

# CUSTODY DISPUTES

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Ruth S. Parry, Elsa A. Broder, Elizabeth A.G. Schmitt, Elisabeth B. Saunders, and Eric Hood, eds. *Custody Disputes: Evaluation and Intervention*. (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D. C. Heath, 1986). xii + 194 pp. Notes, appendices, bibliography, index. \$22.00.

This book deals with the conceptualization and clinical experience of the Custody Project of the University of Toronto Medical School. Evaluations of the divorce custody cases are carefully structured. The project required written agreements by the parties and their attorneys to the assessment, completion of lawyer and parent questionnaires, and guarantees by the parents of the payment of the clinicians' professional fees. These agreements are provided in the appendices and are equally applicable to team and sole evaluations.

The authors address the difficulties encountered in carrying out such evaluations, including the families' expectations of the clinician, and the clinician's expectations of themselves, their identification with the children, and their reactions to parents. The importance of having a colleague or group to consult with regarding these types of cases is emphasized.

The authors place special emphasis upon two issues: viewing the custody evaluation as a *process*, and working closely with the attorneys. The form letter sent to persons inquiring about Custody Project services states that an evaluation can take from one to three months and that "parents can sometimes begin to think more flexibly about their children's situation and needs as we work with them over a period of weeks" (p. 152). In the forward, Dr. Quentin Rae-Grant mentions that project evaluations are not only designed to develop the basis for any recommendations, but also, "by a deliberate process, to seek negotiated arrangements through the course of multiple contacts with the adults and children involved" (p. xii). In the same vein, found in a chapter by Simmons and Parry, "As the clinical understanding of the family develops, it has been found useful to meet with counsel again to provide some information as to the direction the family members appear to be taking in developing a [custody] plan of their own" (p. 45).

Perhaps the most important and distinctive features of the

Custody Project are the degree of the clinicians' engagement with the parties' attorneys and the attorneys' involvement in the process of the evaluation. The authors recommend a meeting of the clinician and all the attorneys prior to any contact with family members in order to clarify the roles and expectations of both the clinician and attorneys. This can aid the clinician in planning initial contact with the family and offer the opportunity, according to Simmons and Parry, "to identify particular views on the part of counsel that might unwittingly contribute to the conflict, hinder efforts to engage the family members in a therapeutic alliance, or reduce the clinician's ability to elicit agreement between the parents about a custody and/or access plan" (p. 44). The authors note that lawyer-clinician contact by telephone calls, letters, and conferences generally increased during the course of the project. This collaboration with the parties' attorneys is an important facet of the project.

The data were derived from 116 assessments. Fifty percent of the families accepted the recommendations and arrived at a settlement without further litigation. A third of the families did not agree with the recommendations, but it is not known whether these recommendations were later incorporated into a court order or whether in time another settlement was reached. In the remaining one-fifth of the cases, no information regarding ultimate acceptance or rejection of the recommendation was available.

This is a readable publication with a wealth of practical information regarding how these clinicians worked and how their procedures evolved. It is not a reference book. A reader new to the field should look elsewhere for reviews or references to the extensive divorce and child custody literature. The book does provide a carefully structure for working in the divorce custody field. The rather unique emphasis on involving the parents' counsel in the evaluation process appears to be a constructive variation and one that promises to enhance the effectiveness of child custody work.

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