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Information for Judges and Attorneys Considering Referral for Psychological Evaluation

Thanks for your inquiry about my availability to conduct an evaluation of your client. I like doing psychological evaluations and may be able to help with your case. However I want to distinguish between a custody evaluation and a clinical evaluation and to ensure that I understand what services you are requesting. At this time I am available to conduct clinical mental health assessments but not comprehensive child custody evaluations. An example of a clinical referral question is, "Does testing reveal evidence of a psychological disorder? If yes, describe the level of pathology and any likely impairment in important life areas such as work, self care, parenting, etc. and provide recommendations that would likely ameliorate these dysfunctions." By contrast a custody referral question might be, "Based upon testing of this (or these) parent(s), is one person more likely than the other to be an effective or fit parent who will best meet the needs of this particular child?" If therapy or family counseling – rather than an evaluation – is needed, my partner and I are always open to accepting referrals for psychotherapy, couples or parent counseling, and family therapy. We are not currently accepting referral for parent arbitration or formal parent coordination, however.

There are many differences to consider in addressing clinical or educational referral questions versus personnel or forensic referrals questions through testing. Job applicants and parents in custody disputes who are required "to prove" their psychological health can look pretty good in routine evaluations, displaying only subtle glimpses of deeper pathology. Judges often request that the MMPI be administered. People referred for evaluations during custody disputes tend to approach these paper-pencil tests in a guarded manner, that is, they minimize disclosure of any problems and therefore appear fairly free of pathology. Consequently, additional individual testing is required to obtain an accurate assessment. Cutoffs (or levels of significance and confidence) must therefore be established in advance; i.e., is it better to err on the side of finding any pathology – even if a pathology-free person is falsely identified, or on the side of letting someone with real pathology slip by because they were given the benefit of the doubt as a result of erring on the other side? Comprehensive Child Custody Evaluations, Threat Assessments and Fitness for Duty Evaluations are typically designed to be both rigorous and thorough, making use of multiple data sources and of successive data points over an extended time period (i.e., a couple of months) to come up with a best overall assessment in which one can place high confidence that pathology and strengths are identified. Mental health and treatment evaluations typically rely upon more limited sources of information gathered over a briefer time span, primarily making use of the results of tests administered by a psychologist in his or her office.

Mental health evaluations typically are completed within a month and may be completed within a week if necessary. They typically include an 1½-hour intake interview, 1-hour review of history and records, several hours for personality and diagnostic testing, and perhaps a 2-hour cognitive assessment, several collateral interviews conducted by phone or mail, and completion of some self-report questionnaires. Several hours of the psychologist's time are required then to score & analyze test results and to write a report. The cost for a battery complete with written report is \$2,400.00. In-person interpretive report-outs, conferences with attorneys, depositions and court appearances are extra and charged at the rate of \$180 per hour.

I hope I haven't told you more about this than you ever wanted to know. If my distinction between custody and mental health evaluations isn't clear or useful I will be glad to discuss the specifics of the actual case you have in mind rather than discussing issues in the abstract. Just give me a call. I hope we can work out something so that I can be of use. Feel free to share this information with the opposing counsel.

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