

SOLUTION FOCUSED FAMILY CENTER

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Introduction Letter Regarding Child Custody Evaluations

Dear Client,

I have been requested to complete a court ordered custody evaluation regarding you and your family. Going through an evaluation can be stressful, both because of the emotions you may experience and the many details to remember. When conducting a child custody evaluation, the goal is to examine the ways in which each parent contributes to the physical, emotional, and social development of the child or children in question and to make recommendations to the court as to what appears to be in the child or children's best interests. Your cooperation is necessary in providing information that will help in understanding you and your family and this letter is intended to help inform you of what will be needed.

The role of any professional conducting a child custody evaluation is that of a third-party neutral. Evaluators always serve impartially, never as an advocate for one parent or the other. We will try to answer any questions you have regarding the evaluation process, but we will refer you back to your attorney to cover any legal or additional questions. Each party to the case will be given the same opportunities for contact, and each will go through substantially similar interview processes. We will not offer any type of parenting time recommendations to you or the other party before the interview process is complete. Recommendations will generally be made via a formal report to the court. After a final report is made to the court we will not have further direct contact with the parties unless the court orders an update to be conducted. We are available to

the attorneys involved, and to pro se parties via written communication, until such time as the litigation is resolved.

We make a special effort to put children at ease and minimize disruption in their lives from the evaluation. You may help prepare them for our sessions together by letting them know the evaluator is someone who works with parents to help them make decisions about how to take care of children. You can also say that we will need to talk to them about their thoughts and feelings about their lives so we can help you with your decisions. Please do **not** tell children we are to decide where they will primarily live – this is both incorrect and places an inappropriate burden on children that they must somehow choose who they want to live with. Children will not be asked with whom they want to live or which parent they like better. Again, the goal of the evaluation is to provide the court information on how each parent contributes to the physical, emotional and social development of the child or children in question, and to make **recommendations** to the court as to what appears to be in the children's best interests. It is up to parents to make decisions for their children, even if that decision is to place parenting issues before the court.

Information about fees and the retainer for the evaluation is detailed on the enclosed advisement form. In an effort to maintain an impartial role during the process the retainer is due in advance of beginning the evaluation. Payment may be made via check or money order. We do not accept payments through credit cards. We will schedule your first appointment after we receive completed intake forms and initial payments from all parties. We will schedule a number of subsequent appointments together during the course of the evaluation to see both you and your children. It is important in order to complete this process in a timely manner that you notify us as soon as possible any time an appointment needs to be changed or rescheduled. Throughout this process you must assume responsibility for keeping the evaluator informed any time there are changes in your situation or any issues or potential problems in completing the evaluation.

If for some reason you believe we may have interacted in the past, or that I may have previously provided services or otherwise been involved with anyone in this case please inform us of this immediately. We attempt to prevent even the appearance of any possible conflicts of interest, however I have been in practice, both privately and at various agencies, for over two decades and cannot guarantee we remember every person I may have had contact within that time. I may have been professionally involved in previous cases with one or more of the attorneys in this case, just as they may have been involved with each other in previous cases. If I am aware of any conflicts of interest that may impact on our ability to conduct a neutral evaluation, I will disclose those to you and to the court.

The number one thing that you can do to help yourself during the evaluation process is to be honest and cooperative with the evaluator. Any dishonest or inaccurate information that you report will only hurt you. Clearly, as in any occasion where people are not in agreement, you and the other parent may have different perceptions of events. This is understandable and something to be expected in a child custody dispute. However, we are required to verify, to the extent

possible, statements of fact that are pertinent to the evaluation. As part of this process each of the parents are asked to voice their concerns regarding the other parent and respond to that parent's concerns regarding them. Any untrue or inaccurate information is likely to be challenged by the other parent.

Along these same lines, please do not expect us to be a mind reader or otherwise guess at your needs or concerns during this process. You will be best served by communicating openly with us so that we may make as accurate an assessment as possible. While it is unlikely that we will share the same beliefs about all issues, my beliefs are not the important issue in an evaluation – the important issue is how both of the parents' beliefs, lifestyles, and other factors interact and affect the children in question. There are many different parenting styles and techniques that have varying levels of success with different children. What is important is how your parenting and the other party's parenting affect the *specific* child(ren) in question in your case.

In order to expedite the process, you are asked to complete the following paperwork tasks:

FIRST: Please read, review and complete the enclosed advisement form. If you have any questions regarding the procedures outlined please contact your attorney. A copy of the form has been provided to them as well. If after consulting with your legal counsel there are any remaining questions regarding our policies and procedures please contact us directly. If there are other adults living with you please make copies and have them complete the form as well. All persons living in the household will need to be interviewed as part of the evaluation process, in accordance with the Texas Family Code.

SECOND: Please complete the enclosed personal history intake questionnaire and acknowledgement of Notice of Privacy Practices and return them with your completed advisement form and initial payment. **Provide complete names, addresses, zip codes, and phone numbers of all persons listed on the personal history form.** Provide complete names and dates of birth on the acknowledgment of Notice of Privacy Practices form. It is important that you **fully complete** the requested information in the forms. Again, if there are other adults living with you please make copies and have them complete these forms as well. We will contact you regarding scheduling your initial appointment after we receive advisement forms, personal history forms, acknowledgment of Notice of Privacy Practices, and initial retainer from all parties

THIRD: Please provide the following additional information:

- A legible copy of the driver's license (or state identification card) of each person in the household (color copies are preferred).
- Copies of school aged children's report cards for the current and previous school year.
- A letter of employment verification/reference from your employer.
- Copies of two of your most recent paystubs.

- Four parenting references answering the questions addressed on the Parenting Reference Questionnaire. These forms should be sent directly to us by your references.

Please send all information to us at the *mailing address* above. These items are not required by your first appointment, but they are needed as soon as possible. It is important that you provide the requested number of Parenting Reference Questionnaires as any fewer returned to the evaluator raise a concern about the level of contact you and your children may be having with the larger community. Please e-mail or fax information to us or contact us by telephone if you have questions. Do not send any information to the interviewing office. All documentation and correspondence should be sent to the mailing address.

Often parents have information from other professionals that they have interacted with (doctors, teachers, law enforcement, etc.) that they feel is important to share during the course of the evaluation. We will be requesting that you sign release of information forms so that we can obtain basic information from these types of professionals. In addition, parents are urged to provide clear copies of any information from these sources which they feel is relevant, but to provide *only* relevant information – it is not necessary to have a copy of every form or report that has ever been generated regarding the child(ren) in question. We will **not** review any video or audio recordings unless directed to do so by the court or by agreement of all parties. Please have your attorney discuss this issue with us if you have any questions.

Again, we do understand that this is a difficult process for parents to go through. With your cooperation and active participation, the evaluation should be minimally disruptive for the child(ren) involved. We will take time at your initial appointment to further detail the process and what you can expect as you and your family go through it. If you have any questions before that time that your attorney cannot answer please contact our office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mindy Harrison, LCSW". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mindy Harrison, LCSW-S,
Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Board Approved Supervisor