

National Victoria [Road safety](#)

Awheata lost an arm in a school bus crash, but just months later she's chasing dreams



Alex Crowe

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Awheata Pikari was on her way home from school with her brothers in May when [the bus they were in crashed](#), leaving her with life-changing injuries.

The 10-year-old's left arm had to be amputated after the Exford Primary School bus flipped on its side in a collision with a truck less than a kilometre from the school.



Awheata Pikari, 10, had her arm amputated after her school bus flipped on its side in a collision with a truck in May. WAYNE TAYLOR

Just three months later, she has just learned to swim and is back writing stories, her favourite school activity.

Awheata said that thanks to some new technology, she was getting on with following her dream of being a YouTuber with her brother.

“I am able to do everything by myself now,” she said. “They’ve been helping me and giving me these cool gadgets so I could do my work properly.”

More than a dozen children were rushed to the Royal Children’s and Sunshine hospitals – at least six with life-threatening injuries – after the May 16 bus crash just south of Melton.

Awheata’s brothers – Te Awhiorangi, 6, and Te Wai, 8 – walked away without serious injury. But their sister was among those rushed to hospital, where doctors assessed the severe damage to her left arm.

Daniel Pikari, the children’s father, had just finished his shift as a safety worker on the railway in Sunshine when he saw a message come through on the school’s messaging app.

The initial information from the school was that there had been a minor accident with the bus, he said.

Pikari messaged his wife, Candice Naera, and made the 45-minute drive to the scene, but something told him it was more serious than the message inferred.

He was reunited with his two boys within moments of arriving, as teachers and other parents rushed about to comfort the hurt and scared children.

“Naturally, the next first thing that came to my mind was” ‘Where’s my other baby?’” he said.

The family was taken to the hospital in an ambulance to be with Awheata, where a surgeon told them her left arm had been amputated.

“Obviously, the initial shock of it – we were upset, rightly so. [Then] parenting mode kicked in. We were just happy and blessed that she was alive and still here with us,” Pikari said.



Daniel Pikari with daughter Awheata and sons Te Wai, 8, and Te Awhiorangi, 6. PICTURE BY WAYNE TAYLOR

Awheata was back at school a month after the operation. She has adapted to writing with the use of an aid that keeps her book still, so she's back using her imagination to write stories.

She has recently learned to swim at a camp for children who survived traumatic events, organised by the KIDS Foundation.

Awheata, whose Maori name means morning love, agrees with her dad's description of her – that she is a young woman who was fiercely independent before the incident and remains so now.

She said three months on from the bus crash she can do almost everything by herself – except for tie her hair, which her mum does.

Awheata said the KIDS Foundation trip to Queensland with her family was “amazing”, especially going tobogganing and “being able to push myself forward for doing all these activities that was at the camp”.

Pikari said that when the family went to Queensland for the camp, it was the first time the children had been back on a bus since the incident. Despite his fears, they were fine.

He said he'd learned a lot from being around other families who'd experienced trauma sharing their stories and how they coped. “If I could sum the foundation camp up in one word, that would be ‘family’,” he said.

“Being originally from New Zealand, one of the key foundations of our culture is family. So to see that outside of our culture was awesome.”

Pikari said Awheata had even had the confidence to wear bathers for the first time without needing to cover up her stump.

“It’s true what they say about kids, they’re – excuse my language – they’re a hell of a lot more resilient than what us as adults are,” he said.

“Just to see the leaps and bounds that she’s made over the last couple of months has been absolutely awesome.

“Everyone has been saying it’s just a testament to us as parents, me and my wife, but you know ... even when she had both arms she was always this real independent kid. The world was her oyster.

“Her confidence was skyrocketed through the room. In short, she’s doing really, really well.”

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