



Quarterly E-Newsletter

Volume 2

January 2006

Parent Coordination, the Vermont Model

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Recognizing the profound harm suffered by children who witness domestic violence, a pioneer project, called Parent Coordination, was piloted in Vermont in 1996. Jennifer Barker, the first director of the Vermont Family Court Mediation Program (VFCMP), joined forces with a community domestic violence program, a local counseling service, and a rural parent child center to obtain a grant for this pioneer project. The administration of the project was under the VFCMP.

Parent Coordination is designed to address some of the issues faced by family members victimized by domestic violence. The overriding mission is to find ways to lessen the burden on children whose lives have been affected by ongoing, relentless conflict and abuse. Because these cases are not appropriate for mediation, the Vermont Judiciary established Parent Coordination as a statewide service. Currently, the services are delivered by fifteen private service professionals who are under contract. A state oversight committee provides program protocols and the VFCMP manages the administrative functions and provides ongoing supervision for each Coordinator.

Training in domestic violence, substance abuse, family dynamics, Vermont Family Law, etc. are integral for individuals to begin the lengthy integration into Parent Coordination. There is a rigorous application process, which also includes a criminal background check. Parent Coordinators must have an initial sixteen hours of domestic violence training and eight hours of substance abuse training before a contract is issued. Thereafter, annual

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education and training is mandatory for all Coordinators, which includes a requirement for advance training in domestic violence. Coordinators receive training and education both through the program as well as other sources. Domestic violence advocates, substance abuse counselors, and supervised visitation centers often suggest and provide trainings for the program.

When a case is identified as suitable for Parent Coordination, parents are asked if they wish to use this service. If they stipulate to enter the program, it will become a Court order, but at any time, either party may terminate the process. Parent Coordination works in incremental steps with a number of interim parenting plans prior to a final plan being put in place. This allows for numerous opportunities to “grow” into a plan and to experiment with a variety of steps along the way.

Parents may file an objection to a parenting plan at a status conference, usually held every 8 to 12 weeks during the Parent Coordination process. Parental Rights and Responsibilities (custody) are not in the purview of the Coordinator, although our work could impact final decisions regarding custody.

Because many of the families referred to Parent Coordination have very limited income, the VFCMP, which is funded by the legislature, provides a uniform sliding fee scale. The fee scale is based largely upon the parent’s income, so a parent may pay as little as five dollars an hour. Each parent pays for only their portion of the services and parents do not necessarily pay at the same rate. Beyond that, there is a “cap” on the number of hours spent on each case, so parents understand their payment responsibility at the outset of the process.

The Coordinator works and meets separately with each parent. In advance of those meetings, the Coordinator has made a thorough review of family/district court files. Additionally, each parent has filled out a multi-page, detailed questionnaire. The parent with legal authority has signed a release providing the Coordinator access to additional records and professionals. In a domestic violence case, the Parent Coordinator views everything through the lens of safety and protection and special needs of family members. This becomes even more necessary in the recognition that Parent Coordination is a non-confidential process and Coordinators may reveal pertinent information to the court. Domestic violence advocates and attorneys have been helpful to the program by creating some working guidelines in this area.

Throughout the process of establishing, modifying or otherwise addressing parent/child contact by the non-custodial parent, the Parent Coordinator has been trained to:

- understand the basic dynamics of abuse and domestic violence
- recognize and handle a batterer’s manipulative language and behaviors
- be aware of the mindset and belief systems of the battering parent
- know the effects of domestic violence on children

Some basic tools that a Parent Coordinator usually employs include:

- ordinarily not delivering communications between the parents. Instead, Coordinators may indicate that an idea is coming from her/him.
- perhaps altering the parent to parent or parent to child communications, depending upon concerns of threats, force and/or manipulation. A recommendation may be that phone conversations between the parent and child are taped.
- using safe exchange methods. E.g. often an aggressor's family members make poor exchange supervisors because they themselves may be intimidated or intimidating.
- possibly recommending the use of supervised visitation so that the children do not get interrogated or hear negative statements made about the custodial parent.
- creating parenting plans and asking for input from the parents, but not so that they negotiate or interact with each other. In fact, minimal contact between the parents and parallel parenting are more often than not the best outcomes in a case of domestic violence.
- writing extremely detailed parenting plans that may state two or more contingencies, making it difficult for manipulation or a claim of misinterpretation to occur.
- writing parenting plans that are behaviorally, not attitudinally, stated.
- creating parenting plans that do not put an unfair burden on a survivor parent. E.g. if the reason for using a supervised center is because of domestic violence, then the aggressor parent pays the charges to the center.

It is never expected that Parent Coordination services will result in successful co-parenting or parental cooperation/collaboration in the raising of the child/ren. Nor is this process appropriate for every case. Vermont Parent Coordinators simply attempt to establish a reasonable and safe contact schedule for the parent and the child/ren.

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