

CHILD CUSTODY EVALUATION STANDARDS

Published by

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL
LAWYERS

The mission of the AAML is to provide leadership that promotes the highest degree of professionalism and excellence in the practice of family law.

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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers is an organization of the nation's top matrimonial attorneys from 50 states who have a wealth of experience in issues related to marriage, divorce, annulment, property valuation, property distribution, contractual agreements, alternative dispute resolution, litigations, alimony and child related issues including parenting time and support. The Academy currently has chapters in 31 states. Fellows are generally recognized by judges and attorneys as preeminent family law practitioners with a high level of knowledge, skill and integrity.

The Academy was founded in 1962. The purpose of the Academy is to provide leadership that promotes the highest degree of professionalism and excellence in the practice of family law.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS
CHILD CUSTODY EVALUATION STANDARDS

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American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers Child Custody Evaluation Standards

P R E A M B L E

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers was founded in 1962, by domestic relations attorneys highly regarded in their respective jurisdictions who identified a need for an organization dedicated to elevating the standards of practice in family law. There are currently more than 1600 Fellows in 50 states.

During the 2006-2007 term, President Gaetano Ferro appointed Maria Cagnetti chair of an interdisciplinary committee to develop standards for the courts, parties, counsel and mental health professionals for the preparation of uniform child custody evaluations. The committee was composed of experienced family lawyers, all Fellows of *The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*, from regions throughout the United States who have not only handled all types of custody disputes but also functioned as Guardians ad Litem. Two nationally recognized forensic psychologists, Arnold Shienvold, Ph.D. and Marc Ackerman, Ph.D. volunteered their time to provide valuable insight into the complexity of the conduct of these evaluations.

Every jurisdiction in the United States has established legal standards for the determination of child custody; few states have rules or laws which govern how child custody evaluations are conducted. In large urban areas where mental health professionals are plentiful these evaluations are typically completed by licensed psychologists who have stated competencies in child development and custody evaluation. However, this committee recognizes the fact that in the rest of the country, where mental health professionals are scarce and economic resources limited, these evaluations may sometimes be conducted by professionals (which may include attorneys) without training in custody evaluations and court appointed lay persons functioning as Guardians ad Litem and under the mantle of various ADR methodologies. It is the intent of the committee that these *Standards* will aid professionals in understanding the necessary training, skill and experience required in conducting custody

evaluations. It is also the intent of the committee that the court will utilize these *Standards* in their selection of custody evaluators.

Citizens are more likely to be touched by the family court system than any other area of law and no intrusion of the law is more intimate than the determination of who will have custody of a child. The ramifications extend well beyond the family to the entire community. The task of the child custody evaluator is unlike any other court expert. The consequences of these recommendations reverberate long after the legal case is over.

It was the conclusion of the committee that there is need for a coherent, uniform set of standards for the variety of professionals who may be called upon by the court to conduct a custody evaluation. The standards set by this committee are not intended to supersede the ethical precepts of each profession; rather they are an adjunct, intended to provide the court with a uniform means of assessing the quality of a custody evaluation submitted to the court. The committee developed these Standards in consideration of existing guidelines found in the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts [hereinafter, AFCC] Guidelines for Brief Focused Assessment, 2009, and the AFCC Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation, 2006. The criteria for expertise as set forth in Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc., 509 U.S. 579, 113 S. Ct. 2786 (1993) and Frye v. United States, 54 App. D.C. 46, 293 F. 1013 (1923) were incorporated in these *Standards*. In addition, the committee reviewed and took into consideration the APA Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings, 2009, the APA Draft Guidelines for Evaluating Parental Responsibility, May 2007, and the APA Ethical Principles of Code of Conduct for Psychologists with 2010 Amendments.

In developing these guidelines, the committee gave special consideration to the Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluations prepared by the AFCC, and approved by the AFCC Board of Directors in May 2006. After carefully reviewing the AFCC Model Standards, the committee elected to utilize them as a template and point of departure for the development of these AAML standards. This committee is especially appreciative to the AFCC for permitting our extensive use of the Model Standards.

Application of the knowledge and skills of mental health providers in the resolution of legal disputes is a forensic endeavor. These standards have been written in consideration of the importance of that skill set to the orderly and effective resolution of child custody disputes. In the case of custody evaluations, the purpose is to assist the court in application of the law to these important decisions. Lawyers, mental health professionals and judges each have different and distinct roles in child custody disputes. The lawyer advocates for the client; the mental health professional investigates, evaluates and recommends under the canopy of the best interests standard. It is in domestic relations that law and psychology intersect.

The *AAML Child Custody Evaluation Standards* are intended to provide the parties, courts and professionals who conduct these evaluations a uniform guide to the properly performed

child custody evaluation. These Standards may be applicable in any proceeding in which custody or access to a child is being determined.

Maria Cognetti, J.D., Chair

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INTRODUCTION

I.1 PURPOSE

These *Child Custody Evaluation Standards* are designed to promote good practice; to provide information to those who utilize the services of custody evaluators; and to increase confidence in the work done by custody evaluators.

These *Child Custody Evaluation Standards* are designed in part to guide and assist custody evaluators, attorneys and the court in the performance of their duties. In disseminating these *Standards*, the goal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers is to contribute to the ongoing education of custody evaluators, attorneys and courts, thereby promoting good practice; to provide information to those who utilize the services of custody evaluators; and, to increase confidence in the work done by custody evaluators. Unless and until these *Standards* are incorporated into law, included in the rules of a court system, or adopted by a licensing board or similar regulatory authority, they do not have the force of law. Nonetheless, the development and adoption of these *Standards* by the AAML, can guide custody evaluators, attorneys, courts, and parties in the best practices to be utilized in custody evaluations.

I.2 ENFORCEMENT

The AAML believes it to be advisable that custody evaluators conform their practices to these *Standards*; however, the AAML does not have an enforcement mechanism.

The AAML does not have and does not intend to establish an enforcement mechanism for these *Standards*. We believe it to be advisable that custody evaluators conform their practices to these *Standards*. These *Standards* may communicate expectations that exceed those established by law or by regulatory bodies. Where conflict exists, law, rules of the court, regulatory requirements, or agency requirements supersede these *Standards*. Where the standard articulated herein is higher than the standard required by law or regulation, the custody evaluators should be guided by these *Standards*.

I.3 APPLICABILITY

The *Child Custody Evaluation Standards* are intended to address the process of a custody evaluation.

The *Child Custody Evaluation Standards* are intended to address the process of a custody evaluation. The *Standards* are designed to apply only to processes that lead to an analysis of the relative strengths and deficiencies of the parties or that offer an analysis of different parenting plans under consideration by the custody evaluator. The *Standards* are not intended to establish standards for the various components of those custody evaluation models that are collectively referred to as briefer models, such as Brief Focused Evaluations, mini-evaluations, and Early Neutral Evaluations. Neither are these *Standards* intended to apply to evaluations that may formally incorporate a settlement component and that are, therefore, hybrid models.

American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers Child Custody Evaluation Standards

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1. TRAINING, EDUCATION & COMPETENCY ISSUES

1.1 CUSTODY EVALUATIONS AS A SPECIALIZATION

A custody evaluator should have specialized knowledge and training in topics related to child custody and should keep abreast of the ever evolving research in the field.

Custody evaluators should have specialized knowledge and training in a wide range of topics specifically related to child custody as well as a broad knowledge of family dynamics. Those individuals conducting custody evaluations that raise special issues should have specialized training. [Refer to 1.2(c) for a list of areas in which specialized training is required.] Because research and laws pertaining to the field of divorce or separation and custody are continually changing and evolving, custody evaluators should participate in continuing education on a regular basis.

1.2 EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

Custody evaluators shall possess appropriate education and training. Custody evaluators should have at least a master's degree in a mental health field that includes formal education in the legal, social, familial and cultural issues involved in custody and parenting time decisions. Custody evaluators who have fewer than three years' experience in conducting custody evaluations and have conducted fewer than 20 custody evaluations should seek ongoing supervision from an experienced custody evaluator prior to offering to perform or accepting appointments to conduct custody evaluations.

EDUCATION

(a) Custody evaluators shall have at least a master's degree (or its regionally-recognized equivalent) in a mental health field or a juris doctor degree, both of which shall have the training requirements in 1.2(b) and the experience requirements in 1.2 (c).

TRAINING

(b) Areas of expected formal education and/or training for all child custody evaluators include but are not limited to:

General Information

- (1) the legal context within which child custody and parenting time issues are decided and additional legal and ethical standards to consider when serving as a child custody evaluator;
- (2) the psychological assessment of children and adults;

Knowledge

- (3) psychopathology of children and adults;
- (4) the psychological and developmental needs of children, especially as those needs relate to decisions about child custody and parenting time;
- (5) family dynamics, including, but not limited to, parent-child relationships, blended families, and extended family relationships;
- (6) research, theory, policy and practice regarding divorce and child custody issues;
- (7) the effects of separation, divorce, custody arrangements, and parental conflict on the psychological and developmental needs of children and adults;

- (8) the significance of culture and religious diversity in the lives of parties;
- (9) relevant aspects of forensic psychology;
- (10) the ethical guidelines for their professions;

Role

- (11) how to make the relevant distinctions among the roles of evaluator, mediator, therapist, parenting coordinator, and co-parenting counselor;
- (12) how to deal with issues of informed consent;
- (13) when to consult with or involve additional experts or other appropriate persons;
- (14) how to maintain neutrality;

Procedure

- (15) how to apply comparable interview, assessment, and testing procedures that meet generally accepted forensic standards;
- (16) how to collect and assess relevant data and recognize the limits of the reliability and validity of different sources of data;
- (17) when and how to interview or assess children and adults;
- (18) how to assess and construct effective parenting and co-parenting plans;
- (19) how to gather information from collateral sources;
- (20) how to recognize safety issues that may arise during the evaluation process and their potential effects on all participants in the evaluation;
- (21) how to write reports for the courts;
- (22) how to conduct an assessment of attachment or bonding;

Recommendations

- (23) how to address issues such as general mental health, medication use, learning or physical disabilities, and special needs;
- (24) how to maintain professional neutrality and objectivity when conducting child custody

evaluations; and

(25) how to achieve balance and recognize bias.

(c) Areas of additional specialized training for a particular situation including, but not limited to:

(1) assessment of allegations of child sexual abuse issues;

(2) assessment of child abuse;

(3) assessment of domestic violence;

(4) assessment of alienation;

(5) assessment of relocation (move-away) requests by one parent;

(6) assessment of substance abuse; and,

(7) sexual orientation issues.

(d) Custody evaluators shall maintain the requisite knowledge and skill, keep abreast of developments in the fields of psychology and the law, and engage in continuing study and education. Custody evaluators who are not competent in a specific area should demonstrate that they have consulted with a professional who is competent in that area, and disclose such consultation in their reports.

EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS

(e) Because a custody evaluation is a unique specialty area, anyone conducting custody evaluations should have obtained appropriate education and professional training prior to offering to perform or accepting an appointment to perform such evaluations. Novice custody evaluators should obtain supervision or consultation with another professional who meets the education, experience, and training requirements of this section. Custody evaluators who have fewer than three years of experience conducting custody evaluations and have conducted fewer than 20 custody evaluations should continue receiving ongoing supervision or to arrange for consultation to be available to them and to utilize the services of a consultant when needed. When a custody evaluator utilizes the services of a consultant in forming their opinion, the consultant and their role shall be identified.

(f) Upon request, custody evaluators should adequately and accurately inform all recipients of their services about relevant aspects of the nature and extent of their experience, training, credentials, and qualifications.

2. COMMUNICATION WITH LITIGANTS, ATTORNEYS & COURTS

2.1 POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND FEES

Custody evaluators should communicate their policies regarding their procedures in conducting custody evaluations.

(a) Custody evaluators should communicate their policies regarding their procedures in conducting custody evaluations. Custody evaluators should provide, to the recipients of their services, detailed written information concerning their policies, procedures, scope of services, time frame of services, and fees. In the portion of the document in which fees are outlined, it should be made clear that the services to be rendered are forensic in nature.

(b) The court order or engagement letter as defined herein shall: specify the intended uses of information obtained during the custody evaluation; include a list of those to whom and the manner in which the report will be released; and confirm that release of items in their file will be in conformance with applicable laws and court rules. This information shall be provided to the parties and to their attorneys.

(c)(i) In the initial meeting with the parties, custody evaluators should review their policies and procedures, confirm understanding of the engagement letter, respond to any questions, and seek assurance that the policies and procedures are fully understood.

(c)(ii) Custody evaluators should inform children of the limits of confidentiality, using language that is based upon each child's cognitive capacity and receptive language abilities.

2.2 INFORMED CONSENT – PARTIES

Custody evaluators should take steps to ensure that parties from whom information is sought know and understand the potential uses of the information that they are providing.

(a) Custody evaluators shall inform the parties as to the manner in which information provided by them will be utilized with emphasis on the fact that the information provided by them is not confidential.

(b) Custody evaluators shall disclose to the parties information that may include, but is not limited to: the purpose, nature, and anticipated uses of the custody evaluation; who will have access to the information obtained during the custody evaluation; and associated limits on privacy, confidentiality, and privilege including who is authorized to release or access the information contained in the custody evaluator's records.

(c) Any document given to the custody evaluator by an attorney or a party shall be also immediately given to the other side. The custody evaluator will inform each attorney of documents received from the parties. Documents provided to the custody evaluator are not privileged.

(d) If a party is ordered by the court to participate, the custody evaluator can conduct the examination over the objection, and without the consent, of the party. If the party declines to proceed after being notified of the nature and purpose of the custody evaluation, the

custody evaluator may, as appropriate, attempt to conduct the examination, postpone the examination, advise the party to contact his or her attorney, or notify the attorneys and/or court of the party's unwillingness to proceed.

2.3 INFORMED CONSENT – COLLATERAL CONTACTS

The custody evaluator should obtain explicit authorization from the parties for the custody evaluator to contact collateral sources unless the authority is provided in the order appointing the custody evaluator or is statutorily provided. The custody evaluator should inform collateral sources that the information that is being discussed between the collateral sources and the custody evaluator is not confidential.

(a) The custody evaluator should obtain explicit authorization from the parties for the custody evaluator to contact collateral sources unless the authority is provided in the order appointing the custody evaluator or is statutorily provided.

(b) The custody evaluator should inform collateral sources that the information that is being discussed between the collateral sources and the custody evaluator is not confidential.

(c) The custody evaluator should disclose to collateral sources relevant information that may include, but may not be limited to, who has retained the custody evaluator; the nature, purpose, and intended use of the examination or other procedure; limits on privacy, confidentiality, and privilege;

(d) Documents provided to the custody evaluator by collateral sources are not privileged and the parties will either receive copies of the documents or a list of documents received from collateral sources.

(e) The subjects of the evaluation should provide explicit authorization for the custody evaluator to contact collateral sources who, in the custody evaluators' judgment, are likely to have information bearing upon the matters before the court. Such authorizations should be secured from the parties in the legal action, unless such authorization is clearly articulated in the order appointing the custody evaluator or such authorization is provided by statute. Custody evaluators should clearly explain the purpose of the evaluation and how the collateral's information will be used.

2.4 EX PARTE COMMUNICATION

Custody evaluators should refrain from ex parte communications about a case with the court or with the attorneys representing the parties, except in extraordinary circumstances.

(a) From the time that custody evaluators learn of their assignments until the time that their custody evaluations have been completed and their reports have been submitted, custody evaluators shall avoid ex parte communication with the court and with any of the attorneys

representing the parties regarding substantive matters. Ex parte communication is permissible only as to administrative or procedural matters.

(b) Upon the release of the report, there shall be no ex parte communications between the custody evaluator and an attorney or a party unless expressly agreed upon by the attorneys and the evaluator. Preparing the custody evaluator for testimony at trial is not considered inappropriate ex parte communication.

3. INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

Custody evaluators should refrain from making interim recommendations, except in extraordinary circumstances.

Unless agreed to by the attorneys, by court order, or by agreement of the parties, or except in extraordinary circumstances, and unless the custody evaluator has the necessary information, the custody evaluator should refrain from making an interim recommendation.

4. DATA GATHERING

4.1 ESTABLISHING THE SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The scope of the custody evaluation should be delineated in a court order or in a signed stipulation by the parties and their counsel.

Custody evaluators should establish the scope of the custody evaluation as determined by court order or by a signed stipulation by the parties and their attorneys. A sample court order and stipulation are appended as Exhibit A. If issues not foreseen at the outset of an evaluation arise and it is the custody evaluator's professional judgment that the scope of the custody evaluation must be widened, the custody evaluator should seek the approval of the court or of all attorneys prior to expanding the originally designated scope of the custody evaluation. Any changes in the scope of the custody evaluator's assigned task should be memorialized in writing and signed by the court or by all attorneys and parties, as applicable.

4.2 COMMITMENT TO ACCURACY

Custody evaluators should strive to be accurate, objective, fair, balanced, and independent in gathering their data and should be prepared to defend decisions made by them concerning their methodology.

(a) Custody evaluators must recognize that their own attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, or biases may diminish their ability to evaluate in a competent and impartial manner. Under such circumstances, custody evaluators should take steps to correct or limit such effects, decline participation in the matter, or limit their participation in a manner that is consistent with professional obligations.

(b) In gathering data, the custody evaluator should be accurate, impartial, objective, fair, balanced, and independent. All data shall should be weighed, and alternative hypotheses

examined. All participants shall be treated impartially. Custody evaluators should be prepared to articulate the bases for decisions concerning their methodologies.

(c) When providing reports and other sworn statements or testimony in any form, custody evaluators should present their conclusions, evidence, opinions, or other professional products in a fair and balanced manner. Custody evaluators shall not, by either commission or omission, participate in misrepresentation of their evidence, nor shall they participate in partisan attempts to avoid, deny or subvert the presentation of evidence contrary to their own position or opinion. This principle does not preclude forceful presentation of the data and reasoning upon which a conclusion or the custody evaluation is based.

4.3 USE OF DIVERSE METHODS

Custody evaluators should use multiple data gathering methods in order to enhance accuracy and objectivity.

(a) Custody evaluators should use multiple data-gathering methods that are as diverse as possible and that draw upon divergent sources of data, and which may lead to alternative plausible hypotheses that need to be explored. Decisions concerning the selection of data gathering methods should be based upon the specific circumstances of the case.

(b) Custody evaluators should avoid reliance on a single source of data. Important data should be corroborated whenever feasible. When relying on uncorroborated data, custody evaluators should make known the uncorroborated status of that data, any associated strengths and limitations, and the reasons for reliance on the data.

(c) Custody evaluators should employ optimally diverse and accurate methods for addressing the questions raised in a specific custody evaluation. Direct methods of data gathering typically include such components as psychological testing, clinical interviews, and behavioral observation. Custody evaluators should seek documentation from a variety of sources (e.g. schools, health care providers, child care providers, agencies, and other institutions), and should attempt to gain information from the extended family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as other collateral sources when the resulting information is likely to be relevant. Custody evaluators should seek corroboration of information gathered from third parties, and are encouraged to document the bases of their conclusions.

4.4 USE OF A BALANCED PROCESS

Custody evaluators should use a balanced process in order to increase objectivity, fairness and independence.

(a) Custody evaluators should employ procedures creating a sense of balance and preventing bias from influencing the result for those involved in the process. As one element of a balanced process, the evaluative criteria employed should be the same for each parent-child combination, except as provided in 4.6. In the interest of fairness and sound methodology, custody evaluators should ensure that any allegation that the custody evaluator is likely to consider in formulating his or her opinion will be brought to the attention of the party against whom the allegation is registered so that the party is afforded an opportunity to

respond. Where circumstances warrant a departure from the foregoing standard, the reasons therefore should be articulated.

(b) Consistent with relevant laws and rules of evidence, when providing reports and other sworn statements or testimony, custody evaluators should provide a complete statement of all relevant opinions formed, the basis and reasoning underlying those opinions, the salient data or other information considered, and an indication of any additional evidence that may be used in support of the opinion offered.

4.5 USE OF RELIABLE AND VALID METHODS

Custody evaluators should use empirically-based methods and procedures of data collection.

(a) In assisting the court, custody evaluators have a special responsibility to select assessment instruments and choose data-gathering techniques that are reliable and valid. Custody evaluators should use methods and procedures of data collection that are empirically-based. In the selection of methods and procedures, custody evaluators should be aware that the use of greater numbers of instruments (particularly when some of those instruments may be of questionable reliability or validity) does not necessarily produce more reliability and validity in the data set. In selecting methods and procedures, custody evaluators should be aware of the criteria concerning admissibility and weight of evidence employed by courts in their jurisdictions.

(b) When offering opinions, custody evaluators should be mindful of evidentiary standards in their jurisdiction and of the importance of reliability, validity and relevance to their specific tasks and should consider multiple factors, including, but not limited to:

1. Possessing the necessary skill, knowledge, experience, training and education in the areas that fall within the scope of their evaluations;
2. Refraining from offering theories and hypotheses that have not been subjected to peer review or publication;
3. Avoiding the application of theories or techniques that are not considered generally accepted within the psychological community;
4. Avoiding opinions that rely too heavily on their subjective interpretation;
5. Avoiding opinions and theories that have not been sufficiently tested within the psychological community; and
6. Remaining familiar with literature within their field of expertise, but especially in the area in which they plan to offer opinions.

In the event of any deviation from the principles set forth above, the custody evaluator shall be prepared to set forth the rationale for such deviation.

4.6 ASSESSMENT OF PARENTS AND PARENTING FIGURES

Custody evaluators should assess each parent and all adults who perform a caretaking role and/or live in the residence with the children.

(a) (i) Except where contraindicated by special circumstances, custody evaluators should assess each parent and any other adults who are currently or likely to be living in a residence with the children and/or performing a caretaking role.

(a) (ii) Special circumstances may arise in situations in which the court has specified who is to be evaluated or in which the custody evaluator believes it is appropriate to evaluate other individuals who are living in the home or who have continued close contacts with the children. In those circumstances, custody evaluators, using their professional judgment, should either seek the court's authority to evaluate the additional individuals, if doing so is deemed necessary; or clearly articulate the limitations on the information obtained and the opinions expressed in light of the inability to assess the other individuals.

(b) Custody evaluators should only provide written or oral evidence about the psychological characteristics of particular individuals when they have sufficient information or data to form an adequate foundation for those opinions or to substantiate their findings. Custody evaluators should make reasonable efforts to obtain such information or data, and they should document their efforts to obtain it. When it is not possible or feasible to examine individuals about whom they are offering an opinion, custody evaluators should make clear the impact of such limitations on the reliability and validity of their professional products, opinions, or testimony.

(c) Custody evaluators shall not offer opinions regarding individuals they have not directly evaluated.

(d) Custody evaluators may offer opinions in response to hypothetical questions so long as the limited basis of the question is noted.

4.7 ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN

Custody evaluators should individually assess each child who is the subject of the evaluation.

(a) Custody evaluators should assess each child whose placement is at issue and should be attentive to any special developmental needs of the children. If a child has stated a preference, then custody evaluators should consider the preference of each child but only if the child is of sufficient developmental maturity to independently express informed views. Custody evaluators should describe the manner in which information concerning a child's stated perceptions and/or preferences were obtained and should specify the weight given by the custody evaluator to the child's stated preference.

(b) Custody evaluators should assess and describe sibling relationships.

4.8 PARENT - CHILD OBSERVATIONS

The custody evaluator should observe each parent-child combination, unless there is a risk to the child's physical or psychological safety.

(a) The custody evaluator should observe each parent-child combination, including pre-verbal children, unless verifiable threats to a child's physical or psychological safety will create foreseeable risk of significant harm to the child or where conducting such an observation is impossible.

(b) Where there are restrictions on the contact between a parent and child, the custody evaluator shall work with the attorneys and the court to develop a safe procedure under which such observation may take place.

(c) Where parent-child observations have not been conducted, custody evaluators have an affirmative obligation to articulate the bases for their decisions.

(d) Observations of parents with children should be conducted in order that the custody evaluator may view samples of the interactions between and among the children and parents, to obtain observational data reflecting on parenting skills and on each parent's ability to respond to the children's needs.

4.9 IN PERSON AND TELEPHONIC INTERVIEWS

Custody evaluators should conduct at least one in person interview with each parent and other adults who perform a caretaking role and/or are living in the residence with the child(ren). Telephonic interviews are an acceptable means for collecting data from collaterals.

Except where contraindicated by special circumstances, custody evaluators should conduct at least one in person interview with any other adults who are likely to be living in a residence with the child(ren). Telephonic communication is an acceptable means for obtaining interview data from collateral sources and as a supplemental technique with primary parties and child. Except where contraindicated by special circumstances, custody evaluators should conduct at least one in person interview with each parent and any other adults who are currently living in a residence with the child(ren) and performing a caretaking role.

4.10 INCOMPLETE, UNRELIABLE, OR MISSING DATA

Custody evaluators should disclose incomplete, unreliable or missing data.

In their custody evaluations, custody evaluators should make known to the court when there are incomplete, unreliable, or missing data. Where data are incomplete, unreliable or missing, custody evaluators should: 1) identify the incomplete, unreliable, or missing data; 2) offer an explanation if doing so is possible; and 3) articulate the implications of the incomplete, unreliable, or missing data upon any opinions communicated in reports or testimony.

4.11 THIRD PARTY PARTICIPATION

Except under unusual and/or necessary circumstances, third parties should not be present during any portion of the custody evaluation.

Except under unusual and/or necessary circumstances third parties should not be present during any portion of the custody evaluation. The presence of third parties shall be disclosed by the custody evaluator in his report. Custody evaluators should be mindful of the potential impact of third parties on the interview or observation process.

5. REQUIREMENT OF COLLATERAL SOURCE INFORMATION

5.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLATERAL SOURCE INFORMATION

Valid collateral source information is critical to a thorough custody evaluation. Sufficiency and reliability of collateral source information is a determination to be made by the custody evaluator.

(a) A custody evaluator should recognize the importance of gathering information from multiple sources that are likely to have access to salient and critical data, in order to thoroughly explore alternative hypotheses pertinent to the custody evaluation.

(b) Decisions concerning the sufficiency of collateral source information should be made by the custody evaluator. The data sources may include, but are not limited to, oral and/or written reports from collateral sources; school, medical, mental health, employment, social service, and law enforcement records; computer files; financial information; and video and audio data that have been legally obtained.

(c) When collateral and documentary data are not available, this limitation should be made known to the court in the custody evaluation.

5.2 CORROBORATION OF RELIED UPON INFORMATION

Collateral source information is usually essential in corroborating participant information.

Custody evaluators should acknowledge the limits in their ability to discern the accuracy of oral reports from the primary participants and so shall to seek from collateral sources information that may serve either to confirm or to disconfirm oral reports, assertions, and allegations. When assessing the information received from participants in the custody evaluation, custody evaluators should seek from other sources information that may serve either to confirm or disconfirm participant reports on any salient issue, unless doing so is not feasible. Where seeking such confirming or disconfirming information is not feasible, custody evaluators should clearly acknowledge, within the body of their written reports, statements that are not adequately corroborated and why it may or may not be appropriate to give weight to such data.

5.3 IDENTIFICATION OF COLLATERAL SOURCES

All collateral sources contacted should be disclosed by the custody evaluator.

A custody evaluator should list all collateral sources whether or not the information obtained was utilized by the custody evaluator in formulating his opinion. Where unsuccessful attempts have been made to contact collaterals, those collaterals should be identified and an appropriate notation made.

6. USE OF FORMAL ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

6.1 THE DECISION TO USE FORMAL ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

Use of formal assessment instruments and psychological tests are within the discretion of the custody evaluator.

(a) Custody evaluators should use assessment procedures in the manner and for the purposes that are appropriate in light of the research on or evidence of their usefulness and proper application. This includes assessment techniques, interviews, tests, instruments, and other procedures as well as their manual or computerized administration, adaptation, scoring, and interpretation. Assessment in legal contexts differs from assessment in therapeutic contexts in important ways that custody evaluators should take into account when conducting custody evaluations. Custody evaluators should consider the strengths and limitations of employing traditional assessment procedures in custody evaluations. Custody evaluators should take special care to ensure the integrity and security of test materials and results.

(b) Where those who are permitted to administer and score psychological assessment instruments elect not to do so, they shall articulate the basis for that decision.

6.2 TRAINING NECESSARY TO USE FORMAL ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

Custody evaluators should be trained and experienced in the selection and administration of formal assessment instruments and should be reasonably skilled in data interpretation.

If formal assessment or testing is advisable and if the custody evaluator does not have sufficient education, training and/or experience, the custody evaluator should refer that portion of the custody evaluation to a case consultant who has sufficient training and experience, including education and training in the interpretation of psychometric test data within a forensic context.

6.3 BASIS FOR SELECTING FORMAL ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

When formal assessment instruments are employed, the custody evaluator should be able to articulate the bases for selecting the specific instruments used.

(a) Custody evaluators should be able to articulate the criteria utilized by them in selecting assessment instruments and to provide the bases for their selection of the instruments utilized in a particular case. Some assessment instruments, data-gathering techniques, and

tests that are acceptable in health care settings may not meet the evidentiary demands associated with forensic work. In selecting methods and procedures, custody evaluators shall know the criteria employed by courts in their jurisdictions in rendering decisions concerning admissibility and weight. Custody evaluators should be knowledgeable of issues pertaining to the applicability of psychometric test data to the matters before the court and should be familiar with published normative data applicable to custody litigants. Custody evaluators should be aware of the reliability and validity of assessment instruments used.

(b) When interpreting assessment results, custody evaluators should consider the purpose of the assessment as well as the various test factors, test-taking abilities, and other characteristics of the person being assessed, such as situational, personal, linguistic, and cultural differences that might affect their judgments or reduce the accuracy of their interpretations. Custody evaluators should identify any significant strengths and limitations of their procedures and interpretations.

(c) If the validity of an assessment technique has not been established in the forensic context or setting in which it is being used, the custody evaluator should describe the strengths and limitations of any test results and explain the extrapolation of these data to the forensic context.

6.4 PROPER USE OF ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

Formal assessment instruments should be used for the purpose for which they have been validated and the testing should follow standardized procedures.

Custody evaluators should utilize the standardized procedures associated with each test. When utilizing tests, custody evaluators should refrain from making substantial changes in test format, mode of administration, instructions, language, or content, unless extraordinary circumstances require that such changes be made. When such changes have been made, custody evaluators shall articulate the rationale for having made such changes.

6.5 INCLUSION IN REPORTS OF RELEVANT DATA FROM PREVIOUS REPORTS

Custody evaluators should take note of any prior formal assessments conducted on the subjects of the evaluation.

Custody evaluators should consider the results of testing data from previous evaluations. In doing so, custody evaluators should consider how current the data are; the qualifications of the previous evaluator; the context of the previous evaluation; and the importance of examining the raw data.

6.6 USE OF COMPUTER-GENERATED INTERPRETIVE REPORTS

Caution should be exercised by the custody evaluator when utilizing computer-generated interpretive reports and/or prescriptive texts.

Custody evaluators should exercise caution in the use of computer-based test interpretations and prescriptive texts. In reporting information gathered, data obtained, and clinical impressions formed and in explaining the bases for their opinions, custody evaluators should accurately portray the relevance of each assessment instrument to the evaluative task and to the decision-making process. Custody evaluators should not assign to test data greater weight than is warranted, particularly when opinions expressed have been formulated largely on some other basis.

7. THE TEAM APPROACH TO CUSTODY EVALUATIONS

7.1 COMPETENCE OF TEAM MEMBERS

A team approach to conducting custody evaluations may be appropriate in certain circumstances.

(a) A team approach to conducting custody evaluations may be appropriate in certain circumstances, provided that all of the mental health professionals are competent to fulfill their assigned roles. In jurisdictions where court-appointed custody evaluations are governed by licensure laws, unlicensed team members should receive close supervision by a designated licensed team member.

(b) A custody evaluator shall explain the reasons for using the team approach.

7.2 RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEAM-CONDUCTED CUSTODY EVALUATIONS

Any team member who signs the custody evaluation report should be knowledgeable and available to the court.

8. ROLE CONFLICTS

8.1 AVOIDING MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Custody evaluators shall take reasonable steps to avoid multiple relationships with any party, attorney, or court.

(a) A multiple relationship occurs when a custody evaluator and either a party, attorney or court is: 1) at either the same or a previous time in different roles with the same person; involved in a personal, fiscal, or other relationship with such person; 2) is in a relationship with a person closely associated with or related to a party, attorney, or court; or 3) offers or agrees to enter into another relationship in the future with the person or a person closely associated with or related to them.

(b) Custody evaluators should take reasonable steps to avoid multiple relationships. The responsible performance of a custody evaluation requires that custody evaluators be able to maintain reasonable professional boundaries, a balanced approach, and objectivity. Custody evaluators should recognize that relationships cannot be time limited; specifically, prior relationships may have the same deleterious effects upon the objectivity of the custody evaluator as current relationships.

(c) Custody evaluators should recognize that their objectivity may appear to be impaired when they currently have or have had a relationship with attorneys for the parties or the children, or with the judge.

(d) Custody evaluators should refrain from taking on a professional role when personal, scientific, professional, legal, financial, or other interests or relationships could reasonably be expected to impair their objectivity, competence, or effectiveness.

(e) The payment by one party of the fees for the custody evaluator does not constitute bias in favor of that party by the custody evaluator.

8.2 INFORMING THE COURT OF MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

If the existence of a multiple relationship is unavoidable, the custody evaluator should inform the court of the existence of a multiple relationship and the impact of the same on the custody evaluation and then proceed only upon waiver in writing signed by the parties and their counsel.

If the existence of a multiple relationship is unavoidable, the custody evaluator should inform the court of the existence of a multiple relationship and the impact of the same on a custody evaluation and then proceed only upon waiver in writing signed by the parties and their counsel.

8.3 DISCLOSURE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS

Custody evaluators should disclose any and all professional and social relationships with any party or participants to the evaluation.

It is recognized that in some geographic areas custody evaluators may not be able to avoid professional or social relationships with individuals whom they may subsequently be asked to evaluate, with attorneys for those individuals, or with judges hearing the disputes. When avoiding multiple relationships is not feasible, custody evaluators should be alert to the ways in which their objectivity may be impaired, and they should provide disclosure of current or prior relationships with others involved in the litigation. Such disclosure should be made in a timely manner.

8.4 AVOIDANCE OF THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

Except in the case of emergencies, custody evaluators should refrain from offering advice or therapeutic interventions to anyone involved in the child custody evaluation process.

When providing custody evaluation services, an emergency may arise that requires the custody evaluator to provide therapeutic services to the examinee in order to prevent imminent harm to the examinee or others. In such cases, the custody evaluator should limit disclosure of information to that which is consistent with applicable law, code, statute, and

order of the court, and should inform the attorney's, or the court in an appropriate manner. Upon providing emergency treatment to a party, custody evaluators in that case shall determine whether they can continue in the evaluative role with that individual.

9. RECORD KEEPING AND RELEASE OF INFORMATION

9.1 RECORD-KEEPING OBLIGATIONS

Custody evaluators have an obligation to expeditiously establish and to maintain a record-keeping system.

(a) Custody evaluators shall establish and maintain a system of record-keeping and professional communication that is consistent with law, rules, and regulations, and that safeguards applicable privacy, confidentiality, and legal privilege. Custody evaluators should create all records in an efficient and timely manner. Unless laws, rules of court, directives from the court, rules promulgated by regulatory bodies, or private agency policy specify otherwise, custody evaluators should presume that their records are created, maintained, and preserved in anticipation of their review by others who are legally entitled to possess them and/or to review them.

(b) Records of all aspects of the evaluation should be created in reasonable detail, be legible, be stored in a manner that makes production possible, and be made available in a timely manner to those with the legal authority to inspect them or possess copies of them. Excluded from the production of records referenced above are items that may be protected from disclosure by trade secret and copyright laws, for example test booklets and manuals, unless the original order for the evaluation defines the manner in which records are to be released that differs from the process described above.

(c) Where the policies of private agencies conflict with the requirements of law, rules of the court, directives from the court, or rules promulgated by regulatory bodies, the role of private agency polices should be considered subordinate.

(d) Pursuant to proper subpoenas or court orders, or other legally proper consent from authorized persons, custody evaluators shall make available records, all financial records related to the matter, and any other records including reports (and draft reports if they have been provided to a party, attorney, or other entity for review), that might reasonably be related to the opinions to be expressed. The records are subject to production pursuant to a validly issued subpoena or court order.

(e) Records should be retained pursuant to the custody evaluator's ethical guidelines, but at a minimum until the youngest child attains the age of majority.

9.2 CONTROL OF RECORDS

Custody evaluators should maintain control of their records and take reasonable care to prevent the loss or destruction of records.

Custody evaluators should maintain control over records and information. In creating and organizing their files, custody evaluators should treat all items pertaining to a particular case as elements of one file. Regardless of the form in which information is presented, once custody evaluators take possession of an item, it must be retained and reasonable care must be taken to prevent its loss or destruction. Custody evaluators can meet their obligation to retain file items by formally notifying the attorneys and parties of the intention to copy items and return the originals and by retaining original items only if concerns are raised with regard to (a) issues of authenticity, (b) the degree to which the copy is a sufficiently accurate reproduction of the original, or (c) an objection is raised to the return of the originals for any reason.

10. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND OPINIONS

Custody evaluators should strive to be accurate, objective, fair, balanced and independent in their work and are strongly encouraged to utilize peer reviewed published research in their reports.

(a) Custody evaluators should present data in an unbiased manner. In their reports and when offering testimony, custody evaluators shall strive to be accurate, objective, fair, and independent.

(b) Since custody evaluations are to be “evidence based”, custody evaluators are strongly encouraged to utilize and make reference to pertinent peer-reviewed published research in the preparation of their reports. Where peer-reviewed published research has been utilized, custody evaluators should provide full references to the cited research.

(c) Custody evaluators should recognize that information not bearing directly upon the issues before the court may cause harm when disclosed and may have a prejudicial effect.

(d) Custody evaluators shall retain all information gathered by them and to be responsive to lawful requests for the production of that information.

11. PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

11.1 ARTICULATION OF THE BASES FOR OPINIONS EXPRESSED

Opinions expressed by custody evaluators should be based upon information and data obtained through the application of reliable and valid principles and methods. Custody evaluators should differentiate among information gathered, observations made, data collected, inferences made, and opinions formulated.

Custody evaluators should only provide opinions and testimony that are 1) sufficiently based upon facts or data; 2) the product of reliable and valid principles and methods; and 3) based on principles and methods that have been applied reliably to the facts of the case. In their reports and in their testimony, custody evaluators should be careful to differentiate among information gathered, observations made, data collected, inferences made, and opinions

formulated. Custody evaluators should explain the relationship between information gathered, their data interpretations, and opinions expressed concerning the issues in dispute.

11.2 RECOGNITION OF THE SCOPE OF THE COURT ORDER

Custody evaluators should avoid offering opinions that do not directly follow from the court order or signed stipulation regarding the appointment of the custody evaluator or are not otherwise relevant to the purpose of the custody evaluation.

Custody evaluators should avoid offering opinions to the judge on issues that do not directly follow from the court order or signed stipulation regarding the appointment of the custody evaluator or are not otherwise relevant to the purpose of the custody evaluation.

Glossary

Assessment Instrument refers to an evaluative mental health device or procedure in which a sample of an individual's behavior in a specified domain is obtained and subsequently evaluated, whether or not it is scored using a standardized process.

Best Interests – “Although there is no standard definition of ‘best interest of the child,’ the term generally refers to the deliberation that courts undertake when deciding what type of services, actions and orders will best serve a child as well as who is best suited to take care of a child. ‘Best Interest’ determinations are generally made considering a number of factors related to the circumstances of the child and the circumstances and capacity of the child's potential caregiver(s), with the child's ultimate safety and well-being as the paramount concern.”

Caregiver refers to any person or entity providing a residence for a child or any person or entity that provides or secures care for a child, including but not limited to: a parent, guardian, custodian, legal custodian, or relative.

Court refers to a judge, magistrate, trier of fact, decision maker, tribunal or general entity or individual who makes final custody and parenting plan determinations.

Court Order refers to an enforceable legal document issued by a court, including judgments, decrees, opinion, and documents that incorporate stipulations, agreements, and consents authorized by the parties.

Custody Evaluation means a professional's process of obtaining information for a report for the purpose of informing a court or attorney that may relate to the parent, caregivers, or child's characteristics, including but not limited to skills, deficits, values, and tendencies, relevant to parenting attributes and the child's psychological needs, especially in relation to the availability and use of effective treatment and the effect of additional caregivers on parenting attributes.

Engagement Letter refers to a signed agreement between the custody evaluator and the parties.

Ex parte communication refers to the transmission of evidence, arguments, or other information relevant to a disputed legal issue to a court to the exclusion of or without notice to other parties which renders the information insufficiently open to challenge and test by an adversely affected party or that impairs or appears to impair the decision maker's objectivity.

Forensic means relating to the neutral and objective investigation of facts and evidence in a structured manner in anticipation of trial or consideration of a legal matter.

Informed Consent means permission granted by a party or party's parent or legal custodian after the professional performing, or seeking to perform, an evaluation has disclosed and explained all information the standards require.

Parenting Time refers to any and all arrangements concerning the care and control of the child's time with a parent.

Parties refers to the litigants associated with a specific case.

Record includes, but is not limited to, all a) reports, letters, affidavits, and declarations; b) notes, recordings, and transcriptions that were created before, during, or after interactions with persons in connection with the evaluation; c) fully or partially completed assessment instruments; d) scored and un-scored raw test data, scoring reports, and interpretations; e) billing, expense, and income records pertaining to the services provided; f) mechanical, digital, physical or electronic print, film, photocopy, tape, audio, video, or photographic records; and, g) all other notes, records, copies, and communications in any form or medium that were created, received, or sent in connection with the evaluation.

Test means an evaluative device or procedure in which a sample of an individual's behavior in a specified domain is obtained and subsequently evaluated and scored using a standardized process.