

Using genograms in practice

Introduction

There is a broad consensus, grounded in research, practice experience and the feedback of those involved, that children and family social work, and family support, should work with the network of family, friends and community rather than focusing on a child as an isolated individual (for example, Sebba et al., 2017; Stanley, 2019). A genogram, which is a visual diagram of the family members and family structure, is one way of doing this.

As a core training and practice tool, a genogram can support strengths-based working, increase understanding of a family's strengths and challenges (O'Brien, 2014) and provide a means to develop as reflective and culturally competent practitioners. This Practice Tool is aimed at practitioners working with children, families and young people to support them in co-producing, drawing and recording genograms.

History of genograms

US psychiatrist Murray Bowen developed the concept of the genogram as part of his pioneering work in family therapy and systemic therapy in the 1970s. Genograms are used in a variety of fields such as medicine, psychiatry, psychology, social work, genetic research and education.

In the 1990s the idea of the 'cultural genogram' built upon Bowen's concept. Cultural genograms seek to describe not just biological or marital relatedness but factors or characteristics (such as sexuality, ethnicity, religion or social class) that are central to people's identity and which will contribute to how we each understand relatedness itself. As a tool in working with families and developing reflective practice a cultural genogram can enable us to:

- > Illustrate and clarify the influences of cultures on our own and others' family systems.
- > Encourage discussions that might allow us to surface our own and others' unexamined assumptions about what 'family' is.
- > Help us to better know what it is we do not know.

(Laszloffy and Hardy, 1995)

While the word genogram is not yet included in the Oxford English Dictionary, 'geno' derives from ancient Greek terms translated along the lines of descent, race, tribe or clan ('gram' means a drawn or written representation). Throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the western use of these terms, and the concept of 'family' itself, have been strongly rooted in concepts of 'ties of blood' and 'ties of marriage' (www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship).

However, since the late 1960s, anthropological studies of kinship have recognised that these ideas about what constitutes family are not universal (Carsten, 2003; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980; Schneider, 2010). In fact, relatedness is often understood culturally or socially through what people are doing with and for each other (for example, living and eating together, providing nurture and support to one another) rather than primarily through being – how people are biologically tied to one another. As practitioners, the reflective use of genograms will involve understanding what family means to us and being curious about how family works for the people we are working with.

It is also important to acknowledge that the meaning of family changes over time and that family ties can be contested, hidden or unacknowledged. Some examples:

- > Family terms like ‘mother’ or ‘aunty’ are used as ‘honorific’ titles in many cultures – conferring respect and acknowledging familial roles taken by women.
- > The term marriage may refer to a legally sanctioned union but the definition of marriage (and indeed of ‘legal’) varies across cultures (Laszloffy and Hardy, 1995).
- > Over recent years the UK and many other (but not all) nations have come to recognise the equal rights of gay and lesbian parents and their families. And yet, as recently as 1988, it was made illegal for local authority maintained schools to ‘promote... the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (Section 28 of the *Local Government Act 1988*). Section 28 was repealed in 2003, but sexual and gender identities can still be issues of contention within and between families.
- > Watts-Jones (1997) reflects how a genogram depicting only ties of blood and marriage fails to capture experiences of past generations, such as those of enslaved African American children who were taken into other family circles to prevent them being isolated.
- > Lived relationships within families often do not directly reflect biological connections. Biological descent may be a closely kept secret, covered up by families. Family names may lead back to enslaved ancestors’ experience of sexual exploitation. These issues have been made very evident by the boom in home DNA testing kits and the option to ‘DNA match’ with others on the database, which can reveal previously unknown relatives or that a father is not in fact a biological father.
www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/18/your-fathers-not-your-father-when-dna-tests-reveal-more-than-you-bargained-for
- > ‘Blended’ or ‘step’ families bring children from various adult relationships into brother/sister relationships and shared parenting arrangements. Children themselves may well share the perspective that ‘it doesn’t really matter whether it’s ‘full’ or ‘half’, they’re still your sisters at the end of the day’ (young person quoted in Monk and Macvarish, 2020).
www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2020/february/brothers-and-sisters-in-public-law-proceedings-assessment-placement-permanence-and-contact-frontline-briefing-2020/

Thus, it is important we don’t take terms like ‘family’ for granted but think about the language and understand that it is culturally understood and interpreted. The **Social GRRRAACCEESSS** provide a framework for exploring a person’s culture, experiences and identity to be considered within a cultural genogram, and by a practitioner themselves. For further information see:

practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-GRRRAACCEESSS-and-the-LUUUTT-model.pdf

Rather than bringing a fixed understanding of what family means to making a genogram, we need to be open to the complex and interesting realities of people’s lives and family relationships.

How are genograms used?

Despite having been used in different fields of practice since the 1970s, there has been limited research on the use of genograms (McGoldrick et al., 2020). In use by medical professionals, a genogram's key role is to chart medical histories over several generations to understand the risk of hereditary conditions. In social work, use of genograms is more focused on outlining a history of behaviours and issues, and where support or alternative care may be available for a family.

What we are recording is often not objective fact but sensitive, relational information, some of which may be unknown to some people within the social network. Setting relationships out pictorially may be the first time someone has tried to understand these connections and may well raise sensitivities. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that we are treating people as experts in their own lives and as participants in understanding and resolving challenges (Carr, 2012).

Constructing a genogram is in itself a social process – reliant on many factors: the relationship between the worker and the family member(s); how much that person knows and/or is prepared to share at that point in time; how carefully the worker listens and records what they hear.

Any genogram represents a moment in time, a representation that can, and likely will, change. The various people represented may well see these relationships quite differently from each other, and from the practitioner drawing the genogram. These different perspectives can tell us a lot. In this way a genogram can be a starting point for exploration, and used as a tool to initiate communication between family members - see www.therapistaid.com/therapy-guide/genograms. When used to their full potential they are a relational tool, co-created with a family and young person, that can be revisited and expanded on during the working relationship.

Constructing genograms

In constructing genograms to represent the structure, history and background of a family (McGoldrick et al., 2020) we use standardised symbols to allow everyone to gather a shared understanding of the information presented. Most electronic recording systems have a genogram or family tree tool incorporated. However, these do not usually display anything other than a basic family structure or invite family involvement in their creation. To enable co-creation, genograms can be hand drawn then photographed and uploaded to the case record.

At its most basic a genogram includes names, ages, separations and deaths within a family and can be edited to take into account changes, for example births (McGoldrick et al., 2020). Cultural genograms can be used to build our understanding of the context in which relationships take place (Burnham, 1986) for instance depicting cultures of origin, ethnic or religious identities (Hodge, 2015). We can use an agreed set of symbols and lines to represent factors such as cohabitants, relationships that are particularly problematic or strong sources of support, and colours to indicate substance use, mental health difficulties, or emerging risks and strengths, etc.

Working on a genogram with a child and their family

It is important to explain to the family what a genogram is and what the aims of completing it are, seeking their permission and building a relationship whilst expanding the genogram. A genogram constructed at the beginning of the working relationship is useful in providing a potted history of the family and who is in it. As the relationship between worker and family develops, revisiting the genogram can be helpful to reflect and expand upon family narratives that may have been given guardedly or in which circumstances may have changed. Over time it can become a more accurate and comprehensive map of the family (McGoldrick et al., 2020).

The process allows the opportunity to ask questions that may not previously have been considered or information offered that was unknown. Different family members will have different perspectives, so speaking to more than one will provide a richer picture. Circular questions can encourage family members to consider each other's view points and actions, and help to connect them (Rivett and Street, 2009). For example 'What do you think your partner would say? Does anyone else have a very different view?' For further examples see figure 6 on page 16.

We need to be humble and curious, and recognise that, as workers, our understanding of who really matters to a young person can be partial and inaccurate. For example, a study by Dixon et al. (2006) found that, when leaving care workers were asked to identify a young person's 'key person' (who might offer practical help), less than 37% of the workers identified the same person as the young person. This finding underlines the importance of carefully mapping networks from the young person's perspective and bringing the important figures for the young person into transition planning processes.

A genogram can be constructed with family members or a young person using pen and paper. Working with a child we might use a play genogram, as developed by Gil (1994, cited by Turns et al., 2019) using objects, such as buttons or toys to represent each person and the feelings associated with them (McGoldrick et al., with Gil, chapter 11, 2020). Whilst genograms can be used to support children and young people with learning difficulties, they may have limitations dependent on the child's communication or non-verbal abilities to either talk through the family members or physically place objects (Turns et al., 2019).

It is important to consider a child's understanding of the genogram, both in the present - even if they are not involved in the process - and in the future if they were to view their social care records as adults. Care experienced people speak about the impact of finding gaps and inconsistencies in their care records, so we need to work on clear, honest accounts that can be shared in full (Brown et al., 2020). The **Memory - Identity - Rights in Records - Access (MIRRA) project** (2019) looks at the representation of care leavers' voices in their files and their experiences of viewing these as adults. It recommends that records should be co-created by all involved in their care, and explicitly include their voice (Hoyle et al., 2020). Watts (2016) encourages practitioners to write directly to the child so that, instead of primarily recording being seen as an inter-professional process, it keeps it front and centre attention to a child's relationships, hopes and identity.

For example, a genogram may show that a mother had a strained relationship with her own father, and that both have mental health difficulties. What might these factors mean for someone trying to make sense of a childhood in foster care and the decisions made for their care? It is important to not just show these on a genogram, but also ensure case records analyse these factors in relation to risk for the child and explain this, so that it is clear why decisions have been made. It is also important that assessments show an understanding of family history and how it may have contributed to the difficulties (Brown et al., 2014).

Using genograms in supervision and reflective practice

As well as a tool for direct work with children and families, genograms are also important for use in supervision, aiding discussion of hypotheses and providing a time-efficient explanation or reminder of the family - see practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Drawing-a-genogram.pdf.

Developing a systemic perspective towards families can guard against biases such as practitioners focusing too heavily on the mother (Laird et al., 2017), and support engagement with fathers. Analysis of Serious Case Reviews consistently find that 'hidden men' are not seen by practitioners - either as a potential risk or as a source of protection and support in children's lives, which a genogram could help to identify - see www.seriouscasereviews.rip.org.uk and learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1341/learning-from-case-reviews_hidden-men.pdf.

Engaging students and newly qualified staff in creating their own genograms as a reflective training tool is an important first step in developing practitioners' understanding of their own cultural identity and encouraging open discussions that challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes (Lasloffy and Hardy, 1995).



Reflective exercise

Try drawing your own genogram. If possible, ask someone else in your family to work on one too and compare how your different perspectives shape the information you set out.

Share this with your supervisor for discussion and exploration of the emotional responses this may provoke.

Direct work in practice

When working with children and families, uses and aims of co-constructing a genogram may include:

- > Mapping out who's who in a child's life, their relationships to each other and to the child or children whose wellbeing is the focus of concern. It can help to build a holistic picture of the family system, which may include close family friends and community (Allen et al., 2011; DeMaria et al., 2020; McGoldrick et al., 2020).
- > Identifying key people and wider support networks – at any point in working with a family – who might be involved in safety planning and Family Group Conferences (FGC), or be a Life Long Link for a child. People who are Life Long Links are usually members of the child's wider network who will make a life-long commitment and support them - see www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences.
- > Helping both families and practitioners consider alternative narratives and hypotheses about the relationships within the family and the impact this has upon their behaviours. Hypothesising allows practitioners to simultaneously consider alternative explanations and keep an open mind to what may be happening for a family (Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011).

Seeing family issues set out as a visual representation can help people reflect on and externalise issues, expand on constraining narratives and see their difficulties, possibilities, and sources of resilience (McGoldrick et al., 2020; Senediak, 2008; Gil et al., 2008, cited in Taylor et al., 2013). See figure 2 on pages 10 and 11 for examples.

- > Understanding the different perspectives of family members, including the child.
 - To explore how risks and strengths have changed over time in different generations.
 - To support conversations and situate challenges in the wider family context rather than focusing on an individual. Considering the patterns of behaviour in the wider family can help family members develop self-awareness and confidence to lead changes within the whole family system (Hecker et al., 2003, cited by Turner et al., 2019).
 - As a tool for direct work with children, play genograms can support them in expressing their experiences and feelings (Turns et al., 2019).
- > Supporting a young person with autism who may struggle with social relationships and experience loneliness (Stoddart, 1999, cited in Turns et al., 2019), so that a practitioner can promote and assess relationships and learning support needs.
- > Scoping potential alternative carers for a child within the family network. If the case escalates to court or an emergency carer is required, there are already potential carers identified. Royal Borough of Greenwich v A & Ors highlights the importance of completing a genogram to help identify family members: www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/case-law-and-legal-summaries-archive/case-law-and-legal-summaries-january-2019.
- > For children who do not remain in their birth family's care, genograms can support them in understanding their own and their birth parents' family networks, strengths and challenges. This information will support a young person's transition out of care, when they may well seek out family connections and test the reliability of support from their kin network.

A genogram can be used at any point during work with a family, as demonstrated in table 1 below.

Table 1: Genogram uses at different stages of social work involvement with a family

<p>Referral being screened at first point of contact</p>	<p>A practitioner may find it helpful to draft a provisional genogram when looking at a new referral to understand who is in the family and the wider context for the concerns. When being saved on the child's record, this should be clearly marked as early work and revisited as relationships with the family develop so that the child's file accurately reflects the family network.</p>
<p>Initial visit or child protection investigation being completed</p>	<p>Within the first visits to a family it is helpful to complete a genogram to understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Who is considered part of the household and wider family network. > Who in the wider network provides support and may be able to help reduce immediate risks whilst an assessment is completed. > If the child has an injury – who had recent care and contact with them. > Whether anyone in the family network may be known to services or pose a potential risk to the child(ren). > Who might be invited to join a Family Group Conference and who might be able to support the family instead of, or alongside, children's services.
<p>Ongoing support and involvement with the family</p>	<p>In ongoing work and assessment with a family, a full cultural genogram can be co-created to further explore the wider family, difficulties and patterns in the network. This may include people being added that the family were initially hesitant to talk about or have since joined the family network, such as a new partner or supportive friend. Family members can be involved in planning who could support them if the parents needed help when children's services are no longer involved, or if they were unable to care for the children in a crisis/ escalation of risk.</p>
<p>Public Law Outline (PLO) and court proceedings</p>	<p>There is an expectation from the family court (Practice Direction 12A, Family Procedure Rules www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/family/practice_directions/pd_part_12a) that family members should be explored as potentially viable carers prior to an initial hearing. A previously completed genogram (which is also a court requirement) can support in legal proceedings and potentially reduce work at a time that can be both demanding to practitioners and difficult for families.</p>

Children in care/ reunification	Ongoing life story work can include genogram work with the children, family or foster carers, to support children’s understanding and sense of identity, and also to identify people who can be a Life Long Link and support them when they leave their placement. A genogram can also be used to gather information and assess family members who want to care for children, or for a return to parent(s’) care.
End of involvement with a family	<p>A genogram could be revisited with a family at the end of professional involvement, to support them in reflecting on the positive changes they have made and discuss how they can continue to build on these strengths.</p> <p>If the case is being referred to a different professional or service, a genogram may be helpful to include within the referral or handover, to support understanding of the family.</p>

A note on limitations

It is important to note that traditional genograms will not take account of the importance of extra-familial peer relationships for young people. When considering issues of criminal or sexual exploitation, Firmin (2019) encourages practitioners to think about contextual safeguarding and to consider using peer association maps in place of, or in addition to, genograms, where appropriate, to explore risks and protective factors within a young person’s peer relationships.

See uniofbedscse.com/2017/02/14/peer-group-mapping-recent-discussions-with-practitioners.

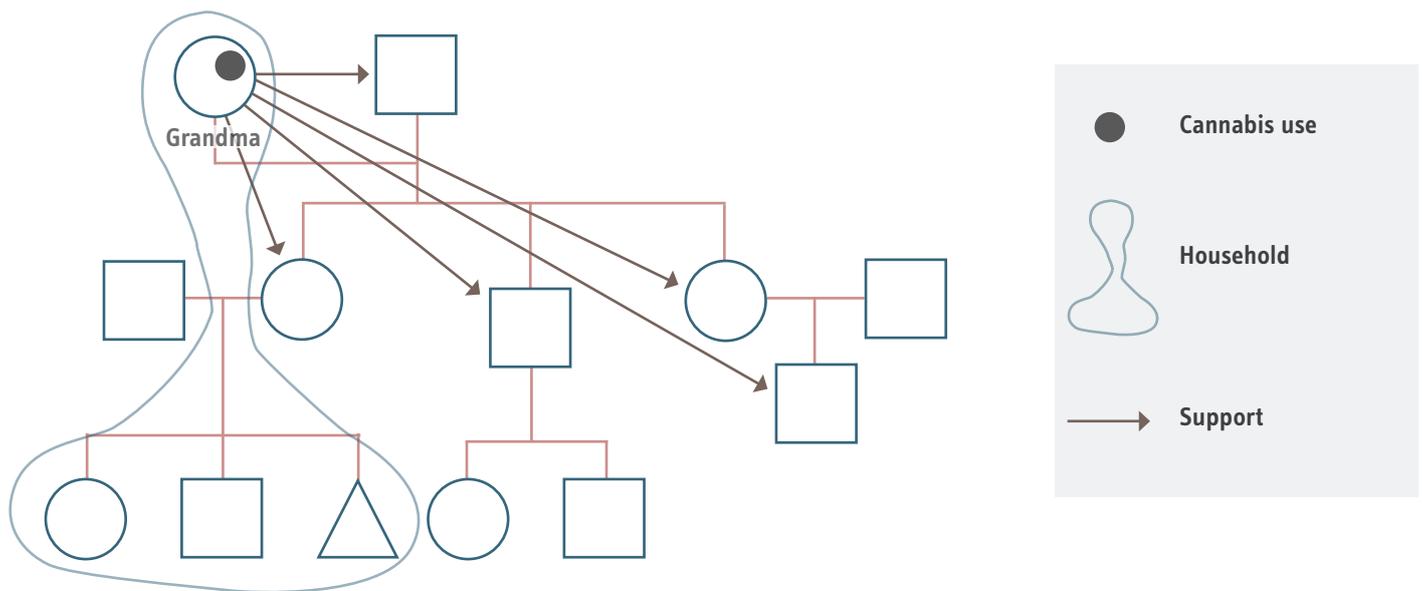
Completing a genogram

Using a genogram can support a practitioner to consider hypotheses, which can be ‘tested’ by exploration with the family through discussion and observation. This can then revise or discount the hypothesis and be used to inform planning to support the family. See:

<https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Using-the-five-anchor-assessment-principles-in-supervision-v4.pdf>.

Hypotheses are a useful starting point for understanding families and their behaviours, and provide a range of preliminary and tentative explanations for the situation - instead of practitioners reacting to symptomatic behaviour. These can be revised and reformulated through involvement with a family (Brown et al., 2012). When hypotheses are formulated with a family, this may support their understanding and ability to create change (Dobrowolski, 2012). Figure 2 below gives examples of how hypotheses may be formed when completing a genogram, which can then be tested and revised using circular questions.

Figure 1 - Examples of hypotheses derived from completing a genogram



Example hypothesis - Grandmother is a key support to many people within the family network. However, she identified very few people who support her. This places a lot of strain upon her and she has spoken about cannabis use helping her to deal with these pressures. Increasing the support to the wider family and reducing pressures on grandmother may therefore ease her stress and help her reduce her cannabis use.

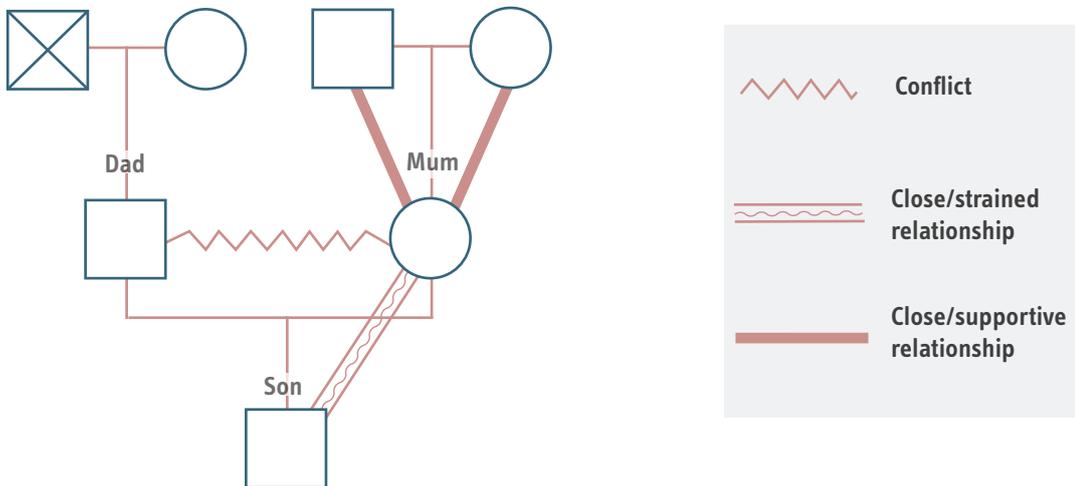
Example questions you may ask the grandmother

“The genogram shows you being a key support to many family members. If someone could return that support to you, what would it look like and how do you think it could help you?”

“Who do you think could do this for you?”

Depending on the grandmother’s responses, the hypothesis may need to be revised or discarded.

Figure 2 - Exploring the relationships between family members



Example hypothesis - The relationship between mother and son has elements of closeness, which means it is difficult for him to be away from her. This is possibly because he has seen his parents argue a lot and so he struggles to see the strengths in their relationship. By behaving as he does he lets everyone know that he has worries about this. An alternative hypothesis could be that the son behaves as he does as it is his understanding from his father's behaviour that this is how men behave and that relationships between men and women are characterised by women criticising men (Rivett and Street, 2009).



Reflective exercise

What questions could you ask this family to explore and test this hypothesis?

What alternative hypotheses are there that you could explore with the family?

Whilst what happens in one generation may repeat itself in the family (McGoldrick et al., 2020), and a genogram may show these family scripts, it is important that events are viewed in their historical context to avoid stigmatising the family (Houston, 2014). For example, there may be a pattern of drug use within generations of the family. However, this does not mean that this will be the behaviour of all family members.

Some family members may feel strongly about certain people being included in representations of their family, such as a step-parent who abused them or someone with whom they have no current relationship. Conversations may be necessary to explore the impact on the family or potential risks to children from these people. However, unless there is an important reason (for example, a court genogram) it may be more helpful to the family to respect their views and not include the person - but a note on the case file should be made to explain this, alongside any other relevant information.

Missing information may provide clues to what has happened in a family and can open up points for clarification (McGoldrick et al., 2020). Exploring when and why people have lost contact with, or do not know the details of some family members, may well be challenging or upsetting. If a family member cannot remember certain information, unless this is thought to have particular significance, a practitioner should not focus on the omission (Carr, 2012) - although it may be helpful to note this within the child's record or explore at a later date.

Key tips

It can be daunting to complete a genogram for the first time with a family. However, remember:

- > A genogram reaches its full potential when co-created with a family. Do not worry about the genogram being drawn perfectly - its purpose is for exploration and discussion. You can always draw up a neat copy afterwards, if needed. This can then be used to update the child's record in line with your organisational policy, such as updating the electronic genogram or uploading a scan of the hand-drawn genogram.
- > Be creative. For example, children may engage more with the process if you set out their family tree using toys to represent each family member or may enjoy drawing their own version of a family tree that you can use for a genogram (McGoldrick et al., 2020, with Gil, chapter 11). For an example of this see figure 4 on page 14.
- > Start with the children, their immediate family and those present in the session, then add aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc (Carr, 2012).
- > Draw the symbol first and link with lines, adding different colours to represent different themes and patterns - such as ethnicities, location of family members, issues and challenges, sources of strength and support, etc.
- > Use standard key symbols (see below) so that there is a common understanding for professionals, and ensure a key is included on the genogram and added to as it is developed.
- > Practitioners should be mindful of their own life experiences and how this may influence the working relationship, as resistance may be encountered when difficult memories or emotions are being gathered for a genogram (McGoldrick et al., 2020).

Examples of genograms in practice

This section illustrates how to construct and record genograms with children and their families.

Figure 3 below shows the universal symbols to use when completing a genogram. It is important to include a key so that anyone viewing the genogram can understand what each symbol represents, as well as any additional lines or colours that may be used to represent strengths, difficulties and pattern in the family relationships.

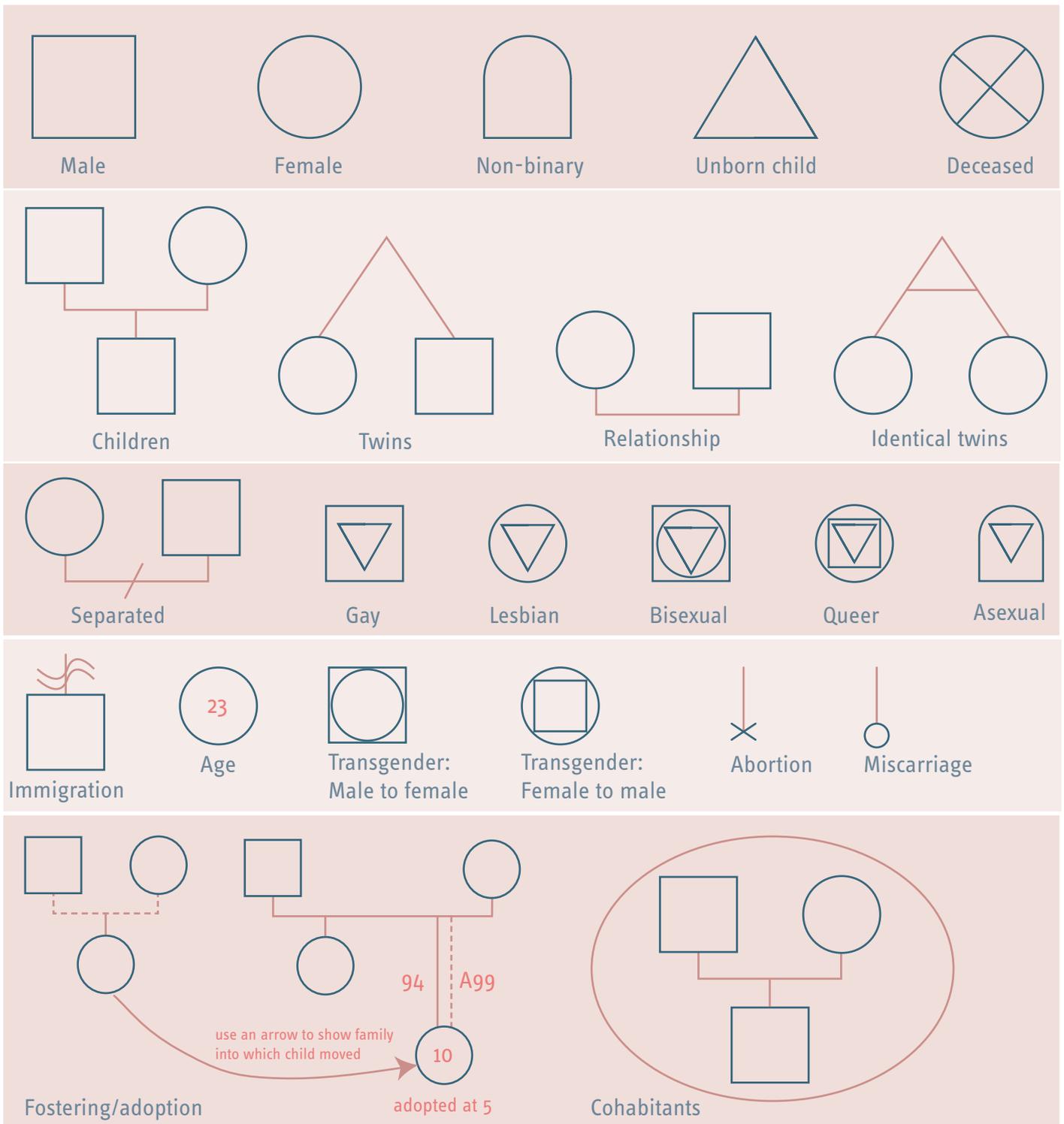
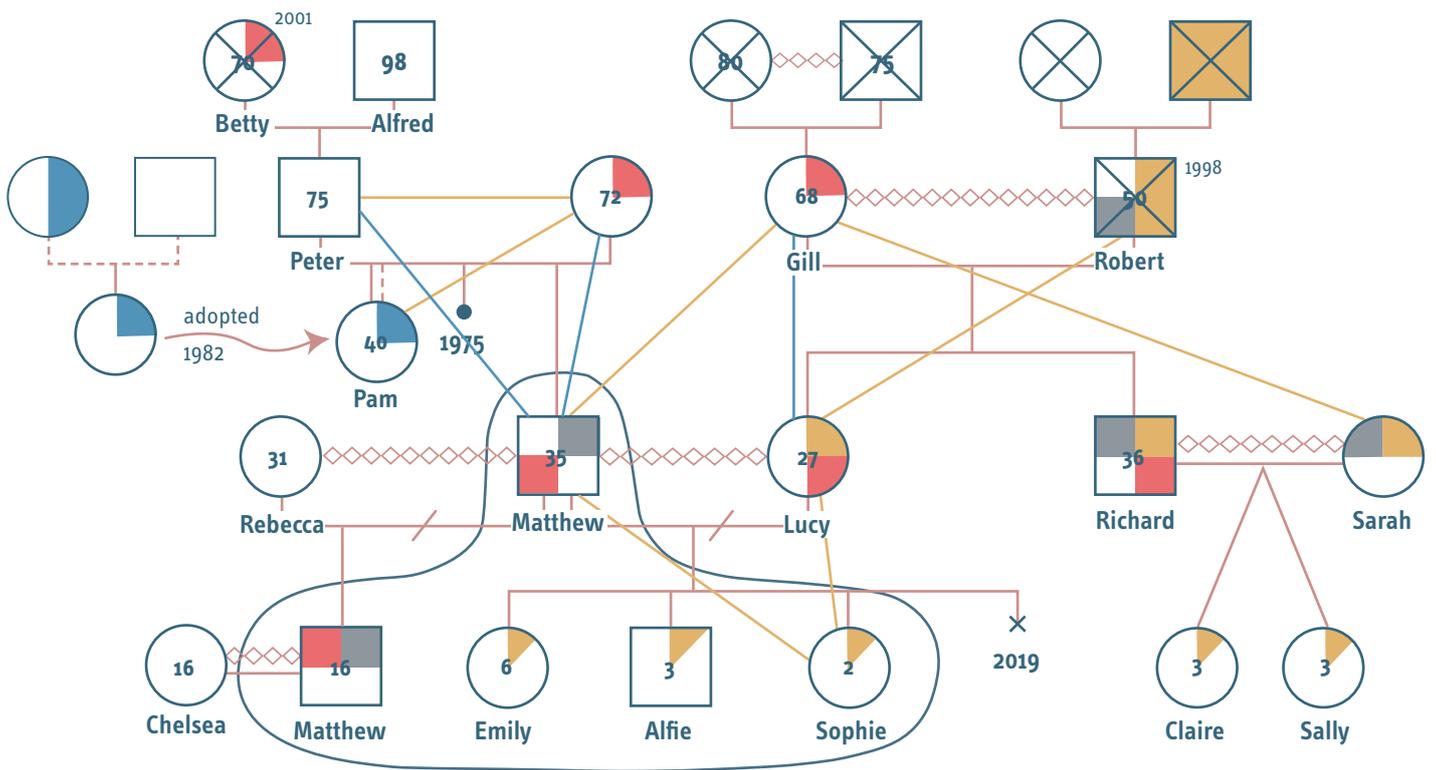


Figure 4 – An example of a genogram that includes relationship strengths and difficulties, ethnicity and patterns of behaviour.



Key

- Strong relationship
- Strained relationship
- ◇◇◇◇ Domestic abuse
- White British
- Black Caribbean
- British Indian
- Mental health difficulties
- Substance use
- × Abortion



Reflective exercise

Using this genogram, and the examples in figure 2 and 7, think of some different hypotheses that could support understanding of the relationships within the family. Once you have done this, consider some circular questions that you could ask different family members if you were a practitioner supporting this family.

The following provides an example of one hypothesis that might be derived following circular questions.

Example hypothesis:

Matthew had a strained relationship with his parents who adopted another child, Pam. Therefore Matthew feels resentment for this and doesn't want to include them in support planning, despite the help they can offer him in being the primary carer for the children. His parents see this as an unwillingness to meet his children's needs rather than a strain in the relationship with their son.

Figure 5 - Co-creating a genogram with a child

This genogram shows how toys and personal objects could be used to discuss different family members with a child.

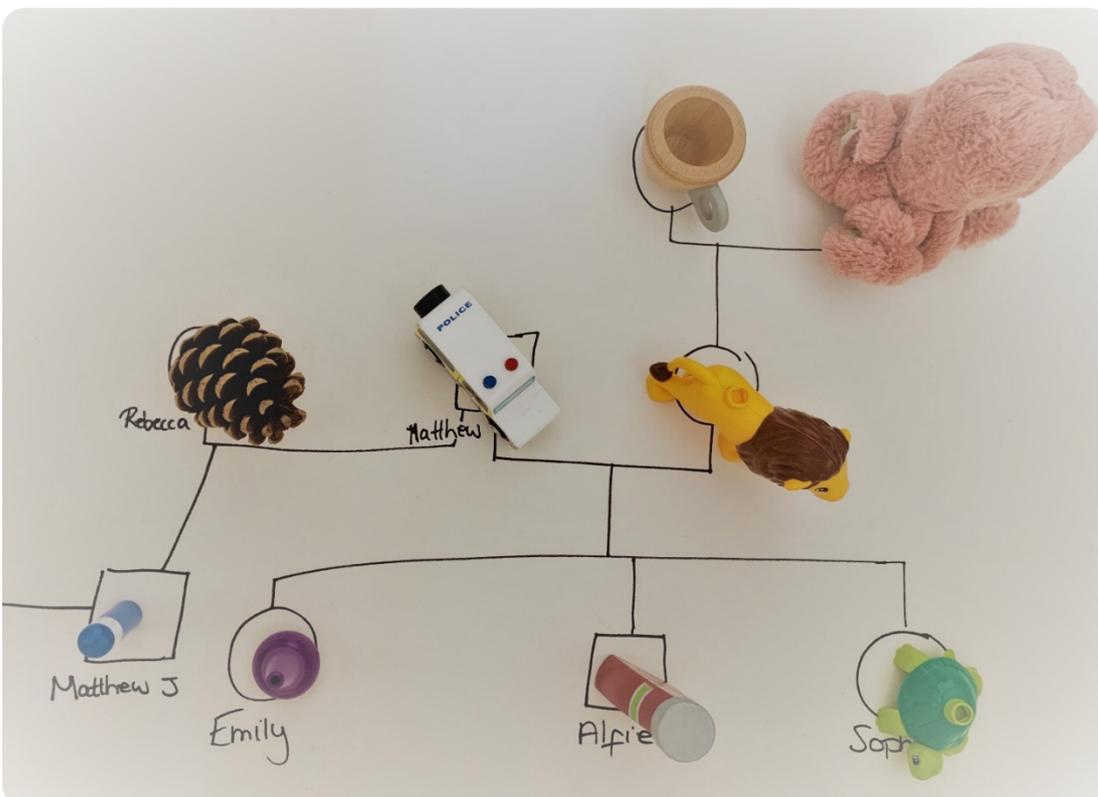


Figure 6 – Postmodern and alternative genograms

These symbols can be used when completing a genogram with children to help explore their positive relationships. It may be helpful to limit the number of symbols used, depending on the age and understanding of the child (Taylor et al. 2013):

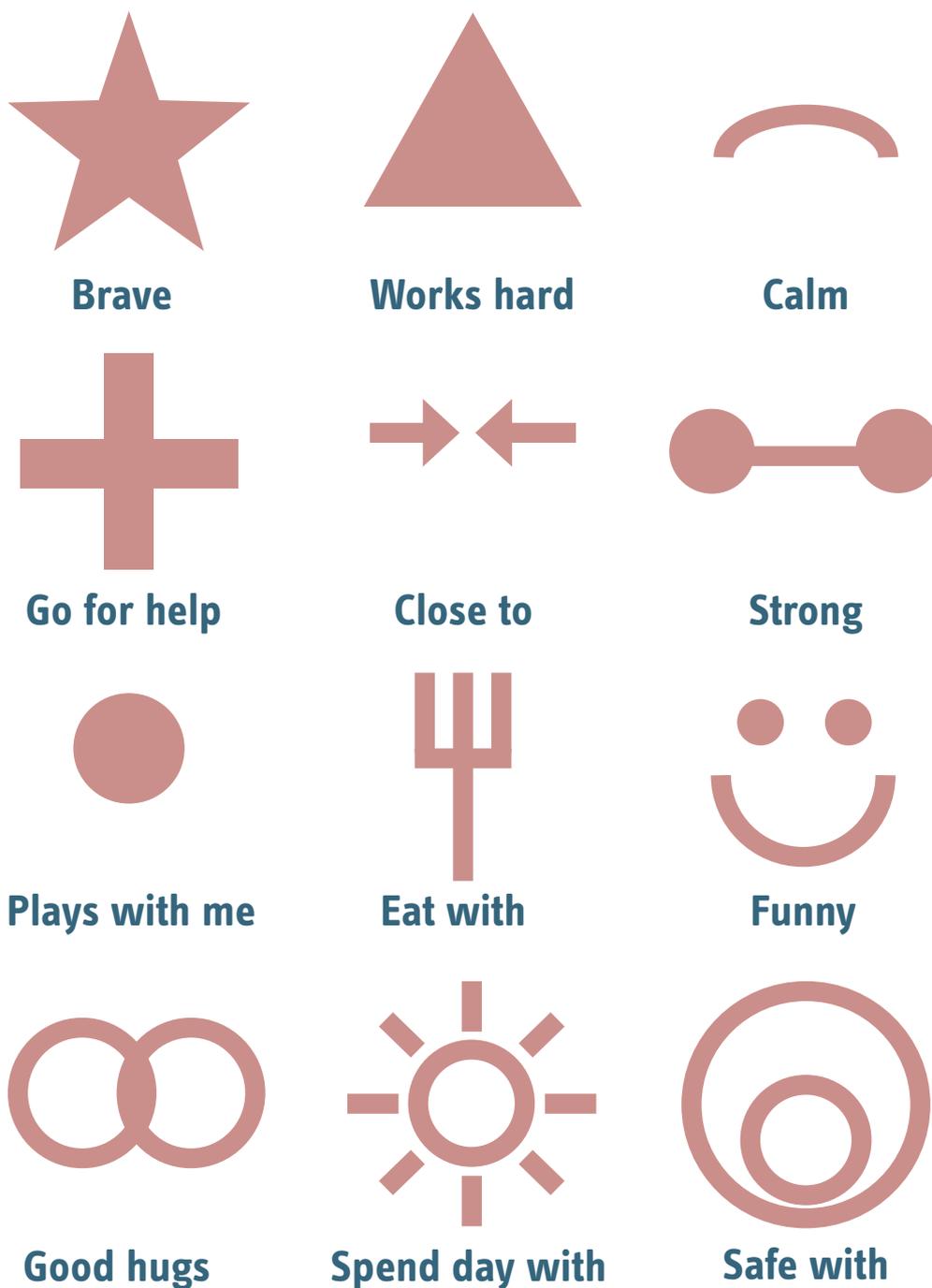


Figure 7 - Questions you might ask when completing a genogram

Circular questions can be used to help consider alternative narratives for what may be happening within the family and the reasons for this. A genogram can help to consider these questions. Some examples of the types of questions you might ask are provided below.

- > What does your sister think about your substance use/relationship with X/child's behaviour? Is there anyone on the genogram that has a different view? Why do you think they have that view?
- > Who here would you consider the most supportive person to you and your family? What is it they do that you find helpful?
- > What difference could there be if we saw what you call your son's 'stubbornness' as determination instead?
- > It is interesting to see how many couples on the genogram have had conflict in their relationship which your child has seen. What do you think this has taught them about relationships?
- > Are there any patterns you see looking at your family genogram that you would like to change or continue?
- > When you look at the strengths and difficulties in the family relationships you have described, how does that make you feel? If you could change any of these, what would the genogram then look like?
- > You have described your partner's family and culture as very different to your own, how does that impact on how you parent your child together and the decisions you make?
- > You have spoken about X displaying challenging behaviour that you struggle to manage, but that she does not do this with your mum. Is there anyone else on the genogram who does not find her behaviour challenging? Do they do anything differently when she becomes upset? Is there anything you think would be helpful for you to do differently, as they do?
- > There are different descriptions of you from different family members in the genogram. Which, if any, would you most like to live up to? What might help you to do that?
- > You have spoken a lot about an event that was significant to your family. How do you think things would be different, and how would the relationships on your genogram look, if that event had not happened or had had a different outcome?
- > When we have spoken about your foster carers, you have spoken about finding it difficult - that they are very different to your own family. Is there anything they could replicate that you think would help you? For example, you have spoken about enjoying a weekly walk to the park with just your mum?

Conclusion

Genograms are a core tool to support families with identifying patterns in their own relationships and for practitioners to gain an understanding of the family members, support and challenges. Practitioners need to develop a reflective perspective on their own understanding of what family means and be curious about how others understand theirs. This practice tool can support practitioners in developing their confidence to use genograms in their everyday practice and in collaboration with families and young people.

Using a genogram can support a practitioner to think systemically about a family, using circular questions and hypothesising to develop alternative narratives about difficulties within families, which can then inform the child's plan and family support.

When working with older children and young people it will be important to explore with them their extra-familial peer networks, as these are increasingly influential connections in adolescents' lives.



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