

Communication maps: a participatory tool to understand communication patterns and relationships

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by SONAL ZAVERI

Introduction

Mapping relationships and communication are important for most development programmes. They teach us about who the participants are talking to, what they talk about, and how important it is. Asking is one way of finding out either through an interview or a questionnaire, or through group discussions. But these methods have their limitations. Not all relationships may be disclosed, the interviewer/facilitator may not be skilled in finding out information, and people may not feel like talking about it. When working with children and young people, it is even more difficult to elicit responses verbally.

Communication mapping is a participatory tool which is a simple and effective way to plot and understand how children communicate with the people in their lives. The tool was developed in Nepal while evaluating a school health programme, where children were taught simple health messages using the active learning methods of the Child-to-Child approach.¹ Children

spontaneously communicated these messages to their friends, family, and community and practiced healthy behaviour in their daily life. The communication map has also been used in other programmes involving children and young people, in Africa and Asia, the most recent being a national Life Skills programme for children affected by HIV in India. It is a visual tool, easy to administer and children in different contexts and countries have used it. The tool can be used at the beginning and at the end of a programme, with an intervention and a non-intervention group providing concrete and quantifiable evidence regarding communication patterns.

Making communication maps

- Take half a sheet of chart paper (about 2 feet by 18 inches) and different coloured sketch pens. It is important to have large thick paper because children like to draw freely. Colourful sketch pens give expression to their feelings.

¹ See www.child-to-child.org/about/approach.html

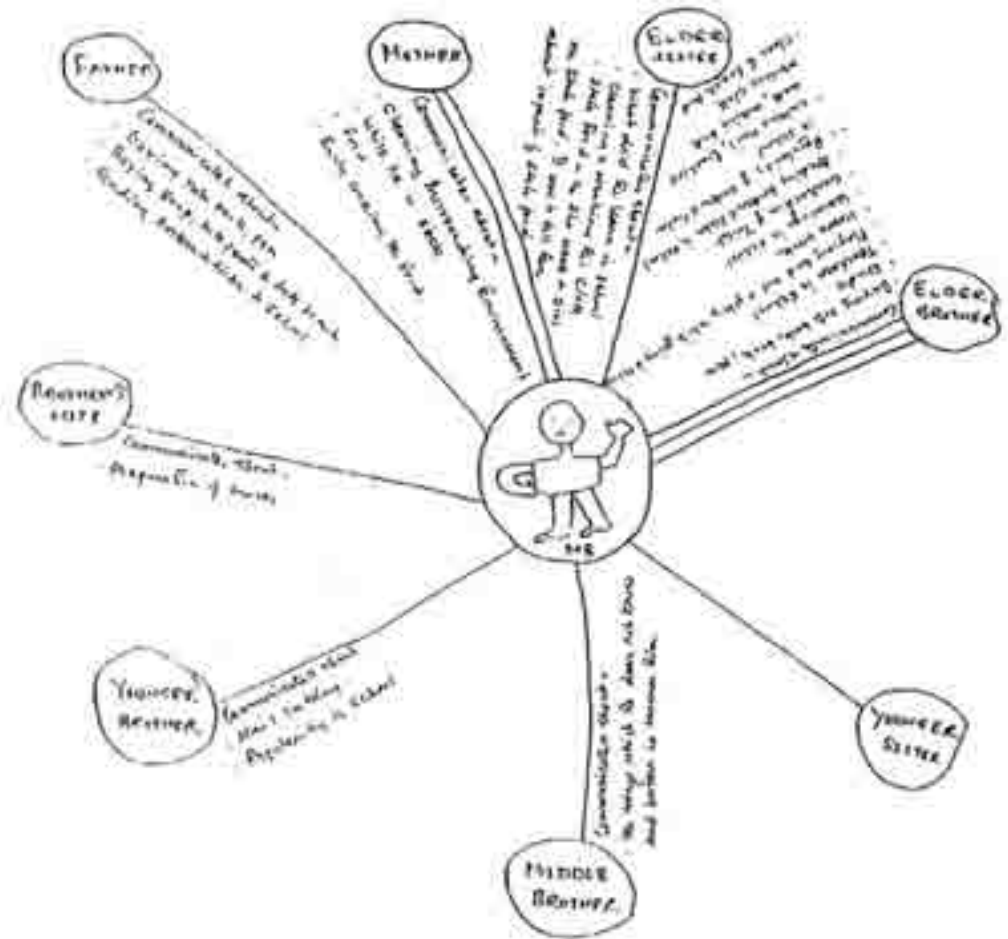


Figure 1: Map drawn by Janak, a Class IV student, Sindhupalchowk Nepal.

- Take the blank chart paper and with your hand make a circle in the air in the middle of the paper and say, ‘Draw yourself in the middle here any way you like, you can write your name or draw yourself in the middle of this paper.’
- Next, place your hand at different parts of the paper saying, ‘Draw or name all the people in your life. If you talk to them a lot, draw three lines from you to that person. If you don’t talk much to them, draw one line and if you talk somewhat, draw two lines from you to that person. On the line, write what you talk about.’

I usually do not like to ‘show’ or demonstrate a communication map as children copy very easily. But by drawing in the air and using a blank paper, the instructions are easily understood without ‘priming’ chil-

dren to copy. These instructions enable children to think unfettered and allow the free flow of their thoughts and expressions. I am always amazed at the variety of maps children make with these simple instructions.

A word of caution – children like to look over their shoulder at what their friends are doing and it is a good idea to have a large room where children can spread out and work on their own. In many cultures, children are expected to follow rules and behave in a defined way – that is why it is particularly important to emphasise and repeat in the instructions – **draw yourself and others anyway you like.**

Most children get engrossed quite quickly in the activity and it is likely to take anywhere from 30 to 40 minutes. Once children have finished, they may share their



Map drawn by Jyoti, a 13-year-old girl at Ankur Night Shelter, CCDT (India).

maps with the facilitator or their friends. Discussion and sharing illuminates much of what children have written, creating a better understanding for later analysis. Two of the most common comments I have received from facilitators are, 'I can see the child's life like a picture in front of my eyes' and, 'I have known this child for so long but never knew about all these relationships'.

Using the maps for evaluation purposes

The communication map has been used in evaluation. In our study in Nepal, we learnt that children were communicating about health to their parents and siblings and that there were gender differences. In other evaluations, a before/after design indicated that children of sex workers were communicating about their studies and life goals, were talking to neighbours without stigma, and

had stopped communicating to those who 'used' or exploited them.

Because the map provides several dimensions of study, one can plot changes in:

- who children communicate with;
- how much they communicate (one line is the least, and three lines is the most); and
- what they communicate (topics and issues can be identified).

All these can be counted and quantified. If you are using a before/after design or a randomised controlled trial, it will be necessary to store the maps safely for later comparison with the maps drawn after the intervention.

Although this tool has been developed for children and young people, it has been used extensively during the training of facilitators and many field programmes have used it with parents of the children as well.

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