

Parent & whānau experiences of babywearing with a baby born preterm in Aotearoa New Zealand



This summary reflects the collective kōrero gifted by parents & whānau through the time, bravery and care they showed in sharing their stories with me.

This kōrero is a taonga that belongs first to the whānau. I hold it as kaitiaki and use it with their consent to inform wider conversations about practice, policy and support for families of babies born preterm. It includes key findings, themes drawn from lived experience, and practical propositions for change.

Short quotes are included to illustrate lived experiences across interviews. All quotes have been de-identified. Pseudonyms were used to distinguish individual voices and convey the diversity of whānau perspectives represented in the study.

Key findings from the interviews:

- Parents & Whānau found **babywearing valuable**
- Families who were supported babywearing reported it was like a “**gateway**” to relational care, autonomy, healing and hope
- Many felt **isolated** and **unsupported** to use it with their **preterm baby**, and struggled to find **trusted guidance**
- Some **families** report they were **actively discouraged**, which resulted in them not feeling able to disclose babywearing use or seek **support** from health professionals

“It’s so important and you cannot give your baby enough heart, you cannot over cuddle your baby...you want your baby to know that you’re right there...and make them feel safe.” (Kōwhai)

Having the **choice to babywear** was important

“I finally got to do something I had planned to, where until that point it felt like nothing had gone the way I had wanted, here’s one thing that I wanted to do that I got to do” (Toetoe)

Support with babywearing was described as needing to be practical, accessible, reflexive, culturally aligned, collaborative, and responsive to the specific needs and risk contexts of each whānau.

Choice to babywear: Themes from whānau lived experiences

The themes below reflect my interpretation of the experiences and ideas shared by whānau across the interviews.

The importance of having the **choice to babywear** was woven throughout the stories shared by whānau and threaded across and through the following themes and subthemes as illustrated by the *Tree of Choice*

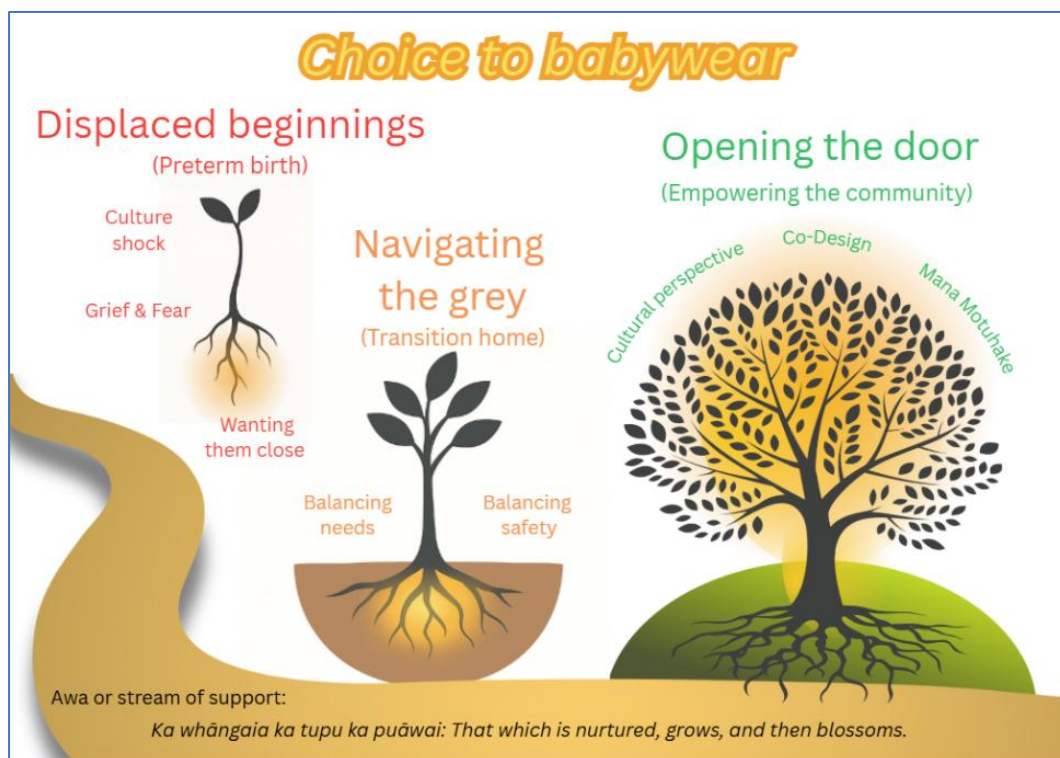


Figure 1. Tree of Choice: Mapping the Journey to Empowerment in Babywearing

Displaced beginnings

Exploring the emotional and relational disruption that accompanies preterm birth and admission to the unit.

“Those four weeks that he was in hospital, I think, were some of the hardest of my life. Yeah, just going home and leaving your baby there every night.” (Toetoe)

Navigating the grey

Describing the ongoing negotiation of safety, instinct, uncertainty, and caregiving on the transition home, within an often risk-averse context.

“We waited so long because we didn't know where to go for advice or support... when we started wearing her, we were like “oh I wish we'd done this like two months ago” (Kawakawa)

Opening the door

Reflecting whānau visions for more culturally attuned, relationally grounded, and whānau-led systems of empowerment, using babywearing as an example of how this could look in practice.

“It could have far reaching effects, like if baby wearing keeps baby calmer, and makes things more manageable for the parents, that could have an effect on mental health and your ability to feel like you're coping with your life.” (Kauri)

Together, the findings from this study illustrate how whānau experiences of babywearing move from disruption and uncertainty following preterm birth, toward growing confidence and empowerment when appropriate support is available.

Whānau also shared practical ideas about what could help families feel more supported to use babywearing with their babies born preterm.

These ideas are summarised in the *Flower of Empowerment*, which brings together the ways whānau suggested babywearing could be supported across perinatal and community care.



Figure 2. Flower of empowerment: Whānau ideas for supporting babywearing with babies born preterm

Propositions for change **include** the **development** of **co-designed, community-focused, evidence- and strength-based recommendations** and **resources** which are **responsive, culturally aligned & collaborative**.

Ka whāngaia ka tupu ka puāwai: That which is nurtured, grows, and then blossoms

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