

Book Review

The Art and Science of Child Custody Evaluations

By Jonathan W. Gould and David A. Martindale Guilford Press, N. Y. 450 pages

Reviewed by Marion Rosenbluth, Ph.D.

There is a long history of literature and concern about what we think of as custody arrangements and the best interests of the child. These concerns began when the *Old Testament* described King Solomon's legendary effort to resolve the conflicting interests of two women claiming custody. Readers recall that he suggested the child be cut in half and that the mother who said she would relinquish her rights to save its life was the most fit, because she prioritized the best interests of her child.

This extremely detailed and well-written book summarizes the history and evolution of how to make child custody evaluations. There has always been some conflict and lack of clarity between psychosocial evaluations and evaluations carried out by members of the legal profession. An ongoing problem here is defining how much clinical thinking should affect the decision, and how strict the evaluator should be in adhering to the best interest of the child statutes. One of the most helpful aspects of this book is the authors' development of clear guidelines in making the evaluation. There is much emphasis on setting standards of what is considered relevant and reliable in making evaluations, such as knowledge of the best interests of the child statutes. Most interesting for social workers might be the first three sections of this book, where the authors give detailed factors involved in how to interview children, assessment of child development factors, assignment of parenting factors, and risk factors in evaluating families.

Although the authors state that the evaluation should not be a clinical intervention, surely clinical judgment goes into evaluating the character, stability,

and motivation of the persons involved in contested custody. Furthermore, relating with lawyers and judges needs to be considered, because they are the final decision-makers. This book addresses that issue and covers very clearly what could be construed as the ideal approach, taking into consideration the many complex factors that impinge on the process.

An aspect of this work that is often neglected is how one can protect oneself from retaliation from the losing side – Evaluators are advisors and have no legal protection such as immunity from lawsuits. This book includes a very clear chapter on self-protection for custody evaluators. Moreover, by setting clear standards and suggesting methods for self-protection, this work seems to be the most thorough and up-to-date attempt to clarify issues for persons doing this sensitive and important job.

I would recommend that anyone doing this work use this very thorough and well-written book as a guide. It is an exhaustive coverage of issues involved in child custody evaluations. King Solomon was on the right track in his judgment, but we have more complicated and reliable methods now, although perhaps not as effective as King Solomon's! Read or at least look through this most useful book to learn what they are.