

Genograms and Ecomaps: Tools for Developing a Broad View of Family

A genogram is a tool for creating a visual display of the child's family tree (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). The ecomap is a visual display of the informal and formal systems in the child's ecology. Both tools can be used to collect information with biological mothers, biological fathers, children, the kinship caregiver, other member of the kinship network, and/or the entire extended family as a whole.

When we work with families we begin with limited information and little familiarity with the family's frame of reference. It is critical to develop skills that will help us understand the family's frame of reference so that our assessments and decisions are as accurate and useful to the family as possible. Genograms and ecomaps are tools to help us gain as much information as possible about the perspective, context, and frame of reference of the families of children in kinship foster care. The genogram is a tool for collecting information about the family's structure and the family's caregiving patterns over time. Constructing a genogram with family members helps identify members of the child's kinship system who are currently involved in caring for the child, those who cared for the child in the past, and those who may be able to care for the child in the future. The ecomap helps the caseworker assess the adequacy of resources and support systems available to the child, the biological mother, biological father, current caregiver, or potential future caregivers. The genogram and ecomap may be used to facilitate engagement of fathers, children, the kinship caregiver, and other members of the kinship network to elicit their perspective on the family system and ecology. Genograms and ecomaps can be developed with biological parents working toward reunification, with kinship caregivers considering temporary or permanent care of the child, and with several members of the child's kinship system who are exploring ways that they can support the biological parent or related caregiver in rearing the child.

Construction of the genogram or ecomap should not be an end in itself. One result of constructing a genogram or an ecomap is a product, a visual depiction of the child's family or ecology. However, the process of engagement is more important than the visual

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depiction of the genogram or the ecomap. Asking questions, probing, and general information gathering in this process can be experienced as an unwelcome intrusion into a person's life and can undermine the development of trust. Questioning should be done sensitively, using good interviewing skills. When the questioning is perceived as relevant to what the person is interested in or concerned about, trust, engagement, and cooperation are promoted. Therefore, the timing and focus of developing genograms and ecomaps must relate to the current case situation and in some way to the child's safety, permanency, or well-being.

Families and their environments change over time. A family's genogram or ecomap may accurately depict the family and its environment at one point in time. Weeks or months later there may be changes in the family's structure or environment that reduce the accuracy of the genogram or ecomap. Genograms and ecomaps should be viewed as dynamic tools that should be updated or re-created over time. Comparing genograms or ecomaps constructed with the same family at two points in time allows useful comparisons, highlighting changes that the family has experienced in its structure, support systems, and ecology. It is also unlikely that two members of the family will perceive the family and its ecology in the same way. Therefore, it is likely that a genogram and ecomap constructed with a child's biological parent will look different from those constructed with the same child's maternal grandmother.

The genogram is a format for drawing a family tree and displaying family information, usually over three or more generations (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Genograms are best developed with families over several meetings. Like families, their genograms are dynamic, changing over time. Therefore, a genogram that presents an accurate picture of a family today, may not be a very accurate depiction of that family a few months later. Common symbols for constructing a genogram are contained in figure I-L.

The genogram records, organizes, and displays a great deal of information. Much of this information is sensitive and may elicit a range of emotions from family members. The genogram can be a useful engagement tool, helping families share sensitive and historical information. Genuine interest in the family's history, strengths, and child-rearing

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patterns over generations can be helpful in engaging families to tell their story. While it is necessary to ask families to describe situations that brought them to the attention of the child welfare system, it is also important to ask them to describe how they have dealt with similar situations in the past, searching for successful coping mechanisms available to the family.

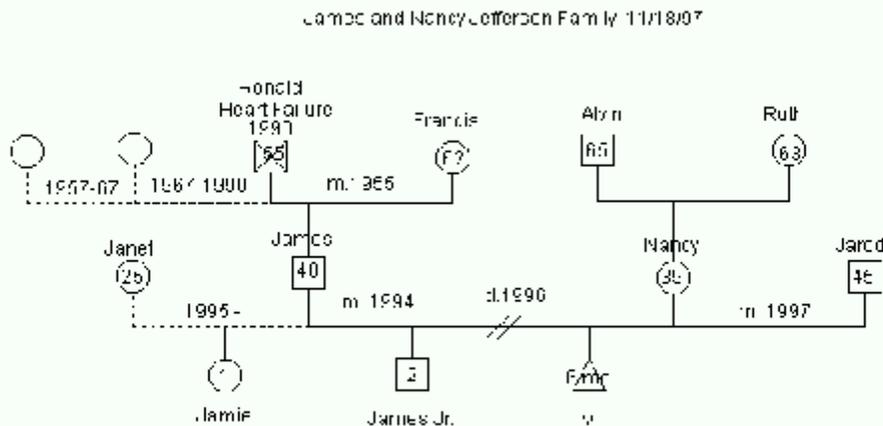
For some families, moving too quickly to collect information about three generations of the family may be viewed as prying for information that is private and not applicable to the caseworker's role. It is wise to look for "natural" openings to obtain the information needed, linking questions to specific tasks that are clear to the family. When sufficient levels of trust are established it will be easier to explore issues such as previous coupling relationships and marriages that are relevant to protection, permanency, or well-being of the children.

It is important to ask questions in a way that allows families to define their uniqueness. Ask not only "who is in the family," "who lives in the home," but also ask if there are significant family members who live elsewhere. A follow up to this would be to ask if family members have lived at various times with different members of the extended family and the circumstances surrounding these moves. This practice recognizes the extended nature of the family system and creates opportunities for family members to discuss informal adoptions and other caregiving patterns that may be components of their kinship network's coping mechanisms.

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Figure 1-L: Common Symbols for Constructing a Genogram



Males are indicated by a square; females by a circle. If you do not know the sex of a family member, indicate this by a triangle.

A married couple is indicated by a solid line connecting a square and a circle, with an "m" (for married) and the year of the marriage above the solid line. Separation or divorce is indicated by a double slash through the solid line, with "s" and the date of the separation or "d" and the date of the divorce over the double slash. An intimate relationship between adults that is not a marriage is indicated by a dotted line. In the Jefferson family genogram, the relationship between James and Janet is depicted by a dotted line. Also, the affairs that Ronald had while married to Francis are depicted by dotted lines.

In the Jefferson family, James and Nancy married in 1994. James began an affair with Janet in 1995. The relationship between James and Janet continues but they are not married. James and Nancy divorced in 1996 and Nancy married Jarod in 1997.

Children are indicated by circles, squares, and triangles attached to the line that connects the child's birth parents. Siblings born to the same couple are attached to the same line that connects the parents. The Jefferson family genogram indicates that the relationship between James and Nancy produced one female child, Jamie, who is now one year old. The relationship between James and Nancy produced two children James Jr, age two, and a six month old child, name and sex unknown to the person constructing this genogram.

James has custody of James Jr. and this is indicated by the fact that James Jr. is located on the side of the double slash closest to James' name. James Jr. and Jamie live with James and Janet. The six month old child (to the right of the double slash) lives with Nancy and Jarod.

A deceased member of the family is indicated by an "X" through the circle, square, or triangle, with the year of death indicated beside the figure. The Jefferson family genogram indicates that James' father, Ronald, died in 1990 from heart failure.

Source: McGoldrick, M. & Gerson, R. (1985). *Genograms in Family Assessment*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

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While the genogram is a particularly useful tool for creating a visual depiction of the family structure and caregiving patterns across generations, the ecomap is particularly useful for creating a visual depiction of the family's relationship with its external environment. The ecomap represents the family in relationship to other formal and informal systems that are part of the family's eco-system. An ecological assessment examines the family's relationship to its environment, the family-environment boundary, and the relationship between individual family members and the environment (Hartman, 1989). The ecomap is helpful in assessing the family's strengths, needs, resources, and resource deficits.

The ecomap is comprised of circles, each representing systems that transact with the family. These systems may be sources of support or conflict. Systems with which the family has no contact may also be included in an ecomap, if the family needs to develop a relationship with the system. For example, families with children requiring specialized medical services need to have access to good quality specialized health care. If the family does not have access to the necessary health care, including a circle in the family's ecomap labeled "specialized health care" and depicting a non-existent relationship between the specialized health care provider and the family identifies an unmet need experienced by the family. For this family, an ecological assessment may lead to development of a service plan that includes altering the ecology by linking the family to a health care provider who can provide the specialized services.

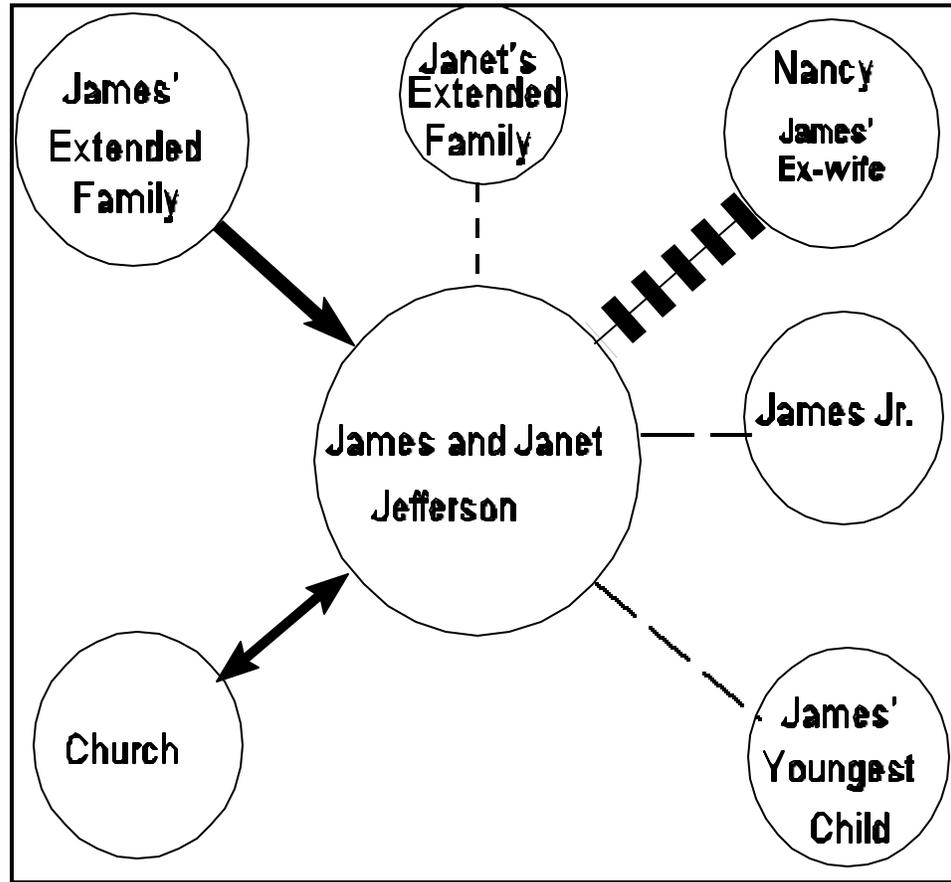
An example of an ecomap is illustrated in figure I-M. The circles represent various systems in the family's ecology. The lines between these circles represent assessments of the quality of the relationships between these systems. A solid line represents a strong relationship, such as the lines connecting James and Janet Jefferson with James extended family and with the church. A dotted line represents a tenuous relationship, such as James and Janet's relationships with James' children and Janet's extended family. Stressful relationships are depicted by hash marks drawn through the line. A stressful relationship is depicted in figure I-M between James and Janet Jefferson and Nancy, James' ex-wife and the mother of his two youngest children.

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Arrows are used to indicate the flow of energy. For example, the solid line connecting the Jefferson family with the church indicates a strong relationship. The line ends with arrows pointing from the family to the church and from the church to the

Figure I-M: Example of an Ecoa ap



family, indicating that the family invests a great deal of energy in the church and receives a great deal of support from the church. The thick line connecting James' extended family with James and Janet Jefferson has an arrow on one end, pointing from the extended family to James and Janet. This indicates that James' extended family invests a great deal of energy in James and Janet but the relationship is not reciprocal. James and Janet do not return the investment.

Families differ in their ability to accept help from others outside of the family system. Each family has a boundary that defines those who are part of the family and distinguishes these people from those who are not part of the family. Well functioning families have boundaries that are permeable enough to allow persons outside of the family to help them in times of need and allow family members to have experiences outside of the family; but

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well enough defined to maintain family integrity and privacy. The James and Janet Jefferson family depicted in figure I-M have a limited support system. In fact, the only strong reciprocal relationship they have is with their church. They do receive strong support from James' extended family but this support may not continue if James and Janet do not reciprocate.

Families define themselves in unique and varied ways and many of these ways work well for families. Like the genogram, the ecomap is a flexible tool that can be used to depict a variety of family and environmental situations. When an ecomap is constructed with a family, it facilitates discussion while allowing them to describe themselves in precise and unique ways. While there is no formula for assessing the health of a family by interpreting their ecomap, the ecomap can help child welfare practitioners assess with families whether the caregiver is receiving sufficient support in caring for the child, whether conflicts between the family and other systems are draining energy. The ecomap may also be helpful in identifying key members of the child's family or others in the family ecosystem who might be helpful in planning for the child's safety, permanent living arrangement, and future well-being.

Summary

Historically, it has been common for relatives to assist parents in the care for children or to rear the children when parents are unable to do so. This type of kinship care is still the most common. In recent years kinship care has also become a program component of the child welfare system. The formal child welfare system's involvement in kinship foster care presents both constraints and opportunities for permanency for children. Research suggests that, on average, children in kinship care fare as well or better than children in traditional foster care. However, children in state custody and living in kinship care arrangements are less likely to return home or be adopted than children in traditional foster care placements. The overwhelming majority of children in kinship foster care placements

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are children of color, and kinship caregivers tend to be older, are more likely to be single-parents, and have fewer financial resources than traditional foster parents.

Public policies describe the purpose of the child welfare practitioner as ensuring safety and permanent placement of children in homes with adults who make a commitment to raise the child to the age of majority. Safety and permanence contribute to child well-being and are as important considerations for children in kinship foster care as they are for children in traditional foster care placements. Facilitating permanency for children in kinship foster care requires a broad view of families, ongoing striving for cultural competence, collaboration with families in decision-making, and working to build the case management capacities of kinship networks to facilitate and support permanent plans for children. The genogram and ecomap are tools that help child welfare practitioners develop a broad view of the families of children in kinship care. Constructing genograms and ecomaps with family members facilitates engagement in a collaborative process, helps the caseworker begin to view the family's experience through their own unique framework, and identifies resources and support systems that may assist the family in the development of a permanent plan for the child.

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