

# Cool Bananas, Reigniting Community-Led Prevention Through Partnership

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## From uncertainty to renewed purpose in primary prevention

Hikitia! For Our Future exists to strengthen those already embedded in local communities doing the everyday work that builds the protective factors of wellbeing. This was demonstrated through partnership with Cool Bananas Youthwork Trust, a grassroots, primary prevention-aligned organisation that had begun wavering within a crisis-focused system.

At Tauranga Children's Day, a young person shared, "This has been my favourite day, I've never been able to do anything like that with my Dad before." A moment that reflects strengthened connection, shared experience, and deeper whānau bonds made possible through this partnership.

Cool Bananas Youthwork Trust, a grassroots, locally embedded organisation, has spent over 30 years supporting tamariki through programmes, camps, events, and digital initiatives across Aotearoa. Over time they realised that while programmes created moments of impact, they weren't enough to create lasting change in the environments young people live in.

In response, Cool Bananas shifted focus into the spaces young people naturally seek out, and the whānau and environments they belong to. This centred on strengthening protective factors such as safety, belonging, and esteem through connection, modelling, and shared experience.

This shift came at a cost. Moving away from structured programmes reduced alignment with funding streams that prioritise measurable, short-term outcomes. Without the language of primary prevention or systems change, and within systems that place limited value on upstream work, Cool Bananas entered a period of uncertainty, stepping back to reassess its sustainability and future direction.

The relationship with Hikitia! marked a turning point. Through this connection, Cool Bananas found alignment, language, and renewed confidence in the direction they had been moving toward. Hikitia!'s primary prevention lens validated the importance of working across the ecosystem around tamariki and provided a framework that connected Cool Bananas' long-held values to a wider movement focused on preventing harm before it occurs. This alignment did not change the essence of their work, but it strengthened it, giving clarity, legitimacy, and momentum.



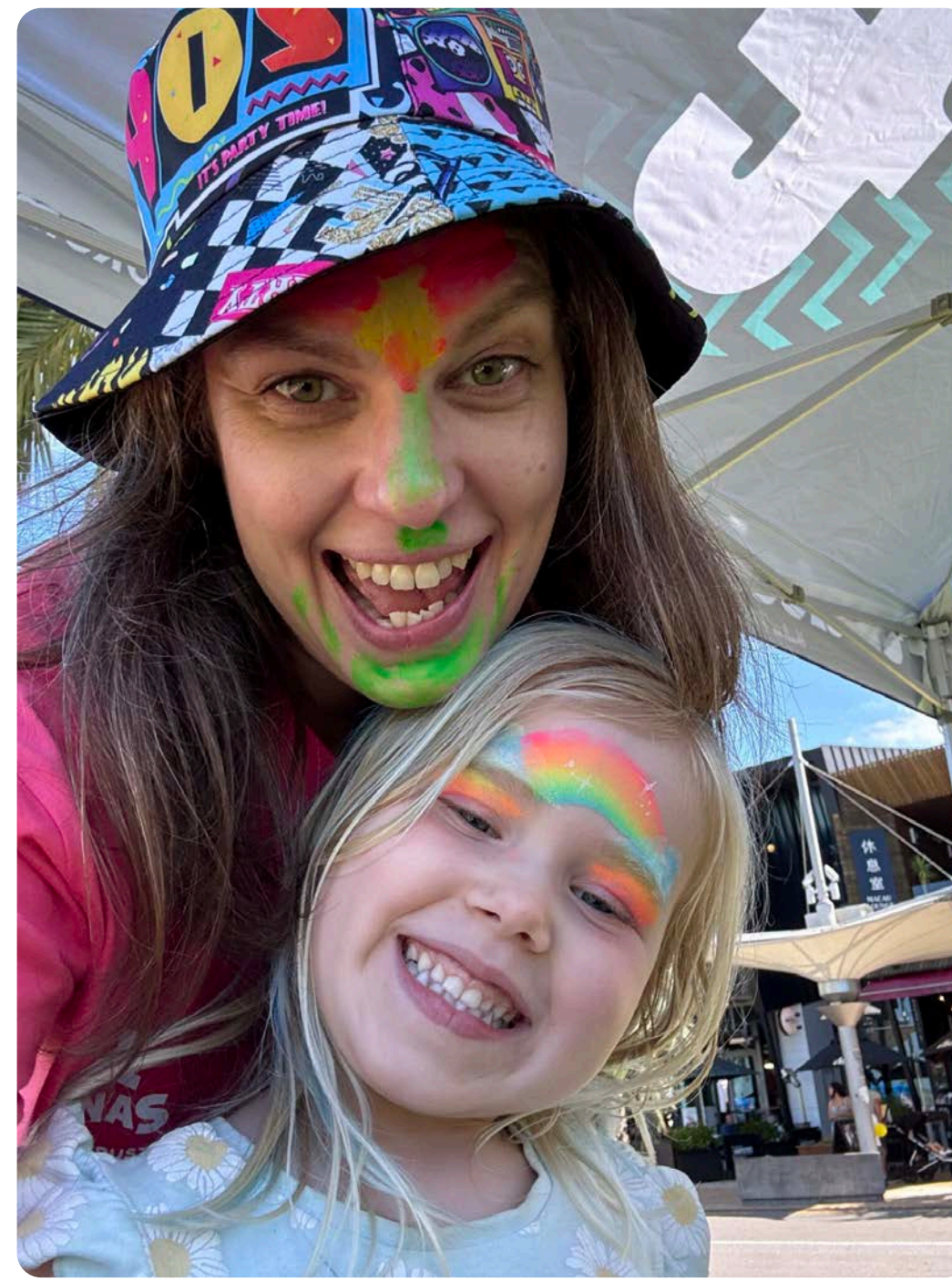
Through this partnership, new opportunities for community mobilisation began to emerge. Connections into local networks, including council, Sport Bay of Plenty, and other whānau-focused groups, opened pathways for collaboration that had previously been out of reach. This led to the development of initiatives such as whānau play activations, designed to support connection between parents and children through child-led play. These activations not only create moments of joy and bonding, but also surface insights into the barriers that can limit connection within families and how these can be addressed in community-led ways.

*"The partnership with Hikitia! has really helped affirm the work Cool Bananas has been doing in our community over the past 30 years. It's given us the language and connections to better express what we've been seeing, and opened up new pathways to respond to the needs of tamariki in ways that can have wider system impact."*

*Niky Hardgrave — Cool Bananas Board Chair*

A clear example of this impact was seen through participation in the 2026 Children's Day in Tauranga, where thousands of families attended across the day. Through partnership with Hikitia!, Cool Bananas was able to bring a unique activation into a space it had not previously accessed. Rather than painting children's faces, the activation invited children to paint their parents. Over the course of the day, 160 adults sat down and handed that creative control to their children.

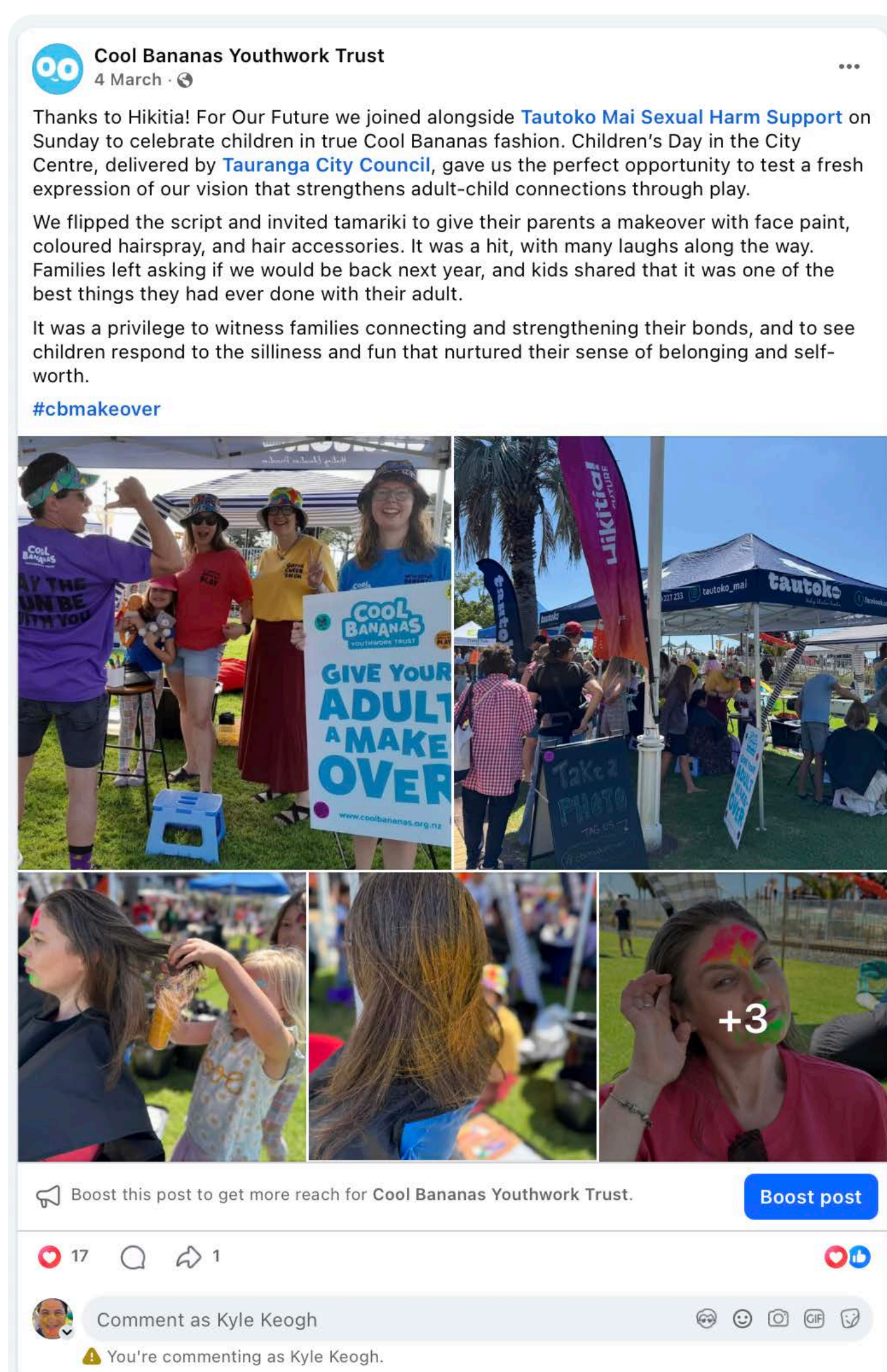
What followed was a visible shift in dynamic. Initial hesitation from adults gave way to openness, laughter, and trust as they entered into play on their child's terms. The pride on children's faces, the willingness of parents to engage, and the shared joy between them created a powerful moment of connection within a large-scale community setting.



Children spoke about this experience as a highlight of their day, with one sharing that painting their dad's face was the best part of the entire event. Parents reflected on the experience as something meaningful and memorable, with many asking if it would return the following year. Across the wider event, adults who had participated recognised each other, creating small moments of connection between families, sparked by a shared willingness to engage in play.

From a Hikitia! perspective, this partnership demonstrates the impact of resourcing and affirming community-led approaches that are already working to strengthen protective factors. By providing language, connection, and support, Hikitia! has contributed to Cool Bananas re-engaging with its vision and stepping forward with renewed clarity and confidence. What was once at risk of being lost has been reactivated as a growing contribution to community-led prevention.

This work continues to build, grounded in the understanding that lasting change is created not through isolated programmes, but through strengthening the relationships, environments, and systems that shape everyday life for tamariki and their whānau.



**ToC** By resourcing and amplifying Cool Bananas as a trusted community-led organisation, this work has enabled the continuation and reactivation of prevention-focused approaches already embedded within their community. Strengthening their capacity to mobilise whānau and local networks supports community-led action that drives safer, more connected environments and sustained systems change.