were beneficial. Also, knowing early worked well for adopted and whāngai children interviewed for this qualitative study. With this in mind, children could be invited to participate in their child protection matters earlier as well. Secluding children throughout the decision making processes can lead to children feeling powerless and can lower their self-esteem and self-worth, according to the literature review findings.

More realistic and honest explanations also lead to improved understanding and more positive identity development according to literature review findings, and it can support children in having more realistic view of their relationships with birth parents, according to the findings of this study.

Improving sharing information with caregivers and keeping everyone on the same page

Caregivers and social workers reflected that sharing information with caregivers about child's history and circumstances could be improved. Many caregivers reflected that they didn't have information, making it hard for them to support children in making sense of their situation.

Also, reasonable efforts should be made to ensure children are not getting conflicting information from trusted adults in their life, which can lead to significant stress for the child. Getting everyone on the same page and encouraging respectful relationships between caregivers and birth parents, helping them accept that the child can have close relationships with both, will be beneficial for the children. This can prevent children from feeling stressed by conflicts of loyalty towards various adults in their life.

[3] https://www.whataboutme.nz

Supporting children's understanding of their situation

Current New Zealand law and policy is set up right, but social workers need more time with children to apply it well

The new legislation that came into effect in July 2019 states that children have the right to know about their care status and be supported over time as they develop their understanding. This legislation and relevant policy and practice guidance reflects what we heard from young people and their caregivers/parents about what they need to make sense of their situations, such as informing and updating children about their circumstances, in age-appropriate way, encouraging participation and informing caregivers.

Social workers reflected that they do inform children about their care status, but to really support their understanding, social workers need to spend more time with children, than they currently do. Time is needed to develop a trusting relationship with a child, that would enable sensitive conversations and enable children to feel safe to ask questions about their situation. To free up some of the social workers time, their workload needs to be lowered, taking into consideration complexity of the work they do – social workers suggested lowering caseload and administrative burden as possible solutions. The importance of a trusting child-social worker relationship was also emphasised in the literature review. Fewer changes of social workers for the child would be also beneficial for developing these relationships.

Ensuring children have someone to talk to and access to mental health support

This study concluded that making sense of being in alternative care arrangements is a highly complex task and that children in these arrangements often deal with additional, sometimes significant, challenges. This study also showed that making sense is a process that occurs over a long period of time and that talking with trusted people, often numerous times, is vital for helping children through the process. Some children in care reflected that they didn't have anyone to talk to, and that this would have helped them. In some cases, social workers lacked time to have these conversations, or were not actively checking on these children as they considered them to be in stable situations.

Easier access to mental health support could be beneficial, supporting children to deal with their often complex situations and working through the emotional challenges some children may experience (e.g. feeling unwanted). That can lead to more nuanced understandings of their situations as well as improved wellbeing.

Ensuring support for children with disabilities

Many children and young people in care have disabilities, such as FASD, autism, ADHD, hearing, speech and language difficulties. A disability can mean understanding and making sense of being in care is even more challenging for

young people. Many caregivers struggled with access to disability support, that would help them to work with children and better support their understanding.

Supporting children's sense of identity and belonging

Records: supporting access to written information and creating life story records

Many young people, caregivers and social workers talked of the importance of having records that a child can easily access. These records would cover information about being in care and the child's rights and entitlements. Later, young people should be supported to have access to all records regarding their history.

More widely, it is beneficial when children are supported in creating a record of their 'life story'. This record would incorporate a child's personal history and whakapapa and information about significant people in their life such as birth family and whānau, hapū, iwi, caregivers, and places where the child comes from. Photos and stories, including whānau stories could be included in these records and child can be supported to create this record in strength-based way, e.g., emphasising their achievements and positive traits. According to literature review, gathering information about child's birth family and origin promotes a positive sense of identity for them. This qualitative study also showed that it promotes sense of belonging.

This 'life story' record would also be useful when children move between placements or change social workers, because it prevents loss of information.

Oranga Tamariki has an obligation under Part Four of the Care Standards to help tamariki and rangatahi to record their life events. The Oranga Tamariki website shows information pouches, a life events book and kit and memory box. These resources can be used to create a record of a life story. This shows that current Oranga Tamariki practice has already shifted to support children's need to record their story.

Social work support can be more flexible and forthcoming

We heard from family and whānau caregivers that it can be harder for them to ask for support, because they feel like it is their responsibility to care for the child, because of the relationship. They would appreciate more forthcoming support from social workers, and being offered support instead of having to ask for it. Also, older caregivers, who are usually grandparents, need extra support because of their lower levels of energy. Respite care support was especially needed.

In regards to children in permanent care, some children and caregivers wanted ongoing social support, and some didn't want any. Support can be offered flexibly depending on specific needs of the children and adults.

Supporting whānau rangatiratanga for less disruption for the child and whānau

Whānau who had whāngai children reflected that whānau rangatiratanga (authority in decision making and bringing whānau solutions) over what is going to happen with the children meant less stress for the child and less disruption in whānau relationships, making it easier for children to make sense of their situation. Supporting whānau rangatiratanga for children who are about to enter care or who are in care, as much as reasonably possible, could be beneficial for these children.

Oranga tamariki has a 'Hui a whānau' process in place. This process brings whānau together and supports them to find their own solutions, before any statutory intervention. This process is a good example of supporting whānau rangatiratanga, and Oranga Tamariki is intending to extend its use.

Enabling Māori cultural connections and whakapapa connections for improved sense of belonging

Māori participants talked of the importance of Māori cultural connections, such as participating in events on a marae, and of making whakapapa connections for improved sense of belonging. Connection to a place, e.g. being placed within a rohe of their iwi, also results in a better sense of belonging. Māori children in care should therefore be supported in making these connections. The literature review also talked of how whakapapa connections lead to a healthier sense of identity for whāngai children.

Supporting children to make many connections

In our study we found that many children and young people had relationships and sense of belonging both with caregiver and birth whānau and that this was viewed positively by young people and caregivers. Having a sense of extended whānau and wider social network that they can rely on helped make them more resilient. Children and young people should be supported in making connections with siblings, birth family and wider whānau, beyond the Western concept of a'nuclear family'. Also, contact with birth parents, while it can have challenges, is an important sense making mechanism for children in care, as they get to see for themselves and better understand the reasons for them coming into care.

Anti-stigma work is needed to normalise various forms of whānau/family

We found that there is a significant stigma in communities associated with being in care and to a smaller extent with being adopted. This stigma has serious negative impacts both on children and wider families, including serious mental health challenges, hiding their care status from others, negative influence on identity and relationships. This was also supported by the literature review findings.

We were told that other agencies and professionals also often approach children in care through the lens of stigma, treating these children as 'troubled' and denying them their entitlements, such as being enrolled in schools.

On the other hand, whāngai practice is seen as positive and normal and whāngai children are treated as part of the whānau, and don't have to struggle with stigma. We also found that when children had friends who were in non-standard families – either adopted or in care – it helped them feel 'normal'.

Urgent work is needed to address the stigma about care that is prevalent in wider society, as well as amongst other agencies and professionals. Growing up cared for by other than birth parents can have many positive meanings and there are various reasons for children being in care. It needs to be shown and accepted that the norm of what constitutes a whānau or family is varied and multiple.

Glossary

Glossary of terms

A-wairua	*In spirit*
Awhi	*To embrace, hug, cuddle, cherish*
Hapū	*Kinship group, clan, tribe, subtribe - section of a large kinship group and the primary political unit in traditional Māori society. It consists of a number of whānau sharing descent from a common ancestor*
Hui	*Gathering, meeting, assembly, seminar, conference*
Iwi	*Extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people, nationality, race – often refers to a large group of people descended from a common ancestor and associated with a distinct territory*
Kai	*Food, meal*
Kaimoana	*Seafood, shellfish*
Kaiako	*Teacher*
Karakia	*Incantation, ritual chant, chant, intoned incantation, charm, spell – a set form of words to state or make effective a ritual activity*
Kōhanga reo	*Māori language preschool*
Kōrero	*Speech, narrative, story, news, account, discussion, conversation, discourse, statement, information*
Koro	*Elderly man, grandfather, grandad, grandpa – term of address to an older man*
Kuia	*Elderly woman, grandmother, female elder*
Mahi	*To work, do, perform, make, accomplish, practise, raise (money)*
Mana	*Prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma – mana is a supernatural force in a person, place or object*
Marae	*Courtyard – the open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae*
Mātāmua	*First-born, oldest child*
Mātua	*Parents*

Maunga	*Mountain, mount, peak*
Mokopuna/Moko	*Grandchildren, grandchild – child or grandchild of a son, daughter, nephew, niece, etc., descendant*
Pākehā	*New Zealander of European descent – probably originally applied to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand*
Papakāinga	*Original home, home base, village, communal Māori land*
Pūhaehae	*Be envious, jealous*
Reo	*Language, dialect, tongue, speech*
Tamaiti/Tamariki	*Child/children*
Tāne Mahuta	*Atua (supernatural being) of the forests and birds*
Tangaroa	*Atua (supernatural being) of the sea and fish*
Tangihanga	*Weeping, crying, funeral, rites for the dead*
Taonga	*Treasure, anything considered to be of value*
Tuakana	*Elder brother (of a male), elder sister (of a female), cousin (of the same gender from a more senior branch of the family*
Rangatahi	*Young people*
Rohe	*Boundary, district, region, territory, area, border (of land)*
Te taiao	*World, Earth, natural world, environment, nature, country*
Whakapapa	*Genealogy, lineage, descent*
Whānau	*Extended family, family group, the primary unit of traditional Māori society*
Whāngai	*Māori customary practice where children are raised and nurtured usually by another relative, rather than birth parent, either permanently or temporarily*
Whenua	*Land, placenta*

Phrases

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou	*Warm acknowledgements to all*
I ngā wā katoa, ko te aha	*All the time, no matter what*

Use of specific terms in this report

Young person in care	*Non-Māori young person who was removed from their birth parents' care by state and placed in the custody of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children (state) or in the custody of a permanent caregiver*
Rangatahi in care	*Māori young person who was removed from their birth parents' care by state and placed in the custody of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children (state) or in the custody of a permanent caregiver*
Rangatahi whāngai	*Māori young person who is raised as a whāngai*
Whāngai parent/Matua whāngai	*Māori parent who is raising a whāngai child or young person*
Whānau care/caregiver[4]	*This refers to the situation where a Māori child is in state or permanent care and is being raised by a caregiver who is a whānau member*
Non-whānau care/caregiver[5]	*This refers to the situation where a Māori child is in state or permanent care and is being raised by a caregiver who isn't a whānau member*
Family care/caregiver[6]	*This refers to the situation where a non-Māori child is in state or permanent care and is being raised by a caregiver who is a family member*
Non-family care/caregiver[7]	*This refers to the situation where a non-Māori child is in state or permanent care and is being raised by a caregiver who isn't a family member*
Oranga Tamariki	*The New Zealand Ministry for Children*

4456 This is specific terminology used in this report to signal ethnicity of a caregiver. Oranga Tamariki only differentiates between whānau and non-whānau care, no matter what the ethnicity of a caregiver is.

Permanent care	*This refers to the situation where a child, after a time in the state care, is placed in the custody of a permanent caregiver and is no longer in the custody of state*
Home for Life	*Home for Life is a permanent care arrangement for children that is secured by legal orders. Permanent caregivers may be joint guardians (additional) with the birth parents.*
CYFS	*Child, Youth and Family Services. Predecessor of Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children*