

A PARENT'S GUIDE

Preparing for Your Custody Evaluation

What to expect, how to prepare, and how to show up as the parent your child needs — written by a Minnesota family law attorney.

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Please read first

This guide is general legal information, not legal advice. Reading it does not create an attorney-client relationship. Custody evaluations vary by county, by court, and by evaluator, and the facts of your case matter enormously. For advice about your specific situation, consult a licensed family law attorney in your jurisdiction.

1. What a Custody Evaluation Actually Is

If a judge has ordered a custody evaluation in your case, it usually means the court wants an objective, professional assessment of what living and parenting arrangement is in your child's best interests. The evaluation does not decide your case. The judge does. But a well-supported recommendation carries real weight.

An evaluator is typically a neutral professional: a licensed psychologist, a social worker, or a court services evaluator, depending on your county. Their job is not to decide who is the "better person." It is to understand your child's needs and how each parent meets them.

KEY IDEA

The evaluation is about your child, not about you

Everything an evaluator observes is filtered through one question: what does this child need, and which arrangement best provides it? Parents who keep that lens rather than focusing on grievances against the other parent consistently come across as more credible.

Who the evaluator talks to and what they review

- Both parents, usually in individual interviews and sometimes more than once
- The child or children, in an age-appropriate way
- Observations of each parent interacting with the child, sometimes in the home
- Collateral sources such as teachers, doctors, therapists, daycare providers, and sometimes family or friends
- Records: school, medical, mental health, police reports, prior court filings, social media posts, and text or email communication between the parents
- Psychological testing, in some but not all evaluations

The standard the evaluator is applying

In Minnesota, custody and parenting time are governed by the **best interests of the child** factors set out in Minn. Stat. § 518.17. The evaluator's report is generally organized around those factors. Knowing them in advance helps you understand what the evaluator is listening for.

The best-interest factors, in plain English

- Your child's physical, emotional, developmental, and cultural needs, and how each parent meets them
- Any special medical, mental health, or developmental needs
- Your child's reasonable preference, if they are old enough

- History and nature of each parent's participation in raising the child
- Each parent's willingness to support the child's relationship with the other parent
- The benefit of maximizing parenting time with both parents — balanced against any harm
- The effect on the child of any domestic abuse

This is a simplified summary. The full statutory list controls in any actual case.

2. The Right Mindset Before You Begin

More cases are helped or hurt by how a parent carries themselves through the process than by any single fact. The evaluator is forming an impression of you as a parent and as a person who can co-parent. These three principles matter more than any clever strategy.

Be child-focused, not conflict-focused

When you talk about the other parent, the evaluator is watching how you handle conflict. A parent who can acknowledge the other parent's strengths — while still being honest about real concerns — reads as stable and child-centered. A parent who can only criticize reads as someone who may put the child in the middle.

Be honest, including about your own gaps

Evaluators are experienced at spotting exaggeration and spin. Overstating the other parent's faults or claiming you have no weaknesses damages your credibility on everything else you say. Owning a limitation and explaining how you're addressing it is far more persuasive than pretending to be flawless.

Be consistent

What you say in your interview, what your records show, and what the evaluator observes should line up. Inconsistencies are the fastest way to lose credibility. You don't need to be perfect; you need to be real and reliable.

A note on anxiety

Feeling nervous is normal and expected. Evaluators know this. Being anxious will not count against you. Trying to appear flawless, coaching your child, or hiding obvious problems will. Aim for honest and prepared, not polished and defended.

3. How to Prepare in the Weeks Before

Gather your documentation

Organized, relevant records make you easy to believe. Pull these together early so you're not scrambling:

- ☐ Your child's school records, report cards, and any IEP or 504 plan
- ☐ Medical and dental providers, and a list of appointments you've handled
- ☐ Your child's therapists or counselors, if any
- ☐ A realistic picture of your weekly schedule and your child's routine
- ☐ A calendar or log of the parenting time you've actually exercised
- ☐ Relevant communication with the other parent (texts, emails, parenting-app messages)
- ☐ Names and contact details of collateral sources who know your parenting firsthand

Think through what you'll say

You don't script answers, but you should be able to speak clearly to a few core topics:

1. Your child's daily routine — meals, bedtime, school, activities, friends — in real detail.
2. Your child's specific needs right now, and how you meet them.
3. A parenting arrangement you're proposing, and why it serves your child.
4. Honest, specific, child-focused concerns about the other parent — if you have them.
5. How you support your child's relationship with the other parent.

Specifics beat adjectives

Vague (less persuasive)	Specific (more persuasive)
"I'm a very involved parent."	"I take her to swim practice Tuesdays and Thursdays and I've been to every parent-teacher conference."
"He's irresponsible."	"On three occasions in the last two months, homework wasn't done during his time and her teacher emailed me about it."
"I do everything for the kids."	"I handle the pediatrician visits and refills, and I've coordinated his asthma plan with the school nurse."

Prepare your child — the right way

This is where well-meaning parents most often hurt themselves. The line between supporting your child and coaching them is one evaluators watch closely.

Do	Don't
Tell your child a nice person wants to talk with them about their family, and that there are no wrong answers.	Don't tell your child what to say, who to prefer, or what not to mention.
Reassure them that both parents love them and this isn't their fault.	Don't quiz them after the meeting about what they were asked.
Keep their routine as normal as possible.	Don't reward or punish based on the evaluation.
Let them know it's okay to be honest.	Don't share adult details of the case or court with them.
Why coaching backfires Children often repeat coaching almost verbatim, and evaluators are trained to notice it. A coached child can damage the very parent who coached them — it suggests that parent is willing to use the child. Trust your child's honesty; it almost always reflects well on a genuinely involved parent.	

4. During Your Interview

How to come across

- **Calm and cooperative.** Treat the evaluator as a neutral professional, not an adversary — even if you disagree with something.
- **Honest about imperfections.** If you've made mistakes, name them and explain what you've changed.
- **Focused on your child.** Bring nearly every answer back to your child's needs and experience.
- **Respectful about the other parent.** State concerns factually, without contempt. Acknowledge their strengths where they're real.

Questions you may be asked

- Describe a typical day with your child.
- What are your child's strengths, struggles, and needs right now?
- What worries you about the other parent's care — and what do they do well?
- How do you handle discipline?
- How do you and the other parent communicate?
- What parenting arrangement are you asking for, and why is it best for your child?

Handling hard questions

If you're asked about a low moment such as a heated text, a missed exchange, a past mistake, don't deflect or blame. Acknowledge it briefly, put it in context, and describe what you've done since. Evaluators and judges respect accountability far more than denial.

If safety is a real concern

If there is genuine domestic abuse, substance abuse, or a safety issue, raise it factually, specifically, and with any supporting documentation. Don't exaggerate, but don't minimize real danger to protect appearances. Safety concerns are exactly what the evaluator needs to know. If you are in immediate danger, contact local authorities and let your attorney know as soon as possible.

5. The Home Visit and Observed Parenting Time

Many evaluations include watching you and your child together, sometimes in your home. The goal isn't a spotless house. It's a real, warm, functional relationship.

What helps

- A clean-enough, safe, child-appropriate space. You'll want the evaluator to see that your child has somewhere to sleep, eat, and play.
- Normal, engaged interaction: talking, helping with a task, an ordinary activity together.
- Patience and warmth, especially if your child acts up. As with most other issues in a custody evaluation, how you handle it matters more.

What hurts

- Staging an unnaturally perfect scene, or putting on a performance your child can feel.
- Being on your phone, distracted, or visibly stressed about being watched.
- Speaking negatively about the other parent in front of your child.

6. Common Mistakes That Sink Good Parents

6. Trashing the other parent. It signals you'll put your child in the middle.
7. Coaching the child. It reads as manipulation and can backfire badly.
8. Exaggerating or lying. One caught overstatement taints everything else.
9. Treating the evaluator as the enemy. They're neutral; hostility costs you.
10. Refusing to admit any fault. Nobody believes a flawless parent.
11. Ignoring your own documented concerns. Vague claims with no support don't persuade.
12. Venting about the case to or around your child. Evaluators hear about it.

7. After the Evaluation

Once interviews and observations are complete, the evaluator prepares a written report with findings and, usually, a recommendation. Timelines vary by county, but several weeks to a few months is common.

The report is shared with the court and the parties (and their attorneys). It is influential but not binding. The judge makes the final decision, and you generally have the opportunity, through counsel, to respond to the report, question its conclusions, or present additional evidence.

If the recommendation isn't what you hoped

A disappointing recommendation is not the end of your case. There are avenues to challenge or contextualize an evaluation, and a single report is one piece of a larger picture. This is exactly the moment to work closely with an attorney who can assess your specific options.

Quick-Reference Preparation Checklist

Print this page and work through it before your evaluation.

RECORDS TO GATHER

- ☐ School records, report cards, IEP/504
- ☐ Medical, dental, and therapy providers and history
- ☐ Your child's routine and weekly schedule
- ☐ Log of parenting time actually exercised
- ☐ Relevant communications with the other parent
- ☐ Collateral contacts who know your parenting firsthand

BE READY TO SPEAK TO

- ☐ Your child's daily routine in real detail
- ☐ Your child's current needs and how you meet them
- ☐ The arrangement you propose and why it helps your child
- ☐ Specific, factual, child-focused concerns (if any)
- ☐ How you support the other parent's relationship with your child

MINDSET REMINDERS

- ☐ Child-focused, not conflict-focused
- ☐ Honest — including about my own gaps
- ☐ Consistent across what I say, show, and do
- ☐ Calm and cooperative with the evaluator
- ☐ I have NOT coached my child

A Word From Attorney Sam Khorroosi

A custody evaluation can feel like the most exposed moment of your life as a parent. It doesn't have to be something you face unprepared. The parents who do best are not the ones with perfect lives; they're the ones who show up honest, organized, and unmistakably focused on their children.

Our practice is built around family law and custody matters here in Minnesota, and we've worked alongside child psychologists on exactly these issues. If you'd like guidance tailored to your situation, we're here to help.



[Schedule Your Consultation](#)

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