

# The Case for Parent-Focused Psychological Evaluations in High Conflict Child Custody Cases

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- ▶ The “high-conflict divorce” case has been the subject of mental health and legal research and opinion for many years. These cases repeatedly come before the family courts are often the most contentious, conflictual and hard to manage.
- ▶ Courts order evaluations to assess the family and provide answers to the Court’s questions.
- ▶ These cases are characterized by: lack of trust between the parents, excessive anger, spurious allegations often with negative comments made by parents to the children, excessive litigation, and an unwillingness to settle their cases because of the **parents’ psychological needs to win at all costs.**

- ▶ Issues presented by the parents in these cases often indicate pervasive and enduring patterns of maladaptive behaviors, the characteristics of Axis II personality disorders.
- ▶ But the custody evaluator's task is not to diagnose, but to describe the parent's behaviors and the impact on these on the children.
- ▶ On-going, high conflict in a family is bad for children.
- ▶ Parent-Focused Assessment - The person/personality => interactional characteristics as a couple => family interactions

- ▶ The challenge we face is to refocus our efforts on the real problem.
- ▶ This approach focuses on the assessment of parents' psychological functioning, understanding and describing these dynamics as essential to understanding their high conflict interactions.
- ▶ The research tells us how their children are impacted - withdrawn and isolated, often depressed or agitated, angry and acting out.
- ▶ The psychological mechanisms these parents have demonstrated for many years are the basis for the problems that evaluators and judges are called on to make decisions about.

- ▶ Evaluators and judges ask, “What can be done to assist this family” and “Why does this keep going on and on, why are these parents always in court?”
- ▶ Method: what most of us were trained to do - multiple interviews, personality testing and review of important collateral sources (mental health records, family members, criminal and civil records, etc.)
- ▶ Assessment: MMPI-2RF/MMPI-3; PAI and Rorschach
- ▶ We formulate our assessments into clinical impressions and compare those with the literature on parenting.
- ▶ Recommendations center on court-ordered management of parent interactions, as well as therapeutic suggestions.

So little time - so much information!

Thank you for your attention!

Questions? Comments?