



Defence
Children
Services

Early Help toolkit

Undertaking an Early Help assessment



Introduction

The basic principle of an effective early help assessment is the gathering and analysis of information, identifying strengths and worries to generate a family action plan which focuses on achieving a positive outcome. This should be done in a collaborative way alongside the child and family, and with their full engagement. The early help assessment is designed in a way that encourages the assessor to use a strengths-based approach in all sections.

It is important when carrying out an early help assessment you have a meaningful conversation with the child and their family. This ensures family action plans, and all decisions are fully informed and agreed with by the child and their parent/carer, and the child and family's goals and wishes are directly included in the plan alongside identified actions to achieve these goals.

A good quality early help assessment provides a holistic analysis of the family's strengths and needs and is also:

- **Accurate:** The assessment must always provide an accurate representation of the strengths and needs of the child and their family.
- **Clear:** The assessment should be concise and understandable by all those involved, particularly the family and any practitioners who may be involved, or who take Lead Professional responsibility for the case at a later stage.
- **Inclusive:** The assessment should evidence the child and their family are fully involved, and their voices, wishes and feelings are evident throughout.
- **Promotes equal opportunities:** Any assessment should provide an unbiased opinion and positive expression of the experiences of the child and their family without prejudice or discrimination.
- **Authentic:** The assessment should be an accurate and evidence-based record of the discussion.
- **Professional:** The assessment is always completed in a non-judgemental manner.
- **Strengths based and solution focused:** The assessment must focus on what the child and their family would like to achieve.
- **Systemic:** All early help assessments focus on the systems within which the children or young people operate (home, setting/school, community, extended family, etc.).
- **Practical:** The assessment identifies strengths, challenges and vulnerabilities of the child and their family, it informs the family action plan in order to address needs, the assessment indicates what could happen if no action is taken.
- **Child Centred:** The child is seen, is the centre of focus throughout the assessment, and that the child's perspective is always considered.

Completing Part 2: The Early Help assessment

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Prior to completing the assessment, you should always ask the parent to complete the Early Help Part 1 My Child and Family, this enables an understanding of the parent's perspective of their family's needs and support structures.

You are encouraged to complete the form as fully as possible based on your professional knowledge of the child, include information shared by practitioners involved with the family, and information shared by the child and the family.

The content of the early help assessment should be open and transparent, and written with the family using, and in a language the family understands. Parents should be provided with a copy of the completed document.

If safeguarding concerns are identified, where appropriate, discussion should be held with the parent to ensure an understanding of the need to make a referral to the contracted social work team.

In 2021, the child safeguarding practice review published findings from their third national review 'The Myth of Invisible Men'. This review recommended a wider emphasis on engaging and working with fathers and male carers, it is therefore important that every early help for every unborn baby, child, and young person maintains positive engagement with fathers and male care givers.

In some families, one of the parents may not be living with the family. Practitioners should explore with the primary care giver how separated parents can be positively engaged in the early help process. Prior to contacting any absent parent, practitioners should be fully aware of the family's circumstances; there may be risks you need to consider. If the decision is made that contact with the absent parent is not appropriate, the reason for this decision must be clearly recorded on the child's early help assessment and file. The practitioner should regularly revisit this decision unless there is an identified risk that prevents contact with the child or care giver.

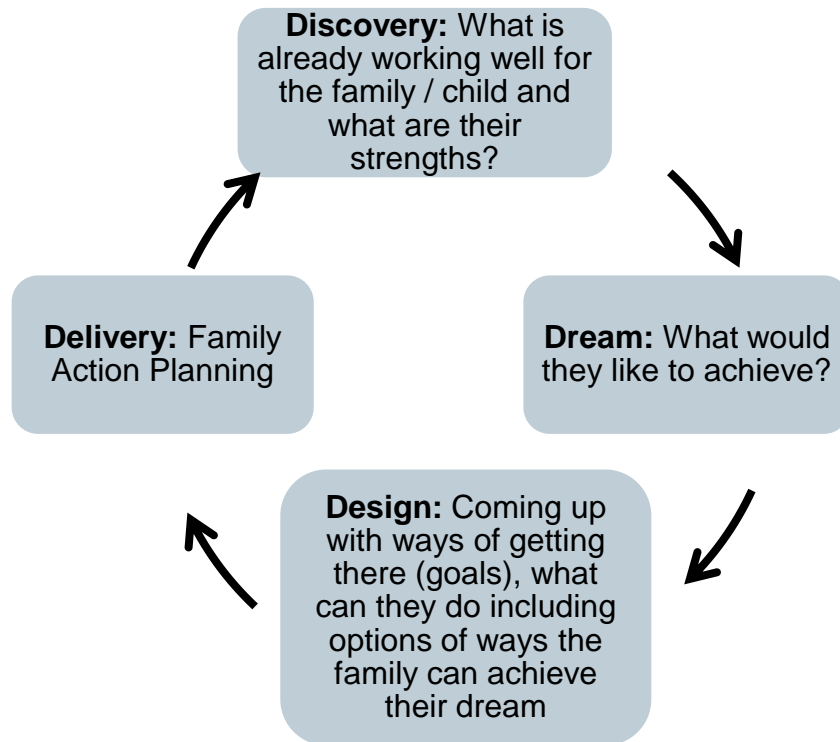
Where one parent (including separated parent) or care giver cannot attend meetings about their unborn baby or child, practitioners should always ensure that their views are ascertained and shared in the assessment and at Team Around the family (TAF) meetings so there is input from them in their absence, and they have a voice.

An appreciative inquiry approach to strengths-based assessments

Appreciative inquiry is a change management approach that focuses on identifying what is working well, analysing why it is working well, and then supporting the family to do more of it. If we only focus on difficulties and worries people can be left feeling hopeless and stuck. 'Asking about skills, successes, and strengths acknowledges achievements and existing good parenting skills, taps into enthusiasm and engenders feelings of hope, even in some difficult or desperate situations.' (Hammond, 1998). Parents and children have more confidence in their futures when they rediscover and carry forward the achievements of their past.

An appreciative inquiry approach to assessment requires the practitioner to conduct the assessment with curiosity, seeking to discover what matters most to the child and family.

The 4D model of appreciative inquiry



Key principles of using a strength based / appreciative inquiry model

- Build trust and safety.
- Work on the principle of what works well, what is valued and what matters most to the child and family.
- Do not deny or dispute difficulties and negativity, help the family reframe their thinking towards their hopes and possibilities.
- Recognise and develop the relationships within the family and their support networks.

*Appendix B contains examples of strengths-based questions.

Basic information

Record the details of each unborn baby, child and/or young person aged 0-18 who is part of the assessment.

Record the details, where known, of each parent/carer and any significant others involved with the unborn baby, child, or young person. Include details of who has parental responsibility for the unborn baby, child, or young person and if a significant

other is included, record what their relationship is to the unborn baby, child or young person. The use of genograms during the assessment process is encouraged, it may help identify support systems available to the family.

Services working with the family

Record the details of other services already involved with the family, particularly involvement with schools, health, and specialist services. Gathering information from agencies involved with a child triangulates information, enhances the assessment, and provides a more holistic picture and collaborative approach to meeting the needs of the child and their family.

As part of the assessment, you should gather information about agencies working with the family and who is in receipt of the services, this includes the details of universal and other services. Agencies should include details for the family GP, primary health nurses such as a midwife, school nurse or health visitor, nursery/school/ college or other education provider, any specialist services for each child such as any specialist health services, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), and any 'adult services' such as substance or mental health.

Previous assessments and existing plans

It is important to identify whether there have been any other previous agency involvement and assessments undertaken with the family to gain a better understanding of the current and historical needs of the child / young person and their family. This can include a previous early help assessment.

Other assessments and or interventions that may have been completed include health or development reviews, education and learning assessments, speech and language assessment, OT assessment, social care single assessment (which may result in a child in need plan or a child protection plan), mental health and /or psychological assessment, drug and/or alcohol assessment/treatment, DASH assessment.

Gaining information about existing plans enables discussion with parents about what is happening right now, helps identify what is working well for the family, and also what needs to change.

The wishes/feelings of the child/family

Including the wishes and feelings of the child and family, and understanding their experience is important for any early help to be effective.

When working with children there are a range of tools that can be utilised to help ascertain the wishes and feelings of children.

The voice of the child

The right of a child or young person to be heard is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and reinforced by national

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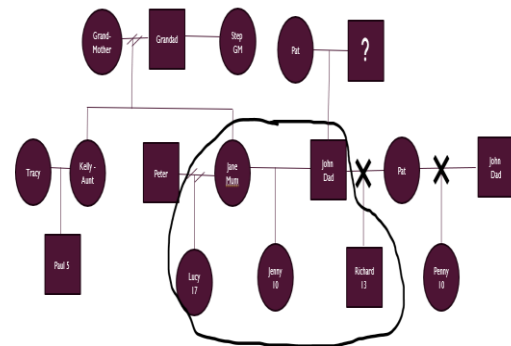
legislation and guidance. For example, in England Working Together 2023 makes it clear that one of the core principles of effective safeguarding practice is a child centred approach which aims to understand children's lived experiences and seeks their views about their lives and circumstances (Department for Education, 2023).

The voice of the child refers not only to what children (including those who are pre-verbal and non-verbal) say directly but to their behaviour as a whole. Facilitating the child's voice involves developing relationships and creating environments in which children feel comfortable and confident sharing their thoughts and experiences. It also means making sure that children's views, opinions, and preferences are sought and listened to when decisions are made which impact their life.

Using genograms and ecomaps to inform the assessment

What is a genogram?

A genogram is a simple tool that can be used to see how a family is made up. It helps you identify who is living in the home with the child and who is in the wider family network. It is a more formal term for a family tree.



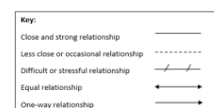
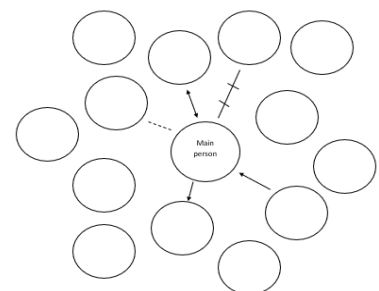
Purpose of a genogram

A genogram can be used when working with children and families. This tool can assist practitioners to help provide information about family members, support systems, and might assist practitioners to see patterns that maybe contributing to the difficulties. Family structures can change over-time, and therefore a genogram should be updated accordingly.

Ecomaps

What is an ecomap?

An ecomap is a visual aid and can be a useful tool when completing an early help assessment, its aims is to map and understand a child and families personal and social connections. It provides an in-depth view of the complex interactions and influences in a family, especially in relation to their environment. Unlike genograms, which focus on family relationships, ecomaps include a broader range of social and support networks.



Purpose of an ecomap

Analysing Relationships: Ecomaps are essential for examining the nature and intensity of an individual's relationships. They extend beyond family connections to cover various social interactions, offering insights into family dynamics and the mix of supportive and challenging aspects within the family.

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Identifying Support and Stress Sources: Ecomaps are instrumental in identifying where support and stress come from, highlighting both positive and negative influences. They assess each family member's links to social support systems, such as housing, income support, and counselling, and offers the opportunity for the practitioner and family to evaluate the quality of these links.

Providing an overview: Ecomaps offer a wide-ranging view of a person's interactions with their surroundings, including community ties like friends, neighbours, clubs, and educational settings, as well as the family's overall engagement with the external environment.

*An ecomap template is included in appendix A

Summary and analysis

"Analysis should inform the action to be taken which will have maximum impact on the child's welfare and outcomes". Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)

Analysis goes beyond the collection of facts and information and is about how you understand that information. The analysis section should not simply be a bullet point or summary of the information already gathered. It is important to carefully examine the child's situation and lived experience to reach an understanding of how that might impact on the child now, and in and the future.

This is the place for you to add your professional judgement and consider your own professional curiosity.

- Consider the information gathered to date, what is this telling you? How have you come to this way of thinking?
- What in your professional opinion is working well, what do you consider to be a worry, and how these impact on the child and or the family.
- Always think 'so what' and 'why is it relevant'?

To get into an analytical frame of mind it may be helpful to open this section with 'From all the information gathered it appears that' It might also be helpful for you to draw on research and link it to the individual child and family situation.

Next steps

There should always be a clear link between the assessment information gathered, the family's goals, and the family action plan. The plan should be written in a language that is understandable and ownership of the plan must be given to the child and their family.

Actions need to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely (SMART). It is good practice, and a way of empowering a family to give actions to individual family members. There is an Early Help Practice Guide for SMART Family Action Planning.

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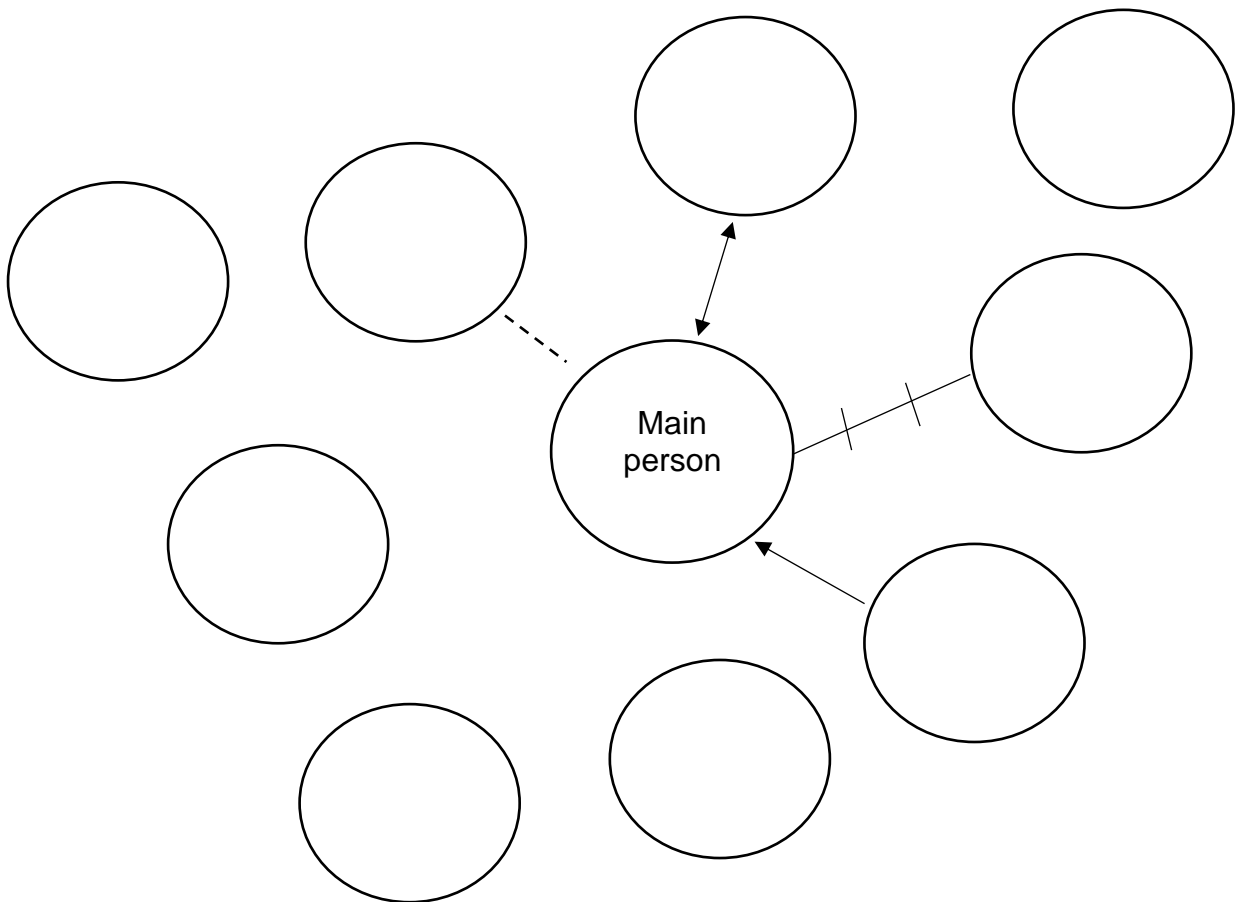
The purpose of any Early Help is not to make a child and/or family dependent on a professional, service or intervention, it is to empower the child and family members achieve positive outcomes for themselves, a good assessment is the first step in providing support that enables this to happen.

Appendix A

Ecomap

Name:

Date:



Key:	
Close and strong relationship	—————
Less close or occasional relationship	- - - - -
Difficult or stressful relationship	— / — / —
Equal relationship	←————→
One-way relationship	—————→

Appendix B

Examples of Strengths based questions. This is only to be used as a guide, make the questions your own using language you feel comfortable with.

Adults:

- What is working well in your family?
- Can you tell me what X's best qualities are?
- What does X like doing? How do you know? What makes this enjoyable for X?
- Who would X say are the most important people in their life?
- Who do you think are the most important people in their life?
- What have you tried? And what has been helpful?
- Tell me about how other people are helping you to make things go well?
- What could be going better?
- What stops things working better?
- What would be happening if things were working better for your family?
- What small thing could you do that would make a difference?
- Tell me about what a good day looks like for you? What makes it a good day?
- Have there been times when this issue has been dealt with or was even a little bit better. What was happening, what was different?
- What do you value about yourself, and yourself as a parent, and what are your greatest strengths?
- Tell me about a time when you responded to a challenge in a way that made you feel really on top of things?
- What kind of supports have you used that have been helpful to you? How did the supports improve things for you?
- Tell me about any creative, different solutions you have tried. How did this work out?
- Can you think of one small manageable step that would improve X for you?
- What resources such as community, services, and people, do you have now that can support you? Do you know of anything else that might be helpful for you? Consider using an Ecomap and/or genogram to help identify support networks.
- Tell me what a good day looks like? What makes a good day?
- What is the best thing about being mum/dad to X
- Who can you talk to when things are tough?

Child:

- When things are going well at in your life – tell me what is happening?
- Who are the most important people in your life – how do they help you?
- Tell me about how other people are helping you to make things go well?
- What are the things in your life that help you keep strong?

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- What do you value about yourself?
- What would your family and friends say you were good at?
- What would other people who know you, say you were good at doing?
- What is one thing you could do to have better feeling of wellbeing?
- How have you faced / overcome the challenges you have had?
- What do you think helps you bounce back?
- How have people around you helped you overcome challenges?
- What are three things that have helped you overcome obstacles?
- If you had the opportunity, what would you like to teach others?
- What do you value about yourself and what are your greatest strengths?
- How could/do your strengths help you to be a part of your community?
- How would you describe the strengths, skills, and resources you have in your life?
- What could you ask others to do, that would help create a better picture for you?
- What are three things that are going well in your life right now?
- What gives you energy?
- What is the most rewarding part of your life?
- When now, or in the past, have you felt like you are making a difference, making a contribution? How did you make this happen?
- What would make you feel you are making a contribution?
- What makes you feel excited OR useful OR satisfied? Tell me about a time when you felt these feelings?
- Tell me about a time when you responded to a challenge in a way that made you feel really on top of things?
- What kind of supports have you used that have been helpful to you? How did the supports improve things for you?
- Tell me about any creative, different solutions you have tried. How did this work out?
- When you think about X (whatever it is that is stopping things going well) is there anything you can think of that could help in any way?
- Can you think of one small manageable step that would improve X for you?
- What resources such as community, services, and people, do you have now that can support you? Do you know of anything else that might be helpful for you? Consider using an Ecomap and/or genogram to help identify support networks.
- Who can you talk to when things are tough?