The process of parenting coordination is designed to help parents or guardians involved in high-conflict custody disputes implement and comply with parenting plans, make timely decisions consistent with children’s developmental and psychological needs, and reduce the amount of damaging conflict between caretaking adults to which children are exposed.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Practice Directorate has been involved for the past several years with developing parenting coordination as an emerging practice area for psychologists. The association appointed a task force in 2008 to draft parenting coordination guidelines. APA’s Council of Representatives approved the proposed guidelines as policy in February 2011.

Good Practice interviewed Helen T. Brantley, PhD, chair of the guidelines development task force, about the content and uses of the guidelines and how psychologists can prepare themselves to practice as parenting coordinators. See the sidebar on the following page for information on where to find the guidelines online.

How is parenting coordination different from other interventions such as couples counseling?

Parenting Coordination is a non-adversarial dispute resolution process for high-conflict divorcing parents or guardians which is either ordered by the court or agreed upon by parents. It is a complex, hybrid role. A parenting coordinator’s (PC) work includes: helping parents comply with court orders, reducing conflict between parents, providing parent education and protecting the best interest of the child.

In many states, if mediation through the parenting coordination process does not work, decision-making by the PC is permitted. The process generally is not confidential.

Parenting coordination is distinct from couples counseling, family therapy, or therapy either for the parents or children. Therapy, formal evaluations and diagnoses are specifically excluded from the practice of parenting coordination.

Why is parenting coordination often preferable to judicial interventions?

The process of parenting coordination provides an alternative forum for parents to resolve differences other than in an adversarial legal setting. It continues for a specified period of time, thereby enabling the PC to reassess needs of the children and parents under changing circumstances. The PC can make decisions in the best interests of the child in a timely way so the parents and child need not wait for the frequent delays characteristic of court hearings.

PCs are trained in child development, family dynamics, domestic violence and conflict resolution, as well as relevant legal terminology and procedures. By contrast, some judges are not well trained in understanding children’s needs, which may result in less advantageous decisions for the children.

Many problems brought to the PC require relatively immediate resolution or are minor adjustments to the custody order, for example, regarding place or time of transition between parents. These decisions may take inordinate time in the court’s schedule, and PC intervention allows the court to be used more efficiently.

Why should practicing psychologists consider providing PC services?

Practicing psychologists are especially qualified to provide PC services by virtue of their knowledge of child development, separation and divorce research, and human interaction. Psychologists generally value non-adversarial resolution to conflict. Many psychologists are adept at negotiating difficult situations with families and understand the problems of working with individuals who have personality and mental disorders. In addition, some psychologists have found it helpful for expanding their practice to incorporate parenting coordination.
How are the new guidelines useful for a practitioner who works with children and high-conflict divorcing families regardless of the clinician’s interest in practicing as a PC?

Even if choosing not to provide PC services, practitioners will learn from the guidelines what kinds of services the PC may supply in their cases involving children and high-conflict parents. Additionally, they will learn how and when to recommend clients for PC services. For example, cases involving intimate partner violence and child abuse may not be appropriate for PC intervention.

As reflected in the new guidelines, what breadth of training and specialized knowledge is appropriate for practice as a parenting coordinator?

PCs require specialized knowledge to understand the limits and complexity of the PC role, to analyze disputes, and to mediate and arbitrate issues between the parents and render decisions. Further, PCs should know and apply research about high-conflict dynamics, intimate partner violence, child abuse and child development. Understanding and appreciating children’s vulnerabilities and resiliencies are very important.

The PC also needs to understand legal terminology, the laws or rules that apply specifically to PC practice, and other relevant laws regarding child custody and ex parte communications in his or her jurisdiction. States with statutes governing PC practice may specify training requirements in terms of number of hours, content and mediation training. PCs need to know what training their state or jurisdiction requires.

Because of the difficulty and complexity of the situations presented to PCs, ongoing education and peer consultation are strongly recommended.

What kinds of issues or dilemmas can the guidelines help practitioners address?

The APA guidelines address crucial issues such as cultural diversity, gender issues and ethical concerns including dilemmas of dual roles and sequential roles with a family. For example, a psychologist who has been a child custody evaluator or a therapist for a family generally would not assume the role of PC for his or her clients.

APA GUIDELINES FOR PRACTITIONERS: WHAT’S NEW AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

In February 2011, the American Psychological Association (APA) Council of Representatives adopted as APA policy the following guidelines related to the practice of psychology:

- **Guidelines for the Practice of Parenting Coordination.** See the question-and-answer article about these new guidelines on page 10.

- **Guidelines for Psychological Practice in Health Care Delivery Systems.** Building on earlier APA guidelines focused on hospital settings, the 2011 guidelines are intended to assist psychologists with understanding and conceptualizing roles and responsibilities in diverse health care delivery systems.

- **Guidelines for Psychological Evaluations in Child Protection Matters.** These guidelines, a revision of 1999 APA guidelines with the same name, are intended to promote proficiency in using psychological expertise when psychologists conduct evaluations in child protection matters.

These three APA guidelines for practitioners and others are found on Practice Central at apapracticecentral.org/ce/guidelines/index.aspx.

Further, the guidelines address distinct requirements for the PC regarding confidentiality, court orders and payment sources. As one example, PCs do not bill insurance companies for their services.

The guidelines also provide record-keeping guidance for psychologists. While important for all psychological services, record keeping acquires special significance in PC work, which may be liable to scrutiny of the court through subpoena. Because most parenting coordination is not confidential and may result in decisions affecting children and parents, record keeping that will facilitate dispute resolution and meet requirements of the courts and families is necessary.

Another area of complexity addressed by the guidelines is the interdisciplinary nature of the PC role. The PC has access to and interacts with many other professionals including attorneys, teachers, physicians and day-care providers. The ability to collaborate with a variety of other professionals is vital.