



**Unlocking
opportunities**

**The power of sport
and physical activity
for care-experienced
tamariki and rangatahi**

Executive summary

Sport and physical activity has the power to improve outcomes for all, yet care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, who are among the most vulnerable in society, face disproportionate barriers to access. As a result, they miss out on the critical benefits that sport and recreation provide – experiences that are a right, not a privilege. By identifying and addressing these obstacles, we unlock opportunities for transformative change that can strongly enhance life experiences.

Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa (Sport NZ) has at its heart the focus of enabling all New Zealanders to participate in physical activity experiences, ensuring the greatest possible impact on wellbeing. Crucial to this is a particular emphasis on improving equity for tamariki and rangatahi who are missing out or doing less. Care-experienced young people are a specific group that inequity significantly impacts.

This report is intended to be a **discussion document**, provoking kōrero and critical conversations between government, social agencies and the physical activity sector, to elevate the role of sport, recreation and play experiences in the care system, inspire

collaboration and collective action, and together create a roadmap for lasting change. It is the result of a comprehensive, multi-agency project between Sport NZ, Sport Canterbury, Oranga Tamariki, Healthy Families NZ and other sporting and physical activity organisations. Particular acknowledgement goes to Lawrence Tau, System Innovator at Sport Canterbury, who has played a key role in this project. Grounded in the knowledge and experience of the sector, this collective mahi has explored and tested ways to improve sport and physical activity experiences for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our findings are informed by kaupapa kōrero (narrative enquiry) and semi-structured interviews, with case studies used to showcase sector-led best practices and highlight practical, actionable solutions.

This document is a summary of our learning and experiences during our journey at the intersection of care and physical activity. What we have learnt informs the development of recommendations and strategies that we believe can be actioned to meaningful participation opportunities for young people in care.

What does the evidence tell us?

Involvement in physical activity fosters wellbeing, stability, confidence and a sense of belonging, all significant factors in supporting better outcomes for young people in care. Evidence strongly shows that participation has the potential to improve outcomes for tamariki and rangatahi in care and contributes to reducing the increased risk of negative life outcomes for these young people, such as the potential pathway from care experience to receiving a criminal custodial sentence later in life.

Abuse in Care – Royal Commission of Inquiry (2022)

In **Part 1** of this report, we explore our sector understanding of the specific and unique barriers and challenges faced by care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

In **Part 2**, utilising the Six Conditions of Systems Change framework,¹ we organise our findings and insights into evidence-based interventions and 25 actionable recommendations we believe can drive change to result in sustained impact.

¹ [The Six Conditions of Systems Change](#)

Tracing the kaupapa: The path to this report

From insights to action: Creating lasting impact

This report is not just about identifying challenges – it is a roadmap for action. Our goals are to:

Raise awareness of the factors preventing care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi from participating in sport and physical activity.

Influence decision-makers to recognise and elevate the role of sport, play and recreation in supporting care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

Empower providers with tools and support to create inclusive, impactful programmes.

Drive systemic change by advocating for a systems approach, ensuring that efforts go beyond one-off initiatives and instead drive long-term, meaningful change.



What began in 2018 with a pilot project, Ngā Hapori, has continued to evolve, developing as an important piece of mahi with significant real-world application. Sport NZ, Sport Canterbury, Healthy Families Ōtautahi and Oranga Tamariki have worked together, alongside other stakeholders, to improve outcomes for tamariki and rangatahi in care, and enable transformative change through sport and physical activity. Individual initiatives focused on awareness building, programme development and provider support through training. However, as this mahi develops further, there is recognition of a need to coordinate and target our approaches.

Timeline

2018	<p>Oranga Tamariki's community engagement team approached Sport NZ to co-design a pilot project Connecting Children in Care to New Zealanders through Sport and Recreation</p> <hr/> <p>Workshops with community and young people in care in the regions of Gisborne, South Auckland and Christchurch led to the creation of Ngā Hapori. This pilot supported 90 young people to engage in sport or recreation of their choice, building life skills and a sense of belonging</p> <hr/> <p>The pilot informed the development of Care Standard 34 which stipulates support for play, recreation, sport and community activities for children in care</p> <hr/>
2019	<p>A formal Relationship Agreement was signed between Sport NZ and Oranga Tamariki, committing both agencies to collaborate on improving access to play, active recreation and sport for children in care</p> <p>https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/news/improving-outcomes-for-tamariki-through-sport/</p> <hr/> <p>A second-phase pilot, drawing on learnings from Ngā Hapori, was initiated in Christchurch. This locally led initiative involved Sport Canterbury, Healthy Families Ōtautahi, Oranga Tamariki, and local partners, led by Lawrence Tau</p> <hr/>
2020	<p>Pilot paused due to COVID 19</p> <hr/>
2021-22	<p>The project resumed as Te Pou o Te Whare – a community-led, insights-driven initiative with two key components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional learning and development for sport and recreation providers, including work within a residential care facility• A community activation programme, pairing tamariki in care with mentors who used sport and play to build confidence and connection <hr/>
2023-24	<p>Lawrence Tau was seconded to Sport NZ to explore how the physical activity sector could strengthen its role in supporting tamariki and rangatahi in care</p> <hr/>
2025	<p>Planned release of discussion document summarising this journey, with insights, recommendations and opportunities for future action</p> <hr/>

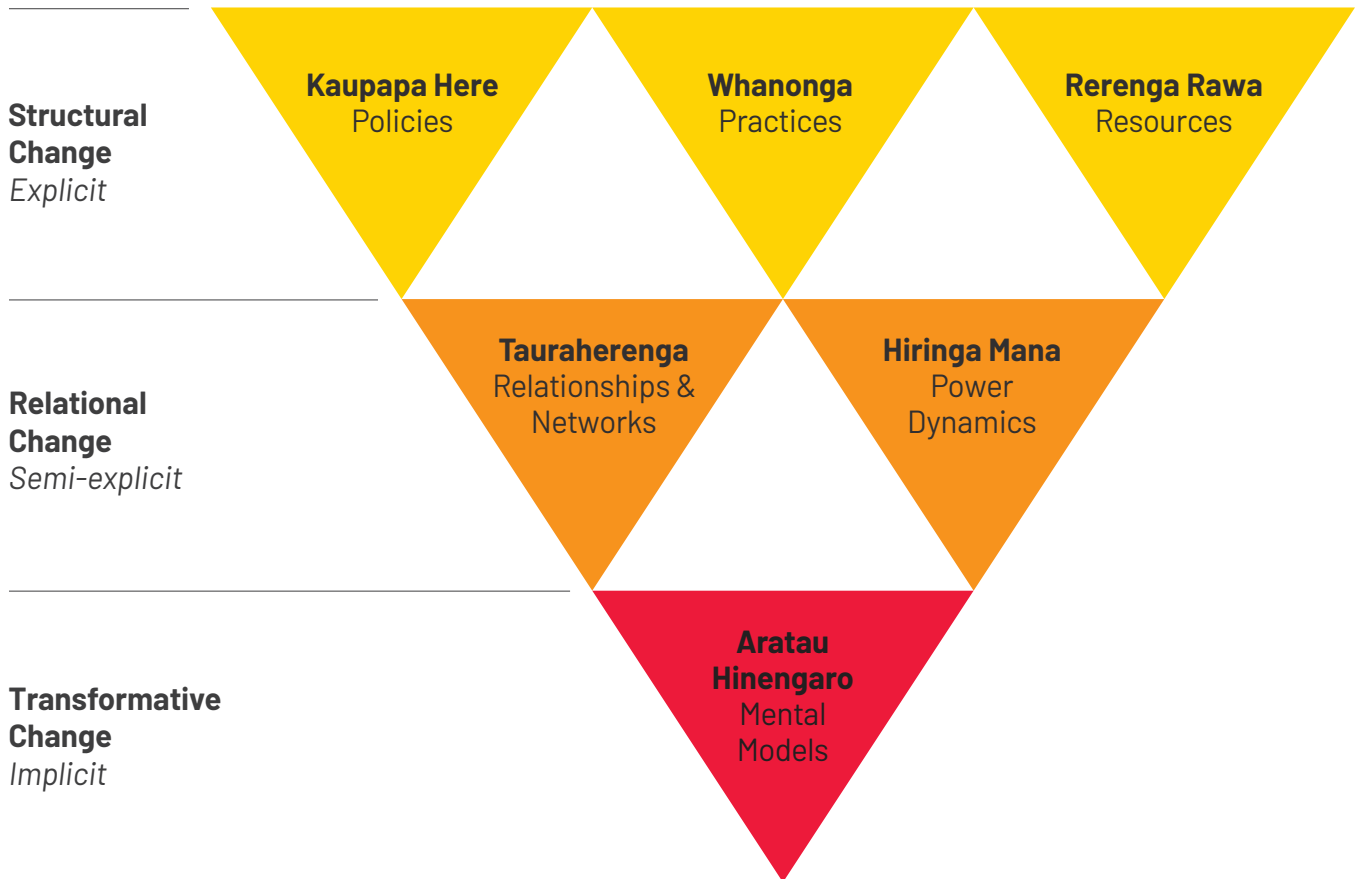
Learn more

Videos

The work that has resulted from this pilot can be viewed in these videos:

-  [Te Pou o Te Whare](#)  [Te Puna Wai Youth Residence](#)

Six Conditions of System Change



By aligning our report findings with the Six Conditions of Systems Change, a trusted framework for enabling lasting change used by Healthy Families NZ, we can move from short-term programmes to systemic transformation. This approach is a powerful way to identify and address root causes and barriers, and drive long-term, meaningful results.

- Instead of just funding more programmes, we embed physical activity into care policies.
- Instead of assuming providers know what care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi need, we equip them with trauma-informed training.
- Instead of designing for tamariki and rangatahi, we design with them, ensuring their voices shape decisions.

Credit: Healthy Families Rotorua

This systems change model has been adapted from the original framework, developed by Healthy Families Rotorua.

Achieving success: Our findings in brief

Structural

Policy

The current landscape

There are several existing policies, but they are not standardised, explicit, coordinated or consistently funded. Accountability and oversight are lacking.

Opportunity for improvement

With tamariki and rangatahi in care at the forefront, fund and embed programmes and evaluate outcomes.



Practice

The current landscape

While there are pockets of great practice, access to quality physical activity opportunities for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi remains inconsistent. There is a significant variation in skills, knowledge and capability across providers.

Opportunity for improvement

Training and support for staff needs to be specific, supervised and formal. Programme design should hold tamariki and rangatahi in care at its heart.

We can identify, highlight and build from effective practices in a coordinated, collaborative way.

National and local networks can drive sector-wide improvements to training programmes.

Resource flow

The current landscape

Current funds and programmes do not target tamariki and rangatahi in care and can misinterpret or fail to prioritise needs. Problems with information sharing add to the challenges.

Opportunity for improvement

With improved and targeted collaboration, reporting and data sharing, resources can be better targeted towards tamariki and rangatahi in care.

Relational

Relationships and connections

The current landscape

There are several agencies and actors in this space, but lack of cohesion and oversight leaves them fragmented.

Opportunity for improvement

Oranga Tamariki and Sport NZ can lead the way and recommit to their existing agreements. Collaboration with other agencies, along with national oversight, must be enhanced and strengthened.

Power dynamics

The current landscape

Tamariki and rangatahi in care and their immediate caregivers have little power over their physical activity experiences.

Opportunity for improvement

By prioritising the voices and lived experiences of tamariki and rangatahi in care and their carers, their perspectives can shape effective programming.



Transformational

Mental models

The current landscape

Currently, understanding of the importance of play, sport and recreation for tamariki and rangatahi in care isn't strong, and perceptions are deficit-based.

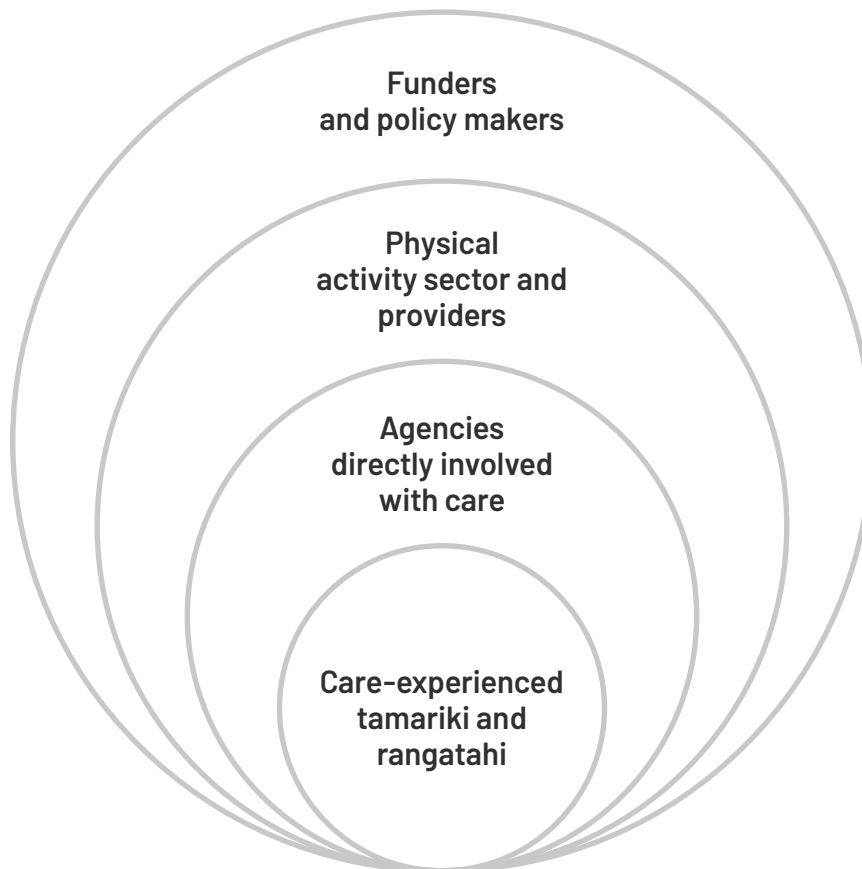
Opportunity for improvement

With deeper understanding of care-experienced youth and an acknowledgement of physical activity as a fundamental right, we must advocate for system-wide changes that prioritise their needs.

Collective responsibility for change

Achieving real change cannot fall on one organisation alone. Instead, it requires:

- **Funders and policy makers** prioritising investment in community-led initiatives
- **Physical activity organisations and providers** committing to trauma-informed, inclusive practices
- **Care agencies** embedding physical activity in the care system
- **Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi** being heard, valued and included in shaping their own experiences.



Part 1

Building an understanding of the care system in Aotearoa

The care system in Aotearoa is inherently complex, with both visible and hidden aspects. Many individuals and organisations have only a surface-level understanding of the challenges care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi face. To enable change, we must deepen our knowledge.

There are numerous reasons a young person may have a connection with state care, including unsafe living conditions, lack of family support, tragedy and loss. Aroturuki Tamariki, the Independent Children's Monitor, provides a comprehensive overview of those in the care system, their carers and their placements.² This is a valuable resource for those working with care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa. By directly connecting with these young people and those who support them, it gives voice to the 5,722 tamariki and rangatahi who spent time in state care (2023–24).

Custody agency

Over the course of 2023/24, 5,722 tamariki and rangatahi spent time in care. They were in the custody of:



5,653



66



Barnardos

<6



KOKIRI
MARAE

<6

Oranga Tamariki is the custodial parent for almost 99 percent of tamariki and rangatahi who were in care during the year.

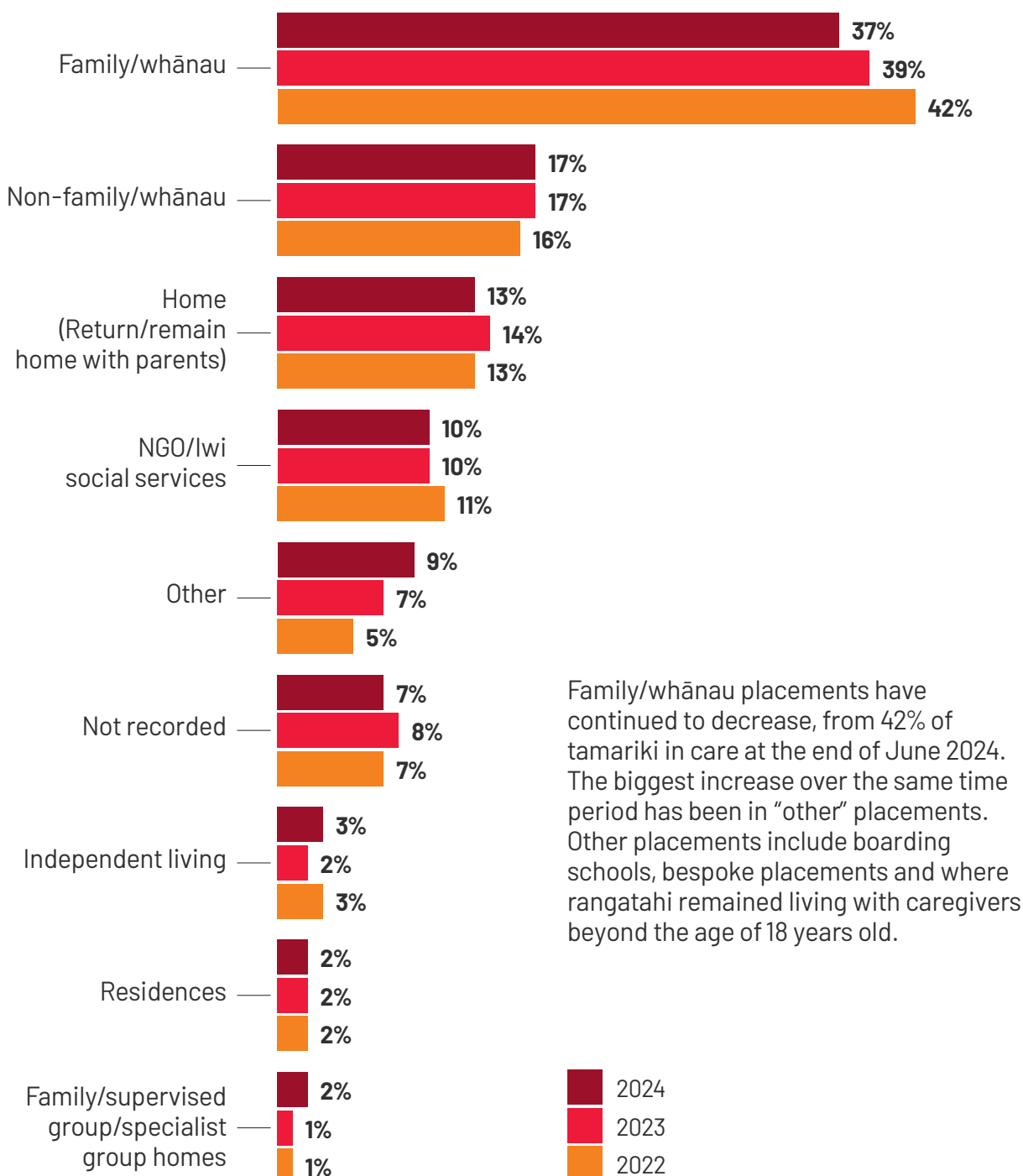
Experiences of care in Aotearoa 23/24^{3,4}

² [Experiences of Care in Aotearoa](#)

³ [About tamariki and rangatahi in care](#)

⁴ To protect the privacy of individuals, Statistics New Zealand guidelines have been followed and the exact number of individuals, when that number is below six, is not disclosed. This is to reduce the risk that information could be used to identify individuals and learn private information about them.

Care is divided into several categories, each with its own challenges that require different approaches to intervention and support.



Placement types as at 30 June 2024⁵

⁵ About tamariki and rangatahi in care

Complexities inherent in the care system can cause challenges, leading to some tamariki and rangatahi slipping through the cracks and being inadequately supported. Bringing the implications of this into stark focus, the Care to Custody Report⁶ states:

One out of every three children and young people placed in residential care by the State went on to serve a prison sentence later in life. For Māori children and young people who had been in State residential care over that time, up to 42 percent went on to receive a prison sentence later in life.

Māori are significantly overrepresented in Oranga Tamariki and state care in Aotearoa, (69 percent of those in care are Māori⁷) reflecting broader systemic inequities and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on whānau, hapū and iwi.

Research tells us that, “Māori can experience trauma in distinct ways linked to the experience of colonisation, racism and discrimination, negative stereotyping and subsequent unequal rates of violence, poverty and ill health.”⁸ It is therefore essential that we consider Te Ao Māori, abide by the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and listen to Māori perspectives when making policy or practice recommendations.

The role of sport and physical activity

Engagement in sport and physical activity has both immediate and enduring benefits for tamariki and rangatahi. In the short term, it gives a sense of achievement and mana, improves both physical and mental wellbeing, and cultivates social connections. Sustained participation is strongly associated with better life outcomes for health and wellbeing, as well as reduced rates of incarceration⁹ and increased pro-social behaviours. Involvement in physical activity positively impacts engagement and success, with physically active tamariki and rangatahi both staying in school longer and having higher levels of achievement.¹⁰

Alongside this is the benefit of inherent joy and fun all children and young people deserve. Tamariki, rangatahi and adults who meet physical activity guidelines are happier than those who do not.¹¹

Recognising physical activity as a right (determined by the United Nations Rights of the Child¹²) not a privilege, the pilot project between Sport NZ and Oranga Tamariki led to National Care Standards Regulation 34¹³ being embedded in the care plans of all tamariki and rangatahi in care or custody. This provided a regulation requirement that support (including financial support) is available to address the

6 [Care to Custody Incarceration Rates Research Report](#)

7 [About tamariki and rangatahi in care](#)

8 [He kohinga kōrero: Gathering of stories](#)

9 [Sport in prison: Exploring the role of physical activity in correctional settings](#)

10 [Active bodies, active minds](#)

11 [Active NZ Participation Trends](#)

12 [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

13 [National Care Standards](#)

play, recreational and cultural needs of a child or young person in care.

Oranga Tamariki has committed to promoting this through building specific goals into the All About Me plan for tamariki.¹⁴ However, there is a lack of consistency with how this is realised in practice, resulting in guidelines and suggestions rather than structured and planned-for activities. Caregivers, whānau and social workers bear the responsibility for facilitating sport and recreational activity and may not be aware of available resources, opportunities, support or how to access funding. Additionally, the physical activity sector has low awareness of the potential and opportunity this care standard offers.

Lived experiences of young people

Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi face unique challenges, and their support needs are diverse. They are more likely to have suffered trauma, be disabled, have periods of disconnection from whānau, or face frequent transitions and changes to their key relationships. Understanding the implications of their lived experiences is essential to providing meaningful support and sustainable physical activity opportunities that have a positive and lasting impact for young people.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are significant and recurring stressors experienced early in life that impact the development and long-term wellbeing of tamariki. Research indicates that ACEs, which include negative experiences such as abuse,

neglect and challenging home environments, are associated with a range of adverse outcomes. Tamariki affected by ACEs have a higher likelihood of mental health challenges, chronic health conditions and lower educational attainment. They are more likely to use or abuse drugs and alcohol. Many care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi have encountered multiple ACEs.

Although the care system is intended to provide safety and stability, instances of harm during time in care are well documented. The Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry has highlighted historical and ongoing concerns within state and faith-based institutions. Recent closures of facilities such as Te Oranga Care and Protection Unit and Whakatakapokai underscore the need for continued scrutiny and improvements in care settings.

Disabilities, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and neurodiversity

A significant proportion of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi live with disabilities, neurodiverse conditions or FASD, adding complexity to their support needs.

There can be inconsistencies in how disabilities are defined and classified, and we know many tamariki remain undiagnosed or are misdiagnosed. However, 2023–24 figures show 20 percent of tamariki and rangatahi in care are whaikaha (disabled), almost twice that of the general population of the same age. Of the total care population (0–20 years old), 31 percent are known to be disabled, and as many as 66 percent

¹⁴ [Support for play, recreation and community activities](#)

¹⁵ [Adverse Childhood Experiences: Understanding their effects](#)

¹⁶ abuseincare.org.nz

¹⁷ [About tamariki and rangatahi in care](#)

of tamariki whaikaha in out-of-home care have high or very high support needs.¹⁷

While Sport NZ's strategy prioritises inclusion for tamariki whaikaha, much of the focus has been on those with visible physical or intellectual disabilities. Neurodiversity and FASD are underrepresented in both policy and practice, leading to additional barriers to physical activity. Compounding this, tamariki affected by FASD currently have limited access to disability support services due to discrepancies in how the disorder is classified.¹⁸

These realities clearly indicate a need for greater recognition and tailored support for tamariki whaikaha to improve access to sport,



play and recreation as meaningful components of their care.

Transiency and disconnection

Many care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi have frequent changes in placements and key relationships, contributing to instability, a lack of routine and sense of disconnection. On average, young people in care undergo four placement changes, though this number can be as high as 40. They may have as many as 20 different social workers allocated to their case.¹⁹ So many transitions disrupt relationships with whānau, communities and support networks, making it difficult for young people to maintain feelings of belonging and continuity.

While the care system aims to provide stable environments and relationships, factors such as placement shortages and ongoing organisational changes present challenges. The ability to maintain physical activities, and the associated feelings of belonging and continuity this brings, is difficult in these circumstances and may not be prioritised. Addressing these issues requires a focus on long-term placement stability, improved transition planning and consistent support systems to help young people engage in their communities.

Make sure you know what you're doing before bringing a kid to your care, before a kid is brought into so many houses. Make sure you know that. We are kids, we hate to be moved to different people. It's hard and it's not fair.

Tamaiti in care in Aotearoa

¹⁸ [Action on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder \(FASD\)](#)

¹⁹ [About tamariki and rangatahi in care](#)

Part 2

A systems approach to enhancing quality physical activity for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi

Our research and mahi with care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi has identified critical gaps in access to sport and physical activity. Traditional solutions such as launching new programmes or increasing funding, while part of the solution, only address surface-level symptoms. To create lasting change, we must take a systems approach, addressing both visible and invisible factors that shape young people's experiences.

Using the Six Conditions of Systems Change framework, we can align our insights with actionable strategies to lead to real, sustained impact.

1. Structural change: Shifting policies, practices and resources

Our findings

- There is **no consistent policy** ensuring that physical activity is a priority in care settings.
- A lack of **specialised training for physical activity providers** means they often don't have the skills to engage and support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi effectively.
- **Financial barriers** limit the ability to participate in sports and recreation.

Systems change actions

Policy change

Advocate for physical activity to be **embedded in care frameworks**, ensuring it is a recognised and resourced component of wellbeing.

Practice shifts

Develop **trauma-informed coaching and training** for those providing physical activity opportunities to care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

Resource redistribution

Secure funding for **subsidised access to physical activity** and invest in **community-led initiatives** tailored to the needs of care-experienced youth.

1.1 Transforming policy for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in physical activity

Policy challenges and opportunities

Aotearoa has a well-established policy framework to support child and youth wellbeing. Key policies relevant to this work include:

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Recognises every child's right to rest, leisure and participation in cultural and recreational activities.²⁰

Sport NZ strategy and National Physical Activity and Play Plan²¹

This cross-sector collaboration identifies how government agencies can use a focus on physical activity to achieve government priorities. It aims to create equitable access to physical activity, particularly for underrepresented groups, but it lacks explicit recognition of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. Without prioritisation of this group, risks include insufficiently tailored programming, inadequate data and a lack of integration with care services.

The Child and Youth Strategy 2024-27²²

This is the most comprehensive government strategy outlining cross-sector priorities to improve outcomes for young people. However, while the preceding 2019 iteration of this strategy stated the goal to: better support those children and young people of interest to Oranga Tamariki and address family and sexual violence,²³ the latest version has minimal mention or prioritisation of those in care. These former principles could be more deeply integrated into current policy relating to physical activity initiatives.

National Care Standards (Care Standard 34)²⁴

National Care Standards (2018) outline the standards of care that children and young people in state care are entitled to, as well as the support that caregivers can expect. The 2018 collaborative project between Sport NZ and Oranga Tamariki led to the inclusion of Care Standard 34, which mandates that tamariki and rangatahi in care must have financial and structural support to access sport, recreational and cultural activities. However, awareness is low among young people, caregivers and social workers. Addressing this gap through an education and implementation strategy and ensuring ongoing access to funding is critical.

Child safeguarding policies

Policies, such as those produced by the Sport Integrity Commission,²⁵ provide comprehensive guidelines, tools and resources for caregivers, coaches, kaimahi and volunteers. However, monitoring and enforcement is inconsistent, which can leave young people vulnerable. Strengthening preventive measures and caregiver accountability, as well as targeted training is essential.

While these policies promote equity and inclusion, most do not explicitly recognise care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, leading to gaps in targeted action. The disproportionate barriers faced by care-experienced young people add complexity that requires tailored, informed measures. Additionally, the lack of systematic data collection and evaluation makes it difficult to measure impact.

20 [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

21 [National Physical Activity and Play Plan](#)

22 [The Child and Youth Strategy 2024-2027](#)

23 [Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2019](#)

24 [National Care Standards and Related Matters](#)

25 [Sport Integrity Commission \(2025\) Child safeguarding](#)

Policy recommendations

1. Make care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi a policy priority

Explicitly embed their specific needs in existing national and organisational strategies, such as the National Physical Activity and Play Plan, Youth Justice and other child safeguarding policies.

Prioritise care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi with tailored interventions, sustained investment and long-term commitment, with a collaborative, coordinated approach.

2. Strengthen and enforce Care Standard 34

Elevate awareness, secure dedicated funding and enhance accountability through agencies like Mana Mokopuna (Children and Young People's Commission) and Aroturuki Tamariki to ensure consistent access to physical activity.

3. Improve monitoring

Consolidating and standardising data collection will enable better evaluation of participation and outcomes.

1.2 Strengthening practice for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi

Practice challenges and opportunities

While some physical activity providers proactively support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, there is inconsistency in skills, knowledge and capability. Without a professional body or structured support, practitioners operate in a grey area, lacking training, supervision and safeguarding mechanisms.

Sometimes it's past trauma, behaviour, or just a coach not understanding them. My hope is we build understanding and remove barriers.

Care advocate

Knowledge and awareness

Critical gaps exist across the physical activity system. Many practitioners want to support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi but lack knowledge about their **unique requirements, barriers and best practices**.

Training gaps

Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi often have neurodiverse needs, trauma histories or other challenges that require **a more informed approach to physical activity programming**. However, training is limited and often assumes a neurotypical model. Practitioners need hands-on training with real-world applications to foster **relational practice**, which is key to building trust.

Kaimahi burnout and supervision

Practitioners in secure settings experience high levels of **mental, emotional and physical stress**, which can lead to burnout and high turnover. Many providers operate without **formal supervision**, relying instead on ad hoc “check-ins” that lack structured support. **Supervision frameworks** should be developed to provide guidance, emotional support and professional accountability.

Effective programming approaches

Programmes must be **designed with input** from care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, prioritising their aspirations and needs over standardised, one-size-fits-all approaches. **Success looks different for each young person:** for some, it may be long-term sport engagement, for others, it's simply stepping outside.

Physical activity as a vehicle for change

Being physically active fosters connection, trust and confidence. Successful programmes use physical activity as a **tool for mentoring, health and life skills development** – a strategy known to be particularly effective in **youth justice settings**.²⁶

Sports-based youth development programmes for youth at risk of delinquency have been found to increase pro-social behaviour, perceptions of community and reduce aggression.

Good Measure Results: Hoa Motuhake²⁷

Building trusting relationships

Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi often have **transactional relationships** with professionals. As acknowledged by Oranga Tamariki and supported in theory by policies that aim for practice to be mana-enhancing, and whānau-inclusive, programmes that prioritise **trust and connection before activity** see the most success by creating **safe, supportive environments**.

Supporting and training for kaimahi

Providers delivering impactful programmes recognise the **emotional toll on kaimahi**. Some have built informal supervision mechanisms, but many lack structured **professional development, reflective practice and wellbeing support**. Investment in **sector-wide training and supervision is critical** to programme sustainability.

In response to some of these challenges, throughout this project Sport NZ engaged **Unbreakable Foundation** to commence initial work around developing **Practice Guidelines**, as a framework to support providers, volunteers and leaders working with care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. These guidelines are currently in draft as the foundation is no longer operating and are an excellent start to build from. They prompt reflection and adaptation rather than prescribe rigid practices.

²⁶ [Building relationships to improve outcomes for youth in Corrections](#)

²⁷ [Hoa Motuhake](#)

Case Study

Hoa Motuhake Sports Mentoring Programme²⁸

Breaking cycles: Building futures through sport and mentorship

The vision

Hoa Motuhake Sports Trust believes every child deserves the opportunity to play sport, no matter their circumstances. They work alongside Oranga Tamariki and other social organisations to identify tamariki aged 8–12 who need additional support – particularly those in care, living in high-deprivation environments, or facing trauma and adversity.

Sport, they believe, is far more than just a game. It's a pathway to belonging, a place to build resilience, and a platform for lifelong wellbeing.

The programme

At the heart of the Trust's approach is a powerful combination: sport and meaningful mentoring.

Through the Mentorship into Scholarship pathway, each referred tamaiti is carefully matched with a volunteer mentor who becomes a steady presence – someone who listens, encourages, and helps them discover not just new sports, but new possibilities.

Mentors meet weekly with tamariki, alternating between one-on-one and group sessions. These moments become more than just practices – they are opportunities to build confidence, trust and connection. After a year, tamariki transition into their chosen community sport with the continued support of a dedicated scholarship liaison who helps navigate logistics, club relationships and whānau support.

Long-term impact

Hoa Motuhake's mentoring isn't a short-term fix – it's designed for sustained engagement. Most tamariki remain connected with the Trust for up to five years, supported through sport transitions, regional events and annual celebrations that deepen their sense of identity and community.

What the numbers show (2023):

\$301,652

total lifetime social value generated

\$13,830

social value per mentored tamaiti

113%

increase in self-confidence reported by mentors and caregivers

100%

engagement rate among all tamariki and caregivers

\$1.80

return in social value for every \$1 invested

In their own words:

“We're not just supporting sport participation. We're helping shape futures. Through consistent mentoring and connection, we offer our tamariki a brighter and more promising future.”

Adapted from: Impact Lab:
Good Measure Results.

Outcomes go beyond the field

Tamariki involved in the programme show measurable improvements in mental and physical health, school engagement, pro-social behaviours and reductions in risky behaviours. Caregivers also report improved wellbeing and stronger connections.

Why it matters

By intervening early, the Trust is helping tamariki stay in positive, nurturing environments for longer – giving them time and space to build new patterns of behaviour and break the cycle of trauma.

28 <https://www.hoamotuhake.co.nz/changing-lives>



Practice recommendations

4. Implement best practice guidelines

Adopt, refine and complete the draft guidelines from Unbreakable Foundation to ensure a consistent, high-quality approach across the sector.

5. Deliver targeted training

Provide sector-specific, hands-on training in trauma-informed practice, child safeguarding, de-escalation, FASD awareness and cultural competency to equip practitioners with essential skills.

6. Establish robust supervision structures

Develop structured supervision frameworks and connect practitioners with professional bodies to enhance support, accountability and ongoing development.

7. Build communities of practice

Establish national and local peer networks that foster knowledge sharing, collaboration and continuous learning to drive sector-wide improvements.

These communities can highlight the effective practices and programmes, enabling learning and expansion from them.

Case Study

Te Pou o Te Whare

Improving young people's wellbeing through co-design and empowerment

Te Pou o Te Whare is a collaborative initiative led by Sport Canterbury alongside Healthy Families Ōtautahi. Firmly grounded in Te Ao Māori principles and prioritising child-centred design, its objectives are to improve access to physical activity for care-experienced young people while empowering providers to meet their needs. By capturing and sharing learnings, the programme aims to develop a roadmap for future initiatives.

The model uses the analogy of a whare, with sequenced phases:

Whakapapa

Gathers insights of lived experiences and analyses challenges, barriers and opportunities.

Paparahi

The team collates the key messages from the insights to ensure clear understanding of the kaupapa and project scope.

Whakamana

Implements and tests two key prototypes designed to directly address barriers:

Prototype One:

Sport mentoring and community activation pairs young people with a mentor for one-on-one support.

Prototype Two:

Professional development for play, active recreation and sport providers, which includes training modules, workshops and peer learning opportunities.

Whakahaumaru

Insights and learnings are used to refine and adapt programmes, form ongoing partnerships and transition to community ownership of the programmes.

Adapted from: Te Pou o Te Whare Case Study: Improving Young People's Wellbeing through Co-Design and Empowerment, by Lawrence Tau

The success of Te Pou o Te Whare is due to several critical factors:

- a culturally grounded, child-centred approach
- strong cross-sector collaboration
- phased implementation that allows for thoughtful planning and ongoing refinement
- mentorship that empowers tamariki and rangatahi
- providers' capacity to offer trauma-informed and culturally responsive programmes
- inclusive community-led physical activity opportunities
- ongoing learning and adaptation for systemic change.

Outcomes and future directions

The mentoring and community activation programmes transitioned into Hoa Motuhake, which continues to support young people with scholarship opportunities. The programme is also being extended to secure youth residences, and a growing network of organisations now collaborate to improve play, active recreation and sport for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

" Young people being very happy, and 'almost floating' after some activities. "

Mentor

1.3 Optimising resource flows for care-experienced young people

Resource flows challenges and opportunities

Resource flows, including funding, workforce investment and information sharing, shape opportunities for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. Currently, limitations in funding flexibility and information accessibility can hinder programme delivery. Additionally, and as previously noted, the current lack of awareness of the Care Standard 34 and its associated funding adds a further layer of limitation. To build a responsive system, we must reimagine how resources are allocated and shared.

Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa

This fund, managed and distributed by Sport NZ in partnership with regional sports trusts, aims to address barriers tamariki and rangatahi face in accessing physical activity. Its particular focus is on groups who are less active, but it does not specifically reference or prioritise care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. Although well-placed to meet their needs, it requires a specific focus and understanding of this group to provide targeted gains.

We need stronger partnerships with care-focused organisations to ensure access and impact.

Regional Sports Trust Tū Manawa Lead

Interviews with fund administrators showed limited awareness or connections with care-focused agencies. Recipients also report that critical programme components – such as relationship-building, supervision and kaimahi training – are often unfunded due to resource constraints.

Additionally, reporting and consent requirements create barriers in secure facilities, where traditional data collection can feel extractive and misaligned with youth needs. Creative, relationship-centred approaches are required to balance accountability with ethical engagement.

Innovative funding approaches

Some initiatives demonstrate how flexible, needs-based funding can drive impact. For example, Active Auckland and New Zealand Police's Multidisciplinary Cross-Agency Team (MDCAT) use Tū Manawa funding to rapidly connect justice-involved rangatahi with tailored physical activity opportunities, addressing underlying factors contributing to offending. By reducing bureaucratic delays and prioritising urgent needs, this model enhances access and engagement.

In secure residential settings, micro-scale **activation funds**, such as those used at Te Poutama Ārahi Rangatahi,²⁹ provide immediate, flexible support tailored to each young person's needs. While these funds facilitate entry points into activity, sustained engagement requires deeper investment beyond activation.

Strengthening information flow

Effective practice relies on having accurate, timely information about young people's needs, strengths and risks. However, communication between the care and physical activity sectors is inconsistent, outdated and fragmented. Providers frequently cite uncertainty about how to engage care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi due to limited data access.

In high-risk environments like secure facilities, poor information flow can lead to inadequate safety measures and missed opportunities for meaningful engagement. Typically, insights are gathered informally through frontline kaimahi, leading to discrepancies in available information.

29 [Barnardos New Zealand](#)

Case Study

Tū Manawa: Back in the game

Empowering youth through sport

Tū Manawa projects encourage using physical activity as a powerful way to help young people to realise their potential. Inspector Aron McKeown, New Zealand Police Youth and Community Manager in Waitematā, has seen this impact firsthand through a collaborative initiative supporting young people to thrive.

NZ Police partnered with iwi, community groups and other government agencies who work directly with at-risk youth, who have recently offended, and their whānau. Together, they identified opportunities for these tamariki and rangatahi to become involved in sport.

The Tū Manawa-funded project was created by, and is administered in collaboration with, Aktive Auckland. It uses sport and recreation opportunities to help young people to build confidence, discipline, resilience and a sense of connection. Critical to success is supporting whānau to find the activities that will have the greatest positive impact.

Adapted from Interaktive: Aktive's E-Magazine³⁰

Since 2022, 114 young people have taken part in activities such as boxing, rugby, waka ama and equestrian. Eighty-two percent of these rangatahi have not reoffended. Tū Manawa funding has helped remove practical barriers by covering gear and participation costs.

Working alongside whānau is key to ensure support is tailored and trust is built. The impact reaches beyond the individual, strengthening families and communities.

This initiative is not only reducing offending – it is opening doors and creating brighter futures.

“ We’re empowering young people through sport and getting them back in the game. ”

Aron McKeown
New Zealand Police Youth and
Community Manager

³⁰ [Tū Manawa: Back in the game](#)



Resource flows recommendations

8. Support flexible funding approaches

Ensure community funds, including Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa and other government and community-funded initiatives, are recognised and understood as mechanisms that can support relational approaches, supervision and training where needed. This flexibility enables impactful, long-term engagement that can adapt to the evolving needs of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

9. Invest in core-focused initiatives

Prioritise funding for organisations that have care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi at their core.

10. Workforce development

Establish dedicated national roles to integrate sport, recreation and play activities into care settings, driving system-wide change.

11. Improve information flow

Invest in initiatives that enhance data sharing and integrate physical activity monitoring into care systems.

Strengthen collaboration between care agencies and activity providers to share relevant, up-to-date information.

12. Ethical and relationship-centred approaches

Ensure information gathering prioritises trust and safety, especially in secure settings.

We want to support these young people, but without the right information, we can't do it well.

Physical activity provider

2. Relational change: Strengthening collaboration and power-sharing

Our findings

- Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi often feel **disconnected from mainstream sports and recreation** due to a lack of inclusion and understanding.
- **Limited collaboration** between the care sector and physical activity providers leads to missed opportunities for partnership and innovation.
- Tamariki and rangatahi in care **rarely have a voice** in shaping the programmes designed for them.

Systems change actions

Cross-sector training

Create **joint learning opportunities** for social workers, caregivers and physical activity providers to **bridge the gap** between the sectors, enhancing opportunities for tamariki and rangatahi.

Stronger relationships and collaboration

Strengthen **formal partnerships** between care agencies and the physical activity sector, creating **programmes designed** with input from tamariki and rangatahi.

Power redistribution

Establish **youth advisory panels** to ensure that the **voices of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi** directly shape policies, programmes, and funding decisions.



2.1 Relationships and connections

Relationships and connections challenges and opportunities

The relationships and connections within a system determine how well different sectors collaborate to support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. While Aotearoa has various agreements, networks and initiatives aimed at improving outcomes, many remain underutilised or fragmented. Strengthening these relationships is critical to embedding physical activity as a meaningful and accessible part of care-experienced young people's lives.

At present, the physical activity system operates in parallel to, rather than integrated with, the care system. While there is a formal agreement between Oranga Tamariki and Sport NZ to enhance opportunities for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, many commitments remain unfulfilled.

Existing relationships between key actors provide a strong foundation for change, but more intentional coordination is required. By fulfilling commitments, embedding physical activity into oversight mechanisms, improving cross-sector collaboration, and centring the voices of tamariki and rangatahi, we can create a system that genuinely prioritises equitable access to sport, recreation and play.

Key relationships partners

Oranga Tamariki and other agencies

There is a formal agreement between Oranga Tamariki and Sport NZ to improve access to physical activity for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, yet progress has been slow.

Limited regional engagement means that national commitments are not always reflected in local action.

While acknowledgement of the value of physical activity is built into policy across relevant social and government agencies (such as Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Youth Development and charitable entities) there is wide variance in how these are applied in practice and few initiatives that support cross-sector relationships.

Clear leadership and accountability are needed to drive sustained change.

Monitoring and advocacy organisations

Mana Mokopuna

Advocates for all young people, including those in care, and oversees detained settings.

Aroturuki Tamariki

Ensures compliance with care standards but does not explicitly monitor physical activity access.

Voyce Whakarongomai

Represents care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, offering direct insight into their needs and experiences.

The valuable data these agencies hold is not consistently available, understood or well used by our physical activity sector.

Education providers in secure residences

Kingslea School and Barnardos Aotearoa provide education in secure care settings with access to independent funding.

While resources exist, a lack of strong partnerships means physical activity opportunities are often underdeveloped in these environments.

Significantly more work is required to comprehensively understand this space. Sport NZ, through its education team, could analyse how better understanding may improve their contribution.

National Sports Organisations (NSOs) and Regional Sports Trusts (RSTs)

NSOs and RSTs already have connections through programme delivery, Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa and other community-level relationships and funders, as well as indirectly through partnerships such as with Police.

Critically, they can act as key brokers, ensuring tamariki and rangatahi in care have greater access to opportunities. Sport NZ, with its existing relationships across NSOs and RSTs, has the potential to drive greater awareness, equip organisations to better understand care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, and lead the development of tailored, inclusive opportunities that truly meet their needs.

Other physical activity providers

Many regional providers have developed innovative and impactful programmes for local tamariki and rangatahi. Sharing learnings from these initiatives, both successes and setbacks, would benefit the sector as a whole. Some examples are: active recreation and environment-based kaupapa, Whenua Iti Outdoors, Live for More, boxing and combat clubs, and the Canterbury Rams' initiatives for young supporters.

Iwi and kaupapa Māori providers

The Enabling Communities³¹ kaupapa which is the centrepiece for decentralising Oranga Tamariki functions into the community, allows iwi and kaupapa Māori organisations to take a more active role in care provision. Within the physical activity system, He Oranga Poutama supports Māori participation, offering significant potential for addressing the physical activity needs of tamariki and rangatahi in care. This is particularly significant as tamariki and rangatahi Māori continue to be overrepresented in the care population.

More intentional partnerships are needed to embed culturally grounded, community-led physical activity initiatives.

31 [Community-led contact centre goes live in Whakatāne](#)

Relationships and connections recommendations

13. Elevate cross-sector leadership

Oranga Tamariki and Sport NZ recommit to their agreement and develop a clear implementation plan with measurable milestones.

Develop a designated leadership group to oversee progress, ensuring commitments translate into tangible actions at regional and local levels.

14. Embed physical activity in oversight and advocacy

Work with Mana Mokopuna and Aroturuki Tamariki to include physical activity access as a monitored factor in national reporting on care standards.

Collaborate with Voyce Whakarongomai to ensure young people's voices shape physical activity policy and programme design.

15. Further explore structured opportunities in secure residences

Partner with Kingslea School, Barnardos Aotearoa and other entities (such as community housing for independent youth) to integrate structured physical activity into education settings.

Identify regional funding opportunities to support sport and recreation within secure care environments.

16. Equip physical activity providers with knowledge and skills to support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi

Key actors lead efforts to educate NSOs and RSTs about the needs of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

Develop training and resources for physical activity organisations to better understand the specific needs of care-experienced youth to create more inclusive opportunities.

Incorporate learnings from other impactful programmes where there is a commitment to working in this space.

17. Strengthen iwi and kaupapa Māori partnerships

Collaborate with He Oranga Poutama, iwi-led initiatives, and kaupapa Māori providers to develop culturally grounded, community-driven physical activity opportunities.

Support iwi-led approaches that use sport and recreation to strengthen whānau and community connections.

2.2 Power dynamics

Power dynamics challenges and opportunities

Shifting power dynamics is essential to ensuring care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi have genuine influence over the policies, programmes and decisions that shape their access to sport and physical activity. Without intentional efforts to redistribute power, young people remain passive recipients rather than active participants in systems meant to support them.

Through extensive discussions and relationship mapping, we identified the connections between the physical activity and care systems. Power mapping revealed where influence is concentrated, where gaps exist, and what shifts are necessary to better support care-experienced young people.

Policy makers are at the top of the power hierarchy. They hold the most significant influence, and their decisions shape regulations, funding priorities and strategic direction across both the care and physical activity systems. The policies they create determine the opportunities available to care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi and set the framework within which all other stakeholders operate.

Care providers also wield considerable power, as their policies and day-to-day practices directly impact the quality of care tamariki and rangatahi receive. They are central to ensuring that care environments are supportive, inclusive and responsive to young people's needs.

RSTs and NSOs hold moderate to high power, given their role in allocating resources, delivering programmes and influencing participation in physical activity. RSTs coordinate and support regional-level initiatives, while NSOs shape national sporting structures. Their engagement is critical in ensuring care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi have access to meaningful opportunities.

Iwi and kaupapa Māori organisations also have significant influence, particularly in advocating for culturally responsive approaches. Their leadership is essential to ensuring that care-experienced tamariki Māori have equitable access to opportunities that reflect their identity and values.

Caregivers despite their direct role in young people's lives, often have limited decision-making power due to institutional regulations and funding constraints. Their ability to advocate for, and support access to, physical activity is crucial but requires greater systemic support.

Tamariki and rangatahi are at the bottom of the power hierarchy. Despite being the most affected by decisions within the care and physical activity systems, they have the least influence. Their voices are often filtered through caregivers and advocacy groups, reducing their direct impact on policy and programme design.

Shifting power to enable better outcomes

Care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi must have a stronger voice to create a more equitable and effective system, power dynamics must shift. Young people in care need direct participation in decision-making processes that affect their access to physical activity. Genuine engagement, rather than tokenistic consultation, is essential to making systems more responsive and inclusive.

Caregivers should be better resourced and empowered to advocate for young people's needs, ensuring they have the tools to support engagement in physical activity of their choice. Providing training and stronger networks for caregivers will enable them to facilitate more opportunities for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

Iwi and kaupapa Māori organisations should have greater influence, ensuring that culturally grounded, Māori-led approaches shape care and physical activity opportunities. Their leadership will be instrumental in addressing the overrepresentation of Māori tamariki and rangatahi in state care and creating pathways that honour Te Ao Māori.

Support organisations should have a stronger role in advocacy and resource distribution, ensuring that care-experienced young people's access to physical activity is a recognised priority across systems.

By addressing these power imbalances, both the care and physical activity systems can become more inclusive, responsive and effective. Redistributing power ensures that care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi are not passive recipients of decisions made about them but active participants in shaping a system that truly meets their needs.

Power dynamics recommendations

18. Amplify the voices of tamariki and rangatahi

Actively engage care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in shaping physical activity initiatives.

Partner with advocacy organisations to ensure their perspectives influence policies, programmes and funding decisions.

19. Ensure ethical and inclusive information gathering

Develop clear, trauma-informed guidelines for collecting insights from care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, ensuring their participation is safe, meaningful and empowering.

20. Create leadership and collaborative opportunities

Support care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi to take leadership roles in programme design, advisory groups and decision-making forums, fostering agency and self-determination.

21. Shift decision-making power

Advocate for decision-making structures that include care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi, ensuring their lived experiences drive policy and investment priorities in the physical activity sector.

3. Transformational change: Shifting mental models

Our findings

- Sport and physical activity is often seen as **optional** rather than essential for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.
- The perception of young people in care is often **deficit-based** – they may be seen as “troubled” rather than **resilient and capable**.
- Sport and recreation programmes tend to be designed for “**mainstream**” youth, failing to consider the **unique needs and strengths** of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

Systems change actions

Shift the narrative

Reframe physical activity as a **fundamental right and necessity**, not a luxury, in conversations with government, funders and providers.

Challenge deficit-based thinking

Promote strengths-based storytelling that highlights the **resilience and potential** of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in physical activity.

Embed inclusion into programme design

Ensure initiatives are **intentionally inclusive**, recognising that care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi bring **unique skills, perspectives and leadership potential**.



3.1 Mental models

Mental models challenges and opportunities

Mental models shape how individuals and organisations perceive and respond to care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. Deeply held beliefs influence policies, decision-making and everyday interactions within the system. Identifying and shifting these mindsets can lead to significant systemic transformation. Through this investigation, several prevailing mental models emerged.

Limited understanding of the care system

While there is broad recognition that care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi face challenges and require support, understanding of their specific needs is surface-level. Many stakeholders already acknowledge the importance of deeper knowledge and skill development. The complexity of the care system – particularly the distinctions between different care facilities, including residential and secure settings – remains underappreciated, and this limits tailored support and opportunities.

Risk aversion as a barrier to participation

Within Oranga Tamariki, particularly in secure settings (such as Te Puna Wai o Tuhinapo Youth Justice residences) a strong risk-averse mindset often restricts young people's access to physical activity and community-based engagement. While safety is a priority, this cautious approach can inadvertently lead to institutionalisation, making it harder for tamariki and rangatahi to transition into community life. In some secure facilities, activities are frequently cancelled or abruptly ended, and concerns over safety can prevent rangatahi from participating in external sports or recreation opportunities.

Physical activity as a privilege, not a right

Physical activity may be perceived as a reward rather than a fundamental right. This results in tamariki and rangatahi being denied opportunities for movement and play, sometimes as a form of punishment. Such an approach contradicts the well-documented benefits of physical activity for mental health, rehabilitation and overall wellbeing.

Media influence and public perception

Awareness of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi and their challenges is growing, driven in part by social media, public discourse and increased scrutiny of Oranga Tamariki. However, media coverage sometimes presents simplified or emotionally charged narratives which can be polarising and politicised, particularly when linked to youth offending. These narratives have the potential to shape public perception in ways that may either uplift or unintentionally stigmatise care-experienced young people, with flow-on effects for policy and funding decisions.

Mental models recommendations

To create meaningful change, these mental models must shift. Building a deeper, system-wide understanding of care experiences, reframing risk to enable participation, recognising physical activity as a right, and fostering more informed public discourse can all contribute to a more supportive and empowering environment for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

22. Shift public perception

Launch targeted campaigns that challenge misconceptions and highlight the transformative role of sport and physical activity in the lives of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

23. Amplify lived experiences

Share compelling stories of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi and the organisations supporting them, illustrating the real impact of inclusive physical activity initiatives.

24. Drive systemic advocacy

Position key organisations as thought leaders, advocating for structural changes that prioritise care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in sport and physical activity.

25. Engage decision-makers

Collaborate with leaders across the physical activity system to embed care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi into strategic priorities, ensuring sustainable, meaningful action.

Final words

We are at a critical moment – one where the physical activity sector can step up and become a catalyst for systemic change in the lives of care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi. By addressing all six conditions of systems change, we don't just increase participation, we reshape existing frameworks to ensure that physical activity becomes a source of stability, belonging and opportunity for this often-overlooked group.

We need **government and care agencies** to show commitment to explicit **policies** that embed physical activity in the care system, and to enable **resource flows** that prioritise those in care. Alongside this, we need **physical activity providers** to invest in trauma-informed, inclusive **practices** and strengthened **relationships** between stakeholders. Critical to change is a shift in **power dynamics** that gives **care-experienced young people** a voice in shaping their own experiences, and **mental modelling** that reframes the public discourse to lift the role of tamariki and rangatahi in care. This report can inform all parties as a roadmap for change.

Adopting and implementing these recommendations – including clarifying areas of responsibility – will involve important, future-focused conversations. This discussion document is intended to support and encourage this kōrero. Our hope is that it sparks collective ownership and coordinated action to create meaningful, lasting impact for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi.

The physical activity sector, with cross-sector collaboration and support, has the power to play a leading role in this, breaking down barriers, building connections and creating opportunities. While change takes time, we must prioritise action and commit to ensuring no young person is left behind.



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