

FORENSIC PARENTING ASSESSMENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SECTOR

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Identifying Information

Assessor:

Report Date:

Requested by:

Family Constellation—who is in the family/how do they belong?

- List anyone in the home or those who will BE referenced in the report, so they are easily identified.
- List name, relationship to other family members, and DOB

Brief Overview

- Succinct but thorough enough to offer a glimpse of current concerns and why the assessment was requested.
- State the reason for the referral: Bluebunny County Case Manager Ms. Lisa Small requested that a parenting assessment be completed on X parent to determine what if any impact a placement disruption would have on the children, assess parenting concerns related to her mental health and identify services that may be appropriate.

State Your Assessment Protocol

- The following assessment includes a summary of the parent-child observations, along with a detailed look into factors which help promote or hinder successful parenting and attachment. Collateral documentation was reviewed after the interview and observations. The following assessment tools/tests/scales were used.

Assessment Content

- Observation with parents/children, dates, names and location.
- Interview with parents, location and date
- Record Review
- Collateral Contacts – who/when?
- Clinical summary, findings, and recommendations

Records Reviewed

- List all records reviewed.
- If you use information in your report from any of these sources, cite them in the body of the report.

Informed Consent

- State in your report that you discussed informed consent.
- Have them sign your form and KEEP IT!
- Explain why the report is being requested, what it will include, and how it will be used.
- Let them know how they will get a copy of the report and who else will get to read it, to the extent you may know.
- Have them sign ROIs for themselves and their children (If the agency has custody of the children, the case manager may sign those ROIs.).

Observations

- Parent-Child Observation 1: Date, location, and time
- Parent-Child Observation 2: Date, location, and time
- Be sure to list whichever home, agency, or visitation center was used.
- These can turn out to be long but the detail is very helpful.
- Becoming a good observer is essential.

I. History of Child Maltreatment or Parenting Concerns

- Parent's version of events – how did your child end up in care/you end up in jail/CPS get involved?
 - You are not trying to get the truth, as it might be documented in the file. You need their story, in their own words. Quote them as often as is helpful to convey this.
- Previous CPS involvement
 - This is often difficult, as it may be reported by the client in a disorganized fashion, minimized or simply 'forgotten'.

Compare with the records

- Once you have their version, look at what they reported and then add in what the court documents say about why the agency got involved, what happened to the children.
 - Mr. Right stated that
 - *According to the CHIPS petition (09/09/2021) his children*
- There should be a factual account of previous interventions, out of home placements and time spent in foster care. State that in the report in this first section.

Do They Think They Were Part of the Problem?

- Does the parent acknowledge or deny the validity of concerns?
- **Does the parent take any/some/no responsibility?**
 - This is VERY important. Unless a parent can admit at least some responsibility, they will continue to deflect, blame others, and refused to use services in a meaningful way.
 - If they don't think they have a problem, why would they think they need to change?

What Have They Learned?

- Does the parent think they could have prevented this intervention had they done things differently?
 - What do you wish you would have done differently?
 - How might you have prevented this?
 - Looking back, why do you think this happened?
- Impact on the parent's life
 - How has this situation affected you? More depressed, went to treatment, asked for help, angry/isolated?

II. Parent-Child Relationship

- Longevity of relationship/parenting experience
- How long have they parented this child?
- Who did the primary caregiving?
- Who helped them parent?
- Was child or parent often/sometimes absent due to out of home care, incarceration, divorce?

Empathy

- Parent's ability to empathize with the child – **this is huge.**
 - *What has this process been like for your child?*
- Parent's ability to prioritize the child's needs. "When I review your case file, will it read like you always put your child's needs first? Even when you were mad, high, etc.?"
- When you were high, angry, absent, how do you think your child might have felt or experienced you?
- **The parent who can empathize is a safer parent.**

Do Some Research of Your Own

- Do some literature reviews and find the best information that you can, that makes the most sense to you!
- Be prepared to explain how you know what you know, where you learned it and if what you are saying is accepted as true, by experts in your field.
- Define Attachment in words that make sense to a judge.
- Be clear on why it matters.
- Document what you observed with the parent/child.

My Breakdown of Attachment

- Attunement: Can they read and effectively respond to verbal and nonverbal cues?
- Reciprocity: Is there an easy call-and-response?
- Parent as Secure Base: Does the child seek out the parent for security and safety?
- Healthy Boundaries: Do they have a proximity-seeking pattern?
- Nurture: How often and in what manner is nurture offered?
- Parent Sensitivity: How does this look and how is it conveyed?
- Empathy: Can they **feel** their child's feelings?

III. Major Life Domains that Impact Parenting

- Housing Stability
- Financial/Educational/Employment status
- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Relationship Status
- Chemical Health
- Criminal Record
- Support System

A. Housing

- **Nature, stability and environmental setting:** Has the parent demonstrated stability since first moving out on their own?
- Do they often move or are they planted in one community?
- Do they couch-hop or count on friends and relatives?
- Are they at risk of homelessness?
- Is the home safe/clean enough?
- Who lives in the home? Are people frequently in-and-out of the home with no boundaries?

B. Financial/Education/Employment Status

- Educational history or plans
- Employment history, including any gaps
- Current income, including welfare, disability benefits, child support, pension, etc.
- Do they run out of money before the end of the month? If so, what do they do?
- Who controls the money? Can they budget?

C. Physical Health

- **Physical Health:** Include any disabilities/chronic conditions which might impact parenting (e.g. seizures, TBI, severe obesity).
- Do they/the children have health insurance and a regular doctor?
- Do they take medications?
- Are they chronic over-users of the ER for medical treatment?

D. Mental Health

- **Mental Health:** Have they ever had a mental health evaluation?
- Were they given a diagnosis? Do they have any current symptoms?
- Do they take medications?
- Are they in or have they been in therapy?
- Do any of their symptoms impact their relationship with their children or impair their parenting?

E. Relationship Status and Stability

For each of the parent's significant romantic relationships:

- How long were they together and why did they break up?
- Was this a healthy relationship? Was there any violence, police involvement, drug use, etc.? Did the children witness any of this?
- Who did they have children with? Where are those children now and what kind of contact do they have?

F. Substance Abuse

- Have they ever been arrested due to substance-related offenses?
- Did they have a chemical dependency evaluation?
- Have they ever been to treatment? How often?
- Are they supposed to provide UAs? Have any been positive?
- Do they have sober friends?
- Did chemical use affect their parenting?

G. Criminal Record

- Do they have a criminal record of violence/assault, aggression?
- Have they ever been arrested for or were there ever allegations of maltreatment?
- Do they have any unlawful detainers or felony charges which might make finding housing and employment difficult?
- Are they on parole or probation

Many clients consider themselves innocent of harm they have committed if no formal conviction was ever made.

H. Social Support Network

- Who can you count on for help when you need it?
 - *Offer examples such as you are sick and need someone to watch your child; your car broke down and you can't pick up your child on time; you need a few bucks to make rent or buy food; you need a friend to talk to...*
- How long have these folks been in your life?
- Are your supports sober and positive?
 - *Families with good supports do not lose their children to foster care.*

IV. Nuclear Family Experience

- Who raised you? If one or none of your parents, why?
- Describe your caregivers. Were/are you close to them?
- List siblings and birth order. Were/are you close to them?
- Was there violence, addiction, mental illness in the home?
- Was your family part of the larger community you grew up in?

A. Is Their Attachment Story Cohesive?

- Would you describe your childhood as happy? Did you feel loved and safe? Were your needs met?
- Who did you go to for help when you needed it? Did you get it?
- Did you experience any sort of childhood trauma (ask specific questions).

B. Disciplinary Experiences

- Did they have a good role model for parenting?
- How did their parent discipline?
- Did they feel it was abusive or frightening?
- How does the parent discipline their own children? Does it work?

V. Significant Life Events

- Past losses, moves, death, abuse, neglect, molestation, poverty.
- Have they resolved their trauma and what remains problematic in terms of being emotionally available to their children when they are triggered by past memories?
 - *Unresolved parents are often emotionally unavailable to their children in times of need.*

VI. Cultural and Religious Identity

- What practices did their family participate in?
- What values or beliefs do they follow now?
- What beliefs do they want to pass onto their children?
- Are there significant cultural parenting practices (e.g. gender roles) which need to be considered?

VII. Children's Development

- Development/health of the child: Special needs, diagnoses, illnesses, behaviors, learning challenges?
- Individual characteristics of the child: How does the parent describe the child? Strengths, weaknesses, talents?
- Parent's understanding of the child's current and future needs: Can the parent meet these needs now and in the future? Have they done so in the past?

VIII. Services

- What services have they used in the past?
- What services are they currently using?
- What is helpful?
- What additional services would they like or need?
- What does their case plan require? Are they compliant?
- Do they accept and utilize feedback?

IX. Hopes and Expectations

- What do they hope will happen/what is their ideal outcome?
- What has to happen before that can occur?
- What help do they need to make that happen?
- What is the most significant barrier to success?
- What do they want the judge to know about them and what they want?

X. Summary of Strengths and Concerns

- Notable strengths
 - In their own words
 - From your perspective
- Remaining concerns
 - In their own words
 - From your perspective

List Collateral Contacts

- Speak with the treating mental health professionals, GAL, case manager, foster parent, teacher, babysitter, etc.
- *List who you spoke to but be careful about what is written in the report. Do not include information that may negatively impact this parent's relationship with service providers or family members.*

Referral Questions

- Ask for these upfront, before you do the assessment.
- It gives you some insight into what the concerns are for this family.
- It offers the agency clear answers.
- Be to the point and document why you think what you think.

Cultural Competence

- What are your own values about self-sufficiency?
- What might you know about their country of origin and customary parenting practices?
- Do you have any experience working with/assessing parents who are blind, hearing impaired, paralyzed?

Clinical Summary – This is Where You Shine!

Mr. Claus reported he rarely drinks too much eggnog. He denies that he overworked the Elves. Collateral records suggest otherwise (CHIPS Petition). Mrs. Claus has repeatedly stated she is afraid of her husband. She reported that when Mr. Claus is drinking, he has delusions about flying around the world in one night. It is the impression of this assessor that although Mrs. Claus has made many statements about wanting to leave her husband, she is unlikely to do so. This leaves the Elves at risk for both abuse and neglect. They should remain in care until Mr. Claus can demonstrate sobriety and Mrs. Claus has engaged with her own therapist.

- Reunification is not recommended at this time. Visits should remain supervised and incorporate some parenting education or mentoring as part of the visit. If the elves are returned prior to their parents following through with recommendations, they will very likely reenter foster care, given the chronicity of the problems in the family home.

SUMMARY OF ATTACHMENT WITH FATHER

- None of the 12 elves appear to have a secure attachment with their father. The two oldest are extremely parentified and have taken on many parenting and household tasks that are developmentally out of step, given their ages. Mr. Clause reports he loves his elves but has not been able to place their needs first, consistently. He lacks empathy for what they have experienced in his care. He was only marginally attuned, as observed and often failed to effectively respond to their cues. Their attachment to him would best be described as anxious/avoidant.

SUMMARY OF ATTACHMENT WITH MOTHER

- The elves have an anxious/ambivalent attachment with their mother. They love her but they do not trust her to consistently meet their needs. They compete for her attention and affection but she is often too overwhelmed to respond in a satisfactory manner. Her oldest two children have become her primary support and they interact much more like siblings than as parent/child.

Findings and Recommendations

- Be specific.
- Don't make recommendations which cannot be fulfilled, such as a service that is not available in a certain community.
- Don't overload the family. If many services are suggested, offer some idea of priority.
- If you do not think services will do any good, say so and WHY.
- Offer recommendations about permanency if you feel you can, and if the agency needs them.

Recommendation Examples

- Reunification is not recommended at this time.
- Mr. Claus should complete a psychological evaluation and follow all recommendations.
- Mr. Claus should complete a Rule 25 assessment and follow all recommendations.
- Mr. Claus should refrain from using any substances and cooperate with random UAs.
- Mr. and Mrs. Claus should work with a marriage counselor to help them resolve longstanding relationship conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Elves should attend Head Start programming and be screened for learning readiness programs.
- The two older elves should each begin working with a therapist who is trauma competent.
- If Mr. and Mrs. Clause fail to follow recommendations and if the safety concerns have not been adequately addressed by the end of six months, it is recommended that the agency proceed with permanency outside the custody of their parents.

Be Prepared to Testify

- Prepare and know your report in detail.
- Speak with the attorney who will be taking the case to court.
- Don't be intimidated by questions that are meant to be confusing, looking for a yes or no answer or are vague.
- Don't be insulted and don't lose your cool. That is the opposing side's job.
- Your opinions are based on evidence. You can present them as facts.

Have a Good CV or Resume

- In every trial, you will need to be qualified as an expert.
 - Child development
 - Attachment expert
 - Trauma expert
 - Sexual abuse
 - Mental Health – diagnosing and treating
- List trainings you have attended or presented
- Be able to explain why you know what you do

At the End of the Day.....

- Know that this is important work and that kids need your voice.
- Utilize research and science that informs us of what kids need.
- Convey that you are able to put research into practice.
- Remember that the court needs to hear from you, about what the children need, and why.
- Celebrate the difference you make in the lives of hurt children.