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PARENT COORDINATION
Information Packet

Parent Coordination is a service provided to parents who are heading into separation and divorce, or who have already completed the divorce process. This service is focused on helping parents make healthy decisions about their children. Parents may be referred by attorneys, therapists, custody evaluators, or judges. Some parents are court ordered to attend parent coordination sessions due to the intensity of the conflict and animosity between parents, and/or because the parents have begun to litigate parenting conflicts in court, rather than being able to talk through conflicts on their own. Some parents learn about parent coordination and voluntarily seek out the service to help them work through a particularly difficult issue on which they have become “stuck”. Still others seek Parent Coordination before separating in order to obtain help in creating a parenting plan for their children that will reflect the needs of the whole family – with an emphasis on the needs of the children.

Parent Coordination is not therapy. It is not aimed at working on marital issues, nor on resolving marital problems. Parent coordinators are not focused on the past, but stay focused on the present and future. Parent coordinators must have expertise in mediation and negotiation; couples’ communication and teaching communication skills; child development and child psychology; conflict management and problem solving; basic divorce and custody laws, and issues related to separation, divorce, custody and visitation. Parent coordination does NOT provide evaluation of custody issues, and parent coordinators cannot make legal recommendations about custody or visitation. However, parents can receive education about child development, parenting plan models for different aged children, and ideas about how to move through separation and divorce in ways that protect children’s emotional, social, and academic functioning.

Parent Coordination for Parents Wanting Help Creating Parenting Plans:

For those parents not yet divorced – or in some instances, not yet separated – parent coordination meetings can offer a safe environment for talking about how to arrange life for your family after creating two separate households. Meetings often focus on how to talk to the children about the separation or divorce in ways to protect their feelings as much as possible. Meetings can also focus on looking at the schedule of time that each parent will spend with the children, and how to accommodate the needs of each family member, placing the needs of the children as a priority. For parents in this situation, meetings are generally scheduled on an “as needed” basis: there may be a need for several sessions to occur within a brief time frame, and then sessions can be scheduled on

a follow-up basis, or as needed. Parent coordination can help parents discuss various options for parenting plans that they will then review with their attorneys, or with a mediator, who will ultimately turn the parents' plan into a legal agreement. In this way, parent coordination meetings can provide a foundation for planning that can set the stage for a healthy, child-oriented process in which the divorce can occur. While still painful and distressing, divorce does not need to destroy families. Children are able to survive the divorce of their parents, and recover successfully in the years beyond it. The single most important factor in predicting how well children will adjust after a divorce is the level of conflict between their parents. When parents are able to maintain civility and cooperation, and eventually move towards a friendly, collaborative relationship, children grow up as healthy and strong as those children in intact families.

Parent Coordination for Parents After Custody Litigation:

Short Term Goals will consist of helping the parents discuss, and resolve, current parenting problems. During each session, each parent will have the opportunity to choose one or two agenda items to focus on. These items can relate to ANY parenting issue directly related to the child(ren). For example, these items may relate to anything from which school a child should attend, to styles of discipline for an unruly teenager. Items may also relate to the communication problems between parents: a session may focus on decreasing the level of rudeness and disrespect in the parental communication, or on eliminating the use of the child as a go-between for the parents.

Longer Term Goals of Parent Coordination include helping the parents learn to clearly, and respectfully voice their views, opinions and wishes, while also helping them to listen closely and respectfully to their co-parent while he/she is speaking. Sessions are also focused on helping the parents learn to brainstorm, problem solve, compromise, negotiate and resolve these conflicts themselves. *A long term goal of Parent Coordination is to achieve an overall improvement in the communication and level of cooperation and trust between parents. This goal is crucial, because hostility and conflict between parents is strongly related to emotional dysfunction and deterioration in the mental health of children in divorced families.*

Decision Making during Parent Coordination sessions will focus primarily on the parents' ultimate choices. Unless parents are court ordered into Parent Coordination, and the Parent Coordinator is named as a "Special Master" of the Court with decision making power, parents ultimately have the right and the power to determine final decisions. However, when parents enter Parent Coordination, they should agree to listen to the Parent Coordinator's recommendations, and to follow suggestions, rather than to return to using attorneys and court to litigate disagreements. *If one parent continues to threaten litigation during Parent Coordination sessions, the Parent Coordination will be rendered useless.* Parent Coordination is aimed at helping parents come to their own compromises and negotiated agreements. Occasionally, parents will ask the Parent Coordinator to act as a "Tie Breaker". In these cases, Parent Coordinators will consider ONLY the best interests of the child, and can offer a strong recommendation that the parents move in one particular direction rather than another. Following this recommendation is up to the parents – unless court ordered to follow it by a judge and decree.

When parents enter into Parent Coordination, they are asked to follow these basic behavioral guidelines to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of sessions:

- DO speak respectfully to your co-parent.
- DO try hard to listen carefully and with an open mind.
- DO come prepared to think about ways in which YOU can be a better parent and co-parent. Try to take responsibility for your own difficulties.
- DO come prepared to work on apologizing, expressing thanks, on cooperating, and on compromising.
- DO try hard to express emotions like anger and frustration using calm, clear “I statements”.
- DON’T insult your co-parent, or raise your voice to express anger or frustration.
- DON’T interrupt when the other is speaking – either with words, or facial expressions.
- DON’T lecture your co-parent, nor verbally attack them.
- DON’T remain in a blaming, “it’s all your fault” position.
- DON’T go back in time to old grievances that occurred during the marriage.

You have a right to expect me, as your Parent Coordinator, to keep the focus on the best interests of your child/ren at all times. You have a right to expect me to be fair, and neutral, though always with your children’s needs in the front of my mind. You have a right to expect me to be respectful to both parents equally at all times.

During every session, I will keep notes about what items are discussed, and what behaviors, chores, tasks have been agreed to by each parent. I will copy my notes at the end of each session and either hand them to both parents or mail them to you soon after the session. When parents agree to do something by a certain date, or agree to work on a certain behavior, future sessions may refer back to earlier notes to illustrate and remind both parents of the previous agreement.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Parents will be asked to sign releases to allow me to communicate with attorneys, the judge, the custody evaluator, and/or any therapists working with family members if I feel such communication would be helpful or essential in working with the parents. If Parent Coordination is court ordered, I will be communicating with the Court about the progress of our work, but I will notify parents before doing so, and parents will be told what my report will say.

ROLE OF CHILDREN IN PARENT COORDINATION

I may suggest that I meet with your child/ren at least once in order to get to know them, and to assess their current needs or problems. I may suggest to parents that a child be seen by another therapist to assess the child’s treatment needs, and I will give parents names of potential referrals if needed.

FEES, PAYMENT, SCHEDULING

My fee for Parent Coordination sessions is \$250 per 60/min session, to be paid at the time of each service. If parents wish to split the payment with each other, that's fine – both people can then write checks at the time of each session. Parent Coordination is not the same as therapy, and therefore I cannot bill it as therapy. Unfortunately, this means Parent Coordination is not reimbursed by insurance companies.

There is a charge for time I spend between sessions at the rate of \$50 per 15 minutes. This time might be spent on phone consults with attorneys, therapists, schools, or other significant people in the life of the family. I also may spend time reviewing emails, writing emails, writing reports, or talking to clients on the phone. Clients will always be aware of my involvement in such activities – these activities are generated by the clients' needs, and our discussions during sessions. Bills for accumulated time spent on this kind of case management are sent to clients at the end of each month, and prompt payment is requested.

Parent coordination sessions are most useful when they continue for several months, and can be scheduled on a bi-weekly, or monthly basis. **Parents should be prepared to meet more often during times of intense conflict or crisis, and can meet less frequently when their collaboration is working well.** I will make every effort to schedule appointments around parental schedules, but please make a note that I do not see clients in the evening, or on weekends.

Sessions must be cancelled AT LEAST 48 HOURS in advance or full fee will be charged to the parents for that session.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF PARENT COORDINATION:

- The vast majority of couples who divorce do so amicably, and without litigation. Among the approximately 5 – 10% of cases in which parents litigate custody and visitation issues, a smaller percentage of parents return to court repeatedly to litigate parenting issues and conflicts. *In states that have documented the effect of parent coordination on frequency of court appearance, studies have found that among this group of parents, court appearances decrease by as much as 75% after the parents begin to participate in Parent Coordination sessions. This means a huge savings in court time for these parents, a huge savings in money spent on legal process and attorneys and a significant decrease in stress experienced by all family members, particularly the children.*
- Research shows that children show better school, emotional and intellectual functioning five years after divorce in families where there is a friendly, working relationship between divorced parents than in families still experiencing parental conflict and hostility. Parent Coordination is aimed at creating a friendly, working relationship, and decreasing conflict and hostility. Children will benefit from these improved relationships.