



Whānau Āwhina Plunket and services · About Plunket · Who we are · Our history

Our history

Whānau Āwhina Plunket is proud of our long history of helping tamariki and whānau across New Zealand. Learn more about our origins and the incredible people who



Language preference

English

Māori

On this page

[Our Story – Ngā Pūrākau a Whānau Āwhina](#)

[Our timeline](#)

Our Story – Ngā Pūrākau a Whānau Āwhina

Whānau Āwhina Plunket has its origins in early twentieth century Aotearoa and grew out of the efforts of many people who were passionate about improving the health and wellbeing of pēpi, babies and their mothers.

The origin of Plunket

Whānau Āwhina Plunket began in the small coastal town of Karitāne near Dunedin (Ōtepoti). Karitāne was the home of Mere Harper and Ria Tikini, both of Kāi Tahu and Kāti Huirapa descent, who were highly respected midwives and healers and often worked closely with their friend and neighbour, health reformer Dr Frederic Truby King, to care for the ill in their community.

Mere and Ria helped deliver Thomas Rangiwhia Mutu Ellison (Tommy), the first Plunket baby, in 1906 – and took baby Tommy to Dr King when breastfeeding issues were causing the baby to lose weight and become unwell.

Mere and Ria helped Truby King and his wife Isabella care for Tommy and restore him back to health. Young Tommy thrived under their care, and returned home to his whānau a well child.

Less than a year later, the Society for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children was formed. Truby King drew on the wide networks of Mere and Ria, as well as their years of experience and their traditional knowledge of health care, to develop the Society.

Shortly after its formation, the Society opened the Karitāne Home for Babies in Dunedin, with Mere and Ria becoming some of the first nurses and midwives there, helping to nurture and raise

We use cookies to improve your experience on our site and to show you personalised advertising.

I'm okay with that

Show me more info

involved with the Society in those early days, travelling the country to promote its work, and

5th

advancing the idea of a professional nursing service for mothers and babies in New Zealand. Lady Plunket lent her name to the organisation which in 1914 was re-named the Plunket Society.

The Society grew rapidly, largely due to the efforts of local women volunteers in small towns and cities throughout the country who set up local committees and clinics, appointed nurses and provided families home and clinic visits, parent education in domestic hygiene, and promoted breastfeeding.

The Plunket Society was on its way to becoming a nationwide service which would touch the lives of generations of New Zealanders.

Wāhine toa – Women of strength

Emblazoned on the heart-like wings of Plunket's new brand is a tohu (pattern), the central figure of which represents our 'women of strength' and proudly acknowledges Mere and Ria.

Mere and Ria, along with Lady Victoria Plunket, were the first in a long line of wāhine toa who have paved the way for Plunket, a service that is unlike anything else in the world.

Read more about our founding wāhine toa here:

- [Mere Harper \(1842 - 1924\)](#)
- [Ria Tikini \(1810 - 1919\)](#)
- [Lady Victoria Plunket \(1873-1968\)](#)

Healing our history

Sir Truby King played an important role in the founding of Plunket, however, he also held a number of views on eugenics, race, and women's roles, which Whānau Āwhina Plunket fully rejects. We acknowledge that our own whakapapa includes a legacy which has caused harm to whānau Māori and apologise for their influence on some early Plunket policies and processes, and any harm these caused.

We are committed to fulfilling the legacy of Mere Harper and Ria Tikini, and so we are on a pro-equity path – our goal is to adapt, modernise, and work to achieve equitable outcomes for whānau Māori, Pacific families and other groups the health and disability system has, traditionally, not served well.

By acknowledging and embracing our bi-cultural origins, we are creating a shared space and working to become a truly bi-cultural organisation that honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Working towards equity

As an organisation that sees around 85% of all newborn babies in Aotearoa, and more than 50% of all newborn Māori babies, Whānau Āwhina Plunket is perfectly placed to make the difference of a lifetime in those vital first 1000 days of a child's life.

Whānau Āwhina Plunket is on a journey to ensure equitable health outcomes for all our whānau – a goal we are passionate and committed to seeing through.

Whānau Āwhina Plunket has existing areas of innovation where services have been co-designed with whānau Māori to be more responsive to the needs of Māori.

Another significant shift in the delivery of our services is Engaging Whānau, a project that ensures services available for whānau are designed around and led by the needs of whānau and community. We have also established the role of Kaitohu Matua Māori, Chief Advisor – Māori Health and our Kaiārahi Māori roles (Māori Capability Advisors) to strengthen our internal capacity and capability to truly 'walk the talk'.

Whānau Āwhina Plunket and Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu have partnered to offer the Mere Harper and Ria Tikini Memorial Scholarship annually to a full-time nursing student of Ngāi Tahu descent.

And that's just the beginning

We use cookies to improve your experience on our site and to show you personalised advertising.

Show me more info

Our timeline

A brief history of Whānau Āwhina Plunket and some of our major milestones throughout the years.

1906

Mere and Ria help deliver the first Plunket baby, Thomas (Tommy) Rangiwahia Mutu Ellison, and later help Dr King care for him when breastfeeding issues cause Tommy to lose weight and become unwell.

1907

The Karitane Home for Babies opens in Dunedin. The first of its kind, the hospital took in babies and children under two years who were not treated under the general hospital system.

1908

Branches of the new society are formed in each of the four main centres of New Zealand, attracting the attention of the influential Victoria Plunket - wife of then Governor-General and mother of eight. The society took the name 'Plunket', after Lady Plunket.

1913

Dr King writes the first manual 'Feeding and Care of Baby'.

1981

The first national car seat rental scheme, now called Plunket's Car Rental Service, is established and piloted in Dunedin with just four car seats.

1990

Plunket starts to see and support more Māori parents and whānau.

1994

PlunketLine launches in April as an 'out of hours service' operating from 4pm until 1am, 7 days/week.

PlunketLine's service increases to 24 hours per day in October.

2010

The Ministry of Health funds PlunketLine as National Well Child Health Line.

2011

PlunketLine supports Christchurch families following the earthquake.

2012

PlunketLine holds its first live chat on Facebook.

2014

PlunketLine celebrates 20 years.

2018

Plunket launches a new digital service to help mothers who need extra support with breastfeeding, thanks to a significant donation from the Wright Family Foundation.

2020

Our new brand is launched in February, recognising our whakapapa through our identity, Whānau Āwhina Plunket. A new website, Tūhono Mai, launches in June.