

# The Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework—Setting out, explaining, and reinforcing our practice approach

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## ABSTRACT

Practice frameworks are a well-established mechanism for practice reform and a growing body of literature attests to this promise. Surprisingly then, little is known about how they are intended to, or indeed, work on the ground. This practice note introduces Oranga Tamariki's new practice framework and explains how this sets out and explains our new practice approach—driving a needed paradigm shift away from risk saturation toward ecological understandings of oranga (wellbeing), promoting te ao Māori principles and supported by the social work discipline, to benefit all tamariki, children, whānau and families we work with. We are proudly (re)positioning and promoting social work in, and for, Aotearoa New Zealand's child welfare statutory offer. This is just and right for families, whānau and their tamariki. This practice note highlights how the practice framework promotes the ANZASW codes of *ethics* and SWRB practice competencies while enabling and driving sound and ethical professional practice. Consequently, social work practice is then delivered, experienced, led and quality assured based on the discipline of social work and not on risk-averse reactions to practice tragedies or the volumes of technocratic policies and procedures that too quickly become outdated.

**Keywords:** Practice frameworks; child welfare; social work

“Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini”.

My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective.

Practice innovation for child welfare services is a complex yet compelling enterprise for every welfare system. Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune—indeed the spotlight is on. It always has been, but in the last few years the light is brighter, it is quite harsh—and requires attending to. Sound lessons in the practice reform literature tell us not to take quick fixes or patch jobs in statutory social work. To this end, this practice note introduces the new Practice Framework for Oranga Tamariki<sup>1</sup>. We explain why we have designed the new framework to support and guide our

frontline kaimahi, leadership and the whole organisation. Finan et al. (2018) argued for separate frameworks to drive leadership and practice; this paper offers an alternative—one underpinning organisational practice framework.

Practice organisations need an unequivocal and relentless focus on practice, yet, too often, dissonance between the frontline and senior leadership limits the potential of practice reform. When leadership is engaged in practice and with the right system conditions, the organisation can focus on and coalesce around reform success.

Decades of well-intentioned child protection reform in Aotearoa New Zealand have failed to produce a practice system where

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social work and Indigenous knowledge flourish and inform an ecological and critical thinking enterprise. This in no way reflects all the reform endeavours, but we are aware that we have not tackled dominant discourses (like the ‘at risk’ monster!) and thus help kaimahi and leaders work differently *with* risk and harm. Risk discourses dominate every child protection system (Featherstone et al., 2018) and calls to move beyond it are compelling (Connolly, 2017). Oranga Tamariki’s practice framework is designed to help us work very differently with risk.

Aotearoa New Zealand’s ‘child at-risk’ focus is our present state for contacting Oranga Tamariki: the child is seen as being at risk because harm has happened or could occur, and the social worker is pitted against the whānau or family (who are easily viewed as the source of harm and therefore posing the risk). This tends to encourage adversarial practice and reinforces ideas that our practice stays child-centric. Parents and the wider family are easily distrusted, and the work tends to be transactional and driven by ideas of risk management and risk elimination. This practice will feel authoritarian. It is not aligned with te ao Māori principles of whakapapa or whānaungatanga. Moreover, this promotes individuated ideas of the ‘child is client’ and is best illustrated by swift and preemptory actions like child removal (Parton, 2016). This is a set of problems we must overcome.

We are not suggesting that we do not respond to worries about children at risk, quite the contrary. In responding we have tended to reinforce the dominant risk discourses as the *only way* to see children and this is a problem. Tamariki and all children seen in the context of their whakapapa and whānaungatanga relationships is where we want our practice to be. To support this, we designed a new practice framework.

## Practice frameworks

A practice framework should provide a logical, coherent, and reinforcing way in which the organisational imperatives support excellent practice because it illuminates the core practice purpose in relation to professional values and ethics, theories, and methods, rather than through managerial edict (Gillingham, 2017; Stanley, 2016). A practice framework then needs to be the practice scaffold and house a range of practice resources, idea, theories, and change models. An underpinning practice framework clarifies how practice models work and how to measure success: “Judge practice by the quality of decision-making, not by the outcome” (Munro, 2019, p. 127).

Practice frameworks should offer a unified vision for practice, grounded in the realities of practice, supported by a strong evidence base, access to research and be embedded in a set of principles and values that are essentially informed by social work (Connolly, 2007). Operationally practice frameworks need to support the professional association and registration requirements for social work. The practice literature supports practice frameworks offering a conceptual professional underpinning, thus being a significant organisational driver to strengthen professional reasoning and build confident practice (Baginsky et al., 2021, Connolly, 2007; Connolly & Smith, 2010; Healy, 2005; Stanley, 2017). Baron et al. (2019) delivered this through a strengths-based practice framework for adult social care in England.

Social workers can draw on the framework to help them marshal rights-based and principle-based arguments for doing the right thing. Moreover, they are supported in their professional obligations because these can be housed and called out within the framework.

The social models of mental health and disability are being drawn on in many child protection systems to offer new frames for

understanding and working with child abuse and neglect (Featherstone et al., 2014, 2018). The argument here is simple—practice analysis needs to be ecological not narrow or diagnostically dominated.

A clear goal of an underpinning practice framework is how it enables and facilitates reflective and reflexive engagement with practice knowledge, theories and epistemologies, our decisions, and judgments. It needs to be flexible so it keeps current with new knowledge, skills, and tools. Decision making is therefore more rigorous, ethical and analytic; the practice system then supports decision making to be analytic, evidence-informed, provisional and, where needed, reviewed, and changed. Practitioners are therefore accountable for *how* they have reached decisions and judgments. Helping social workers and practitioners to be competent and confident in decision making, while being clear and ethical is an ongoing and necessary investment for every practice system.

Stanley et al. (2021) argued that practice frameworks need to offer and reinforce five interrelated areas of practice:

1. Promote an espoused *values base, core principles and an ethical basis* for the work drawing on professional, indigenous, local and international codes, legislation, agreed international conventions, rights-based ideals and professional obligations.
2. Provide an *evidenced-informed knowledge and research base*, where Indigenous, professional and practice knowledge and research is supported by co-creation principles that ensure narratives and the lived experiences of tamariki, children, whānau and families are to the fore.
3. Guide kaimahi in how to use an agreed range of *practice models* that can be engaged with in supervision, in legal and practice consultations, and when explaining how we have reached decisions and practice judgments.
4. Develop an agreed range of practice and interpersonal *skills* that are supported by the learning offer.
5. Reinforce a growing practitioner and leadership self-awareness, with *experiential learning* and reflexive practice promoted, and supported through an active attention to our emotions, bias and patterns of practice.

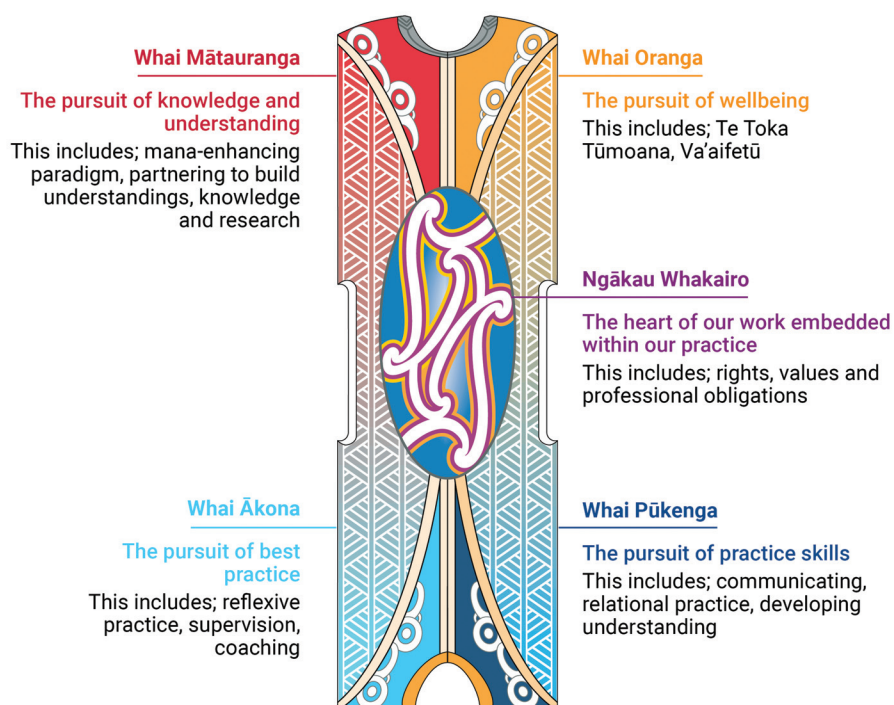
### In summary:

A practice framework integrates systems, practice, indigenous and professional knowledge with empirical research, practice theories, and ethical principles, with the practice skills needed, and engages practitioners and leaders from an experiential base. Presented in a compact and convenient format, practitioners and leaders can then understand and influence the systems conditions, while drawing on practice knowledge and core principles to inform everyday work.

### The Oranga Tamariki practice framework

Our practice framework is underpinned by several assumptions.

- Te Ao Māori knowledge is valuable and needs to be to the fore in our mahi and practice system.
- Social work is our underpinning discipline—ethical and regulatory competencies need to be at the heart of our mahi.
- We have a unique cultural context where Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and responsibilities need enshrining and promoting.
- Dominant deficit discourses of risk-elimination need shifting toward working *with* risk differently. Working proactively *with* risky and uncertain situations.



- Our practice framework needed to be grounded in the realities of practice, be accessible and enabling of a practice shift from risk saturation toward an ecological understanding of oranga (wellbeing) and drive a restorative practice approach.

A design feature was that the practice framework needed to offer leadership and quality assurance functions, thus an aligned approach to the organisation would be possible through one practice framework.

*Ka whiria ngā muka tangata, ā, ka whiria ngā muka wairua – weave/plait the fine fibres of mankind and we will then weave/plait the fine fibres of our cultural wellbeing.*

### How the practice framework works

Starting our work from the central Ngākau Whakairo domain our practice framework promotes a rights and values base to the work. The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) competencies and our

international obligations (United Nations conventions for the child, indigeneity and disability) shine brightly from the heart of the framework. This ensures the social work discipline, ethics, rights and advocacy are enacted. This is a significant departure from procedural drivers or managerial demands yet promotes professional practice and case recording in line with organisational expectations.

Social workers are guided to understand the situation via the knowledge domains, Whai Mātauranga and Whai Oranga, guiding them to build then deepen their understanding and offer a clear rationale for change via practice models. Skills and tools are promoted (the Whai Pūkenga domain) with supervision and coaching connected through the Whai Ākona domain. A focus on reflexive learning is called out. Moreover, when kaimahi feel overwhelmed or anxious the framework offers a place to pause, to review where we are, and to ask, “what’s my purpose here?”

The practice framework has four functions, it:

- sets out and explains our practice approach;
- guides us as we apply practice models and tools;
- supports our professional reasoning; and
- reinforces good and improving practice.

The practice framework is a guidance map that orientates and provides an intervention logic. Questions emerge early on, like “What is the right thing to do?” “What does my professional knowledge tell me?” “What hypothesis is forming as I start my work?” “Who am I working with?” and “How am I building my understanding of the situation?” “Who is helping me to understand things?” This promotes Indigenous and cultural forms of knowledge, with whānau and family voices and views considered alongside professional perspectives, our ethical codes, theories and competencies. Practice slows down. Staying curious, hypothesising and being exploratory are encouraged. For example, “How might poverty and stress be affecting this family’s day-to-day life?” “What ethical debates may need clarifying?” “Am I being empathic or possibly biased?” “How will I know?”

The framework helps social workers to articulate the purpose of their work and, when asked for, help them to explain *how* they do it—that is being clear on the models, tools and approaches in use, and the theories of change they draw on. This encourages a relational focus and differentiates the practice of “understanding the situation” (*assessing*) to the task of recording and producing a codified report (*assessment*). To illustrate, the Whai Mātauranga domain asks me to include everybody around the child and consider whānau and family’s views and hopes equally with codified reports and professional views. The social work task is to “sense make” a variety of views and not just hear the loudest voice.

Risk and harm are kept in sight while we understand more ecologically about what

is going on, and what is contributing to risk or harm, and what and who can offer interruption, support and tiaki (protection). This negates the need for a separate assessment system. The practice framework takes care of this. Practice models help us to deepen our understanding and logically guide actions needed in the pursuit of an improved situation. Thus, working with risky and less certain situations is supported, and risk-averse responses better tackled.

The practice framework encourages kaimahi, supervisors and leaders to be proactive in their learning and in growing their practice (through the Whai Akona domain). Reflexivity happens when kaimahi check in with how they, themselves, may be affecting the mahi. For example, through questions like “What do I bring?; how do my values shape my practice?; why am I attracted to certain practice models?”

Importantly, social workers are encouraged to argue for *the right thing* for tamariki and children (practice that is ethically and professionally driven—called out in the Ngakau Whakairo domain) rather than “doing things right” (that is, narrowly following bureaucratic processes). The former is toward greater ethical and just practice; the latter indicates risk aversion in action. The ANZASW codes of ethics and SWRB competencies (along with our international convention obligations) are highlighted in this domain as legitimate mandates and benchmarks, promoting our profession and calling out our nation’s international responsibilities.

### What is new and different

Our practice framework is a significant departure from previous versions. Since 2005 these have mainly been knowledge and values-based frameworks, organised for practitioners (Connolly, 2007). Well-intended, previous practice frameworks failed to disrupt or adjust the managerialist systems around practice that reinforced and maintained a discursive *child at risk* emphasis.



By preferencing te ao Māori principles and understandings of whakapapa and oranga, the new framework illuminates a new paradigm (the mana-enhancing paradigm), a counter to an individualised child at risk focus toward one where tamariki and all children are seen relationally, connected and belonging to whānau and families. This is a strong social work set of ideals and principles that guide an understanding of harm and risk of harm through a wider social and ecological framing.

The framework tidies up a messy and confused practice offering. Models and tools are located within the domains, helping to guide our social work mahi in consistent yet creative ways. Supervisors can use the framework to explore social work practice methodologically and theoretically; thus conversations about practice have a structure for reflective supervision and case advice. Feedback and complaints have a clear methodology to follow in determining what is good or poor practice. Quality systems the same, and leadership can articulate and lead a coherent practice approach, while adjustments to recording and technology updates can be aligned to support the practice framework.

A significant contribution is in the unmuting of the social work voice by guiding our kaimahi to articulate *how* they have reached their understanding, view or decision. This is a needed move from description to analysis. And when we are unsure or feeling overloaded, the framework offers clarity and support in next steps.

Further contributions include:

- Understanding and then responding to harm and risk of harm situations is ecological and holistic, relational and partnered
- Professional reasoning is rendered visible and explainable. Accountability in terms of what we think and “how we know what we know” is hard-wired in.

- Social work as our underpinning discipline is promoted and SWRB competencies benchmarked and alive in practice and supervision
- Advocacy skills and professional reasoning skills are promoted and encouraged
- Relational practice is hard-wired in, leading to more inclusive and restorative practice
- A coaching culture is legitimised (e.g., supervisors leaving the office to observe and offer real-time feedback)
- A leadership and quality assurance focus can be explained and guided by the practice framework; this being the benchmark for expected and improving mahi.

Building practitioner and supervisor confidence and skill in practice discussions, analysis and reflections is another gain from having the practice framework. This helps us to reflect on how bias and emotional responses can play out, inviting us to review the knowledge we draw on, the skills used, and fundamentally ask “Did I do the right thing here?” (Turnell, 2004). Supervision conversations can then focus on why we have selected particular models or tools and explore how we have employed them.

Whai Akona domain reinforces the offer of reflexive practice so that we grow our practice. When practitioners are asked how they, themselves, may be affecting the work, and asking “What do I bring?; how do my values shape my practice?; and why am I attracted to certain practice models?”—an invitation to deepen our practice is made. Practice is invited to slow down, to be considered, and the social worker enabled to articulate what they know, how they know it, and what it means. Further, performance conversations can be founded on an agreed basis of practice. It is important for us to ensure the ethical and regulatory competencies of social work are to the fore, something the new framework explicitly promotes.

The opportunity here is a more risk-sophisticated approach to child protection, adoptions and youth justice mahi. Further, this provides system leadership a cogent explanation of our practice approach in those rare but high-profile cases of child death or injury, tempering but helping the harsh media and public condemnation that swiftly follows.

### Implementation planning and challenges

Implementation will require a whole-of-system focus and confident leadership who demand improved social work practice while driving systems alignment. Over the past year, six Oranga Tamariki sites have been trialling the practice framework. A relentless investment in learning and coaching has been key. Leadership is a significant enabler of practice to support the move from risk aversion to relational practice where we work in partnerships to understand and respond to harm and risk. This will be emotionally and intellectually demanding for our kaimahi, supervisors and leaders, indeed the whole organisation, and the practice framework is on hand to support and guide. Moreover, it is now available for whānau families and partners to understand how we work, and this offers further accountability for our practice.

Practice reform is a long game. We need to stay the course and keep the waka heading forward. Child protection systems are rocked around in times of high-profile tragedy (Hyslop, 2021). Therefore, a coherent and clear practice framework allows us to show where practice falls short and indeed promotes sound and ethical practice going forward. We think this offers an antidote to quick-fix reform solutions or swift risk-averse responses, so common in child protection systems, while driving the very best social work Oranga Tamaki can offer.

*The Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework can be found at*

<https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/practice-approach/practice-framework/>

### Notes

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