

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Workers: Simple Guide to Eco-Maps

Eco-maps, like genograms are a visual tool that can provide very useful information for workers and clients in the process of developing case plans.

Whilst genograms provide an historical picture of the family and the links across and between generations, eco-maps locate the family in their current social context. They provide a visual map of the family's connections to the external world.

They give workers a comprehensive picture of:

- the family dynamics – relationships that are nurturing or conflictual;
- each individual family members connections to social support systems. For example: housing support, income support, counselling, justice programs etc and the quality of these connections;
- each individual family members connections to their community. For example: significant friends, neighbours, sports clubs, spiritual influences - and the quality of these connections;
- the whole family unit's level of connectedness to the external world;
- areas of deprivation where resources may need to be mobilized or strengthened;
- and areas of service duplication.


They provide a useful tool for assessment of family, social and community relationships and the quality of these connections.


They can be particularly useful in working with migrant and refugee families to get a picture of the breadth of their social and family connections or to map areas of isolation or disconnection that may need to be addressed.

### Drawing an Eco-map


1) Use a white board or a large piece of paper and draw a large circle in the centre. In this circle describe each member of the immediate family - squares to show males and circles to show females. Put each persons name and age in the centre of the square or circle.

2) Identify the quality of the relationship between the family members through the use of lines:

a.  a solid or thick line represents an important, strong or positive connection

b.  a broken line represents a tenuous or weak connection

c.  lines with crosses through them indicate a stressful relationship

d.  arrows along the line point towards the direction or flow of resources, energy or interest.

3) Next identify any significant extended family relationships or important friendships and the quality of these relationships currently using the lines outlined above.

4) Next identify the social and environmental systems which impact on the family. For example their links to school, work, church, welfare support agency, child protection services, youth justice, department of corrections etc. Then draw a line to represent the quality of the relationship between the family member and the environmental system that has been identified as above.

5) Connections can be drawn to the family circle as a whole or to one individual in the family if there is one person involved with that system. This helps to show the differing levels of connectedness to the external world amongst family members.

6) Always put a date on your eco-map.

### Using ecomaps as a baseline for discussion

When working with a young person's family, there may be some disagreement amongst family members about the quality of the relationships and level and nature of support provided by extended family, friends, church, school and other external sources.

As a practitioner, try to view this sort of discussion as useful. It may help to elicit each family member's beliefs about the role of family and community and something of the underlying values held by each individual within the family unit.

It can be very useful to repeat this exercise after a few months of working with a family to assess any changes in the family's relationship with the external environment and whether there is increased levels of social and family connectedness and less or more reliance on professional services.

### What does an Eco-map tell us?

Once the eco-map is completed you can then assess whether the family's needs are being met from their basic needs for food, shelter and an income through to their need for belonging and social connectedness.

Other areas you can explore include:

1. How do family members feel about the neighbourhood they are living in?
2. Are they reliant on professional agencies for support? Or do they have family, friends and neighbours who are supportive?
3. If they are reliant on professional agencies for support, what is the quality of support provided? Is it meeting their needs?
4. Are services being duplicated or is there good communication between services providing assistance to family members?
5. Do they have links with people from their own cultural background? Are their values appreciated or in conflict with the surrounding environment?
6. Do they engage in any activities outside school or work or belong to any groups?
7. Do they have access to good health care?
8. Are there areas of need that are not being met and is there capacity to access needed support within the local community?

### **Family boundaries**

Eco-maps help workers to assess whether the boundaries between family and their environment are open or closed. Families who have flexible open boundaries have healthy relationships with people outside the family. They allow individual family members to develop independent relationships whilst maintaining family connections.

Families with closed boundaries have little contact with the outside world and tend to view the world with suspicion. Family members become enmeshed and sometimes depressed as there is no new input to energise relationships and thinking.

Eco-maps provide a clear visual representation of the state of boundaries within a family unit and highlight where a worker may need to encourage parents to allow more openness and input so individual members can develop relationships both external to the family as well as internal. If a family unit remains closed, there is the risk that it may disintegrate altogether.

### **Boundary questions to ask include:**

- a. Is this family open to new experiences or relationships? To what extent and in what ways is it 'closed'?
- b. Are the family boundaries permeable and porous? Are members free to make individual connections with other people and organizations? Does the family allow others in physically or emotionally? Do in-laws remain outsiders?
- c. Are the boundaries flexible, i.e., can they expand and contract adaptively in relation to the environment? Does the family protect its members when necessary and allow differentiation when appropriate?

- d. Are restricted family boundaries primarily due to something about the family, something about the world, or both? <sup>1</sup>

### **Service support**

Eco-maps also help you to analyze whether the level and type of support the family is receiving from health, welfare, employment and other services is adequate and appropriate for their needs. Eco-maps can highlight deficits in service delivery, duplication of service delivery or a lack of co-ordinated service delivery.

1. Are the services the family is engaged with meeting the family's needs?
2. Are they communicating with each other? Is there a co-ordinated approach to service delivery?
3. Are there areas of need that are not being addressed?
4. Is there duplication of service delivery and no one agency taken a lead role in ensuring the adequacy and appropriateness of the response to the family's needs?
5. What is the quality of the relationship between professional and support workers and family members? What energy is going into work with the family and is it having any measurable results?

<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan State College of Denver, Utilising an Eco\_Map, <http://www.msdc.edu/~socwrk/online/ecomap.htm>, accessed 2009.



### Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Eco-maps are a visual map of a family's connections to the external world.
- They provide a useful tool for assessment of family, social and community relationships and highlight the quality of these connections.
- Eco-maps can be particularly useful in working with migrant and refugee families to get a detailed picture of their social and family relationships and/or to map areas of isolation or disconnection that may need to be addressed.



### Related Help Sheets

#### Worker Help Sheets

- When/How to Involve Family Members
- Engaging CLD Families
- Simple Guide to Genograms

#### Parent Help Sheets

- Dealing with Services
- Getting the Right Help (plain English)



### Suggested Reading

- Hartman, A. & Reid, J. (1984). Family-Centered Social Work Practice. New York: Free Press.



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