

How to Help Families in Trouble

BRIEFING SHEET

ASSESSMENT AND TOOLS TO USE: FAMILY TREES AND ECOMAPS

This factsheet is part of a series designed to work alongside the book *How to Help Families in Trouble – a short guide* (by Honor Rhodes, published by the Family and Parenting Institute). The book is available from the Institute’s website: www.familyandparenting.org/publications

What is ‘assessment’?

Simply, assessment is the enquiry process we undertake as workers with families and individuals who have come to our agencies’ attention. How we conduct the assessment and the questions we ask depend on the nature of our role and the problems or issues that the family is facing. A complex and in-depth assessment undertaken by workers from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services would not be appropriate for a family referred to a

Housing Officer or Children's Centre where the main concerns focus on rent arrears or a parent struggling to cope after the breakup of a marriage or relationship.

Horses for courses: what do you need to know to help the family best?

On the basis that if a question is not pertinent then it is impertinent, we need to think carefully about what we need to know and who is going to give us the information we need. The manner in which we approach the task is vital; our job is to enable families to believe that by answering our questions they can enable us to find ways and means of helping them. Family members who are engaged with us in the task are the best resource we can have. We need to have built enough trust with the family to allow this to happen and we achieve this by our behaviours: being able to explain ourselves - our role, the nature of our concerns and some of the things that we might be able to do to help. Many families engage rapidly on this basis but some take longer. They may be more suspicious of us, more anxious about their struggles or firmly believe that any agency knocking on their door will lead to children being taken away from them. These families need more time and need to feel more in control of the information-giving process. You can help by being reliable and courteous, listening intently to what they have to say and thinking with them about the problems that they are finding it hard to talk about. You might want to say something like, *"It is hard to talk to someone you don't know well about difficult things, but if we can talk about this together then I will be able to help you better. Lots of families find starting hard but are relieved when they have done so. Just trying to help me understand you can help you, too."*

Questions need not always be asked to get the information we need - try using family trees and ecomaps

It is sensible to remember that some questions are much harder to answer than others so we should always begin with the easier ones; the "Who lives here?" and "What schools do the children go to?" are simpler and demand factual answers rather than the, "Why is Alice/Bernard refusing to go to school?" or "What is the impact on your family of your partner moving out?".

Rather than ask lots of questions, we can use tools like family trees (or geneograms) or relationship maps (or ecomaps) to help families tell us about themselves. Both require you to have brought with you some large sheets of paper (flipchart paper is ideal) and big bright marker pens in a variety of colours. **Before trying these out on families, try them yourself and again with a colleague, - that way you'll be able to explain the task better and know some of the issues and problems that can emerge.**

A well-planned family tree session and ecomapping should give you valuable information on:

- The nature of this family, who is in it, who is outside it, what does everyone do? Where are grandparents? Where are gaps and how did they come about? Who parents whom? Who is seen as the most powerful person and how do they manage that?
- Family culture: what are the family 'rules' about decision-making; childcare; discipline; emotional intimacy/distance; expressions of love and anger? What is this like across generations?

- Family communication: are there identifiable channels of communication? Who communicates to whom and how?
- The relationship systems: how do members of this family feel about each other? Who is closest to whom? Are there secret and not-so-secret alliances? What are the major conflicts within the family from each person's point of view?
- The family through time: what is the history of this family and its major events, (marriage, children, etc.)? Are there significant themes or patterns; events in the family history; major losses; changes; and how has the family handled them?
- The family network: what persons or systems are important to the family? Outside the immediate family, where does the family turn for support?
- How does the family 'fit' in relation to larger society? Are there problems with other organisations, neighbours, schools, work, faith community etc.?

The use of these methods offers the worker a vital chance to observe and engage the family in their environment. Get the family to sit with you around a table and start drawing. Start with "Who is this family?" Gather names, ages, relationships and occupations - religion might be important too. Significant family events (deaths, marriages and accidents) can all be included to help the family explain themselves to you and, in doing so, perhaps explain themselves to one another.

It is always helpful to include as many generations as you can and certainly ask about parents' own parents, as this will give you information on their early lives and experiences.

Conventional symbols



Female, child or adult (useful to put age inside the circle)



Male, child or adult



Pregnancy/miscarriage/abortion where the gender of the foetus/infant is not known



Enduring adult relationship/marriage or blood tie



Adult relationship/non-marital couple relationship



Separation of a married couple, children remain with the parent on one side of the diagonal line

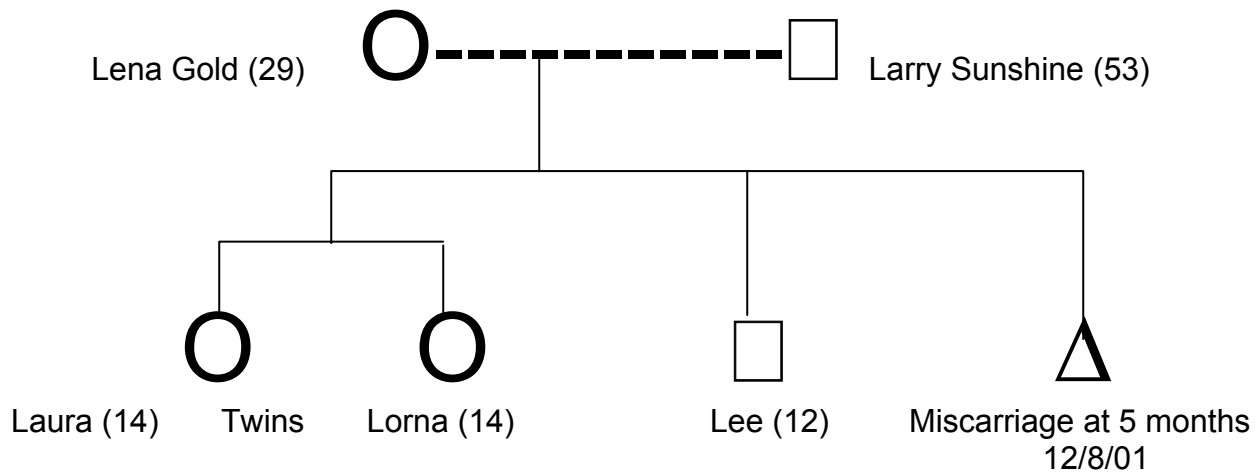


Divorce of a married couple in April 2002



Separation of a co-habiting couple

Sunshine family



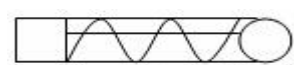


This tells us that Lena Gold had her first children by Larry when she was 15, she continues to live with him, as co-habitants, and has had another child; two years ago she was pregnant but lost the baby at 5 months, the sex of the child was not disclosed or known.

We know nothing about Lena or Larry's families of origin. It is significant that this information is not available; perhaps Lena and Larry did not want to talk about it at this stage or perhaps not in front of their children. The worker in this case went back to visit when the children were not at home and found out a great deal from both parents that helped enormously in understanding the twins' school refusal and Lee's offending. It is in the three generations of information that patterns emerge, names may be understood as significant and 'absences/family secrets' appear.

Using the geneogram again to make it fuller or reflect quality of relationships

You can return with the family's geneogram and add more to it. You can get information on the strength and nature of relationships by using the relationship lines in a different way,

<p>Difficult or upsetting relationship with conflict</p> 	<p>Difficult or upsetting relationship with conflict that has been cut off</p> 	<p>Intense relationship with lots of conflict</p> 
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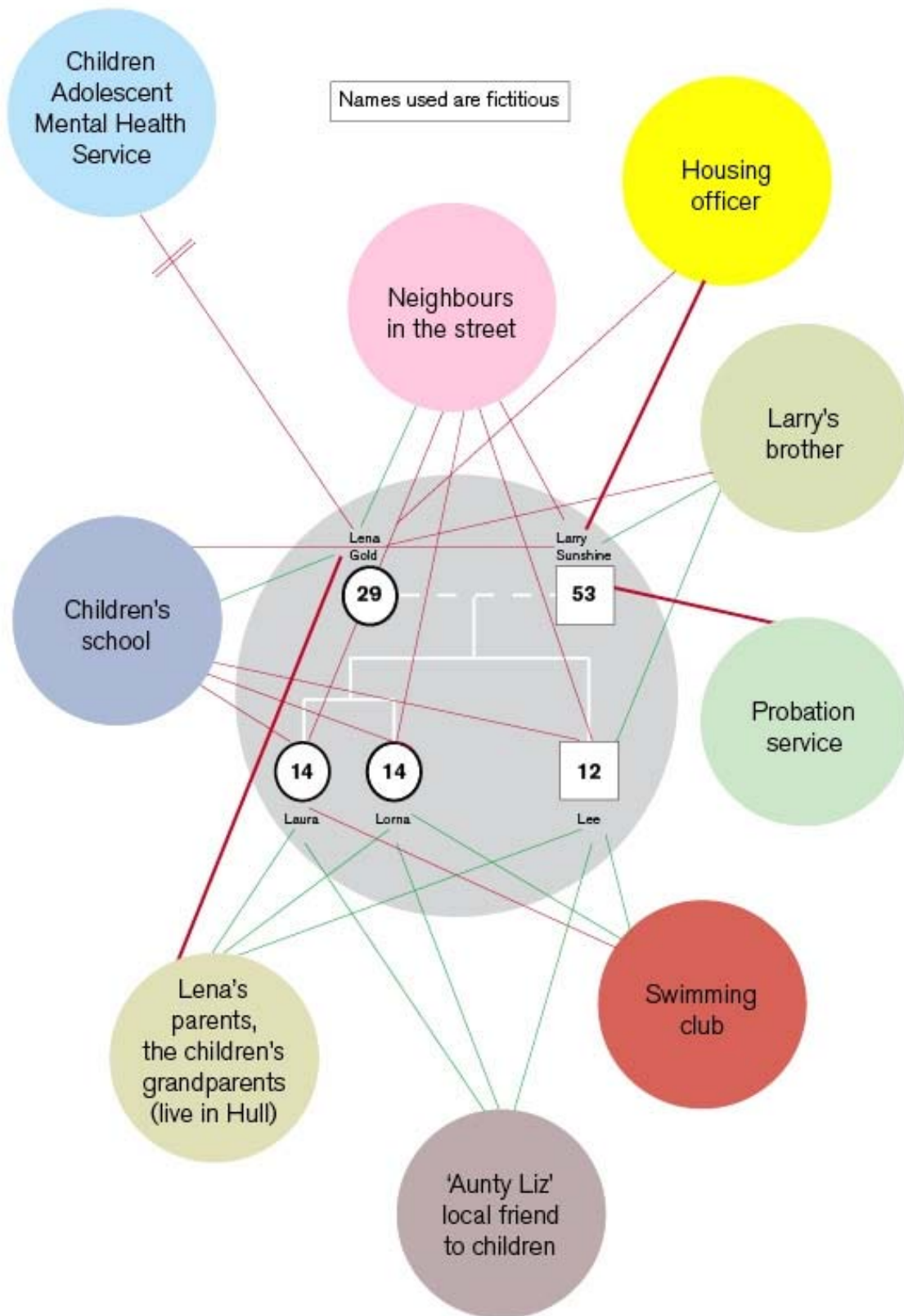
Ecomapping

Again, you'll need a big sheet of paper because you and the family are going to draw their world and their relationships to it.

Through mapping we get information about:

- The family and how they see their world
- Areas of conflict and their origins
- Where the family get help or resources and where they offer support and help to others
- Pinpointing conflicts to be resolved or reduced and where our help can most usefully be focused and those of other agencies.

Below is an example of the ecomap drawn with the family whose geneogram is above (thicker lines denote strength of relationship):



You can see that current family is located in the centre of the large circle. Other circles are added to surround them representing agencies and people who are outside the family. These include Lena's parents who are supportive of the children but place her in some distress as her relationship with them is very painful.

Once the circles for the outside world are in place you can start to help the family make judgements on the quality and nature of those relationships. You may do this in colour as, for some families, it is only when they see mostly red 'angry' lines that they pause and reflect on why so few are green 'positive' ones. Different relationships with same agency, for example, Larry's hostile relationship with the children's school and Lena's better one, tells you something about how to proceed using that strength.

It will start the discussion on what has to change and how the family might reduce its struggles and concentrate on building its strengths. It will focus your mind on how, where and when to help for maximum effect.

It's the process NOT the product!

What you get from this should not be lovely and beautifully drawn diagrams – it's the doing that is the most important thing, the conversation that flows as the family discuss why they had a falling out with their neighbours and the school - it is from this that you will take your work forward.

Who owns the pieces of paper?

The family do, it is their story, but they may want you to take the paper away with you as it can be a painful reminder for them of problems. You can keep it safe, as you may want to return with it as a part of your review of work process, reminding them how their family looked when you first met them and what has changed. The family may want to keep them or destroy them; what they reveal is private and painful often, after all. It is always sensible to ask if you can copy down what they have written so that you can have a clear reminder of what they were saying when you first met them. Explain that you need to think about what they have shown you as the process went along.

After a session?

You need time to digest all the family have told you. Show the diagrams to your manager and talk about the process; this will enable you to think more about issues you might have missed or the family might have avoided. Return to the diagrams before you meet the family again to refresh for yourself the questions you now need to ask and to double check your understanding.

Does this briefing help you?

We want to produce simple briefing sheets that assist family practitioners everywhere. Does this sheet answer your questions? Is there more you'd like to see? Help us to help you by posting your thoughts on our Practitioner Forum website and we'll continue to revise the papers in the light of your comments.