

# Drawing a Genogram with children and young people Practitioner Briefing

**What is a genogram?** It is a simple tool that can be used to see how a family is made up. It helps practitioners identify who is living in the home with the child/young person and who is in the wider family network. It is a more formal term for a family tree.

**When would you use it?** A genogram can be used when working with children/young people and their families. It can assist practitioners to help provide information about family members and see patterns that maybe contributing to the concerns raised about the child/young person. Family structures can change overtime, and therefore a genogram should be updated accordingly.

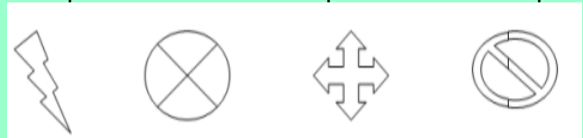
**How would you use it?** Children/young people may initially feel uncomfortable engaging in this type of activity. For some focusing on a task which is on paper, where eye contact doesn't need to be maintained can feel safer. Just remember that there is no 'right way' of constructing a genogram with a child/young person.

## Children/Young People's Perceptions.

Understanding a child/young person's view of themselves in their family is crucial. It's therefore not essential if they do not 'accurately' outline who's who in their family etc. It's their perception that counts. A useful way of doing this is by checking if there is anyone who the child/young person would like in their genogram, or who used to be there but is no longer. Ask them to think of a special symbol for that person. A sheet of different pictures/symbols which the child/young person can choose may help. This may also aid a discussion about why that particular picture was chosen.



In contrast, check if there is anyone in the child/young person's family that they would like to miss out. Ask them to think about a symbol which they can put in the place of the missed person for example.



## Assessing Feelings / Script.

From a practitioner's perspective it is useful to understand the child/young person's emotional link to people who may have hurt them or let them down. The following ideas can help generate discussion about how a child/young person feels about someone, who they like/don't like, what they feel angry about and what they do want to happen. Using different faces, ask the child/young person which face they would put next to the people in their family e.g. happy, angry, sad, scared. Explore with the child/young person why they chose that particular face e.g. **"I can see that you put an angry face next to your mum, can you think of an example when your mum was like that with you?"**

Whilst the genogram is being drawn out, have conversations about the family:

- **Who would you go to if you were sad, upset?**
- **In your family, who is the 'good one', who gets into trouble the most?**
- **What 3 words would you use to describe your mum, dad, brother, sister etc.?**

Children/young people hold a set of beliefs about their place in the family history, the present and the future. These incorporate other 'world views' e.g. big boys don't cry, I have grown to be grown up, etc. To get a sense of these views you could suggest a hypothetical question then ask the child/young person to think about what each person in their family might say. Using bubble thoughts can be a fun way of doing this e.g. **"What do you think mum, dad etc. might say if you came home with a certificate saying you had been good at school?"**

Information about the child/young person's family can be of interest to both them and their parent/carer. Family secrets and things that are not talked about can be raised and explored. A child's understanding of an event can be surprising to parents and carers.

## The four rules to build a genogram are:

1. The male is always at the left of the family and the female is always at the right of the family.
2. In the case of ambiguity, assume a male-female relationship, rather than male-male or female-female relationship.
3. A spouse must always be closer to his/her first partner, then the second partner (if any), third partner, and so on...
4. The oldest child is always at the left of his/her family, the youngest child is always at the right of the family.

## Preparation.

Be led by the child. Ask them where they would like to start, with themselves, their parents, do they want to include pets, friends etc? Do they want to draw/create the genogram themselves using any art materials in replace of the symbols etc. It's important that whatever the child creates is their perception so don't worry too much about accuracy. Some descriptions may need clarifying. Children might describe individuals as aunts, uncles, granny etc but are not technically related to them. You could explore this by saying.... **'That's great to hear about Auntie Sam, how are you related to them?'** Genograms can help children look at how their family has changed and who has come into and out of their life. These complicated relations can be an additional source of stress for children because the changes are difficult to understand.

A useful way of doing this is by checking if there is anyone who the child would like in their genogram, or who used to be there but is no longer. It is also very important to be sensitive to a child's understanding of relationships. For example, issues of paternity or other brothers and sisters not known to them. Always check with the adults in a family what the child's awareness of family relationships is. Think about how to translate the questions the genogram raises for you, into a sensitive and curious conversation with the family. As much as genograms are useful tools for practitioners, they have equal value for families in helping to explore what is important to them and gain insights into their own family patterns, which subsequently can be the start of change. Use open ended questions to gain as full a picture as possible. Some of the symbols used can appear insensitive. For example, the X symbol to represent a death in the family can feel clinical and lack feeling. Ask the family what symbols they would like to use or use art/craft materials to represent the genogram. Preparation to commence the genogram needs to involve the child/young person. The following questions can be used to help you in this: Ask them how a big piece of paper they will need (A4, A3). Where do they want to start – with themselves, their parents etc.? Ask the child/young person if they want to draw it out or do, they want you to do it? Whilst squares and circles are traditional shapes used in genograms, allow them to use their own shapes. If the child doesn't know what to choose, think about having a sheet of different shapes. They can either copy them or cut them out and stick them on to paper.

## General Principles.

**Families do not want to have to repeat their story and experiences repeatedly, so check whether they have already done a genogram with another practitioner? If so, what was their experience? Has anything changed since then? How can you add to existing work or add value by doing it a different way? It can be emotional doing a genogram, but it is important to recognise that it can also be a positive experience for families and children. Crucially, it can make sure that family strengths and networks can be identified and brought into support plans. Ideally, genograms should cover at least three generations. However, if the information is not available then a smaller genogram is useful for analysis. Does it mean a lack of family support? Is the family isolated? Is there trauma in previous generations that parents don't want to revisit or known?**

For more information and guidance on genograms please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Inter-agency Child Protection Procedures](#)