



THE HIVE: ADOPTION LAW REFORM ENGAGEMENT.

OCTOBER 2021

We hosted a seven-day kōrero with The Hive's Instagram community about Adoption Law Reform. By focusing on inclusive themes like identity, belonging, nurturing and family, and sending clear signals to Māori, Pasifika and Rainbow young people that we wanted to hear their voices, we saw a wide range of responses, from a diverse range of rangatahi. **16%** of written responses came from rangatahi who identify as LBGTIQ+ and **23%** of written responses came from young people with experience of adoption, blended family, whānau, whāngai, chosen family, or queer family. **56** interactive Instagram Stories made it as easy as possible for young people to engage with a click or a comment. We have been blown away by the thoughtfulness of their responses, and the depth of the insights that have emerged.



What We Heard

Young people's 'family needs' don't disappear when they turn 20. They may be as practical as needing 'next of kin', or as emotional as wanting to identify as a son or daughter. Regardless, those needs are just as important after your 20th birthday as they were before it, and sometimes take on greater importance the older a young person becomes.

"As an adult it would be nice to be adopted into a family, if I had a different chosen family by then."

"You don't want every single person you come in contact with, even when you're over the age of 20, to know they're not your legal Mum, even if they are your Mum in all the other ways."

"If I became part of a family as an adult I might want to be adopted. I'm still a daughter as an adult and it still means a lot to be one."

"We still have next of kin needs over the age of 20 - medical decisions, etc - so that legal foundation is important even when you're over the age of 20."

In fact many of young people's most important adoption needs don't emerge until *after* they reach adulthood. There was sadness and frustration from young people who felt like they'd finally found their family, but were too old to have those ties legally recognised.

"Sometimes you don't get that right person until you're a lot older, great parent roles can come into your life really late, and then it's too late."

"It's about choosing your family, even as an adult. Those who were fostered might not have been able to be adopted before 20."

"I would have loved to have the right to cancel my adoption, but when I was old enough to make that decision it was too late."

Young people want a seat at the decision-making table of their own lives, with choices about who *and* how. They recognise that those choices can place a huge burden on young people, and would need to be age-appropriate, but it was clear that young people want to feel like they've chosen their family, as much as their family has chosen them. In fact **91%** of respondents took it even further and told us they'd feel good about young people legally belonging to their chosen family.

"I don't belong to a family because I am told. I belong because I choose."

"Future me would want to have the right to a unique adoption process. I think at the start, an agreement should be made. Each person would be different."

"If a young person is of a certain age, there should be really in-depth collaboration with that young person...even if they're younger...based on their current brain development and understanding."

"All about choice...a choice in the process, some power in the process, not having something imposed on you. And in a really personal tailored way."

Young people want adoption laws that create more family bonds, not less.

There was a sense from young people that current adoption laws reduce family ties, often in very Pākehā-centric ways, rather than widening those ties. **67%** of respondents told us they'd feel great about young people being able to legally belong to more than one family.

"The whole one family thing is very Pākehā nuclear and ignores what familial relations hapū are."

"I think it's important that people can choose their families. The western construct of one family is not the (norm)."

"More than one family is the only option. It takes a village."

"I feel like people should not be forced to choose just one family to care for them."

"That 'choosing' puts a lot of added pressure on a child - who they are and should be connecting with. There could be real guilt about hurting other people's feelings. Guilty about disconnecting from someone, connecting with someone else."

"I'd feel great about people legally belonging to more than one family because I have grown up with three families. My dad is my family, my mum is my family, and my ex Step Dad is also."

"Often with whāngai you are still connected to your bio parent/s and adoptive whānau is cousins."

"Young people should have the right to stay connected to all of those who fulfill their needs."

"Everyone in the whānau should be able to be involved if they want to be, and those wider legal connections (uncles, aunts, wider whānau) are important. The few people who hold exclusive parental rights shouldn't be able to lock out others who might want to play a role and stay connected."

"It shouldn't just be about exclusive legal custody, it should be a wider idea of inclusive legal connection."

For many young people the legal ties of adoption reinforce and amplify the emotional ones. 71% of respondents told us that being legally accepted through something like adoption would make them feel more accepted.

"How validating it is, having the law recognise something that already exists."

"There's a big difference between belonging to a chosen family and having that belonging recognised by law. So so validating."

"It's not been enough to know she loves me, words are just words, but having that legal immovable recognition would be really healing."

"Legal recognition can be powerful for adults, as it is for young people."

Family is still a crucial source of acceptance, belonging and identity for young people, and it can be hard for them to find these crucial things in other places. Some felt that our current adoption laws force young people to cut ties with their sources of acceptance, belonging and identity, rather than protecting them. **89%** of respondents told us it's super important to have their family accept their religious, sexual or cultural identity and **88%** of respondents told us it's really important to feel like they belong in their family.

"A chosen family is a plaster, but it doesn't replicate that 'Mum hug' feeling"

"What DON'T good parents give you? Financial support, emotional support, practical support, advice, calling you out on stuff, celebrating you. If family is so important, and provides all these things, it's so sad that some young people don't have these things."

"If you as a young person have to create all this stuff for yourself, it's really really hard."

"I've lost a lot of family and feel disconnected to many members of my wider whānau, so feeling like I belong to my family is important."

"Family is an important safety net. If you know you are part of it, you can go with confidence."

"Family is my safe space, the space I can relax, cry, laugh with no judgement."

"I was raised that it's family over everything, and that no matter what I'd always have them."

"We have to make sure that adoption can provide these things, because otherwise you have children who grow into adults, without this stuff."

"This highlights the big impact that adoption can have on young people - that loss of identity, insecurity of not fitting in. If you've got a good whānau that can be a really positive experience, but if not that can be really unsettling and negative for young people."

Thank You

To the team of brave young co-designers who worked with The Hive to design this engagement, and weave together what we heard into this report. Thank you for your honesty, imagination, and vulnerability. And thank you also to the team at **VOYCE Whakarongo Mai** who provided clinical feedback on all our Instagram content, and mental health support for our co-designers, we couldn't have done this mahi without you.