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A STUDY OF FAMILY COURT REPORT
WRITERS: THEIR PRACTICES RELATING
TO CHILD CARE AND PROTECTION
CUSTODY EVALUATIONS, AND THEIR
VIEWS ABOUT THE BEST INTEREST OF
THE CHILD STANDARD AND
MANDATORY REPORTING OF CHILD
ABUSE.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Psychology at Massey University.

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2003

ABSTRACT

This is the first known study of psychologists and their evaluations of children specifically subject to care and protection Family Court custody proceedings, and replicates and extends some overseas research. The Family Court refers to these psychologists as report writers. The evaluations are referred to as s178 Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act (1989) psychological reports. Overall, report writers in this study meet the criteria to be considered as forensic experts. When compared to overseas studies (e.g., LaFortune & Carpenter, 1998), the most popular evaluation procedures used here were similar with the exception of the use of test instruments. It was found that report writers here (a) do not often use test instruments, (b) do not utilise a wide range of instruments, and (c) do not use test instruments specifically designed for custody evaluations. Report writers do believe that they have an important contribution to make in Family Court matters. The majority also expressed positive comments about this type of work. However, it does appear that report writers are operating in some respects within various sets of guidelines, but not so in other respects. In particular, and contrary to the guidelines, report writers provide recommendations, do not obtain relevant on-going training or engage in the administration of appropriate tests, and importantly do not appear to keep current with relevant literature. Furthermore, it is recommended that one set of guidelines be developed and that these offer greater levels of specificity. This research also extends the study of Jameson, Ehrenberg, and Hunter (1997) that looked into factors relating to the best interests of the child standard. Abuse factors (e.g., sexual and physical) rated the highest among report writers. Many new factors introduced for this study, including historic abuse, were also highly rated (e.g., emotional abuse and/or neglect, child's safety with other children, and child's physical or psychological vulnerability). Participants were also surveyed concerning the mandatory reporting of child abuse. The majority do not favour its introduction. If such a policy were to be introduced, the majority of participants want professionals who interact with children, particularly medical doctors and school teachers, to report confirmed incidents of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and the neglect of physical needs. The Discussion considers the value of one coherent set of guidelines for report writers, which includes up to date research findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, and most significantly, I wish to honour my wife who has provided tremendous support and understanding. Without this support, I could not have completed this thesis. I thank my children who, although too young to completely understand this undertaking, have also been supportive.

I acknowledge Dr. Kevin Ronan, my supervisor, for his guidance, encouragement, and understanding. I am very thankful that Dr. Ronan allowed me to pursue this area of interest. Thank you for walking this part of the road with me.

I wish to acknowledge the advice of Barbara Jameson. Also, I thank the three psychologists who provided advice in the pilot stage of developing the questionnaire.

I have appreciated the support from Open Home Foundation staff. My colleagues and staff have upheld me during this time. To my friends, particularly those in Palmerston North, I thank you for your encouragement and also your understanding when I have not always been available.

Finally, I wish to thank the participants of this study. The survey was extensive, and many participants went the extra kilometre to provide helpful and insightful comments. Thank you for your effort.

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