

PARENTING COORDINATION AND CO-PARENTING COUNSELING: Choosing the Best Intervention for Families

by Annette Burns

When a family court judge or lawyer needs to choose among available coparenting interventions for families, two of the best known interventions are parenting coordination and coparenting counseling. Both choices are designed to help and educate parents who share decision-making and parenting time of their children, although both processes can also be helpful even where one parent has sole or primary decision-making. Of the two, parenting coordination is the more intensive process.

Early in a separation or divorce case, the coparents' feelings about each other are affected (and often destroyed) by their long-standing conflicts, ineffective communication styles, anger, differing parenting styles, substance abuse, sexual issues, and feelings of abandonment and unfairness in the relationship. Debt and finances are often major points of stress and anxiety. In many cases, one parent was almost entirely in control of the child's day-to-day activities, and with separation, that parent expects to continue in that role, which will not be the case when joint legal decision-making and almost equal parenting time orders are created.

As the divorce case progresses, those conflicts tend to escalate. The parties may have taken positions against each other, and may have positive and negative advocates (attorneys, family, and friends who have taken sides). Intractable conflict is exacerbated by legal threats, court dates, fees and costs, and third party involvement, including custody evaluators and judges. When the parents do communicate, they may be blaming, defensive, threatening, and want to rehash past perceived injustices. The involvement of third parties enhances the desire to blame, as a parent who believes he or she was wronged feels they can convince a third party how right they are and how wrong the other person is.

Collaborative efforts such as mediation or parent education may fail to resolve conflict at this stage. Being involved in court isn't good for coparenting. For a variety of reasons, litigants don't make good coparents. The characteristics of a litigant are directly in conflict with the characteristics of effective coparents.

(SIDEBAR)

Litigants	Coparents
Advocate a position	Look for compromise
Distrust of other party	Attempt to create trust
Focus on own interests	Focus on child's interests
Win-loss mentality	Compromise mentality; child "wins"
Blame on other party	Takes responsibility
\$\$ spent on attorneys/litigation	\$\$ spent on counseling
Relies on court for resolution	Competency in creating solutions
(Adapted from Sullivan and Burns, 2020)	

Interventions help remove parents from the most adversarial environments and focus on their children. Whether parenting coordination or coparenting counseling is chosen as a solution, the parents are more likely to stay out of court and focus on their status as coparents rather than combatants.

Any analysis of what might help coparents should recognize that some families need less assistance, while others are engaged in what is known as intractable conflict (conflict that causes harm to both children and relationships) that may involve multiple returns to court. When parents experience mild to moderate conflict, coparenting education with a skilled therapist can provide

information that parents will put into use in their own families. (Moran, Weinstock, & Butler, 2019). When parents are taught to gain insight into their own relationships and behaviors, and how their behaviors affect their children, they may be able to learn skills to lessen damage to the children.

A coparenting counselor is a mental or behavioral health professional who works with both parents, either conjointly or separately (and usually both), with the goal of educating parents about the best ways to work together for their children. Coparenting counseling can include aspects of child development as well as communication and dispute resolution skills.

A parenting coordinator is a hybrid legal-mental health role, usually court-appointed, that combines assessment, education, case management, conflict management, dispute resolution, and sometimes decision-making functions. A parenting coordinator, according to the Association of Family and Conciliation Court Guidelines for Parenting Coordination (2019) may be an attorney or licensed mental health professional with practical professional experience in high conflict family cases.

Parents can enter into coparenting counseling voluntarily, or as the result of court orders. Parenting coordination is generally available only through court appointment, although a few jurisdictions allow the parents to enter into a contract for parenting coordination without an underlying order. The use of either process

may begin with an agreement of the parents, or the process may be initiated by the court, depending on jurisdiction. The goal of both processes is that the parents work together to reach resolution of their child-related conflicts. But in the event the parents cannot agree, coparenting counselors generally do not have the ability to make a decision, while parenting coordinators often do have decision-making authority.

Parenting Coordinator or Coparenting Counselor? Manageable or unmanageable conflict?

The course of a particular family's conflict helps determine how the conflict might be managed. In some cases, the use of both parenting coordination and coparenting counseling at the same time can help, with the goal that the parents will need the parenting coordinator less and less as they learn skills. Eventually the parenting coordinator appointment will expire, as the parents use the skills developed with the coparenting counselor to manage future conflict.

The initial uses of both a coparenting counselor and a parenting coordinator are similar. Some of the most common parenting issues to be brought to each type of professional include:

1. Child's daily routine.
2. Minor alterations in the parenting schedule that do not drastically change court-ordered parenting time.
3. Child care arrangements, daycare, and babysitting.

4. Child exchanges and transportation.
5. Medical, dental and vision care.
6. Psychological counseling, testing, or other assessment of children.
7. Child's education, including choice of school, tutoring, participation in special programs (and, more recently, whether in-person or online school options will be chosen where both are available).
8. Extracurricular activities and schedules.
9. Discipline.
10. Manner and methods of communication between the parents.
11. Scheduling and implementation of telephone and online contact between parent and child.
12. Child's use of electronic devices and social media.

Parenting coordination may be more effective in the early, learning phases of conflict, as the parents get used to the idea of separation and joint decision-making. Parents often need to see, with a professional's help, that their conflicting communications are causing harm to their children and are not productive.

Children may miss activities, parties, and family events while the parents exercise control over parenting time and fail to cooperate with each other. As time goes on, and with some help, most parents (approximately 80-85% according to some research) will learn that effective interventions, including formal coparenting

counseling and implementation of parallel parenting mechanisms, will allow decisions to be made for their children, and those parents will become less conflicted within years after the separation. (Hetherington, 1999) Parallel parenting involves teaching the parents to independently parent the child, without trying to force the other parent into the same day-to-day household decisions. The parents disengage, and do not try to give the other parent advice or complaints about the child's day-to-day activities or schedules at the other parent's household. The parents do not communicate about minor things regarding their child, and do not concern themselves that the child has somewhat different homework, bedtime, and nutritional schedules at the other parent's home; they learn that the child can be fine with differences between households. The parents keep their communications limited to important information about school, health, medical and schedule information and learn not to bicker about the small things.

How does parenting coordination attempt to manage intractable coparenting conflict? The role of parallel parenting.

A parenting coordinator's goal is to manage and reduce the parents' level of conflict while keeping the parents directed towards child-focused information-sharing and decision-making. A secondary goal is to keep the parents from relying on litigation to resolve most of their parenting issues. It should be noted that resolution of financial issues, even those related to children such as child support and reimbursement of expenses, is usually not available through parenting

coordination, although both parenting coordination and coparenting counseling can assist parents with conflict-reducing strategies that may help them resolve financial issues as well.

A significant distinction between parenting coordination and coparenting counseling is the tendency of parenting coordination to disengage the parents as much as possible. While coparenting counseling may concentrate on more communication and sharing between the parents, parenting coordination may emphasize less of both. If the parents' engagement has become toxic and counterproductive, a parenting coordinator's focus may be to reduce the engagement to minimum levels. The parenting coordinator may educate the parents on a parenting model known as parallel parenting. In essence, parallel parenting is an arrangement where separated parents co-parent by disengaging and having limited direct contact with each other. Focus on parallel parenting tends to eliminate opportunities for conflict and creates focus on sharing only the information that is essential to coparent the children: information about children's calendars, educational needs, and medical attention. (Sullivan, 2008).

Although many coparenting counselors believe that significant collaboration and cooperation between coparents is crucial, if the parents' engagements are persistently in conflict – conflict that involves or is seen by the children --- disengagement of the parents may be the best approach. Research supports that a

parallel model of coparenting supports healthy child development much the same as a collaborative/cooperative model of coparenting. (Sullivan, 2008).

A disengaged (parallel parenting) coparenting relationship can serve to minimize the majority of the parents' conflict. The most detailed possible parenting plan which includes specific dates, times, locations, and structures, supports parallel coparenting. While both a coparenting counselor and a parenting coordinator can help the parents facilitate the most structured plans possible, only the parenting coordinator is in a position to put the necessary structures into place should the parents fail to agree. Formal structures can help the parents move from an unstructured, chaotic world of information-sharing to a world of specific guidelines to be followed. If new areas of conflict arise --- problems at exchanges or while at mutually-attended child activities, for example --- new policies are created to add to the structures, to give each parent (and more importantly, the children) reasonable expectations and guidelines to follow.

These structures can include email guidelines; use of formal parenting programs such as Our Family Wizard; formalities for "parent reports" about a child's education, social, and medical status; use of online calendars to exchange information about appointments and travel; and timelines for the exchange of information and notification of vacation schedules.

After establishment of fairly rigid structures that give each parent a measure of comfort and trust, many families can move beyond the rigidity and start to trust themselves to work more cooperatively. The goal of parenting coordination, as in coparenting counseling, is that the process helps the parents build skills, and then progress and become independent from third party involvement. A parenting coordinator can assure the parents that the parenting coordinator's role is, in fact, to retire from their case for lack of use.

How does coparenting counseling attempt to manage intractable parenting conflict?

Coparenting counselors, like parenting coordinators, know that conflict is what creates the most distress for children after separation of their parents and that resolving parents' disagreements is best for children's wellbeing. In many cases, both parents express to be desperate to resolve their conflicts, but may not be aware of family dynamics that continue the conflict. A family systems approach recognizes that the (previous) family was an emotional unit that affects interactions between family members long after the family is dissolved. Whether the parents realize it or not, while the family was together, each family member played certain roles in the family and were expected to respond to each other in certain ways according to those roles. The transition from those prior, pre-separation roles to their new roles as separate parents (who may be in new relationships and with new roles and responsibilities in a new household) is a difficult one. Coparenting

counselors can work with the parents to help each recognize his and her role in the prior family unit, their role in the current conflict, and help them to move beyond those roles into functional coparenting roles. The counseling is often crucial in helping a parent who previously controlled almost everything in the joint household to realize and accept that he or she is no longer in control of the other parent's parenting or household.

Coparenting counselors can be helpful in teaching parents effective communication techniques, including practicing with various forms of communication (emails, texts, or online platforms), and working to edit their communications to focus on current issues about the children.

When coparenting counseling has not been effective, how does the parenting coordination role expand the parents' options?

When education and coparenting counseling are not effective in resolving the conflict, progression on to parenting coordination provides a structured process to manage and resolve the conflicts, including decision-making by the parenting coordinator when necessary. The parenting coordinator process may, depending on the jurisdiction, include arbitration-like rulings from the coordinator, or the parenting coordinator may make recommendations which are then reviewed by the court and either approved, modified, or rejected.

In some cases, a coparenting counselor may report back to the court, attorneys, or parenting coordinator that coparenting counseling is premature and

should not continue until one or both parents obtain individual services for mental health, domestic violence, or substance-related issues.

If coparenting counseling has been attempted and has not substantially reduced conflict, the parenting coordination role adds at least three elements that can improve efficacy: authority, knowledge, and availability. While a coparenting counselor may act as an authority figure to the parents, that counselor usually does not have real authority under the law. An experienced parenting coordinator's knowledge about coparenting disputes will provide a wide background of possible resolutions that the parents may not have explored on their own. And, the parenting coordinator's ability to respond quickly on most issues provides availability that even the most experienced family court judges can rarely offer. The hybrid nature of parenting coordination allows a parenting coordinator to offer these three elements in a way entirely different than any other type of professional.

Coparenting counseling may not be of great assistance in cases with extreme allegations against one or both parents, including accusations of child neglect or abuse; a parent with intermittent or ongoing mental illness; a family history of domestic violence; substance or alcohol abuse that is either denied by one parent, or which needs to be monitored; chronic unreasonable hostility and distrust between the parents; consistent unsubstantiated allegations by one parent of misconduct on the part of the other parent; or a history of alleged or actual

alienating tactics, or violation of court ordered parenting time. If the court has established a specific reunification process between parent and child, for example, a parenting coordinator may be needed to monitor the process and ensure compliance.

Similarities in the processes

Parenting coordination and coparenting counseling have a number of similarities. Parenting coordinators are not, however, always mental health professionals, and in general, the parenting coordinator herself is not giving therapy or counseling to the parents. A parenting coordinator and a coparenting counselor can both offer resources and suggestions for “standard” provisions for parenting plans. Use of standard, tried-and-true plan provisions can help resolve persistent sources of conflict, such as holiday and vacation scheduling issues that arise year after year. Both processes can offer parents resources in the form of books, articles, websites, and online parenting classes and information that can educate, such as online.divorce-education.com (Children in Between Online) or onlineparentingprograms.com.

Both processes give a measure of formality and functionality to the parents which is absent when the two parents attempt to resolve conflict on their own without a “referee”. Both parenting coordinators and coparenting counselors can monitor the parents’ communication to offer feedback about better communication

techniques and language. Unfortunately, it is likely that neither process will be covered by health insurance and both will be private pay for the client, particularly if court ordered, although some coparenting counselors may agree to start the process with the parents jointly with some measure of insurance coverage.

The choice of remedy for any family can be explored by knowing what your jurisdiction allows, what is required to start either a parenting coordination or coparenting counseling process, and examining the specific needs of your case with your client. Ideally, all cases which have not been able to resolve their parental conflict on their own, even after several months of separation, will benefit from one or the other.

SIDEBAR

Coparenting Books for Your Clients

Baker, Amy: Coparenting with a Toxic Ex (New Harbinger Publications, 2014)

Carter, Debra: Coparenting After Divorce (Unhooked Books, 2015)

Eddy, Bill: Don't Alienate the Kids! Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce (High Conflict Institute Press, 2012)

Eddy, Bill, and Annette Burns, Kevin Chafin: BIFF for Co-Parent Communication: Your Guide to Difficult Texts, Emails, and Social Media Posts (Unhooked Books, 2020)

Ross, July, and Corcoran, Julie: Joint Custody With a Jerk (St. Martin's Griffin, 2nd Ed, 2011)

Stahl, Philip: Parenting After Divorce (Impact, 2nd Ed, 2007)

Thayer, Elizabeth, and Zimmerman, Jeffrey: The Co-Parenting Survival Guide: Letting Go of Conflict After a Difficult Divorce (New Harbinger Publications, 2001)

References

Hetherington, E.M. (1999) Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting, and Remarriage. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

Moran, John & Weinstock, David & Butler, Kolette. "Matching Parent Education Programs to Family Treatment Needs", Evidence-Informed Interventions for Court-Involved Families: Promoting Healthy Coping and Development (2019), Oxford University Press

Sullivan, M. J. (2008). Coparenting and the Parenting Coordination process. Journal of Child Custody, 5 (1/2), 4

Sullivan, Matthew, and Burns, Annette (2020) Effective Use of Parenting Coordination: Considerations for Legal and Mental Health Professionals. Family Court Review, Vol 58, 3.