

## **CUSTODY EVALUATIONS: TEAM APPROACH VERSUS INDIVIDUAL EVALUATOR**

At Lepage Associates, we are proponents of the team approach to custody evaluations. We believe using a team of experienced clinicians results in the most comprehensive evaluation wherein each area evaluated is done so by an expert in that area. In addition, the team approach takes less time to complete as multiple professionals are working on the evaluation, and families seeking custody evaluations are always hoping the evaluation will be completed as soon as possible. With a team the turnaround time is excellent, and the report is of the highest quality.

### **Full Service Testing Facility & Team**

Lepage Associates uses a team approach to conducting custody evaluations. Dr. Tina Lepage acts as the team coordinator, an experienced lead evaluator is assigned, along with other adult clinical and child psychologists on the team. Dr. Lepage completed both her master's thesis and doctoral dissertation on custody evaluations and has been working in this area for over 10 years. All evaluators have significant training and experience working with adults and children in conducting psychological and forensic assessments as well as doing therapy. We are regularly involved in continuing education to stay abreast of the most recent research data as it applies to custody considerations. In contrast to some mental health providers, we are quite willing to attend settlement conferences and testify in court.

The breadth of specialty areas of our Associates makes us truly a full-service evaluation site. We can perform in-depth psychological testing to determine psychological health and functioning, educational testing to determine children's special needs, substance abuse testing, and forensic testing such as child abuse and sexual abuse evaluations. Thus if any of these issues are raised in a custody case, we have experts who can address the issue. Having such a broad range of experts in-house allows the evaluation process to flow smoothly, and results in a comprehensive custody evaluation service.

### **What We Do**

The evaluators look at the child's psychosocial needs, which are related to developmental age and the unique personality and temperament of the child, then looks at each parent's strengths in meeting that child's needs and at the unique needs of the family as a whole, and also take into account how well the social environments of each parent (school, neighborhood, social supports, community, etc.) meet the current needs of the child. Lastly the lead evaluator factors in empirical data on psychosocial needs and on various custody and visitation arrangements at different ages. With that the evaluator generates an opinion as to what would likely be the best custody and visitation arrangement possibilities at this time. The evaluator provides a wealth of information and a professional opinion, but does not make the final decision. The parents utilize the expert opinion provided by the evaluator and make the final decision, and the parenting plan agreement is written into the divorce or separation agreement. If the parents cannot come to an agreement, the written report can be used in court, where the judge will make the decision. We will also be deposed by both lawyers should the case proceed to court, and will appear in court if necessary. We encourage people to utilize the information to come to their own agreement whenever possible.

### **How We Do It**

Custody evaluations include clinical interviews with parents, step-parents, and children. These interviews include a review of the marriage, divorce, and custody situation. They also include a review of each individual's background. Each parent, including step-parents, is observed with their child(ren). Although not all cases require psychological testing, most do. Psychological testing includes assessment of each individual's personality, mental health functioning, and parenting strengths and weaknesses.

Collateral information is a very important part of custody evaluations. We need to review all available legal, medical, school, and mental health/substance abuse records. We contact doctors, family members, neighbors, friends, teachers, and mental health providers.

Generally, we try to have the entire family seen in one day to ensure the children do not come to the office multiple times. When this is not possible and multiple appointments are necessary, we try to have parents come back to the office rather than the children. While we recognize that most families have an urgent need to be seen quickly, scheduling multiple parties and doctors can be complicated. We are generally able to schedule people within one or two weeks after the first contact is initiated. While there may be exceptions, our standard is to have reports written and provide feedback within two months after the first day a family presents for the evaluation.