



## ☰ The Benefits of Longitudinal Evaluations in Parental Alienation Cases

June 30, 2022

Alan D. Blotcky, PhD



*Here's why longitudinal evaluations in high-conflict divorce cases are critical.*



JenkoAtaman/AdobeStock

### FORENSIC PRACTICE

As a clinical and forensic psychologist, I am often court-appointed or privately retained to conduct psychological/custody evaluations in high-conflict divorce cases. My evaluations in these cases usually take at least 6 months or more to complete. Why? Because longitudinal evaluations are the best way to detect, uncover, and describe complicated family dynamics. Family dynamics can be largely or entirely missed in a one-shot, cross-sectional evaluation. Inaccurate or wrong findings, conclusions, and recommendations can be the unfortunate consequence. A child's well-being and best interest can be lost if the evaluation is completed too fast with too few information/data points over time.

I have had many cases where important family dynamics did not reveal themselves initially in individual interviews and psychological testing. The goal of any psychological/custody evaluation is to determine the impact of parental and family influences on a child and to make recommendations based on those findings.<sup>1</sup> Anything short of that is a missed opportunity and will be unhelpful in a legal proceeding.

Uncovering family dynamics is especially fraught in high-conflict divorces that are, by definition, contentious, adversarial, and prone to obfuscation and falsehoods.<sup>2</sup> The surest way to see family dynamics clearly is to experience them in real-time as part of the evaluation process. In essence, the evaluator becomes a watchful spectator of the interactions and maneuvers of the various family members over an extended period of time.

Cross-sectional evaluations usually take 3 or 4 sessions per adult and 2 or 3 sessions per child. They include interviews, psychological testing, review of collateral information, and review of mental health records. Such evaluations can be accomplished in short order, like 2 months. But, all too often, these evaluations are not sufficient to uncover vital family dynamics. They often lack depth and breadth because they are based on limited information collected over a short period of time.

My longitudinal evaluations take at least 6 months and always include the filling in of a timeline of events and behaviors as they are occurring in real time.<sup>3</sup> Information for the timeline is collected through many interviews, phone contacts, emails, and text messages. Both parents and children can provide valuable data for the timeline. At the end, a comprehensive picture of the family and its dynamics can be described extensively in vivid color and with texture.

Longitudinal evaluations are especially helpful in suspected cases of parental alienation.<sup>4</sup> Since alienating or offending parents never admit to their damaging behavior, it behooves the mental health expert to follow the family over many months to see the sequence of events and behaviors as they unfold in real time. A timeline can be established that reveals the ebb and flow of harmful family maneuvers and behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

Longitudinal evaluations also make sense when false allegations of abuse are a part of the case. In my experience, multiple false allegations during a divorce proceeding are a huge red flag for parental alienation.<sup>5</sup> If the evaluation process extends for many months, these false allegations can mount up, clearly showing their role in the alienating process. And "not indicated" or "not substantiated" reports by child protective agencies can mount up as well during the evaluation period.

In court, longitudinal evaluations are robust and compelling. They provide many more data points to be considered in the overall assessment and depiction of the family. It is far easier to describe parental alienation in detail if a longitudinal approach has been taken in the evaluation process. Also, it lends itself to gripping courtroom testimony.

The American Psychological Association has published a report regarding the important features of a child custody evaluation.<sup>6</sup> Ethical considerations are always paramount. What is missing in their model is an emphasis on a longitudinal evaluation rather than a cross-sectional one. Perhaps this feature should be added to the American Psychological Association's model of custody evaluations.

By definition, longitudinal evaluations are much more time-consuming than one-shot assessments. But time should not be the guiding factor in mental health evaluations in high-conflict custody cases. Getting it right is far more important for the child. Taking as much time as needed should be the mantra of a highly helpful evaluation.

Treatment recommendations can be more accurate and specific when a longitudinal approach is taken in the evaluation. Treatment should always follow from diagnosis, and a comprehensive evaluation can set the stage for ongoing interventions that will be both effective and efficient.

In my experience, attorneys and judges make better decisions about custody arrangements when they are provided longitudinal information. Judges seem moved by timelines, documentation, and real-time examples.

There is 1 additional advantage to a longitudinal approach. Sometimes, the evaluation process itself can lead to significant awareness, changes, and resolution. The evaluation itself can be an intervention. In mild cases of parental alienation, for example, the evaluation process can convince the alienating parent to cease his or her damaging behavior, thereby resolving the crisis at hand.

One final note: In some cases of divorce, when parental alienation is not suspected and false allegations of abuse are not present, a one-time, cross-sectional evaluation does make sense. Simpler cases can indeed call for simpler evaluations.

In summary, parental alienation cases need longitudinal evaluations in order to detect and describe the damaging alienating behavior. These cases can be complicated and confusing at the beginning, but the evaluation process can tease out the prominent problematic dynamics in the family. A one-time, cross-sectional assessment can miss powerful and conclusive information in a case.

**Dr Blotcky** is a clinical and forensic psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Alabama. He is also clinical associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Dr Blotcky can be reached at [alanblotcky@att.net](mailto:alanblotcky@att.net).

### References

1. Lee SM, Olesen NW. [Assessing for alienation in child custody and access evaluations](#). *Family Court Review*. 2001;39(3):282-298.
2. Bernet W. Children of high-conflict divorce face many challenges. *Psychiatric Times*. October 30, 2015. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/children-high-conflict-divorce-face-many-challenges>
3. Blotcky AD. Timelines are a critical tool in cases of false allegations of abuse and parental alienation. *Psychiatric Times*. May 12, 2022. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/timelines-are-a-critical-tool-in-cases-of-false-allegations-of-abuse-and-parental-alienation>
4. Harman JJ, Bernet W, Harman J. [Parental alienation: the blossoming of a field of study](#). *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2019;28(2):212-217.
5. Blotcky AD. Child abuse allegations: sorting out lies versus truths. *Psychiatric Times*. August 25, 2021. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/child-abuse-allegations-lies-versus-truths>
6. [Guidelines for child custody evaluations in family law proceedings](#). *American Psychologist*. 2010;63-67.



PSYCHIATRISTS

\$280,344 – \$336,864  
annual salary (Board Certified)

\$273,156 – \$327,360  
annual salary (Board Eligible)

INPATIENT • OUTPATIENT

 CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES  EDE