

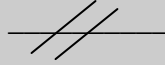
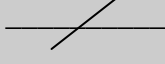






Gathering information: Genograms

The demands placed upon parents caring for a child with autism contribute to a higher overall incidence of parental stress, depression, anxiety and can adversely impact upon family functioning and marital relationships compared to parents of children with other intellectual, developmental or physical disabilities. Therefore it is important that early intervention services provide family support together with parent education programmes as well as child-centred services and activities.

Intervention begins with assessment that provides a full picture of the child and family's needs. A key worker should be appointed when the assessment process begins. Typically assessment of the child will include information about the child's profile of autism symptoms, learning style, developmental level – profile of abilities and communication skills. Assessment of the family should include information about the family needs, strengths, parent education needs and supports and resources. Getting to know the family is an important first step. Drawing a genogram during the initial parent interview is a useful method to gather information about the family you are working with. Put simply, a genogram visually represents family relationships and provides an opportunity to gather information from the family not only about their child with autism but also may include relevant information about siblings, the wider family, social supports, and any mental health or medical issues. It allows you to gather an extensive amount of information very efficiently and may also identify gaps in knowledge about the wider family. For example there may be parts of the family about which little or nothing is known or where there is estrangement. A genogram may include a chronology of important family events, and information about ethnic and religious background, occupation, losses, family migrations, and identify intergenerational family patterns and roles. It is not unusual to find problems such as learning difficulties, problems with speech and language, and mental and physical ill health in families where there is a child with autism. The genogram can provide a multigenerational context for exploring problems such as these.

These are the basic symbols used in a genogram

Female	●	Divorced	
Male	■	Separated	
Unknown/foetus	▲	Couple never married
Twins		Deceased	
Identical twins		Adopted child	

General rules when drawing a genogram:

- Indicate focus child with a bold shape / colour it in
- Start with oldest child on the left
- Each vertical line should represent a generation (e.g. all cousins on one line)
- It is helpful to write in ages of family members
- Draw a line around all family members who live with the focus child
- Always draw the genogram so that the parents can see the drawing. This helps to clarify that the genogram is correct and makes the process more open and interactive

What questions to ask?

First, start with the parents:

- Age - occupation - health
- Are the parents still together?
- If not - access arrangements
- Parental mental health – current/in the past
- Who else is in the family?
- Child with autism – age, sex, any other diagnoses?
- Siblings of the child with autism – age, sex, school/work?
- Have any of the siblings had any significant illnesses or learning problems?

Next gather information about the mother’s side of the family. (Usually work up *one side* at a time)

Ask about the focus child’s maternal grandparents:

- Are they still alive?
- If not what was the cause of their death?
- Is that something that runs in the family?
- General health – any problems with mental health?
- How was your mother/father for you growing up?

Next ask about mother’s siblings and their children:

- Are they still alive? Cause of death?
- General health – any problems with mental health?
- How did you get along with them growing up?
- Do they have children? How many? (First cousins of the child with autism)
- Any problems with development or learning in the cousins?
- Does anyone in the mother’s wider family (aunts/uncles/cousins of the parents) have learning difficulties?
- Is anyone in your wider family prone to anxiety or depression?
- Is anyone in the wider family a bit different? Is there anyone in the wider family who is a bit of a loner?

Repeat for father and his side of the family

