

Rough Guide to Mapping Family Networks

Introduction

Effective work with families is at the heart of many professionals roles across education, social care, healthcare, and community services. Understanding the dynamics, strengths, and support systems within a family network is essential for delivering person-centred, culturally responsive, and sustainable support.

This professional toolkit is designed to equip all professionals working with families and children with practical tools and strategies to engage families meaningfully and map their networks with clarity and purpose.

This guide provides guidance and resources on how to explore family relationships, uncover informal support systems, and recognise both risk and resilience within family contexts. Whether you are conducting assessments, planning interventions, or supporting long-term case management, the resources in this toolkit will help you move beyond surface-level engagement to a deeper understanding of family and support structures and community connections. It is grounded in principles of respect, inclusion, and partnership, and is adaptable across diverse settings and cultural contexts.

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1. Best Questions

It can be difficult for individuals or families to identify the people who support them, especially if this support is given on an informal basis. These questions are designed to help you prompt them to think outside of formal family structures and identify their informal support structures.

Questions to Assist in Finding Networks

Signs of Safety (Hartlepool Practice Model): Network Best Questions Matrix

Systemic Practice (Stockton Practice Model): Best Questions for Finding Support Networks

“I don’t have anyone”

Negative	Positive
Past Who would Mum say have been the people close to her or know her in the past that were really bad to her and bad for her? What would Mum say were the worst things that person/those people did?	Past Who helped you the most to get through the difficult times in the past? Who would your son say helped you most? Who else? What would your Mum say she was trying to do to help you (even though you think what she did was appalling)
Present Who are the people you know, on Facebook or somewhere else, who you would never talk to and keep away from? What is it about who they are and what they do that makes you want to avoid them?	Present Who are the people you know, on Facebook or somewhere else, that you like even if you don't have much to do with them? What do you like about them? Who do you know who has a lot of people to support them – what do you think is good about that? Who are the people your son thinks would be good for you?
Future If you asked someone to help you, what's your worst fear about what they might do that would make you feel bad or embarrassed? Who would be the worst person to help you solve these problems?	Future Who would be the best people/type of people to get to help your family solve these problems? What would they do? Suppose you had the exact people you wanted in your life supporting you, who would they be, what would they say and do? What would they say they would be doing to help you?

2. Genograms

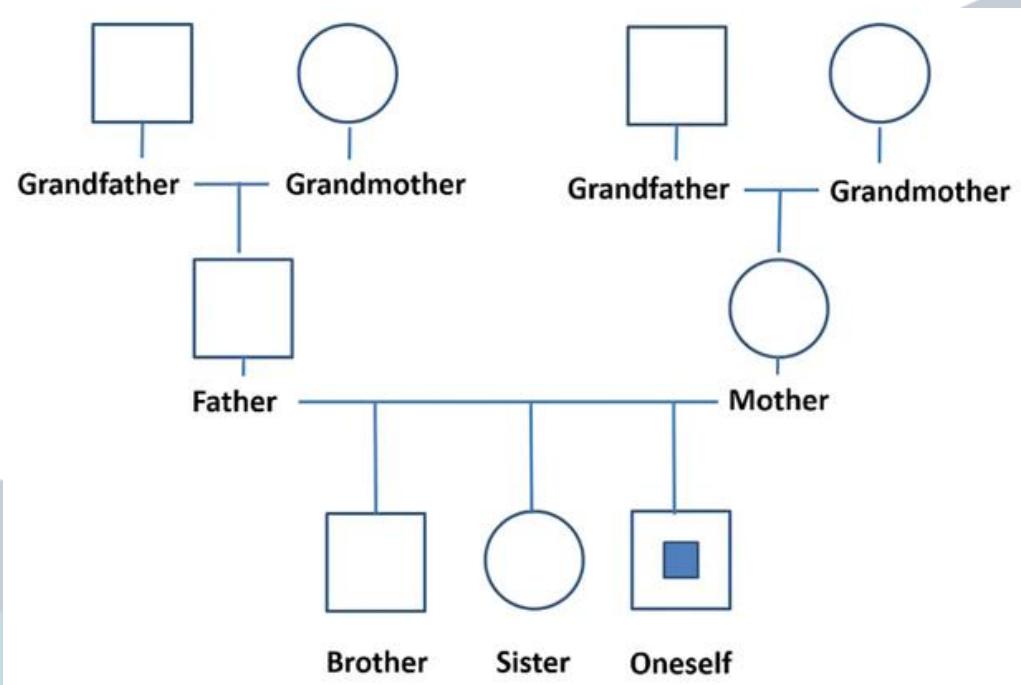
A genogram is a visual tool that **maps out a family's structure and relationships** across generations. It contains the names and biological connections of family members, but also can hold key information such as ages, health issues, emotional relationships, patterns of behaviour, and significant life events.

Professionals can use genograms to **gain deeper insight into family dynamics, identify patterns (such as inherited health conditions or cycles of trauma), and understand the roles and influence of different family members.** In a family mapping context, genograms help practitioners to:

- Visualise and understand complex family structures quickly
- Identify key caregivers, support networks, or areas of concern
- Facilitate meaningful conversations with individuals and families
- Inform assessments, care planning, and interventions

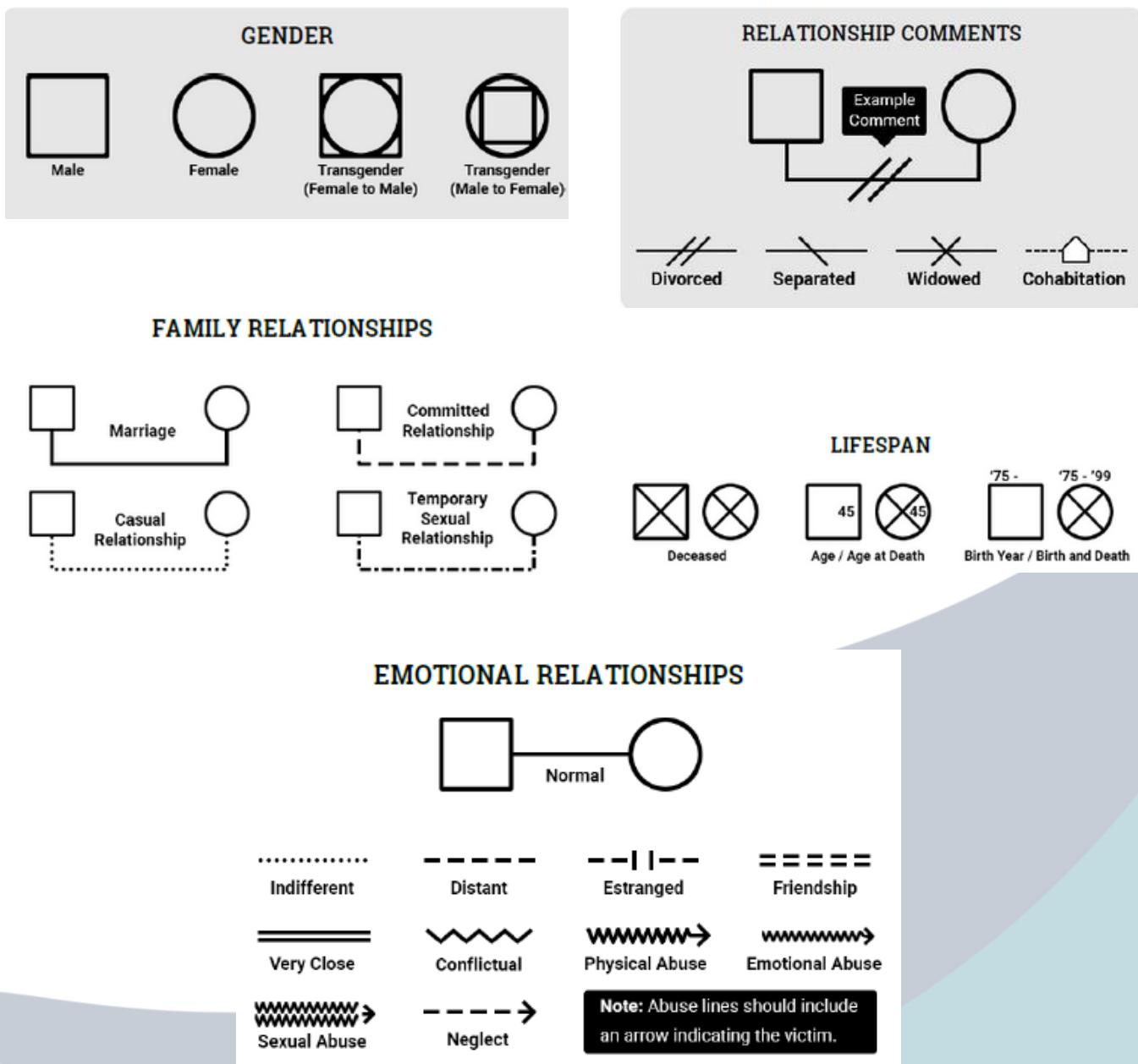
By highlighting both strengths and stressors within a family network, genograms support more **holistic, informed, and person-centred approaches** to working with children, adults, and families.

Below is a very basic example of a genogram for a simple family structure.



Basic Genogram Symbols/Key

There are many symbols that can be used in a genogram to symbolise relationships and their dynamics. Below are some of the basic symbols to use. It is necessary to include a key at the side of your genogram to ensure that the information and relationships are easily understood.

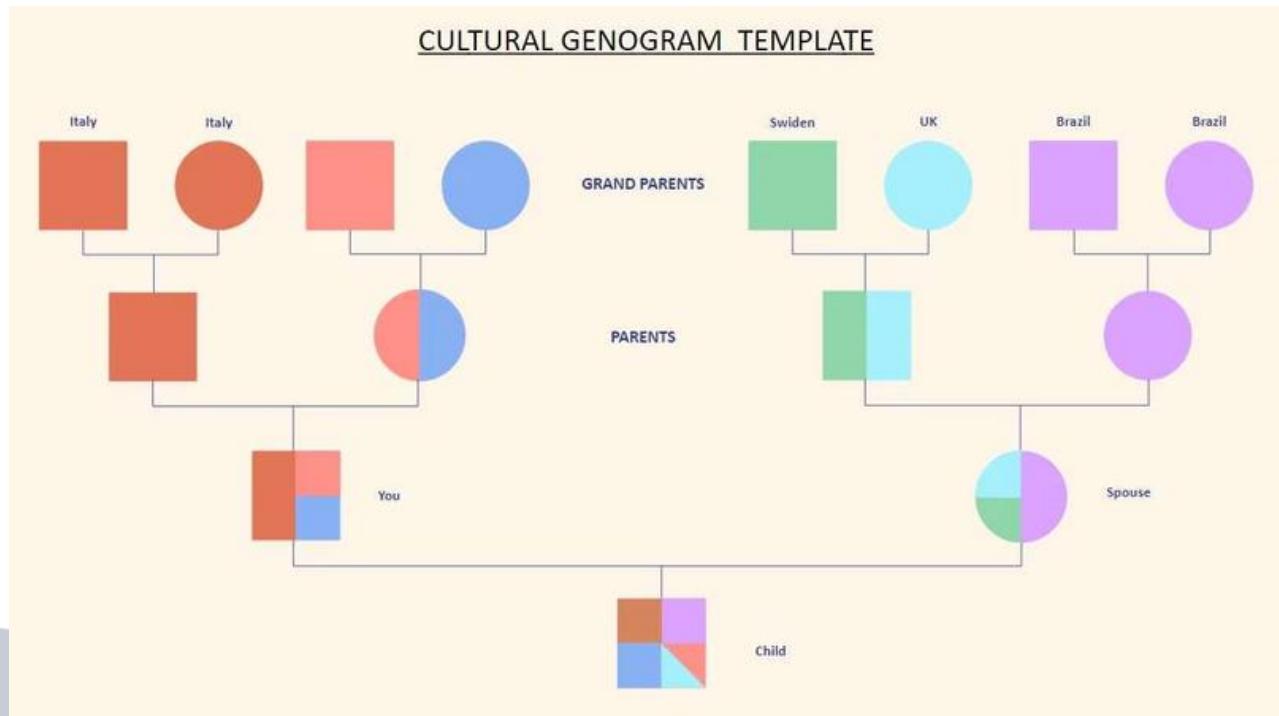


3. Cultural Genograms

Genograms can also be used to map a person's cultural, familial, and intergenerational dynamics, which can provide a richer and more nuanced picture of a person's background and lived experience.

In professional settings, cultural genograms can support a more culturally responsive and person-centred practice, enhancing communication, assessment, and intervention planning.

A cultural genogram uses the same standardised symbols and lines as a regular genogram to map out family structure, relationships, and significant cultural factors over at least 3 generations. In addition to the standard symbols and lines, cultural genograms might use additional visual cues, such as colour coding, symbols, or annotations, to highlight cultural affiliations, language fluency, religious practices, migration events, experiences of displacement and other identity-shaping factors.



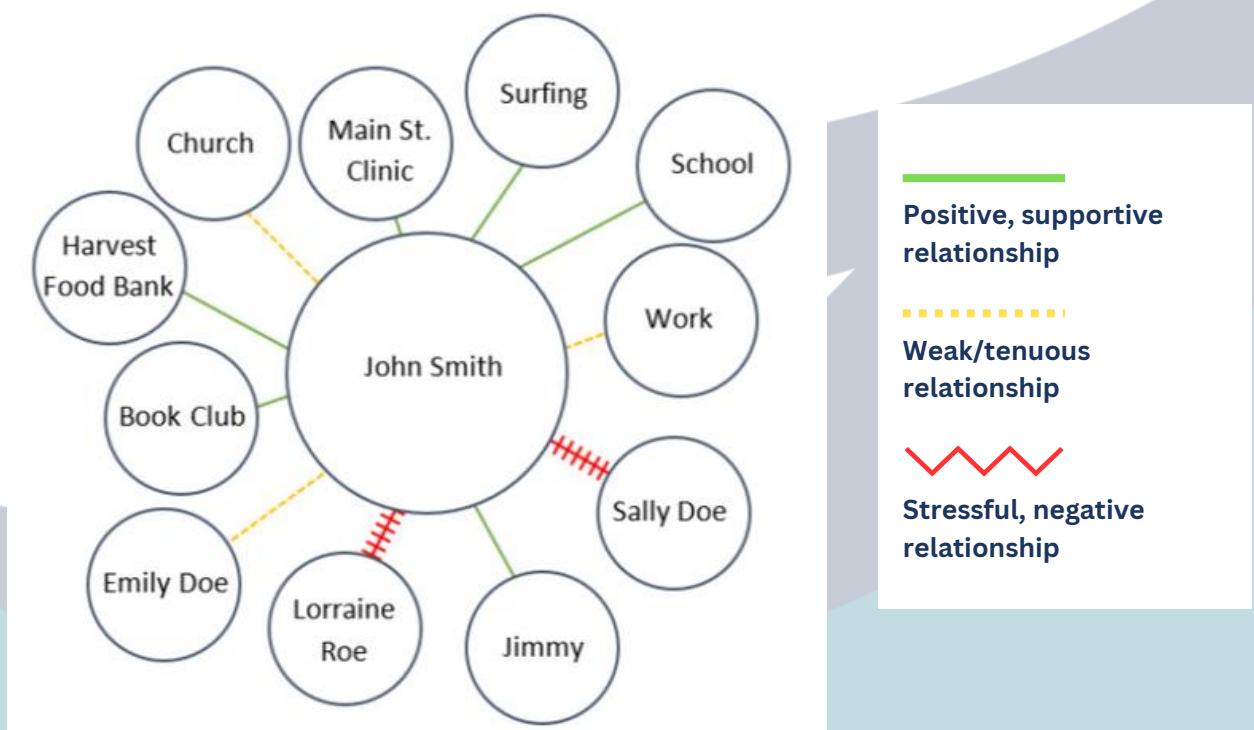
4. Ecomaps

Ecomaps are visual tools to explore and understand the complex web of relationships and environmental systems surrounding an individual or family. They are widely used across health, education, and social care settings to support a holistic and person-centred approach to assessment and planning.

Ecomaps provide a snapshot of a person's family connections with key people, services, and community resources. They help practitioners to identify sources of support, areas of conflict or stress, and potential gaps in service provision. By placing the individual or family and mapping out connections with others, ecomaps can visually illustrate both formal and informal networks - including extended family, friends, schools, healthcare providers, housing services, religious groups and more.

Example with Key

The below ecomap example shows the individual at the centre, surrounded by the people, organisations, community groups and services in their life. The lines joining the individual to each circle show the nature of the relationship. This can help the individual/family and the practitioner to quickly identify sources of support and areas of concern in their life and inform planning.



5. Family Safety Circles

Family Safety Circles are a simple yet powerful visual tool used to help individuals or families map out the people in their lives based on emotional safety, support, and stress. This exercise promotes open conversations around trust, boundaries, and relational dynamics - especially helpful in work with families navigating trauma, instability, conflict, or complex caregiving role.

By literally 'drawing out' a network of relationships, individuals are guided to identify not only who they feel safe or unsafe with, but also those whose presence may be ambiguous, draining, or underutilised. This tool is especially useful when working with children, teens, trauma survivors, or families under stress.

How to use:

On a blank sheet of paper or worksheet, draw 3 or 4 concentric circles, like a target.

Label the centre: 'Me' or 'Us'

Label each layer from inside to out:

- Inner Circle: very safe/supportive people
- Middle Circle: Sometimes safe or neutral
- Outer Circle: unreliable, unsafe, or stressful
- Options outside the circles: no contact/harmful

Use best questions (link can be found on page 3) to guide the discussion and help them to sort the people in their life into the circles.

5. Family Safety Circles: Templates

