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## **PARENTING COORDINATION INFORMATION FOR COUNSEL AND PARENTS**

### **What is Parenting Coordination?**

Parenting Coordination is a dispute resolution service for high conflict couples. A Parenting Coordinator (PC) is usually a mental health professional, although lawyers and mediators sometimes perform this function. Regardless of profession, the PC must have experience with and knowledge of separation/divorce, high conflict families, child development, conflict resolution skills, family systems, and domestic violence.

### **What do Parenting Coordinator's Do?**

The Parenting Coordinator (PC) has two general functions. One is as a coach/educator/facilitator, who attempts to minimize parental conflict and enhance parallel parenting, cooperation, and mutual respect. This involves helping parents to develop more effective problem solving skills and strategies, to communicate better with each other, and to understand relevant child development principles. Whenever possible, a major goal is to help parents develop better skills so they do not need a Parenting Coordinator. The second function is to assist parents to implement, maintain and comply with their Parenting Plan. If there is a dispute and the parents cannot come to a mutual agreement, either on their own or with the assistance of the Parenting Coordinator, the PC makes final and binding decisions in keeping with the children's best interests for matters that are not designated otherwise in the Parenting Plan. However, the PC does not make binding decisions regarding legal custody, relocation and/or parenting time schedules, other than those of a minor and temporary nature.

### **What types of situations are best suited for Parenting Coordination?**

Parents may want to consider hiring a Parenting Coordinator when other avenues of problem and conflict resolution have been unsuccessful and when disagreements persist. It may be helpful for families where parents remain very angry at each other, and/or where the parents have difficulty sharing child related information in

an effective and child focused manner. Parenting Coordinators may be useful in families where parents have concerns about drugs, alcohol, child abuse, and/or the stability of the other parent. Parenting Coordination may be helpful in resolving interim arrangements and issues for parents who are separated although living temporarily in the same home. Also, the PC may be useful to families with young children when the Parenting Plans include schedules that change incrementally over time. Here, the PC assists the parents to implement the evolving parenting time schedule, making minor adjustments in accordance with the children's best interests.

Many, although not all families, have already participated in a custody/access assessment. All families will have a Parenting Plan. Some of these plans, though, require more specification and clarification, which can be accomplished in Parenting Coordination.

### **What is involved in the referral and intake process?**

The Parenting Coordinator accepts referrals after obtaining preliminary information from the parents and lawyers, if they are also involved. A review of the current Parenting Plan, Court Order and custody/access assessment report, if available, is required. If lawyers are involved, a brief conference call is advised to review the situation and mandate. The parents attend for an information meeting with the Parenting Coordinator during which the Parenting Coordination Retainer Agreement (subsequently referred to as Agreement) is reviewed. The parents and lawyers will be provided with this Agreement prior to the conference call and/or information meeting. A retainer is accepted in advance for this preliminary work.

The parents must consent to participating in Parenting Coordination as well as consent to the specific Parenting Coordinator. It is strongly advised that the parents' consent be formalized into a Court Order. The parents are strongly encouraged to obtain independent legal advice prior to signing the Agreement.

### **What happens during the Parenting Coordination process?**

The PC will have full access to any reports and documentation that may be relevant, as well as to any other professionals, who have been and/or continue to be involved with the family. Meetings with the parents and sometimes the children in various combinations may be regular or on an add needed basis when a problem arises. When a dispute occurs that the parents are unable to resolve on their own, the Parenting Coordinator will attempt to assist them by providing support, education, and facilitation. If the parents cannot come to an agreement, the PC will make a binding decision relying on information from the parents, and where necessary the children and other professionals (e.g., doctors, teachers, therapists, etc.).

Once the parents have agreed to a Parenting Coordinator, they may be “stuck” with that person for the term that is defined in the Agreement and/or Order. Terms typically range from 12 to 24 months. If both parents find that the Parenting Coordinator is unhelpful, they can agree to dismiss the PC. If the Parenting Coordinator comes to the conclusion that he/she cannot be helpful to the family, he/she can resign. However, if only one parent is unhappy with the Parenting Coordinator, that parent cannot dismiss the PC prior to the previously agreed to term.

Fees are paid by the parents in accordance with the Agreement. Typically, Parenting Coordinators request a retainer when they begin their work with a family.