

Parenting Coordinators

By K. Dean Kantaras and Joanna Hotalen

Family courts often see some of the most conflict-driven and emotionally taxing litigation. Parties to a divorce are often anxious, angry, and wounded people who often have very different versions of events as to what caused their marriage to fall apart. The uncertainty of what life will be like post-judgment only fans the flames of such vexing disquiet. Yet even while weathering one of the most painful experiences of their lives, parents still must act in the best interests of their children. Parents with solid parenting skills and the best intentions may struggle to act in their children's best interests while navigating the minefield that can be family court.

This is where a parenting coordinator may ease the burden on families. With the 2009 enactment of § 61.125, Fla. Stat., parenting coordinators were added to the tools that family courts may use in an effort to ameliorate the effects of parental conflict and alienation on the children of divorcing parents. The statute defines a parenting coordinator as "an impartial third party appointed by the court or agreed to by the parties whose role is to assist the parties in successfully creating or implementing a parenting plan." Parenting coordinators specialize in helping parents create customized parenting plans that minimize their children's exposure to parental conflict, while also keeping their developmental needs in mind.

Parenting coordinators have a unique skill set and must meet certain qualifications in Florida. Ideally, a parenting coordinator is a licensed mental health professional who is also a state-certified mediator in family law. Mediation experience provides a foundational knowledge of the legal system, as well as conflict resolution and communication techniques, while a background in mental health allows a parenting coordinator to quickly recognize



K. Dean Kantaras, Esq.

and respond to any immediate threat of parental alienation before children become so heavily indoctrinated. Florida law also requires that parenting coordinators complete a minimum of 24 hours of training in parenting coordination concepts and ethics, family systems theory and application, family dynamics in separation and divorce, child and adolescent development, and a minimum of 4 hours of training in domestic violence and child abuse related to parenting coordination. Judges also have the discretion to require additional qualifications based on a family's specific needs.

Some advantages to working with a parenting coordinator is that they can provide guidance to the parties on how to co-parent effectively and work out disputes that might lead to unnecessary litigation (e.g., last-minute holiday timesharing). Keeping parents out of court is also more

time-efficient and curtails legal fees. Working with a parenting coordinator also empowers parents with the ability to make mutually acceptable agreements rather than be bound to one drafted by a Judge. For parents who cannot escape the cycle of discord and tension, a parenting coordinator can help structure timesharing in ways that minimize the potential for conflict while ensuring that the children maintain access to both parents. Although it is preferable to have a parenting coordinator involved from the outset of divorce litigation, many are also appointed post-dissolution when prior agreements are no longer workable or where conflict arises.

Attorneys are knowledgeable as to the damage parental conflict causes and appreciate the distinct role that qualified parenting coordinators have in family court. Attorneys know that the right parenting coordinator is an invaluable asset who can create space for cooperative co-parenting. That is exactly why attorneys must be very selective in choosing a parenting coordinator that is the right fit for each individual family. An experienced family law attorney can help parents select the most qualified parenting coordinator that meets their family's specific needs. ❖

EDITOR'S NOTE: K. Dean Kantaras is the managing partner of K. Dean Kantaras, P.A., a firm handling cases in family law and immigration. Mr. Kantaras is board certified in marital and family law by the Florida Bar. He has been practicing for over 25 years and is "AV" rated by Martindale-Hubbell. Joanna Hotalen, Esq. is an associate attorney at the firm and a member of the Florida Bar. She is a graduate of Barry University, Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law. Their offices are located at 3531 Alternate 19, Palm Harbor, 34683, (727) 781-0000 and 1930 East Bay Drive, Largo, 33771, kantaraslaw.com.