

*This article was written in 2012 for a series that used to appear on the Texas AFCC Chapter web page. While that series is no longer available, I've preserved the short article here, including the original bio that went along with it. – Dr. Robb*

### **A brief discussion on the major differences between Parenting Coordination, Parenting Facilitation, and Family Therapy**

What follows below is an excerpt from a letter that I used to send out with such regularity I turned it into a generic form letter to help educate attorneys who were sending me cases. While it is much less common for me to send the form letter these days, it still occurs, and I have come to realize that if even attorneys are somewhat confused by the differences between all of these services it must be especially hard for the general public, who hopefully will have little need for such services on a regular basis, to sort them out.

Parenting coordination is confidential under the same provisions as mediation (see Texas Family Code 153.0071 (g) referring to Texas Civil Practices and Remedies Code Chapter 154). Much like mediators, parenting coordinators cannot be called as witnesses and cannot provide feedback to the court. This differs from both court appointed counselors (where the traditional patient-therapist privilege does not fully apply in suits affecting the parent-child relationship) and from parenting facilitators. Parenting facilitators are significantly similar to parenting coordinators, however their role is in a non-confidential capacity where they also can be directed to monitor the family's compliance with court orders and assist the parents in acting in the best interests of children (TFC 153.6083 and 153.6061). Parenting facilitation differs from counseling in this monitoring role as well – ethically counselors have obligations primarily to the persons they are serving, whereas parenting facilitators are primarily responsible to the court and working to see (to the extent possible) that parents are acting in the best interests of the children in question. The Family Code requires that the duties of parenting coordinators and parenting facilitators be specified in the appointment order (TFC 153.606 and TFC 153.606 & 153.6061) so there should never be confusion about which service was ordered or what duties are intended. When there is confusion (such as inconsistent references to both being a parenting facilitator and parenting coordinator, or provisions for the parenting coordinator to provide detailed reports back to the court) the order will need to be clarified before proceeding.

Nationally parenting facilitation-type services (non-confidential alternative dispute procedures for high conflict families) are known by a number of names, including parenting coordination and special master, which leads to significant confusion at times. While parenting coordination initially referred to a non-confidential service (Garrity & Barris 1994; Gould 1998), in Texas parenting coordination was enacted as a confidential procedure, very similar to transformative mediation for high conflict families, by the 79<sup>th</sup> legislative session. The non-confidential service now known as parenting facilitation has been used informally in Texas even longer than parenting coordination, although due to the invasive nature of the process it is intended only for the most high-conflict cases. During the 81<sup>st</sup> legislative session procedures for parenting facilitation were codified and the new statutes governing that process took effect 9/1/2009.

- Differentiating the need for family counseling or parenting coordination, and the limited need for parenting facilitation

Something I am frequently asked about by courts attempting to assist parents is what works “better” for families? In the end “better” is defined by what needs the particular family has, as there is no “one size fits all” answer to co-parenting issues. I have come to the conclusion that for parents who want to work on co-parenting issues, but who do not need the level of directive oversight that is provided in parenting facilitation, family counseling is generally the most appropriate and cost-effective service. For parents who want assistance crafting an agreed parenting plan or who have other mediation-like needs that may be best suited to a multi-session approach (rather than a one-off mediation session) parenting coordination can be a useful tool for identifying common ground and building communication skills to the point where parents are able to resolve their issues. Family counseling, on the other hand, is quite useful for resolving intra-family problems, such as difficulties in parent-child relationships, and promoting healthy continuing relationships between parents and children. It has the added advantage that parents who have mental health coverage through their insurance carrier can often seek reimbursement for counseling, significantly reducing the cost of services. While I have encountered parenting coordinators who are essentially acting as family therapists while taking advantage of the confidentiality provisions of the parenting coordination statute I remain unconvinced that this is either appropriate or necessary. While I discourage parents from calling family therapists to testify or provide recommendations to the court, I also realize that this may be necessary at times to protect the best interests of children. For families in need of more directive, solution-focused conflict resolution (often where one or both parents have serious issues with their functioning) parenting facilitation services provide a method of accountability while working to build skills necessary to move forward with minimal outside involvement in the long term. Each service is appropriate for different needs, and by carefully considering what the issues and long term goals are families can better determine which interventions will bring them the most benefit.

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