**How to ... use genograms**

**Introduction**

Developed by McGoldrick and Gerson in 1985, genograms were originally used in the field of medicine but their use has been adopted into other disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, counselling, education and social work (McGoldrick et al., 2008). The use of genograms (or family trees) is commonplace in some areas of social work practice (for instance, in fostering and adopter assessments) and their use is becoming increasingly visible in other areas (such as social work with older people).

Put simply, a genogram is a graphic representation of a family structure and the relationships within that family. A genogram can display and provide detailed information beyond that proffered by a traditional family tree. Beesley (2010: 90) suggests that genograms allow ‘the user to analyse hereditary patterns and psychological factors that punctuate relationships’. In fact, skilful use of genograms can create intricate pictorial representations which hold detailed information about an individual and their family’s births, deaths, marriages, and when used in medical practice, genograms can include information about chronic illness and disorders such as alcohol addiction and mental ill health. However, when used at a more simplistic level, a genogram can still convey a great deal of information which is of value in your social work practice.

**How do I use genograms?**

There is a wide range of freely available software, accessible via the internet. This software automatically builds a genogram for you once you have entered your data. However, it is not always possible or appropriate to use technology when working directly with a service user; for instance, you may not have use of a laptop or you are using your placement agency’s laptop which does not come equipped with the appropriate software. Therefore, it is of great value to learn the basic symbols and format in order to be able to create a genogram when working directly with an individual, couple or family. In addition, once you have mastered the basic skill in creating a genogram, you can decide how much or how little information you include depending on the purpose of completing the exercise.

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| **An example of a simple genogram** |
| **Mark and Ali’s genogram**  80  75  70  67  45  42  Bill  40  Ted  12  Liam  Mark  38  Ali  6  3  Iona  Milly  28  25  Samina  **Genogram symbols**  45  38  45  45  38  38  45  38  Married or a civil partnership  Divorced  Cohabiting or in a long-term relationship  Separated |

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| **Genogram symbols continued**  Male Female Adopted Fostered Deceased Twins |

Where twins are identical, a horizontal line is added in addition to the depiction in the above legend. Other symbols can be found for stillborn children, gay and lesbian identities, miscarriage and for pets (who are shown by a diamond shape). A question mark is used if a gender is unknown.

When you create a genogram you can keep individual information to a minimum or you can use bigger squares and circles and include name, date of birth (and date of death if relevant) should you wish to.

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| Elizabeth Jones  DOB 13/3/1950    Brian Smith  DOB 1/1/1950  DOD 2/2/2005 |

You can show emotional relationships by including an arrow, broken or wavy lines or by using colour coded lines (which you code yourself).

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

**References**

Beesley, P. (2010) *Making Good Assessments: A Practical Resource Guide.* London: BAAF.

McGoldrick, M., Gerson,R. and Petry, S. (2008) *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention* (3rd edn). New York: W.W. Norton and Company.