

## Best Practice Standards for Adequate Assessment of Parenting Competency<sup>†</sup>

*An Initiative of the Coalition for Family Law & Mental Health*

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### Methodological Components

The following are critical methodological features that characterize a sound assessment of parenting competency.

1. It uses parenting adequacy rather than optimal parenting as the standard, recognizing that under scrutiny any parent would demonstrate flaws.
2. Parenting knowledge, skills, and attitudes are assessed directly rather than inferred indirectly from more general tests designed to assess mental status or individual psychological functioning.
3. The evaluation emphasizes behavior and includes direct observations of parent-child interactions. It includes an evaluation in the home setting.
4. The assessment uses multiple sources of information and is interdisciplinary in nature with each source being duly weighted.
5. It uses valid and reliable assessment tools administered by a qualified professional trained in their use.
6. It is informed by an expert knowledge of the impact of parenting on healthy and pathological child development.
7. It takes cultural context and diversity into account.
8. It minimizes bias (e.g., it is not employed in the service of one party of an adversarial court proceeding).
9. It pulls together all relevant information, including results of drug screens; medical, psychiatric, and criminal records; information about safety in the home; children's school reports; and pediatric records. Information from collateral sources (e.g., therapists, neighbors) may also be critical.
10. The decision process is generative – that is, when necessary, additional information (e.g., physical examination) is obtained to make a final decision.

<sup>†</sup> Adapted from "Assessing Parenting Competency in Individuals with Severe Mental Illness: A Comprehensive Service", Jacobsen & Miller, *Journal of Mental Health Administration*, Spring 1997.

## Assessment Factors

A sound methodological assessment of parenting competency also includes determining factors that can decrease and increase the risk of abuse or neglect.

- ◆ **Social support.** Social isolation can significantly affect parenting competency, especially during times of stress. Abusive parents are more apt to be socially isolated or to have unsupportive and violent spousal relationships. Ties with neighbors, family members or community-based professionals, can significantly reduce the risk of child abuse.
- ◆ **Ability to read a child's cues or moods without gross distortions.** Parents who have difficulty in reading and responding to a child's cues are at a greater risk of being abusive. Realistic expectations about what can be expected from children at different ages is integral to the development of adequate parenting skills, as well as being able to respond to a child's medical and emotional needs.
- ◆ **Ability to function as a secure base for the child.** Insecure parent-child attachment quality, role reversal, scapegoating of the child, and extreme worry about a child's well being occur more frequently in dyads with a high risk for child maltreatment.
- ◆ **Good parental role models, and insight, including acknowledgement of parenting problems.** Parents who deny the existence of parenting problems may pose risks to their children; a parent who has a history of violent behavior is more likely to have a recurrence of such behavior. Children whose parents perceive them as more stressful to raise may be at a greater risk of maltreatment.
- ◆ **Maintains a safe home environment.** A parent, who does not recognize the hazard of open and unscreened windows, sharp objects or toxins within reach of young children, drug paraphernalia, guns or other weapons, fire hazards, and uncovered electrical outlets, may pose a high risk to children's safety.
- ◆ **Help-eliciting and help-seeking behaviors.** When parenting is impacted by medical or psychological illness, the parent seeks treatment and assistance to manage the illness. Parents who acknowledge problems with parenting due to medical or psychological illness and seek treatment are better able to recognize the effects of their illness on the child and to take steps to reduce adverse effects. Assessors should review the prognosis for and projected course of the parent's illness.
- ◆ **A parent's ability to recognize the effects of their own upbringing on their parenting skills.** It is important that parents can demonstrate an aware of the serious parenting difficulties that may stem from a wide range of adverse childhood experiences, including neglect, unmet emotional needs, harsh and unfair discipline, foster care, multiple separations and losses, unresolved parental discord, including family violence, and institutional upbringing.

## Necessary Professional Qualifications

To ensure uniform and quality parenting assessments, assessors shall be licensed Mental Health Professionals with training in assessment of parenting competency.