Parenting Coordination:
A New Service for High Conflict Divorcing Families

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Abstract: Parenting Coordination (PC) is a relatively new service that aims to assist parents in high conflict separations and divorces establish and maintain healthy relationships conducive to the positive adjustment and development of their children. For the most part, it is intended for those parents who are caught in legal wrangling and are unable to formulate or implement viable parenting plans that are handed down by the court or stem from mutual agreements. Ultimately, parenting coordination attempts to offer parents an opportunity to increase cooperation between them while minimizing conflict and the potential risk factors associated with a litigious separation or divorce. This article will outline the philosophy and basic tenets of Parenting Coordination and review the evolution and potential application in the context of existing services to families in transition.

Parenting coordination (PC) is a relatively new approach in working with high conflict divorces in which parents are, often, entangled in long term disputes over the care and support of their children. Issues of abuse, parental alienation, lack of access to a parent and inappropriate parental behaviours and actions can put children at risk and draw attention to the need for long term follow-up and monitoring by well trained professionals acting in the capacity of parenting coordinators. Historically, PC evolved in the 1990’s in the United States in response to an ever growing need of the family court system to make more effective use of mental health professionals and experts in helping high conflict couples going through the process of a difficult separation or divorce. Carla Garrity and Mitchell Baris, in their seminal work entitled Caught in the Middle: Protecting Children of High Conflict Divorce, identified parenting coordination as an important service that could greatly assist parents to find solutions in very stressful situations in which children become the unwitting victims of their on-going disputes (Garrity and Baris, 1994). Interest in this unique approach grew rapidly and many professionals as well as several

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state judicial counties began to outline concrete proposals for training and service delivery. Among the early pioneers were Susan Boyne and Anne Marie Termini who created the Cooperative Parenting Institute in Atlanta, Georgia, and developed one of the first training manuals intended for therapists who wished to assume the role of PC’s in working with high conflict families (Boyne and Termini, 2003). A National Parent Coordinators Association (NPCA) was soon created to develop protocols and standards of practice as well as providing support, education and an opportunity for parenting coordinators to network and consult with each other. In the past three years, numerous articles on the subject have also appeared in leading professional journals furthering the interest and legitimacy of parenting coordination (Ho et al; Boyne, 2000; Sydlik et al, 2002).

Presently, several American states ² utilize the services of parenting coordinators which are assigned either in accordance with special legislated statutes (Oregon, Oklahoma, Idaho, Florida ) or by mutual consent of the parties concerned. The State of Oklahoma passed, in 2001, the “Parenting Coordinator Act” which allows the appointment of a PC by a judge in high conflict divorce cases in which children are involved. Another state, Oregon, recently, passed a law that facilitates the appointment of a PC to assist in the formulation and implementation of parenting plans. Proposed parenting coordination statutes have been drawn up in Florida (May, 2003) by a committee of the AFCC and efforts are being made to have such statutes legislated into law.

In Canada, there are, at the present time, no provisions in any federal or provincial laws or regulations dealing with divorce that could mandate the appointment of a parenting coordinator. However, there has been a strong interest by legislators to revise the present legal structures in an effort to better handle cases of high parental conflict as highlighted by the recommendations presented in a report of the Senate and House of Common’s Special Joint Committee on Child Custody and Access (1998).³ While no formal public mechanism exists for the implementation of a parenting coordination program, the urgent need for such a program is being voiced by many legal and mental health professionals. Amendments to the Divorce Act – Bill C22- make

² Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas and Vermont make use of parenting coordinators in their court orders.

³ Among some of the more important recommendations made by the joint committee was to eliminate the notion of “custody” and replace it with the concept of “parental responsibilities” with particular emphasis on developing parenting plans. Presently, the Divorce Act will be amended to reflect this new orientation.
reference to ‘parenting orders’ and the exercise of ‘parental responsibilities’ which are expected to be carried out after a judgement is rendered. Furthermore, article 16 subsection 6 (c) provides for a “dispute resolution process for any or all future disputes regarding parenting arrangements” (2002). Invariably, courts throughout the country are confronted by a certain powerlessness and inability to have specific orders carried out by parents who are unable to extricate themselves from chronic parental disputes. The use of parenting coordinators could be an invaluable tool at the disposal of judges who are desperately looking for competent professionals who can act as “coaches” to these parents.

Underlying Rationale
The concept of parenting coordination emerged in response to an urgent need for intervention and monitoring of high conflict divorces when traditional forms of assistance (family mediation, counselling, psychosocial assessments) proved ineffectual or inadequate. Findings from a prodigious number of longitudinal studies conducted on the effects of separation and divorce on children clearly indicated that, for many, the post divorce adjustment was a painful and most debilitating experience that severely impeded their normal development and well being (Hetherington and Cox, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). More alarmingly, new evidence suggested that, while many children survive the initial trauma, those who are caught in the middle of chronic long term parental conflict do not fare so well in the post divorce period (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Lamb et all, 1997). In the past ten years, experts in the field such as Janet Johnson (1994) and Joan Kelly (1998) have studied, in depth, high conflict divorce and its effects on the adjustment of children. Their findings indicate, most conclusively, that chronic conflict between parents (i.e. verbal and physical aggression, intractable disputes, persistent litigation, distrust, hostile and alienating behaviour) place children at high risk. More specifically, these children, and especially boys, are extremely vulnerable and much more likely to be clinically disturbed, emotionally and in their behavior, than children who grow up in more normal circumstances.

In response to these startling facts, Janet Johnston (1994) concludes that while children need to be protected from such damaging behaviours, ..”high conflict divorced parents have a relatively poor prognosis for developing cooperative co-parenting arrangements without a great deal of
therapeutic intervention” (p.179). Conventional forms of intervention have, generally, consisted of psychosocial assessments, mediation services, individual and couple counselling, and have required the full consent of the feuding parents. While such resources have proven to be useful tools in some circumstances, they have been all but ineffective with many conflict ridden divorcing families. These parents need the direct intervention of impartial and highly trained professionals, preferably mandated by a judge, to provide the necessary guidance, education and structure to facilitate cooperative parenting behaviour.

**How Parenting Coordination Works**

First and foremost, it should be noted that parenting coordination is distinguished from other forms of professional intervention in very specific ways as the following table illustrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting Coordination</th>
<th>Counselling/Therapy</th>
<th>Family Mediation</th>
<th>Co-Parenting Counselling</th>
<th>Psychosocial Assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Practitioner is a licensed member of a professional order</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>not necessarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>not necessarily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Requires mediation skills</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of legal issues</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Background in child development</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Authority</td>
<td>yes-limited</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Process is confidential</td>
<td>limited</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Volunteer Client Participation</td>
<td>mandated</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Can make modification to parenting plans</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Directive and can provide advice to parents</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>not usually</td>
<td>yes-limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Monitoring and reporting on compliance with court order</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Court testimony required</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Role of educating parents</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Long term follow-up</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Focused on the best interest of the child</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>part</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Susan Boyne -2000

In practical terms, what makes PC a unique service is the fact that it is, generally, mandated by the court or jointly requested by the attorneys for both parents with limited authority given to the parenting coordinators to make simple and temporary modifications to an existent court order or mutual agreed parenting plan. It is designed to provide long term follow up as well as an obligation to report back to the court and to the legal representatives for both parties. The intervention provided is structured, pro-active and solution focused (future oriented) with the main goal of bringing about needed changes and progress in a limited period of time. This approach differs greatly from counselling or therapy which tends to focus on personal growth.
and change using a less directive approach. Although it makes use of mediation and conflict resolution skills, PC also differs from family mediation which is a confidential, voluntary and time limited process not subject to any legal accountability. Parenting coordination is also not meant to replace a psychosocial assessment as it is, generally, mandated after the deposit in court of an expert’s report.

The benefits of parenting coordination services can be summarized in terms of its effective service delivery, monitoring and follow up capability, and capacity to respond to the immediate and long term needs of children and parents. More specifically, such services can:

1. Ensure that the children’s safety and best interest receive top priority
2. Help reduce the level of conflict and rancorous relations by mediating disputes between parents
3. Help parents to implement any court ordered or mutually agreed parenting plan
4. Assist parents to draw up their own parenting plan and modify those already in force, if necessary
5. Teach parents skills and techniques related to anger management, effective communication and problem solving (coaching)
6. Help parents become aware of the negative impact on their children of escalating conflict and parental alienation
7. Provide judges, lawyers and parents with feedback and suggestions with regards to improving parenting practices

**Role of Parenting Coordinator**

Parenting coordinators are experienced and accredited professionals who have a background and formal training in family mediation, child development, individual, couple and family counselling, as well as a knowledge of the legal system and family law. As a main function, they provide long term follow-up services to parents and children referred by the courts or on a mutual basis. Parenting coordinators are impartial and work with the parents on behalf of the children. The role of a parenting coordinator is that of a counsellor, mediator, educator, advocate and case manager, committed to ensuring that the children’s best interests are prioritised and advanced. Using their counselling and mediation skills, they can help parents disengage from each other and lower the level of conflict that prevents them from making effective joint
decisions involving their children. Where warranted, the parenting coordinator is expected to act as a coach and educator, helping parents to better communicate and understand the nefarious effects of heightened conflict and discord on their children’s development and well being. In the process, parents learn skills and techniques that they can use to improve relations between them. Often, community based programs and resources (personal counselling, support groups, parenting seminars) are used to supplement the direct services being offered.

Another important responsibility of the parenting coordinator is to oversee the implementation of a court order or parenting plan. Having a good knowledge of the legal and psychosocial guidelines affecting residential and access arrangements, the parenting coordinator can make a significant contribution in helping parents negotiate and maintain a flexible attitude and navigate unforeseen contingencies which tend to, often, escalate conflict and destroy the little collaboration that exists.

Formal training for parenting coordinators varies depending on the jurisdiction and state in which they are employed. This can imply minimal or no specific requirements (California, Ohio, Arizona) or extensive specialized training above and beyond the required basic professional degree (Atlanta, Vermont, Oklahoma). In Canada, no criteria has yet been established as the service is in its embryo stage. The few known professionals attempting to put into practice a PC service are social workers who are also trained in family mediation and who have a thorough knowledge of the impact of separation and divorce on parents and children.  

In terms of approach, the parenting coordinator is often required to be direct and authoritative when parents need to be confronted about a behaviour or decision that is not considered in their children’s best interest or that it undermines an existing parenting plan. At other times, the professional involved needs to be conciliatory and able to draw a compromise from very divergent positions. At all times, the parenting coordinator must, necessarily, maintain a high degree of integrity and credibility with both parents and a legal system that is predicated on protecting the individual rights of all parties concerned.

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4 Dominic D’Abate and Marie-Josée Gamache are both professional social workers based in Montreal who have been formally trained as parenting coordinators.
In those judicial districts and states where parenting coordinators are engaged by the courts, they are given different degrees of authority in order to carry out their mandate. Some of these powers include:

1. The authority to recommend additional services to parents
2. The authority to use program discretion
3. The authority to provide the court and attorneys with reports and recommendations
4. The authority to make “temporary” modifications (lasting a few weeks or months) to existing arrangements that involve residence and access

(source Susan Boyne, 2000)

**Implementing Parenting Coordination Services**

Unlike states such as Oklahoma, Oregon and Florida, non of the provinces in Canada (including Quebec) have any provisions in either their statutes or regulations permitting a judge to appoint a parent coordinator to provide follow-up services to high conflict divorcing families. What is possible at the present time is for the judges to recommend that parents avail themselves of parenting coordination services in those instances where it would seem unlikely that the two parties would have the ability to carry out a judgement (parenting plan) related to the care and support of their children. Such measures would form part of the judgement and would place a good deal of pressure on the parents involved to follow through and seek the services of a competent PC. A similar initiative could, equally, be taken without the court’s intervention whereby the two parents and their attorneys agree voluntarily, that the services of a competent professional is needed.

The advantages of having the PC appointed by the court are numerous and significant to the final outcome. As is already the case with the appointment of an expert to conduct a psychosocial assessment, such a provision in the law legitimises the process and casts the PC in a more neutral and impartial role. Also, the PC could receive a specific mandate that would address the special needs of the children and parents who are the subject of a court order while being accountable to the judge in question. Finally, the PC would have recourse to the court should there be a refusal to collaborate or comply with decisions taken. While parenting coordinators are not engaged to
provide a final opinion or recommendation on the custodial care of children, their input can help judges and the parents themselves formulate parenting plans that are more sensitive to the needs of all concerned.

In both cases, fees for services could be assumed by the parents or procured from special funds set aside for that purpose. Ideally, this service should be provided free of charge using existing budgets set aside to help families maintain healthy and normal relations.

**Immediate Steps to be Taken**

Given that parenting coordination is a relatively new phenomenon in Quebec, judges, lawyers, mental health professionals, parents and politicians need to be sensitised and informed as to the potential benefits of a parenting coordination services to children and society as a whole. Towards this end, information sessions should be organized whereby competent individual who run these programs in the U.S. can be invited to present this new approach to interested professionals to provide this service locally. Specialized training should be made available to ensure that PCs in Quebec meet the standards set by the national association for parenting coordination. 5 Professionals ‘orders’ (e.g. Order of Social Workers or Psychologists) need to set up ‘practice’ committees similar to those that regulate family mediation and psychological assessments. Ultimately, each ‘order’ needs to assume responsibility for the licensing and monitoring of its members who act as PCs.

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5 The National Parent Coordinators Association is an organization consisting of parent coordinators, special masters and other professional fields committed to assisting high conflict families at specific times of turmoil. It is based in Florida and provides an arena for professionals to collaborate in order to enhance the standard of practice while at the same time provide ethical and competent services to these families.
REFERENCES


Ho, V., Monaco, D., Rosen, J. Parent Coordinators: An Effective New Tool in Resolving Parental Conflict in Divorce. Florida Family Law Newsletter


