Using Placement Genograms in Child Welfare Practice

J. CURTIS McMILLEN  
VICTOR GROZE

Few tools exist to assess and process the impact of placement experiences on the lives of children in out-of-home care. In this article, the placement genogram is offered as an assessment and intervention tool for children in the child welfare system. Borrowing from the widely used family genogram, the placement genogram graphically depicts the family and placement histories of children in care. This presentation can be used to assess the influence of previous experiences on the children's behavior. The placement genogram can also facilitate several kinds of child welfare interventions. It can be used to help children deal with the losses they have suffered, to help workers focus on important patterns of maladaptive behavior, and to help placement providers better understand the struggles of the children in their care and develop realistic expectations for these children.

Children who enter the out-of-home-care system must deal with a variety of family systems. At a minimum, they experience living with their biological

J. Curtis McMillen, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, MO. Victor Groze, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of the foster care social workers of the Baltimore County, MD. Department of Social Services for their helpful comments on the use of placement genograms in child welfare practice.
families and at least one set of substitute caregivers. These children face multiple attachments, the loss of important relationships, and confusing loyalty conflicts. As a result, attachment, separation, loss, and continuity of family ties become crucial themes in child welfare practice with them [Siu and Hogan 1989]. Few tools exist, however, to assess and process the impact of placement experiences on the lives of children in care. Borrowing from the widely used family genogram, the placement genogram offers promise as an assessment and intervention tool for children in out-of-home care.

This article describes the placement genogram and its potential uses in child welfare practice. First, a traditional family genogram is constructed using a case example. The placement genogram is then introduced using the same case. A description of several uses of the placement genogram follows.

The Family Genogram

The family genogram has become a widely accepted and valuable social work tool in family assessment [Hartman 1978; Hartman and Laird 1983; McGoldrick and Gerson 1985]. As a visual representation of clients’ current and extended family systems, it helps workers and families identify inter-generational family patterns, themes, myths, expectations, roles, and losses. In addition, it helps workers and families compile a chronology of important family events. Most importantly, perhaps, it provides a multigenerational context for exploring family problems.

Families creating genograms with their workers have an opportunity to discuss important events in family history and their impact on family functioning. All family members can see how each has been affected by others in the family system and how each affects others. Important family themes, set forth graphically, are more difficult to dismiss and ignore [Hartman and Laird 1983]. For all of these reasons, family genograms have become an important tool to help child welfare workers understand children in placement [see, for example, Sandmeier 1988].

The Case

A report from ten-year-old Aaron’s school brought the C family to the attention of child welfare authorities. The school reported that Aaron’s attendance was sporadic and that his father had not responded to requests for a meeting. A Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation elicited the child’s history, presented in figure 1 as a traditional family genogram.

Reason Aaron came into care: Aaron was alone for many days at a time while his father was on the road.

Aaron lived in a rural area in a trailer with his father, Darrell. Aaron’s older brother Skip was serving time in the state penitentiary on an armed robbery conviction. Aaron’s mother, Norma, reportedly had drug problems and left the family when Aaron was three. They had not heard from her since she left.

Mr. C reported that he was a long-haul truck driver who was routinely on the road for five to seven days at a time. He admitted that he had been leaving Aaron alone for the past two years whenever he was away. Mr. C said that Aaron was able to care for himself and that he was unaware that Aaron was not attending school.

Upon questioning, Aaron said that he received little attention or supervision from his father even when he was home, and that he spent most of his time doing assigned chores. These chores included all the cleaning, laundry, cooking, caring for numerous animals, and cleaning his father’s truck. Mr. C admitted this was true. “I work and pay the bills,” he said. “Aaron takes care of the house.” Aaron also said that his father would “whip him with a switch” when the chores were not completed to his father’s satisfaction. A physical examination revealed no bruises or suspicious scars.

The agency ruled that neglect was indicated. Physical abuse was ruled as unsubstantiated. The CPS worker told Mr. C that he would have to make other arrangements for his child when he was away, or change his work schedule so
that he was not out of town overnight. To do neither, the worker said, would mean having Aaron placed out of the home. Mr. C declined to make the changes, saying he liked his job and didn’t know anyone with whom Aaron could stay when he was away.

The family genogram reveals the family’s isolation. Mr. C’s parents were both deceased. Although he had one sister who lived in the area, he had little contact with her. She and her husband had three children. The sister said that she could not care for Aaron because they had little income, no space, and no emotional energy left to care for another child.

Aaron had no contact with his maternal relatives. His mother was an only child. Mr. C described the mother’s parents as severe alcoholics. He knew they lived out of state, but was not sure in what town. While going over the family genogram with the CPS worker, Aaron revealed his fantasy of moving out of state to live with his maternal grandparents.

Because of Mr. C’s unwillingness to care for Aaron, and the lack of extended family placements available for him, the county reluctantly placed Aaron in a foster home. The father joined with the agency in requesting that Aaron’s custody be transferred to the County Department of Social Services.

The traditional family genogram provides child welfare practitioners with much information. Constructing a family genogram with child welfare clients helps identify extended family resources, family themes, and other important family influences on placed children. In this case, it reveals a history of alcohol and drug use on the maternal side, and the nuclear family’s isolation from relatives. Although the family genogram provides significant information to child welfare practitioners, it disregards the influences of placement experiences on children in care.

Limitations of the Family Genogram

For children in out-of-home care, the family genogram is an insufficient tool for organizing information about placed children. Children in placement must deal with both biological families and new placement providers. Unfortunately, many children experience multiple placements. Each placement experience offers new roles, rules, expectations, and attachment relationships. Each placement also may mean the loss of important relationships that were made in previous placements. For children in out-of-home care, a visual display limited to the child’s family of origin ignores these important new influences in their lives. The placement genogram can help assess the influence of these placement experiences on children in care.

The Placement Genogram

The placement genogram can be used as an assessment and intervention tool for children placed outside their biological families. Although the placement genogram is a natural extension of the traditional genogram, its exact origins are unclear to the authors.* Although it has been briefly introduced as an assessment and intervention tool for children involved in adoption programming [Allen 1990; Pinderhughes and Rosenberg 1990; Young et al. 1992], its use for all children experiencing out-of-home care has not been explicited.

Building on concepts from traditional family genograms and incorporating a human ecosystem framework, the placement genogram charts children’s families of origin and out-of-home living arrangements. It visually documents children’s placement histories and the multiple influences on their lives.

Constructing a Placement Genogram

The placement genogram includes information found in the family genogram. It also provides a chronology of the child’s history and relationships after the initial placement. In the placement genogram, successive placements and other important relationships are visually represented below the child’s family of origin. The type and dates of each placement are noted next to each representation of a placement episode. Other information about the placement experience can be noted. Colors can be used to enhance the genogram. For example, the authors suggest that placed children be represented in a different color than other children, to help the viewer find the child in each placement.

The Case

A placement genogram for Aaron C is presented in figure 2. Upon entering care, Aaron was placed in the H foster home. The H’s were a warm, child-oriented farm family who had been agency foster parents for 15 years. They had an older son, Jeff, who was 17 when Aaron was first placed there. During most of Aaron’s stay in the H home, another foster child, Tommy, two years younger than Aaron, lived with the family.

Aaron lived with the H’s for just over three and one-half years. He adjusted very well to the family. He developed close relationships with the foster parents (whom he called Mom and Dad) and with Jeff and Tommy. He did well

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* A computer search of relevant databases, such as Psyclit and Social Work Research and Abstracts, revealed no reference to the term placement genogram. The National Resource Center on Family Based Services, which presented the placement genogram in its training materials in 1990, has also been unable to identify the originator of the placement genogram.
in school and was only occasionally a discipline problem. When conflicts developed, they usually had to do with chores on the family farm.

Unfortunately, Jeff was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The H’s were emotionally devastated over the impending death of their only biological child. Mr. H became sullen and quick to anger. Jeff began to require significant home care. After much agonizing, the H’s notified the agency that they were retiring as foster family and that Tommy and Aaron would have to be placed elsewhere.

Aaron was moved to the foster home of Rene and Kirk P. Aaron had few problems his first few weeks in the new home. Suddenly, however, he got into several fights in his new school and stopped doing his schoolwork. After three months in the new home, he took the P’s car for several hours. The next day, they requested that Aaron be removed from their home.

Unable to find Aaron a new foster home, the agency placed Aaron in a therapeutic group home in a nearby city. There, Aaron had immediate problems. He ran away twice during his first month at the group home, reportedly to find his mother’s out-of-state relatives. Each time he was returned by the state police. The group home reported Aaron had “problems with authority” and was “oppositional.” Many of these problems centered on his refusal to do his chores.

Using The Placement Genogram

The placement genogram can be used as an assessment tool, to facilitate interventions with placed children, and as an information and intervention tool with placement providers.

The Placement Genogram as an Assessment Tool

A comprehensive assessment is a crucial component of planning for the treatment and care of children in out-of-home care. Children in the child welfare system are most fully understood when an assessment includes the influence of events and relationships both from their biological families and their placement experiences. Placement genograms, because they include information across time and across settings, can help workers and therapists assess adaptive and maladaptive patterns of behavior and identify clinical issues and questions for further exploration.

The placement genogram can provide much of the crucial information about children in one graphic presentation. Practitioners can easily review multiple influences on children’s lives and begin to pinpoint when problem behaviors developed, increased, or decreased.
The placement genogram requires users to view behavior in both the context of a child’s current living situation and the context of the child’s history. Reactions to multiple separations and losses can be examined. Current problems or symptoms are often not reliable guides to the nature and severity of underlying problems [Chess and Hassibi 1986]. The placement genogram provides the historical context of current difficulties.

Aaron’s placement genogram clarifies several assessment components that could be missed by using only a traditional family genogram. Among them, attachment and loss are primary. Aaron’s placement genogram reveals that he has lost all the relationships that have been most important to him—those with his biological mother, his father, the H’s, Jeff, and Tommy.

Although Aaron experienced many stressors before entering care, most of his behavior problems developed after he left the H foster home. Too often in child welfare, and perhaps in other disciplines, it is easy to apply a label to children based on their current behavioral problems. Aaron had stolen a car, had fought in school, and had been described as having “problems with authority.” Some may quickly label Aaron as a juvenile delinquent or say he has a conduct disorder, and search for services for him that are appropriate to these labels. It could be more useful in helping Aaron to say that his recent behavior problems are a protest of the loss of important relationships in his life.

The placement genogram also exposes patterns across placements. These often involve consistent problems with parental figures or peers. Aaron’s placement genogram shows many problems centered on chores, which most likely relates to his father making him responsible for most of the household chores.

The Placement Genogram as an Intervention Guide

The placement genogram provides information that can guide interventions that range from the major decisions that are made in child welfare to direct clinical work with individual children.

Major decisions include, at a minimum, where children should be placed and the determination of permanency plans. The construction of placement genograms can identify important placement resources. Although Aaron’s family genogram can be used to identify potential kinship resources, the placement genogram offers more options. For example, the H’s, or perhaps their relatives, can be considered as placement resources.

Placement genograms can inform decisions about children’s plans for permanent living arrangements. They provide a quick summation of the significant influences in children’s lives for all of those involved in permanency planning, including administrators, judges, and citizen review boards. Placement genograms often lead to all the right questions to ask in planning children’s care. Questions raised by Aaron’s placement genogram include: Were his maternal relatives adequately explored as placement resources? What has been done to reunite Aaron with his father? If efforts at reunification failed, why was he not freed for adoption? Could additional services have been offered to keep Aaron in the H home during their time of crisis? What can be done to get the H family reinvolved in Aaron’s life now? Are they available as a placement resource in the future?

Perhaps the placement genogram’s greatest potential lies in its ability to aid direct interventions with children while they are in care. If the child is old enough, the placement genogram should be drawn with his or her help, affording the opportunity to discuss salient issues. Getting children involved in the production of a visual product helps them relax and talk about their feelings and the significant events in their lives—most importantly, perhaps, the loss of important relationships that may be affecting their behavior. As the genogram is drawn, children can be asked to talk about who was important to them in each placement, what it was like to enter and leave the placement, and whom they miss from other placements.

Once the placement genogram is drawn and the child agrees that it is an accurate representation of the facts, it can be used to challenge and explain certain behaviors. The visual expression of the child’s experiences can make it difficult to deny the existence of certain facts in their lives, overcoming resistance to talking about important clinical themes.

For example, if Aaron denies that leaving the H home was emotionally difficult for him, the worker could re-explore Aaron’s placement genogram with him. This work could involve a series of interactions, such as identifying who has been most important to him in his life, when his behavioral problems began, and how Aaron had hoped these important people might react to his behavior problems.

Thus, the placement genogram is not an intervention in itself. It is used, instead, as both a starting and reference point for clinical discussions. In the example of Aaron, the worker felt that Aaron’s misbehavior was tied to his removal from the H home. Although the worker could have used various methods to get Aaron to talk about this, the placement genogram was used as a shortcut to the heart of the clinical matter. In this case, Aaron eventually said that he was trying to get kicked out of both the P foster home and the group home in an effort to convey to the H’s how much he needed to live with them.

The placement genogram also can be used to challenge children’s participation in maladaptive relationship or behavioral patterns. Especially if such patterns persist across placements, it becomes difficult for children to deny
their part in these difficulties once they are displayed visually. Children who have experienced a large number of placement disruptions due to severe behavioral difficulties are often adept at blaming placement providers for their difficulties. Aaron, for example, may say that the group home workers are unreasonable about the chores they expect him to do. The placement genogram can be reviewed with him to see how chores were dealt with in his family of origin and in each placement. This review indicates that Aaron is especially sensitive about chores and the real origins of this problem can be discussed with him.

Using the Placement Genogram with Placement Providers

There is no reason to assume that only children should be the focus of intervention. The placement genogram may serve as a useful tool for interventions with placement providers. Foster and adoptive families often complain about the lack of information available to them about the children in their care. Children enter care with a history of complex influences that have largely shaped their behavior. Foster and adoptive parents deserve the best information possible about why the placed children act as they do. The placement genogram is one vehicle workers may use to provide useful information about children’s histories in an organized and concise manner. With better information, foster or adoptive parents and group home workers will better understand the children’s needs.

Placement genograms may help providers to develop realistic behavioral expectations for children new to their care. Inexperienced substitute caregivers often expect the new children in their lives to become emotionally close to them quickly. Children in care who have experienced important losses may well resist such closeness. The clarity with which the placement genogram points out these losses can modify caregivers’ expectations for emotional closeness with these children.

Placement genograms may also help new caregivers to cope with certain behaviors. Children in care often become experts at getting substitute caregivers to react to them in ways similar to ways they have been previously treated. Aaron, for example, purposely doesn’t do his chores to see how he will be treated. If new caregivers react as former caregivers did, children’s behavior may be reinforced and perpetuated.

Conclusion

As with other clinical tools, the placement genogram has limited utility with some children. Placement genograms have less utility with very young clients because they lack the cognitive and verbal abilities to participate in the process. The placement genogram still has assessment utility for them, however, even if it must be constructed without the aid of the child.

Children with many placements may be those most likely to benefit from the construction of a placement genogram. Their genograms will reveal more losses and behavioral patterns across placements. Genograms for some of these children can become difficult to create, however. The sheer number of placements and of important persons in their lives makes the history difficult to present visually in a limited space.

The flexibility of the placement genogram also creates inherent drawbacks. It becomes difficult to decide what information to include. On the one hand, if too much information is represented, the genogram will look cluttered and lose its visual effectiveness. On the other hand, valuable information may be lost if too much is excluded.

Few assessment and therapeutic tools have been designed specifically for children in the child welfare system. The life story book is a rare exception, and it does not serve the same clinical purposes. The placement genogram’s limitations, therefore, should not hinder its use. Instead, workers should be encouraged to further develop and refine the tool to best suit their needs.

The placement genogram provides a new and valuable instrument for those who work with placed children. It can help workers and therapists assess the influence of families of origin and placement histories on children in care. As a review tool, it can aid in child welfare decision-making. Used with children, it can help them process the losses they have experienced and focus on important patterns of maladaptive behavior. It can also help placement providers develop realistic expectations of children, and better understand the struggles of the children they serve.

References


(Address requests for a reprint to Victor Groze, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, 11235 Bellflower Road, Cleveland, OH 44106-7164.)

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