Assessing Informal and Formal Networks  
2000

This document is a guide only. Its content and application need to be considered critically in conjunction with other literary sources, specialist consultancy and normal supervisory structures.

Research and experience indicate that social isolation and severe fragmentation of families are commonly associated with heightened risk to children/young people from abuse or neglect.

Other studies show that social networks and social support can have a positive influence on parenting attitudes, parent-child interactions and child behaviour. Social support has a mediating role for parents at risk for child maltreatment, with differential impacts from various types and sources of support. For example, concrete assistance with child-rearing and housing tasks is associated with increased responsiveness of parents to children. Likewise, the availability of emotional support, especially from close relationships, has a stress-buffering effect on the well-being of clients. (Tracy et. al. “Support Networks of Primary Caregivers Receiving Family Preservation Services: An Exploratory Study.”)

Following the comprehensive assessment questions provided below, and/or using a social network, can enable support resources and challenges to be readily and interactively identified with the primary carer or adolescent, as appropriate. This can be a critical step, not only in engaging, but also, in empowering, a high risk family and/or young person; by helping the family members to gain more insight about and control over their lives.

<table>
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<th>Informal Networks</th>
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<td>Both the number and proportion of friends within a network are associated with higher levels of support, and reciprocity is positively related to concrete support. The proportion of critical network members is negatively related to emotional support. (Tracy &amp; Whittaker)</td>
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<td>These questions may be asked of the primary carer, or of each carer or potential carer, in the family.</td>
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<th>Family:</th>
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| • Who does the carer identify in his/her family network?  
  NB: A genogram should be generated in response to this question. |
| • For each family member identified, ascertain the carer's perceptions about:  
  - the level of concrete assistance provided to the carer,  
  - the level of emotional support provided to the carer,  
  - the level of information/advice provided to the carer,  
  - the degree to which the person is critical of the carer,  
  - the direction of help in their relationship,  
  - the degree of closeness in their relationship,  
  - how frequently they see each other,  
  - the length of time that they have known each other. |

- Describe/summarise the carer’s family support network, in the context of his/her family history, with particular reference to the presence/absence of the following:
  - family fragmentation (i.e. family members live far away from and/or have lost contact with each other)
  - complex and disrupted structure (i.e. history of marital/relationship breakdowns; children from different partners)
  - history of involvement with Protective Services
  - history of involvement with other welfare services

- Who currently resides in the carer’s household?

- For each household member (who was not previously identified in the family network), ascertain the carer’s perceptions about:
  - the level of *concrete assistance* provided to the carer,
  - the level of *emotional support* provided to the carer,
  - the level of *information/advice* provided to the carer,
  - the degree to which the person is *critical* of the carer,
  - the *direction of help* in their relationship,
  - the degree of *closeness* in their relationship,
  - how frequently they see each other,
  - the *length of time* that they have known each other.

- Describe/summarise the carer’s household with particular reference to the following:
  - capacity to tolerate children
  - level of chaos/stability of household membership
  - accommodation history (i.e. nature and frequency of moves)
  - financial security (i.e. poverty/frequency of material crises)

**Friends and Other Contacts:**

- Who else does the carer identify in his/her informal support network? Who are the carer’s:
  - friends?
  - acquaintances from work or school?
  - acquaintances from clubs, organisations or religious groups?
  - neighbours?

- For each person identified by the carer, ascertain the carer’s perceptions about:
  - the level of *concrete assistance* provided to the carer,
  - the level of *emotional support* provided to the carer,
  - the level of *information/advice* provided to the carer,
  - the degree to which the person is *critical* of the carer,
  - the *direction of help* in their relationship,
  - the degree of *closeness* in their relationship,
  - how frequently they see each other,
  - the *length of time* that they have known each other.

- Describe/summarise the carer’s extended informal support network with particular reference to the following:
  - number of relationships outside the home
  - whether the children are encouraged/discouraged from participating in outside activities
Research on neglectful parents indicates that the families are isolated from helping networks, extending to both formal and informal participation with others. The lack of social involvement was already visible in adolescence, prior to their becoming parents. (Polansky 1981, quoted in Whittaker)

Adolescents:

An adolescent may be asked the same assessment questions regarding identification and exploration of family and other informal support network members as were listed above in relation to carers. Alternatively, the following questions may be asked:

- What is the nature of the young person’s current placement/accommodation?
- What is the young person’s placement history?
- What is the nature of the young person’s connections with his/her family?
  - What attitudes do the young person’s parents/significant others hold towards him/her?
  - What attitudes do the young person’s parents/significant others hold towards Protective Services?
- Where does the young person spend most of his/her time?
  - What are his/her hang outs?
- With whom does the adolescent associate?
- What is the nature of the young person’s peer network?
- What is the young person’s status, position and role within their primary peer group?
  - What is the history of the young person’s peer attachments?
- Describe/summarise the young person’s family and extended informal support network with particular reference to the following:
  - whether there are any ‘significant others’ in the network
  - level of contact with parents
  - nature of relationships with parents
  - nature of parents relationship with Protective Services

Formal Networks

Families often delay mobilising their social support network until the situation reaches crisis proportions. (Tracy et. al.)

On the other hand, where a supportive family or friendship network exists, the individuals making up the network can become overloaded, and the relationships with the family subsequently damaged, if more is asked of the individuals than they can provide in a given crisis situation. (Wilson)

Early exploration of network resources, strengths and limitations with the primary carer may lead to a more proactive consideration of options for change, and subsequently more timely and appropriate network mobilisation. Further, as carers learn to ask others for help, their base of support widens, thus decreasing their dependency on professionals as their sole source of support. (Tracy et. al.)

- Who does the carer identify in his/her formal support network?
  i.e. professionals (agencies or other service providers)
• For each member of his/her formal support network identified, ascertain the
carer’s perceptions about:
  - the level of concrete assistance provided to the carer,
  - the level of emotional support provided to the carer,
  - the level of information/advice provided to the carer,
  - the degree to which the person is critical of the carer,
  - the direction of help in their relationship,
  - the degree of closeness in their relationship.
  - how frequently they see each other,
  - the length of time that they have known each other.

• With what agencies/professionals has this family previously been involved?
  - How were these services utilised?
  - What was the nature of the relationships between the carer(s) and the
    agency/professionals? (e.g. cooperative/hostile)

• With what agencies/professionals is the family currently involved?
  - What is the nature of the service utilisation?
  - What is the nature of the relationships between the carer(s) and the
    agency/professionals? (e.g. cooperative/hostile)

Where more than one other agency is involved in service provision to the family, a number of factors relating to the functioning and coordination of the professional network require consideration.

• What is the nature and level of cooperation and coordination between the
  agencies/professionals involved with this family?
  - Are the agencies/professionals operating in collaboration or isolation?
  - What is being done to address any service fragmentation?
  - Is there any inter-agency conflict? What is its nature?
  - What is being done to address the basis for such conflict?

• What is each agency’s/professional’s understanding of their own and each other’s
  roles regarding service provision to this family?
  - Is there clarity or confusion?

• How clear is each agency/professional involved regarding the protective plan and
  case direction for this family?
  - Has the case conference been held? Have critical decisions been confirmed?
  - If not yet held, what is being done to ensure that a case conference is not
    further postponed?
  - If held, did all the agencies/professionals working with this family
    participate?
  - Did the parents/carers participate?
  - Is the protective/case plan clearly documented? Does it need clarification
    or review?
  - Has a written copy of the protective/case plan been provided to each
    agency/professional involved?
  - Is there clarity in the case discussions between the agencies/professionals
    working with this family?

• Has there been continuity in the personnel providing services to this family from
  the agencies involved?
  - If there has been staff turnover, what is the level of experience of any staff
    newly allocated to the family?
  - What is being done to minimise the impact of staff turnover on service
    provision to the family?

• What is the availability of any specialist support services identified?
Adolescents:

Some young people are particularly vulnerable to problems in their formal network: namely, those who have been in care for more than two years and who were placed prior to adolescence; and those who initially entered care in adolescence but whose case plan is for long-term out-of-home care, or preparation for independent living.

- What is the history of involvement of the young person with:
  - Protective Services?
  - Juvenile Justice?
  - Disability Services?
  - Psychiatric Services?
  - Drug and Alcohol Services?

- What is the history of community based service involvement with the young person?

- What myths, fears or labels are associated with this adolescent?
  - Is the young person seen as a ‘lost cause’?

- What agencies are currently involved with the young person, and what roles do they play?
  - What successes and problems have they had with the young person?

- What consistent and supportive figures are available to the young person?

- What is the current case plan for the young person?
  - Are the case planning directions clear, consistent and do they include contingency plans?
  - When was the most recent case conference held and what were the outcomes?

- Is there evidence of any dangerous processes taking place in relation to planning and intervention for the young person?
  - e.g. agency conflict, fragmentation of service provision, role confusion, lack of engagement/availability of specialist support services

- Describe/summarise the formal support network of the carer and/or adolescent, as appropriate.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Responses to the preceding questions will enable informed analysis of the carer’s or adolescent’s social support network.

- What are the strengths and capabilities of this network?
- What are the weaknesses or gaps in this network?
  - Is there a lack of fit between the types of support the network is willing or capable of providing, and the types of support the carer/young person needs or desires?
- What potentially useful resources are evident in this network?
  - Was any unexpected information revealed regarding more supportive resources than the client and worker initially realised were present?
- What obstacles or barriers to utilising social network resources exist?
  - Does the carer/young person lack supportive resources, or lack skills in
How are the carer’s/young person’s social support needs prioritised in relation to his/her other presenting problems and needs?

### Definitions

**Social Support**
- Refers to the many different ways in which people provide assistance to one another: emotional encouragement, advice, information, guidance, tangible aid, or concrete assistance.
- Can be provided spontaneously through the natural helping networks of family and friends, or can be mobilised through professional intervention.

**Social Network**
- Refers to the structure and quantity of a set of interconnected relationships.
- Describes the way in which people relate to one another on an ongoing basis.

**Social Support Network**
- Refers to a set of relationships that provide nurturance and reinforcement for coping with life on a daily basis. However, not all networks are socially supportive, nor do they always reinforce positive social behaviours.
- A complex and multi-dimensional construct, consisting of social network resources, types of supportive exchanges, perceptions of support availability, and skills in accessing and maintaining supportive relationships.

**Social Network Map**
- A useful tool for systematically gathering specific information on the size, composition, structure and functioning of a person’s social support network.
- Includes a circle map which visually displays network membership, and an accompanying grid for recording information about the supportive and non-supportive functions of network relationships.
- The tool was adapted from Tracy & Whittaker (1990) by Dorothy Scott.

### Sources:

- Dorothy Scott. Social Network Map adapted from Tracy & Whittaker (1990).