

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Professional Issues : Importance of Family of Origin

What is a 'Family of Origin'

Family of origin refers to the significant caretakers and siblings that a person grows up with, or the first social group a person belongs to, which is often a person's biological family or an adoptive family. Our early experiences provide a kind of blueprint, which forms our understanding of the world. They have a major influence on how we see ourselves, others and the world, and how we cope with and function in our daily lives.

There are other contextual influences on our families and us as well, including culture, class, and other social and biological kinships.

Be aware of projection

As a worker your own family of origin experience influences the way you view people, families and experiences. How you understand your experiences and make sense of them influences the way you work with young people in the context of their families.

A worker needs to be able to see a young person's situation as objectively and neutrally as possible. Experiences you may have in common with them may help you to empathise and hypothesise about what may benefit them. However they can also lead to assumptions, 'blind-spots' and narrow ideas on interventions and service delivery.

You can never assume that a young person's experience and needs are the same as yours. It is important to gain awareness about your own experiences and deal with your feelings about your own family, so you can avoid projecting your own feelings and experiences onto your clients.¹

Deficits and Strengths

Family dynamics and experiences have significant and complex effects on the way we function and live our lives. Family experiences may be detrimental to our health and well-being, for example, where there has been physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect. Alternatively, families may offer a place of safety, belonging, support and nurturing.

No family is perfect. Often, families involve some negative dynamics or traits, as well as positive experiences and strengths. It is useful to try to consider both problems and strengths when understanding your own family of origin, and the families of the young people you work with. Even non-abusive family experiences can lead us to struggle with some areas of our functioning, or daily lives. We each have to manage our own vulnerabilities and get help when we need it. However, it is important to remember that difficult experiences can lead us to have particular strengths and coping capacities.

Learning you can pass on

Exploring your own family of origin, ideally with another trained person such as a family therapist, may provide you with invaluable insights that you can bring to your work with young people. If you have explored your own family of origin and how your family experience has impacted on your life, you may be more confident about exploring family history with the young people you are working with.

Differentiation from family

One of the pioneers of Family of Origin work, psychiatrist Murray Bowen, discusses a theory called differentiation.² Differentiation is when a person is sufficiently separate from their family, to the extent that they are capable of separating their emotions from those of their family members.

People who are 'well differentiated' are capable of being flexible, adaptable, self-sufficient and autonomous in their thinking and feeling, enhancing their ability to have close relationships.³ In contrast, an undifferentiated person may be rigid and emotionally dependent on others for their sense of wellbeing. This can lead to difficulties of over-identification and a failure to set appropriate boundaries when working in the helping professions.

Therefore, it is helpful for you to work towards understanding your own family experiences, and toward being more objective in your understandings and actions in relation to other families.

1. Corey G., & Schneider Corey, M. (2003) *Becoming a Helper*, Brooks/Cole, USA

2. Nichols M., P. with Schwartz R. C. (2001) *The Essentials of Family Therapy*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.

3. *Ibid.*



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- As a worker, your experiences in your family of origin are likely to impact on the way you work with young people and their families.
- Families always involve negative and positive dynamics, which may lead to members gaining strengths and abilities or experiencing difficulties.
- Differentiation from family is a significant concept. Well-differentiated people function better.
- Greater awareness of the impact of your family of origin on you will benefit your work with young people.



Strategies

- Draw your own family genogram (See: Simple Guide to Genograms) and think about relationships between family members and themes which may come up in your family. How do different family members operate in relationships? What roles did you and other family members play in your family? What are the good attributes and qualities you have taken away from your family experience and what are the negative qualities you may have taken away? How differentiated are various family members?
- Think more broadly. What are the social, cultural, economic, environmental and physical influences that impacted on you as a child from your family of origin and previous generations?
- Consider what influence your own family of origin has on your work with young people. Are you empathic? Are you able to set appropriate boundaries and limits in your work with young people? In what circumstances might you over-identify with a young person?
- Is there someone (a friend, colleague or family therapist) you can explore your family of origin with?
- You may consider doing some training in this area or some further reading.



Suggested Reading

- Schneider Corey, M., Corey, G. (2001), *Becoming a Helper*, Brooks/Cole, Canada
- Nichols, M., P., Schwartz R., C. (2001), *The Essentials of Family Therapy*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.



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