

Types of Interventions Conducted by a Parenting Expert

What is a Parenting Expert?

A Parenting Expert is a member of a regulated profession with a combination of education, training, experience, continuous learning and expertise such that they would be recognized by the Court as an expert witness in the area of service they are providing.

Most commonly, Parenting Experts are Psychologists and Clinical Social Workers.

Members of a government regulated profession (Law, Psychology and Social Work) also have ethical codes and standards of practice to follow and are accountable to their professions. The Parenting Expert must adhere to the ethical codes and standards of practice for their profession.

Types of Interventions

There are two primary types of Interventions that fall under the Practice Note 7 Guidelines, Evaluative Interventions that provide information to the Court to assist in decision-making and Therapeutic Interventions that work toward resolution of disputes, manage conflict and make changes in the existing family dynamic (PN7, 2019)

Evaluative Interventions can include:

- Triage
- Views (Voice) of the Child
- Parent Psychological Evaluation
- Child/Adolescent Psychological Evaluation
- Focused Assessment to address a specific question

A Parenting Expert conducting an Intervention will not provide an opinion or recommendation on parenting time, parenting responsibilities, decision making, or relocation.

The Parenting Expert can, however, describe what is happening with the child(ren) and within the family dynamic. Should an opinion or recommendation be required, a Practice Note 8 Assessment is required.

An assessor can only make recommendations that affect parenting time/ parenting responsibilities (access, residence or decision-making, elements which potentially change the rights of one parent over the other) after conducting a thorough evaluation of the entire family. Even if a Parent Psychological Evaluation is first conducted with one parent and later conducted with the other parent the processes used and data collected does not make the equivalent of an PN8 Assessment of Parenting Time and Parenting Responsibilities.

Therapeutic Interventions can include:

- Therapeutic Intervention with One Parent (counselling for one parent)
- Therapeutic Intervention with Both Parents (post-separation/divorce counselling)
- Therapeutic Intervention with the Child only (counselling for the child)
- Therapeutic Intervention with Parents and Children (counselling involving the entire family)

- family)
- Parent-Child Reunification (also known as remedial facilitated access)

All of the different (therapeutic or evaluative) interventions listed above can be undertaken by a Parenting Expert pre and post-settlement. In addition these are services families can access on a voluntary basis (which often eliminates the possibility of report writing or communication with lawyers or the Court), they can be initiated by legal counsel for the parties (which often allows for report writing and communication, thus increasing accountability of participants) or Ordered by the Court (with direct communication with the Court allowed and limitations on the parents ability to have copies of any reports).

EVALUATIVE INTERVENTIONS

1. Evaluative Intervention: Triage

The Parenting Expert will evaluate the family and make recommendations to the Court concerning the type of intervention(s) that may best meet the needs of that family. Recommendations may include providing various forms of therapeutic support to the family, obtaining additional information to identify issues or needs, or obtaining an evaluation under Practice Note 8 to determine the parenting arrangement and decision making that is in the best interests of the child(ren). (Practice Note 7, 2019)

This process begins with consultation with a Parenting Expert. The discussion focusses on the problems the family is facing and selecting the best service(s) to assist the family. The Parenting Expert will identify the least intrusive process that may help the family.

If brief conversation with legal counsel does not point to “the best” process, a triage approach could include:

- Interviews with each parent;
- Interviews with the child(ren) – often each child is brought once by each parent;
- File/document review; and,
- Collateral contacts (child and family services, school, and police).

The Parenting Expert will produce a report describing information obtained, the apparent needs of the family and what processes could best assist the family in moving towards resolution.

The time required to complete a triage is discussed with the Parenting Expert in advance

2. Evaluative Intervention: Views (Voice) of the Child

This Intervention canvasses the specific needs of, or where appropriate, the wishes of the child(ren). In some cases, a Views (Voice) of the Child Intervention is expanded to include examining the child(ren) for emotional, behavioural, academic/intellectual or other needs and whether any child is in need of therapy or special programming and supports. In some cases, a medical opinion is sought.

There is a popular misconception that at the age of 12 a child is legally able to decide which parent they want to live with. There are no dimensions of child development that would suggest a child at 12 (or 14 or 16) can fully understand the consequences of such significant decisions.

The process of a views/voice of the child report often includes:

- one interview with each parent;
- two or more (one to two hour) interviews with each child, with the child brought once by each parent;
- in rare occasions document review or collateral contacts may be included (usually two hours or less);
- in some circumstances, psychological testing; and,
- report writing (usually two to three hours per child).

A report is provided which describes:

- What the parents identify as issues regarding the child;
- What the child says about the parents/family situation and their needs;
- Whether the statements made by the child are consistent (vocabulary, perspective) with what a child of that age is expected to say or whether the child appears to be influenced, coached or exposed to negative influences regarding the family;
- An adolescent's understanding of the pros and cons of a decision, and his or her appreciation of the implications may be explored; and,
- The needs of the family and what processes could be of assistance in meeting those needs.

The advantage of this process is that a deeper analysis of the child's statements can be made than if a non-mental- health professional interviews a child. It meets the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child of which Canada is a signatory.

Disadvantages include that opinions cannot be made regarding issues that would affect parenting time or parenting responsibilities and that the parenting expert cannot go on to any other role with this family.

3. Evaluative Intervention: Parent Psychological Evaluation

Under this Intervention, the Parenting Expert can examine if there are risk factors or protective factors present that suggest the parent cannot adequately meet the needs of a child and what supports that parent may require. (Practice Note 7, 2019)

Typically, a parent psychological evaluation is used where there are concerns about the functioning of one parent but not the other. It is a comprehensive evaluation of one parent, examining areas such as:

- Psychological functioning/mental health;
- Addictions history/substance abuse/risk;
- Parenting knowledge and beliefs;
- Personal history;
- Knowledge of and involvement with their child(ren); and,
- The impact of trauma on a parent or child.

Components of a parent psychological evaluation are often:

- Interview of the parent;
- Psychological/parenting testing of the parent;
- Interview with the other parent;
- Possible interview with the child(ren);
- Office or home observation of parent and child(ren);
- Collateral contacts;
- Document review; and,
- Report writing.

Advantages: This process can state if a parent presents an apparent risk to children or not. It can state if there are factors that would prevent the parent being involved with the child(ren), if any forms of supports/restrictions would be required to make it safe for the parent to be with children or if there are no concerns about the person acting in a parental role.

Disadvantages: Opinions cannot be made regarding issues that would affect parenting time or parenting responsibilities which can only be done with a Practice Note 8 assessment. Additionally, the parenting expert who conducted the Parenting Psychological Evaluation cannot go on to any other role with this family, including not being able to conduct a PN8 assessment.

4. Evaluative Intervention: Child/Adolescent Psychological Evaluation

Other forms of evaluative interventions could be Ordered by the Court. Information could be sought regarding:

- The mental health/need for counselling for a child;
- The treatment, supports or special school programming that may be required for a child with special needs (emotional, behavioural, intellectual, learning); and,
- Potential risks/benefits to the child from participation in a special educational program (for example, French Immersion, Sports Academy).

The Parenting Expert can provide guidance where each parent describes the needs, aptitudes, likes and dislikes of the child in very different terms.

This type of Intervention generally includes an interview with each parent and one or more interviews with the child.

5. Evaluative Intervention: Focused Assessment to address a specific question

Other interventions could also be ordered under practice note 7 that are narrow in focus such as:

- Evaluating the severity of an addiction;
- A mental health assessment of a parent to address a question or issue not otherwise addressed through a Parent Psychological Evaluation;
- Risk of recidivism for a parent with a criminal history; and/or
- A parent's knowledge of child development and appropriate discipline.

The obvious limitation is that the more narrow the focus, the narrower the report will be. Looking at a specific area may not have any generalizability into practical parenting issues

but can answer individual issues of contention between parties.

THERAPUTIC INTERVENTIONS

1. Therapeutic Intervention with One Parent (counselling for one parent)

This Intervention aims to change the attitudes, beliefs and practices of a parent seen to be creating difficulties for the child(ren) through their actions or who is impeding the ability to reach resolution on parenting issues. Examples include alienating a child, relying on a child for emotional support, an overly harsh and rejecting discipline style or any other parental behaviour that could be detrimental to the child(ren). Counselling may also be directed where a parent is stuck in stages of grief (denial, bargaining, anger, depression), suffering from the effects of trauma, or has or may have mental health issues that interfere with their functioning as a parent. (Practice Note 7, 2019)

Therapy is:

- An open process – feedback can be provided to the Court.
- Best done with clear referral goals and possibly assessment results.

Therapy is not:

- Wasting time blaming the other parent, the lawyers or the Court.
- Non-directive supportive counselling.
- The therapist aligning with the client and becoming part of the problem.

Example: an assessment has been completed and found that a parent is displaying alienating behaviours, relying on a child for emotional support, overly harsh and rejecting in their discipline style or any other parental behaviour that could be of detriment to the child. It could also be used when one parent is stuck in stages of grief (denial, bargaining, anger, depression) or has been seen to have mental health issues that interferes with their functioning as a parent.

2. Therapeutic Intervention with Both Parents (post-separation/divorce counselling)

The Parenting Expert attempts to resolve conflict, address parenting issues or disputes or build a parenting plan with the parents. This Intervention involves active teaching, modeling and guidance to the parents to improve the emotional relationship between the parents, as well as the practical parenting issues. (Practice Note 7, 2019)

In cases of extreme conflict, significant concerns pertaining to the mental health of a parent or a history of violence, one Parenting Expert may be appointed for each parent and all joint sessions will involve both Parenting Experts. In this case, the Court will authorize the Parenting Experts to consult with one another.

The focus can be on addressing the needs of the child(ren), improving or regulating communication between the parents, modifying aspects of a parenting plan, or even developing an entire parenting plan.

Therapeutic interventions do not do well during ongoing litigation unless the issues under litigation are split from the issues addressed in counselling. With families

where all issues tend to come back to money it may be advisable to get financial settlement as quick as possible before starting therapy.

Unsuccessful therapy can still provide a narrative report which identifies the outstanding issues or concerns regarding the participants as well as further recommendations.

Post Separation/Divorce Counselling Is:

- Directive
- Goal Oriented
- Future Focused
- Child Focused
- About Parenting
- Educational

Post Separation/Divorce Counselling Is Not:

- Litigation/Court
- Reconciliation
- Supportive Counselling
- A Place to Fight
- A Custody Assessment

3. Therapeutic Intervention with the Child only (counselling for the child)

This Therapeutic Intervention focusses on helping the child with adjustment issues from being part of a separated or divorced family. It can address difficulties in relationships with parents, siblings or other children, difficulties learning, and difficulties with behaviour.

Working with the Child Only

It Is:

- Providing therapeutic support for the child.
- Developing coping strategies for things that are largely out of their control.
- A way to help them understand what is taking place.

It Isn't:

- A substitute for an assessment of the family.
- Acting an unconditional advocate for the child's wishes.

To Clarify in Advance:

- Limits of confidentiality and reporting;
- Who will bring the child to the sessions;
- The therapist's ability and modality speaking to the parents. The therapist should spend minimal time with each parent and discussion should remain in the context of the child's therapy;
- In most instances, any communication should be transparent with both parents; and
- If parents are also seeing a Parenting Expert or involved in other therapeutic processes, consent should be given for the two therapists to communicate with each other for case planning.

4. Therapeutic Intervention with Parents and Children (counselling involving the entire family)

The Parenting Expert works with the family to increase cooperation, facilitate a change in relationships, meet the emotional needs of family members and/or develop a parenting plan. (Practice Note 7, 2019)

Therapeutic Intervention with the entire family may take place when:

- It is apparent that parental conflict exists and is negatively impacting the child(ren);
- The parents need to learn new ways to communicate; and,
- Major changes have taken place and there is concern for how the child(ren) are coping.

Often, there are separate Parenting Experts for the parents and the child(ren) with all Parenting Experts given authority to confer with one another. The Parenting Expert working with the child(ren) can provide information regarding the child(ren)'s needs or opinions to the Parenting Expert(s) working with the parents.

5. Therapeutic Intervention: Parent-Child Reunification (also known as Remedial Facilitated Access)

This Intervention includes assisting a parent and a child to meet and to become reacquainted when one parent has been out of a child's life for a long time. Depending on the complexity of the case and the presence of past allegations, it can take place with a single Parenting Expert working with the parent and child, two Parenting Experts (one for the child and one for the parents), or, in extreme cases, three Parenting Experts (one for the child and one for each parent).

Reunification Therapy

- Is child-centered but therapist directed;
- Is an active, future-focused process;
- Assumes that in building a relationship, objective truth is irrelevant, and the starting point is the truth from the child's perspective;
- Seeks to incorporate a second parent, not replace the chosen one; and,
- Expects that as progress is made contact will gradually increase "back to normal"