

ASPECT

ACKERMAN-SCHOENDORF SCALES FOR
PARENT EVALUATION OF CUSTODY

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INTRODUCTION

General Description

The Ackerman-Schoendorf Scales for Parent Evaluation of Custody (ASPECT) is a clinical tool designed to aid mental health professionals in making child custody recommendations. Consisting of a group of standardized scales devised to evaluate parent fitness for custody, the ASPECT incorporates several commonly used instruments, in conjunction with the clinician's observations, to quantify characteristics related to effective custodial parenting.

Since its publication in 1992, the ASPECT has assumed a prominent role in the area of custody evaluation. A 1996 survey of custody evaluators (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997; Ackerman, 2001), and a survey of family law attorneys (Ackerman & Kelly, 2000) revealed the ASPECT to be the custody evaluation tool most frequently used for adults.

The ASPECT is divided into three subscales: the Observational Scale, the Social Scale, and the Cognitive-Emotional Scale. The Observational Scale assesses the quality of the parent's self-presentation during the evaluation process. The Social Scale reflects interpersonal relationships, as well as societal and intrafamilial concerns. The Cognitive-Emotional Scale measures the individual's affective and cognitive capabilities in relation to child rearing. The combination of the Observational and Social Scales is a measure of the outermost impression conveyed by the individual of his or her parenting effectiveness. These two scales are therefore seen as "overt" measures of fitness. On the other hand, the Cognitive-Emotional Scale is considered to be a measure of the underlying cognitive and affective capacities for parenting, and is therefore seen as a "covert" measure.

The various factors and issues that are considered pertinent to custody evaluations (reviewed in chapter 5) were used to form the foundation of the ASPECT.

The general questions "Who would be the better custodial parent?" and "What custody arrangement is in the best interests of the child?" were set aside in favor of a series of specific questions that were generated to reflect each of the issues deemed essential by researchers and other mental health professionals in determining appropriate custody recommendations. On the basis of these questions, which are answered by the examiner, the ASPECT assesses various characteristics of each parent, as well as the relationship and interaction between each parent and the child or children. A quantitative measure of these significant characteristics, relationships, and interactions is provided in the form of the Parental Custody Index (PCI), a score that may be regarded as an indicator of overall parenting effectiveness.

Each of the parents completes a Parent Questionnaire, which is composed of questions regarding preferred custody arrangements, living and child care arrangements, the children's development and education, the relationship between the parent and the children, and the relationship between the parents. It also includes questions about the parent's background, including past and present psychiatric treatment, past and current substance abuse, and legal history.

The examiner then completes a separate questionnaire for each parent. The examiner's questionnaire contains 56 items that reflect the factors recognized as meaningful in custody evaluations. Twelve of these items have been designated as *critical items* because they are considered to be highly significant indicators of deficits in parenting. To complete each parent's form, the examiner utilizes information derived from (a) observations and interviews of the parent, both alone and with the children; (b) the data from several psychological tests administered to the parents and the children; and (c) the parent's responses to the Parent Questionnaire. There are two versions of the 56-item

questionnaire: the AutoScore™ Answer Form, which is completed and scored by hand, and the computer-scannable WPS TEST REPORT Answer Sheet, which is completed in pencil and then mailed to WPS for computerized scoring and interpretation. The use of both versions is discussed in chapter 2.

A short form of the ASPECT (ASPECT-SF) is also available. It is described in the supplement at the back of this manual.

ASPECT Subscales

A weighted average of all three ASPECT subscales, the PCI is a global score that can be used to compare one parent to the other. Analysis of the differences between the parents' scores on individual subscales clarifies the specific ways in which the parents differ. Although the subscale scores are used to explain PCI differences, it is the PCI that is used to guide custody recommendations, which are not made based on subscale differences alone. A brief description of each of the subscales follows.

Observational Scale

The Observational Scale assesses the self-presentation and appearance of the parent. Information used to score the items on the Observational Scale is obtained primarily from observation of the parent and, to a lesser degree, from the parent's responses to specific items on the Parent Questionnaire. Items on the Observational Scale reflect (a) the parent's physical appearance; (b) the manner in which the parent interacts with the examiner, with the child, and with the other parent; (c) the parent's initial understanding and articulation of the effects of the divorce on the child; and (d) the parent's own perception of his or her parenting abilities. For specific information on scoring these items, as well as those on the other subscales, see "Scoring Criteria" in chapter 2.

Social Scale

The Social Scale addresses the parent's social conduct and interaction with others, including the child, the other parent, and the community. The parent-child relationship is a major factor in the social environment of the child, and it is therefore afforded the most items. This relationship can be further divided into the direct interaction between parent and child, the child's perception of the parent, and the social environment that the parent provides for the child. Direct interaction between parent and child is assessed by examining the quality of their observed interaction (e.g., warm, positive) and the manner in which they communicate (e.g., open, easy, honest). Other items, which more indirectly assess the parent-child relationship, include the parent's ability to recognize present and future needs of the child, the parent's ability to provide discipline and self-care training, and the parent's motivation for seeking custody.

The parent's ability to provide a healthy home environment and his or her capacity to understand and become involved with the child's education and school environment are indications of the extent to which the child's social needs are being (or will be) met.

On the Social Scale, an attempt was made to include items representing a wide range of variables that have been cited as being relevant to custody determinations. Many of the questions refer to very basic conformance to societal standards of adequate parenting. These items inquire about the parent's arrest history, as well as any possible problems with alcoholism, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and other legal difficulties.

Cognitive-Emotional Scale

The psychological health and emotional maturity of parents are assessed by this subscale. The Cognitive-Emotional Scale of the ASPECT includes items that reflect current psychological functioning, past psychiatric history, current stress, and overall cognitive functioning. To quantify and specify each parent's cognitive and affective functioning, the ASPECT utilizes specific elements of several psychological tests that are already frequently used in custody evaluations. By using measures from these established and widely accepted instruments, and by weighting them equally, the ASPECT facilitates an evenhanded assessment and reduces examiner bias. This method also simplifies comparisons between the two parents.

Principles of Use

Respondent Population

The ASPECT is intended for use with parents engaged in a dispute over custody of their children. Because the ASPECT employs a self-report format, it should not be administered to individuals who are either unable or unwilling to cooperate in responding to the Parent Questionnaire or to testing in general. This would include hostile, uncooperative, or malingering subjects. Individuals with poor reading ability may have the questions read to them.

Clinicians should be cautious when examining subjects who have had prior exposure to the questions on the Parent Questionnaire. These individuals may be able to present themselves in a falsely positive light, and therefore may not be suitable candidates for the ASPECT.

The ASPECT has not been used to determine placement with relatives, or in cases involving either same-sex couples or couples who are cohabiting but not married. Additionally, over 10% of the items on the ASPECT do not apply to parents whose children are all below the age of 2.

Users who employ the ASPECT with respondents in any of these excluded groups will find that the results are not valid or cannot be scored.

User Qualifications

In general, the ASPECT should be used only by skilled mental health professionals with advanced training in psychological assessment. Although transfer of information from the various tests, the Parent Questionnaire, and the examiner's notes can be accomplished by clerks, the responsibility for interpretation should be assumed by the professional.

Prior to administering the ASPECT, the user should become familiar with the theoretical rationale, standardization, psychometric properties, and specific limitations of the instrument, as described in this Manual. It is also helpful for the user to draw on personal clinical experience in order to make judgments concerning individual items, and to supplement the ASPECT with other information, when appropriate.

Users are encouraged to become familiar with and conform to the standards prescribed by the American Psychological Association (1985) for the use of tests. Users who are unfamiliar with the issues and laws regarding custody evaluations should review the literature in this field before using the ASPECT. Additionally, it is assumed that the user will confer with outside consultants, when appropriate, to assure proper use of this instrument.

Ethical and Legal Issues

Use of the ASPECT in research and clinical settings should conform to the ethical principles developed by the American Psychological Association (1981). Users should take precautions to safeguard the confidentiality of the results, particularly because the validity of the ASPECT is threatened if the respondent is familiar in any way with its constituent items. In addition, ASPECT results for each parent should be conveyed in accord with the aforementioned guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association (1981). The legal and professional standards for confidentiality vary throughout the country, and it is the user's responsibility to be familiar with the laws and standards of his or her state. Safeguards should also be maintained to ensure protection of the information contained in the instrument and in this Manual from those not qualified to interpret psychometric data of this type. In particular, consultation with attorneys and judges should focus on the clinician's judgments, based in part on his or her interpretation of the ASPECT results, rather than on the actual test data, which nonclinicians may not be qualified to interpret.

Normative data, both parents' scores, individual items of the ASPECT, and the examiner's clinical judgment should all be considered when making a custody decision. The user takes responsibility for integrating the results of the ASPECT with any other available information to arrive at a decision regarding custody recommendations or mediation. In doing so, the clinician

should always take account of the current laws and practices regarding custody. The ethical and legal issues discussed here also apply to use of the computer-scored results, interpretations, and graphic representations contained in the WPS TEST REPORT.

Computerized Versus Hand Scoring and Interpretation

As previously explained in this chapter, there are two methods of scoring the 56-item questionnaire completed for each parent by the examiner. The questionnaire exists in two forms, enabling either hand scoring by the examiner or computerized scoring and interpretation. Some users may prefer the computerized scoring method because it standardizes the interpretation and produces a narrative report. The report highlights significant items for each parent and provides information about each parent in relation to the other and to the normative sample. Users seeking the most complete standardization in the interpretation of ASPECT scores may therefore wish to use the information provided in the WPS TEST REPORT. If the hand-scored AutoScore™ Answer Form is selected, the user may interpret the results by consulting the ASPECT Manual. The AutoScore™ Answer Form provides scoring sheets for both parents, and a Profile Form on which the user can plot both parents' scores.

Limitations

The assessment of fitness for custody is a complex process that requires a thorough understanding of current custody laws, in addition to clinical sensitivity and judgment. Although the ASPECT has been shown to predict individual court orders of custody, additional validity studies on the relationship of the PCI score to the satisfaction and health of the child have yet to be conducted. The ASPECT scales are intended to provide normative data for a wealth of information gained through the course of a thorough custody assessment. The PCI score provided by the ASPECT can be a useful anchor point for comparing each parent to the other on the basis of quantified results. In addition, the clinician may wish to give his or her own weighting to specific items, in accordance with the particular needs of the child or children in each individual case.

The ASPECT cannot completely counteract the effects of parents who present themselves in a falsely positive light. This must be considered when interpreting the results.

Whether the user employs the interpretation contained in the computer-generated report or personally interprets the results obtained on the AutoScore™ Answer Form, he or she should use clinical judgment in rendering a decision regarding placement based on the ASPECT.