

LOS ANGELES COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION FAMILY LAW SECTION
SPECIAL MASTER COMMITTEE
(Leslie Ellen Shear, Chairperson)

**PARENTING PLAN COORDINATOR
(Child Custody Special Master)
INFORMATION SHEET**

What is a Parenting Plan Coordinator (PPC)?

A Parenting Plan Coordinator is a professional appointed by the Court *by stipulation of the parties* to resolve recurrent disputes between parents concerning the clarification, implementation and adaptation of a court-ordered parenting plan. The parents give the PPC the power to make certain decisions about parenting plan issues when they are not able to do so. Major decisions are reserved for the Court, but the PPC may make recommendations about those major decisions.

Which Families Benefit From Appointment of a Parenting Plan Coordinator?

Most often, a PPC is appointed for families who have recurring issues and disputes relating to their parenting plan, after there has been a custody evaluation and a court order. Appointment of a PPC may also be valuable once a temporary order is in place, pending an evaluation, in situations where the family is experiencing many changes, stresses or difficulties. A PPC may help manage cases in which a parent and child are rebuilding a relationship which has been interrupted or damaged. Another situation in which appointment of a PPC may be appropriate is when one parent suffers from an intermittent recurring problem which impacts upon caretaking capacity, such as substance abuse or mental illness.

A PPC resolves disputes about issues such as schedule changes, extracurricular activities, holidays, vacations, special events, adaptation of a parenting plan to meet the rapidly changing needs of an infant or toddler, managing a child's behavior, school selection, health care decisions, difficulties at the exchange of children between parents, and problematic behaviors by one or both parents.

How Successful Is the Program?

Santa Clara county studied the experiences of a 166 families who choose to use PPC's in 1994. Those 166 family's cases had accounted for 993 court appearances in the one year

before appointment of the PPC (average of six appearances per case). Those same 166 cases produced only 37 appearances in the one year following appt. of the Special Master.

What Is the Decision-Making Process Like?

The Parenting Plan Coordinator uses a mediation-arbitration approach to informally resolve disputes which arise between parties. After initial meetings to get to know the family, many decisions are made based upon phone, fax and e-mail communication with the parties.

What is the Difference Between a PPC and a Mediator

In mediation, no decision is reached unless both parents agree. The mediator facilitates decisionmaking, but has no power to make decisions. By stipulating to appointment of a PPC, parents give the PPC the power to make decisions when the parents cannot agree.

What Qualifications Should the Parenting Plan Coordinator Have?

Persons appointed as PPC's should be mental health professionals or family law attorneys with many years of experience in working with high conflict custody cases in a court-connected setting as an evaluator, mediator, family law attorney or judicial officer. The PPC should have substantial expertise in the custody law and in the needs of children and families after separation or divorce. It is helpful for the PPC to have completed at least a full day of PPC/Custody Special Master training, in addition to substantial training and/or experience in mediation and other dispute resolution skills.

What are the Advantages of Using a PPC?

- A PPC can facilitate parallel parenting, reducing the need for stressful contact between parents.
- A PPC can make frequent small decisions when they arise, which otherwise would require an *ex parte* or Order to Show Cause.
- Informal decisionmaking is far less expensive than litigation.
- The PPC works with the family and gets to know them well. Decisions are apt to be better-tailored to the needs of the family as the PPC's knowledge of them grows.
- A PPC can help parents improve their communication with one another, and help them recognize what communication is necessary and what is not necessary.
- A PPC can be selected who has expertise about an issue of particular importance to the family such as needs of

infants, substance abuse, learning disabilities, special medical needs, etc.

- A PPC can help keep children out of the middle, and help them grow up seeing their parents successfully manage and resolve conflicts.

Who Pays for the PPC?

The parents are responsible for paying the PPC. The stipulation appointing the PPC sets forth the responsibilities for payment. Most PPC's will require a security deposit, which is refunded at the end of the PPC's term if not applied. In addition, most PPC's will require advance payment for services.

What If We Don't Like the PPC's Decisions?

Most decisions of the PPC may be reviewed by the Court at the request of either party by Order to Show Cause. If both parents are dissatisfied, they can enter into a stipulation to terminate appointment of the PPC or to select a new PPC. Complaints about the PPC should be raised with the Court by Order to Show Cause. Like judges and custody evaluators, the PPC is protected by "quasi-judicial" immunity. This means that the PPC cannot be sued. The reason for giving the PPC this protection is that the PPC may make decisions that one parent may not like. If the PPC was afraid to make decisions because of the risk of lawsuits, no professionals would be willing to serve as PPC's.

Please see the Order Appointing Parenting Plan Coordinator for more detailed information.