

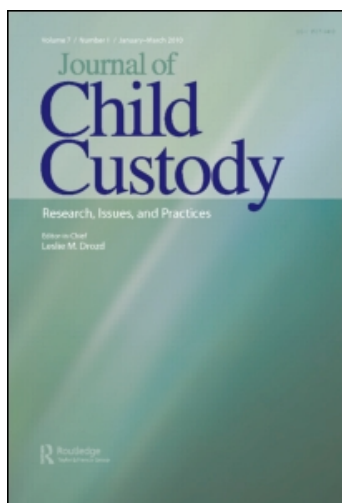
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### Assessing Children's Perceptions of Family Relationships: An Interactive Instrument for Use in Custody Disputes

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## **Assessing Children’s Perceptions of Family Relationships: An Interactive Instrument for Use in Custody Disputes**

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*There is a pressing need for a structured method for assessing children’s feelings about the behavior of parents and other family members that provides reliable and valid—rather than anecdotal—information to the court. This paper reviews available instruments and presents preliminary data on a new method for measuring children’s perceptions of emotional security, positive parenting, negative parenting, and co-parenting. This instrument, the Structured Child Assessment of Relationships in Families (the “SCARF”), is structured, interactive, and engaging to children age 4 to 14. Forty children undergoing custody evaluations were assessed. Evaluators, blind to the children’s responses, rated the quality of parenting. A sample of 131 children was used to assess reliability. The SCARF was shown to be highly reliable and to correlate strongly with evaluator ratings of emotional security, positive parenting, and negative parenting.*

**KEYWORDS** *attachment, child custody, co-parenting, emotional security, family relationships, parent-child relationships, parental separation, parenting*

Family law courts have increasingly turned to custody evaluators and other neutral professionals in the court system to provide information about families involved in custody disputes. Separating and divorcing parents often

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have very different views of their children's feelings, needs, and experiences in the family. Therefore, courts often have to rely on information about family relationships from third-party professionals such as independent custody evaluators, mediators (in "reporting" jurisdictions), minor's counsel, guardian ad litem, and/or other mental health professionals, depending on the laws and particular jurisdiction. Decisions based on these reports from neutral professionals can affect children's family relationships for a lifetime, which, in turn, may affect their development and psychological adjustment. But while children's best interests are at the heart of a child custody dispute, the accurate representation of young children's feelings and perceptions about the family are difficult to obtain and present to the court in a clear and concise way. Currently available structured methods of obtaining information from children in custody evaluations and other types of investigations are of limited usefulness. Further, in this high stakes area of child custody litigation, there has been almost no empirical research on children in custody evaluations.

There is a pressing need for standardized methods for assessing aspects of family functioning in order to provide better information to the courts in custody disputes. Such aspects of family functioning include the qualities of family interaction, parenting competence, and (the focus of this article) children's perceptions.

However, there are tremendous problems in conducting empirical research in this area. First, studies of clinical populations are hard to recruit and often have small sample sizes; forensic clinical samples are even harder to recruit. Second, there is limited funding for research in divorce compared with disorder-oriented research that grabs the lion's share of funding resources. Finally, there is the challenge of a new instrument meeting sufficient scientific standards for the courts (e.g., *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharm., Inc.*, 1993; 1995). No test in its preliminary development can meet the Daubert standard. The goal should be to develop procedures for providing information to the court that would meet the Daubert standard. This research is a first step in that direction for developing an assessment instrument for use with children in custody assessments.

In this paper, we review various methods for assessing children's perceptions of family relationships and present a first study of a new interactive instrument to assess children's feelings and views of their parents and other family members. The goal was to develop a process for obtaining information from children, in a systematic and engaging way, about their feelings and perceptions of, not only their parents, but also the panoply of other important family members, including stepparents, grand-parents, siblings, and so on. In this process, children select silhouettes of family members and communicate their perceptions by using colorful rubber stamps with a booklet of carefully selected statements. The procedure takes about 30 minutes.

The aim was not to produce a “test” but to create a systematic way of eliciting information that can be used as one part of an assessment by clinicians and/or researchers. It was not conceptualized to be used in isolation as a measure of parenting or attachment or to make custody recommendations. In interpreting the significance of the data, it is important to be aware of, and collect data from, other sources about emotional family forces that may distort the perception of the child and/or his or her presentation of their perceptions, such as alignment, estrangement, or alienation.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to develop accurate assessments of children’s feelings and perceptions, in particular those of young children, because the median age of children at the time of their parents’ divorce is only 6-years-old (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Assessment techniques should avoid making these young children feel they are choosing between parents; instead, Ackerman (2006), for example, recommends eliciting information about the children’s experience of parenting and their feelings in general. Smart (2002) points out the importance of really listening carefully to what children actually experience during a separation. A reliable and valid child instrument may help to give children a voice in the custody process, a right they deserve according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). However, information about children’s feelings and perceptions of their families is only one piece of the information needed in making a best interest determination for custody.

Getting information from very young children presents a special challenge in forensic settings because of their cognitive and linguistic limitations, their susceptibility to leading questions, their difficulty maintaining attention, and their desire to please adults (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Walker, 1999; Kovera & McAuliff, 1999; Kuehne, Greenberg, & Gottlieb, 2004). Such problems in obtaining reliable and valid information from children may result in the undervaluing of information from children in custody evaluations (Kuehne et al., 2004).

Empirically researched psychological tests may improve the validity and admissibility of information in custody evaluations (Gould & Stahl, 2000; Bricklin, 1999; Galatzer-Levy & Ostrov, 1999). The accuracy of children’s reporting can be improved by using an assessment instrument that uses age-appropriate language and an engaging format that holds a child’s attention. An assessment instrument can also gather a great deal of systematic information in a short period of time. Such information can supplement interview data and parent-child observations. Self-report measures, empirically tested and supported by an underlying theory, are more likely to meet the criteria for admissibility in court than are projective techniques that rely on inference (Gould & Stahl, 2000). Further, in many court systems in the United States, there has been a push to have shorter, less expensive custody evaluation procedures, often involving less than a day of interview time with the family (Gray & Ogulnick, 2002; Greenberg, Martindale,

Gould, & Gould-Saltman, 2004), which increases the importance of having brief and valid assessment techniques for children.

Despite the fact that a child's family relationships are usually the most central issue in custody disputes, the limited research on custody evaluation procedures shows that there are very few assessment instruments used to elicit children's feelings and perceptions of the family. The most commonly administered psychological tests for children in custody evaluations are intellectual tests such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children and projective personality tests such as the Rorschach (Ackerman, 1999). While children's adjustment and psychological functioning is an important part of a custody evaluation, intellectual and personality tests are not likely to provide information that is directly pertinent to custody decisions.

What information that is relevant to custody can be obtained from children? We believe that children can provide useful information about their parents and other important family members in terms of their experience of the quality of parenting and family relationships, both positive and negative.

Much has been written about the importance of maintaining children's attachments after parental separation (Kraus, 1999; Kelly & Lamb, 2000). Nevertheless, professional guidelines for custody evaluations do not mention attachments. Perhaps the authors of these guidelines wanted to avoid the theoretical quagmire involved in defining the term "attachment." However, most divorce professionals would agree that it is important to consider children's subjective feelings about their parents and other family members as well as their experience of the care they receive, even if these expressed feelings and perceptions are distorted due to alignment, estrangement, or alienation issues. The 1994 American Psychological Association (APA) Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce did not mention the concept of attachment but did discuss an assessment of the child's "wishes" where appropriate (APA, 1994). The 2009 APA Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings direct psychologists to weigh and incorporate overlapping factors as family dynamics and interactions and focus upon skills, deficits, values, and tendencies relevant to parenting attributes and a child's psychological needs (APA, 2009). The 2006 Association of Family and Conciliation Court Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation directs evaluators to assess the relationships between each child and those adults residing with the child (or functioning in caretaking capacities) and between the child and his or her siblings. The child's stated wishes should also be considered 'if the child is of sufficient maturity' (AFCC, 2006). Finally, the child's preference is commonly one of the best interest criteria in many jurisdictions.

Thus, although custody evaluators are directed to consider children's family relationships, there is little guidance about how to conceptualize the attributes of those relationships or how to assess them. The current research

investigated a new interactive assessment instrument to assess children's feelings of emotional security, their views on the parenting they receive, and their views on their parents' negative behavior that may have an adverse impact on them. The development of an instrument that could be used with younger children was of particular concern.

### INSTRUMENTS CURRENTLY USED TO ASSESS CHILDREN'S FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS IN CUSTODY EVALUATIONS

There has been very limited original research done on custody evaluations, in general, and on the development of instruments to be used with children in custody evaluations, in particular. Ackerman and Ackerman (1997) and Bow and Quinnel (2001; Quinnel & Bow, 2001) reported from national surveys of child custody evaluators that the most commonly used psychological tests for children that may give some indication of a child's feelings and perceptions are the Bricklin Perceptual Scales (BPS), given by about 30% of evaluators, and the Bricklin Perception of Relationships Test (PORT) given by about 20% of evaluators.

These two assessment techniques have some innovative features but suffer from a variety of problems. The BPS (Bricklin, 1992; 1999) uses children's ratings of each parent on 32 questions about each parent. The child responds non-verbally by punching a hole through a line on a piece of paper to indicate his or her preference, which is an innovation. However, because of the linguistic and cognitive demands of the BPS, it is difficult to use with children younger than six. A further problem is that the data items are not organized into scales.

The PORT (a projective test) (Bricklin, 1992; 1999; 2004), which can be used with children under six, relies heavily on an intricate scoring system of children's drawings with dubious validity. A limitation of both the BPS and the PORT is that they produce scores regarding the child's purported "Parent of Choice" only. There are no sub-scales. There are no measures of internal consistency. There is no information about any other family members. Further, most of the validity research cited is contaminated. In most of the studies, the categorization of the "Parent of Choice" by the custody evaluator, based at least partly on the basis of the scores on the instruments, was correlated with the judges' categorization of the preferred parent where sole physical custody is the presumed outcome. Thus, the research was contaminated because the instrument was itself used as part of the process for categorizing the "preferred" parent, which, in turn, the judges used to make their "finding." In conclusion, the Bricklin measures lack internal consistency data (reliability) and validity data.

The only other instrument used with any frequency to assess children's attachments in custody evaluations is The Bene Anthony Family

Relationships Test (Anthony & Bene, 1957), developed at the Tavistock Institute in England in the 1950s. The Bene-Anthony has been widely used in research on children's attachments in a variety of settings and applications (Parkin, 2001). It has the advantages of easily engaging young children, providing complex information about children's positive and negative feelings and security-seeking responses, and allowing for the investigation of relationships with multiple family members. Unfortunately, there are still problems with standardized scoring and administration, the wording of questions, and use with non-white ethnic groups (Parkin, 2001). Further, it has not been normed with a custody evaluation population.

### KEY DIMENSIONS FOR A CHILD MEASURE IN DIVORCE SETTINGS

We propose that there are four main areas where children can provide useful information for child custody evaluations: their feelings of emotional security; and their experience of positive parenting, negative parenting, and co-parenting. Our selection of these four areas emerged from both a systematic review of the literature on children's perceptions of parenting and co-parenting and the attachment literature. Because of the dearth of research on children's instruments that could possibly be used or adapted for use in custody evaluations, the relevant literature spans decades.

#### Emotional Security Dimension

Attachment in pre-school children's relationships has been researched using primarily observational measures of parent-child interaction, with a focus on Ainsworth's categorization of attachments as secure, avoidant, anxious, or disorganized (Waters & Deane, 1985; Ainsworth, 1991; Crittenden, 1992; Teti & Gelfand, 1997; Oppenheim, 1997). There have been many studies of the relationship between attachment measured in preschoolers and later adaptation and adjustment in childhood, adolescence, and later years (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). The predictive ability of these studies has been mixed, but the most parsimonious conclusion is that measures of attachment of children aged one to three have some predictive ability to later behavior, while other variables, such as later experiences and economic circumstances, may be equally or even more important (Ludolph, 2009; Thompson, 2008; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008).

A further problem is that, in comparison with studies of pre-school children, there is a dearth of studies and instruments for assessing attachment in school-age children. This further limits the generalizability of the predictive attachment research.

In terms of instrumentation, Calloway and Erard (2009) say, "thus far, at least, there is no generally accepted royal road for measuring or classifying

attachment across a wide range of ages and settings” (p. 5). Kerns, Schlegelmilch, Morgan, & Abraham (2005) review what measures exist for 8–12-year-olds, including structured interviews about primary attachment figures, projective tests of attachment, and some promising scales such as the Security scale which was used with 9- and 12-year-old-children (Kerns, Aspelmeier, Gentzler, & Grabill, 2001). However, these tools remain untested and, therefore, not normed in a divorced population.

There is a lot of controversy about how to measure attachment in school-age children. Some of this controversy springs from the difficulty of extrapolating from a concept that was essentially developed from observations of infant behavior to a parallel concept based on the behavior of elementary- and middle-school children who have a very different sense of security (see e.g., Kerns, 2008; Ludolph, 2009). Yet, others suggest that a strict test of the validity of an instrument include not only that the measure predicts other theoretically important variables (convergent validity) but, also, that the measure is not related to theoretically unrelated measures (discriminant validity) (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Solomon & George, 2008).

Instead of measuring “attachment,” per se, our approach here is to measure children’s perceptions of their emotional security with different adults. This is based on the use of a social psychological perspective to measure close relationships, the aim being to capture the internalized representation of concepts (i.e., only one side of the relationship). This decision echoes Bowlby’s concept of children having “internal working models” (Bowlby, 1982).

Our measure of emotional security taps three sub-dimensions culled from the literature: 1) the child’s seeking a particular person for security in anxiety-provoking situations; 2) the child’s seeking physical and emotional closeness with a person who is responsible and available; and 3) the child’s seeking a person who provides emotional comfort, support, and a feeling of responsiveness (‘a holding environment’). This mirrors the factors identified by Bowlby (1982) as three components of attachment in middle childhood. It also resonates with what Bowlby wrote in what was probably his last piece of writing (Bowlby, 1991): “An urge to keep proximity or accessibility to someone seen as stronger or wiser, and who if responsive is deeply loved, comes to be recognized as an integral part of human nature and as having a vital role to play in life” (p. 293).

### Positive Parenting Dimensions

Positive Parenting, the functional ability of each parent to meet the needs of the child, is one of the areas that should be assessed in a custody evaluation according to the APA and AFCC Guidelines (APA, 1994; 2009; AFCC, 2006). We conducted a literature review of the academic research on children’s reporting on family behavior. While there is a literature on parent’s



perceptions of family behavior, the literature on children's perceptions is surprisingly sparse. However, this research on non-clinical populations has shown that children can make reliable and valid reports about the way their parents interact with them, including how they take care of their day-to-day needs, set limits, and respond to their emotional needs (Schaefer, 1965; Siegelman, 1965; Hazzard, Christensen, & Margolin, 1983). We used our own experience in interviewing children of divorce and separation as well as our review of items from our literature review to write items. We condensed them into sets focusing on the key dimensions of practical caretaking, fostering the child's development, setting clear limits, and expectations and positive reinforcement.

### Negative Parenting Dimensions

Parents' negative behavior, such as anger and aggression (toward the child or in the child's presence), parental depression, drug and alcohol abuse, inattentiveness or neglect, and inappropriate physical contact with the child, are often concerns investigated in custody disputes. The same challenges to interviewing children when there are allegations of child abuse apply when investigating other parent problems in child custody disputes (Kuehnle et al., 2004). There is considerable concern about relying solely on children to provide information about parental behavior in high conflict divorcing families, and the APA Guidelines recommend collateral interviews (Gould & Stahl, 2000). Nevertheless, children's subjective views of a parent are important information to weigh in a custody dispute.

Again, we used our own experience as custody evaluators as well as our review of the literature to develop items. We bundled them into two categories: negative parenting, in general; and, what we called "red flags": items that might signal areas of concern for further questioning.

### Co-Parenting

Considering the body of research that has shown the negative impact of exposure to conflict on children (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989; Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) and the resulting emphasis that courts have placed on reducing inter-parental conflict and improving the quality of co-parenting, there is a surprising dearth of instruments for assessing children's perceptions of both the positive and negative aspects of co-parenting.

For example, two studies assessed children's feelings in middle school and high-school aged children. Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) developed a scale to measure the extent to which older children, including adolescents, felt "caught in the middle." This was a 7-item scale. Children

aged between 10 and 18 were asked in an interview to rate each item on a 4-point scale. The study found only moderate inter-item reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.64$ ) and predicted depression in the adolescents somewhat (correlation = 0.40).

Grych, Seid, and Fincham (1992) developed the Children's Perception of Interpersonal Conflict Scale. This was a 51-item scale. Children aged 10–12 were asked to complete a paper and pencil questionnaire and rate each item on a 3-point scale. The study found three factors (conflict properties, threat, and self-blame) with reasonably good reliability (all alphas above 0.78) and found significant correlations between the Conflict Properties factors and teacher and peer reported externalizing problems and with child reports of internalizing problems.

The strengths of these approaches are the rigor of the methodology, including the measurement of reliability and validity. However, the weakness of these approaches is that they do not work well with young children. Their samples were with  $N = 10$ , 18 year-olds and  $N = 10$ , 12 year-olds, respectively, and required the children to respond on a 3- or 4-point scale, in one case using a paper and pencil test. Young children of, say, 4–8, cannot do this. Our approach was to use a simpler categorical approach.

Following Buchanan et al. (1991), we aimed to measure two dimensions of co-parenting: the extent to which a parent supports the relationship with the other parent and the extent to which a parent undermines the relationship with the other parent. Our experience is that these two dimensions are usually, but not always, inversely correlated.

In conclusion, custody evaluators and others are in need of a better way to measure children's perceptions of family relationships in custody disputes. The question is whether children can reliably report their feelings and experience. We believe they can.

## RESEARCH GOALS AND DESIGN

Research on the use of assessment instruments in custody evaluations is hampered by the ethical and practical considerations of working within a forensic setting. The research design must not interfere with the primary requirement of providing the necessary information to the court. In this study, the administration of the Structured Child Assessment of Relationships in Families (SCARF) was included as part of the regular evaluation procedure as well as being part of the information provided to the court. Thus, the family did not have to go through any additional procedures to be part of the research. Both parents gave permission and signed consent forms for the validity study. The evaluators stressed that use of the data for research purposes was totally voluntary and the participants' consent or lack of consent would have no bearing on the evaluation.

The research had two goals: The first being to develop a theoretically-based child self-report instrument that used a developmentally-appropriate procedure that was reliable and valid. Establishing the internal consistency of the sub-scales of the instrument would show that young children can give consistently similar answers to similar questions about their family. We hypothesized that children's responses on the 64 items would result in reliable (i.e., internally consistent) measures of the 12 sub-scales and of the global scales. The second goal was to collect construct validity data by correlating children's responses on the instrument with evaluator ratings based on a wide range of data, including observational data and collateral informant data.

Data was obtained from children, aged mainly 4 to 12 years old (with a few older children), during comprehensive custody evaluations with two experienced private practice custody evaluators.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRUCTURED CHILD ASSESSMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS IN FAMILIES

### Item Development

Sixty-four items were developed from a review of the literature, a careful examination of items used in previous instruments, and a pilot study for usability with children undergoing custody evaluations. The number of questions was limited to the time available to keep a four-year-old engaged with the task, which we found to be 20 to 30 minutes. Questions were developed for the four major theoretical constructs with 12 total sub-categories (examples of items are shown):

### Emotional Security

*Security*, 5-items ("Who do you want to be with when you get scared at night?"); *Closeness*, 5-items ("Who do you like to hug or cuddle?"); *Emotional Support*, 5-items ("Who really understands you?").

### Positive Parenting

*Practical Caretaking*, 5-items ("Who buys you clothes and shoes?"); *Fostering Child's Development*, 5-items ("Who helps you do things with friends?"); *Rules and Expectations*, 5-items ("Who makes you eat food that is good for you?"); *Limit Setting*, 3-items ("Who tells you to stop when you do something you shouldn't?"); *Positive Reinforcement*, 3-items ("Who gives you a treat or something special when you are good?").

## Negative Parenting

*Negative Behavior Toward Child*, 7-items (“Is there anyone who makes you cry?”); *Red Flags*, 9-items (“Is there anyone who touches you in a way you don’t like?”).

## Co-Parenting

*Support of Other Parent*, 3-items (“This person helps me to talk to Daddy [Mommy] on the phone”); *Undermining of Other Parent*, 3-items (“This person says bad things about Daddy [Mommy]”).

## Development of an Interactive Procedure That Engages Children

Piloting of the format with 20 children in custody evaluations showed that children as young as four could respond to questions about family members when we used the following procedures. The child selects, from an assortment of silhouettes on cards, the drawings that look most like his or her family members in both homes (the silhouettes include profiles of a variety of ethnic groups). The family members can include parents, siblings, and other household members, including grandparents, nannies, and stepfamily members. The purpose of the silhouettes is to have a graphic representation of each family member that will act as a prompt for the children’s responses. The assessor lines up the selected drawings, which represents family members, in front of a booklet containing one question item per page. A drawing of a trashcan is added to the line up of drawings. At the top of each page are boxes that line up with the silhouettes. The assessor reads each question out loud and asks the child to answer the question on each page of the booklet by stamping a square on the page in front of every person the child chooses. If there is no one in the family the child wants to stamp, the child can stamp the box in front of the trashcan. The trashcan is included so that young children have an option to stamp something on each page (Children love to stamp!). This diminishes the possibility of false positives (because children want to stamp something!).

## INTERNAL CONSISTENCY RELIABILITY STUDY

### Sample

The sample for the internal-consistency reliability study was larger than for the validity study. This sample consisted of 131 children—69 girls and 62 boys—from 91 families in Los Angeles County all undergoing a private custody evaluation in a contested divorce. The mean age of the children was 8.2 years with a range of 4 to 17 years. The ethnicity of the children was

77% Caucasian, 8% African-American, 7% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 0% Native-American.

### Children's Scores

The children's scores on the 12 sub-scales for each family member were produced by adding together the number of times the child stamped a box in front of the illustrated figure for each of the items pertaining to the theoretical construct. For example, a child's scale score for Mother's *Practical Caretaking* could be 0–5, depending on how many times the child stamped Mother's box for the five possible items associated with that construct.

### Results of Internal-Consistency Reliability Analyses for Children's Scores

The data for the children's scores on the 3 global scales and the 12 sub-scales are shown in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha was computed combining children's scores for mother and father (see Table 1). The internal-consistency reliability coefficients for most of the scales were high, showing that it was possible to

**TABLE 1** Reliability of Children's Scores by Scale and Age

Scale	# of Items	Reliability <sup>a,b</sup>
Emotional Security		
Security	5	.87
Closeness	5	.82
Emotional Support	5	.82
Total Emotional Security	15	.94
Positive Parenting		
Practical Caretaking	5	.73
Fostering Development	5	.68
Expectations & Rules	5	.81
Limit Setting	3	.68
Positive Reinforcement	3	.74
Total Positive Parenting	21	.94
Negative Parenting		
Negative Behavior	7	.65
Red Flag Behavior	9	.66
Total Negative Parenting	16	.78
Co-Parenting		
Father's undermining	3	.62
Mother's undermining	3	.45
Father's support	3	.57
Mother's support	3	.63
Age		
Ages 4, 5, and 6	62	.92
Age 7 and over	198	.85

Notes: <sup>a</sup>This is the internal-consistency reliability; <sup>b</sup>Cronbach's alpha with n = 262, except co-parenting where n = 131.

use this procedure to obtain consistent responses from children. The reliability for *Emotional Security* was .94, for *Positive Parenting* was .89, for *Negative Parenting* was .83, and the average of the *Co-Parenting* sub-scales was .57. Lower reliabilities were associated with lower standard deviations, reflecting truncated ranges.

### Age and Reliability

Secondary analyses were conducted to see if the reliability was affected by age: it was not: we calculated the overall internal-consistency reliability across all items for the 4-, 5-, and 6-year-olds and found it to be .92 (Cronbach's alpha,  $n=62$ ); the parallel measure for ages seven and up was .85 (Cronbach's alpha,  $n=198$ ). This suggests that this procedure produces responses from children as young as 4–6 that are internally consistent.

## VALIDITY STUDY

### Sample

The sample for the validity study was a sub-sample of the sample for the internal-consistency reliability study. This sample consisted of 40 children—23 girls and 17 boys—from 31 families in Los Angeles County all undergoing a private custody evaluation by one of two evaluators conducting independent custody evaluations (see Table 2).

The mean age of the children was 7.8 years with a range of 4 to 12 years. The ethnicity of the children was 70% Caucasian, 19% African-American, 7% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 0% Native-American. The mean custody time was 70% with mothers and 30% with fathers. Physical custody patterns were: 61% with mother having primary custody and father having overnight visits; 8% with father having primary custody and mother having overnight visits; 23% relatively evenly split custody time with mother and father; and 8% one parent having very limited visits. There were requests to the court for a parent to relocate with the children in 33% of the cases.

**TABLE 2** Characteristics of Validity Sample

	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
Mean custody time	70	30
Drug problem	18	10
Anger problem	27	40
Negligent or abusive parenting	18	8
Major psychiatric problem	15	8
Alienating behavior by parent	30	20
Child alienated from parent	15	23
Potential relocation	33	10

## Evaluator Ratings

Parents signed informed consent for the data from the custody evaluation and their children's responses to the child assessment instrument to be used for a reliability and validity study. The evaluators stressed that use of the data for research purposes was totally voluntary and the participants' consent or lack of consent would have no bearing on the evaluation. Because the study took place in the context of court-ordered custody evaluations, there were no modifications of the evaluators' usual procedures for performing evaluations.

Evaluators obtained information about the child's relationships with parents, positive parenting, negative parent behavior, and co-parenting by using their standard procedures in a comprehensive custody evaluation: multiple individual interviews with parents, multiple interaction sessions with each parent and the children, multiple interviews with each child, a joint interview with the parents, collateral interviews, psychological testing, drug testing in some cases, home visits usually with small children, and a review of ancillary materials such as police reports, psychiatric records, children's report cards, and so forth. The evaluators did not ask the same questions in the children's interviews that were asked in the SCARF: some similar areas (e.g., discipline) were explored with the children; those and other areas were explored with parent and other reporters. The interviews totaled around eighteen hours per family.

Another mental health professional, blind to information collected by the evaluator, administered the SCARF to each child on his or her own, usually on the first day of the evaluation when both parents were present.

Evaluators remained blind to the results of the child assessment instrument until they rated each parent on the constructs being researched. Each evaluator made ratings based on all the information they had available from their standard evaluation which included the evaluators' direct interviews, observations of the children in interaction with the parents and collateral data from teachers, psychotherapists, and friends and family members. The evaluator rated each parent from 1 to 7 on all ten sub-constructs described previously for Emotional Security, Positive Parenting, and Co-Parenting as well as a global rating for Negative Parenting. On each scale, a rating of one indicated that there was very little information from the evaluation to support that construct and a rating of 7 indicated that there was a very large amount of information from the evaluation to support that construct. For example, a rating of seven for the father's *Fostering Child's Development* meant that the evaluator had information from several sources that the father did many more things than most parents to enrich the child's life such as facilitating recreational and extracurricular activities, encouraging peer relationships, helping with school projects, and so forth; and a rating of 1 meant that the father was not at all involved in those aspects of his child's life.

## Results of Validity Analyses

Table 3 shows the correlations between Children's Scores on the SCARF and the Evaluator Ratings on the constructs being researched. Correlations are presented for mothers and fathers combined and separate. Overall, there were highly significant correlations for the main constructs of Emotional Security, Total Positive Parenting, and Total Negative Parenting. For the subscales, there were significant correlations for 7 of the 10 subscales. Correlations tended to be higher for fathers than for mothers, attributable to greater variance in both the Children's Scores and Evaluator Ratings for fathers on most scales (see Table 4). There were no significant correlations for the subscales of Co-Parenting.

In terms of Emotional Security, there were significant correlations between Children's Scores and Evaluator Ratings for the *Emotional Security* global scale and the sub-scales, *Security*, *Emotional Closeness*, and *Emotional Support* overall and separately for both mothers and fathers, the only exception being for mother's *Emotional Support*.

In terms of Positive Parenting, there were significant correlations between Children's Scores and Evaluator Ratings for the *Positive Parenting* global scale and 4 of the 5 sub-scales, *Practical Caretaking*, *Fostering Development*, *Expectations and Rules*, and *Positive Reinforcement*. The exception

**TABLE 3** Correlations Between Evaluator Ratings and Children's Scores on Parenting

	Parents	Mothers	Fathers
Sample size	80	40	40
Emotional Security			
Security	.63**	.49**	.71**
Closeness	.55**	.39*	.66**
Emotional Support	.27*	.15	.45**
Total Emotional Security	.58**	.42**	.69**
Positive Parenting			
Practical Caretaking	.54**	.37*	.54**
Fostering Development	.30**	.26	.35*
Expectations & Rules	.23*	.24	.35*
Limit Setting	.08	.15	.03
Positive Reinforcement	.27*	.35*	.24
Total Positive Parenting	.35**	.36*	.38*
Negative Parenting			
Negative behavior <sup>a</sup>	.42**	.58**	.25
Red flag behavior <sup>a</sup>	.33**	.26	.37*
Total Negative Parenting	.43**	.29	.35*
Co-Parenting			
Support of other parent	.16	.13	.24
Undermining of other parent	.00	-.03	.06

Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; <sup>a</sup>Correlations for negative parenting dimensions are with the evaluator rating of overall negative parenting.



**TABLE 4** Children's Scores on Parenting for Mothers and Fathers

Scale	Mothers Mean (SD)	Fathers Mean (SD)	Test of difference t (78) <sup>a</sup>	Test with % custody removed F(1,77) <sup>b</sup>
Emotional Security				
Security	3.90 (1.46)	3.33 (1.96)	1.49	0.87
Closeness	3.90 (1.48)	3.35 (1.79)	1.50	4.30*
Emotional Support	4.10 (1.30)	3.43 (1.96)	1.82	1.00
Total Emotional Security	11.90 (3.78)	10.10 (5.43)	2.01	1.47
Positive Parenting				
Practical Caretaking	4.15 (1.08)	3.20 (1.70)	2.99**	2.75
Fostering Development	3.80 (1.14)	3.23 (1.76)	1.75	1.50
Expectations & Rules	4.25 (1.10)	3.22 (1.92)	2.93**	4.51*
Limit Setting	1.98 (1.10)	1.65 (1.12)	1.31	0.84
Positive Reinforcement	2.58 (0.84)	2.30 (1.04)	1.40	1.97
Total Positive Parenting	16.75 (4.08)	13.60 (6.48)	3.27	3.44*
Negative Parenting				
Negative Behavior	1.35 (1.62)	1.40 (1.50)	-0.14	0.08
Red Flag Behavior	1.00 (1.38)	1.55 (1.81)	-1.53	1.95
Total Negative Parenting	2.35 (2.62)	2.95 (2.98)	-0.99	0.05
Co-Parenting				
Support of Other Parent	1.45 (1.13)	1.23 (1.03)	0.93	0.49
Undermining of Other Parent	.52 (0.85)	0.60 (0.90)	-0.38	0.33

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Independent t-test, d.f. = 78; <sup>b</sup>Analysis of covariance with d.f. = (1,77) \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01.

was *Limit-Setting*. Inspection of the data suggested that this was due to the low levels of *Limit-Setting* in this sample, which is consistent with our clinical experience with divorcing families. Three of the 5 correlations for fathers' sub-scale scores and 2 of the 5 for mothers' sub-scale scores were significant.

In terms of Negative Parenting, there were significant correlations between Children's Scores and Evaluator Ratings for the *Negative Parenting* global scale and both sub-scales, *Negative Behavior* and *Red Flags*. There were significant correlations for both mothers and fathers on the global scales and the sub-scales.

In terms of Co-Parenting, there were no significant correlations between Children's Scores and Evaluator Ratings for either sub-scale, *Support* or *Undermining of Relationship with the Other Parent*.

### Comparing Children's Scores of Mothers and Fathers

The means and standard deviations of the children's scores for mother and fathers are shown in Table 4.

Children's scores did not differ significantly for mothers and fathers on most scales and subscales. However, children's scores for mothers were significantly higher than for fathers on the subscales of *Practical Caretaking* and *Expectations & Rules*. While this at first suggests a gender effect, this

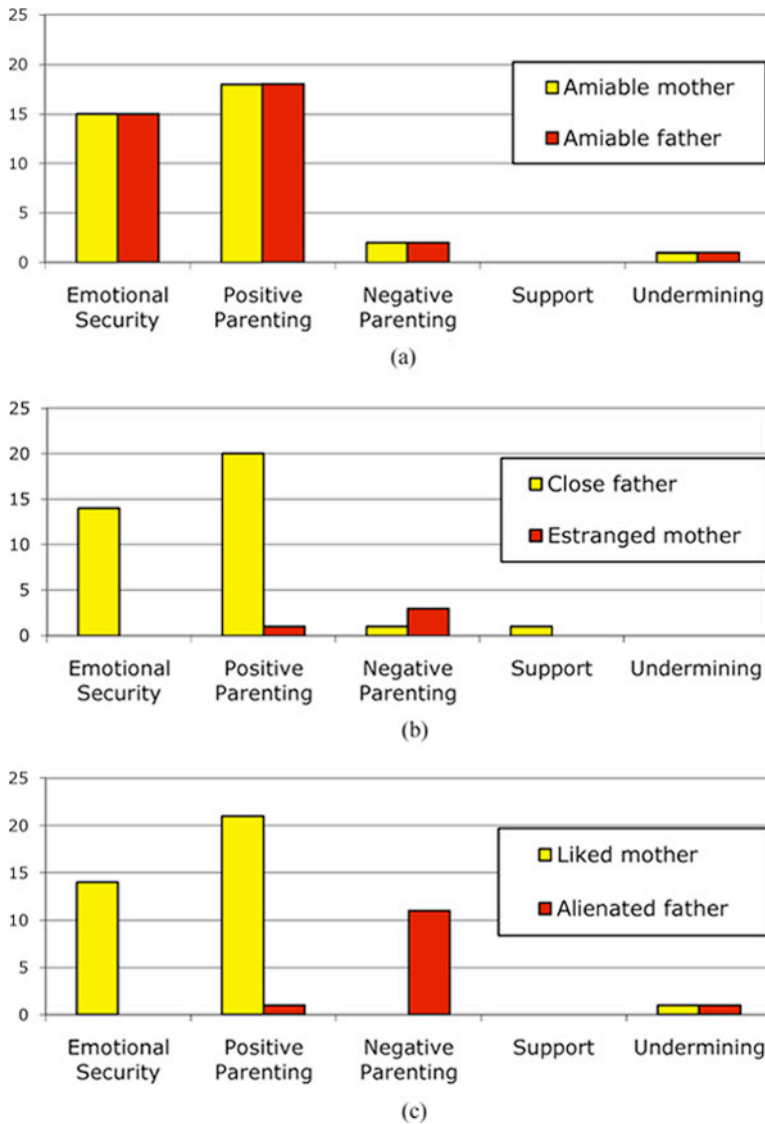
finding is confounded because mothers in this sample spend a greater percentage of time with the children (70%) than fathers (30%). It could be expected that some of the children's scores for parenting would be higher for the parent with whom they lived more of the time. To investigate this, analyses of covariance were conducted (see Table 4). These showed that, when the amount of custody time was factored out, the difference in *Practical Caretaking* was no longer significant. On the other hand, the difference on the sub-scale of *Expectations and Rules* remained significant. Further, the scores on *Closeness* and *Total Positive Parenting* became significant. These findings suggest that some of the differences between mother and fathers can be attributed to a gender effect (or a primary parent effect) and some to the effect of custody time.

### PATTERNS OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

We have found this approach to be useful in revealing a pattern of responses in various kinds of families. To illustrate, we show the responses from three typical cases: one from a family with amiable co-parents facing a relocation; one from a family in which the child is estranged from a mother who has real psychological problems; and one in which the child is alienated from a father because of strong emotional pressure from the mother.

Figure 1a shows the pattern of responses from "Sandra," a 10-year-old girl, in which the mother wanted to relocate across the country. Sandra scored both parents as high on the emotional security dimension, high on positive parenting, and endorsed only a few negative comments about the parenting provided by each parent (which we conceptualize as normal ambivalence). Incidentally, the maternal grandfather and the stepmother had medium scores on Emotional Security and Positive Parenting and low scores on Negative Parenting, showing a benign family atmosphere on both sides of the family.

Figure 1b shows the pattern of responses from an 8-year-old boy, Carlos, who is estranged from his mother and who was referred for "reunification therapy." The mother has been uninvolved with him and has many psychological problems, including delusions and hallucinations. Carlos scored his "estranged mother" as providing no emotional security, very low positive parenting (he acknowledged that she had come to some school performances), high negative parenting (he endorsed her teasing him, not keeping promises and making him angry), and scored her co-parenting as showing low support and low undermining. In contrast, the pattern of scores given to the "close father" showed high emotional security, high positive parenting, low negative parenting (again, non-zero scores on this scale suggest normal ambivalence), some support, and no undermining of the other parent.



**FIGURE 1** (a) Typical pattern with amiable co-parents; (b) typical pattern of estranged child; (c) typical pattern of alienated child.

Finally, Figure 1c shows the pattern of responses from Anna, a 13-year-old girl, who is alienated from her father. The pattern is more skewed than that of the aforementioned estranged child shown. Thus, the “Liked parent” (the mother) gets very high scores on emotional security and positive parenting and no scores on negative parenting; the “Alienated parent” (the father) gets 0 scores on emotional security and a score of only 1 on positive parenting (she acknowledged that he bought her clothes and shoes), and

very high scores on negative parenting. Incidentally, her scores on the “undermining dimension” were revealing. While she endorsed her father for “This person doesn’t like me to be with mommy,” which is to be expected, she also endorsed her mother for “This person asks too many questions when I am with daddy” (this was her only negative endorsement of her mother).

Of course, it is important not to draw conclusions about the pattern of relationships in the family solely from this instrument. It is important to obtain information about the accuracy of children’s from other sources of data. Nevertheless, this method provides a quick method for obtaining a snapshot of what a child wants to say.

## DISCUSSION

Calls for listening to the voice of the child in parental separation and divorce have intensified following the adoption of both the best-interests-of-the child standard and the UN children’s rights charter. Despite this clamor, there has been a paucity of methods for systematically assessing children’s voices especially in the crucial area of their perceptions of family relationships.

We reviewed existing methods for assessing children’s perceptions in custody disputes and found them wanting. We also reviewed existing methods of assessing school-age children’s perceptions of attachment, parenting and co-parenting. This is the first report of a new instrument for assessing children’s perceptions of a variety of family figures in families experiencing parental separation and divorce. The instrument includes measures of positive and negative parenting and co-parenting, as well as perceptions of emotional security, using items culled from previous family and social psychological research.

This instrument does not assess attachment as an interactive process, nor does it provide the classifications of attachment often used by clinicians and researchers. It assesses children’s subjective feelings and experience. Most clinicians are familiar with assessing attachment from the observation of young children in interaction with their parents in stressful situations. There is limited research extrapolating this concept to elementary-age children. However, Bowlby (1982), the attachment theorist, and social psychological researchers on close relationships (Weiss, 1991) converge in emphasizing that children’s perceptions of emotional security, closeness, and responsiveness are suitable measures of attachment in children who can verbalize.

The question is, can these dimensions be assessed systematically by young children’s self-reports? Our preliminary results suggest that children as young as 4-, 5-, and 6-years old were able to give consistent and meaningful responses to the SCARF about their feelings of emotional security with

family members, and their perceptions of the parenting they received, both positive and negative. Using age-appropriate procedures that involved non-verbal responses, children can reliably report on their experiences of their family. The courts, parents, and evaluators depend on methods for assessing family relationships and children's perceptions that are consistent (reliable) and meaningful (valid) so that they have confidence in the stability and meaning of the scores. The results showed strong internal-consistency reliability for the major dimensions of Emotional Security, Positive Parenting, and Negative Parenting, and most of the sub-scales, even though the scales had only 5 items and some only 3. This suggests that our careful work selecting and polishing the items was productive. We failed to show acceptable levels of internal-consistency reliability and validity for the co-parenting dimensions: part of the difficulty is that there were only 3 items in each sub-scale; another difficulty is that co-parenting behaviors are infrequent, varied, and subtle and therefore hard to capture.

We conducted an initial validity study in which we examined the question of whether evaluators who were blind to the results of the SCARF assessment would rate the dimensions of interest similarly to the scores from the children's assessment of their parents. The evaluators used information commonly available to custody evaluators, including interviews with family members and other observers, access to court documents, and the results of any psychological assessments. They did not ask the same questions to the children as were covered in the SCARF but may have covered some of the same areas.

We found highly significant correlations between the children's scores and the ratings of the blind evaluators on the major dimensions of positive parenting, emotional security, and negative parenting. We also found significant correlations on many of the sub-dimensions of these dimensions such as closeness, security, practical caretaking, and positive reinforcement. We did not, however, find significant correlations on the coparenting dimensions. We believe this provides preliminary support for the construct validity of the child measures. It should be emphasized that this is only a first step in establishing such validity. Unfortunately, because of the relatively small sample size, we were unable to conduct multivariate analyses, such as factor analyses, to establish the independence of the dimensions.

The study showed few differences between children's perceptions of mother and fathers: these few differences were not surprising. As Kyle Pruett says: Fathers do not mother (Pruett & Pruett, 2009). It should be noted that, when the percentage of custody time was factored out, some of the differences disappeared, suggesting that at least some of the gender differences could be due to differences in custodial time rather than the gender of the parent, per se. Further research with a larger sample could tease out the relative influence of gender, primary parent status, and custodial time.

The significance of this technique is that it goes beyond children's isolated interview statements by pulling together a large array of data about the child's perceptions. In a typical administration about, say, eight family members, the child provides over 400 data points in about 30 minutes that are collapsed into sub-scales for each family member. These data may suggest important patterns such as attachment, alienation, and estrangement, not only for two parents but also for other family members, such as stepparents, grandparents, and siblings. These other family members may be as significant to the child as the biological parents and may be the subject of investigations in a custody evaluation.

We recommend great care in extrapolating data from individual scores. In line with Solomon and George (2008) and Calloway and Erard (2009), we recommend carefully distinguishing between attachment, dependency, and positive parenting. The concept of attachment is subtle, in that it involves not only "proximity-seeking" and "separation protest" but also the "secure base parent effect" (Weiss, 1991). Thus, a high score on "emotional security" without the child having confidence in him- or herself and without confidence as well in a parent who provides authoritative parenting shows dependency, not attachment.

Another concern is that one or both parents may influence children, either directly or indirectly, to present themselves in a certain way. While this is often true, the same can be said of interview data: in both cases, the results need to be tempered by a thorough assessment of such biases.

Further, children think in less complex ways than adults. Typically, elementary-age children tend to evaluate other people and themselves in a simplistic univariate manner and only develop more complex representations of themselves and others as they mature and develop (Strachan & Jones, 1982). Their stage of cognitive development will affect their pattern of reporting observed behaviors. Of course, this is a problem for any similar measure.

There are methodological limits to this study. The evaluator, while blind to the results of the child assessment instrument data, interviewed the child about some areas similar to those assessed by the instrument and observed the child interacting with his or her parents; therefore, the evaluator's awareness of the child's feelings about family members could have affected the independence of his or her ratings of the quality of the parenting. Nevertheless, the evaluator is tasked with considering the totality of the data.

Overall, the strength of this research is that it is one of the first studies reporting data from actual custody evaluations. The results demonstrate the power of this instrument in predicting evaluator ratings from independent children's data. The use of this structured assessment instrument may increase the confidence of evaluators presenting information about children's feelings and views of their family in the highly contentious area of child custody disputes.

Further research needs to be done using this instrument. The types of multivariate analyses needed to confirm the findings from this preliminary study will require a much larger sample size. It would be useful to examine the response patterns of children at different cognitive stages. Also, useful would be studies with married parents of pre-school and elementary-age school children, test-retest reliability studies and cross-validation using other attachment and parenting measures such as the Bene Anthony Family Relations Test, attachment figure interviews, security scales, and co-parenting instruments, as well as the various self-report measures of parenting available in the literature. The measurement of co-parenting needs to be refined and improved. Future research could continue to make valuable contributions to divorcing families embroiled in the family court system.

It is important to re-emphasize that decisions about child custody arrangements should not be determined only by information from a self-report child assessment any more than they should be only from young children's stated wishes (Warshak, 2003). Nevertheless, such information should be collected and presented in a scientific manner.

This study was an attempt to develop a systematic way of eliciting and providing information from young children in custody evaluations. It is one step towards developing more scientifically-based custody evaluation procedures, an effort that needs much more attention from the professional and research community.

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