In the Best Interests of Children

Psychologists are well aware that the impact of divorce on children is closely related to the level of ongoing conflict between parents and the quality of parenting. Children of high-conflict parents are at particular risk for harm.

The past couple of decades have witnessed considerable growth in the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms by family courts in the United States. Judges and others clearly recognize that the adversarial nature of the legal system makes it ill-equipped to serve the needs of families or function in the best interests of children experiencing separation or divorce. Parenting coordination (PC) has become well established and continues to evolve as a highly regarded, child-focused ADR process. “The main goal of parenting coordination is to reduce conflict between parents and re-stabilize families with high levels of entrenched conflict involving their children,” says Joan B. Kelly, PhD, a clinical psychologist who served 15 years as a PC and formerly was executive director of the Northern California Mediation Center.

Primary Roles of the Parenting Coordinator

Parenting coordination typically begins with a court order or stipulated agreement between the parents or legal guardians that provides the authority for psychologists and others serving as PCs to make binding decisions.
According to Kelly, the PC role combines several functions:

- resolving parents’ disputes about their child or children in a timely manner — for example, involving temporary variations in parenting time schedules, as well as decisions about children’s recreational and enrichment activities
- helping parents comply with the parenting plan established by the court
- making decisions or moving to arbitration if parents cannot settle disputes with the PC’s assistance (if specified in the PC agreement or court order)
- refocusing parents on their children and providing education about their children’s developmental and psychological needs
- communicating with children to understand their views and perspectives

Debra K. Carter, PhD, co-founder and clinical director of the Florida Institute for Cooperative Parenting in Bradenton, notes that PCs focus on reducing parental conflict, minimizing stress for children and encouraging parents to resolve their conflicts without litigation.

“Parenting coordinators work to ensure that children maintain access to both parents, as appropriate, and have the freedom to maintain a loving relationship without fear of reprisal or adverse consequences,” says Carter. She adds that psychologists in particular may more readily identify the needs of parents or children for interventions such as psychotherapy or psychological evaluation and make appropriate referrals.

Psychologists’ Suitability for PC Work

Parenting coordination is not the sole province of psychologists. It is a multidisciplinary function also practiced by attorneys, social workers, licensed counselors and others. Even so, psychologists who are well versed in PC work identify several reasons why many of their colleagues are well suited to the role.

Carter emphasizes that parenting coordination requires an integration of professional skills and experience to help families who are caught in conflict to disengage, emotionally and behaviorally, from dysfunctional parenting relationships and to develop child-focused communication and problem-solving techniques. Psychologists’ understanding of human interactions and their knowledge of how individuals function within systems allows for interventions not typically afforded by the family court system.

“Mental health training helps the parenting coordinator understand behaviors and reactions of adults and children when the family system is in flux and under stress,” she says. Dr. Kelly notes other facets of the skills and experience that psychologists contribute to the PC process. These attributes include understanding the dynamics of divorce, effective parenting, the impact of conflict on child development and
adjustment, personality disorders and ethical behavior. Kelly adds that, “Psychologists also bring their clinical experience in complex case management, establishing appropriate boundaries with clients and maintaining objectivity in their work.”

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But not all have the characteristics that enable successful PC work. “Some psychologists have difficulty recognizing when they must simply make decisions rather than continue to work on the disputes,” says Kelly. It is important that psychologists bring to the table extensive experience working with high-conflict parents and families, she says, while cautioning that those who function as PCs are likely to receive little if any positive reinforcement from these clients.

The Need for Specialized Training

Doctors Carter and Kelly observe that while psychologists generally may have skills needed to serve as effective parenting coordinators, there are significant differences in the PC role and the professional experience of many practitioners. For example, even though psychologist PCs use their therapeutic knowledge and skills to work with difficult clients, parenting coordinators are not engaged in psychotherapy or psychological assessment. Unlike the more traditional clinical role as psychotherapist, the psychologist-PC serves as an objective third party and is not an advocate for either parent — provided the children are not in danger or at risk for physical or emotional harm. Yet another distinction between parenting coordination and psychotherapy is that the former is a nonconfidential intervention.

Both psychologists emphasize that the nature and demands of the PC role require specialized training. Such training can help familiarize the psychologist with:

- creating parenting plans that meet the needs of both parents and children and that integrate the child’s views
- sorting through the complexity of parental disputes and enhancing skills in working with challenging clients
- the importance of working with a court order or signed consent agreement that authorizes his or her authority
- functioning effectively in an interdisciplinary environment, for example, involving attorneys
- understanding ethical and risk management issues associated with the PC role

A HYBRID ROLE

Psychologists involved with parenting coordination often describe it as a hybrid function that demands knowledge and skills in both psychological and legal domains. The latter includes:

- Familiarity with the legal processes of custody and divorce
- Knowledge of relevant state law and other legal requirements governing PC work
- Understanding of legal terminology such as in a court order
- Training in family mediation
- Informed consent requirements and securing appropriate release of information to enable communication between various parties as needed, such as health care professionals and school officials

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A Growing Market Opportunity

Eight states already have statutes that pertain specifically to “parenting coordinators,” and the number of state laws is growing. In other states such as California, parenting coordinators function under the authority of “special masters” appointed by the court.

Psychologists involved with PC work observe that as judges more fully understand and appreciate the benefits that parenting coordination brings to children and families, many are eager to help facilitate its expansion. “The demand for parenting coordination is developing rapidly,” says Dr. Carter. “The considerable need provides psychologists with a unique opportunity to expand their services.”

Dr. Kelly sums up the rewards of PC work with a focus on strengthening families. “It is a fascinating, complex intervention with significant positive benefits for parents — and particularly for children,” she says.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The APA Practice Directorate’s legal and regulatory affairs department is planning a 2009 APA Pre-Convention Institute in Toronto on parenting coordination.
- The APA Practice Organization is developing an online course for psychologists interested in learning more about parenting coordination. Visit Practice Central at www.APApractice.org in 2009 for more information.