

Using Psychological Testing in Child Custody Evaluations

Child custody evaluations have evolved over the years. A shift has occurred from the 'tender years doctrine,' which presumed it was best for young children, and girls of any age, to be in the custody of their mother, to the 'best interest of the child' standard. With this newer standard, neither parent is believed to have an innate right to the child. The court must consider the mental and physical health of the parents and other individuals involved in childcare; the ability to provide food, clothing, medication, and other material benefits to the child; the interaction and relationship between the child and parent; and the wishes of the parents and child. This allows fathers greater access to the custody of their children. It also makes custody decisions more complicated and conflict laden.

Psychologists are therefore often asked to conduct child custody evaluations. Psychologists are encouraged to gather multiple data on parental capacity, the child's adjustment, and the parent-child bond. Therefore, the child is interviewed alone and each parent is interviewed separately. Both parents are observed in a separate interaction with the child. Psychological testing is also often used to objectify the process. The most commonly used instruments are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2), Rorschach Inkblot Test, Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS). However, more traditional tests such as these do not directly assess parenting skills. For example, while most psychologists, attorneys, and judges are familiar with these tests, they were not created to assess parenting capacity and are not directly related to the parent-child relationship.

The **MMPI-2** assesses truthfulness, mental illness, and maladaptive personality traits, which are important factors in parenting. However, it should not be used as a standalone test as it does not directly assess how these traits impact the individual's parenting. The **Rorschach** meets professional standards in the field but is highly controversial, has limited acceptability in court, and does not directly answer questions related to parenting. Therefore, if the MMPI-2 or Rorschach are used it should be to address the mental health of the parents and the data should be interpreted appropriately to reflect mental state rather than parental capacity. Intellectual capacity, as measured by the **WAIS**, has no direct bearing on parenting capacity unless there is a question of mental retardation. The **TAT** also has limited acceptability in court, has limited validity and reliability, and does not directly answer questions related to parenting.

Therefore, several tests have been developed to more directly gauge parenting. The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI), Parenting Stress Index (PSI), and Children's Reports of Parental Behavior (CRPB) are valid and reliable indicators of parental abilities.

The **PCRI** assesses the parent's attitudes toward parenting and their children on domains of parental support, satisfaction with parenting, involvement, communication, limit setting, autonomy, and role orientation. Parents who implement discipline well have high scores and those who are referred for court-ordered mediation, and are at risk for child abuse, have low scores. The **PSI** identifies stressful factors within the child such as adaptability, demandingness, mood, distractibility/hyperactivity, and how acceptable and gratifying the child is to the parent. It also measures stressful factors in the parent's life and interactions

with the child such as depression, sense of competence, level of attachment to the child, spousal support, parental health, level of role restriction, and social interaction. The PSI appears to be a good predictor of which parent feels stressed by their child. The **CRPB** assesses a child's perception of their parent's warmth, acceptance of autonomy, limit setting, positive involvement, rejection, hostile control, intrusiveness, and inconsistent discipline. This is a good measure to help assess the child's view of the situation that does not solely rely on questions they may have been prepped by their parent to answer.

Given that tests exist which more accurately assess parenting, it is suggested that data be gathered from such tests rather than purely from traditional tests. It is also expected that information will be gathered from alternative sources of information, such as interviews, observations, record review, and psychological testing will be used as a supplement to this information. Traditional tests should be used for their intended purposes only. When they are used, they should be used in conjunction with other materials and interpreted appropriately.

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