

The AAML Child Custody Evaluation Standards: Bridging Two Worlds

by
Sacha M. Coupet*

I. Introduction

In 2006, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) established “an interdisciplinary committee to develop standards for the courts, parties, counsel and mental health professionals for the preparation of uniform child custody evaluations.”¹ Noting the significance of child custody evaluations to the judicial decision making process in a number of domestic relations cases, the Child Custody Evaluations Standards committee brought together experienced legal and mental health professionals with the aim of developing uniform standards that might inform both the legal consumers and mental health producers of child custody evaluations of optimal standards of training, communication with parties, and data gathering, among other issues pertinent to the conduct of quality custody evaluations.²

In many respects, one overarching goal of the committee was to develop a shared understanding of what constitutes “best practices” in the conduct of child custody evaluations, building on the body of guidelines and standards that have been developed within specific disciplinary domains. I found my own dual disciplinary background in psychology and law particularly useful in my service as Reporter for this committee, as I could appreciate the unique challenges of translating mental health practices

* Ph.D., J.D. Associate Professor of Law, Loyola University Chicago School of Law. Professor Coupet serves as Reporter for the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers Child Custody Evaluation Committee.

¹ *Preamble*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 8, 2012, 8:42 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/preamble>.

² American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, *Child Custody Evaluation Standard* (2010), http://aamlillinois.org/documents/aaml_custody_eval_standards.pdf

into relevant, and most importantly, reliable material for legal advocacy. This translation, and the focus on ensuring that the custody evaluations themselves were conducted in a manner most likely to produce the highest quality possible was, indeed, the touchstone of the drafting process. The aim of developing uniform standards, particularly to assist legal consumers in vetting the quality of the evaluators and eventual evaluations, shaped the interdisciplinary dialogue throughout the entire nearly two year process of developing these new standards.

Not surprisingly, the committee confronted some general interdisciplinary tensions in areas pertaining to the role of the evaluator and the purpose of the standards. Like much expert testimony, mental health evaluations used for legal purposes can sometimes advise the court and at other times answer or testify to ultimate legal questions. In the context of child custody evaluations, there are those who see the role of the evaluator as limited to an advisory one and others who do not view evaluators testifying to ultimate legal questions as outside their authority nor invasive upon the province of the court. When the committee first met to decide the scope of the project, it was decided that we would not tackle this particularly contentious, and as yet unresolved, issue. Therefore, while the standards focus comprehensively on the conduct of evaluations, the critical question of whether the custody evaluator should advise the court or speak to the ultimate legal issue remains unaddressed since it was regarded as outside the scope of the work of this committee.

The second interdisciplinary challenge concerned the possibility that the document risked being perceived as a set of standards inappropriately developed by legal professionals for mental health professionals. As such, the standards might fail to reach or find wide acceptance within the mental health community as a baseline for the competent practice of child custody evaluations. The presence and participation on the committee of two of the most preeminent mental health professionals in the field of child custody evaluations helped tremendously to bring to the drafting process a mental health practitioner's perspective and, most importantly, the current state of research and practice in the conduct of child custody evaluations. To further allay any concerns that the standards might be perceived as a purely legally based construction, members of the committee took great

care to explore and digest the existing standards proposed by the American Psychological Association (APA), the scientific and professional organization that represents psychology and psychologists in the United States,³ as well as the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, a national organization whose membership includes psychologists in addition to other mental health practitioners.⁴ It is hoped that the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers standards will, by virtue of the above, be welcomed by mental health practitioners as reflective of a shared understanding of the needs of courts, parties, and counsel when answering legal questions pertaining to child custody and the capacities of mental health practitioners to provide material critical to that endeavor.

II. Evolving Standards Addressing Child Custody Evaluations

Members of the committee began the process well versed about the significance of child custody evaluations to judicial decision-making regarding initial custody decisions, but also to those domestic relations cases where settlement is achieved prior to a final judicial decision as well as cases in which changes to a custodial arrangement are proposed. With an understanding that parental conflict has been shown to predict maladjustment among children whose parents have separated or divorced, quality child custody evaluations were seen as critical to minimizing parental conflict and thus, ultimately serving the best interests of children.⁵ Indeed,

[q]ualitative and quantitative research conducted over the past thirty years demonstrates that highly conflicted custody cases are detrimental to the development of children, resulting in perpetual emotional turmoil, depression, lower levels of financial support, and a higher risk of mental illness, substance abuse, educational failure, and parental

³ American Psychological Association, *Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings*, 65 AM. PSYCHOL. 863 (2010).

⁴ ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY CONCILIATION COURTS, <http://www.afcnet.org/ResourceCenter/CenterforExcellenceinFamilyCourtPractice> (last visited June 12, 2012).

⁵ ROBERT E. EMERY, *RENEGOTIATING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: DIVORCE, CHILD CUSTODY, AND MEDIATION* 13 (1994) (internal citations omitted).

298 *Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*

alienation. The level and intensity of parental conflict is now thought to be the most dominant factor in a child's post divorce adjustment and the single best predictor of a poor outcome.⁶

It was the hope of the committee that the development of uniform standards aimed at generating comprehensive, quality and neutral child custody evaluations would reduce incidents of interparental discord, which research reveals is pervasively and consistently detrimental for children and believed to have a broad negative impact on virtually every dimension of a child's long-term wellbeing.⁷

A number of organizations, such as the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), have developed guidelines and standards for child custody evaluations. As noted above, the committee spent a significant amount of time at the outset of the drafting process reviewing previous attempts to establish uniform guidelines within the largest organization of psychologists engaged in child custody evaluations, the APA, and the standards that had been developed within an interdisciplinary law and mental health organization, the AFCC. While the committee found these previous standards useful in establishing consistency within disciplines, the committee believed strongly that the AAML's standards could achieve not only a cross-disciplinary acceptance, but could also educate a broader network of practicing legal professionals utilizing child custody evaluations. Nonetheless, the committee integrated much of the underlying principles evident in the APA and the AFCC documents, tailoring them to the aim of developing standards better suited to their use in child custody court proceedings.

A. American Psychological Association Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings

Psychologists and other mental health professionals are increasingly called upon to evaluate children and families in custody disputes, due in large part to the growing number of

⁶ Linda D. Elrod, *Reforming the System to Protect Children in High Conflict Custody Cases*, 28 WM. MITCHELL L. REV. 495-97 (2001).

⁷ PAUL R. AMATO & ALAN BOOTH, *A GENERATION AT RISK: GROWING UP IN AN ERA OF FAMILY UPHEAVAL* 219 (1997).

separated, divorced, and never-married parents as well as the subsequent intraparental conflict that often accompanies the breakup of a family and division of time with children.⁸ As more mental health professionals have become involved in the process—each with varied training, procedures and applicable constructs—a corresponding need has grown for more exacting and uniform standards of practice for conducting child custody evaluations.⁹ In 1994, the American Psychological Association developed such uniformity when it drafted the Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (APA Guidelines). The APA revised these guidelines during the time that the AAML committee was continuing to meet to develop its own standards. The new guidelines, Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings, became effective February 21, 2009, and are in effect for the next ten years. Collectively, the guidelines consist of fourteen individual guidelines that are conceived by the organization as aspirational in nature, and not mandatory upon its members. The APA Guidelines have as a goal the promotion of proficiency in the conduct of child custody evaluations and accomplish such aims as defining the purpose of the child custody evaluation, highlighting the centrality of the child's welfare as well as establishing education, training and practice requirements.

According to APA Guidelines, the purpose of the evaluation is to ascertain the child's psychological best interests, "weigh[ing] and incorporat[ing] such overlapping factors as family dynamics and interactions; cultural and environmental variables; relevant challenges and aptitudes for all examined parties; and the child's educational, physical, and psychological needs."¹⁰ The role of the evaluator is that of a "professional expert" who is expected to be objective and impartial and possess training beyond that of "general competence in the clinical assessment of children, adults, and families[.]"¹¹ Indeed, the evaluator is expected to possess "specialized competence" that includes knowledge of assessment pro-

⁸ Robert E. Emery, Randy K. Otto, & William T. O'Donohue, *A Critical Assessment of Child Custody Evaluations: Limited Science and a Flawed System*, 6 PSYCHOL. SCI. PUB. INT. 1 (2005).

⁹ See *id.* at 9.

¹⁰ American Psychological Association, *supra* note 3, at 864.

¹¹ *Id.* at 864.

cedures, as well as specific knowledge of child and family development, psychopathology, and applicable legal standards and laws relevant to divorce and custody decisions. The APA Guidelines admonish psychologists against deviating from their role as impartial evaluators, cautioning them to avoid multiple relationships and rendering opinions in custody and visitation matters, unless ordered by the court. According to the Guidelines, the recommendations made by psychologists pertaining to child custody are to be “based upon articulated assumptions, interpretations, and inferences that are consistent with established professional and scientific standards.”¹²

According to the APA, the Guidelines “are intended to facilitate the continued systematic development of the profession and to help facilitate a high level of practice by psychologists.”¹³ However, the APA’s guidelines are not intended to be either mandatory or exhaustive and, as such, are not expected to apply to every situation in which a psychologist is performing a custody evaluation. The APA stresses that its guidelines are, moreover, not definitive and are not intended to take precedence over the judgment of individual psychologists. In addition, the APA Guidelines acknowledge that the issuing body is without the enforcement mechanism to make the Guidelines mandatory. Similarly, the AAML committee is without the authority to enforce its recommendations or take action against those who fail to meet the outlined standards. However, the AAML committee believed that the use of the term “standards” over “guidelines” would serve to highlight the importance of adherence to an established norm, and, after much discussion, chose to utilize the term “Standards” to make this point particularly clear.

B. *Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation*

The AFCC is an interdisciplinary group of attorneys, judges and mental health professionals with a shared interest in matters of family law and child custody. In 1995, the AFCC drafted the original Model Standards for Child Custody Evaluation and, in 2004 began the process of revising those standards. At the time,

¹² *Id.* at 866.

¹³ *Id.* at 864.

the existing AFCC standards were regarded as more substantive than the existing APA Guidelines, because they identified particular areas of inquiry in the evaluation process rather than general statements about role definition and competence. By focusing on the substance of the evaluation, they were believed to offer more guidance to custody evaluators than the APA Guidelines.¹⁴

In 2006, the AFCC published the new Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluations, from which this committee took significant guidance. The purpose of the AFCC Model Standards is described as contributing to the ongoing education of evaluators, thereby promoting good practice, as well as informing those who utilize the services of child custody evaluators and increasing public confidence in the work done by custody evaluators.¹⁵ In many respects, the purpose of both the AFCC and AAML Standards are identical, with the distinction being the broader reach of the AAML and the focus of the latter on emphasizing a common understanding between the mental health and legal disciplines of those elements constituting an ideal custody evaluation. The AAML's membership is widely distributed across the United States, representing the highest skilled domestic relations practitioners. While the committee utilized the AFCC Standards as a template from which to start its own work, it was the intent of the committee to draft standards that would find acceptance within a wider network of practicing attorneys than those promulgated by the AFCC. Since many of the elements comprising the AFCC Standards were used as a template for this committee's drafting of new standards, I will avoid redundancy by omitting a detailed review of the AFCC Standards.

C. *Wingspread Report and Action Plan*

In addition to the previously drafted APA Guidelines and AFCC Standards, the committee also reviewed a prominent

¹⁴ IRVING B. WEINER ET AL., HANDBOOK OF PSYCHOLOGY: FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY 183-84 (2003); Sarah H. Ramsey, *The Wingspread Report and Action Plan, High-Conflict Custody Cases: Reforming the System for Children*, 2001 A.B.A. 39 FAM. CT. REV. 146.

¹⁵ *Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation*, ASS'N OF FAM. & CONCIL. CTS. 5 (2006), <http://www.ModelStdsChildCustodyEvalSept2006.pdf>.

commentary regarding child custody evaluations, The Wingspread Report and Action Plan was published in 2001 in *The Family Court Review*, a leading family law journal published by the AFCC.¹⁶ The Wingspread Report challenged all professionals involved in child custody litigation to respond to the crisis that child custody legal proceedings visit upon families and children, including the conduct of child custody evaluations that often drive the litigation.

Many of the themes of the Wingspread Report are reflected in the AAML Child Custody Evaluation Standards. Among the concerns regarding child custody evaluations noted in the Wingspread Report was a recommendation that such “evaluations should be neutral and include evaluations of both parents and all children and be undertaken with the agreement of the parents and the children, if appropriate, or by court order.”¹⁷ The Wingspread Report also established a critical distinction between a “child custody evaluation” and what the authors termed a “parental capacity evaluation,” which focuses on one parent instead of both.¹⁸ With respect to the qualifications of child custody evaluators, the Wingspread Report recommended that such qualifications should be uniform, and each state should have a court rule or statute establishing these qualifications. The authors of the report suggested that mental health professionals should develop and adhere to national qualification guidelines for child custody evaluations in divorce proceedings. Included in these qualifications were elements of training and continuing education in relevant areas that would better ensure that evaluators would recognize and appreciate the impact of conflict on child and adult development and functioning child interview techniques, custody evaluation protocols, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, and the basic principles of child custody law and procedure.

One distinction between the Wingspread Report and the AAML Standards is that the former clearly articulates a position on the role of mental health professionals in the child custody dispute relative to the legal parties, clearly stating that while lawyers advocate for clients, the mental health professional’s role is

¹⁶ WEINER ET AL., *supra* note 14, at 183-84.

¹⁷ Ramsey, *supra* note 14, at 148.

¹⁸ *Id.*

solely to investigate and make a recommendation. Although the committee did discuss this issue, and favored identical limitations on the role of mental health professionals, articulating a position on the matter was not central to the task of developing uniform child custody evaluation standards.

III. The AAML Child Custody Evaluation Standards

A. Key Provisions

The AAML Standards begin with a notation about their purpose, which is, in part, to guide custody evaluators, attorneys and the court in the performance of their duties. Like the AFCC Standards, the AAML Standards are designed to promote good practice, provide information to those who utilize the services of custody evaluators, and to increase confidence in the work done by custody evaluators. The AAML Standards make clear at the outset that they are not mandatory, yet are more than merely aspirational. Rather than use of the word “strive,” which is reflected in the APA Guidelines,¹⁹ the AAML, like the AFCC Standards, utilizes “shall” in reference to attributes of education, training, competency and the substance of the evaluation itself.²⁰ Of course, unless and until the AAML Standards are incorporated into law, included in the rules of a court system, or adopted by a licensing board or similar regulatory authority, it is acknowledged that they do not have the force of law. That said, the AAML Standards are intended to guide the practice of custody evaluators who are advised and expected to conform their conduct to these Standards. In addition they are intended to educate the legal consumers who utilize the services of evaluators about best practices and minimal thresholds of competency.

1. Training, Education and Competency Issues

Issues regarding training, education and competency of child custody evaluators were particularly challenging in light of the

¹⁹ American Psychological Association, *Guidelines for the Practice of Parent Coordination*, 67 AM. PSYCHOL. 63 (2012).

²⁰ *Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation*, ASS'N OF FAM. & CONCIL. CTS., 6 (2006), <http://www.afccnet.org/ResourceCenter/PracticeGuidelinesandStandards>.

304 *Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*

wide range of professionals who have conducted custody evaluations to date, particularly non-mental health professionals, including guardians ad litem.²¹ The committee found itself wrestling with the dilemma of “fitting the person to the process or the process to the person,” as one member so aptly framed it. On one hand, the committee could approach the task of developing minimal standards of training and education based on a profile of a particular professional engaged in child custody evaluations, most likely a licensed psychologist, or it could establish the minimal standards of practice for all evaluators and see what level of education and training appeared to fit the process defined as ideal or model. The committee chose to use the latter and recommends in its Standards that custody evaluators possess a minimum of a master’s degree in a mental health field or a juris doctorate that includes formal education and training in the legal, social, familial and cultural issues involved in custody and parenting time.²² In fitting the process to the person, the Standards were developed in light of best practices and aimed principally at establishing an ideal process, such that the person conducting the evaluation has a clear framework within which to conduct an ideal or model evaluation. Still, however, the problem of developing Standards that are reflective of the reality of practice remains.

Adoption of the AAML Standards does mean that some non-mental health professionals who, for a variety of reasons in certain parts of the country, presently conduct custody evaluations will fail to meet our established minimal standard of practice unless they also possess extensive knowledge and training in areas of mental health, including, among other areas, psychopathology, psychological assessment and psychological research and evaluation. In addition to an education component, the committee felt strongly that experience conducting evaluations was

²¹ See, e.g., Janet M. Bowermaster, *Legal Presumptions and The Role of Mental Health Professionals in Child Custody Proceedings*, 40 DUQ. L. REV. 265, 270-73 (2002) (describing roles played by experts, therapists, psychological evaluators, custody evaluators, mediators, and special masters).

²² *Training, Education & Competency Issues*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012, 7:19 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/training-education-competency-issues-0>.

necessary to demonstrate competence. In what reflects the most rigorous experience recommendation of any published guideline or standard, the AAML Standards establishes an expectation of evaluators of no less than three years of experience conducting custody evaluations and no fewer than twenty custody evaluations.²³ In the absence of this minimal experience, evaluators are expected to seek ongoing supervision from an experienced custody evaluator prior to offering to perform or accepting appointments to conduct evaluations.

2. *Communication with Litigants, Attorneys and Courts*

With respect to communication with parties, the AAML Standards establish an expectation that evaluators will communicate in writing to all recipients of their services their policies regarding their procedures in conducting custody evaluations, including policies, procedures, scope of services, time frame of services, and fees.²⁴ Moreover, evaluators are expected to take steps to ensure that parties from whom information is sought know and understand the potential uses of the information they are providing. The committee thought it was critical for this informed consent to extend not only to the parties themselves, but to the collateral contacts that are often utilized in custody evaluations. Finally, the committee strongly discouraged *ex parte* communication about a case currently before the court, except in extraordinary circumstances.²⁵

3. *Data Gathering*

The committee believed that the process of data gathering commenced with a clear understanding of the scope of the evaluation. That said, the committee recommended that the scope of the evaluation be outlined in a court order or in a stipulation

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Communication with Litigants, Attorneys & Courts*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012, 7:19 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/communication-litigants-attorneys-court>.

²⁵ *Id.*

signed by the parties and their counsel.²⁶ It is hoped that clarity at the very beginning of the process helps to avoid later misunderstandings about the role and purpose of the evaluation. Evaluators are expected to be accurate, objective, fair, balanced and independent in gathering their data with an expectation that they are prepared to defend their decisions regarding the precise methodology employed.²⁷ Evaluators are, moreover, expected to use multiple data gathering methods, as well as a balanced process, to increase accuracy and objectivity, and eliminate possible bias from influencing the evaluation. The committee felt it was axiomatic that evaluators use empirically-based methods and procedures of data collection, including an assessment of each parent, all adults who perform a caretaking role and/or live in the residence with the children, and each child who is the subject of the evaluation. With insight gleaned from the many years of experience of the two psychologists who participated in drafting the Standards, the committee addressed the issue of third party observations by establishing an expectation that third parties should not be present during any portion of a custody evaluation, except under unusual or necessary circumstances.

4. *Collateral Source Information*

The committee strongly believed that collateral source information was critical to a thorough custody evaluation and usually essential in corroborating participant information. Collateral sources were regarded as both the written sources and people with information relevant to the custody evaluation. Custody evaluators are expected to disclose all collateral sources whether or not the information obtained was utilized by the evaluator in formulating his or her opinion.

5. *Formal Assessment Instruments*

The committee was cognizant of the significance of formal assessment instruments in the evaluation process, yet cautious of the need to limit their selection and use to evaluators with sufficient training and experience and only for the purpose for which

²⁶ *Data Gathering*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012, 7:32 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/data-gathering>.

²⁷ *Id.*

the instruments have been validated. Although the committee generally agreed that formal assessment instruments added tremendously to the quality and thoroughness of evaluations—a belief supported by some of the leading texts on child custody evaluations—the committee decided that the use of formal assessment instruments would best be left to the discretion of the custody evaluator.²⁸ Custody evaluators who do utilize formal assessment instruments are expected to articulate the bases for selecting the specific instruments used. Moreover, they should be aware of the criteria employed by courts in their jurisdiction regarding issues pertaining to admissibility and weight of such data.

6. *Role Conflict and Multiple Relationship Issues*

With respect to multiple relationships, the committee understood and appreciated the fact that many professionals involved in utilizing and conducting child custody evaluations might have multiple relationships that may give rise to the appearance of bias or conflict. The committee recommended, therefore, that multiple relationships are to be avoided and that evaluators are to maintain reasonable professional boundaries, a balanced approach, and objectivity.²⁹ With an understanding that at times professional and social relationships may exist with any party or participant to the evaluation, evaluators are expected to disclose any such relationships.

7. *Presentation of Findings and Opinions and Interpretation of Data*

Last among the key provisions of the AAML Standards, the committee reiterated the importance of evaluators striving to be accurate, objective, fair, balanced and independent in their work, and presenting data in both written reports and court testimony

²⁸ *Use of Formal Assessment Instruments*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012, 7:39 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/use-formal-assessment-instruments>.

²⁹ *Role Conflict*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/role-conflicts>.

308 *Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*

in an unbiased manner.³⁰ Evaluators are strongly encouraged to utilize and make reference to pertinent peer-reviewed and published research in the preparation of their reports. In addition, all opinions expressed by custody evaluators are expected to be supported by reliable and valid principles and methods related to child custody evaluation. Evaluators are to avoid offering opinions that do not directly follow from the court order or are otherwise not relevant to the purpose of the evaluation. As it did when addressing issues pertaining to minimal education and training, the committee confronted the reality of practice when drafting these sections, recognizing that access to and understanding of peer-reviewed and published research will be beyond the scope of custody evaluators who are not qualified mental health professionals.

B. Child Custody Trends

The committee worked tirelessly to stay abreast of current events in child custody, emerging trends, new scholarship and research, as well as newly released guidelines and standards both addressing child custody evaluations directly as well as psychological evaluations that may have an impact on child custody litigation. These current events were regarded as having a potentially profound impact on the drafting of the AAML standards. One particular challenge that was confronted early on and throughout the drafting of the Standards concerned the use of the term “custody.” Acknowledging that this term is rapidly becoming replaced with terms such as “parental responsibility” or “parenting time,” the committee debated which term was most apt, finally settling on the more widely accepted term “custody.” It is hoped that even in jurisdictions where the term “custody” has been replaced with one of the above terms, that the Standards will still find wide acceptance.

³⁰ *Presentation and Interpretation of Data*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (June 12, 2012, 7:46 PM), <http://www.aaml.org/library/publications/21621/child-custody-evaluation-standards/presentation-and-interpretation-data>.

IV. Conclusion

The AAML Child Custody Evaluation Standards committee is extremely proud of its final product and believes strongly that it will profoundly impact the practice of child custody litigation. It is the committee's hope that, by establishing uniformity and high quality, these standards will serve to bridge the gap between mental health professionals who conduct evaluations for the purpose of legal decision-making and legal consumers of child custody evaluations. Moreover, we hope that the standards will become a meaningful tool to reduce parental discord in child custody disputes, thereby benefitting all parties involved in custody litigation.

