

Spring 4-21-2016

# An Empirical Review of Child-Related Factors and Considerations in Child Custody Evaluation

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## Recommended Citation

Will, Kaylee B.S.; Luehrs, Rose B.S.; Zelechowski, Amanda Ph.D., J.D.; Moran, John Ph.D.; and Weinstock, David Ph.D., J.D., "An Empirical Review of Child-Related Factors and Considerations in Child Custody Evaluation" (2016). *Graduate Academic Symposium*. 25.

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## An Empirical Review of Child-Related Factors and Considerations in Child Custody Evaluation

Child custody evaluations are arguably among the most volatile and complex types of clinical assessments conducted by mental health professionals. Oftentimes, courts call upon mental health professionals to assist them in this process. It is common practice for evaluators to provide the court with family information by observing, interviewing, and assessing a family, then compiling the results of the assessment into a report giving recommendations about what is in the best interests of the children.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these evaluations are among the toughest for psychological evaluators to conduct. The methods used to conduct family assessment evaluations have long been disputed, and although guidelines by governing bodies such as the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Psychology and the Law, as well as numerous resource manuals have been published about how to conduct family assessment evaluations competently and ethically, there is little empirical basis for why we are conducting these assessments the way we are. As a result of this, the methods used to conduct family evaluation assessments are under fire by the broader psychological community because they contain little consistency and empirical basis.

Specifically, there seems to be inadequate standards of practice in the child custody and family evaluation field. Consequently, this area is where the research has focused in recent years. However, some research has pointed out before we can put standards of practice into place, we need to know from an empirical standpoint what factors to include on family evaluation assessments that will produce positive outcomes for families. Otherwise, the evaluation tools that are used could have little validity and potentially produce more negative outcomes for families that are already in turmoil.

Additionally, the majority of child custody assessments focus around parent-related factors that assess how capable a parent is of meeting their child's needs. While this is certainly the right idea, certain flaws about current assessments have been brought to light. Specifically, current assessments tend to assume what children need, as there is no specific assessment of this information. Additionally, current assessments tend to treat children as a collective group as opposed to individuals. As each child in a family has their own individual needs, child custody assessments may be more prone to meeting these needs by considering each child's identified needs.

The goal of the current project is create more standardization and to identify pertinent child-related factors to include on future family assessment tools. In order to accomplish this goal, a comprehensive, exhaustive literature review was conducted to evaluate whether and to what extent empirical support exists for many of the child-related factors often considered to be relevant for child custody evaluations. The proposed talk will focus around the results of this literature review. Empirically-supported, as well as emerging factors, will be discussed. It is the hope that this literature review will aid evaluators to better gauge how diversely child-related factors, such as a history of trauma, or medical conditions, can affect the parent-child relationship and child outcomes. Additionally, a better understanding of which child-related factors are important to consider during these assessments will hopefully result in custody arrangements that better fit a child's specific needs.