

# BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS

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## Purpose & Thought Process

When abuse, neglect, and/or exposure to violence has been alleged or confirmed, a forensic assessment of the child or adolescent can be critical in assisting the court in its decision-making.

## Questions To Be Addressed:

- What maltreatment of the child, if any, occurred in this case?
- If maltreatment has occurred, how seriously has the child's psychological well-being been affected?
- What therapeutic interventions would be recommended to assist the child?
- Can the parent(s) be successfully treated to prevent harm to the child in the future? "If so, how? If not, why not?"
- What would be the psychological effect upon the child if returned to the parent(s)?
- What would be the psychological effect upon the child if separated from the parent(s) or if parental rights are terminated?

APA Guidelines 2013

## Other Considerations

- When either an allegation by the child, parent, or other party regarding harm to the child occurred in the context of an emerging family conflict or custody dispute.
- Civil litigation following an allegation or documented incident of abuse. To assist the attorney with respect to the credibility or preparation of a child witness. Necessary interventions and/or monetary compensation.
- Criminal charges proceedings that focus not on the welfare of the child, but on the accountability of the offender.

## Why Another Evaluation?

- Psychologists have unique training in the area of assessment
- It can be an invaluable tool in understanding and addressing the psychological needs of a child
- It can aid us in understanding how the child perceives and is reacting to his/her world
- It can aid us in the development of a “customized” plan and intervention for the child verses a “one size fits all”

## Children Are Not Miniature Adults

Must consider:

- The child’s developmental level (especially in very young children)
- The child’s ability to express his or her experiences in a manner that can be understood by the court
- As children many times feel the need to give answers they think are expected, it is important that the wording of the questions be age-appropriate and not leading

## Situational Factors

Children's growth in physical, emotional, and cognitive areas are noted by stages; however, there can be considerable variation within the stages for each child. Many factors can affect how a child develops, including trauma, illness, and personality factors. Knowledge of normative child development and its variation helps avoid the mistake of assuming that common behaviors do or do not reflect abuse experiences (Fredrick, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Poole & Wolfe, 2009).

## THE EVALUATION

What To Expect?

## Before Appointment

It is imperative that the evaluator have all records that are available in order to review the situation and events that have already unfolded.

What records are needed?:

- The evaluator should have access to the recording of the CAC interview
- Investigative records
- Medical & mental health records

## Assessment Procedures

What types of tests are typically used in these evaluations and why?

## Types of Assessments

- Intelligence/cognitive assessments
- Achievement
- Personality
- Behavioral
- Trauma

## Collateral Interviews

The importance of collateral interviews

- Help confirm or dispute hypotheses
- Clarify behavioral observations
- Obtain different views of the child's behaviors as it relates to situational factors

Who can be a collateral source?

- Not only parents, but extended family members, foster parents, or other caregivers
- Other professionals such as social workers, treating sources, and attorneys

## Clinical Interview

- If necessary, it may take several interviews. In many cases there is a notable increase in comfort in the second interview. Also, additional interviews may allow for the following to be assessed:
  - The consistency of the storyline
  - Emergent themes over time
  - The nature of rapport between child and evaluator
  - The degree to which the child has been “coached” to present a particular history by nature of the explicit repetition of narrative

## The Completed Report Should:

- Be clear and concise
- Address or attempt to address the referral question based on research-supported procedures
- Help the Court understand the child from a psychological perspective and his or her view of events that may have occurred
- Assist in future treatment efforts
- Serve the best interest of the child

## Limits of Psychological Evaluations

- Not a “magic bullet”
- Provides predictions of future behavior and likely effective interventions based on information available at time of evaluation
- The more factors included/considered, the higher likelihood of making accurate statements
- Given the complexity of human behavior, and the numerous variables associated with such, the evaluation cannot always be 100% accurate
- These evaluations, however, are guided by ethical standards of best practice, scientific principals/research, and evolve as a our understanding of human behavior progresses, and as a result, can standup against more intense scrutiny than other approaches (e.g., “gut instinct” or personal bias)

## Questions?

Thank you for your time & attention