



What is a Parenting Coordinator?

Parent coordination is designed for moderate to high-conflict custody disputes, where one or both parents have demonstrated a consistent unwillingness to comply with court orders. Meant to reduce the conflict and keep children safe, parent coordination is provided by a mental health or legal professional with extensive training and experience in mediation, arbitration, child development, and dealing with high-conflict people. Simply put, the coordinator's job is to help parents implement their court ordered custody plan.

Parents may want to consider parent coordination when, despite a lengthy court process, they can't agree on things such as schedules, overnight visitation, choice of schools, community activities, or drop-offs and pick-ups. A parent coordinator can be especially useful in cases that involve domestic violence, child abuse, drugs, alcohol, or situations where one or both parents have a mental illness.

Unlike a shared custody coach who serves at the pleasure of one or both parents, a parent coordinator is appointed by a judge for a period of two years and subsequent periods of the same length, as required. The exact term will be set out in the court order. Most families find two years to be an optimal length of service, because it allows the parent coordinator to fully get to know the family and their issues. It also helps parents avoid having to explain their story to a new mediator or judge over and over again.

After a parent coordinator has been appointed, that person will meet with the parents and the children, as well as review the custody evaluation if one was done, and all other court documents. These preliminary steps help the coordinator to get to know the family. In the early stages (first three to six months), the parent coordinator will meet with the parents/children on a regular basis. Once things are going well, meetings will be scheduled only when a problem arises.

When a dispute occurs, the parent coordinator's job is to help parents: solve their own shared-custody problems, communicate more effectively, incorporate child-development research into parenting styles, and protect the children from the

effects of conflict. The coordinator does this by trying to help parents mediate the problem. If that fails, the coordinator has the authority to decide on the issue. Depending on the jurisdiction, decisions are then forwarded to the court and can become legally binding on both parents, often without the need for a court hearing.

For major issues such as a change in legal custody, or a major change in the visitation schedule, the parent coordinator will typically submit a written recommendation to the court. The judge will then review the matter with the parents at a hearing and then make a ruling.

If the coordinator makes a decision that seems wrong or acts in a manner that seems unprofessional to either parent, that parent should first talk with the coordinator about it. If the parent is still unsatisfied, he or she should submit a written complaint to the coordinator, both attorneys (if applicable), and the other parent. The coordinator will then meet with the parent and his or her attorney. If the complaint still can't be resolved, the parent can make a motion to have the parent coordinator removed. A judge will then review the complaint and make a ruling.

If both parents are dissatisfied with the parent coordinator, they can agree to fire that person. However, if only one parent is unhappy, that person cannot fire the coordinator on his/her own. If the parent coordinator feels he/she can no longer help the family, he or she can resign.

Finally, it is essential that parents work with a well-trained parent coordinator who adheres to the "Guidelines for Parent Coordination" published by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) in 2005. This document sets out detailed guidelines for practice, guidelines regarding ethical obligations and conduct, as well as qualifications for practice, including relevant education, training, and experience.