

Exploring Possibilities: 5 Tips for Documenting Alternative Hypotheses

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Identifying and documenting alternative hypotheses are important aspects of working with court-involved families regardless of your role. Whether you are a parenting coordinator, a therapist for an adult or a child, or a family therapist, considering all possible explanations for the behaviors that you are observing within the family system is vital to mitigate bias. Alternative hypotheses are particularly important in parenting plan evaluations.

The exploration of rival hypotheses has been identified through the literature as a basic element in forensic work. The development of alternative hypotheses, as well as the assessment of which hypothesis best fits the data acquired through multiple methods and multiple sources, provides parenting plan evaluators with an effective strategy for debiasing according to Hirt, Kardes, and Markman (2004 and 1995). With this in mind, it appears clear that the literature and best practice validate the importance of alternative hypotheses. However, the practical nature of how to identify and document alternative hypotheses during the evaluative process and within the final report is less clear. Below are a few tips to get you started:

1. **Gather comprehensive background data with an open mind.** Work to avoid initial assumptions, and when you catch yourself making an assumption, make a note to consider alternative hypotheses. In other words, show your work! When an attorney or a work product reviewer reads your evaluation and your file, notations regarding your considerations of alternative hypotheses from the onset of your evaluation provides additional validity to your methodology.
2. **Identify each party's concerns about the other party and begin to consider all the possible explanations for those concerns.** Think outside the box, think critically, and think creatively. Don't simply dismiss one party's stated concern just because it seems absurd on its face. Seek consultation when needed to help ensure that you are thoroughly examining the issues before you. Consultation is a key component of bias mitigation according to Dr. Itiel Dror.
3. **Conduct additional parent-child observations and interviews of the parties, the children, or professional and personal collaterals with your alternative hypotheses in mind.** Add new hypotheses to your list as new possibilities surface. For example, the research suggests that victims of IPV dynamics can appear overly reactive on the surface, while perpetrators can come across as gregarious and even charming. First impressions are not all there is and are not always accurate. Dig deeper. Is it possible that the person who has been victimized in the IPV dynamic is just clamoring to be heard because they

have been repeatedly told no one will believe them? Is it possible that one party is just very good at charming the audience? What is going on beneath the surface? Are there additional possibilities that you have not explored? What is the data telling you?

4. **Collect collateral data that are relevant and available with a focus on verifying AND refuting your alternative hypotheses.** Data from medical providers, mental health providers, educational providers, law enforcement, and child protection agencies often contain significant information that may assist you in verifying or refuting the hypotheses you develop. You may also develop new hypotheses for exploration based upon the data you uncover.
5. **When you summarize your findings in your report, identify the alternative hypotheses you considered and which hypothesis/hypotheses are more likely than not supported by the data.** Dr. Jonathan Gould's work dating back to 2006 denotes how critical it is that our testimony and our opinions are scientifically informed and not based on our personal beliefs and values. In turn, our opinions must show that we have considered plausible, alternative hypotheses. Such transparency only increases our credibility.

Obviously, evaluators maintain discretion in determining how to identify and document alternative hypotheses in both their file and in their final report. However, one thing is clear. Alternative hypotheses cannot be minimized, ignored, or forgotten all together. We are all prone to bias in the work that we do, and alternative hypotheses serve a vital role in ensuring that we remain open-minded to all the possible explanations for the parties or the children's behavior.

Alternative hypotheses encourage us to remain curious, to think critically, and to be diligent and thorough in the data we acquire. We, as parenting plan evaluators, must prioritize the documentation of alternative hypotheses to counteract bias and enhance the validity of our assessments. Our role demands that we remain open to various explanations for the behaviors of the families we serve. The well-being of these families depends on our commitment to thorough, unbiased evaluations.

For more on this important topic, please join [Dr. Victoria Harvey and me at the 16th Symposium on Child Custody in Columbus, Ohio](#), for a deeper dive into alternative hypotheses in Workshop 7 - Riddle Me This: How to Explore and Document Alternative Hypotheses in Parenting Plan Evaluations beginning at 1:45 pm on Friday, November 15, 2024. We look forward to examining practical ways to refine your approach and enhance your evaluative practices.



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