

It is widely acknowledged that an individual's childhood and family background impacts on how they go on to parent and care for their own children. This will also impact on how they care for a child in their care.

The genogram or family tree aims to build rapport as well as explore the applicant's background, attitudes and values that have been acquired over generations.

Instructions are given for drawing up the family tree from which key events, beliefs and attitudes may be elicited. The applicants' child rearing histories, child rearing attitudes and childhood experiences are explored with the aid of set questions and inventories.

The majority of applicants who have undergone this process have found the genogram very interesting and may wish to keep a copy for their own record.

Occasionally applicants being assessed will question what their family history has to do with their application to foster and may feel uncomfortable about sharing information about other family members or themselves. It is important that workers understand the purpose and usefulness of the genogram and are able to explain this to applicants.

When introducing the genogram to the applicants it is also important to highlight that in the exploring of their family and experiences of family, some sensitive and painful memories may emerge. If this happens it may be relevant to 'slow down' the process to allow them to share these memories with the worker. If however, they do not feel they can share them with the worker at that moment, it is important this is respected whilst at the same time making it clear that the worker will need to raise them again with the applicant. They can then decide if they are willing to do this before the next meeting with the worker.

Indigenous people in particular may find the process difficult, due to historical experiences of generations. Applicants are to be left as 'intact' as possible throughout the assessment process. De-briefing and follow up may be required. Sometimes applicants may need to be encouraged to access counselling before resuming with an assessment if there are any unresolved issues from their past that need to be addressed that may have an impact on their ability to care for children. In particular, issues around abuse can trigger emotional responses in a person once a child is placed with them, especially if the child has had similar experiences to that of the carer. Whilst this can lead to an emotional relapse or an over reaction that impacts on the way they deal with a child, it also can be quite a traumatic time personally for the carer and/or their family, which can lead to the placement breaking down.

As such it is very important to explore as thoroughly as possible the experiences of childhood and family and the impact that this has had on a person, and how they have dealt or not dealt with it. We do this primarily to protect the interests of very vulnerable children, who deserve to have a stable and supportive environment in which to deal with the separation from their family of origin.

The genogram (family tree) is a very useful tool in beginning this exploration.

### **Suggestions in the construction of a genogram**

- The genogram is a visual representation of three to four generations.
- In most assessments it is recommended to draw a family map that begins or ends with the applicant's grandparents. This means for single people without children it is three generations, and for a person with children it is four generations.
- Either begin with the grandparents and then work down to the applicants, or begin with the applicants and work up to grandparents

- Use a large piece of paper (A3) in the construction of a family tree, to give enough room to make notes and record relevant information next to the person.
- For applicants from large families, use a separate piece of paper for each applicant, then join them up once completed.

## Example of symbols used in the construction of a genogram:



= **male symbol**, name, age and occupation to be added



= **female symbol**, name, age and occupation to be added



= **unknown gender**



= **married** - year to be added



= **de facto relationship** - year to be added when commenced



= **separation** - year to be added



= **divorce** - year to be added

Both separation and divorce lines should appear so as to cut off that parent with whom the children do not live



= **relocation** - moved to another geographic location.

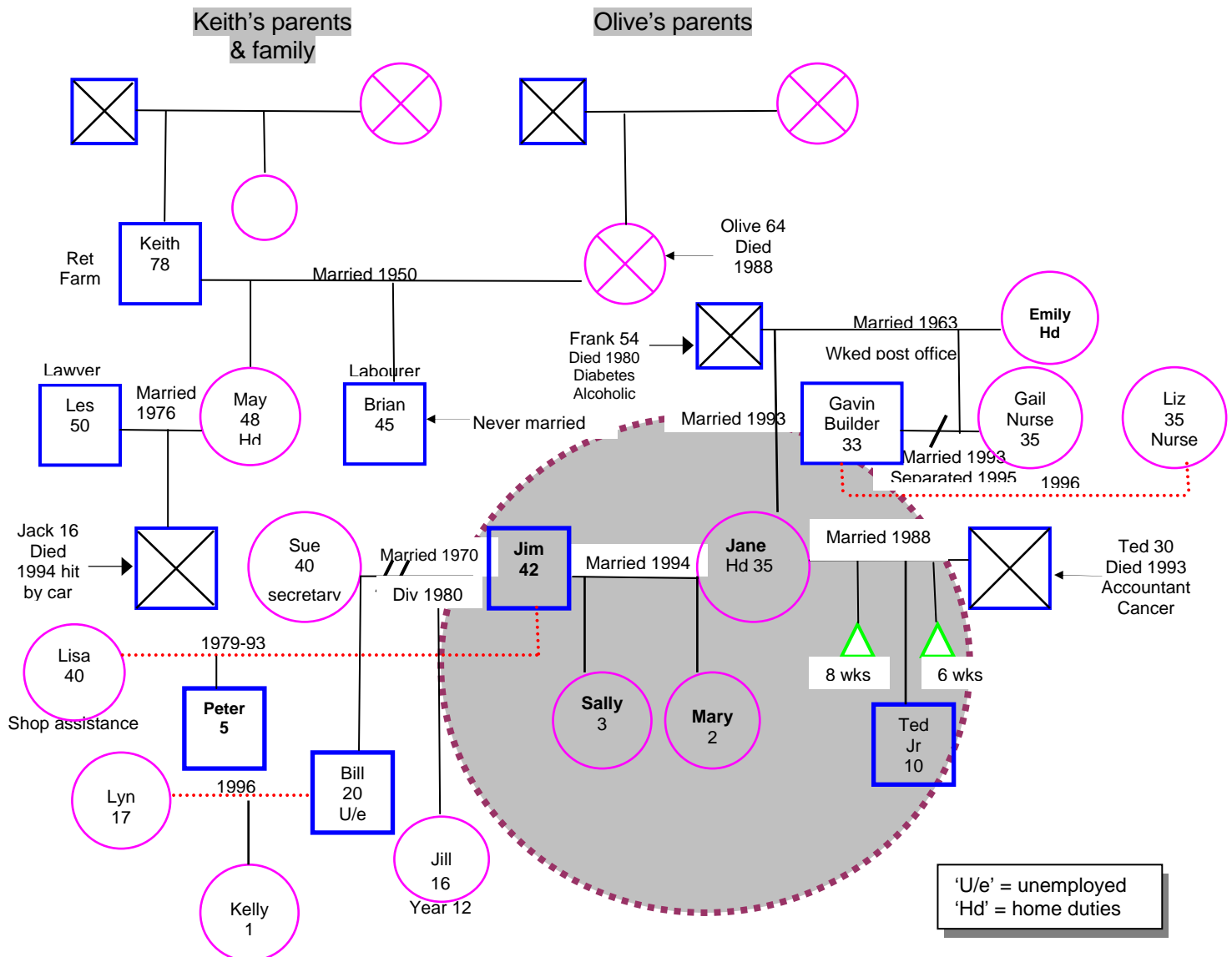


= **death** - a cross through a square or circle denotes a person who has died. The year and cause of death may be added.



= **A dotted** circle is used to enclose the members of a household.

**Example of a genogram:**



Below are some examples of the issues that need to be explored with applicant/s

1. How have the family dealt with grief and loss (miscarriages, death of a husband, separations, divorce)?
2. How did the relationships start and end?
3. How have values and beliefs been passed on (eg. work, education, divorce, money, family, religion etc)?
4. How do they support each other/ how much contact do family members have?
5. How have disputes/friction between family members been handled?
6. Which are the strong or weak relationships?
7. How importance is family- is there any contact with children from previous marriages/relationships?
8. How would they describe individual family members, and who are they most similar to?
9. How would they describe relationships with father, mother, siblings, extended family, ex partners, etc?
10. Are there any patterns noted (eg. careers, illness, names, violence, alcohol)?