Forming children as healthy sexual beings

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Anglophone Safeguarding Conference
Rome, Italy
3 July 2019

Whakatauki *Māori proverb*

Hutia te rito o te harakeke,
Kei whea te kōmako e kō?
Kī mai ki ahau;
He aha te mea nui o te Ao?
Māku e kī atu,
he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata

If the heart of the harakeke (flaxbush) was removed, where will the bellbird sing? If I was asked what was the most important thing in the world;   I would be compelled to reply, It is people, it is people, it is people.

This proverb reflects the Maori reference to the harakeke (flax) plant as a whanau or family group. The outer leaves are the tupuna (ancestors); the inner leaves are the matua (parents); the most inner leaf is the rito (baby). Only the tupuna are cut as the matua are left to protect the child. Accordingly the proverb reflects that without the sound of children in the world, the next generation will not survive.

Overview

Background

Key ideas and questions:

- **How do we understand 'the child' and childhood?**
- **What is 'childhood innocence'?**
- **Safeguarding children: Formation of children as sexual beings**

Background

- Counsellor/therapist (families & groups)
  - Prison & community sex offender programmes with male adults and adolescents (1995-1999)
  - Statutory agency and NGO sexual abuse counselling with boys aged 5-16 years (1999-2007)
- Published articles focussed on practice
  - For counsellors (2000 [with J. Lamusse], 2010), carers (2003), educators (2009, 2011)
- Research focus on childhood and sexuality
  - International (2012, 2013, 2015)
  - Doctoral research (2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2019)

How do we understand 'the child' and childhood?

Please turn to the person next to you and discuss your understanding of childhood:

-How do you define a child? Childhood?

-What three main ideas surface for you about childhood?

-When do you think childhood ends?

-And what defines 'the end' of childhood?

Children in the Old Testament

- The metaphorical relationship between God as parent and Israel as child proves central to the identity of the people.

- Children also play a critical theological role in the text as the members of the community responsible for perpetuating the covenant.

- The common experience of having been a child gives every adult a shared point of privilege for entering into conversations about children

    (Parker, 2019, p. 133)

Children in the Gospels

- Selected words of Jesus

  – Mark 9: 33-37 (Matthew 18:1-5; Luke 9:46-47)

  – Mark 10:13-16 (Matthew 19:13-14; Luke 18:15-17)

  – John 13: 33-34

Concepts of childhood

- Developmental
- Determinism
- A range of interrelated concepts that are considered 'universal' :
  - Natural and normal
  - Medical and biological
  - Age and (im)maturity
  - Societal norms and morality

Concepts of childhood

- Contemporary 'fragmented' discursive concepts:
  - Fluid and multiple; not a single universal childhood, but 'child' and childhood are shaped in social and cultural contexts
  - Language constructs childhoods – how we speak of childhood shapes current realities of childhood
  - Cultural knowledges – values and practices that 'speak' of childhood in culture

Formation of children

In family (constructions of family)
In whānau, hapu, iwi
- Concepts of close and extended families

In community
In parish, school
- Concepts of faith and education
  communities

In society, globally
- National and International policy

Formation of children

Te whare tapa wha

(The four walls of the house)

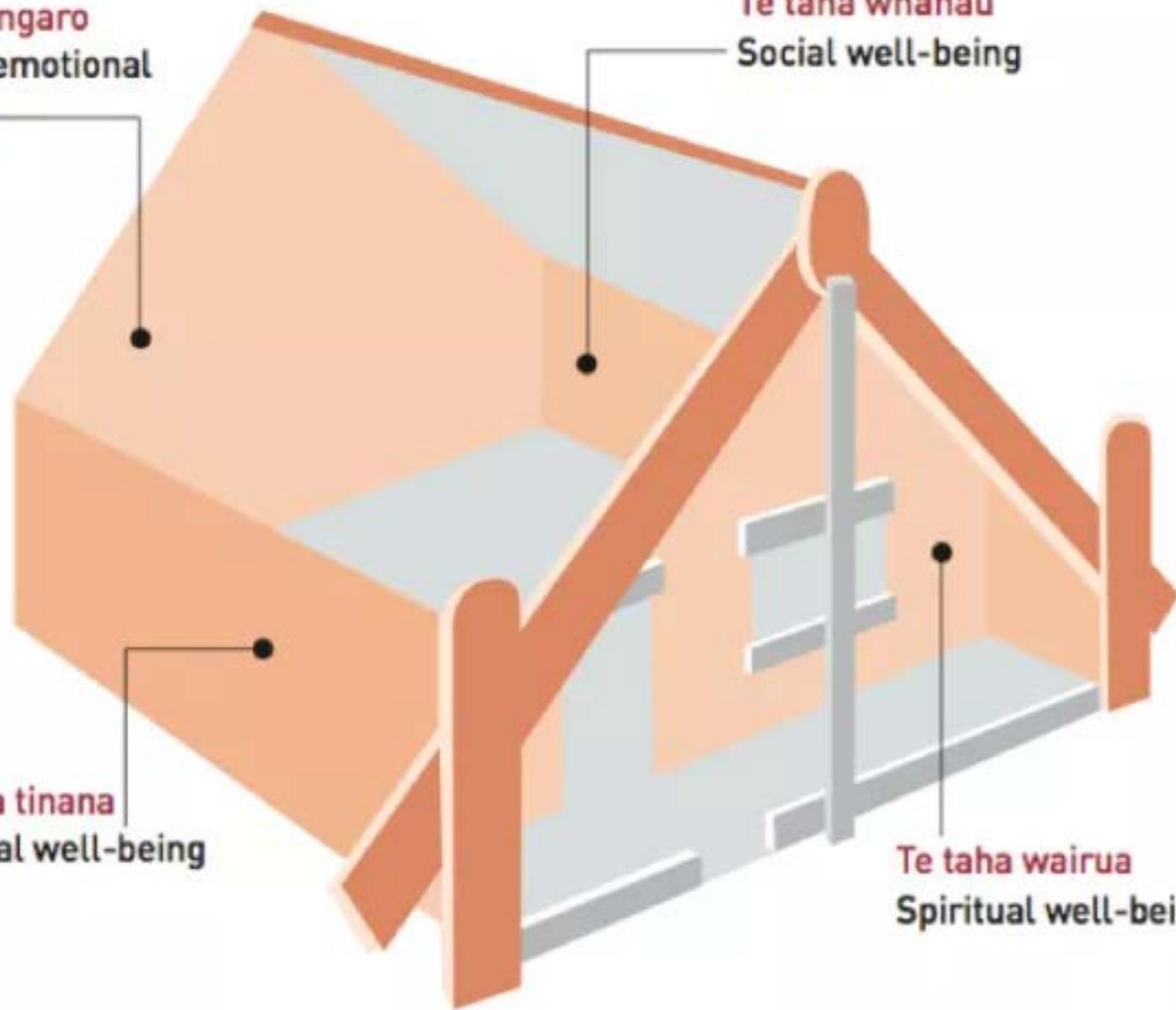- Whānau   Family and social wellbeing

- Tinana   Physical wellbeing

- Hinengaro   Mental/emotional wellbeing

- Wairua   Spiritual wellbeing

Te taha hinengaro
Mental and emotional
well-being

Te taha whānau
Social well-being

Te taha tinana
Physical well-being

Te taha wairua
Spiritual well-being

Mason Durie (1994) Te Whare Tapa Whā concept of hauora

Ephesians 2:19-22

Brothers and sisters:

You are no longer strangers and sojourners,
but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones
and members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.

Through him the whole structure is held together
and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord;
in him you also are being built together
into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

1st Reading for the Feast of Thomas, Apostle (3 July)

Formation of children

Depends on family, community and society for the child's
- physical wellbeing
- social wellbeing
- mental wellbeing
- spiritual wellbeing

The *rito* (heart of the flaxbush) is vulnerable but necessary for the life of the community

With your neighbour, discuss:

How do the safeguarding principles and practices in your country respond to:

- Children's social wellbeing
- Children's physical wellbeing
- Children's mental wellbeing
- Children's spiritual wellbeing

What sense do we make of sexuality in children's lives?

- Is sexuality relevant to children?
- Reactions and panics: that sexuality is dangerous to children
- Constructing good and healthy (sexual) citizens: The task of parents (and teachers?)
- That sexuality education should provide only 'appropriate' knowledge
- Children as citizens with rights to information about sexuality

The ambivalence we have toward our own sexuality is shown in our reactions to each other and in our rearing of children

...evidence of the separation of the sexual from the rest of our lives

...changes in sexual behaviour are more towards openness than toward promiscuity

There has been a massive plot to keep children ill-informed which has made them rely on the misinformation of their peers

(Donnelly, 1978, pp. 171-172)

The particular patterned way in which sexuality is talked and written about maintains it as a discrete, special area of life.

In combination with our ideas about the special needs of children and the exclusion of children from adult social life, this creates the possibility of regarding sexual knowledge as something beyond their grasp and the opportunity from gaining access to it.

(Jackson, 1990, p. 48)

5 myths and contradictions of sexuality education and childhood

1. Children are asexual and sexuality is irrelevant to young children's lives
2. Talking with children about sexuality is developmentally inappropriate
3. Sexuality education encourages children to be sexually active earlier
4. Children who transgress normative gendered behaviours in childhood will turn out to be gay
5. 'Once I've done "the talk" I've done my bit as a parent

(Robinson, 2013, pp. 137-140)

What is childhood innocence?

Presumed innocence:

- naïve, immature, unable to understand or have interest in sexuality

Western thinking

- Christian thought: Christ-like
- Locke (17th C) *Tabula rasa*
- Rousseau (18th C) 'Nature's child'
- Naturally innocent
- Sexual information withheld by adults
- Corrupted by adult sexuality
- A child with sexual knowledge seen as potentially evil and behaving unnaturally

The effects of presumed innocence

- Adult disbelief and indifference to children's sexual interest or possible experience

- Children's curiosity into their own and others' bodies may be ignored or repressed

- Children do explore and curiously examine pathways to knowledge

- Adults can assume children's sexual interest as indicative of abuse

- Ignorance results in increasing vulnerability and that is the risk.

Linking sexuality education for children to safeguarding

- Silin (1995) 'passion for ignorance' and Bhana (2016) 'price of innocence' question ideas of protection of childhood in the face of AIDS and its effects for children.

- Each author calls for a realisation that innocence and ignorance are unsafe for children, and that ideas of protecting children must respond to an active and curious childhood even when this appears transgressive.

- If we are serious about safeguarding children, can we be serious about informing children?

Safeguarding: forming children as sexual beings

Supporting children in knowledge about their sexual selves

- physically, socially, mentally and spiritually

Supporting parents and teachers in their care of children to speak about sexuality as

- physical, social, mental and spiritual relationship

[see for example, Balter et al., 2019]

Safeguarding

Protecting children from maltreatment

Preventing impairment of children's health or development

Ensuring that children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care

Taking actions to enable all children to have the best life chances

(Hurcombe et al., 2019, p. 83)

Dame Whina Cooper

Te Rārawa
1895-1994

Take care of our children.
Take care of what they hear,
take care of what they see,
take care of what they feel.
For how children grow,
so will be the shape of Aotearoa
(New Zealand).

Metaphors of safeguarding children as sexual beings

- Vulnerable shoots in the centre of the flaxbush (te rito o te harakeke)
- Four walls of wellbeing (te whare tapa wha)
- This care is not left to parents alone but is the responsibility of family communities, learning communities, faith communities, and political communities…

Tōia te waka mātauranga
Mā wai e tō?
Māku e tō, māu e tō
Mā te whakaranga ake e tō

Haul forth the canoe of education
Who should haul it?
I should, you should
All within calling distance
should haul the canoe

[cited in Macfarlane, 2007)

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