

Chief Social Worker practice note

Supporting identity and oranga for rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi

(August 2026)

Practice notes do not replace practice policy, guidance, standards or tools. They provide prompts for practice in response to emerging evidence, lived experience and practice learning.

Whakataukī

Kia maumahara ki tōu mana āhua ake
Remember your unique identity and authority

Summary

Identity influences how a person understands themselves and their place in the world. It shapes how they make sense of their culture, environment, experiences, beliefs and aspirations, and contributes to self-esteem, belonging and relationships. This is particularly true during adolescence, a time of significant biological, psychological and emotional change that can be exciting, affirming, challenging and confusing, and requires supportive, understanding adults.

For some tamariki and rangatahi, including those in care, disabled, rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi, exploring identity may be more complex due to stigma, discrimination and other social barriers. Our role is to uphold their rights and mana, walk alongside them, and support them to safely explore and express who they are.

Focus practice areas

This practice note supports kaimahi to strengthen identity-affirming practice with rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi by focusing on four areas

1. Recognising identity exploration is a natural, evolving part of adolescence.
2. Understanding whānau and family worldviews.
3. Practising in relational, inclusive and unbiased ways, including the use of chosen names and pronouns.
4. Connecting rangatahi to safe and affirming supports.

[Identity and culture | Practice Centre](#)

Language and identity

Language plays a central role in identity. For rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi, the way language is used can either affirm or undermine their sense of self.

Using the words rangatahi use to describe themselves – including their name and pronouns – is a simple, practical way to demonstrate respect and uphold mana. Remaining open, curious and up to date with language supports inclusive and relational practice.

Key terms used in this practice note include:

- **Rainbow:** an umbrella term that covers all sexual and gender identities, and people with variations of sex characteristics. This term can be used to identify communities as well as an individual.
- **Takatāpui:** a traditional Māori term reclaimed to encompass Māori culture and spirituality alongside diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics.
- **Sex:** the physical and genetic characteristics people are born with. Includes male, female and those who are intersex or have innate variations of sex characteristics.
- **Gender:** a person's internal sense of being a woman, a man, neither of these, or somewhere along a continuum. Gender is a socio-cultural category, not fixed, and expressed through a variety of social means.
- **Transgender:** a term used to describe a wide variety of people whose gender is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may identify as binary or non-binary.
- **Non-binary:** an umbrella term for gender identities outside the male/female binary.

Language evolves, and not all rangatahi will use these terms. Self-identification should always guide practice, meaning we are guided by the words tamariki and rangatahi use for themselves and ask us to use.

[Rainbow inclusive language guide | Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)

What rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi tell us they need

Making Ourselves Visible (2023) is a report commissioned by Oranga Tamariki to gather insights and make visible the lived experiences of takatāpui and rainbow rangatahi in care. The following insights were shared by participants:

‘I know that whatever I say about my gender identity or sexual identity I am not going to be judged in any way [by my social worker]. So, it just makes me feel like I have had that parent for the first time.’

Participant C, p38

‘She [social worker] educated herself about what I was going through... she was able to understand my dysphoria and she knew the signs of when I got dysphoria and struggled.’ Participant F, p38

‘I am not just a transgender girl. That is something I want [Oranga Tamariki] to understand. I am a normal person and have normal thoughts. I have normal feelings.’ Participant D, p31

[Report on experiences of takatāpui & rainbow rangatahi in care | Oranga Tamariki](#)

Our practice framework guides us



Ngākau whakairo

Rights, values and professional obligations sit at the heart of our work and require us to recognise, respect and respond to the diversity of human experience.

Our practice responsibilities

Our practice framework reinforces our responsibility to recognise the diversity of human experience and uphold the rights of tamariki and rangatahi. As registered social workers, we practise respectfully and inclusively, and advocate where rights or wellbeing are compromised.

Rights-based practice means recognising each tamaiti and rangatahi as a whole person, including their gender identity, sexual orientation, culture, disability, neurodiversity, whakapapa, and other aspects of identity. Tamariki and rangatahi have the right to express who they are and to be supported by people who respect and affirm their identity. Our role is to walk alongside them as they explore and understand who they are, while ensuring they have the safety, support and opportunities they need to thrive.

We also recognise that adolescence can be an intense period of growth, exploration and change. We remain open to the possibility that a young person's understanding and expression of themselves may shift over time, while continuing to provide respectful, affirming and person-centred support.

Championing rangatahi

Kaimahi have a professional responsibility to protect the rights and wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi. This may involve advocating for them, challenging bias and supporting difficult conversations when their rights, identity or wellbeing are not being respected.

Practice example: Ko wai au?

Josh, aged 14 and pākehā, has been in care since he was 9 following the death of his mother. His father has addiction issues and Josh sees him occasionally. He has lived with the same caregiver throughout his time in care and maintains some contact with his older siblings.

Josh has recently shared with his social worker that he is transgender. He says his caregiver continues to use the wrong pronouns and describes his gender as 'just a phase'. They plan a supported conversation with the caregiver.

During the meeting, Josh explains how misgendering affects him and that he is beginning to dread coming home. The caregiver says that she wants to support Josh but doesn't understand him right now and is worried about bullying. The social worker reinforces with the importance of affirmation, explains that support at home strengthens resilience, and shares some resources. The caregiver agrees to learn more and make greater effort to use Josh's name and pronouns.

At a follow-up meeting, Josh reports feeling safer at home and says that connecting with an online rainbow peer group has helped him build a sense of belonging. They agree to meet again in a month to review progress and address any emerging concerns.

The social worker remains attentive to Josh's grief, family relationships and important connections, recognising that these factors may influence his wellbeing, sense of belonging and identity journey.



Whai mātauranga

All tamariki, rangatahi and whānau are supported through mana-enhancing practice. Understanding their experiences, strengths and aspirations for oranga requires us to intentionally seek out the knowledge and perspectives that help us do so.

Te Puna Oranga and identity

Te Puna Oranga guides us to understand how gender and identity can influence resilience and oranga. While identity shapes all dimensions of oranga, it is particularly reflected in ngākau, whānau, hinengaro and waiora.

Ngākau – safety, trust and affirmation

- Use the name, pronouns and language chosen by the rangatahi.
- Listen without judgement and respond with curiosity, respect and consistency.
- Address behaviours or environments that undermine the rangatahi and their sense of safety, trust or belonging

Whānau – whanaungatanga, connection and belonging

At times, a whānau or family's belief system may not be compatible with aspects of rangatahi identity. Our relational and inclusive practice skills enable us to support potentially difficult conversations between rangatahi and whānau or family and work through the tensions that may arise.

- Explore with rangatahi how their whānau, family and significant others view their gender identity or sexuality, being mindful of privacy, consent and safety.
- Explore who already knows about the identity of the rangatahi, who they feel safe with, and who they would like involved in conversations.
- Where belief systems conflict with aspects of rangatahi identity, practise respectfully while prioritising the rangatahi and their wellbeing and mana.
- Use Te Toka Tūmoana and Va'aifetū to understand whānau or family worldviews and support restorative, culturally grounded conversations and relationship repair where possible.
- Remain attentive to whakapapa and the importance of whānau and family connections, even where engagement may need to be paced or supported over time.
- Provide resources to whānau or family and encourage them to connect with other parents and whānau or family of rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi.

Hinengaro – emotional and psychological wellbeing

Rainbow and takatāpui rangatahi experience higher rates of mental distress and suicidality than their non-rainbow peers. Experiences of discrimination, exclusion and lack of affirmation can contribute to poor wellbeing.

Kaimahi should:

- listen for signs of distress related to discrimination, exclusion or relationship difficulties
- explore strengths, supports and sources of resilience
- use Tiaki Oranga to assess and respond to risk, including suicidality
- work alongside rangatahi to identify solutions and strengthen wellbeing.

Waiora – participation, environments and supports

Waiora focuses on participation, connection and support across the settings that shape everyday life, including schools, communities, faith groups and health services. Identity-affirming environments and relationships can strengthen belonging, resilience and wellbeing.

When identity-related needs are identified, kaimahi work alongside rangatahi, whānau and families to connect them with appropriate services, supports and peer networks. Kaimahi make considered decisions about referrals and connections, ensuring services are affirming, culturally responsive, and equipped to meet the needs of takatāpui and rainbow rangatahi and their whānau or family.

Government-funded health and social services

While these are subject to quality and accreditation standards, this does not guarantee that individual practitioners will provide affirming and responsive support for takatāpui and rainbow rangatahi. Before making referrals, kaimahi should discuss preferences with rangatahi, including practitioner characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or experience working with takatāpui and rainbow people. With consent, this information can be shared with providers to support effective engagement.

Referring to community, voluntary or peer supports

Community, voluntary and peer-led supports can strengthen identity, belonging and connection, but may not be subject to external quality assurance. Before referring, kaimahi should consider:

- the suitability of the support for the rangatahi and their needs
- the service's ability to respond to identity-related needs
- previous experiences or feedback about the service
- alignment with Oranga Tamariki values
- any risks and how these will be managed.

The Voices team is available to provide advice, resources and connections with appropriate community organisations.

[Takatāpui and rainbow organisations and resources](#)

[Takatāpui: A whānau perspective | VOYCE](#)



Whai oranga

All tamariki/mokopuna, rangatahi and whānau have the right to consistent, high-quality practice that is grounded in oranga and informed by our practice models. Te Toka Tūmoana and Va'aifetū provide valuable guidance for supporting rangatahi and whānau Māori, and Pacific children and families.

For Māori, understanding identity includes recognising that diverse gender identities and sexual orientations have long existed within te ao Māori. Historically, takatāpui were accepted and valued, with their existence embedded within whakapapa. The suppression of gender diversity and sexuality was a consequence of colonisation rather than a reflection of traditional Māori beliefs.

Traditionally, many Pacific societies have acknowledged gender diversity, often described as a 'third gender'. This includes identities such as fa'afāfine and fa'afātama in Samoa, fakaleiti in Tonga, akava'ine in the Cook Islands, vaka sa lewa lewa in Fiji, fafaine in Niue, pinapinaaine in Tuvalu and mahu in Tahiti and Hawai'i. However, recognition of gender diversity does not always mean acceptance of diverse sexual orientations, particularly where religious beliefs have influenced community attitudes.

Te Toka Tūmoana and Va'aifetū help us understand how culture, identity, spirituality, whakapapa, family and community connections shape experiences of belonging and self-discovery. These models support culturally grounded, relational and restorative practice that strengthens identity, connection and oranga.

In practice, this means exploring with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau how culture, whakapapa, spirituality, faith, family expectations and community connections shape their understanding of identity. Kaimahi should avoid assumptions and remain curious about the unique experiences, strengths and aspirations of each tamaiti or rangatahi.



Whai pūkenga

All tamariki/mokopuna, rangatahi and whānau are entitled to intentional and skilful practice.

Our practice tools and resources are inclusive and designed to prompt kaimahi to consider diversity and identity needs throughout their practice. Supporting tamariki and rangatahi and their whānau and families with identity is skilful practice, and the social worker may need additional support from their supervisor and colleagues when required.



Whai ākona

All tamariki/mokopuna, rangatahi and whānau deserve the very best of us. We demonstrate this through reflective practice, continual learning, and the ongoing development of our knowledge, skills and self-awareness.

Supervision provides a space to strengthen practice, explore complexity and support reflective, oranga-focused work with rainbow and takatāpui tamariki and rangatahi.

Supervision should support kaimahi to:

- reflect on how personal values, beliefs and experiences may influence practice
- identify and challenge assumptions or biases
- maintain a holistic, rights based and oranga-focused approach
- build confidence in navigating difficult conversations and advocacy
- consider the emotional impact of practice and support their own wellbeing.

Reflective supervision prompts

- What assumptions or biases might be influencing your practice?
- How confident are you discussing gender, sexuality and identity?
- What further learning or support do you need?
- How confident are you advocating for rangatahi when others hold differing views?
- What support do you need to sustain your wellbeing in this work?

Additional resource

[Short film about engaging with tāngata whai ora from the rainbow community | Te Pou](#)

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