

Let's kōrero (talk): talking about the past among Māori mothers and children



RESEARCH

'Let's kōrero (talk): the practice and functions of reminiscing among mothers and children in Māori families'

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Background

Reminiscing (or talking about the past) is a parental practice that has crucial positive consequences for children. Research from different cultures has found that elaborative reminiscing is linked with children's language, cognitive and social development.

Dr Tia Neha, a fellow of the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research at Victoria University of Wellington, worked with Professor Elaine Reese of the University of Otago to investigate the practice and functions of mother-child reminiscing in contemporary Māori families.

The researchers wanted to know whether more elaborate conversations about past events helped improve the child's recall and (articulation) engagement in talking about those events. They also explored the influence of a mother's cultural knowledge, and the type of event talked about, as well as implications for language development and memory in Māori families.

Main research findings

Māori mothers who were more culturally knowledgeable reported more frequent reminiscing practices with their children and tended to be more elaborative when talking with them. Language was also more developed among children whose mothers were more culturally affiliated. Memory and oral language skills were more enhanced in Māori children whose mothers reminisced more frequently and more elaborately with them.

Open-ended elaborative questions, and confirming what a child said, were positively linked to children's recall and memory. Elaboration was associated with children remembering more about all four types of conversation. Confirmations were associated with increased recall of everyday events, cultural rituals and conversations about their behaviour.

Contrary to previous studies, this research showed that repetition does support children's remembering of cultural rituals and everyday events. The Māori mothers used repetition sparingly to emphasise key details and cultural messages. Repeating key points for the child to understand was associated with children's enhanced recall of both cultural rituals and also everyday events.

Māori mothers discussed topics in more elaborative ways with their daughters than when discussing the same topics with their sons, and daughters recalled more content than sons did. This was consistent for discussion of all four events. Contemporary Māori mothers discussed everyday events (e.g., going to Kura or school) with their children in more elaborative ways than other topics such as birth stories, cultural rituals or misbehaviour events. This might be a newly adapted or integrated cultural practice. There was no reason to assume that they were less likely to choose to reminisce about culturally significant matters, especially since Māori culture played a big part in the content, practice and function of the reminiscences across all conversations.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and make up nearly 15% of the total population, with, nearly 22% of Māori in New Zealand under 25 years of age. Narrative and oral culture are hugely important in Māori tradition and may be considered as treasure troves (taonga) within traditional and contemporary Māori culture.

For Māori, the functions of reminiscing may have a more interdependent social and historical focus rather than an emphasis on individual experience. Repetition is essential for remembering oral cultures. In line with indigenous peoples' oral practices, this research affirmed that repetition of key relevant points can indeed help lock these in memory.

The findings of this study showed that reminiscing is a culturally important practice in Māori families and is beneficial for Māori children. Culturally significant events appeared to be very important for the children, especially in nurturing their memory.

Increased reminiscing about everyday events in contemporary Māori families can be seen as adding to the reminiscing environment, and not as detracting from it. Adding those child centred conversations elaborating about everyday shared events in diverse cultures is linked to children's linguistic cognitive and social cognitive skills. Incorporation by mothers of an identified western reminiscing practice could be beneficial for Māori children and does not indicate reduced overall discussion of culturally significant events.

Quantity and quality of reminiscing may enhance Māori children's school readiness by supporting their oral language development in both listening and speaking skills.

