



**April 2014 Tip of the Month:
Brief Focused Assessments in Hennepin
County Family Court**

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In contested cases involving child custody or parenting time, it is common for the family court to seek the input and recommendations of a neutral evaluator to help resolve the contested issue. Hennepin County Family Court Services has developed a new service, Brief Focused Assessment (BFA), as an alternative to comprehensive custody and parenting time evaluations. The purpose of this tip is to provide a brief overview of the program and what to expect if your case is referred to BFA.

BFAs are designed to provide evaluative services on narrowly defined issues in family court cases involving children. A BFA is generally completed in less time than a comprehensive evaluation. BFAs are typically completed in 60 - 90 days, depending on the complexity of the situation, compared to the 120 days or more for a comprehensive evaluation. BFAs are also less expensive than a comprehensive evaluation (follow the link at the end of the article for a fee schedule).

BFAs provide a versatile tool for use in many family law scenarios. Examples of situations appropriate for referral to Brief Focused Assessment include:

- Assessing a child's wish to live with a non-custodial parent
- How to reestablish interrupted parent/child relationships
- Determining developmentally appropriate parenting time for a child with special needs
- Parenting time after a relocation

While BFAs are useful in a wide variety of cases, the question presented in the court's order for a BFA must direct the evaluator to address a specific, narrow and well defined question. For example, in a case involving allegations of a parent having substance issues, a question for assessment could be: Does the parent suffer from substance abuse and if so, how does it impact the parent's ability to provide a safe and consistent living environment during parenting time? For more examples of questions appropriate for a BFA, please refer to the attached information about the program provided by Family Court Services.

A BFA is not appropriate for every situation. When there are a multitude of issues or questions raised or if addressing one question causes many more to be raised, a comprehensive evaluation may be required. In addition, the BFA does not offer custody recommendations as would a comprehensive evaluation.

For more information about the BFA program go to <http://www.hennepin.us/residents/public-safety/family-court-services>

Examples of Appropriate BFA Questions

- **Assessing children's wishes to live with non-custodial parent:** In a case where one parent asserts that a child wishes to live with the non-custodial parent. A BFA would assess what is the context and basis of the child's wish to change residence; is the child able to articulate his/her reasoning in a developmentally appropriate way; what is the parent's report of the history of this request as well as the parenting and attachment history, are there concerns about parental influences on the child's thinking/wishes; does the child have special needs which warrant consideration and what would be the impact on the child if such a change was granted.
- **How to reestablish interrupted parent/child relationship:** In a case where a parent has been absent from a child's life for a lengthy period of time: under what conditions might it benefit the child to establish a relationship with the parent and what might the risks be to the child and current caretakers?
- **Chemical health/Mental health as it relates to providing a safe and consistent environment:** In a case where there are allegations of instability in a parent: In what ways might a parent's alleged substance abuse or mental health condition impair their ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the child during their parenting time? Does the parent suffer from a mental illness or substance abuse and if yes, then how might this impact their ability to provide a safe and consistent environment during their parenting time.
- **Determining developmentally appropriate parenting time for a child with special needs:** In a case where a child is very young, or has special needs: Given a parental agreement or court ruling on legal and physical custody, what sort of parenting time schedule would be developmentally appropriate?
- **Parenting time following abuse/neglect allegations where there has been a lapse in contact:** In a case with a young child and unsubstantiated allegations of abuse; How can access be allowed in a safe, developmentally appropriate and careful manner, especially if there has been a lapse in contact?
- **Parenting time schedule after relocation:** In the context of a larger matter (custody or relocation) a well-defined issue may be identified for a BFA, for example; what would be a developmentally appropriate access plan if post-divorce relocation is allowed.
- **Assessing family dynamics where child is aligned with one parent, with suggestions to improve the relationship with the excluded parent:** In the case of a child who appears aligned with one parent to the exclusion of the other; and assessment of the dynamics of the parent-child relationship with suggestions to improve the relationship, if appropriate to do so.