

## The Genogram

The genogram is an important resource-finder. It identifies resource in a life-world expert's immediate and extended family. In drawing out the networks in a chart, each person, represented by a symbol, equates to a whole assortment of resources that a client can tap on.

Unfortunately the use of the genogram has often been restricted to its function as a 'professional tool'. Social workers see the uses of the genogram in reports and case files only. Drawing a genogram becomes, therefore, a tedious activity, often done in a silence of a room, at the desk of a caseworker.

This, however, does not have to be the case.

Some less obvious uses of the genogram are identified below:

- It is a great tool for building rapport when it is drawn with a life-world expert.
- It is a good leveler—particularly when you share family anecdotes and draw similarities between your family and the life-world expert's.
- It is a way of exploring family dynamics and relationships—for example, of drawing out hero stories.
- It can be used to identify possible experts for a strengths check.
- It enables us to obtain a well-rounded picture of our clients because we see them framed in their natural setting—as a part of a family.

Getting a child or youth you work with to draw a genogram is also a great way to initiate bonding with his or her parents. Often, children may not know members of their extended family circles. Having them sit in the kitchen with a mother or grandmother gets a great dialogue going. It also respects the family hierarchy by empowering older generations to share histories and what they feel to be important.

### Drawing a genogram: some basic tips

A genogram is usually drawn at the stage when your clients are relatively comfortable with you. It should be drawn in a quiet environment that is empowering and respectful for your client.

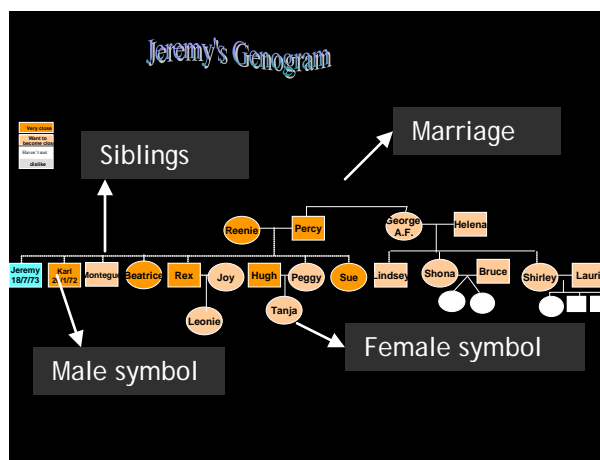
Two key things to remember:

- Drawing a genogram is a creative exercise, not a clinical one. It is an exercise between two partners: the life-world expert, and yourself as a community worker or trainee.

- The act of creating a genogram is never a formulaic, step-by-step exercise. There is no 'right' way of creating a genogram. Ultimately, the owner of the genogram must find the process meaningful.

A few tips to bear in mind while facilitating the drawing of a genogram:

- **Be totally transparent.** Start by explaining what you are doing—some people may not be used to talking openly about their family relationships, particularly if some ties are hurtful.
- **Give your client the pen/ marker.** It is his or her genogram, so let him or her determine the starting point. This act empowers your client. Some people prefer to start with their siblings or themselves. Others like to go as far back as their great-grandparents.
- **Use a set of symbols in drawing the genogram.** You can get your client to come up with his or her own symbols, as long as they remain consistent and make sense to the two of you. The most common symbols *traditionally* used are: male, female, and relationship ties that represent marriages, divorces, live-in arrangements, estranged relationships and departed relatives.
- **Clients choose the information they think is necessary.** Information chosen usually includes the age of the relatives and their professions.
- **Have your client identify where he or she is in the genogram.** This can be done by highlighting the respective symbol in a way that suggests that he or she feels proud to be a part of this network. Having your client show you where she or he is symbolises that he or she is not alone.



Using symbols in a genogram

## Drawing a genogram: getting past the bends

Drawing a genogram is not always easy, as it is up to the community worker to make the exercise as engaging as possible. Here are a few pointers our community workers themselves have found useful:

- As with counseling, it is important to **feed the communication loop**. Do not take close-ended answers as dead ends. Probe—but probe respectfully. For example, you could say, “Think about one of the happiest moments in your life. What happened? Are all the people you associate with that moment here?”
- In feeding the communication loop, remember to **actively listen** to what your client is telling you, rather than having your mind be elsewhere, thinking up good questions to ask your client.
- When trying to engage an introverted child who feels uncomfortable wielding the marker, it might be a good idea to initiate the drawing. However, engage the child in the process. For example, ask him or her, “So tell me about your mother... does she have black or *blue* hair?”, or say, “Your uncle has a nose? What kind of nose?” Not only do you throw humour into the process; importantly, you reaffirm that it is the child who directs the drawing, giving him or her ownership of the genogram.
- Remember that a **genogram can always be revisited**. A genogram cannot be ‘completed’—like life itself, it is never a finished product. It is a representation of your current relationships with immediate and extended family members, some precious, others lukewarm at best.
- **No one is ever ‘alone’**. Even in the most dire situations, where clients say that they have been ‘disowned’ by their families, they are rarely unable to identify a relationship, even if this relationship is lukewarm.

Similar to the strengths check, the genogram will always be regarded as something precious by your life-world expert. A genogram sums up who they are—it represents their identity. Originals can be made into keepsakes that clients take back with them. You can also make a copy and revisit it with your client from time to time.