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Post-Pandemic PPEs: Remote Evaluations and Returning to Normal

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The world of parenting plan evaluations drastically pivoted in response to COVID-19 and vast systemic closures beginning in March of 2020. During this time, we discovered the viability of conducting parenting plan evaluations (PPEs) safely and reliably using videoconferencing (VC) and other remote technology. Milfred D. Dale and Dawn Smith addressed the use of new technologies in their article, “Making the Case for Videoconferencing and Remote Child Custody Evaluations (RCCES): The Empirical, Ethical, and Evidentiary Arguments for Accepting New Technology,” (published in *Psychology, Public Policy and Law* in 2021) and evaluators adapted to find ways to provide necessary services during challenging times.

A Series of Surveys

Through a series of surveys posed to California mental health professionals conducting PPEs, the author collected informal feedback about their implementation of technology and new methods into their processes. Through an initial survey, PPEs were asked how they were incorporating technology in response to the pandemic, and what they were learning as a result. About a year later, in 2021, a second survey collected thoughts about the effectiveness, and possible limitations, of the VC PPE methods and outcomes, and to obtain more information about how results were received and implemented by decision-makers in the court systems. Finally, in 2022, a third survey sought to understand current work methods utilized by PPEs, comparing the work process pre-pandemic with early post-pandemic approaches. While the information collected is anecdotal in nature, it lends insight into the role of technology for practice during the pandemic and how that impact has lingered and evolved.

First Survey

The initial survey asked relatively simple questions regarding the number of PPEs conducted in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, compared to immediately preceding, and plans for returning to the office setting.

There were four key themes:

- 1) The overall number of PPE was substantially lower than during a similar time period pre-COVID.
- 2) Evaluators wholeheartedly embraced the remote videoconferencing techniques.
- 3) Evaluators planned to continue to use the remote techniques.
- 4) Approximately one-fifth of the evaluators had returned to the office using in-person meetings, just over half were using a hybrid approach using in person meetings together with remote techniques, and one-quarter had not returned to in-person work, and planned to use only VC methods until there was a vaccine and clear path to safety.

Overall, forensic practitioners who participated responded that they used the crisis as an opportunity for significant and positive change as to how we do our work and how we can best assist the populations we serve.

Second Survey

The goal of the second survey was to learn more about the perceived effectiveness, and possible limitations, of the VC CCE methods and outcomes, and to gain insight as to how those outcomes were being received and utilized within the courts. The second survey sought information about the number of remote PPEs started and completed from about March 2020 through summer of 2021. Eight California Bay Area practitioners who completed the survey agreed to be interviewed telephonically to answer follow-up questions.

There were five key themes from the second stage of this project:

- 1) The number of evaluations had increased substantially.
- 2) All evaluators believed that the remote CCE process worked well for the families, and decreased parents' anxiety about their interviews.
- 3) The final reports and findings were well received by attorneys, and PPEs believed that the attorneys were less likely to challenge the findings and more likely to resolve their matters.
- 4) The evaluators participated in fewer trials than they had pre-pandemic, and those trials were conducted by video conference, with no personal appearances. Evaluators who participated in video conference trials (and depositions) found those experiences positive and to some extent easier than when done in person.
- 5) The hybrid model was used by all evaluators. The most common process was to complete individual interviews with videoconference methods (on a secure platform) and to conduct parent-child interviews and observations in person. These in person methods occurred at parks near parents' homes, in their backyards, and some inside the homes. The hybrid model was uniformly embraced by evaluators not only as the preferred modality (as compared to conducting in office, but masked, interviews) but the one they believed allowed them to have most confidence in their work. All evaluators used a variety of

COVID-19 protocols in all settings. These included having parents complete Covid Health Questionnaires (similar to those one would complete at a physician's office) in advance of in-person interviews and home visits; using social distancing and masks; increased screening for vaccination status (including disclosing their own); and conducting in-person interviews only with adults who had been vaccinated.

Those who participated in the survey did not reveal a clear or uniform plan for evaluators to return to their offices. The evaluators' comments suggested a great deal of trepidation, likely due to the fact that during the period when they replied, the pandemic went from easing (May of 2021) to worsening (July of 2021) due to the then-new Beta variant. By the end of the summer, three of the evaluators stated they had stopped taking new cases, and two of whom said they would cease doing evaluations completely. However, a majority of evaluators indicated that the pandemic did not dissuade them from continuing their work. They were committed to continuing the hybrid model and figuring out how to do their work in a safe and sure manner that would yield accurate, valid, and reliable data. While a few evaluators had suspended their work, the majority chose a middle ground and continued to complete evaluations or begin new ones using a variety of methods.

It was clear that this was not work for the faint of heart and required great attention to detail, rigorous application of consistent methodologies, and a willingness to examine all that one does in order to be assured of the reliability and validity of the final work product. Further, at that time there were no best practices guidelines to apply to the use of these new methods. This concern has been corrected with AFCC's new *Guidelines for Parenting Plan Evaluations in Family Law Cases*, which includes a section on virtual evaluations.

Third Survey

The final survey was disseminated in Fall of 2021 and was designed to take a look at more current practices. Interestingly, most responding practitioners indicated that with the incorporation of hybrid methods for conducting evaluations, the amount of time it took to conduct the evaluations increased, or was about the same as before the pandemic protocols were implemented. The survey also asked about methods used to protect against the transmission of COVID-19, including the use of health and vaccine questionnaires, and the requirement for masking. Respondents were also asked about their methodology for interviewing, including variations for seeing children and meeting with parents together or separately.

Evaluators who returned to in-office practice reported being vigilant in protecting against COVID-19 transmission. Few reported requiring their clients to be immunized before allowing in-office meetings. The majority of respondents reported continued use of remote technology for conducting interviews. Those who used a hybrid model largely reported continued use of technology for remote interviews.

Several thoughts came from this final, modest survey.

- 1) This highly experienced group of evaluators were making full use of the virtual/remote CCE methods that they had never used before the pandemic.
- 2) There were definite signs that the majority were making a return to the office using the hybrid approach.
- 3) After what seemed to be a drastic decline in the number of evaluations conducted in 2020, the number of evaluations starting in 2021 seemed to be more comparable to the numbers reported in 2017-2019 - and those PPEs were being completed in less or the same amount of time compared to 2017-2019.

Finally, the feedback clearly indicates that the respondents using these virtual methods found them to be useful methods for use to conduct PPEs. Thus, not only have they embraced the new technology, they found that evaluations so conducted could be of service to the families they evaluated.

Conclusion:

In 2023 both the informal, collected feedback and anecdotal evidence suggest that many evaluators have returned to the office and that the majority of them plan to augment or have augmented their practices with these new videoconference methods. Clearly this is a remarkable change and development none could have seen in 2019. Dr. Dale and Ms. Smith appear to have been on point when they optimistically looked at MHPs embracing the R-CCE methods and indicated the pandemic has “temporarily and permanently changed the landscape of mental health service delivery, including the conduct of child custody evaluations.” They showed great insight when they suggested that “the child custody community-for example, courts, attorneys, evaluators, and families-should accept RCCEs as a valid alternative that, when properly done, can help resolve custody disputes.” There is no doubt our field has been positively and irrevocably changed.

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