

Child Custody and Access Assessments and Impression Management

In the context of child custody and access assessments, each parent tries to present the best of him or herself and the worst of the other through a series of defense mechanisms.

As such, the assessor will see issues of;

Projection: placing blame on the spouse or other service organizations for trouble originating with oneself;

Denial: even in the face of compelling information;

Minimization: which is some acceptance of an allegation but with a “good” excuse or view that the significance is not as great as what is presented;

Blaming: placing cause for difficulties solely at the feet of the other in view of the other person’s most obvious problems.

This scenario is quite different from a voluntary counselling context wherein persons seek help with issues they identify within themselves.

In voluntary counselling, a person has some degree of insight, is distraught and unsatisfied with their feelings and seeks to make personal changes to limit, cope with or expunge their distress as they themselves may be contributing to it.

In the context of child custody and access assessment, parents may be sent or may seek for themselves, other issue-specific assessments such as for alcoholism or other addictions. Given the context in these situations, the parent is more apt to use the above noted defense mechanisms to hide, minimize or obscure issues that may prove unfavourable to the custody and access assessment. Hence “impression management” underlies their behaviour as they seek to provide the best impression of themselves so as not to undermine their objectives with regard to custody and access.

If service providers offering these ancillary assessments for the overall purpose of the child

custody and access assessment are not properly trained to understand, appreciate and control for the difference between that and a voluntary assessment as would be seen for the purpose of counselling, there is a good likelihood that the results will be skewed. There is a likelihood that the self-report of the client will be circumspect compared to when genuinely seeking help for a self-identified problem within producing a more favourable assessment than is actually the case.

The reason a good child custody and access assessment seeks multiple sources of data is to control for the issue of impression management on the part of the client and thus sift through to detect the story under the story and sort out fact from fiction from half-truths.

Parents and family attorneys are best cautioned to be mindful of who provides ancillary assessments and find service providers who are adept at conducting assessments in the context of the client who may find it best to hide or minimize their issues.

Thus the ancillary-assessment service provider is best to have two specialties; one pertaining to the issue of investigation and the other pertaining to working with clients who may be engaged substantially in impression management for an ulterior motive. To the experienced child custody and access assessor, these ancillary assessments, when provided by persons ill equipped for this context, can be suspect as inaccurate and may reasonably be discounted in their assessment process.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.