**How to ... use ecomaps**

**Introduction**

People can have difficulties in life; sometimes these are discrete events or there can be a chronic, long-term issue. Individuals and families can find themselves unexpectedly in crisis. Any of these scenarios can make people feel isolated and lonely. Understanding a service user’s support network can be an important aspect of your work as you try to assess and differentiate between people who represent challenges or risk, and those who offer support and protection from risks. Indeed, relationships are viewed as an individual’s main source of stress or as enabling in terms of helping to generate or maintain resilience.

Put simply, an ecomap (or ecological map) is a graphic representation of an individual’s support network. Originating in social work practice, ecomaps were developed by Ann Hartman in 1975 as a means of depicting an ecological system (pertaining to the surrounding environment) that has at its centre the service user or carer (Hartman, 1995). Thus, ecomaps were intended to be a tool for producing a ‘snapshot’ picture of individuals or groups in a support network and the types of relationships had with those individuals or groups. Connections with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours are shown; these types of relationships can be considered as ‘informal’. In addition, an ecomap can contain connections with all of the relevant [systems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems) (or organisations) that are at play in the life of a service user or carer; these are ‘formal’ sources of support (for example, school, social worker, police, medical practitioner, support group).

**How do I use ecomaps?**

There is a plethora of software which produces well presented ecomaps. However, these are easily produced by yourself as an ecomap can be as simple or as detailed as you wish.

Place the individual or family at the centre of the map. By using symbols and/or colour, an ecomap can illustrate the quality and emotional content of relationships and connections and thus can highlight the type of energy that flows into and out of the family. This can show the reciprocity of relationships in positive and negative terms. You need to create a legend to show what your symbols mean but there are some conventions that you should follow. For example:

* Thicker (darker) lines represent a strong and healthy connection.
* Broken or ‘lightning’ lines mean that the person/organisation is a stressful one.
* Arrows pointing to the service user mean that the person/organisation primarily influences them.
* Arrows pointing to the person/organisation mean that the service user primarily influences them.
* Arrows pointing in both directions depicts a reciprocal flow of influence.

An example of an ecomap is shown below.

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| **The Hill Family Ecomap** |
| Mark and Ali Hill  Bill, Ted & Liam (Mark’s brother). Live 5 miles away. Weekly visits and regular text contact.  Samina (Ali’s  sister). Lives  next door.  Daily visits.  Church.  Supportive  relationships with people who help when in need.  Joe and Sara (Ali’s parents) Lived 55 miles away. Visit at school holidays. Weekly calls.  Susie (Ali’s best friend). Lives in  the next street.  Daily contact.  Mark’s work colleagues  Daily contact, no close friends.    Myra (Ali’s  bereavement  counsellor).  Weekly sessions.  Alfred (Mark’s dad). Lives 10 miles away.  Occasional  contact at family events.  Local Brownies  Ali’s colleagues offer support and friendship. Weekly contact.  **KEY**  Strong connection  Significant connection  Weak/stressful connection |

The Hill family ecomap represents a simple example of an ecomap, nevertheless you can see that a great deal of information is contained with the picture. As stated above, the type of line used in making connections depicts the nature of that relationships and the use of arrow heads conveys information about the influence of the relationship. For example, in the case of Ali’s connection with Susie (her best friend), this is a strong connection which is mutually supportive. You can also see that there is a significant relationship with Myra, Ali’s bereavement counsellor, and this warrants much more exploration in terms of the circumstances around Ali’s loss and the impact upon the family.

You can include whatever information is relevant and useful in your assessment and work with the service user or carer. For example, adding the ethnicity of members of the network enables you to understand the diversity of a person or family’s support network; this would be important data to have when assessing someone to adopt or foster. If you want to keep the information contained with the map itself to a minimum, you can use abbreviations (for example, WB for White British); just remember to include a key.

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| **Top tip**  Create a fictitious ecomap so that you can take this with you to use a guide when you are with service users. |

Using ecomaps does not have to be a one-off exercise, but can form part of your initial assessment and then be a utilised as a tool which assists as part of your on-going evaluation and review.

**References**

Hartman, A. (1995) Diagrammatic assessment of family relationships, *Families in Society* 76(2):111–122.  
Originally produced for *Developing Skills for Social Wok Practice* by Rogers et al. © 2017.