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UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS

Course Description

- This course will provide CASA volunteers, GALs, and DFCS personnel with basic understanding of how to read and interpret a basic psychological evaluation report, focusing on information most pertinent to your work with DFCS children and families.

What is a psychological evaluation

- It is NOT:
 - A “psychiatric evaluation”
 - A “neurological evaluation”
- It IS:
 - A formal evaluation including several basic components:
 - Interview, records review, collateral contacts, one-on-one testing, diagnosis, recommendations

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

- Mandated for all children taken into custody
- Periodic updates are required for children in long-term foster care
- Drug & Alcohol Evaluations
 - When issues are suspected, but cannot be confirmed, such as if client denies, or minimizes, drug or alcohol use
 - When treatment options need to be determined

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

- Fitness for Parenting Evaluations
 - Either legally based or information based
 - *Legally-based* – Such as when petitioning for non-reunification or termination and an expert will help to bolster your case
 - *Information-based* – when it is suspected that there are issues such as mental health concerns, substance abuse, cognitive deficits, dysfunctional parenting beliefs and attitudes that could significantly impair ability to parent

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

- **Anger-Violence Assessment/
Domestic Violence Assessment**
 - When issues are suspected, but cannot be confirmed, such as if client denies any violence
 - When treatment options need to be determined

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

● Psychosexual Evaluations

- When sexual abuse perpetration or victimization is alleged or suspected, but not necessarily confirmed
- When treatment options need to be determined

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

● Psychosexual Evaluations

- BEWARE – A psychosexual evaluation is not the same as a formal forensic sexual abuse interview. Forensic interviews are often needed if criminal charges are pending; these need to be done ASAP after allegations are made.
- For standard psychological evaluations, the good psychologist will very carefully do minimal questioning regarding allegations of sexual abuse, so as not to contaminate the evidence if a forensic interview is to occur afterward.

When is a psychological evaluation needed?

● Neuropsychological Evaluations

- For use when there are suspicions of dementia (e.g., Alzheimer's), serious cognitive deficits, serious memory deficits, if there has been a significant head injury or trauma
- Will sometimes be recommended as part of the initial psychological evaluation
- Very costly and therefore not covered by Medicaid

What makes a good general psychological evaluation?

- There is no set standard
- Detailed clinical interviewing, including collateral and corroborative sources
- Behavioral observations
- Review of available records

What makes a good general psychological evaluation?

- Validity must be addressed
- Testing includes IQ screening, academic screening, visual-motor functioning, personality-emotional-behavioral functioning (both objective and projective)

What makes a good Fitness for Parenting Evaluation?

- There is no set standard
- Includes interviews (with client and collateral), records reviews, behavioral observations IQ screening, academic screening, visual-motor functioning, personality-emotional-behavioral functioning (both objective and projective) that is part of a standard psychological

What makes a good Fitness for Parenting Evaluation?

- Additionally, it also includes tests specifically designed to measure parental beliefs and attitudes
- VALIDITY MUST BE ADDRESSED
- Why can't you do just a parenting eval without it being part of a full psychological eval?

What makes a good Drug & Alcohol Evaluation?

- There is no set standard
- VALIDITY MUST BE ADDRESSED
- You get what you pay for! Most "bargain" A & D evals will not stand up in court against strong cross-examination

Validity concerns

- What is validity?
 - A valid evaluation is one that accurately measures what it says it will measure – an accurate measure of the client's cognitive abilities, emotional functioning, parenting beliefs and attitudes, etc.
- Why are validity indicators needed?
 - Because much of the information gathered in a psychological evaluation is self-reported by the client
 - Because your clients are motivated to look as good as possible.

Validity concerns

- Types of validity problems
 - Faking good
 - Faking bad
 - Inconsistency

Validity concerns

- Informal validity indicators – e.g., comparison of self-report with records and collateral contacts
- Validity assessments aren't fool-proof
- A forensic evaluation that does not address validity is never a good thing

Is it OK for the psychologist to use templates?

- They are imperative if you don't want to pay \$\$\$ for evaluations
- No need to reinvent the wheel
- Liability? Can result in typos and other errors (he/she; him/her)

Is it OK for the psychologist to use assistants?

- Financial constraints – Allows me to give you a superior product at a substantial discount off of “retail” rates
- Allows for multiple perspectives

Limitations of psychological evaluation

- Available data – is it complete?
- Accuracy of data
- “Snapshot in time”
- Predicting the future
- Determining ultimate, “black or white” questions (e.g., Is this a fit parent?)

Difference between psychological and psychiatric

- Psychiatric evaluation is typically for medication
- Psychiatric evaluation is much more limited in scope than psychological
- Psychological evaluation is much more in-depth, and can answer all questions except for prescribing specific medication

Difference between psychological and psychiatric

- Psychological can be used as a screening for if a psychiatric is even needed
- Many (but certainly not all!!) psychiatrists will nearly always prescribe medications if there is a valid diagnosis (depression, ADHD, anxiety, etc.)

Miscellaneous issues:

- What does “rule out” mean when part of a psychological/psychiatric diagnosis?
- “Objective” vs. “Subjective”
 - Applies to how information is obtained (i.e., test administration) and how tests are scored and interpreted
- “Projective” Tests

Miscellaneous issues:

- Can you give a copy of the report to the client?
 - Forensic evaluations that are requested (especially if they are court ordered) and paid for by a third party (DFCS) are different than other medical records – the client is not automatically entitled to a copy of the report

Miscellaneous issues:

- Can you give a copy of the report to the client?
 - DFCS records are protected and confidential by state statute; the psychological report, in essence, becomes part of the DFCS record, so DFCS owns the rights to the report, the psychologist cannot give the report to the client without specific permission from DFCS
 - There are legal ramifications regarding the status of the court case – best to always ask your SAAG first!!
 - Although “discoverable,” judges do not always require the SAAG to give the report to the defense attorney

What makes a good psychologist for DFCS' needs?

- Ability to develop rapport with wide variety of culturally and ethnically diverse clients
- Ability to develop rapport with difficult clients
 - Non-compliant children; angry adults
- Ability to write reports that are understandable to a wide range of readers – no “psycho-jargon,” average reading level

What makes a good psychologist for DFCS' needs?

- Understanding of and ability to work well with the various systems involved (DFCS – CPS, ongoing, etc.; referral agencies; DJJ; YDC; schools; attorneys)
- Ability to be an effective expert witness in court
- Ideally, should be a “forensic psychologist” since nearly all DFCS cases go to court, thus any evaluation could require expert testimony
- Ability to be a therapist as well as an evaluator
- Service - fast appointment times; fast general turnaround times; ability to handle “rush jobs;” ability to do “off-site” evals

Recommendations

- These often are considered to be a mandate that DFCS must follow!
- Therapeutic –
 - Individual therapy
 - Group therapy
 - Family therapy
 - Psychiatric evaluation for medication
 - Substance Abuse treatment
 - 12-step meetings
 - Routine drug screens (random, unannounced, & observed)

Recommendations

- Further evaluation -
 - Baby's Can't Wait
 - Developmental pediatrician (for Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Autism, Asperger's, etc.)
 - Comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation
 - Neuropsychological evaluation
 - Psychosexual
 - Forensic Interview

Recommendations

- Related services –
 - Speech therapy
 - Occupational therapy
 - Educational
- Social –
 - Extracurricular Activities
 - Mentoring

Recommendations

- Specific recommendations regarding the parents for children evaluations are not made if we have not met the parents. Reunification, non-reunification, termination of parental rights, etc. usually is not addressed. Exception is when recommending a psychological/fitness for parenting evaluation.

Thank You!

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