

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding Family : Simple Guide to Genograms

A genogram or family tree is a useful tool to gather information about a young person's family. This visual representation of a family can help you to identify patterns or themes within families that may be influencing or driving the young person's current behaviour.

Most young people really enjoy this opportunity to talk about their family history, and it can work as a good tool to build trust and rapport in a working relationship. However be aware that some young people may find seeing a visual picture of the state of their relationships confronting, particularly if the majority of relationships in their life at present are conflictual or distant. Use this tool sensitively and in cases where you think it will be useful to help promote healthy change and the development of more positive relationships in the young person's life.

General hints

- Use a large piece of paper (A3 or bigger), to give you plenty of room for drawing and recording extra information over time.
- Always put a date on the genogram, and a date next to additional information recorded.
- You can make it relaxed, informal and fun, e.g. use colours
- It is often useful to keep a genogram in the back of the young person's file, to refer to and add to in subsequent sessions
- Keep this guide beside you and let the young person know that you are learning how to draw genograms
 - your honesty will be appreciated
- As the young person tells you about family members and relationships, make a note alongside the name.
- Ask about relationships between family members
 - Who are you closest to?
 - What is/was your relationship like with...?
 - How often do you see...?
 - Where does live now?
 - Is there any one here that you really don't get along with?
 - Is there anyone else who is very close in the family? Or who really don't get along?
- Ask about characteristics or habits of family members, particularly those relevant to your role: health issues, alcohol/ drug use, physical and mental health, violence, crime/trouble with the law, employment, education.

With the young person

- Start with questions that are relevant to your role with the young person, e.g. is there an issue with a particular family member that brings them to your service?
- Aim to gather information about three generations: the young person's generation, their parent, and their grandparents.
- Include significant others who lived with or cared for the family
- Start with drawing the family structure, who is in the family, in which generations, how they are connected, birth/marriage, deaths etc.
- You may ask them to tell you a bit about each person
 - Ask about family values, beliefs and traditions.
 - Try to explore patterns and themes.
 - Who are you most like?
 - What is like? Who else is like them?
 - Did anyone else leave home early? Is anyone else interested in art? etc.



Symbols for drawing the genogram or family tree



Female symbol – name, age



Male symbol – name, age



Unknown gender



Married – add the year or ages



De facto relationship – commencement date or ages



Separation – date or ages



Divorce – date or ages

List children in birth order and put names and ages either within in the symbol or underneath.



Death – a small cross in the corner of the symbol (record date if known)



Dotted circle – this can be used to enclose the members living together currently, for example, who the young person is living with



Conflictual relationship



Very close



Distant relationship



Suggested Reading

- McGoldrick, M., Gerson R., (1985), Genograms in Family Assessment, Norton
- McGoldrick, M., Gerson R., and Shellenberger Norton S., (1999) Genograms: Assessment and Intervention. Melbourne PsychOz Publications
- Another information sheet on drawing genograms, with an example attached, can be found at: <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/fostercare/documents/fcagenogram.pdf>



Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au