

The wahakura the safe bed-sharing project

A wahakura is a woven flax bassinet for infants up to 5-6 months of age. This return to a traditional Maori way of sleeping babies creates a safe sleeping space for your baby and protects baby from SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) and prevents accidental suffocation. It also promotes breast-feeding and bonding with baby.



Dr David Tipene-Leach

Safe sleeping rules for the wahakura:

- **Always sleep baby on the back.**
- This gives protection from SIDS.

- **Sleep on a firm mattress.**
- Babies can turn face down in a soft mattress and suffocate.

- **Don't use a pillow.**
- Pillows may cause baby's head to come forward and block the airway. They can also turn over into the soft pillow and suffocate.

- **Keep baby's face clear of blankets.**
- Place baby to sleep with feet near the bottom end of the wahakura because otherwise they can move downwards in their sleep and can end up under the blankets.

- **There should be no gaps between mattress and wahakura.**
- Baby might roll into and become stuck in the gap. A very thin mattress (20-25mm sponge at Para Rubber) is best, with a cotton cover.

- **There should be no loose articles in the wahakura.**
- Blankets, pillows or soft toys can cause suffocation.

- **Never let baby sleep with any adult who is exhausted, drunk or drugged.**
- Babies can be laid on and suffocated by these adults

And if you leave the wahakura behind.....

- **Never put baby to sleep alone on an adult bed.**
- The pillows and heavy blankets pose a suffocation risk without you there to watch and protect baby.

- **Never sleep with baby on a sofa, or in a waterbed.**
- Surface needs to be firm and flat otherwise babies suffocate in these places.

- **Never put baby between you and the wall.**
- Babies can get squashed in and suffocate.

- **Babies should never sleep in a car seat.**
- The head will drop forward and block the airway.

- **There should be no loose strings around.**
- Strings or ties on clothing, cords for window blinds, mobiles that baby can reach are dangerous.

- **Never let other children sleep with your infant.**
- Children can also overlay and suffocate infants.

Your wahakura and how to look after it...

1. Your wahakura will be made by an expert weaver. It should have a flat bottom, reasonably firm sides and a top edge strong enough to pick it up.
2. But your wahakura is not designed to be a carry-cot. It is for sleeping only. We do not suggest that the wahakura has any handles at all. Imagine if you picked it up and baby fell out!!!
3. It should have a thin 20-25mm mattress (probably a sponge rubber from Para Rubber) with a cotton cover. Both mattress and cover are easily washable.
4. If soiled, wash the wahakura with a wet cloth and mild household detergent. Bleach will kill any mould. Dry with towel and leave in the sun.
5. Watch out for worn and weakened spots in the walls, or split flax that might create a sharp edge to catch you or baby on. Check with your weaver or your wahakura supplier.



And what about babies older than 6 months

The wahakura is designed for babies up to around 6 months. This is when the high risk of SIDS ends. ‘Community owned’ wahakura will be retrieved by your health worker and given to another family their 6 month turn. Your own wahakura might serve all of your children – or do the rounds inside the whanau. Baby will now need to move to another sleeping environment like your bed, a bassinet or to a cot. But we also know of mothers who have commissioned the making of larger wahakura because baby, mother and father didn’t want to change sleeping arrangements!!!

How to weave a wahakura

Nanny Whaipooti Hitchiner

Summary of instructions:

- Use whariki flax
- Boil the flax
- Base size approx 14" by 28" long
- Approx 24 strips each side of 3 whiri plaits to make the base
- Lock off before weaving the sides
- Sides approx 8-10 inches high
- Strong thick whiri to finish at the top
- No artificial dyes

You need to find a flax with long blades, eg a whariki flax like Rataroa or a Kohunga flax. Harvest 100 blades of flax. This may be too many - but better than not enough because some blades are wider than others and you may get more flax strips depending on the width of the blades.

To prepare the strips you fold one side of the flax blade inwards (ie with the shiny sides on inside) against the other. Then mark and make little splits in the folded flax with your thumbnail in order to exclude the tuara of the blade and mark each strip. The size of the strip should be about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide. Now take the strips you have marked to the top end of the flax by pulling your fingers through from the splits and then take the strips down to the end where the whitau is. One strip at a time, fold down (outwards), hold the fold tight with thumb and first finger of left hand, taking the strip in right hand and pull (takiri) to make a whitau at the end of the strip. Then lightly scrape (haaro) the underside (non-shiny side) with the back end of a knife and you are ready for boiling.

The reason for boiling the flax is to make it last longer and it is easier to weave your wahakura. Boil water in your copper/pot. Put your prepared flax strips in bundles of 25 or less – not too thick a bundle. Put the bundle into boiling water for 3 minutes.

Hang bundles on clothesline to drip dry. You may start weaving your wahakura straight away or leave the flax to dry completely. If your flax strips dry out you can dampen them again with water. You should discard discoloured (maarari) flax so you will have an even shade for the wahakura.

Start a three plait (whiri), like you would for a kete kumara – the whitau ends of the blade into the plait. Put the shiny side up on either side so that the dull side ends up inside the wahakura.

There are 48 strips in each plait, 24 on each side. You weave three of these plaits. They should be about 14 inches long to create the width of the wahakura. Some flax shrink more than others so watch carefully. If your strips are less than $\frac{3}{4}$ " or the flax shrinks you may need to add more strips the whiri to get a 14" wide wahakura. These three plaits woven together will form the base of the wahakura.

You are now ready to weave up the sides. The base should continue longways a little way past the whiri (approx 1-2”) before locking off to make a crease (a whatu whakarunga, whatu whakararo) and then weaving up the sides till it reaches the height you require (about 10-12 inches). This is like locking off the top of a kete to finish it off, but instead you start weaving up the sides of your wahakura.

To finish off at the top you can apply a kete kumara finish that makes gaps in your plait so that you can put your fingers through or you can apply an ordinary thick plait which you can grip when carrying the wahakura.



Frequently Asked Question's.

What is a wahakura?

A wahakura is a woven bassinet like structure intended as a safe sleeping space for an infant from birth to 6 months of age.

Why have a wahakura?

To decrease risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Risk of SIDS is doubled if the mother smokes in pregnancy but goes up by eight times if the mother who smoked in pregnancy bed-shares with her baby. A wahakura removes much of the risk of a shared bed by providing a safe place to sleep.

Where do I get a wahakura?

A wahakura is easy to make if you have a weaver in the family. All the instructions are on this website. You can also get wahakura made professionally by kai raranga who weave for the commercial craft market.

In addition many infant health care (Tamariki Ora) providers will have wahakura that you can borrow/hire for 6 months in the same way as you can hire baby car seats from Plunket.

Is a wahakura it a modern invention or is it a return to a traditional practice?

Elsdon Best records in Te Whare Kohanga and its Lore that in pre-European days there was a bassinet like structure called a *porokaraka* – it was a flax cradle that was slung from a tree or from the rafters of the whare puni or wherever the mother went.

And the kuia involved in this project spoke of babies in more recent years, being laid in kete kumara to sleep while the parents tended their gardens. Also, many of the weavers in this project had made “Moses baskets” in the 1980's and 90's.

So this project to develop its lifesaving product by building on very old tradition and those previous experiences of kai raranga.

What is SIDS?

When a baby between 1 month and 1 year dies in its sleep and no cause is found for the death, then it is labelled a SIDS – Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

What is the cause of SIDS?

Babies, like all other animals, have a natural drive to breathe. In a SIDS death the baby stops breathing in its sleep for some unknown reason. There are a number of things that are proposed to make this more likely.

1. Re-breathing its own air: Air is breathed in order to get oxygen and CO2 is breathed out. If an infant re-breathes its own air (eg lying face down, lying under the blankets) then all it gets is CO2 and high levels of CO2 makes the breathing drive weak.
2. Smoking in pregnancy: Cigarettes poison the development of the breathing drive in the womb.
3. Overheating. This may be caused by infection, over-wrapping, too many blankets and sleeping under the blankets between parents.
4. Blockage of the airways: Babies have big tongues and small airways. If a babies head and neck are slumped forward (eg in a car seat) then the airway can be blocked.

Any one of these may cause the baby to stop breathing - more likely if two or more of these things are happening at once. But some babies however, do not seem to have any of these problems.

How does a wahakura protect a baby from SIDS?

The wahakura provides a safe sleeping environment. It will not allow blankets to cover babies face, it keeps the parents a little distance away, there are no foreign objects in the wahakura like soft toys or cot bumpers, and so it keeps a flow of fresh air around baby's face. This means that baby has a good temp. Because the rule is sleeping on the back there is no danger of CO2 re-breathing.

Why do Maori babies die with SIDS at such a high rate?

SIDS risk is high where both bed-sharing occurs and the Mum smoked in pregnancy. This occurs very commonly for Maori Mums and babies.

Do I need a wahakura if I didn't smoke in pregnancy?

SIDS is very little where there was no smoking in pregnancy. But a wahakura has some other very positive effects like making breast feeding easy that you may not want to miss out on.

