



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Drawing a genogram

## Introduction

Genograms are simple and effective to use in supervision. This learning tool explains what they are and how they can be used to provide rich insights and reflections in supervision discussions. You don't need to be an expert to use genograms. We hope this tool will encourage you to use them with your supervisees.

You can find a short film that shows a genogram being drawn and used in supervision on the website next to this tool. We suggest you watch the film after you've read through it.

Other learning tools in this section of the website ('Using systemic questions in supervision' and 'Social GRRRAACCEEESSS and the LUUUTT model') also complement the information contained in this one and would be useful to read in tandem.

## What is a genogram?

A genogram is a visual tool which shows a family tree of at least three generations. It is used to give a pictorial representation of a family system.

Genograms are a foundational tool used in systemic practice, where there's a focus 'on relationships' and a recognition 'that individuals are always embedded in their social context' (Burns, 2018).

Genograms help us to be curious about relationships in the family from the perspective of different family members. Because they are pictures, they enable us to engage with ideas and information about a family in a different way than if we had read a written report.

Read the following quotation taken from Burns (2018):

'Patterns of belief and behaviour which may give rise to problems in daily life, here and now, may also be tracked back through the generations. These patterns are strongly influential, the more so if they are unrecognised. They can also be a source of strength and resilience.'

This quote highlights how significant genograms can be for social work practice, given that they can help us to track and reflect on the impact of different patterns of beliefs and behaviour through the generations within families. This includes the impact of adverse experiences on family functioning, as well as identifying relationships within the family system that are resilient and supportive. More specifically, genograms help us to:

**map family and other significant relationships**

**think about life stages and transitions**

**understand why a particular issue is significant now**

**map out professional help in the past and present**

**identify resources within the family's life.**

Genograms are usually drawn and discussed with families themselves. They are considered to be a therapeutic tool that enables the family to learn more about themselves and each other. The act of drawing a genogram and talking about this with a practitioner is useful in creating feedback for the family to consider, and to gain a more rounded perspective about whether or not there are connections between life events and the issues of concern. Similarly, when used in supervision discussions, genograms can help supervisees and practice supervisors to generate feedback and ideas about family life and relationships in exactly the same way.

You can see an example of a genogram in figure 1 below

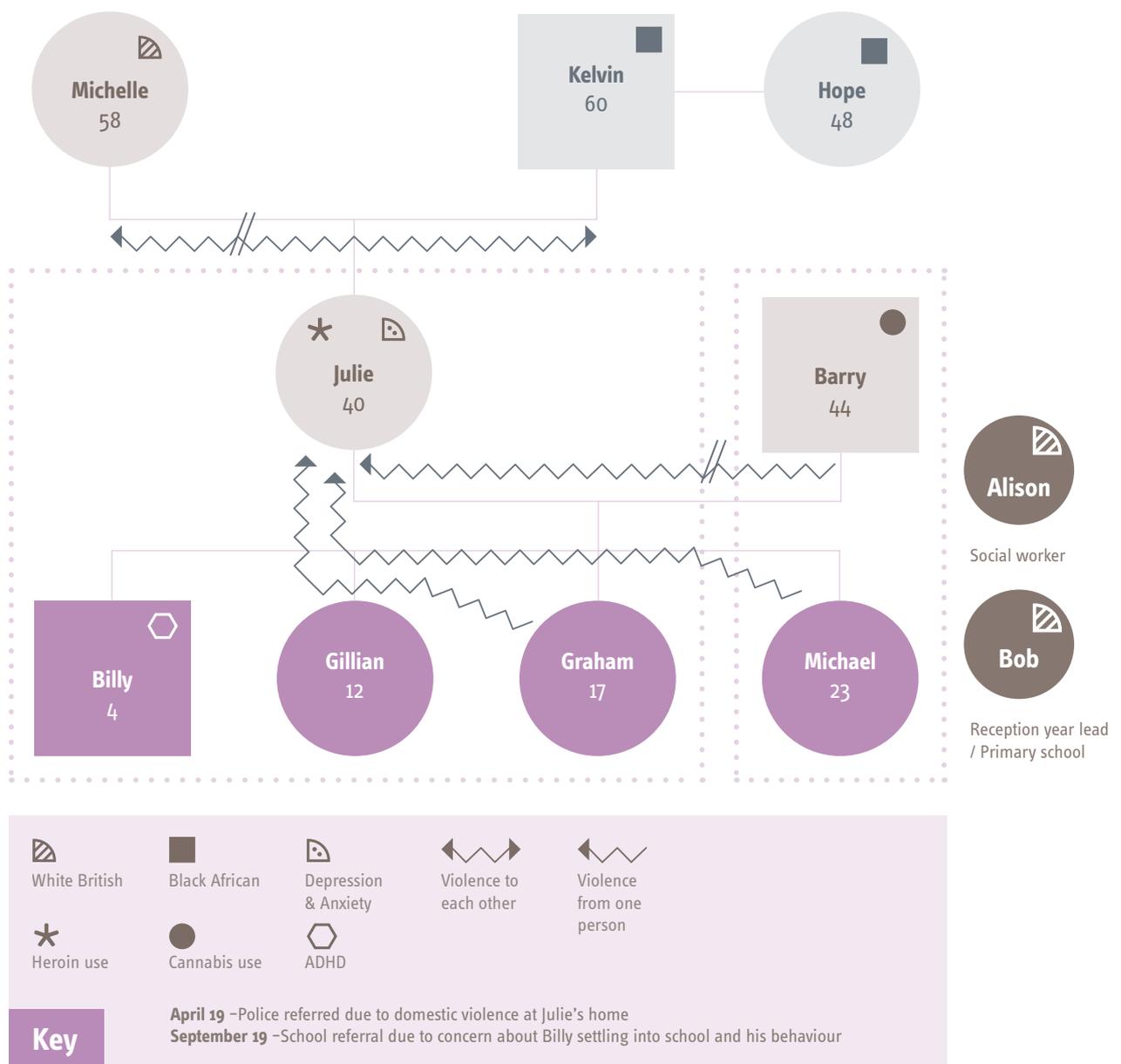


Figure 1: example of a genogram

## What information goes on a genogram?

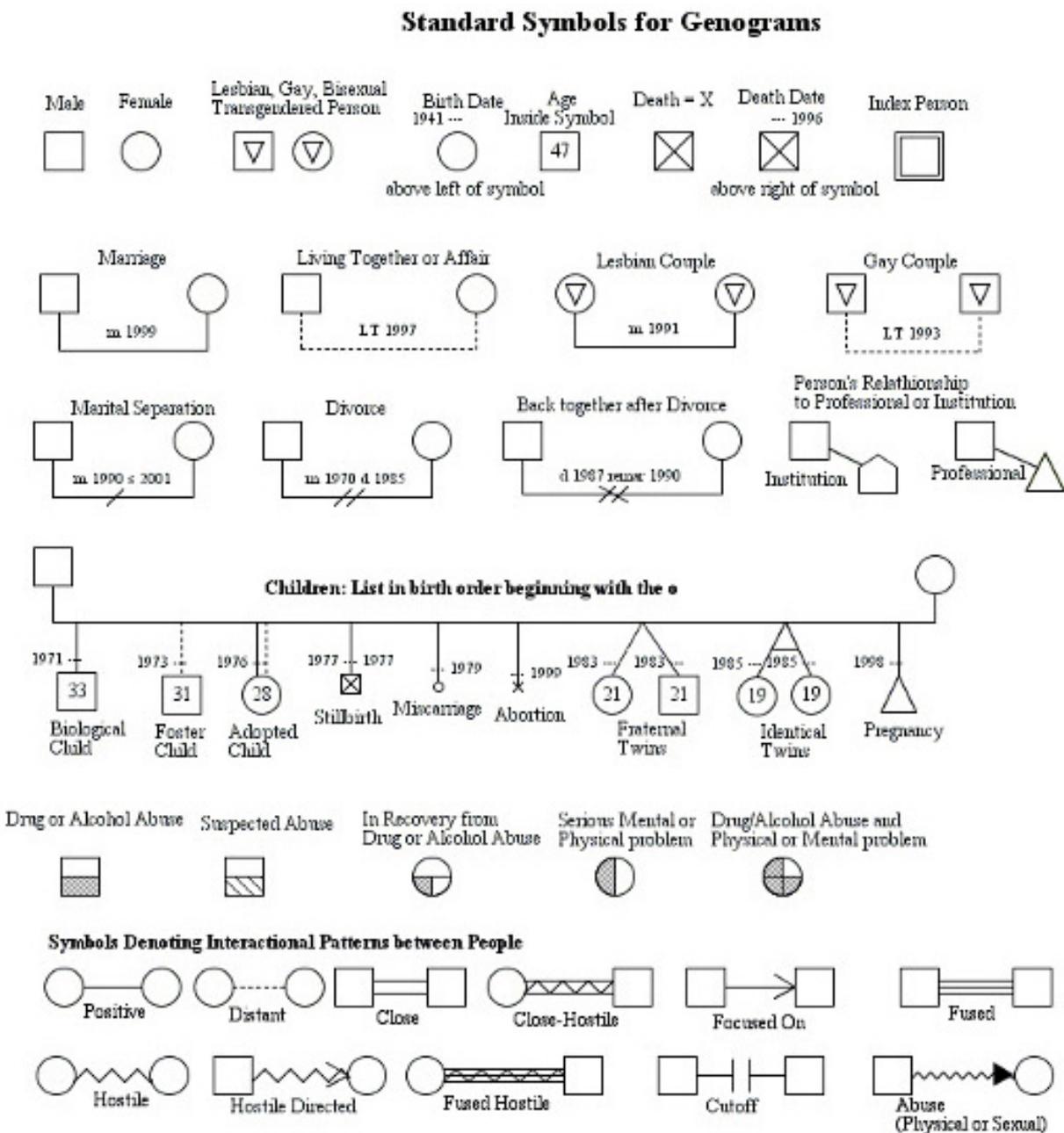
Genograms typically include the following information:

- > names and ages of all family members
- > information on three or more generations
- > dates of birth, marriage, separation, divorce, death and other significant life events
- > notation with dates about transitions, migration, illness and other changes in life
- > other significant relationships and / or connections with community agencies, i.e. church, mosque, school etc.
- > details of cultural background
- > significant dates and events in relation to social work involvement.

You should always include the practitioner and other workers involved with the family in the genogram, along with information about gender, age, culture and any other factors relevant to working with the family.

Have a look at figure 2 below, which shows you the most commonly used symbols on genograms.

Figure 2: standard symbols for genograms adapted from Power (1992)



More detailed information about symbols used on genograms can be found [here](#).

## Using genograms in supervision

1. Before using a genogram in supervision, it is important that you discuss what genograms are and how they can be helpful to your supervisee. You should encourage your supervisee to use the genogram as a visual prompt to help them think creatively about the family and explain how you want to work with them using this tool.
2. The first stage in constructing a genogram is to get the basic information on the page. We recommend that you avoid moving into discussion at this point with your supervisee and focus on getting the key information for the genogram down on paper in 2-3 minutes. It is important to remember that genograms record a moment in time. They can be redrawn as many times as needed in order to explore family life. For this reason, it is useful to always include the date when you completed a genogram.
3. Having done so, you can then move into a fuller discussion using the genogram as a visual prompt. Ask your supervisee to start to think about what they know about the family. If any factors are significant these should be drawn onto the genogram so that they can be recorded visually.
4. In order to get the conversation started, you might ask the supervisee to pay particular attention to patterns and connections that are transgenerational (across generations) and intergenerational (between generations).

## Using genograms in supervision (continued)

5. We suggest that you also pay attention in your discussion to:
  - > Culture-identities, migration and issues of pride and shame. It can be helpful to identify ‘organizing principles’ of culture(s) which can include fundamental perceptions, beliefs and behaviour (e.g. in Jewish culture, ‘fear of persecution’ could be an organizing principle and ‘educational achievement’ could be an issue of pride or shame (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995).
  - > The social GRRRAACCEEESSS is a model that describes aspects of personal and social identity which include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality (Burnham, 2013). It can be helpful to ask your supervisee to reflect on whether any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS are significant in helping to understand how the family members respond to each other or to the worker? For example, gender scripts and roles of family members.
  - > Loss and bereavement and patterns of illness, alcohol use, violence or abuse etc.
  - > Circular patterns of behaviour in which family members respond to each other in particular ways (e.g. when the parents argue, the child runs away).

You might also find the following prompt questions useful:

What are the migration patterns in the family?	What are the dominant religious groups?	How is social class thought about?	How are gender roles defined in the family?
What occupational roles are valued and devalued?	What are some ideas about success and failure?	What is the relationship between age and values in the group?	How is family defined in the group?
How are any intercultural relationships negotiated?	If there is more than one cultural group in the family, how are differences negotiated?	Who is close in the family and who isn't?	What stories does the family have about itself?

Who is included or excluded in the family? Who agrees / disagrees with each other in the family?

How open can the family be with each other and how much do they know about each other?

Are there any aspects of family members' culture(s) that are seen positively (that they feel proud of) or negatively (that causes them to feel ashamed)?

How is emotion expressed in the family?

How are any intercultural / same-sex / cross-class partnerships negotiated?

6. It is also helpful to ask about areas of similarity and difference between the family's experiences, culture and background, and those of the supervisee. In particular, it is useful to consider the advantages and disadvantages this might have in the work, as well as the impact on the supervisee.

For example, if the supervisee has children the same age as those belonging to a family they work with, there might be a strong connection or feelings of anger around how those children are being brought up.

You might want to explore with the supervisee:

What things about the family do you like? What things bug you or get under your skin about this family? Are there any aspects of this family's life and experiences which are similar or very different to your own family life or culture? What impact might this have on how you see the family or engage with them? What are the dominant religious groups?

What prejudices or stereotypes do others have about the family's culture of origin? What prejudices or stereotypes does your culture of origin have about other groups?

Drawing genograms can assist workers to consider the culture(s) of origin in the family, which refer to, for example, the major groups from which we are descended, ethnicity, nationality, region, culture, class and / or political affiliation.

In supervision, this can assist mapping out the differences and similarities between practitioner and supervisor. This is an area you may also want to reflect on as part of the discussion, given that insights from it may have a direct bearing on how the worker approaches the family in future.

7. As you complete your discussion you should leave time for open questions and seek feedback from your supervisee. You might want to ask about whether or not they have gained any new insights during the discussion.

It is also useful to spend time reflecting with your supervisee about:

what new hypotheses they've developed from discussions about what might be happening in the family

what new areas of discussion and questioning they'd like to try with the family.

## Other ways you can use this tool

Use genograms in group supervision to explore work with a family. Hearing the multiple perspectives and discussions that result from the reflections and input of other team members is a rich learning experience.

Set up a workshop for the team to practice doing their own genograms and encourage them to start using them with families if they don't already do so.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

## References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GRRAAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (2012) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

Burns L (2018) *What is systemic practice?* Blog post, [communitycare.co.uk](http://communitycare.co.uk). Available online: [www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/04/30/systemic-practice/](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/04/30/systemic-practice/)

Hardy K and Laszloffy T A (1995) 'The Cultural Genogram: Key to Training Culturally Competent Family Therapists'. *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 21 (3) 227-336.

Power T A (1992) *Family Matters: A Layperson's Guide to Family Functioning*. New Hampshire: Hathaway Press.

---

Practice Supervisor Development Programme  
The Granary Dartington Hall  
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692

email [ask@rip.org.uk](mailto:ask@rip.org.uk)

 [@researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) #PSDP

[www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk](http://www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk)

**Authors:** Esther Usiskin Cohen,  
Consultant Systemic Psychotherapist  
and Systemic Training Portfolio  
Manager, Tavistock and Portman NHS  
Foundation Trust

Alison Domakin, Practice and  
Engagement Lead, Practice Supervisor  
Development Programme

Research in Practice is a programme of  
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company  
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.  
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756  
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:  
The Elmhist Centre, Dartington Hall,  
Totnes TQ9 6EL