



142 Assessment of Parental Skills-Interview (APS-I) in Child Custody: A Research in Legal Separation

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The goal of this presentation is to highlight the importance of the assessment of parental skill that are based on a scientific evidence. In this regard, Camerini, Volpini, and Lopez have established an interview protocol called APS-I for the assessment of parental competence that was used in this research.¹

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by explaining the potential use of a psychological instrument called "Assessment of Parental Skills-Interview (APS-I)" which evaluates parenting ability as well as dysfunctions and suffering in family life..

Psychological and psychiatric professionals are being increasingly commissioned by the courts to assess parenting ability in cases of conflictual separation.² It is well known that within the legal and forensic system, evidence-based practices should be valid and reliable.³ However, it is important that each assessment with psycho-forensic value be characterized by scientific requirements under theoretical, methodological, and procedural profiles.⁴ In this regard, Camerini, Volpini, and Lopez have established an interview protocol called APS-I for the assessment of parental competence.⁵

The general goals of this study are, on the one hand, to contribute to the definition of strengths and limitations of the instrument and, on the other hand, to evaluate the ability of the APS-I to discriminate (in a significantly statistical way) between the levels of global parenting skills, comparing parents with consensual separation against parents with contentious separation. It was hypothesized that parents with contentious separation are less competent, according to literature on conflicts between ex-spouses involving an impasse in the redefinition of functions and parental responsibilities.⁶ These conflicts can involve their children and are an important risk factor to the minor, with the possibility of impacting children's mental health and behaviors.^{7,8}

Fifty-three interviews with separated parents were administered (27 with consensual separation and 26 with contentious separation, with the duration of separation ranging from three months to 15 years); all were parents of minor children (68.7% mothers and 31.3% fathers).

The APS-I is an instrument assessing specific behaviors which define the basic functions related to a concrete parental exercise exploring three main areas: (1) social support and organizational capacity (Scale A); (2) protection (Scale B); and, (3) and warmth and empathy (Scale C). Use of the APS-I presents 24 items to the parent in a conversational manner; the scores for each item are given, through the double-blind method on a Likert scale from 1 (optimum capacity) to 5 (capacity is not exercised). The answers are evaluated according to two criteria: the ability to understand; and narrative and reflective capacity.⁹

The study resulted in the following findings: (1) the APS-I is able to discriminate the levels of parental competence between the two groups, meeting the criteria of specificity and sensitivity; (2) parents with contentious separation were less competent, both in terms of global parental ability ($F(5,1)=4,16$; $p<0.05$) and in the specific area of "protection" ($F(5,1)=7,21$; $p<0.05$); and, (3) socio-demographic variables, including education, income, and being a mother or a father, do not significantly influence parenting capacity. Only in the group of parents with consensual separation did: (1) the variable of "presence of more children" appear to influence the organizational capacity; and, (2) the duration of the separation appear to decrease global parenting skills and the Scale of warmth and empathy.

Consistent with scientific literature, this study demonstrates how conflicts may negatively impact parental capacity and how these parents may be unable to completely fulfill their roles as "protectors" of their children.¹⁰

When confronted with complex and dynamic family situations questioning child custody, it can be important to further study and assess tools such as the APS-I in order to conduct improved interventions in legal (forensic) and also psycho-social areas.¹¹

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