

Inclusive Education

From

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[inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/understand](https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/understand)

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# Understanding behaviour

Key concepts and terms related to behaviour and learning.

## What is behaviour

Behaviour describes actions, reactions and interactions between people and their environment. Behaviours are what you see on the surface – and often judge.

Behaviours are shaped by and are a response to what's happening around children and inside of them.

The literature and research on supporting learning and behaviour in schools is vast. It offers a variety of different and at times opposing approaches. While knowledge can improve our practices, it is our values that drive what we do.

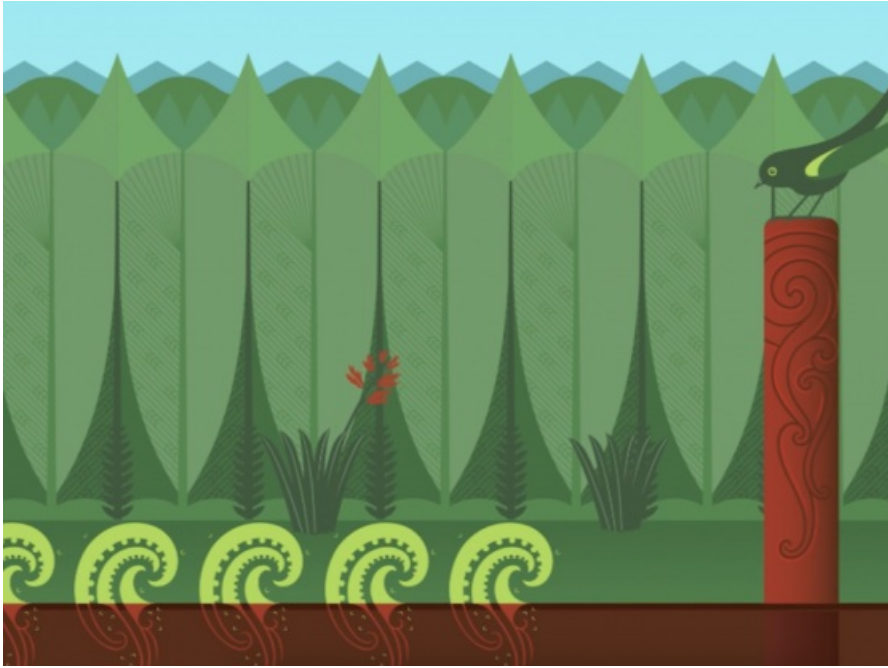
## Reframing behaviour – the ngahere narrative

The ngahere (forest) is used as a metaphor throughout this guide and refers to ākongā as developing plants that reach upwards towards the light, seeking growth and knowledge. Staff act as forest guardians and ensure that ākongā thrive in the environments we create with them.

The metaphor helps us to visualise the multiple aspects that shape behaviour and impact relationships and learning.

You can read a detailed description of it in [Aramai He Tētēkura – A guide to prevent distress and minimise the use of physical restraint](#)

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[View full image \(744 KB\)](#)

The ngahere or forest metaphor emphasises taking a multidisciplinary collaborative approach to understanding that multiple factors, such as relationships, classroom or school environments and the design of learning, all impact ākonga wellbeing and behaviour.

In this view of behaviour, the aim is to nurture the potential of every part of the ngahere – forest. Behaviour is not viewed in isolation, or as something inside the ākonga that needs fixing. Instead, a layered approach to understanding what is shaping behaviour involves asking “what is happening here?” and collaborative sense making. It involves being curious about many factors, for example:

- ākonga needs
- the context of the interactions
- thoughts and feelings
- feelings of safety and security
- the wellbeing of relationships.

Many components work together to shape behaviour. Components of the metaphor include:

- Te Tētēkura – the learner is the young plant, rooted in the whenua, sustained, and supported by the individual rights that protect them.
- Te Manu Tāiko – the staff act as kaitiaki or forest guardians and ensure whānau and kura work as one to protect ākonga and provide for their unique needs.
- Te Wao Nui – a protective and supporting canopy consists of many trees of the forest who are our whānau and school community. Just as the branches interlock in a forest to create a safe haven, so must whānau and school deepen whanaungatanga and relational practice to strengthen mana sustaining strategies and proactive planning for ākonga.
- Ngā Pakiaka – the roots nurture and sustain the learner and ensure their rights are secure. Staff respond to the unique strengths and needs of ākonga and whānau, recognising and valuing te ao Māori and disability perspectives.

We use our collective strengths to build on ākonga and whānau centred approaches that understand, recognise and respond to their unique strengths and needs.

Behaviours are shaped by and are a response to what’s happening around ākonga and inside of them. These are below the surface. To understand and respond helpfully and without judgement to what’s on the surface, explore below the surface what might be shaping that behaviour.

# Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the founding document of New Zealand. “It establishes a relationship 'akin to partnership' between the Crown and rangatira, and confers a set of rights and obligations on each Treaty partner.” (Source: [Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission](#))

In the education setting, Te Tiriti principles serve the needs of Māori when they are given practical effect “... enabling student identities and cultural backgrounds to be legitimated, included, and expressed through and in the learning contexts in which they are situated”. (Source: Te Mātaiaho, The NZ Curriculum Principles)

Belonging is central to identity, wellbeing and learning. When ākonga feel nurtured and protected, and have a sense of being a valued member of the learning community, they are more able to focus on learning. Conversely when students experience racism or feel marginalised or isolated, their hauora or wellbeing may be impacted, and learning and behaviour suffer.

Stress or distress may also build up over time. Experiences such as perceptions of racial bias or unfair treatment, power imbalances, and misunderstandings or misinterpretations created by different cultural norms are examples of things that can damage relationships and build up over time.

Trusting relationships are key to enacting Te Tiriti and culturally responsive practice for Māori as tangata whenua. The curriculum principle also calls for schools and teachers to deliver a curriculum that:

- Values te reo Māori and te ao Māori, a Māori worldview.
- Affirms Māori cultural identities.
- Incorporates Māori cultural contexts into teaching and learning programmes.
- Helps students understand and respect diverse viewpoints, values, customs, and languages.

## Trauma informed approaches

Trauma-informed care treats people with manaakitia kia tipu – nurturing of people so that they can prosper and grow. It includes treating people with atawhai, or kindness, humanity, compassion, dignity, respect and generosity in a manner that upholds their mana.

**Source:**

[What it means to be trauma-informed - Abuse in Care, Royal Commission of Inquiry](https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/)  
<https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/>

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This guide is underpinned by understandings of neuroscience and trauma informed approaches.

A trauma informed approach is about creating a cultural shift within an organisation or school so that ākonga and whānau feel cared for, safe, and empowered. It is not about targeting individuals.

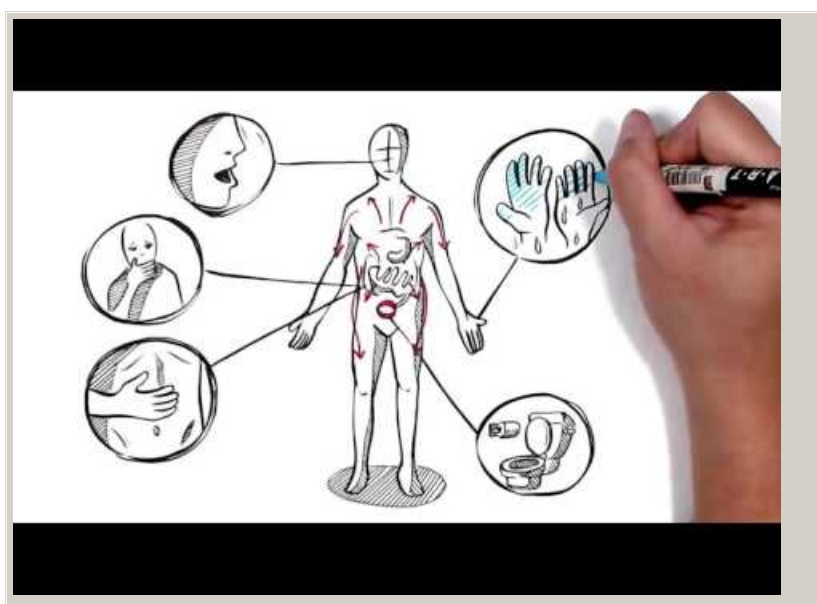
Trauma is experienced differently by each person and is defined as an intense response that “... activates a robust emotional response, which not only acutely changes the choice of a behavioural response, but also induces lasting alterations that would change the response of the individual to a variety of future experiences.” (Source: [Labels Matter: Is it stress or is it Trauma?](#), Richter-Levi & Sandi)

Further, “while trauma is an experience that can impact on all people, Māori experience trauma in distinct ways that are linked to the experience of colonisation, racism and discrimination, negative stereotyping and subsequent unequal rates of violence, poverty and ill health.” (Source: [Investigating Māori approaches to trauma-informed care](#), Pihama et al)

## Neuroscience and trauma informed approaches

Neuroscience helps us to understand what happens in the brain and body of ākonga when they feel unsafe or distressed. There are different lists that categorise stress responses. They typically include responses such as:

- Fight: physically fighting, pushing, struggling, and shouting
- Flight: running, hiding or backing away
- Freeze: going tense, still and silent.



Video hosted on Youtube [http://youtu.be/jEHwB1PG\\_-Q](http://youtu.be/jEHwB1PG_-Q)

This video explains how FFF-responses work, what it does to our body and mind, and how to deal with it.

Closed Captions

Source:

[Braive](#)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG\\_-Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG_-Q)

## Trauma informed approaches in practice

Trauma informed approaches provide valuable understanding for the holistic care of ākonga. The approach is multifaceted and centres on creating a school culture where everyone can feel safe and learn.

It is not a single add-on strategy, instead it is embedded into every aspect of school life and every interaction that takes place.

The US-based Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SASHA, defines a trauma-informed approach using the four “Rs”:

- Realize
- Recognize
- Respond
- Resist re-traumatization.

SASHA identifies six key principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice, and choice
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues.

## Understand how relationships shape behaviour

Disabled (and all) ākonga want to learn in places where their sense of belonging is enhanced, where their identity, language and skills are strengthened, and their diversity is understood and valued. Our sense of belonging is based on whanaungatanga, strong trusting relationships and daily interactions.

### Source:

[Ministry of Education, Aramai He Tētēkura](https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/behaviour-services-to-help-schools-and-students/minimising-physical-restraint-in-new-zealand-schools-and-kura#minimising-student-distress-in-schools-1)

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The ngahere or forest metaphor refers to Te Wao Nui – a protective and supporting canopy consisting of many trees of the forest who are our whānau and school community. Just as the branches interlock in a forest to create a safe haven, so must whānau and school deepen whanaungatanga and relational practice to strengthen mana sustaining strategies and proactive planning for ākonga.

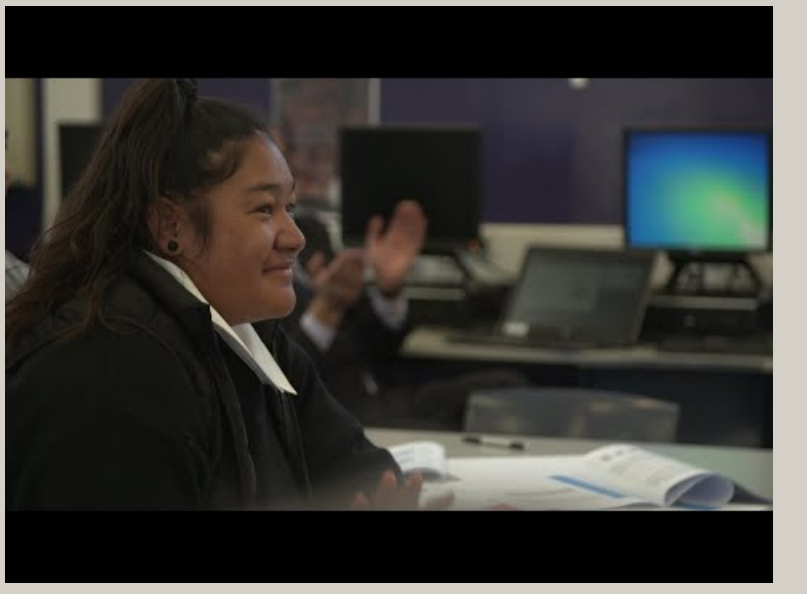
Deep trusting relationships provide the interlocking branches that create a safe haven for learning.

“Investing in relationships between kaiako and other school staff, ākonga and whānau is a vital part of building a supportive environment where ākonga can thrive.” (Source: [Ministry of Education, Aramai He Tētēkura](#))

Behaviours are expressions of deeper social and emotional dynamics. This highlights the significance of understanding behaviour within its context, emphasising the pivotal role of relationships in shaping ākonga experiences.

By nurturing strong, affirmative connections between ākonga whānau and kaiako, we enable them to navigate challenging situations with deeper understanding, dialogue, and community engagement.

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Video hosted on Youtube <http://youtu.be/fPMafha6mFc>

Principal Louise Anaru, principal at Flaxmere College, talks about building relational trust to improve engagement and student achievement.

Closed Captions

Source:

[The Prime Minister's Education Excellence Awards](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPMafha6mFc)  
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## Understand how environment shapes behaviour

The ngahere or forest metaphor refers to Ngā Pakiaka – the roots nurture and sustain and respond to the unique strengths and needs of ākonga and whānau, recognising and valuing te ao Māori and disability perspectives.

The nature and quality of the school environment play an important role in shaping ākonga behaviour. Environments encompass cultural, social and emotional aspects along with physical spaces. In classrooms, the environment includes relationships, the learning tasks and activities, and physical, social and emotional aspects.

Responsive learning environments are co-designed with ākonga and whānau and constructed to cater for the unique needs of the learners and staff in them.

Many aspects of the environment are designed and refined on a daily basis. For example:

- Routines to strengthen relationships such as karakia, circle time and daily check ins.
- Visual timetables to support smooth transitions.
- Step-by-step guides to support independence.
- Outdoor spaces and gardens can lift wairua, mental and spiritual health.
- Furniture arrangements can support different connections and combinations.
- Break out and calming spaces can reduce sensory overload.

Just as a young plant might need more light or water to thrive, young learners thrive in secure, caring environments where their needs are met and their strengths are celebrated.

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When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.

**Alexander den Heijer**

Source:

[Alexander den Heijer](#)

<https://www.alexanderdenheijer.com/>

## Hauora and wellbeing

Wellbeing is supported by developing universal, systemic responses in learning and community environments. Support is built on a holistic understanding of mokopuna with the aim of preventing challenges and supporting inclusion.

Inclusive and supportive learning systems provide the conditions for ākonga, whānau and staff to flourish by reducing unhelpful patterns of interacting, and empowering mana-enhancing culture and relationships.



Video hosted on Youtube [http://youtu.be/\\_SESJGjuLnk](http://youtu.be/_SESJGjuLnk)

Henry Hill School in Napier has implemented a whole-school approach to wellbeing. This video showcases practices and physical spaces at Henry Hill School that help ākonga to regulate and be calm.

Closed Captions

Source:

[The Prime Minister's Education Excellence Awards](#)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_SESJGjuLnk&t=85s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SESJGjuLnk&t=85s)

# The role of adults

Like a ngahere or forest, “a classroom is an environment with its own ecology, including teacher, pupils and their interrelationships, the equipment, books and a range of activities which all interact to influence the behaviour of the room’s inhabitants.” (Source: [Evidence-based classroom behaviour management strategies](#) , Parsonson 2012)

When ākonga aren’t flourishing it falls on those around them to broaden their view of ākonga and whānau and look beneath what’s on the surface. It falls on those around them to reflect upon and take shared responsibility for what is and isn’t working in the school and class environment.

What teachers think, say and do matters because the way a teacher acts impacts on the student wellbeing and behaviour.

When teachers get to know students and students feel teachers believe in them and have high expectations (mana motuhake), it can have a significant influence on student behaviour.

It is important for student safety and wellbeing that teachers use their knowledge of students to inform their practice. Having sensitivity to individual differences and experiences will also help teachers support students more effectively.

If we focus on what's going on for ākonga and whānau and what they need from us, we can respond appropriately. If we focus only on the behaviour and try to minimise it, the behaviour may recur because the needs of the learner are still not being met.

Be still and listen. What you define as inappropriate may be my attempt to communicate with you in the only way I can...[or] the only way I can exert some control over my life...Do not work on me. Work with me.

## Source:

[A credo for support, Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift \(YouTube\)](#)  
<https://youtu.be/SKCxwDF-SrI?si=6cdDU1M4e0Kl45mW>

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