

PARENTING COORDINATION: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is Parenting Coordination?

It is a new alternative dispute resolution process in which a qualified impartial professional assists separated or divorced parents to resolve issues pertaining to their parenting plan and to help them implement their parenting plan. This can include: identifying disputed issues; reducing misunderstandings; clarifying priorities; exploring possibilities for problem solving; developing methods of collaboration in parenting; developing a parenting plan; and aiding parties in complying with the court's order regarding parenting issues. Parenting Coordination helps the parents avoid repeated trips to court over parenting issues.

Q. What is a Parenting Coordinator?

A professional trained in parenting coordination who performs three functions:

- a. Education about communication and co-parenting
- b. Mediation of post-divorce (post decree) parenting issue
- c. Arbitration of minor parenting issues

Q. What are the benefits of Parenting Coordination?

Parenting Coordination offers a much better way of resolving parenting plan issues than returning to court. And the resolution comes much faster than waiting for a court date and then the court decision. The Parenting Coordinator educates the parents about the harm to the children of hostility between parents, mediates issues as they arise, and if the parents are unable to resolve minor issues, makes the decision.

Q: What does Parenting Coordination provide that mediation, therapy, and other services for families do not provide?

Parenting Coordination is a long-term success-oriented process for divorced or separated parents whose relationship continues to be hostile.

It is not:

Therapy to treat an emotional problem or psychological problem.

Mediation or arbitration designed to resolve issues or cases in a short timeframe.

Guardian *ad litem* looking at the parents, their situations, the children, and so forth and making recommendations where the child is to live and who has what legal rights.

A parenting education course although it may include some educational issues regarding children of divorce, child development, divorce research, the impact of parental behavior on children, parenting skills, communication, and conflict resolution skills.

The Parenting Coordinator will work with others involved with the family, including mental health experts, health care personnel, social services, education and legal professionals, as well as extended family, stepparents and the children. The Parenting Coordinator may make recommendations for outside services, such as counseling, that the Parenting Coordinator may determine are needed.

Parenting Coordination is a solution oriented process. It helps parents work together for the good of their children rather than fighting each other. Parenting Coordination provides an opportunity for parents to develop an ability parent their children in a healthy, constructive way rather than perpetuating a conflict that places their children in the parents' war zone.

Q. What are the characteristics of families who could benefit from parenting coordination?

The parents are having frequent disputes about issues such as the parenting schedule, exchange times and locations, extracurricular activities, education choices, and medical decisions. They may have gone back to court several times since the divorce. Some of these families may be called "high conflict" meaning continuing hostility and frequent disputes between the parents.

Q. What are the goals of Parenting Coordination?

The goals of Parenting Coordination include:

- a) Providing an alternative method for parents to communicate about child-related issues;
- b) Taking children out of the middle of parental conflict.
- c) Fostering creative problem solving that involves both parents in the children's lives.

Q. What background and training is required of parenting coordinators?

Parenting coordinators need an advanced degree in law, psychology, social work, or counseling and experience with "high conflict families." They must complete a two-day training in parenting coordination and also mediator training. The New Hampshire

Parenting Coordinator Handbook provides guidelines for parenting coordinator qualifications which specify a family-experienced background as well as specialized training in mediation in addition to parenting coordination.

Q: What information does a Parenting Coordinator have about the family?

The Parenting Coordinator should have access to any of the following for review: parenting evaluations; guardian *ad litem* reports; interim or final court orders in the divorce or parenting case; protective (family violence) orders; and other applicable cases involving criminal assault, domestic violence or child abuse regarding one or both parents; educational records; other relevant records; and information from parents, children and other collateral sources.

Q: When in the court process is Parenting Coordination most likely to be used?

Parenting coordination can be utilized at any point in the divorce or separation process. However, a parenting coordinator usually works with a family after the divorce or final parenting decree when there is repeated returns to court, continuing anger and distrust, difficulty between the parents in communicating and cooperating in the care of their children, or other behaviors that the court feels warrants the appointment of a parenting coordinator. A parenting coordinator may be appointed prior to a final decree if the court or the parents determine that PC involvement at that stage is necessary. In this latter case the PC may coordinate his/her activities with a guardian *ad litem* if a guardian *ad litem* is also involved.

Q: How is Parenting Coordination typically conducted?

The Parenting Coordinator will typically meet with the parents, individually and/or jointly. The parents' concerns will be identified, the family situation will be assessed with the aid of court orders and documents, and a course of action will be identified, including the setting of specific goals for resolution of conflicting issues. Emails and phone calls are used to assist the parents' work toward the goals. Additional individual or joint meetings may be scheduled and other people with information may be contacted.

Q: How long does a typical Parenting Coordination process last?

This depends upon the parties and the complexities of the issues in conflict. In general a parenting coordinator is likely to be involved with the family for 18-24 months.

Q. What does a parenting coordinator cost and does he/she get paid?

Parenting coordinators are paid an hourly fee, set by each parenting coordinator. The fees are similar to those charged by lawyers, psychologists, accountants, and other divorce professionals. The order of appointment spells out how the fee is split. The overall cost will depend on the amount of time the process takes. The shorter the period of time, the less expensive it will be. But the cost of Parenting Coordination is small in

comparison to what it could cost to battle in court. Continued litigation over parenting matters increases the stress and animosity between the parents with resultant harm to the children – a cost that cannot be measured in dollars.

Q. How is a Parenting Coordinator different from a guardian *ad litem*?

A guardian *ad litem* in a parenting context generally refers to a person appointed by the court to represent the best interest of a child or children in a proceeding where, in a divorce or separation of parents, a court deems it necessary to appoint such a person to assist the court in determining the parenting plan for the child or children. The term "ad litem" means "for the purposes of the proceeding" and the guardian *ad litem's* involvement with the family normally ends when the court case ends. The guardian *ad litem* performs those functions identified in the court's Order of Appointment of Guardian *ad Litem*. The guardian *ad litem's* work in determining the best interest of the children is independent of the parents in that the guardian *ad litem's* is not appointed to educate the parents regarding co-parenting issues or to mediate or arbitrate disputes between the parents. In contrast, the Parenting Coordinator's work involves a problem-solving alignment and close working relationship with both parents while still keeping the best interests of the children at the forefront.

Q. How is the arbitration function of a Parenting Coordinator different from the decision-making of a judicial officer (master or judge)?

The arbitration function is limited to relatively minor matters, often on issues that cannot wait the month or two that it would take to get a decision from the court. The court can make decisions about a change in primary residence, allocation of time between the parents, moving the child's residence a substantial distance, and changing child support. A Parenting Coordinator may make NONE of these decisions.

Instead, the Parenting Coordinator decides about times and locations to exchange the child, choice of extracurricular activities, holiday schedules, daily, weekly and/or monthly schedules; daycare/babysitting; parenting exchanges and transportation responsibility; medical, dental and vision care; psychological counseling and related arrangements for the children; extra-curricular activities and arrangements for the children; education, including but not limited to school choice, tutoring, participation in special education programs; discipline; methods of communication; and any other issues that may be identified by the Court or agreed on by the parents.

Q. How is Parenting Coordination different from Parent Training?

Parent Training, like Parenting Coordination, helps parents create a better environment for their children. Parent Training teaches parents the behavioral techniques and parenting skills to use with their children. The main differences, however, are (1) Parenting Coordination is strictly for parents that do not live together, (2) it

incorporates issues unique to separation and divorce, and (3) it utilizes alternative dispute resolution techniques to help resolve conflict (mediation and arbitration).

Q. Can a Parenting Coordinator have another role in helping the family, such as a guardian *ad litem*, a mediator, a therapist or the like?

A Parenting Coordinator cannot serve in dual roles such as a guardian *ad litem*'s, a divorce mediator, a psychotherapist, a lawyer for either parent or the children, or a visitation supervisor involved with the family. This prohibition applies before, during, and after service as Parenting Coordinator. For example, the therapist for the child may not be appointed as Parenting Coordinator. Also, after serving as Parenting Coordinator, the person may not become the guardian *ad litem*.

Q. How do we get a Parenting Coordinator?

There are several ways to retain a Parenting Coordinator. Generally there are two steps: agreement of the parties followed by a court order. The parents (or their lawyers) may request a parenting coordinator or the judicial officer may suggest it. A list of trained parenting coordinators is available at: www.pcanh.org

Q. Does Parenting Coordination have to be court ordered?

No. Parenting Coordination *can* be court ordered, but it does not have to be. If both parents agree to use a Parenting Coordinator, then they may do so, notifying the court of their decision. Nevertheless, either parent can petition the court for appointment of a court-ordered Parenting Coordinator.

Q. Is Parenting Coordination covered by insurance?

No. Parenting Coordination is not therapy or a medical procedure. It is not based on either pathology or medical diagnosis. Parenting Coordination is a productive conflict resolution process facilitated by a professional who is knowledgeable about divorce, the effect of conflict on children, and children's needs insofar as parenting is concerned.

Q. What research is available on the effectiveness of Parenting Coordination?

Parenting Coordination is a relatively new dispute resolution process with the research just beginning to be conducted. Studies since 1994 have found that with the services of a Parenting Coordinator, court appearances in the cases studied were reduced by up to 90%. If this reduction in court appearances can be correlated to a reduction in conflict between parents, then Parenting Coordination can be seen to have an ameliorating effect on the well researched and proven fact that children exposed to conflict in the home are four times more likely to experience psychological problems.

Q. How Can Parenting Coordination Help?

During the parenting coordination process, an experienced and specially trained attorney or mental health professional uses skills learned over many years of education and experience to help parents:

- Manage their emotions
- Communicate more effectively
- Understand the impact of conflict on children
- Learn about children's developmental needs
- Negotiate appropriate post-divorce or separation boundaries
- Develop a sensitivity to their children's needs
- Identify mutually agreeable parenting goals
- Brainstorm options to meet goals
- Evaluate options to reach agreements within legal guidelines

Q. How can I get more information about parenting coordination?

The PCANH has compiled a Parenting Coordination Handbook that is available from its website (www.pcanh.org) The PCANH website also has links to other sites with Parenting Coordination information.

Q. What is PCANH?

The Parenting Coordinator's Association of New Hampshire is a non-profit interdisciplinary organization dedicated to fostering the understanding and use of parenting coordination and to supporting professionals who serve as parenting coordinators.