

Engaging Pacific families during COVID-19

Prepared by: Professional Practice Group
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This guidance will support you when working with Pacific children and their families. Key points:

- Continue to use Va'aifetū and its island-specific cultural models to support your practice.
- Pacific children and those that support them may be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, and our usual approach to engaging with their families and communities during this time will be affected by physical isolation restrictions.

THIS IS INTERNAL GUIDANCE FOR ALL SOCIAL WORKERS, SUPERVISORS, PRACTICE LEADERS AND MANAGERS

Oranga Tamariki provides essential services to tamariki and their whānau and we need to keep doing this in a way that keeps everyone safe and well and is in line with the Ministry of Health guidelines. This includes engaging with Pacific families during COVID-19 and continuing to meet the day to day needs of children.

In all of our engagement with children and families we need to be first guided by our values and how we will ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. This guidance will help you to modify our usual social work practice approach to engage with Pacific families in the context of the current restrictions required to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. Please be mindful our current COVID-19 health and safety guidance must be followed when applying this guidance. You should also take into account our existing practice guidance and operational policy.

This guidance will be updated as required. If you need more information, discuss with your supervisor or manager or contact covid19response@ot.govt.nz. Daily updates can be found on [Te Pae](#).

Overview

Whenever you are working with Pacific children and their families you should use Va'aifetū and its island-specific cultural models to support your practice. This guidance provides you with additional support to work with Pacific children and their families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and should be used in conjunction with Va'aifetū. The guidance highlights additional considerations for Pacific people in the pandemic environment and within constraints of the alert level responses.

When working with Pacific people, demonstration of humility, dignity, care, and an intention to connect earns entry into homes, hearts and minds, and yields outcomes.

Impact of COVID-19 on Pacific communities

Within the COVID-19 pandemic environment our Pacific population is one of the most vulnerable.

In Aotearoa, Pacific communities are highly urbanised, have larger families than the average population, have strong multigenerational family structures, more frequently live in substandard and overcrowded homes, and have high rates of underlying health issues.

The resilience of Pacific communities comes from the strength of, and fluency in, their cultural values and principles. These are protective factors characteristically expressed through spirituality, language, identity, guardianship and collectivism. Loss or lessening of these protective factors in combination with social disadvantage render Pacific families vulnerable and exposed.

Pacific families are specifically impacted by COVID-19 in several ways.

- The notion of collective responsibility and decision-making is embedded in Pacific culture. The requirements of alert levels and social isolation, while limiting the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, may diminish the collective agency of Pacific families through physical separation from loved ones, extended family networks, churches and other community networks.
- For a significant sector of the Pacific community, family life is inextricably linked with church and faith-based activities. With at least 80% of the Pacific population having a religious affiliation and the church being the focal point of social life for many Pacific families the potential for community transmission increases the vulnerability of Pacific communities. Cessation of this social connection, however, creates a different form of vulnerability.
- Large and multigenerational families traditionally embody concepts of responsibility and interdependence, which contribute to an optimal state of wellbeing for Pacific children and families. However, social disadvantage experienced by a large percentage of the Pacific population in Aotearoa undermines these strengths as associated economic and material need puts stress on Pacific families. The pandemic environment further exacerbates circumstances for those with precarious employment, living in poor-quality and overcrowded housing and belonging to a population for whom chronic health problems occur at a younger age.
- Age is a dominant factor in the fatality potential of COVID-19 but underlying health conditions are equally important. This combination increases the risk for the elderly in Pacific communities.
- Cultural practices attached to important life events such as bereavement will modify significantly. This will be challenging for Pacific families managing grief processes.

Engaging Pacific families during the COVID-19 pandemic

Engagement is an essential pathway towards demonstrating respectful relationships with Pacific families. In the current pandemic environment, it is important to ensure your engagement is consistent with the family's pandemic experience and circumstances.

Establish how well informed the family and children are about the pandemic and make sure they have access to the right information in their own language. Make use of the Talanoa Mai app to access information in various Pacific languages.

[COVID-19 – Ministry for Pacific Peoples](#)

[Talanoa Mai APP](#)

Do not assume every Pacific family will manage COVID-19 the same way. They will have their own strengths, limits and supports and the needs of each family should be specifically assessed on these.

They will have been through lockdowns previously and will know themselves what worked well for them and what could have been better.

Explain to them the difference in your approach because of the pandemic and the alert level requirements. Keep your language clear and free of professional jargon.

Offer support. For Pacific people, humility is integral to meaningful relationships. Demonstrations of humility help to alleviate feelings of disempowerment. Find out what the family needs and how you can help. This is a time to build your connectivity to peers across social services and resources so you can make on-the-spot referrals. Your ability to make an immediate impact for the family, no matter how small, will make a positive difference to the relationship you have with them.

Pacific communities have strong connections to family and cultural networks such as churches and other community groups. These strong family and community networks are key to keeping Pacific children and families safe during the pandemic.

Talk to the family about how you can help if they are isolated from their usual supports. Are there people you can connect them with? Church, spiritual support people, health professionals or Pacific agencies who can provide material support where needed? Refer to the Pacific support and resource links at the end of this guidance.

Remember that not all families will have access to technology that enables them to access support and important connections during the isolation period. Many may not have internet or Wi-Fi service because they cannot afford them. Similarly, many may only have pre-paid phones which puts additional constraint on their communication and connection. Think about what this means in practical terms – for example, if family members are using pre-paid phones don't put an additional burden on them to pay for outgoing calls or recorded messages. Always arrange to call or text them and don't leave voice messages. Have support people and agencies do the same.

There will be a cumulative impact of the pandemic which goes beyond the current health crisis. Many Pacific families, by virtue of existing disparities experienced in employment, home ownership and health, will experience increasing hardship as the social and economic consequences take a toll even as isolation requirements relax. Stress will intensify for families experiencing reduced or lost income and overcrowded living conditions. This stress may manifest in behaviours which are harmful for children.

Consider behaviour which may be negatively impacting children in the context of the needs and experience of the family in their changed circumstances. Listen to what families need and be mindful of what pride might prevent them from telling you, such as they are struggling with a lack of food etc. Link families to supports that assist with material needs; this can help decrease the stress felt and reduce possible behaviours that put children and other family members at risk.

Things to consider when engaging with Pacific families

- What do I know about the household's cultural makeup (traditional, contemporary, nuclear), ethnic mix, language needs?
- Does the family speak and understand fully when conversing in English?
- Does the family understand what is happening currently with COVID-19?

- Do they have access to information in their Pacific language?
- Do they need additional support or resources within their home to help while they have their children and young people home?
- Do they need support for caring for other family members, grandparents, health, disability support and resources?
- Who is this family connected to within the community?
- Who has the family had experience and good relationships within the community?
- Who is their family spokesperson?
- What role does the spokesperson hold within the family? For example, grandparent, uncle, aunt, elder or chief/matai. Does the spokesperson live outside their immediate household bubble?
- Who else do you need to talk to who may have knowledge and information about this family (such as community providers they may be involved with, church leaders, elders, a Pacific colleague, cultural advisors in the Pacific collectives)?
- What cultural support do you need to engage this family?

Seek cultural support and guidance from appropriate sources in your site or regionally. Across the regions we have Pacific cultural advisors who can help you with language needs, advice and exploring family networks.

Seek assistance through the Pacific collectives, such as Auckland Pacific Island Network, Christchurch Pacific Island Collective and Central Pacific Collective.

APIN: Auckland.Pacific.Island.Network@ot.govt.nz

Christchurch Pacific Collective: Junior.Taula@ot.govt.nz

Waikato: Brian.Purcell@ot.govt.nz

Use the Va'aifetū cultural models and the Talanoa Mai App which has now been updated with all COVID-19 resources and tools in Pacific languages.

[Working with Pacific peoples: Va'aifetū](#)

[Talanoa Mai APP](#)

Engaging with Pacific children and young people during COVID-19

"To me family is something that can't be broken, people that will be there no matter what, support you, even though they know you're wrong, loving, that's family to me" (Pacific youth)

In normal circumstances Pacific children and young people have strong physical connections with family and community networks. Much of their social and peer networks will be linked to extended family, church and other cultural supports. Despite social and economic disparity experienced by Pacific families in Aotearoa, at-risk Pacific young people have been found to have higher levels of independent resilience compared with other major ethnic groups because they have more familial, cultural and spiritual supports.

During the pandemic period and response constraints it is important to understand how Pacific children and young people are maintaining those protective factors which boost their resilience. Explore with children and young people how their circumstances are impacting on them, especially if they and their family are isolated from their usual supports. Find out what can be done to resume and maintain those connections.

Talk to them about:

- the people who are part of their bubble
- the people who they miss having contact with outside of their bubble
- how they stay in contact with friends and family
- their understanding about COVID-19 and the alert level restrictions
- any worries they have or things that have become more difficult for them and ways they have to manage these
- positive things they and their family are still able to do within their bubble, such as exercise, watch movies, faith-based activities such as online church services or evening devotion
- things they miss being able to do and what they can do instead
- the supports and resources you can help connect them to
- the best way for you to stay connected to them.

Respect for authority and elders may influence the response you get from children and young people. Respect is a foundational aspect of Pacific culture and Pacific children learn from an early age that showing respect when relating to one another is expected behaviour. This includes respect towards elders, parents, and people in positions of authority. Respect also includes keeping face, acknowledging someone's status and observing proper etiquette. In your engagement with Pacific children and young people be mindful that:

- Expressions of agreement, understanding, caution or quietness from children and young people may signal a respectful response to adults in positions of authority. Make sure you gauge these responses accurately in recognition of the power dynamic that exists in your engagement with them.
- Some children and young people may not openly acknowledge a need for material support. Children and young people living in reduced circumstances and accustomed to living within minimal means may, out of respect, embarrassment, or because their parents haven't asked for assistance, be reluctant to disclose material needs.

Your respect is demonstrated when you seek permission from the parents or carer of children and young people before speaking with them. However, it is important that you always prioritise the child or young person's best interests and where there is a conflict ie where a child's safety is compromised or they cannot have a voice through lack of parental or carer consent, you will need to explore other ways to ensure the child's interests are met. If families are resistant to you speaking with their child or young people elicit the support of someone the family acknowledges and respects, or has a trusted professional relationship with, to get consent. This could be a relative, church minister or community worker or you should seek the support of another social worker of the same island ethnicity or one of the regional Pacific cultural advisors.

Pacific children are raised to understand expectations of them within their families which include relational protocols, hierarchy, duty, responsibility and accountability to household members and family. Traditionally adults are responsible and speak for children and young people. Be aware that children and young people may:

- expect to have an older sibling or a parent speak on their behalf
- feel uncomfortable speaking with you on their own and upsetting family relational and hierarchy protocols
- worry about repercussions of what they say for them or their family
- lack confidence to speak openly with an adult stranger and authority figure.

It is important for children and young people to:

- have the support of their family to speak with you
- know they can have someone with them, eg another sibling, if that's what they need to feel comfortable
- feel that it's ok to ask for help.

You may want to find someone they acknowledge and respect, or is already currently involved with the family, to assist.

In the current pandemic environment, your ability to engage in a meaningful and helpful way with the child or young person will be compromised by the necessarily remote mode of contact – most likely phone contact. Remote contact limits your ability to use or observe body language to interpret each other or put someone at ease.

- Speak in a calm and friendly manner and show patience.
- Listen for cues from the child or young person they may be anxious, frightened, frustrated or angry.
- Acknowledge their emotions and feelings. Allow them to feel heard and listened to.
- Use paraphrasing to clarify understanding – theirs and yours.
- Think of ways to bridge the gap between you. Use humour – let children and young people use their own humour, find out about significant cultural events/people to bring into the conversation, use Pacific language/phrases of the child or young person.
- Consider whether the child or young person feels more comfortable speaking in their own language.

[Working with Pacific peoples: Va'aifetū](#)

[Talanoa Mai APP](#)

Pacific COVID-19 resources

[Family violence information – areyouok.org.nz](#)

Healthline: 0800 358 5453

[Pasifika Futures](#): these services will inform you on what support packages they provide in your local area. The services they provide may differ from region to region (health, food parcels etc)

[Workforce request – Pacific workforce – Auckland region \(Community and District Health Boards\)](#)

[Le Va](#) – Pacific support services for mental and public health, disability support, addiction, suicide prevention, general health and wellbeing

[#CatchYourself: respect your bubble – Le Va](#)

[COVID-19 – Ministry for Pacific Peoples](#)

[Pasefika Proud](#)

[Pacific Business](#)

[COVID-19 – Ministry of Social Development](#)