

TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING SOCIAL SUPPORT

This article reviews a number of techniques for assessing a family's social support network. Some of the techniques are typically used in care planning or treatment to gather information about support that can be mobilized to help families meet needs or reach goals. These assessments are usually easy to use and can be adapted for use with adults, adolescents, or children. Other techniques are more formal and are used to measure social support for research and evaluation purposes.

Techniques for assessing social support are valuable in a wide range of planning, intervention, and evaluation contexts; however, this article focuses on how they can be used by wraparound teams or programs. Wraparound is a collaborative, family-driven process for creating individualized plans of care for children and youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties. One of the principal goals of the wraparound process is to strengthen the family's social support and community connections.

Informal Assessment

Social support assessments are useful in the wraparound process because they help the team pay attention to important information that may otherwise be overlooked. Given the empirical evidence for the importance of social support for families caring for a child with a disability (Beresford, 1994; McDonald, Gregoire, Poertner, & Early, 1997; Snowdon, Cameron, & Dunham, 1994), the identification of actual and potential social support resources is an essential part of the team's assessment process. Individuals who offer informal supports to parents or youth can be valuable resources in the implementation of a plan of care.

What is more, these individuals will probably be available for the youth/child and family after wraparound and other formal services have ended.

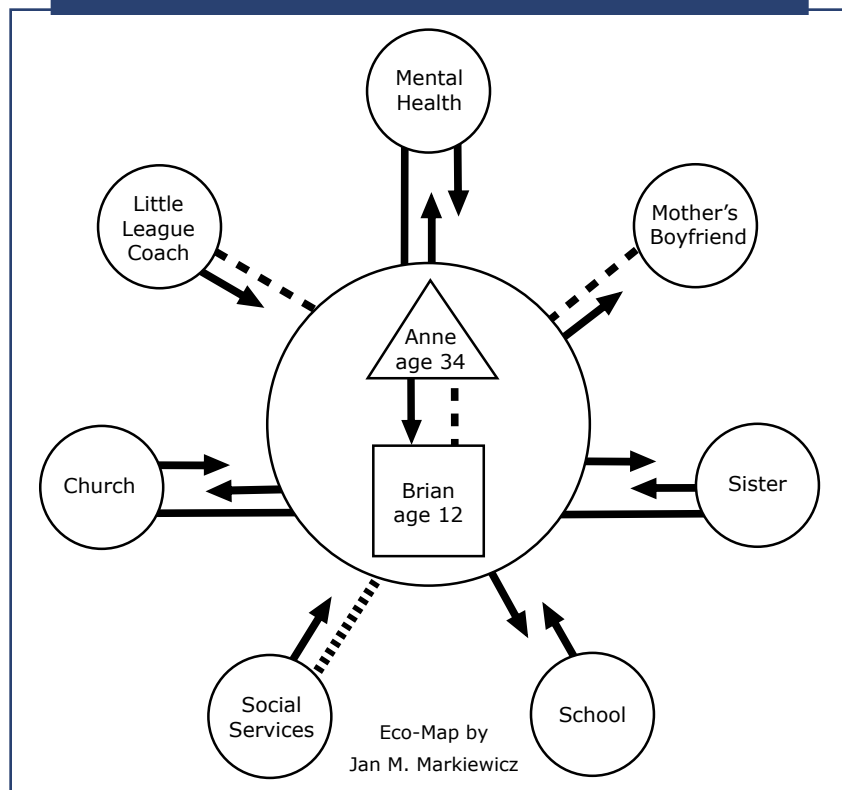
An ecological map or eco-map (figure 1) is one technique that teams can use to show a family's relationships with helping resources. To create an eco-map, the team begins with a piece of paper that has a large circle (representing the family) in the middle, and a number of smaller circles around the larger circle. Family members are asked to identify both people and services that serve as resources for them. Possible resources are extended family, church, recreation activities, friends, health care, and school.

The family then indicates the nature of the connections between themselves

and the resources by drawing different kinds of lines between the large circle and the smaller circles, and/or using a descriptive word that can be written on the map. Typically, a strong positive connection is indicated by a solid line, a moderate connection by a broken line, and a stressful connection by a line with slanted lines drawn through it. Arrows can also be used to illustrate whether the relationships and flow of resources are reciprocal, or in one direction only. The team can use the information on the completed map to identify supports that may be useful in the development of the service plan and to identify gaps where additional supports may be needed.

Another tool for depicting the relationships between a caregiver and her

FIGURE 1: ECO-MAP



social systems is the Social Network Map (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990). This instrument attends to both the structure (the number and quality of social relationships) and the function (the various types of supportive exchanges) of informal social supports. A circle mapping technique is used to portray network members and a grid is used to identify the supportive and non-supportive functions of relationships. For example, who provides what types of



supports, which relationships are conflicted, and which are reciprocal? Information is collected about network size, reciprocity, perceived availability of support, closeness, directionality, stability, and frequency of contact.

There can be a number of advantages of using the Social Network Map. The map helps to identify and evaluate not only resources but also sources of stress and strain within the family's social environment. Responding to the mapping and grid questions helps caregivers review existing resources and identify new sources of potential support. Using the tool may also provide a vehicle for discussing other issues, such as current stressors, that the caregiver may be experiencing. Finally, caregivers sometimes find that using the instrument is empowering, because it helps identify specific steps they can take to use their networks more effectively.

The Community Connections and Team Composition Questionnaire, designed by the King County Blend-

ed Funding Evaluation Team (2001), creates a list of the individuals, services, and activities that a youth has been connected to over the past three months in five categories: family, friends, school/work, community, and formal services. After all the supports are listed, the parent rates the strength of the connection on a scale of 0 to 3, with 3 being the strongest connection. As a final step, the parent identifies the members of the wraparound team, if there is one, and provides information about how often each person attends the team meetings and the types of support that the team member provides for the parent and/or the child.

The EMQ Connectedness Model (EMQ Children & Family Services, 2003) is another technique

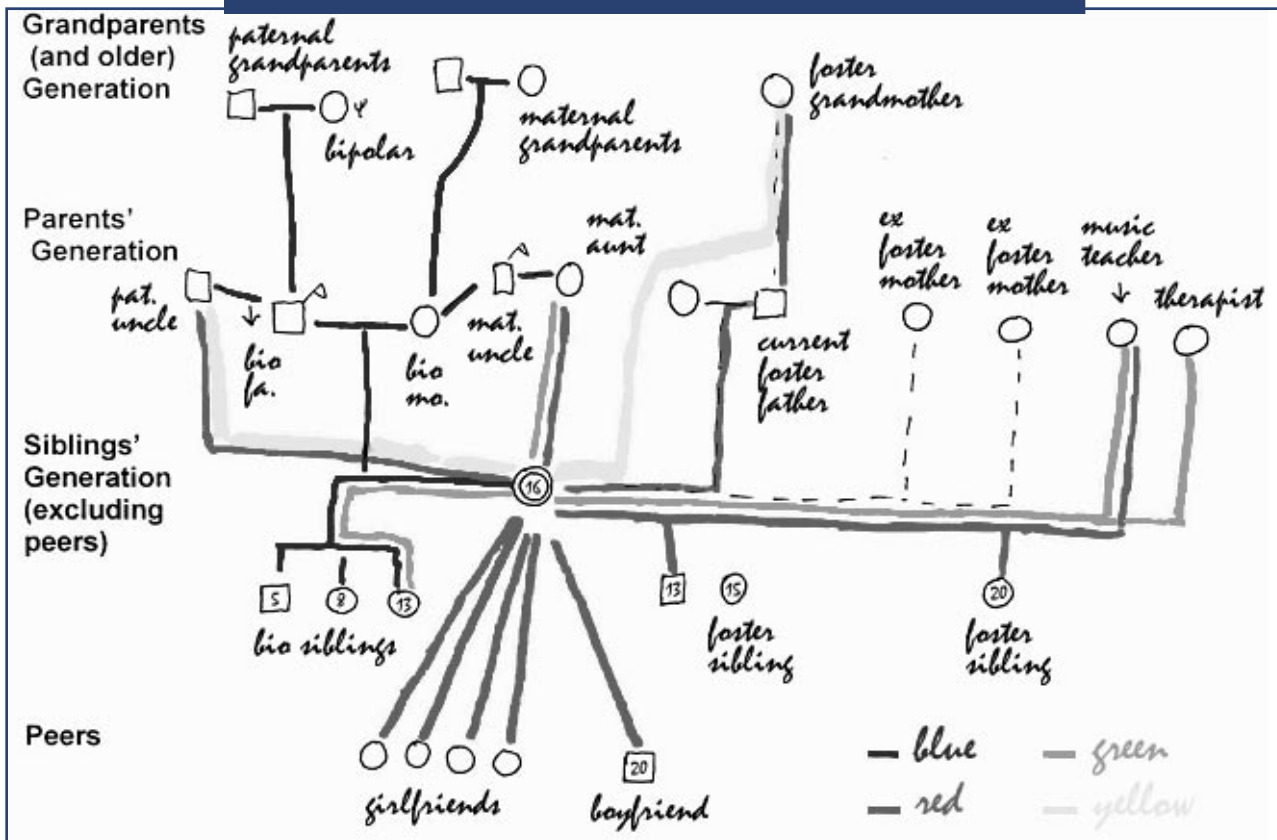
that is used collaboratively with a child and family to discover social supports and connections. The technique is used to generate a Connectedness Diagram (Figure 2). The diagram begins with a genogram, which shows the child's biological relationships using horizontal tiers for the child's generation, parents' generation, and grandparents' generations. This part of the diagram is done in blue. The next step is to identify the individuals who the child loves, and by whom the child feels loved. These connections are done in red, to represent the heart, and may extend beyond the biological relatives and include friends, teachers, coaches, siblings, foster grandparents, etc. The color green, standing for the fertile and creative mind, is used to represent those from whom the child learns and those the child teaches. These may include teachers, siblings, aunts and uncles, coaches, and others with whom the child has a positive connection. The spiritual dimension is diagrammed in yellow, represent-

ing the light of the soul. As each of these individuals and resources is identified, the team can ask whether they can be mobilized as a strength or support, or whether they can provide a specific activity that can be built into the child's service plan.

Teams should keep several things in mind when assessing social support using any of these techniques. First, information gathered through such a process may be limited since the data is self-reported. It can be affected by factors such as the type of social support, the individual's recall skills, and social desirability. Through using the instrument, the team may overestimate or underestimate the social network's strengths and capacity for offering support, as well as the family's capacity for receiving support. Interpersonal relationships also change over time, and change may be particularly likely when the team attempts to increase the support offered by particular individuals in a family's interpersonal network. Thus, the team should remember that the assessments provide only a starting point for an evolving understanding of the family's social network and its potential for offering support.

Any structured instrument can also miss population-specific or cultural nuances related to social support. For example, in one study of social support, parents of a child with a chronic disability reported the unique challenge of resource maintenance within their support network (Bregman, 1980). Given the long-term nature of their child's challenges, parents' supports can burn out unless parents direct attention and resources into maintaining and re-fueling the members of their support network. In addition, reciprocity with the social support network is difficult because the parents' needs are often large and ongoing. A structured technique may miss these aspects and, thus, ignore the risk of the family depleting or losing a vibrant support network. Cultural differences in the types of interactions that are seen as supportive have been documented. People from

FIGURE 2: THE EMQ CONNECTEDNESS MODEL



different cultures also may have different ideas about the kinds of support or resources that can be appropriately exchanged between friends and relatives. Being aware of these differences can help the team make adjustments as new information about a family's social support network emerges over time.

Formal Assessment

The techniques that are described above are useful for child and family teams because they are directly related to the team's purpose--the development and implementation of an individualized service and support plan. In research and formal program evaluation, social support is often included as an independent variable, contributing to positive child and family outcomes, or as a dependent variable when the research question is about how social support can be facilitated and maintained. There are a

number of standardized instruments that are used to assess social support in these studies.

The Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera, 1981) is a 40-item self-report measure of received support. Its purpose is to gather information regarding the support recipient's perceptions of available social support. Respondents are asked to assess the informal supports received from different individuals during the past 30 days using a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (about every day). Concurrent validity of the ISSB total score with measures of network size has been demonstrated with correlations of .24 and .42 (Barrera & Sandler, 1984). Internal consistency coefficients range from .90 to .94, with a test-retest reliability over a one-month interval of .80 (Barrera, 1981).

The Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI) was developed to assess perceived availability of support in specific relationships and is based

on the interactional-cognitive model that distinguishes between general and relationship-specific perceptions of social support. The QRI is composed of three separate dimensions labeled support, depth, and conflict. The QRI is a self-report questionnaire with 25 items that participants rate using a four-point scale regarding their perceptions of a specific relationship. It takes approximately four minutes to complete for each relationship. Studies testing the psychometric properties and validity of the QRI scales reflect a broad range of methodologies, including cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, observational, and retrospective designs. Internal consistency for each of the scales has been shown to be high, with Cronbach's Alpha in the .80's and .90's. In addition, QRI scores have high test-retest reliability, with correlations between scores on each scale across a four-month period ranging from .66 to .82, with an average correlation of .75 (Pierce, 1994).

Some research studies also collect data on social support through observations of child and family team meetings. For example, observers will record whether one or more natural helpers are present at the meeting, whether social support is mentioned and/or assessed during the meeting, and whether social support is included in the family's service plan.

Conclusion

Social support assessments are obviously useful in both practice and research. Informal assessments help stimulate thinking about ways that interpersonal relationships can be mobilized to help children and families meet needs and achieve goals. More formal assessments help develop knowledge about whether or not strategies designed to increase social support actually succeed in doing so, and whether increasing social support contributes to other positive outcomes for children and families. It is important to remember, however, that these assessments are only approximations of what a family's "real" social support network may be. Social support is a complex concept and a complex phenomenon, and knowledge about the best ways to measure social support continues to evolve.

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