

Preparing for a Custody or Parental Fitness Evaluation

Tips for Answering Difficult Questions Honestly, Clearly, and Without Character Assassination

A custody or parental fitness evaluation can feel intimidating, particularly when there has been significant conflict, betrayal, frightening behavior, or concern about your child's well-being.

You do not need to minimize concerning behavior. You also do not need to diagnose, label, or condemn the other parent in order to describe what has happened.

Your job is to tell your story as accurately and concretely as you can.

1. Describe behavior rather than assigning labels

Whenever possible, describe what you personally observed, heard, experienced, or were told rather than giving the behavior a psychological label.

Instead of: "He's a sex addict."

Describe what led you to that concern: "He was frequently viewing pornography late at night. On several occasions he left explicit material visible on the computer where our nine-year-old could potentially see it."

Instead of: "She's a narcissist." Try: "When I brought up concerns about our child's school attendance, the conversation often shifted to what she believed I had done wrong. I found it difficult to keep the conversation focused on the original concern."

Instead of: "He gaslights me." Try: "There have been conversations in which he denied saying something I remembered clearly, told me I was imagining things, or changed the subject to something I had supposedly done wrong. I began doubting my own recollection and started keeping notes after difficult conversations."

Describe the pattern. Let the evaluator evaluate it.

2. Be prepared to give examples

If you make a general statement, expect the evaluator to ask: "Can you give me an example?" Prepare yourself to answer that question.

Rather than saying, "He became obsessed with pornography," think about the observable information behind that statement:

- What did you actually see or hear?
- Approximately when did it happen?
- How frequently did it happen?
- Did the behavior affect you, the child, parenting, work, sleep, finances, or household functioning?
- Did you discuss it with the other parent?
- What happened when you did?

You do not have to remember every date or detail. If you do not remember something precisely, say so: "I don't remember the exact date, but it was during the summer before our child started fourth grade." That is more credible than trying to manufacture certainty.

3. Separate what you know from what you suspect

Keep clear distinctions among: "I saw..."; "He told me..."; "Our child told me..."; "I became concerned that..."; and "I wondered whether..."

For example: "I don't know how often he was viewing pornography when I wasn't present. I became concerned because I encountered explicit material left open on the computer several times."

You can have concerns without presenting your interpretation as established fact.

4. Explain your response to the behavior

Your experience matters. You can say: "He asked me to attend swinger's parties with him. I was uncomfortable and told him I did not want to participate."

Another example: "When conversations repeatedly turned into accusations about me, I found myself becoming defensive and eventually stopped raising certain concerns because the conversations were exhausting."

This communicates the relational impact without requiring you to declare that the other parent is sexually deviant or emotionally abusive. The evaluator can ask additional questions and reach their own conclusions.

5. Look for patterns, not adjectives

One troubling interaction does not necessarily define a person or relationship. Repeated patterns are often more informative.

What happened? -> How often? -> Under what circumstances? -> What was the impact? -> What happened afterward?

For example: "When I raised a parenting concern, he frequently responded by bringing up unrelated things I had done wrong. I would end up defending myself, and the original parenting issue often went unresolved."

That provides much more useful information than: "He's a manipulative gaslighter."

6. Don't let negative language take over your story

If every answer becomes a description of how terrible the other parent is, the evaluator may learn surprisingly little about you as a parent.

- your relationship with your child
- your child's temperament, strengths, interests, and needs
- your parenting strengths and challenges
- how you discipline and set limits
- how you comfort your child
- your daily parenting responsibilities
- how you handle disagreement
- what you believe your child needs from each parent
- what you would like the parenting arrangement to accomplish for your child

The evaluation is not simply an evaluation of the other parent. Tell the story of your parenting, not only the story of the conflict.

7. Avoid diagnosing the other parent

Unless you are reporting an established diagnosis that is genuinely relevant, avoid diagnosing the other parent yourself.

- narcissist
- sociopath
- psychopath
- sex addict
- borderline
- bipolar
- delusional
- pathological liar
- gaslighter
- abuser
- alienator

Some of these terms have clinical meanings; others have become popular shorthand for complicated behavior. You don't need them. Describe what happened.

8. Avoid guessing at motives

Compare: "She did this because she wanted to destroy my relationship with my child."

With: "She scheduled an activity during three of my scheduled parenting weekends. I don't know why she did that. I was concerned because it reduced my parenting time."

The second statement distinguishes behavior, impact, and interpretation. You usually know what someone did. You may not know why they did it.

9. Don't be afraid to acknowledge something positive

If the other parent has strengths, acknowledging them does not erase your concerns.

You might say: "He loves our daughter and they enjoy playing music together. My concerns are primarily about his judgment regarding sexual material in the home and some of the conflict between us."

Being able to hold both positive and negative information can demonstrate perspective.

If the evaluator asks whether you contributed to the conflict, consider the question rather than automatically defending yourself. It is okay to say: "Looking back, I wish I had handled that differently."

10. Keep returning to the child

Ask yourself: Why does this information matter to my child's well-being?

Not every painful event in an adult relationship is necessarily relevant to parenting. Something can be hurtful, infuriating, or evidence that the relationship needed to end without automatically demonstrating that someone is an unfit parent.

For example: "My concern is not simply that he watches pornography. My concern is that explicit material was repeatedly left accessible where our child could encounter it."

That distinction matters.

11. If you become emotional, you can still answer

You are allowed to have feelings. You can say: "This is difficult for me to talk about."

Take a moment and return to what you know. Strong emotion does not require stronger language.

This happened. This is what I observed. This is how I responded. This is how it affected our child or me. This is what I did next.

A Simple Formula to Remember

OBSERVATION -> PATTERN -> IMPACT -> RESPONSE -> CHILD

Observation: What actually happened?

Pattern: Was this isolated or repeated?

Impact: What effect did it have?

Response: What did you do about it?

Child: How, if at all, did it affect the child or parenting?

You don't have to prove that the other parent is a terrible person. You need to provide the evaluator with enough clear, accurate information to understand the family, the parenting relationship, the areas of concern, and what you believe your child needs.

Describe. Don't diagnose.

Give examples. Don't exaggerate.

Acknowledge complexity.

And keep the child - not the conflict - at the center of the story.

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