

# Chief Social Worker practice note

## Tiaki Mokopuna – protecting pēpi from harm to their oranga (June 2026)

*Use this note alongside practice policy, guidance and tools. It provides prompts to support oranga-framed assessment, planning and supervision, keeping pēpi and those caring for them at the centre of our practice.*

### Whakataukī

**He taonga te mokopuna, me tiaki, me manaaki.**

A child is a treasure, to be protected and nurtured.

### Scope and terminology

This note applies to practice with piripoho (newborns) and pēpi (infants). For consistency, the term pēpi is used throughout. It applies across all work types, including where kaimahi engagement arises through youth justice-related work.

### Summary

We play an important role alongside others to understand the safety of pēpi who come to our attention and ensure there are plans to uphold their oranga.

Pēpi are completely dependent on others for care and protection. Their safety and wellbeing are closely linked to the oranga, stability and resilience of their parents or carers. Evidence consistently shows that pēpi under 1 year are the most vulnerable group of tamariki. They experience the highest rates of death from caregiver abuse, and Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) remains the leading cause of preventable death for pēpi aged 28 days to 1 year, most commonly between 2 and 4 months.

Pēpi vulnerability usually reflects multiple, interacting factors. These may include caregiver capacity, stress, substance use (particularly methamphetamine), physical and mental health, relationships, family violence, housing and other environmental conditions. Importantly, vulnerability is not static and can change quickly. Many of these factors can heighten the risk of SUDI-related deaths.

Building understanding about the safety and oranga of unborn and newborn pēpi is complex because we are generally seeking to understand harm that **may occur**, as opposed to harm that **has occurred**. It is vital that we ensure we have built a good understanding of historical patterns, have sought information from those who can provide a robust understanding of the whānau over time and have involved whānau and professionals early.

Most often, our role involves supporting parents and whānau early, by linking them to practical, culturally appropriate supports that reduce stress and increase safety.

Whānau tell us that being safe and caring parents is strengthened when support is offered early, respectfully and in ways that recognise the realities of their lives.

*“Being a good parent means having support, not doing it alone.”*

There are times, however, when ensuring pēpi safety requires changes to care arrangements. Early involvement of whānau, support people and professional colleagues is essential to enable sound, defensible decision-making.

## Practice focus

Reducing pēpi vulnerability and ensuring their oranga means strengthening the conditions around them so they are safe, loved and able to thrive.

From the first interaction – including where kaimahi are involved for youth justice reasons – any concern about the oranga or safety of pēpi living in the home must be taken seriously, assessed and shared with the wider team.

## Expectations of practice

Kaimahi are expected to:

- promptly and regularly assess pēpi safety and oranga
- build a thorough understanding of historical patterns of harm and protection
- ensure safe sleeping arrangements are in place
- share concerns early with the wider team
- build shared understanding using Te Puna Oranga, particularly of factors that can influence safe parenting, including parental substance abuse (particularly methamphetamine), family violence and mental health needs
- use whānau decision-making processes (including family group conferences) early where appropriate
- strengthen protective factors around pēpi
- support the wellbeing of parents and carers
- work in partnership with whānau, iwi, Māori and community providers
- collaborate with other agencies to ensure coordinated, culturally aligned support
- monitor progress and respond promptly to changes in risk
- use supervision intentionally to test judgement and keep pēpi safety visible.

Practice leaders are expected to:

- maintain active oversight of unborn and newborn pēpi
- support timely escalation when oranga does not improve
- ensure clarity of roles, lead agency and accountability.

[Strengthening our response to unborn and newborn pēpi](#)

[Safe sleeping and Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy \(SUDI\)](#)

[Vulnerable infant practice triggers](#)

## Our practice framework guides us



### Ngākau whakairo – rights, values and professional obligations

This domain reminds us of the importance of balancing the rights of pēpi to be nurtured within their whānau alongside their right to be safe. It also helps us to hold the rights of parents and guardians in our thinking, particularly when a statutory response may be required.

The Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 affirms that:

- the primary responsibility for caring for and nurturing pēpi lies with their family, whānau, hapū, iwi and family group
- pēpi have the right to safety and a full life, upheld through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRoC)
- pēpi have the right to be cared for and nurtured through whakapapa and whanaungatanga, affirmed through Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- where pēpi cannot be cared for safely within whānau, whakapapa or whanaungatanga networks, they have the right for these important relationships and networks to be protected and nurtured
- parents must not be separated from their pēpi because of disability unless this is in the best interests of the child, as affirmed through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Rights-based practice can require balancing:

- pēpi rights: safety, care, protection, whakapapa, relationships and culture
- parent, whānau, hapū, iwi and family group rights: to have the support and opportunity to provide safe care.

When these rights are in tension, the safety of pēpi is the first consideration and our primary obligation.



### Whai mātauranga – build shared understanding

Our practice is strengthened when we seek the perspectives of those who can help us understand the safety and oranga of pēpi. We also draw on knowledge about factors that can enhance the safety and wellbeing of pēpi, such as safe sleeping practices.

#### ***Build shared understanding through Te Puna Oranga***

Reducing pēpi vulnerability starts with mana-enhancing conversations between kaimahi and the people caring for pēpi, and developing a clear, shared picture of what is influencing pēpi oranga and safety.

The 'frame within a frame' approach keeps pēpi at the centre while exploring the lived experiences of parents or carers, including their daily realities, pressures and aspirations.

#### [Te Puna Oranga](#)

Use the following prompts to guide oranga-framed conversations.

### *Waiora – environmental wellbeing*

Environmental conditions shape caregiving capacity and pēpi safety.

- Identify living conditions for pēpi and their parents or carers – are they safe, warm and stable?
- Check whether basic needs (housing, kai, transport, income, access to services) are reliably met.
- Consider what environmental changes would reduce stress and increase safety.
- Work with whānau, community supports, hapū or iwi to strengthen waiora.

Safe sleeping – Te Noho Moenga Haumaru:

- Sight the current sleeping arrangement for pēpi.
- Consider how the arrangement aligns with the safe sleep policy.
- Identify whether additional support is needed to enable safe sleep.

### *Whānau and whanaungatanga – relationships and support*

Pēpi safety and oranga are shaped by the strength, stability and safety of the relationships around them. Support should strengthen connection, confidence and collective responsibility for care.

- Explore relationship dynamics around pēpi, including new partners and other adults involved in care.
- Consider how parents' or carers' care and protection or youth justice histories are influencing stress, confidence and trust in services.
- Assess the impact of family violence or relationship instability on pēpi safety, routines and emotional availability.
- Understand how parents or carers experience their caregiving role – pressures, strengths and sources of pride.
- Identify practical and emotional support to parents and carers, including other household members, whānau, friends and community, and assess how reliable, safe and consistent these supports are.
- Review whether plans actively strengthen safe relationships and support networks.

### *Ngākau – emotional wellbeing*

Strong emotions are common when caring for a pēpi and can influence coping, judgement and responsiveness.

- Identify the emotions parents or carers are experiencing in relation to pēpi and caregiving.
- Explore how they are coping with stress, uncertainty or fear – what helps, and what increases risk?
- Ask how they describe their bond with pēpi.
- Identify strengths, values and protective factors to build on.
- Create space for parents or carers to feel heard and emotionally supported.

### *Wairua – cultural and spiritual wellbeing*

Wairua is the foundation of ora and wellbeing. Even before birth, pēpi are influenced by the emotional, cultural and relational climate around them. When wairua is unsettled, this may show in pēpi behaviour and adult responses, increasing safety concerns.

- Notice the emotional tone and energy around pēpi and its impact on settling, bonding and safety.
- Listen to the whānau narrative about pēpi and the values and beliefs shaping care.
- Identify cultural anchors that support wairua – whakapapa, hapū, iwi, faith and community.
- Recognise where cultural disconnection, whakamā or stress may affect engagement or care.
- Work with whānau to restore cultural connections and strengthen the wairua of those caring for pēpi.

### *Hinengaro – mental wellbeing*

Postnatal challenges, trauma, neurodiversity, addiction and mental health needs can compromise parenting and caregiving capacity if not well supported.

- Build shared understanding of parents' or carers' mental wellbeing over time and in daily life.
- Identify indicators of postnatal distress, trauma responses, unmanaged addiction, mental health needs or unmet disability needs.
- Explore how these factors affect safe and consistent responses to pēpi.
- Assess the effectiveness of formal and informal supports.
- Identify where additional whānau, community, hapū, iwi or specialist support is needed and how access can be enabled.

### *Tinana – healthy and active lives*

Caring for a pēpi draws heavily on physical stamina, particularly when sleep is disrupted and routines are unsettled.

- Explore how parents or carers are managing health needs, fatigue and daily demands.
- Consider how housing, kai and relationships affect physical wellbeing.
- Assess flow-on effects for pēpi and other tamariki.
- Identify what supports are improving rest, routines and physical wellbeing, and how effective they are.
- Determine where additional health or community support is needed and how to facilitate access.

Considering pēpi health and development:

- Ask parents or carers about any concerns regarding pēpi health or development and validate these.

- Identify what support is needed to access health services, assessments or reassurance.
- Ensure engagement supports parents or carers and avoids blame or dismissal.

### ***Collaborating with partners, other practitioners and community supports***

Sustained improvement in pēpi oranga requires **intentional collaboration** with whānau, iwi, Māori and community providers, midwives and Well Child / Tamariki Ora services.

Collaboration is strengthened when:

- roles and responsibilities are clear
- one agency is clearly identified as the **lead agency**
- decisions, actions and timeframes are recorded and shared.

When Oranga Tamariki is not the lead agency, kaimahi remain actively responsible for ensuring pēpi safety concerns are visible, understood and responded to, and that plans do not drift.



### **Whai oranga – culturally focused practice**

We consider in our practice how we can best engage with pēpi, and their family, whānau, hapū and iwi. We use whānau decision-making processes early to build robust plans and ensure we actively follow up to activate agreed supports. We draw on our cultural models to support us to work effectively with whānau Māori and Pacific families.

### ***Using family group conferences for coordinated planning***

Family group conferences create opportunities to build shared understanding, strengthen whānau involvement, and align professional roles. When used intentionally, family group conferences support coordinated, culturally grounded planning and help prevent fragmentation across agencies. Outcomes must be monitored and reviewed with the right people involved.

### ***We use our practice models to guide our practice***

Within te Ao Māori and across the unique and distinct island nations, various cultural concepts and metaphors are used to demonstrate the valued place pēpi hold within families and across generations. Understanding the cultural context and meanings, rituals and worldviews that are significant in the care of each pēpi we work with helps us to build stronger and more enduring oranga-framed plans with their whānau.

When working with whānau Māori, we draw on Te Toka Tūmoana to guide our practice. When working with families from our Pacific nations, we use Va'aifetū and the relevant cultural approach.

When we are unsure about the cultural context of the whānau or family we are working with, we seek advice and support to enable respectful and purposeful engagement.

[Te Toka Tūmoana](#)

[Va'aifetū](#)

[Strengthening our response to unborn and newborn pēpi](#)



## Whai pūkenga – intentional practice

Professional practice skills and behaviours and tools are part of our professional kete – they promote intentional practice. These include relational skills, analytical skills, facilitation, advocacy, professional reasoning, theorising and communication. These skills are particularly important as we are often working in the context of harm that may occur, rather than harm that has occurred.

In practice, kaimahi consistently:

- identify, analyse and clearly articulate risk and protective factors using Tiaki Oranga
- monitor progress and adapt plans as understanding deepens or circumstances change
- escalate concerns in a timely and transparent way when oranga does not improve or safety risks persist.

## Whai ākona – oranga-framed supervision



All tamariki/mokopuna, rangatahi and whānau deserve the very best of us in our practice relationship with them. We need to be aware that our own experiences can influence the way we think about the decision-making rights and support needs of children, their whānau and caregivers.

Oranga-framed supervision provides protected space for kaimahi to reflect intentionally so learning from practice continually informs assessment, planning and decision-making for pēpi. It supports a purposeful balance between pēpi safety and the daily realities, pressures and aspirations of their parents or carers.

Effective supervision slows practice down, tests assumptions and keeps judgement grounded in oranga, evidence, cultural knowledge and relational integrity.

It also allows us to test our own assumptions, blind spots and worldview and the extent to which this may be influencing our practice and decision-making.

When working with pēpi, consider oranga-framed supervision prompts such as:

- How is this whānau progressing along the continuum of pēpi vulnerability toward safety?
- What indicators show increased safety, stability or connection – and what signals emerging or escalating risk?
- How clear is our shared understanding of pēpi safety, including when and how it becomes compromised?
- How often are we reassessing oranga and risk, particularly at key transition points or when circumstances change?
- What evidence shows things are improving – or not? Are we relying on observable change and whānau-led action, or unintentionally leaning on hope, empathy or long familiarity?
- Are concerns clearly articulated and documented, or being softened due to empathy or long involvement? How are we ensuring compassion for parents or carers does not minimise risk to pēpi or obscure patterns of harm?

- Are plans living documents? Do they adapt as understanding deepens and situations shift?
  - What does 'good enough' safety look like for this pēpi right now, and how are we measuring progress?
  - How might the experiences and views of kaimahi be influencing their decision-making?
  - What emotional impact is this work having on the kaimahi? How might stress, vicarious trauma or strong emotional responses be shaping assessment, judgement or decision-making, and what support is needed?

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