

## Changing Your Parenting Plan

Sometimes separated or divorced parents discover that their parenting plan is not working well for them. It may be that there has been a change in a work schedule and the agreed upon access schedule is no longer convenient. Or it may be that a child has taken a new interest in a sport or activity and provisions for who pays for it or how time is managed is not included in the existing parenting plan. Prior to 2011, regardless of the reason why the plan was no longer working, parents had only one avenue to amend their existing parenting plan and that was through the Family Court System. This was expensive (because you have to hire a lawyer) and time consuming (because the court date could be months away). This is no longer the case.

Since 2011 ex-spouses who are co-parenting have the opportunity to bypass the Family Court System and make amendments to their existing parenting plan by working with a Parenting Coordinator. The Parenting Coordinator (PC) can assist in settling any parenting issues that may arise except making a change to access or custody orders. Some issues that a PC would reconcile are: time sharing, routines between homes, daycare, transportation or exchange plans, extracurricular activities, education needs, discipline strategies, or planning for special occasions or events like a 13<sup>th</sup> birthday party or bar mitzvah.

The benefits of choosing to work with a PC are numerous: PC is the only method of resolution when all other methods have failed for high-conflict couples. The PC can preserve the privacy of the proceedings unlike the public forum of the Family Court System. And clients can choose the PC they work with thus exercising more control over the process whereas they do not have a choice in which judge hears their case. The most significant advantage of PC is the dual role of mediator and arbitrator. The PC begins with mediation and attempts to involve all parties to find a resolution to the issue. However, unlike a mediator, should the parents be unable to agree on a resolution, the PC can arbitrate and make a binding decision that becomes a fully enforceable addendum to the agreement or award. Thus, choosing a PC is prudent (especially when there are time sensitive issues) because you can bypass the Family Court System but still reap the benefit of a binding decision. And the cost is a fraction of returning to your lawyer and Family Court.

The key benefit of amending a parenting plan is because any conflict that arises out of an unsatisfactory plan runs the risk of transmitting to the children that you are arguing *about them*. The long term consequences of feeling caught between battling parents are well documented. Please don't waste any time arguing about a parenting plan that doesn't fit anymore. Regardless of who you hire (a lawyer or PC) it is of utmost importance that your family functions optimally even after a separation or divorce for the children's sake.