

Pito'enua: a Cook Islands Model of Health and Wellbeing

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TUATUA 'AKAMATA'ANGA | INTRODUCTION



The development of this health and wellbeing project took place on all but three of the inhabited islands and atolls of the **Cook Islands**.

The **Cook Islands** are in the Pacific Ocean, spread across approximately **2 million square kilometres** of ocean.

- The **Cook Islands** is a **Large Ocean State** — with a total land area of 240 square kilometres and a population of about 15,000–17,000 and 180,000+ tourists a year.



PITO'ENUA — tōna Papa'anga

*Taka'i koe ki te papa enua,
'Akamou i te pito'enua
A'u I to'ou rangi.*

*You step on to solid land,
Affix the umbilical cord
And carve out your world.*

-Puati Mataiapo

AKARURU | DATA COLLECTION

Participatory focus groups were held with participants from across all inhabited islands other than Nassau, Rakahanga and Palmerston:

Student Groups

Across all islands to ascertain youth voice (Farran, 2016)



Government Organisations

Related to health and wellbeing

Community & NGO Groups

Both youth and adult groups connected to health and wellbeing

Teacher Groups & Staff Meetings Across all islands



Initial Teacher Education Students

Kuki Airani Concept of Health – Pito'enua

Two questions were asked of every group:

Question 1

What does 'being healthy' mean to you?

To identify a Cook Islands understanding of Health

Question 2

What makes it hard to be healthy (in the Cook Islands)?

To identify the barriers to being healthy

What Does Being Healthy Mean?



Fun

Friends

**Positive
relationships**

**Knowing and
liking who I am**

**Communication
skills**

**Knowing how to
care for myself
and for others**

**Healthy food /
body**

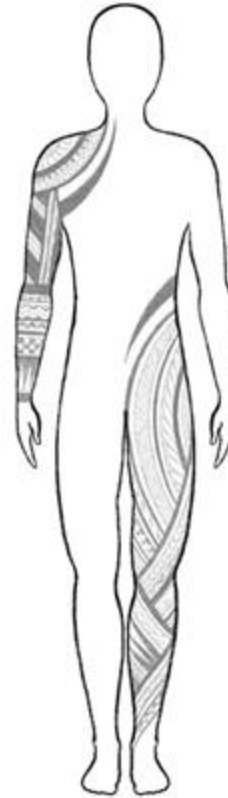
**Someone to talk
to**

**Choosing when
to become a
parent**

What Makes It Hard to Be Healthy?

Family & Relationships

- Not wanting to do what my family wants me to do
- Seeing my parents fight
- Abuse – physical, sexual and emotional
- Parents not understanding my needs



Social Pressures

- Nothing to do
- Smoking, drugs and drinking
- Peer pressure – sex, drugs, etc.

Access and Resources

- Costs money to do uni courses and we don't have enough
- Eating the wrong foods; healthy food is expensive or not available
- Can't get off my island
- Can't get condoms; too scared to ask questions

PITO'ENUA



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— **Puati Mataiapo**

The Pito'enua model draws on this ancestral verse and its underlying concept of traditional navigation to ground Cook Islands health and wellbeing in place, identity, and connection — anchoring the self to land, community, and cosmos.

PITOENUA

Kie

represents **Tu Manako**
Mental and Emotional Wellbeing
What you put in your sails determines what path you take, what you think and how you handle situations influences your decisions.

Oe

represents **Kopu Tangata**
Social Wellbeing
You can have more than one paddle to support the journey you are on and it is how you use your paddle that makes life smooth or difficult. If more than one person is paddling a vaka the paddles need to be in harmony.

Ama

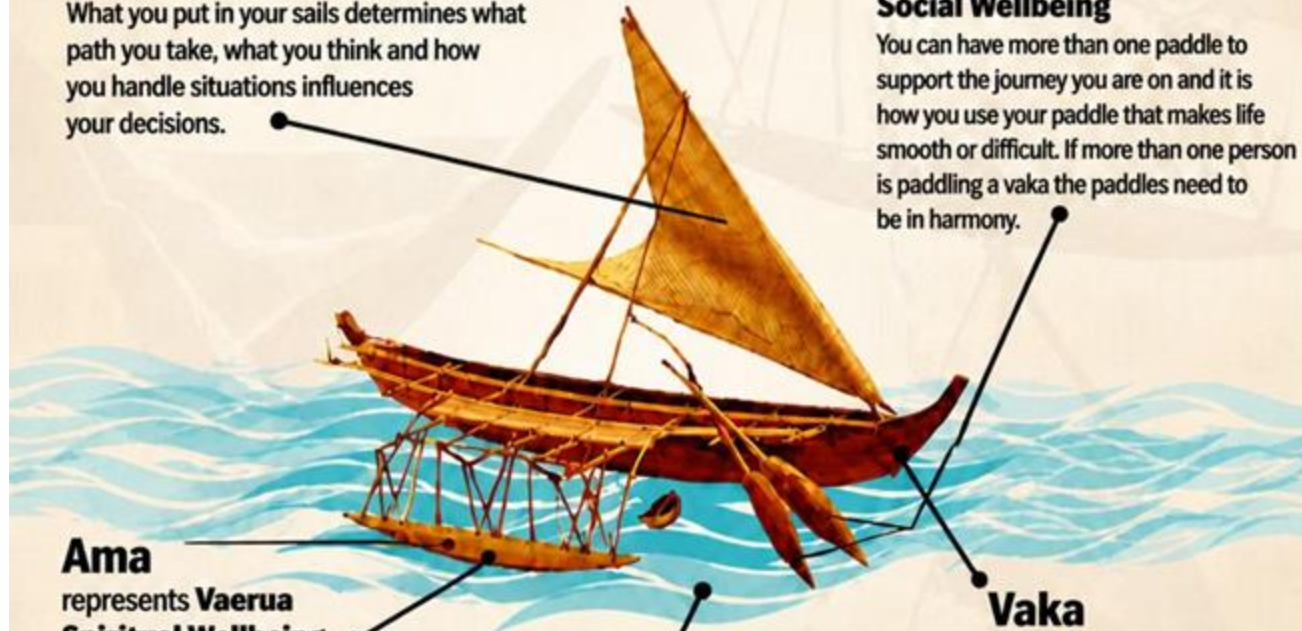
represents **Vaerua**
Spiritual Wellbeing
The ama balances the canoe in rough weather, your values and beliefs help to give balance in your life.

Vaka

symbolises **Kopapa**
Physical Wellbeing
The "hull" is the body of the vaka and where the paddlers sit.

Aorangi

Is the conditions the vaka finds itself in.
Whatever the environment is, you need to be equipped to handle it and to understand how it influences your journey.





Counselling...

...elite sport...



Cook Islands
Sports & National
Olympic Committee

Plurality of Pito'enua...

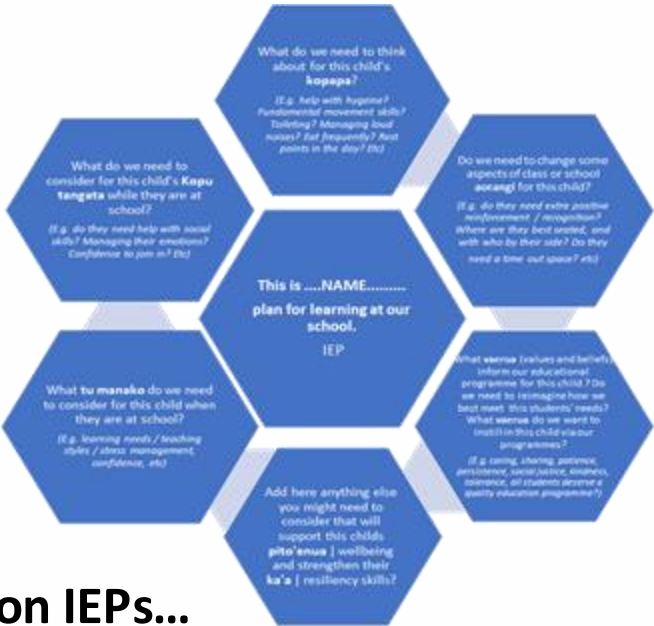
Spaces that have adopted this conceptual framework.



...National Representation...



...Inclusive Education IEPs...



Meitaki Maata

Thank you

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Further reading:

Uri-Puati, James & Futter-Puati, Debi. (in press - due Oct 2026).

Creating Pito'enua: a Cook Islands Model of Health and Wellbeing. Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing: Te Mauri - Pimatisiwin.

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