



# PLAY

## TĀKARO TAIRĀWHITI

Perceptions and experiences of play  
from sector stakeholders, whānau and  
tamariki in Tairāwhiti



**Ko te ahurei o te tamaiti arahia ō tātou māhi.**

Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work.

This report explores the findings of a study led by Innovation Unit, commissioned by Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa and supported by Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti and Healthy Families East Cape He oranga whānau.

Innovation Unit is a not-for-profit social enterprise that works to develop new solutions for social issues and create impact at scale. [innovationunit.org](http://innovationunit.org)

Sport New Zealand is proud to be the kaitiaki/guardian of our country's Play, Active Recreation and Sport System. [sportnz.org.nz](http://sportnz.org.nz)

Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti is a charitable trust on a mission to build an active, connected and healthy community. [sportgisborne.org.nz](http://sportgisborne.org.nz)

Healthy Families East Cape are working across the region to shift conditions in our local system so every person in Te Tairāwhiti, Opotiki and on the East Cape can be healthy and thrive. We are working with our partners and community to create healthier environments in the places where we live, learn, work and play.

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**Thank you to the stakeholders, whānau, and tamariki who shared their precious play memories with us.** Your experiences will help us to understand what it will take to give more children quality play experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Thank you also to the team at Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti** for bringing together a great group of people across the sector and connecting us to tamariki and whānau in the community.

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**Drawings throughout by Tairāwhiti children and adults.**

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## Why play?

How might we create more quality play\* experiences and lay the foundations for a life-long love of being active?

Play is a vital part of children's physical and cognitive development, and helps them build the skills, competencies, and attitudes they need to be active for life, including: fundamental movement skills, social and emotional connections, resilience, independence, and leadership<sup>6</sup>. However, the play opportunities children have access to is changing due to social, environmental, technological, and economic trends. 'Play deprivation' is becoming an increasing international concern<sup>5,6</sup>.

We know that children have the time, place, and permission to play in their communities, when:

- play is widely understood to be a crucial part of physical, cognitive, social/emotional, and spiritual development for young people
- adults understand their role in enabling play and everyone shares responsibility for supporting play
- young people have access to varied playful experiences within their local environments, including risk-taking, challenge, and the opportunity to be active.

Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa is committed to increasing opportunities for children to access quality play experiences, and has started a project to explore what play looks like in Aotearoa, today.

.....  
**Play helps tamariki build social and emotional connections, resilience, independence and leadership skills.<sup>6</sup>**  
.....

To better understand different communities' perceptions and experiences of play, and what helps – or hinders – children's play, Sport New Zealand has partnered with Regional Sports Trusts and Innovation Unit to help them hear from a diverse range of people across Aotearoa. The findings will inform Sport New Zealand's planning and strategies for play, and spark a nation-wide conversation about the role of play in the wellbeing of young New Zealanders.

\*For the purpose of this project, we decided to avoid defining what is and isn't within the scope of 'play', to instead hear how the communities themselves understood and described it.

# Key highlights

Although the Tairāwhiti community shared many thoughts and experiences about play that overlap with what we've heard across Aotearoa, the region also clearly has some distinct differences and unique influences around play.

## State of Play

Play in Tairāwhiti has historically centered around survival - such as finding kai - and is strongly influenced by the communities' strong connection to te taiao and Te Ao Māori. Other unique aspects of play in the region included:

- A strong sense of community and local pride
- People's creative, playful mindsets
- Easy access to nature and low-cost activities
- Play through mahi

*Read more on page 7*

*"There's a real sense of community - everyone is there for you when the chips are down." - Coast parent*

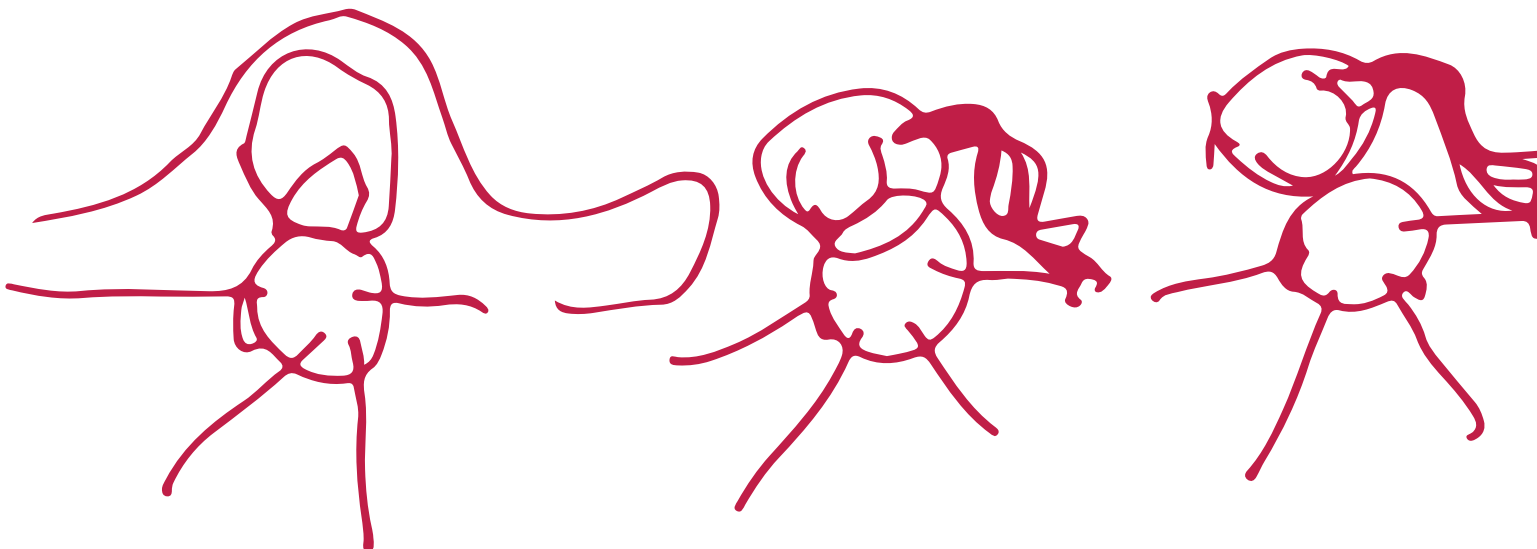
## Play over time

People said they remember play 'back in the day' being about outdoors and nature, taking risks, and very little adult supervision. Social, environmental and physical changes in the region have, however, contributed to changes in play over time including:

- More constructed/structured play
- Influence of information and technology
- Increased fears around safety and risk
- More supervised play, less roaming
- Increased safety restrictions, rules and regulations
- Less opportunities for children to build confidence and skills
- Less time for families to play

*Read more on page 13*

*"Previously we didn't have to create play opportunities; supervision is a new thing as well. We used to just roam free, we learnt about risk" - Town stakeholder*



## Barriers and enablers

People described the many influences on play in the region today, including:

- Volunteers
- Perceived value of play
- Funding, leadership and strategy
- Parent and whānau involvement
- Access to play spaces, equipment and opportunities
- Community, networking, partnership
- Play within Te Ao Māori
- Co-design
- Competition

*Read more on page 22*

*"People have a westernized view of Play, that they see learning as Maths and English and play is a treat, it is almost discarded but there are many benefits."  
- Rural stakeholder*

## Future of play

Looking forward, the community hoped that in the future Tairāwhiti might provide opportunities for play to be:

- Inspirational and freely available
- Nature-based
- For the whole whānau
- Embedded in our urban fabric
- Balanced between safety and risk
- Valued and normalised
- Child-led
- Part of holistic wellbeing
- Embedded in Tairāwhiti Te Ao Māori

*Read more on page 28*

*"I walk to school with my mum every day and there's no playgrounds or safe places where she lets me play on the way."  
- Tamaiti*



# STATE OF PLAY

What play looks like in Tairāwhiti today and what is unique about play in this area

# Play today

With 39% of the population under the age of 25, Tairāwhiti has the highest proportion of young people in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

Tamariki and adults across Tairāwhiti described a diverse number of spaces and places to play. Many activities related to the outdoors such as the beach, bush, and farms, or play through other activities such as hunting, eeling, and fishing.

Tamariki said their favourite ways to play included: going to the playground, playing outside with friends, riding their bikes, and jumping off the bridge<sup>1</sup>. They also like to play with friends, whānau, and pets - including horses. Tamariki spend more time being active in PE or class at school and are less likely to play on a playground or be active in indoor facilities compared to national averages<sup>2</sup>.

Play activities described included:

## Home

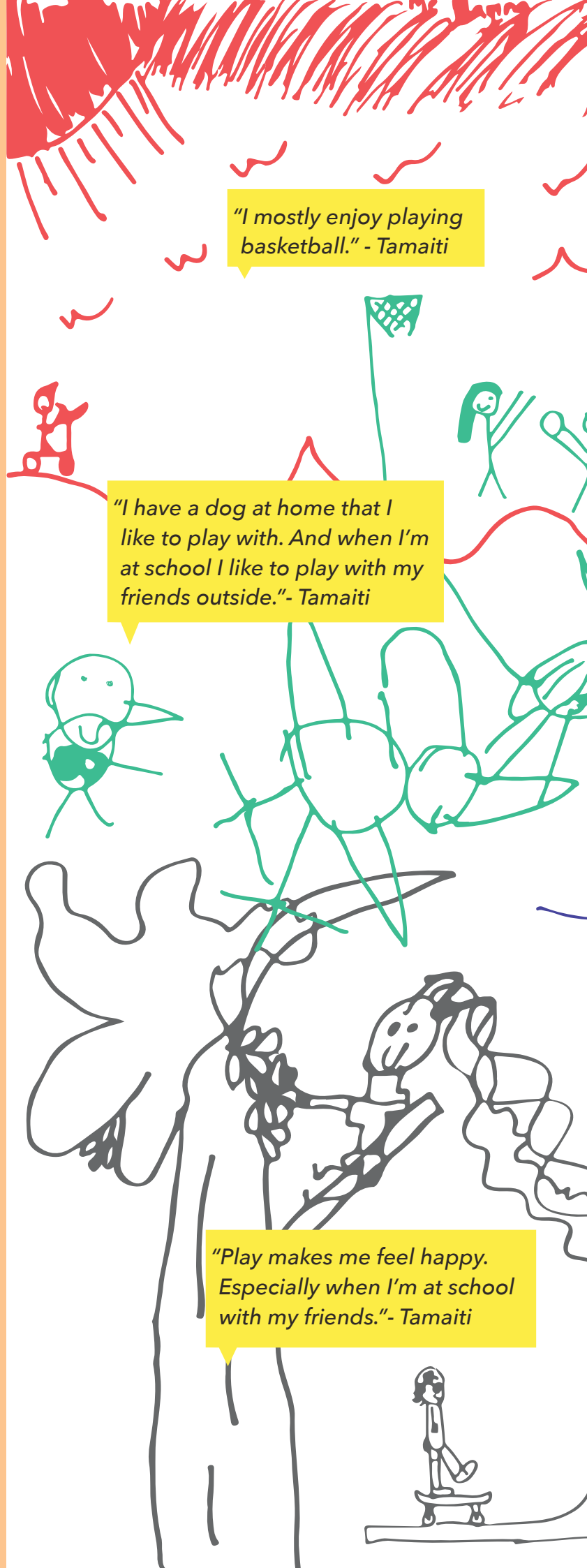
- **Technology:** Ipad, chromebook, computer games, playstation
- **Toys:** Lego, Barbies, balls
- **Pets:** dogs, horses

## Neighbourhood

- **Games:** tag, running, handball, ping pong, dodgeball
- **Imagination:** building huts, pretend farming
- **Active transport:** bike riding, walking, running
- **Playgrounds and parks:** Waihere Domain, Donneraille Park, Botanical gardens

## Wider community

- **Sports:** ripper rugby, netball, boxing, football/soccer, waka ama
- **Active recreation:** boccia, kapa haka, swimming, horse riding, rock climbing, yoga, surfing, water skiing, camping, mountain biking, jumping off bridges/wharves
- **Kai:** eeling, fishing, diving, hunting
- **Nature:** river, beaches, farms, hills, and bush, Rere Rockslide





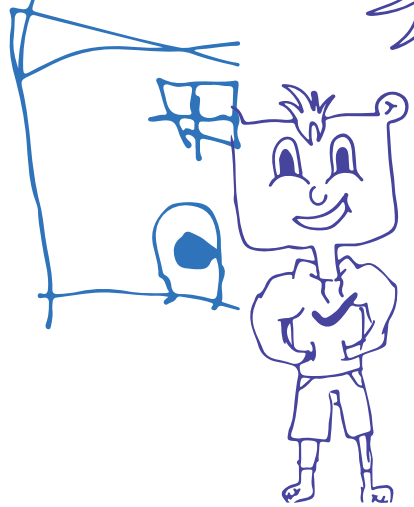
"In summer all the kids are down bombing the wharf."  
- Town stakeholder



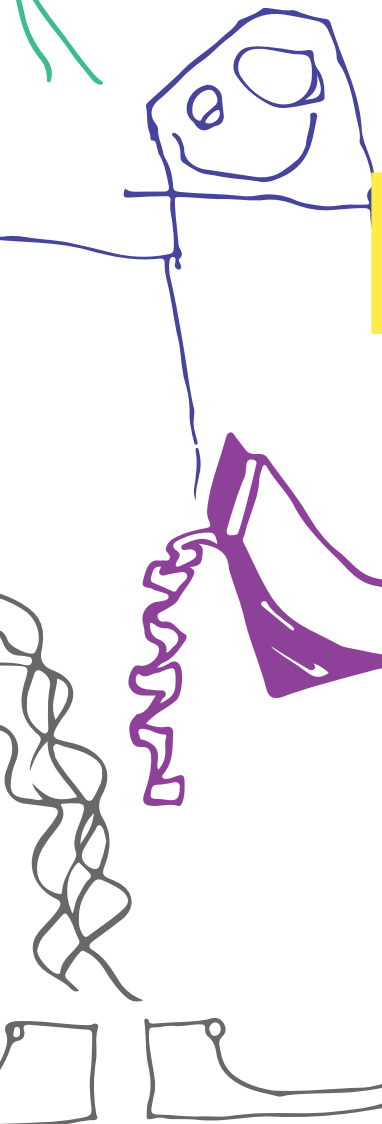
"The beach is our playground."  
- Town parent

"Both kids are really imaginative. They sit there for hours and act out those little scenarios" - Town parent

"Going to the beach, exploring in the rock pools, finding shells, going to the park, hunting and playing hide and seek." - Town parent



My kids still do pig hunting and fishing today like I did back then." - Rural stakeholder



"Our favourite game at the moment is building big pillow forts." - Town parent

## Unique aspects of play in Tairāwhiti



*"There's a proud generation of us who want to bring up our children as we were brought up." - Town stakeholder*

*"If you're not watching your kids, someone else is watching them. I do live here because of that - that they'll feel confident." - Coast parent*

### Strong sense of community and local pride

Gisborne and the wider Tairāwhiti region are tight-knit communities, with a strong whānau and extended whānau culture where people look out for each other. Being a smaller community makes it easier to communicate *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face to face) and offers more opportunity for community activities. Many of the people we spoke with were proud to be from Tairāwhiti, and had a strong connection to place and culture.

### Creative, playful mindsets

People spoke of how those within the region are adaptable and have a unique perspective and sense of humor. They said that the region naturally develops more 'risky thinkers', with parents being less precious and safety-focused. Play is also well supported by different agencies in the region.



*"If things break, it's ok." - Town stakeholder*

*"Using seat belts for saddles on horses..." - Town stakeholder*



*"We're within walking distance to maunga, awa, moana." - Rural stakeholder*

*"We are ocean, waterpeople." - Coast stakeholder*

*"It only takes 5 minutes to get anywhere" - Town stakeholder*



### Easy access to nature and low-cost activities

Tairāwhiti has an abundance of open spaces and natural playgrounds - from rivers and beaches to bush, hills, mountains, farmland, and parks. This enables a diverse range of activities in te taiao - often focusing around the gathering of kai. Being a smaller, more condensed region, activities and spaces are often within a short driving, biking or walking distance and people noted that the streets are less busy than larger towns. Lastly, people noted that play activities are generally free or low-cost in the region.

### Play through mahi

Especially in the more rural spaces in Tairāwhiti, the line between work and play is often blurred. Tamariki are encouraged and enabled to work and play alongside parents and whānau, such as helping on the farm, digging vegetables, coming along to the office, or hunting and fishing for kaimoana.





## Connection to Te Ao Māori and te taiao

With 53%<sup>2</sup> of the Tairāwhiti community identifying as Māori, stories shared across Te Tairāwhiti were rich in a cultural and Te Ao Māori perspective. Coastal and rural communities in particular spoke to the importance of the relationship between people and te taiao. Rural and coastal stakeholders spoke about the weaving of whakapapa connections to the land, and told us that the innate connection between tamariki, whenua and te taiao could be strengthened to benefit their health and wellbeing, and reconnect them through play to their environments. Many participants agreed on the role of outdoor play in supporting the social wellbeing of all tamariki. There was wide recognition of the whenua being of fundamental importance to Māori due to their relationship to the Tairāwhiti region through whakapapa and the sense of identity and belonging this created. Whānau Maori acknowledged that they understood the need to foster the wellbeing of tamariki through their own understanding and knowledge of Te Ao Maori.

*"Every generation has its time playing on their own whenua. Parents and grandparents know where the kids are playing as they used to play there too. It's a succession plan for Māori land blocks - teaching kids to love the land. If they love that place they'll learn to look after it. It instilled a genuine love of nature in me, now I'm fiercely protective of it." - Coast parent*



Credit: Darryl Crawford

# PLAY OVER TIME

What sector stakeholders, whānau and tamariki say play looks like today in Tairāwhiti and what's changed over time

# Play 'back then'

The stakeholders and parents we spoke with said they remember that play from their childhood was about:

- being outside in nature and connecting with the whenua,
- survival - finding food with and for their whānau,
- big groups of children and navigating social dynamics including play between 'town' and 'rural' kids,
- taking risks, learning from and being proud of injuries, and
- very little adult supervision.

Play was often with cousins, or through doing mahi/chores with adults. Very few memories included constructed public spaces (such as playgrounds).

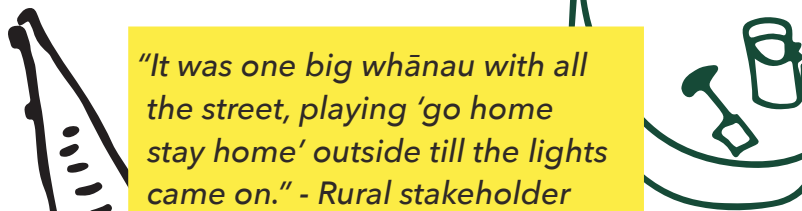
Play activities people shared included:

- **Imagination:** cardboard, dressups, making huts, make-believe
- **Marae:** learning tikanga, storytelling
- **Mahi with whānau:** washing, eeling, hunting, picking plums
- **Outdoors:** tree climbing, sliding down hills
- **Games and sports:** kick the bucket, double dutch, gutterboard, rugby
- **Toys:** trampoline, go-karts
- **Transport:** horse riding, biking, skateboards
- **Pushing boundaries:** throwing things at people, trying to trick people, sneaking further away from home, stealing fruit from neighbouring trees

Illustrations by stakeholders



*"Community members picked me up when I munted my feet after falling off my bike and took me home." - Town stakeholder*




*"It was one big whānau with all the street, playing 'go home stay home' outside till the lights came on." - Rural stakeholder*




*"Your cousins were your first friends." - Rural stakeholder*






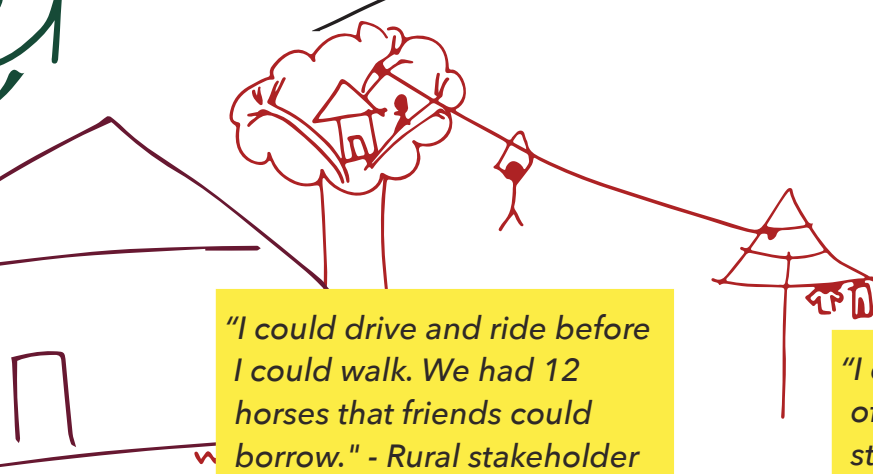
"We'd cover ourselves in mud, go floundering, float to the bridge...we stayed there all day, no one was watching us." - Rural stakeholder




"Bloody noses and knees from scrapes." - Town stakeholder




"I was the youngest of 14. During the summer months we would play down by the river with dad, eeling." - Rural stakeholder



"I could drive and ride before I could walk. We had 12 horses that friends could borrow." - Rural stakeholder



"I could tell you all the names of the families that lived in the street." - Town stakeholder



"Cattle yard tag - you ran along the top of the cattle yard fences and if you fell off, you were in the shit (literally)." - Town stakeholder

"cattle yard tag"

## How play has changed over time

Parents and stakeholders across the region said there have been some significant changes in the way children play today. Overall, people found it difficult to describe how play had changed for the better.



*"When I drive down the street I never see kids anymore" - Town stakeholder*

*"We grew up living below the poverty line, but we didn't know we were. Grandies are now financially well off but time poor." - Coast stakeholder*

### Wider social, environmental and physical changes

Stakeholders in town, along the coast, and rural areas spoke about the wider interconnected changes in the world, and how these changes have impacted play opportunities today.

This included:

- Family structures and makeup: increased financial pressure and both parents working, smaller families with fewer children, more transient families, decline in Playcentre involvement
- Diversity and inclusion: increasing cultural diversity in the community, with multicultural play not always being accommodated for
- Community connection and safety: less likely to know neighbours, more and faster cars on the road, heightened fears of stranger-danger, and dogs
- Spaces: play being prioritised at home, smaller backyards, less children seen outside playing in the neighbourhood
- Natural environment: natural spaces being further away and kai less freely available
- Built environment: McDonalds playgrounds, shops being open all weekend so whānau are working longer hours
- City-drift: population decline as residents move to larger centres for work, school and other opportunities, impacting the close relationships with kin and whānau which historically enabled free play.

Although the majority of these societal changes were seen as negative, one positive change was noted that finding a balance between work and life is more encouraged today, with parents in some cases being more involved in their child's life and more knowledgeable around parenting and development.



## More constructed/structured play

Town and coastal stakeholders saw that play opportunities have become more structured and restricted, with parents often being the initiators or supervisors of play, compared to the freedom they remembered from their childhoods. Active NZ data supports this notion, with parents in Gisborne being less likely to agree that *'It's up to my child(ren) to decide for themselves how active they want to be'*. Some teachers spoke about the difficulty of incorporating play into a highly structured education timetable.

Other people spoke about the proliferation of information and how parents can be too focused on creating specific outcomes or outputs (such as building resilience, or building a motor-cross track) instead of the basics of play. Some concerns were raised that this is having an impact on children's ability to instigate play, and their fundamental play skills - as well as parents having less time due to the number of children's extra curricular activities.

*"We try to figure it out for them instead of letting them figure it out for themselves. Adults just intervene too much. I'm trying to unlearn" - Parent*

*"There's more structure around play. It's hard to say to your kids "go outside and play". That's what we got as kids. Now - kids don't necessarily know what to do." - Town stakeholder*

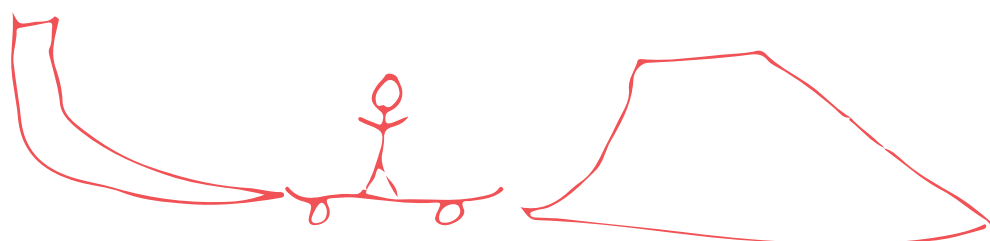
## Influence of information and technology

People across the region saw the spread of information and technology available today as a double-edged sword in relation to play. On one hand, stakeholders saw that the internet enabled greater accessibility with children able to easily and quickly learn about new skills or projects, as well as community coordination through social media in times of crisis (such as when children go missing).

On the other hand, people had strong concerns about the spread of misinformation, the lack of privacy online, the distraction and disruption of play, unrealistic expectations created by social media (such as body-image), and both parents and children spending too much time on devices instead of connecting with each other and the outdoors. Interestingly, there was an expectation that parents need to spend less time on their devices in order to spend time playing with their children, which contradicted the sentiment many held - that parents are overly involved in play.

*"My boy said, Mum my favourite time of the day is when you put your phone down and play with me." - Parent*

*"Back in the day there was one teacher for kapa haka, and I'd learn through practice. Now you go online and watch videos on facebook, Vimeo. It's instant information." - Town stakeholder*



Noah  
14

*Skating cause it's boring at home*

## Increased fears around safety and risk

Parents and sector stakeholders saw a significant shift around parents' perceptions of safety and risk-taking, and a disconnect from communal living. This was largely seen as influenced by a heightened awareness of safety issues across New Zealand and the world via social media, an increase in traffic and a car-centric transport system, and a much stronger focus on safety rules and regulations. One parent even moved back to Tairāwhiti from South Auckland specifically to try and provide her children with access to safer play spaces.

*"We're more exposed to the world. Nothing seems like it's safe. It makes you fear, doubt, worry. You even know what's happening in China."*  
- Coast stakeholder

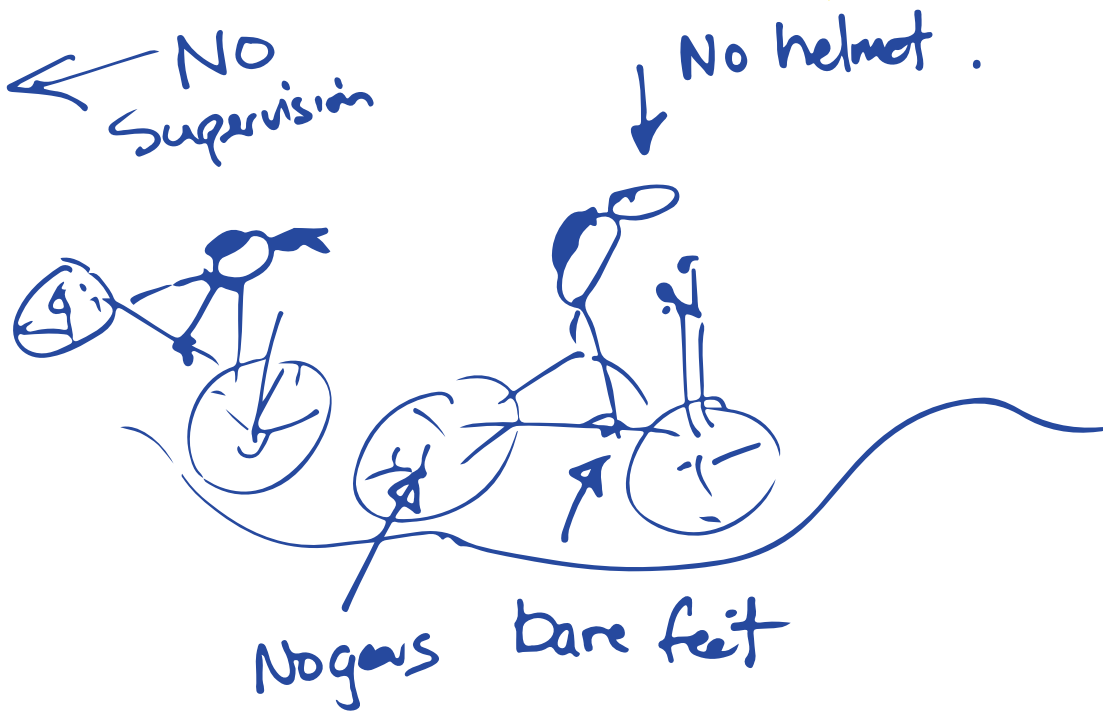
*"I don't feel safe letting my kids roam with neighbors driving really fast, even though we're in a cul-de-sac."*  
- Town parent

## More supervised play, less roaming

People saw that these perceptions around safety have created an increase in play being supervised by adults, and less space and permission for children to roam freely. In contrast, a stakeholder on the coast spoke of how in their childhood, parents had safety and control mechanisms (such as pūrākau) in place that still allowed freedom for children to roam, explore, and take risks. Interestingly, people also spoke positively about how involved some parents are in play, and that their role-modelling of play can be a strong enabler.

*"They'd say 'there's a taniwha on that corner of the river' which meant those spaces were dangerous. Or, 'as long as you're on this side of the river, your tūpuna are looking after you'. Or 'you know your tupuna are watching you!' as a control mechanism."* - Coast stakeholder

*"I'm trying to unlearn suffocating my kids - I'm quite suffocating cause I don't want them to be scared."* - Coastal Parent



## Increased safety restrictions, rules and regulations

Stakeholders across the region spoke about the heightened focus on health and safety across the country through rules and regulations, and the challenges this poses to letting children learn and play outdoors. Teachers, in particular, felt the administrative burden and heavy expectations around safety from both parents and policies. They spoke of how both can stop them from creating opportunities for children to learn through play and risk-taking both inside and beyond the school environment. One parent spoke of wanting more freedom for her kids, and how it was difficult to create change when those focused on safety were often the louder voices. This contrasted strongly with one coastal stakeholder's childhood memories of not 'telling on each other' if accidents happened - unless it was really serious.

*"We haven't got the time to do all the paperwork. When you leave school, an ETOC has to be signed off, and you're constantly counting when kids are in the water to make sure you have 6 per adult."*  
- Coast stakeholder

*"A lot of the problem is the policies and regulations have dictated the way we play. The RAMS forms and the red tape...We know how to play but we're not allowed to."* - Town stakeholder

*"As a teacher, kids love taking those risks! It's dealing with the parents..."*  
- Coast stakeholder

## Less opportunities for children to build confidence and skills

People spoke about how increased safety concerns are leaving less room for children to develop fundamental skills and confidence through risk taking. Interestingly, tamariki in Tairāwhiti are more likely to state that 'I worry I might get hurt when I do physical activity' than the national average.<sup>3</sup>

*"The [tree] climbers are not the ones that get hurt because they know how to."*  
- Town stakeholder

*"We need to provide and empower these experiences and make them positive experiences - small injuries prevent big injuries."* - Parent referring to below comic



www.lunarbaboon.com

Above comic mentioned by a parent interviewed.  
From: [lunarbaboon.com/comics/tools.html](http://lunarbaboon.com/comics/tools.html)

## Less time for families to play

Stakeholders spoke about how parents are often busy, with both adults needing to work, which makes it increasingly difficult for some parents to find time to spend with their children. Children can also be occupied helping out at home and looking after siblings when parents are working which can make it difficult for them to participate in activities such as kapa haka. One mother spoke about the societal pressure put on mothers in particular to balance work and parenting, and several stakeholders saw a decrease in Playcentre involvement as a result of parent's limited capacity. Parents' mental health can also impact their ability to be there for their kids when they need to prioritise their own self-care.



*"You're expected to work like you don't have kids and mother like you don't work."*  
- Coastal parent

*"You like seeing them play, but it's a daily nag for them to stop playing to get something sensible done. I'm worried that might set a negative mindset about play."*  
- Town parent



## What has stayed the same

Although sector stakeholders and parents found it a little difficult to identify what had stayed the same about play today compared with their childhoods, they believed that the fundamentals of play had stayed constant. This included the benefits of play, who children play with, and how, where, and why they play.

- Benefits of play: learning, skills, problem solving, communication
- Who children play with: friends, whānau, uncles, cousins
- How they play: adventures, games: hide and seek, hopscotch, elastics, double dutch.
- Learning from ancestors, practicing social development, hierarchies, imitation, imagination and creativity.
- Where they play and the free natural resources available: beach, rivers, mountains
- Why they play: Have fun, learn, challenge themselves



Above photograph by Hika Photography.

*“Kids are still on the farm at home, all coming together. Still playing with cousins, especially at the marae. Wedding, tangi, all the kids are together.” - Town stakeholder*

*“As parents we live such sensible lives. We understand the laws of physics, finance and time. But the kids don’t have these boundaries. Their imagination is limitless” - Town parent*

# BARRIERS & ENABLERS

What helps or gets in the way of stakeholders and families providing play experiences for tamariki

# Community

## Parent and whānau involvement in and role-modelling of play

People spoke about the strong influence parents and whānau can have on play, through their actions and beliefs. With the shift towards smaller family sizes, some commented that the expectation is now that parents are more involved in play, but that this can be difficult when they are time-poor. There is also an interesting tension around the role of parents in play: on one hand they are expected to role model, encourage, and be involved in play, while on the other hand they can be critiqued for being too involved in the supervision and initiation of play.

Grandparents were often seen as positive influences in encouraging outdoor and physical play, and people said that including and encouraging the whole whānau to play was an enabler. Stakeholders saw that imitation is an important part of play and learning, and that children who grow up without older tamariki to learn from can be disadvantaged. It was also noted at a 'huddle' in town that there were very few tāne represented in the room (two of 25), and that men in the community need to 'step up' to support play.

*"What they enjoy about play is when adults see them play, to know that mum and dad are there and participate." - Town stakeholder*

*"We can't be what we can't see." - Town stakeholder*



Above comic from: [lunarbaboon.com/comics/father.html](http://lunarbaboon.com/comics/father.html)

## Access to play spaces, equipment and opportunities

Parents and sector stakeholders saw that there are many more play options and opportunities today than 'back in the day', however, access to these opportunities is not equal.

Tamariki in the Cobham school survey mentioned the lack of playgrounds and safe spaces to play in their area. Active NZ data confirms this, as tamariki in Gisborne are almost twice as likely to state that they have 'no places nearby to do what I want to do'<sup>2</sup> compared with the national average. Kaimahi from one kura kaupapa in a more isolated coastal town described how they did not have a swimming pool, meaning staff have to drive tamariki to town three times a week to learn how to swim, otherwise they would miss out. Coast stakeholders pointed out that there is 'something seriously wrong when you live on the coast and you can't swim'.

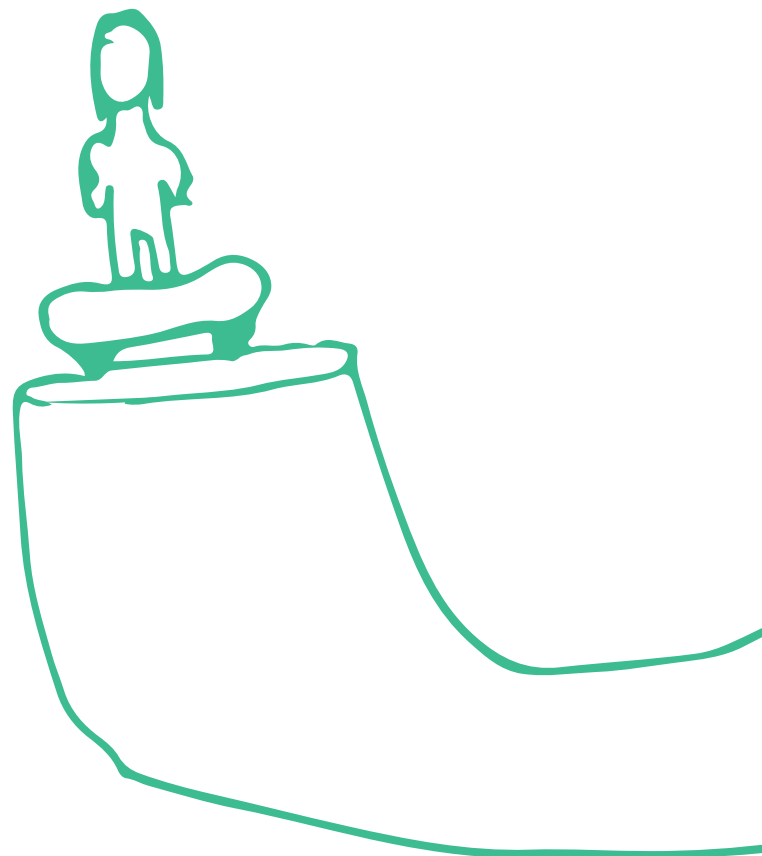
Not having easy access to play spaces and facilities can mean tamariki are not allowed to play on the way to school and are restricted to playing in their backyards. Town stakeholders talked about the nearest playground for some tamariki in more rural areas being a 30 minute drive away and how the cost of transport can mean some tamariki miss out.

Even though town stakeholders mentioned there is more choice of play equipment now, more are needed as 'toys now do only one thing. They used to be multi-purpose'. The cost of equipment was again seen as a barrier for some children to participate, however, it was seen as a good thing that toys are getting more nature-aware and gender-neutral. Data from Active NZ confirms that tamariki in Gisborne are more likely to state 'I don't have the equipment I need' as a reason for not participating in physical activity (10.63% in Gisborne to 4.70% nationwide)<sup>2</sup>.

*"It's really hot today. I wish the beach was closer so we could play there heaps more." - Tamaiti*

*"My parents always have to drive me to playgrounds in other parts of Gisborne. We have nothing here." - Tamaiti*

*"I feel like this town could do with a lot more that sort of stuff. There's not many bushwalks close to town or even walkways that don't cross roads. The networks are not here, and we try to create this stuff retrospectively, but it was never part of the urban planning." - Parent*





## Volunteers

Town and coast stakeholders raised the challenge of finding committed volunteers to help provide ongoing play opportunities for tamariki. On the coast, the lack of volunteers has become a struggle in recent years with only a few core people showing up because they don't want children to miss out. This can put extra strain on those few individuals to provide opportunities for all children. Barriers to volunteering can include: the time commitment, a lack of support and training for volunteer coaches, and the unseen costs involved as coaches often end up paying for children to participate out of their own pockets (such as paying for gear and food).

Coast stakeholders reflected that the people leading these opportunities (such as coordinating sports teams and championships) may have been doing so for so long without succession that the community has become reliant on them. In town, people spoke about how although they have access to some of the best tohunga for teaching kapa haka, it can be a challenge for those people to fit teaching the next generation around their jobs and work hours, and after-hour times don't work well for whānau.

*"I don't want kids to miss out, so I coach 3 teams... Inspiring parents to coach is a struggle" - Coast parent*

*"For kapa haka kura, finding the skilled practitioners available during the school day to come and deliver can be a barrier. We want to give our kids access to the best in taonga māori and to not sell them short. Here in Tairāwhiti we do have those people but they're in paid jobs and only available after 5pm, which isn't ideal for our whānau. Being a teacher also I really treasure my weekends, but it's when our skilled tohunga o te ao haka are available." - Town stakeholder*

## Competition

Town stakeholders mentioned that the professionalism of sport is a big barrier to tamariki participating. The focus seems to be on winning and some children might not get a chance to participate because they aren't as skilled. Some competition is seen to be good, but there are not enough resources to balance social engagement and competition and it can get in the way of tamariki just having fun and 'playing' sport.

## Perceptions around messy play

Both parents and stakeholders spoke about how adult's perceptions around mess, dirt, and germs can become a barrier to play. Some saw that this was influenced by how children are portrayed in social media.

*"I really try to play in my house, but sometimes my child doesn't play with the stuff how it should be played with." - Coastal parent*

*"I was different when the kids were younger. I'd let them jump in the puddle in the middle of winter, and get saturated head to toe splashing around in puddles. They had so much fun. I have a feeling these days I would say, 'don't do that, you'll get wet' because of the adult baggage: washing, sickness, being scared to take the risk..." - Town parent*

## Sector

### Perceived value of play

Stakeholders spoke about how peoples' mindsets within organisations influence how easy it is to create play opportunities. This included leadership and wider teams' attitudes, motivation and support for play "even if it's not their jam", and the amount of people-resources dedicated to play.

Similar comments were made about schools and teachers and their attitudes towards play. Interestingly, some saw a need to help schools and teachers understand the value of play, and how to engage with tamariki around play. This conflicted with what teachers told us in terms of how difficult it is to implement play opportunities due to the administrative barriers in place (see more on page 19). Although those teachers valued and understood the purpose of play, the safety barriers put in place by parents and policy makers were too restrictive. In addition, the 'Parent as First Teachers' programme was seen as a valuable resource which helped parents understand the value of play, however it was discontinued by the government in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

The role of parents and their attitude towards play was also discussed. Rural and town stakeholders see play not being valued by parents as a learning opportunity and therefore not being prioritised. They spoke about how people often have a westernised view of play, where it is seen as separate from learning activities.

*"People have a westernised view of Play, that they see learning as maths and english and play is a treat." - Rural stakeholder*

*"We need to shift people's hearts, minds and souls to re-embrace play." - Town stakeholder*

### Funding, leadership and strategy

Coast and town stakeholders mentioned the importance of continued funding, resources, and support to enable play in their region. One stakeholder spoke about the need for funding that goes towards people, such as educators, as well as physical resources - although their school has bikes, they have no one to teach the kids how to ride. Other stakeholders talked about the role council can play in having a dedicated budget and quick processes to inspect and maintain play spaces, such as playgrounds.

Town stakeholders commented that having a play champion in their leadership team to advocate for play and support their work was invaluable. Other enablers included professional development around play and an organisational commitment to play by including it in strategies, long-term plans, and dedicated roles such as the Regional Play Systems Lead.

*"I'm very lucky at my kura, my senior manager supports me to make whatever happen." - Town stakeholder*

## Community, networking, partnership

Communication, community consultation, and partnership were mentioned as strong enablers for town stakeholders, as well as opportunities to come together with different play agencies to share their passion for play. Although being able to talk face-to-face was seen as important for relationship building, technology was also seen as helpful for reaching out to networks.

Schools, kura, and early childhood education centres were seen as an important part of the community network. A kaimahi described how being able to engage with the whānau at their kura was hugely helpful, while some town stakeholders commented that some schools are closed to the community outside of school hours.

Coast stakeholders confirmed a strong sense of community up the coast, stating that “when the chips are down, the community comes together”<sup>8</sup>. They also talked about a positive shift towards having a more meaningful partnership with Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti since the Community Connector and Manawakura Lead have joined.



## Value of Māori play

Insights heard across Te Tairāwhiti were rich in a cultural and Te Ao Māori perspective. Coastal and rural stakeholders spoke to the importance of the relationship between te taiao and the people, with weaving of whakapapa connections to the land. While this was the case with adults and parents playing back then, the innate connection between tamariki, whenua and te taiao had potential to be strengthened to benefit their health and wellbeing and reconnect them to their environments through play.

Stakeholders also agreed on the importance that outdoor play had in supporting the social wellbeing of all tamariki and recognising that the whenua is of fundamental importance to Māori due to their relationship to the Tairāwhiti region through whakapapa, and the sense of identity and belonging this created. Whānau Māori acknowledged that they understood the need to foster wellbeing of tamariki through their own understanding and knowledge of Te Ao Māori.

## Codesign

Rural stakeholders said it is important to include tamariki in discussions and to co-design with them to create programmes based on their interests. It is good to know what children are interested in, so this can be incorporated into their learning space. One stakeholder mentioned that after listening to the kids saying they like anime, they are now studying cosplay for their drawing.

# FUTURE OF PLAY

Opportunities and next steps

# Opportunities

Stakeholders, whānau, tamariki, and rangatahi saw that in the future Tairāwhiti might provide opportunities for play to be:

## Inspirational and freely available

There are a diverse range of play facilities freely available across Tairāwhiti that are attractive, safe, weather-proof, and integrated within the community through the clever design of new and existing spaces. Rural and coastal whānau have equal access to play opportunities, and the unique connection Tairāwhiti has with Te Ao Māori is embedded in play.

*How might we:*

- increase the diversity of play facilities across Tairāwhiti?
- make existing play spaces fun and attractive?
- integrate play into our community spaces?
- increase access to play for rural and coastal whānau?
- embed Te Ao Māori into play?

## Embedded in our urban fabric

Play is prioritised in city planning, strategy, and policies, meaning that play flows beyond the boundaries of playgrounds and is integrated into everyday community spaces and events. Low and slow traffic as well as strong community relationships enables tamariki to safely roam in and between our neighbourhoods. The whole whānau can play on the way to destinations by using safe cycling and walking connections, and schools are community hubs where whānau of all backgrounds come together to play.

*How might we:*

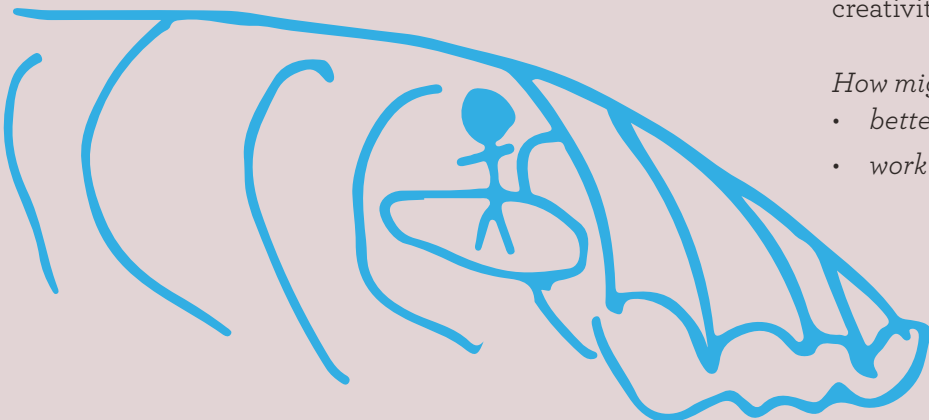
- prioritise play in our regional planning, strategy, and policies?

## Valued and normalised

Play is seen and valued at all levels of our community as a fundamental right and developmental need for tamariki. People who champion play in their community and whānau are supported to do so through funding, connections, professional development, and collaboration. We have a collective commitment as a community to help play thrive, and our region is known for its youthfulness and creativity.

*How might we:*

- better support our play champions?
- work together across the region to normalise play?



## Nature-based

Play in te taiao is celebrated and prioritised over manufactured play equipment. Natural taonga are protected and regenerated to future-proof nature-based play, and to strengthen the connection between whānau and whenua. Reserves are rewilded with natural features such as trees to climb and clean waterways and beaches. The unique diversity of natural spaces and connection to te taiao in Tairāwhiti is celebrated. Technology enhances experiences with the environment by passing on local stories of the maunga, moana, awa, and whenua to the next generation.

*How might we:*

- *prioritise natural over manufactured play resources in our play spaces?*
- *protect and regenerate our natural resources for future generations?*
- *use technology to enhance the connection between whānau and whenua?*

## Balanced between safety and risk

Risk-taking and risky play are seen as normal parts of tamariki play and development. Parents and whānau are confident to let their children push boundaries, and aren't afraid of judgement when tamariki learn through making mistakes. Pūrākau and other traditional Māori approaches to safety are revived in the region as an alternative to warning signs and administrative-heavy health and safety processes.

*How might we:*

- *change the whakaaro around risk and safety in our region?*
- *empower whānau to give their children greater freedom without fear of judgement?*

## For the whole whānau

Play spaces and equipment encourage and enable play for the whole whānau. More adults are involved in play, and grandparents hero play through their storytelling and role modelling. Tāne are celebrated for their role in encouraging risky play and helping tamariki learn by pushing boundaries.

*How might we:*

- *ensure play spaces and equipment are fully-functional for the whole whānau?*
- *celebrate the role of kuia, kaumātua, and tāne in play?*

## Child-led

Tamariki and rangatahi are leaders of play in our region. They are actively involved in the design of new spaces and events, and are empowered to bring fresh thinking and creativity to our design processes.

*How might we:*

- *hear from tamariki more often?*
- *deeply understand tamariki and rangatahi views on play in our region?*
- *leverage the creativity of tamariki to bring play to life in our communities?*

**"Kids being empowered and given the space just to be kids. Propping up their crazy ideas and not knocking them down. Let their imagination be - try not to bring our adult world into their play experience and the reality of things. Let their play be completely unrealistic because that's what it is." - Town parent**

## Centred in Te Ao Māori

Play for whānau, hapū and iwi in Te Tairāwhiti sits deeply in a connection to the environment that spans generations and holds stories, histories and the identity of its people. Play in places of significance for Māori (marae, awa, maunga, ngahere, pā sites or other key places) is considered an important and unique aspect of play for our region.

*How might we:*

- *connect with play from a Māori perspective?*

## Part of holistic wellbeing

Whānau in Tairāwhiti are well and thriving, enabling them to embrace play and creativity. Secure housing, employment, health, and connection are seen as foundations for play, so that whānau have the capacity to spend time playing together in the small moments of the day.

*How might we:*

- *include whānau wellbeing in the conversation around play?*

Below photograph by Hika Photography, of the new skate park design at Ruatōria.





## Next steps

This report is just the start of an exciting play movement at the local, regional and national levels. Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti is committed to increasing opportunities for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau to access quality play experiences across our town, rural and coastal play catchments.

At a local level, the next steps for this kaupapa will be to:

1. Share back, test, and build on what we've heard with the community
2. Create a local play champions network - supporting each other to identify and grow play opportunities across Te Tairāwhiti.
3. Increase awareness of the importance of play with the wider community through accessible information and promotion
4. Understand the history, context and purpose of play for whānau, hapū and iwi within Te Tairāwhiti
5. Collectively develop an inclusive play framework for Te Tairāwhiti.
6. Support groups and initiatives to access external funding for play resources.
7. Create new partnerships, initiatives, and collaborations across the region.

If you'd like more information about play in Te Tairāwhiti, or to be involved in these next steps, contact: Anna Tolich, Regional Play Systems Lead, Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti. [annat@sportgisborne.org.nz](mailto:annat@sportgisborne.org.nz)

At a national level, Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa will continue moving across Aotearoa to learn more about what play looks like and how it's changed, what's special about play in Aotearoa, and opportunities to create more play opportunities across the motu.





# INDEX

How this report was created and references

## How this report was created

### Tairāwhiti region

After exploring play in Christchurch, Southland, and Whanganui, Innovation Unit and Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa then worked with the Sport Gisborne Tairāwhiti team and Healthy Families East Cape to hear from sector stakeholders, whānau, and tamariki in the Tairāwhiti community about their experiences and perceptions of play. Over the next few months, we will follow a similar process for one additional region.

### Play 'huddles'

Innovation Unit facilitated two workshops in Gisborne with a diverse group of staff from local council, education, health, and community sectors, and a hui with kaimahi and parents at a kura kaupapa in Ruatōria. Sport Gisborne then held an additional workshop at Te Karaka Area School with rural stakeholders. We have referred to these groups throughout the report as Town, Coast, and Rural stakeholders respectively.

### Interviews with tamariki and whānau

Sport Gisborne then engaged with whānau and tamariki across the region to hear about their experiences and hopes for play. This included an online survey for caregivers, interviews with children and parents at Gisborne skatepark, interviews and a survey with children and parents at 'Playgroup with a difference', and surveys with children at St Mary's Primary School and Cobham School. Sport New Zealand also held one follow-up call with a parent who lives in Tairāwhiti to dive more deeply into their perceptions and experiences of play for their whānau.

### Analysis

Finally, we spent time going through the collected data to explore common themes, tensions, and opportunities to consolidate the knowledge from the workshops, interviews, and existing research into this report.



Images from top: 'Huddle' with town stakeholders, coast stakeholders, drawings from the huddles, and making sense of research data.

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## Te Reo Māori glossary

<b>Aotearoa</b>	New Zealand
<b>Awa</b>	River
<b>Hapū</b>	Subtribe
<b>Iwi</b>	Tribe
<b>Kai</b>	Food
<b>Kaimahi</b>	Staff
<b>Kaimoana</b>	Seafood
<b>Kaumātua / Kuia</b>	Elders
<b>Kaupapa</b>	Purpose/ initiative
<b>Kura</b>	School
<b>Kura kaupapa</b>	primary school operating under Māori custom and using Māori as the medium of instruction
<b>Mahi</b>	Work
<b>Maunga</b>	Mountain
<b>Moana</b>	Sea
<b>Ngahere</b>	Forest
<b>Pā</b>	Fortified village
<b>Pūrākau</b>	Legends
<b>Rangatahi</b>	Young people
<b>Tākaro</b>	Play
<b>Tamaiti</b>	Child
<b>Tamariki</b>	Children
<b>Tāne</b>	Man
<b>Taonga</b>	Treasure
<b>Te Ao Māori</b>	The Māori world
<b>Te taiao</b>	The environment
<b>Tikanga</b>	Protocol
<b>Tohunga</b>	Expert
<b>Whakaaro</b>	Thinking
<b>Whakapapa</b>	Genealogy
<b>Whānau</b>	Family/ families
<b>Whenua</b>	Land

