

## **The role of the Parenting Coordinator**

It is a difficult decision to end your relationship, especially where children are involved. But the reality is we don't ever really end that relationship *because* of the children. You both will *always* be parents to the children and therefore *always* be involved with one another. When the process of ending a relationship was solely in the hand of the legal profession, the parenting focus was on type of custody and determining an access schedule. Much attention was paid to the outcome like who got the children on major holidays or significant dates. But little attention was paid to the process such as how mom and dad negotiate those issues that cannot be contracted. When conflict arose, the only recourse was to return to family court. But things have begun to change.

In the summer of 2011, the Attorney General implemented a program whereby divorcing couples are required to attend an information session to introduce them to alternatives to litigation. Increasingly separated and divorced couples have the option to seek alternative dispute resolution avenues (ADR). What this means is should ex's be challenged by an issue that is absent or poorly defined in their separation agreement or divorce award, they no longer have to return to their lawyer and wait for their day in court. They now can enlist the assistance of several professions, including Parenting Coordinator.

Parents may enlist the PC when they have chosen to separate to help plan how their family will function. The PC can help prepare the Parenting Plan to be included in the separation agreement drafted by the family lawyers. This is a wise choice because many PC's are therapists who have extensive knowledge about children and/or clinical experience working with families experiencing transitions. Knowledge of childhood development stages and tasks will create a Parenting Plan that is not only responsive to the immediate needs of children, but is flexible to accommodate their changing needs too. For those parents who are already separated/divorced sometimes a parenting issue arises from their existing agreement or award. While the PC cannot change access or custody orders, s/he can assist in settling important parenting issues like what school a child will attend or routines between homes.

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 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.