

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Parenting Coordination

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Parenting Coordination (PC) is a burgeoning new professional role in the family courts in North America. This Special Issue of the *Journal of Child Custody* on PC is the first of its kind, dedicated to the current development of this highly specialized mental health and legal hybrid role. PC continues the proliferation of alternatives to the traditional legal-adversarial process of families in transition. Unlike many alternative dispute resolution processes, however, PCs provide services to the most conflicted coparents and the most vulnerable children. Judges, attorneys and mental health professionals have long agreed that the profound psychological and relational issues that characterize these families make them a poor fit for the more adversarial legal processes they typically find themselves repeatedly utilizing. In the early 1990s, PC emerged from grass-roots collaboration of these professionals, initially in case-by-case “experimental” interventions. These humble PC beginnings have led to a more standardized role, with greater uniformity in professional practice across jurisdictions. The role of PC, in his/her efforts to intervene with the high-conflict coparents to assist them in implementing their parenting plans, is one of the most challenging roles a professional can perform. The articles in this volume provide a much-needed professional resource to professionals who embrace the challenge of this emerging role.

The articles in this volume provide a picture of the current state of development of parenting coordination. In the opening article, I provide a conceptual understanding of why the PC process may be helpful to chronically conflicted coparents. Structural family systems theory has helped me anchor my work in the trenches with high conflict families in transition for two decades. Hopefully, sharing some of

my insights along the way can be a light in the storm for professionals who work with these families.

The next two articles provide a snapshot of PC programs in the United States and Canada. Karl Kirkland, with whom I recently collaborated on a survey of experienced parenting coordinators (*Family Court Review*, in press), provides a state-by-state comparison of PC programs that delineates the essential elements of practice across jurisdictions. Barbara Fidler and Philip Epstein, two leaders in the field, give us a view of Canada's evolving experience with PC. These articles highlight that the fundamental dispute resolution and case management of PC programs must be established firmly on the constitutional bedrock of statutory authority and judicial review. The uniformity of this foundation is then implemented with variations on specific parameters of PC programs as they develop in a growing number of states and provinces. The message from these articles to those who seek to develop new PC programs, is "don't reinvent the wheel," draw on the applicable structures of established programs.

Research on PC is sorely lacking and is a critical next phase in supporting PC's emerging role as well as its legitimacy in the child custody field. The next two sets of authors provide the first studies evaluating PC programs. Stephen Lally and Shirley Higuchi present some preliminary findings from the American Psychological Association PC project. The project is noteworthy in three ways: (1) it is a wonderful collaboration of the APA, District of Columbia Bar Association and Argosy University; (2) its goal is to provide PC services to low-income, multi-ethnic families; and (3) it describes a model that utilizes advanced graduate students under close supervision to provide some of the services. The second study, by Connie Beck, et al., also advances the state of research on PC programs, with their exploratory study of the Pima County, Arizona program. Their results, obtained by interviewing PCs, offer some insights about differences in approaches used by legal and mental health professionals as well as how PCs articulate the goals they are trying to accomplish. Both of these articles pave the way to future research that can build on these studies.

The volume is anchored by an article on PC training by my mentor and friend, Joan Kelly, who is not only a pioneer in the PC field, but in the field of child custody research, practice and training. This specialized and innovative role, which integrates mental health and legal functions to serve our most difficult clients, necessitates extensive and

specialized training. Kelly makes a compelling case for PCs being required to have an adequate base of knowledge and experience in the family dynamics of separation and divorce, parental conflict, dispute resolution, parenting after divorce and domestic violence – to function competently in the PC role.

## **REFERENCE**

Kirkland, K. & Sullivan, M. (2008). Parenting coordination practice: A survey of experienced professionals. *Family Court Review*, in press.