



# Foundational theories and knowledge

## Systems theory Practice Paper

### 1. Introduction

This practice paper provides DCP case workers with an understanding of the principles of and key concepts and skills associated with systems theory in child protection practice.

This practice paper should be read in conjunction with the [Strengths based practice Practice Paper](#) as there are critical links between systems theory and strengths based practice.

Please note that in this document, the term Aboriginal, refers to all people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This term is used as the First Nations Peoples of South Australia are predominantly Aboriginal peoples and it is their preferred term. We acknowledge and respect that it is preferable to identify Aboriginal peoples, where possible, by their specific Language group or Nation.

### 2. What is systems theory?

Systems theory:

- asserts that individuals, including children and young people and families, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader system and multiple environments (ecological systems) in which they exist
- promotes consideration of the individual in the context of these interconnected environments or sub-systems
- explores the relationships between children and young people, their family and community and how these relationships and social contexts influence safety and risk.

There are five environmental sub-systems used to explore and explain impacts on the individual:

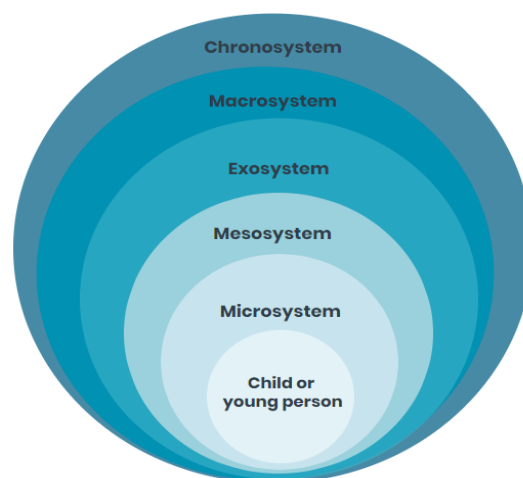


Figure 1: Systems theory diagram (adapted from Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory)



The five environmental sub-systems are:

Sub system	Description and example
Microsystem	The microsystem includes people and groups who have direct impact on the individual, including their safety and development (for example family members, neighbours, peers and education and health services).
Mesosystem	<p>The mesosystem is the interactions between the people and groups in the microsystem (for example caregivers and the school).</p> <p>Mesosystem interactions may offer safety and support to the child or young person, but could also contribute to risks. For example, if a caregiver is positively engaged with the school, it is likely that the child or young person will receive the education supports they require. Conversely, if there is a conflictual relationship between caregivers and the school, this could limit the child or young person’s school engagement or negatively influence the child or young person’s attitudes towards school or the support the child or young person receives.</p>
Exosystem	The exosystem explains the linkages that exist between two or more sub-systems and social settings that do not directly involve the child or young person but still impact them. For example, if a caregiver’s income reduces due to lost hours, this could cause frustration and contribute to an increase in domestic and family violence, thus causing harm to the child or young person.
Macrosystem	The macrosystem includes the culture that influences the child or young person, as well as the microsystems and mesosystems embedded in those cultures. The macrosystem has a significant impact on the child or young person through access to opportunities and developing their sense of self including their feelings of belonging.
Chronosystem	The chronosystem explores how factors change over time and includes changes in family structure and social changes. For example, the impact of caregiver relationship breakdown may be initially conflictual and over time may stabilise and improve. Social changes could include the impact of caregiver employment as well as broader societal impacts such as economic cycles (for example a recession).

In child protection practice, the individual at the centre of the system is the child or young person. The safety of the child or young person is the paramount consideration. The interconnected nature of the sub-systems means that change in one area or relationship has the potential to create change in other parts of the sub-system (either positively or negatively). Systems theory also promotes DCP case workers to consider the factors that impact the individual directly such as their developmental age, gender, culture, health and disability. Systems theory is helpful to identify strengths and supports, as well as opportunities for change.



### 3. Systems theory and Aboriginal families

Systems thinking supports implementation of all elements of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. Understanding how children, young people and their families are impacted by these interconnected environments or sub-systems can only be achieved through deep listening. When considering the microsystem for Aboriginal children and young people, it is important to be aware that in Aboriginal communities family is broader than parents and caregivers and includes kinship and community relationships. Ensuring that family and kin are supported in self-determination and to engage in family led decision making is crucial to implementing the prevention and participation elements of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. Refer to the [Family Led Decision Making for Aboriginal families Framework](#) for further information. When thinking about how the mesosystem around the child or young person is functioning, consideration should be given to how connected the child or young person and their family is to culture, community and Country. For Aboriginal families, it is vitally important to consider how issues within the macrosystem have been and currently are impacting the child, young person, their family and community (for example systemic and structural racism, impacts of intergenerational trauma, non-Aboriginal world views as the dominant cultural narrative). Recognition of how intergenerational and collective traumas have impacted the child or young person, their family, their community, their wider environments and how trauma has affected the relationships between each of these systems in Aboriginal families and communities is critical.

### 4. Systems theory tools

Genograms and ecomaps are essential tools in systems theory application.

#### 4.1 Genograms

Genograms map out the diverse and complex relationships of families and should include as much information regarding family connections as possible. Genograms have application across all phases of child protection practice and development should commence as early as possible. DCP case workers must develop genograms in partnership with families, ensure that information is accurate and regularly updated. Genograms can be used as an engagement tool with families and are helpful in clarifying critical family relationships.

For Aboriginal children and young people, family relationships and connections extend beyond the nuclear family unit and identity is often determined by this wider network of relationships. For this reason, using a genogram that focuses only on the nuclear family to map for placement is not culturally appropriate for Aboriginal children and young people as family definitions are broader and not limited to biological or marital relationships. It is also important that an ecomap of the child or young person, their family and community is developed and it should identify cultural decision makers. Consultation with a Principal Aboriginal Consultant or Aboriginal Family Practitioner can assist in developing an understanding of complex kinship structures and support engagement with Aboriginal families.

Where the child or young person requires a placement, genograms are crucial for family mapping and identifying potential placement options, including wider networks and community. Genograms are also useful in identifying who the decision makers are in the family which supports family led decision making.



Generally speaking, the more information and family connections a genogram contains the better. As a minimum, the genogram should include three generations (for example the child or young person, the parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents).

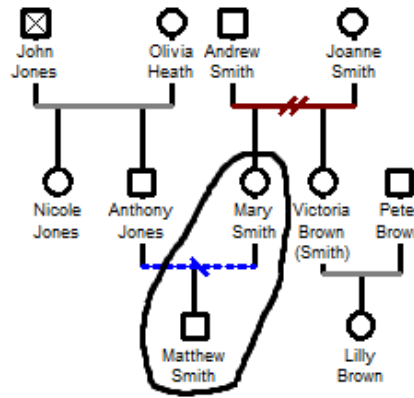


Figure 2: example genogram with three generations

Genograms can be hand written or developed using *GenoPro*. The genogram must be recorded to the child or young person’s C3MS record. Refer to the [Genograms C3MS Guide](#) for further information. Genograms can also be used to inform the review of relationships screen of the child or young person’s C3MS record.

#### 4.2 Ecomaps

An ecomap is a visual representation of the child or young person’s network and support system. Ecomaps detail how the child or young person’s relationships and environment influences their safety and wellbeing. Like genograms, ecomaps can be used as an engagement tool and inform an understanding of the child or young person in their social context. Ecomaps can support connections to family, community and culture and are critical in identifying strengths that exist within the child or young person’s network.

Ecomaps are an essential tool in assessment and case planning as they highlight connections that may either promote or compromise safety and support. Using an ecomap with a family when engaging in safety planning can be helpful to identify strengths and risk issues and ensure that mitigating safety factors appropriately draw on existing strengths.

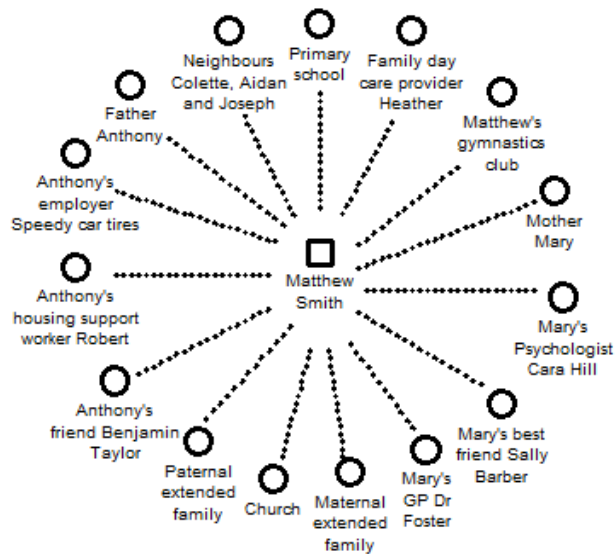


Figure 3: example ecomap

Like genograms, ecomaps can be hand written or developed using *GenoPro* and must be recorded to the child or young person's record [Genograms C3MS Guide](#). The child or young person should be positioned at the centre of the ecomap, with their networks and system highlighted around them.

## 5. Systems theory in assessment and intervention

Understanding the systems that exist for the child or young person is critical when undertaking holistic assessments to identify safety concerns, risks, strengths and opportunities for change. Through applying systems theory, DCP case workers can develop a deeper understanding of how sub-systems are interrelated and impact upon one another. Understanding the context of an individual's behaviour can support DCP case workers to work effectively with children and young people, families and carers to better understand their own circumstances and develop interventions which recognise the impact of the sub-systems on each other. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the impact of systems and relationships, children and young people, families and their networks must be actively engaged in assessments, case planning and decision making. Refer to the [Assessment framework](#) for further information about assessment.

## 6. Reflective practice prompts

DCP case workers are better able to develop their skills when they engage in reflective practice. During supervision or team meetings, consider the following questions in relation to one of your cases:

- Locate the genogram and consider whether there are at least three generations. Does it need updating?
- What supports exist within the child or young person's micro and macrosystems? What more that can be done to build on these supports? If supports are limited, develop a plan to build supports and community connections.
- What risks might be in the child or young person's microsystem? What additional measures can be implemented to mitigate these risks?



## Document control

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