

Family Court Services Custody/Parenting Time Evaluation Process Statement of Understanding

Why an Evaluation? Parents sometimes have disagreements about how to share decision making and time with their children. Intense feelings come up during these periods of disagreement that make it hard for parents to be objective about the best interests of their children. The Court recognizes this reality and orders parents to participate in a Custody and/or Parenting Time Study.

What is the Goal? A Custody/Parenting Time Evaluation is intended to ensure the best possible outcome for children. The Court may use the evaluation during a trial or hearing to help make a decision about custody and parenting time if the parents are not able to negotiate a plan themselves.

Who performs the Evaluation? Family Court Services counselors are master's level mental health professionals who meet education and training standards to complete child custody evaluations. They are also guided by professional standards and agency policy and practices. In the role of evaluator, Family Court Services counselors complete careful, respectful and thorough evaluations for the Court.

An evaluator's role is to assess families and make recommendations to the Court about custody and parenting time of minor children. Evaluators are impartial/neutral and do not take the side of one parent. Their primary focus is on the best interests of the child.

Evaluators are mandatory reporters. That means that information about harm to a child or adult, or information about outstanding criminal warrants must be reported to appropriate agencies.

What do Evaluators Assess? Evaluators use a mental health perspective in their evaluation. The fact or fiction of specific events or behaviors may be assessed, but always in light of the impact upon the parent-child relationship. The assessment is largely based on our evaluation of the following factors:

- The child's needs, based on their age and developmental level, attachment to each parent, and individual personality, thoughts and feelings.
- The ability, stability, mental health and maturity of each adult as a parent.
- The desirability of continuing existing relationships and environments.

- The relationship between the parents and each parent’s ability to support the child’s relationship with the other parent.
- The plan presented for the day-to-day needs of the child.
- Any patterns of substance, child or domestic abuse

What is the Process? The usual procedure is for an evaluator to interview each parent, and when appropriate, the children. A home visit is not necessarily a part of our evaluation. With your consent, the evaluator may seek information from professionals in the community such as teachers, mental health professionals and other agency staff. Information provided during the evaluation is not confidential and may appear in a written report to the court. Evaluators may review personal references if they feel they are relevant.

In most cases the evaluator will write a report summarizing the family dynamics, addressing the parents’ concerns, and suggesting a plan that will best meet the needs of the children involved. A copy of this report will be sent to your attorney. If you do not have an attorney, you may review the written evaluation before trial. The evaluator may testify in Court.

What is My Responsibility? You are responsible to pay your evaluation fee. The fee is set based on your income and must be paid prior to the evaluation beginning. You are responsible to cooperate with the evaluator, by providing information and access to documents as requested. You must notify your evaluator of any changes in your address or phone number, your attorney, or any hearing or trial dates. *It is extremely important that you attend all scheduled appointments and reschedule appointments in advance if necessary. If attendance becomes an issue, the evaluator may close your file and refer your case back to the Judge.*

What Happens Now? In the near future you will have an appointment with a counselor who will provide any additional information you may need. You may contact our office at 503.988.3189 if you have any questions about your evaluation. Your evaluator will review the above information with you at your first appointment and you will be asked to sign this form as indicated below.

I have read and understood the information contained in this Statement of Understanding.

Parent

Date

Evaluator

Date