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# Guidelines for the Practice of Parenting Coordination

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American Psychological Association

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These guidelines are designed to address the developing area of practice known as *parenting coordination*. In response to the recognition by family courts and substantial evidence in the empirical and clinical literature that divorce does not end patterns of high parental conflict for some families (Garrity & Baris, 1994; Hetherington, 1999; Johnston, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), parenting coordination interventions began to be developed more than two decades ago. In the past decade, parenting coordination work has expanded across states and jurisdictions (Kirkland, 2008; Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

The course of the divorce process is commonly one of heightened anger and conflict, anxiety, diminished communication, and sadness or depression for one or both partners. These negative emotions are often accelerated by the separation and the adversarial nature of the divorce process. Although the majority of parents significantly diminish their anger and conflict in the first two to three years following divorce, between 8% and 15% continue to engage in conflict in the years following divorce, with little reduction in intensity of their feelings (Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Kelly, 2000, 2003; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Generally, this relatively small group of parents is not able to settle their child-related disputes in custody mediation, through lawyer-assisted negotiations, or on their own. They turn to litigation in the years following separation and divorce to settle these disputes and utilize disproportionate resources and time of the courts. They are more likely to have significant psychological problems, which may interfere with their parenting, and they more often expose their children to intense conflict and intimate partner violence, also commonly referred to as *domestic violence* (Johnston et al., 2009). As the negative impacts of continued high conflict on children became well established in the empirical and clinical literature (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Emery, 1999; Grych, 2005; Hetherington, 1999; Johnston et al., 2009), family court judges, divorce intervention researchers, and psychologists practicing in the divorce and family area explored alternative interventions that would diminish the use of the adversarial process to resolve child-related disputes and deal effectively with these parents to reduce the conflict to which children were exposed (e.g., Cookston, Braver, Griffin, deLusé, & Miles, 2007; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007; Emery, Kitzman, & Waldron, 1999; Henry, Fieldstone, & Bohac, 2009; Johnston, 2000; Kelly, 2002, 2004; Pruett & Barker, 2009; Pruett & Johnston, 2004; San-

dler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, & Smith-Daniels, 2005).

Parenting coordination began gaining recognition in the 1990s as a result of presentations and trainings first offered at conferences, such as those of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), and by experienced parenting coordinators (PCs). Initially, there were variations in role, source and degree of authority, and practice in different jurisdictions, and different titles were used to describe this innovative intervention model, including *special masters*, *coparenting facilitators*, or *mediator/arbitrators*. In 2003, AFCC appointed an interdisciplinary task force to develop guidelines for parenting coordination to guide mental health professionals, mediators, and lawyers with respect to training, practice, and ethics (AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, 2006).

The complex and hybrid parenting coordination model continues to be refined in professional deliberations about the role, emerging statutes and case law, and court and local rules and regulations governing parenting coordination practice at the local jurisdictional level. These American Psychological Association (APA) "Guidelines for the Practice of Parenting Coordination" are intended to provide a specific framework and direction for psychologists for professional conduct and decision making in the practice of parenting coordination. Although designed for psychologists, many aspects of these guidelines may be relevant to other professionals as well.

The literature reviewed in drafting these guidelines was selected by the members of the APA Task Force for the Development of Parenting Coordination Guidelines

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to include the most seminal, relevant, and recent publications.

## Definition of Parenting Coordination

Parenting coordination is a nonadversarial dispute resolution process that is court ordered or agreed on by divorced and separated parents who have an ongoing pattern of high conflict and/or litigation about their children (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004; Deutsch, Coates, & Fieldstone, 2008; Kelly, 2002, 2008). The underlying principle of the parenting coordination intervention is a continuous focus on children's best interests by the PC in working with high-conflict parents and in decision making. Parenting coordination is designed to help parents implement and comply with court orders or parenting plans, to make timely decisions in a manner consistent with children's developmental and psychological needs, to reduce the amount of damaging conflict between caretaking adults to which children are exposed, and to diminish the pattern of unnecessary relitigation about child-related issues. Parenting coordination is appropriate pre- or postdecree, though it is most widely used as a postdecree model of intervention for parents who have demonstrated an inability to resolve their disputes through other dispute resolution and adversarial processes, such as mediation, initial settlement conferences, and custody evaluations. Arbitration is a central component of the practice of parenting coordination, where permitted under state law, local rule, or by court order. Recent research provides some preliminary evidence of the benefits of parenting coordination for high-conflict families and for the courts (Henry et al., 2009; Lally & Higuchi, 2008; Scott et al., 2010).

Parenting coordination is generally not a confidential process. The PCs may be authorized to speak with other professionals involved with the family, and the court may require documentation regarding parenting coordination interventions and outcomes. PCs do not disclose clients' records or information except as relevant to the parenting coordination process, in emergencies, or as authorized by court order or written agreement of the parties.

In these guidelines, the term *parents* is used generically when referring to any adults who have legal standing and/or have a caretaking role with the children in dispute, for example, grandparents, guardians, other relatives, or nonbiological parents.

## Purpose of Guidelines

The role of the PC differs in significant ways from the usual roles of psychologists and requires specialized knowledge and training, including mediation and arbitration skills, familiarity with relevant legal contexts, and experience in assisting parents with high conflict (AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, 2006; Coates et al., 2004; Kelly, 2008). These guidelines describe best practices for ethical and competent functioning in this unique role. State laws

and court and local rules may govern the practice of parenting coordination. In addition, psychologists who provide parenting coordination services are familiar with relevant APA standards and guidelines, including the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (APA, 2002), hereinafter referred to as the ethics code; "Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists" (APA, 1991); "Record Keeping Guidelines" (APA, 2007); "Guidelines for Psychological Evaluations in Child Protection Matters" (APA Committee on Professional Practice and Standards, 1999); *Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings* (APA, 2009); and "Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists" (APA, 2003).

The term *guidelines* as used here refers to statements that suggest or recommend specific professional behaviors, endeavors, or conduct for psychologists. Guidelines differ from *standards* in that standards are mandatory and may be accompanied by an enforcement mechanism. The following guidelines are aspirational and intended to facilitate the continued systematic development of the profession and a high level of practice by psychologists. They are not inclusive of all considerations and are not intended to take precedence over psychologists' judgment.

## Undertaking the Parenting Coordinator Role

**Guideline 1. Psychologists endeavor to understand the complexity of the parenting coordinator role and to distinguish it from other professional roles.**

**Rationale.** Psychologists who provide parenting coordination services endeavor to understand the PC role, including sources of authority and appropriate activities, in order to maintain professional boundaries and to avoid incorporating clinical, forensic, or legal practices that are beyond the scope of the PC role.

**Application.** The PC's role is to reduce conflict between parents by providing parent education, guidance, and coaching; facilitating discussion about children's needs and parenting priorities; obtaining information for mediating disputes as they arise; arbitrating decisions as necessary; encouraging compliance with court orders; and developing methods to improve the communication between parents and facilitate constructive parenting, as appropriate.

The PC role can be initiated in one of three ways: The parents and PC sign a formal private consent agreement; the parties agree to the use of the PC, which then may become a court order; or the court orders the use of the PC in certain high-conflict cases. The PC's professional relationship is with the parents and is defined by a written agreement, regardless of the way in which the role is initiated. PCs strive to ensure that both parties are fully informed about the parenting coordination process and role and freely consent to participate. If a court orders parenting coordination over the objection of one party, the PC may decline the appointment or later withdraw from the case if the parenting coordination services are not effective. PCs

may meet with parents together or individually and privately, when indicated. For example, PCs may meet with parents individually when there are concerns regarding potential abuse or significant power imbalances or to avoid high-conflict interactions between family members. PCs with appropriate training and experience may find it helpful to interview children when their views and opinions would help parents achieve resolution of a particular dispute in a manner that meets the psychological, social, or academic needs of the child. PCs may also meet with other involved caretakers or professionals when their input would be relevant to decision making.

The number and timing of sessions with the parents will vary on the basis of the frequency and complexity of disputed issues and the amount of information needed to mediate or arbitrate the conflict. In new cases, PCs typically have several sessions with the parents to become acquainted with the family and the parents' major concerns but may then decide that further sessions are not necessary until notified by a parent that a dispute needs to be addressed by the PC. Phone contacts of varying lengths and e-mail communications are typical in parenting coordination cases. PCs engage in the use of e-mail and other types of electronic communication cautiously to protect sensitive information and comply with relevant legal and ethical requirements.

Parenting coordination services are distinct from other types of professional services that may be utilized by separating or divorcing parents, such as legal services, custody mediation, custody evaluation, divorce coaching, marriage and family counseling, or couples therapy. The role of a PC differs from the clinical role of a psychologist in various ways. In the PC role, the psychologist does not provide formal psychological evaluations or testing, offer any psychological diagnoses, or render individual, family, or marital therapy or counseling services to the parents or children. Such clinical assessment or psychotherapy intervention services are referred to other providers as deemed necessary or helpful. If the PC is concerned about the children's or any family member's safety because of parental mental illness, family violence, substance use, or other conditions or behaviors, the PC considers appropriate actions, such as making a referral in a timely fashion, reporting concerns to the court, or contacting law enforcement or child protection authorities.

PCs may provide assistance to the court within the scope of their role; however, they may not provide legal advice. The functions of a PC do not include forensic assessments of the parents or children with whom the PC is working. Forensic training and expertise as a child custody evaluator, mediator, or child abuse evaluator may be valuable in preparing for the PC role, but these experiences taken individually or together are not ordinarily sufficient for undertaking parenting coordination practice without further specialized training. Moreover, although clinical experience will be useful in negotiating the complex practice of parenting coordination, clinical training is not sufficient preparation for the PC role.

## Gaining and Maintaining Specialized Psychological and Legal Knowledge

**Guideline 2a. Psychologists strive to gain and maintain specialized knowledge and training in psychological domains that are relevant to the parenting coordination role.**

**Rationale.** The practice of parenting coordination requires the acquisition and application of specialized psychological knowledge relevant to effective implementation of the PC role. PC psychologists strive to acquire more specialized knowledge through activities such as formal continuing education and case-specific consultation.

**Application.** Psychologists strive to augment professional knowledge by means of formal professional development prior to serving as a PC. Specialized PC training addresses important substantive areas that include but are not limited to the following: objectives of the PC role and function; types of parental disputes that arise and require resolution; differences between the work of the PC and other professional roles of psychologists; combinations of dispute resolution techniques (e.g., mediation techniques, arbitration, and parent education) used to assist parents in resolving their parenting disputes; provisions of the court order or stipulated agreement governing the PC's work; protocols for initiating parenting coordination cases and maintaining working alliances with parents and children over time; case and conflict management techniques; analyzing disputes and drafting of decisions; and management of specific ethical dilemmas related to the PC role (Kelly, 2008). Such knowledge generally requires participation in basic and advanced PC trainings offered by highly qualified and experienced professionals. To gain understanding of these important aspects of the PC's role and function, relevant trainings would ordinarily be comprehensive of the substantive areas just listed and of sufficient duration and intensity to enable psychologists to function competently in the PC role and to meet statutory requirements.

Relevant and important psychological knowledge for PCs includes understanding of empirical and clinical research on the impact of relationship and marital dissolution on parents and children. Of particular value is research focused on risk and protective factors predicting child and adolescent outcomes and ways of fostering resilience in children or families affected by separation and divorce. The knowledge base regarding children includes the dynamics of complex postseparation situations, such as refusal to visit a parent, parental undermining of the child's relationships with the other parent, relocation of a parent, and the inappropriate involvement of the child in parental disputes. Knowledge pertinent to parents involved in the parenting coordination process includes the dynamics of parents with continuing high levels of conflict, including how personality disorders, mental illness, and substance use contribute to disputes; the impact of high parental conflict on the quality of parenting; and effective interventions that reduce acrimony and restructure the parenting relationships. Un-



Understanding the ways in which high-conflict divorces and intimate partner violence overlap and interact is crucial for determining whether, when, and how parenting coordination interventions can be undertaken and proceed safely and constructively (Johnston, 2006). Additionally, the knowledge base of intimate partner violence, child abuse, and trauma includes understanding the dynamics, warning signs, long-term effects, and appropriate interventions for family members. Other relevant areas of psychological knowledge include the following: family dynamics; communication patterns; family life cycle development; normative infant and child development and mental health; developmentally appropriate methods of interviewing children; the impact of a child's or parent's disability on family functioning; diversity issues; and cultural context (see also Guidelines 4 and 5b).

Review of these topics may not reflect a sufficient and exhaustive understanding of the content relevant to all parenting coordination cases. The PC may need to gain additional specialized knowledge or training.

**Guideline 2b. Psychologists strive to understand legal authorities, terminology, and procedures that affect parenting coordination practice.**

**Rationale.** PCs function in a specialized area in which their actions are generally governed by legal authority applicable to PCs (e.g., statutes, regulations, case law, and state and local court rules) as well as by legal authority used in the particular case or by the particular PC (e.g., court orders or private consent agreements). Thus, the PC needs to have adequate familiarity with the relevant legal terminology and authorities. Qualifications for practice as a PC may be specified by state and local laws, rules, or regulations (e.g., education and training requirements).

**Application.** Psychologists strive to acquire specialized knowledge of legal concepts and procedures specifically relevant to PC functioning prior to undertaking the PC role. Relevant legal knowledge ordinarily includes the following issues: the role and authority of the PC, including the PC's decision-making authority and procedures (e.g., disputed issues that can be addressed and/or decided by the PC); the distinction between the PC role and other clinical and forensic psychological roles and the practice of law; state and federal arbitration statutes; immunity from civil damages for any acts or omissions in the role of PC, if applicable; custody statutes; domestic violence statutes; statutory requirements and reporting obligations arising from cases of intimate partner violence or child maltreatment; and ex parte communications.

Court orders or private consent agreements for specific cases ordinarily cover the issues listed in the prior paragraph as well as the following: legal source(s) of the PC's authority; the PC's reporting to the court; limits to confidentiality and privilege; authority and procedures pertaining to interviewing the children, parents, and involved professionals; grievance processes; and fees.

## Competencies Necessary for the Parenting Coordinator Role

**Guideline 3. Psychologists acknowledge the importance of providing services consistent with the highest standards of their profession and strive to undertake the parenting coordinator role only if they have the necessary specialized competencies.**

**Rationale.** Specific professional competencies (e.g., relevant professional knowledge domains), personal competencies (e.g., ability to work effectively with persons in high conflict and potentially volatile situations), and cultural competencies as well as relevant experience are advisable for the practice of parenting coordination. State and local laws, rules, or regulations may specify particular requirements for practice as a PC (e.g., professional degree in law or mental health, training on domestic violence, mediation training). Given the unique and complex role of the PC, competencies for standard psychological practice are generally insufficient for competent functioning as a PC.

**Application.** Consistent with competencies for psychological practice in other areas, critical competencies for PCs include the following: using research- and practice-based knowledge; writing clear and detailed recommendations, agreements, decisions, and reports to the court documenting the resolution of parental disputes; practicing in a culturally competent manner by recognizing personal biases and values (see Guideline 5b); and understanding the ethical and legal responsibility to maintain competency (AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, 2006; APA, 2002, Standard 2.03).

Professional and personal competencies of the PC help high-conflict parents settle their disputes and comply with court orders in ways that are in the best interests of their children, while recognizing and maintaining sensitivity to the fact that there may be situations in which the children's interests seem to vary from those of one or both parents. These competencies include the following: the ability to engage in a careful, fair, and disciplined consideration of relevant data and evidence; understanding alternative views; relationship skills, such as empathy, respect, and self-awareness; engaging in professional problem solving in a systematic manner; collaborating with the parents to identify outcome-oriented goals for both parents and children; understanding interpersonal processes and how to establish, maintain, and conclude a professional relationship with high-conflict parents; and establishing interpersonal boundaries and guidelines for effective communication. These competencies may enhance the resolution of parental disputes, may reduce the demands of parents or their legal representatives arising from anxiety, anger, miscommunication, or ambiguity; and may mitigate the harmful impact of the parents' conflict on the children.

Awareness of one's own personal and professional biases, values, and opinions enables the PC to avoid undue

influence over parents' agreements or parenting plans. Knowledge of the polarizing effects of high conflict or a history of abuse between parents helps the PC to avoid making unwarranted alignments with one parent. The PC endeavors to base professional guidance of parents and decision making on empirical social science research regarding children's psychological and developmental needs, cultural context, diversity, and best interests.

Problem-solving competencies may be strengthened by participation in case supervision, professional and peer consultation, and continuing education. To resolve problems effectively in the parenting coordination process, these professional supports are often helpful to PCs in assessing whether they are setting appropriate limits with parents, remaining impartial, and making appropriate efforts to settle parental disputes. Such supports may also be helpful in learning to work collaboratively with legal, medical, and mental health professionals as well as lay persons and other professionals who have regular contact with the families.

## Family Violence

**Guideline 4. Psychologists aspire to facilitate healthy environments for children and appropriate parent-child relationships while ensuring the safety of all family members in the parenting coordination process.**

**Rationale.** Parents who have a history of prior or current domestic violence, also commonly referred to as *intimate partner violence* (Johnston et al., 2009), may present substantial safety risks or power imbalances and may not be appropriate for parenting coordination. In determining whether to accept such cases, the PC seeks to rely on the extensive empirical and clinical research involving violence between partners, including research differentiating among patterns of domestic violence (Dalton, Carbon, & Olesen, 2003; Ellis, Stuckless, & Wight, 2006; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Johnston, 2006; Johnston et al., 2009; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). PCs are aware of their professional and ethical responsibilities and take great care to avoid any harm that their professional interventions may have on others with whom they work (APA, 2002, Standard 3.04; APA Committee on Professional Practice and Standards, 1999).

**Application.** The terms *high conflict* and *domestic violence* are often used interchangeably; however, they do not describe the same types of interactions. Of greatest concern is the pattern of violence characterized by coercion and control, psychological abuse, intimidation and threats of harm, economic control, and often severe physical and sexual violence. Victims of such violence are at very high risk following separation and in contested custody cases and may be best served before and after divorce by court intervention. In other families, violence may have occurred as a result of conflicts escalating out of control with one or both partners being violent toward the other. In such cases, the dynamics of power and control are less likely to be

present, injuries are infrequent, and victims are less likely to be afraid of the other.

PCs carefully determine whether a specific case involving past or present intimate partner violence or child maltreatment is appropriate for the PC process, with a particular focus on safety concerns and substantial power imbalances. PCs understand that when intimate partner violence and/or child maltreatment is present or alleged in a custody case or ongoing litigation, parent-child contact may create opportunities for renewed intimidation, violence, or trauma and pose risks of abuse and exposure to the children. PCs use their professional judgment in carefully reviewing any evidence, allegations, or findings regarding family violence, harassment, intimidation, and current power imbalances when deciding whether use of a PC is safe or appropriate. The PC also carefully considers the safety risks posed by the ordered parenting plan. When PCs determine that a case is appropriate for parenting coordination, PCs take great care throughout the process to protect family members from being abused, exploited, or intimidated directly by another family member or indirectly through a family member's attempts to manipulate the parenting coordination process.

The scope of parenting coordination interventions may need to be significantly limited or modified in some cases, with an emphasis on monitoring parties' adherence to court orders and facilitating safe implementation of the court orders and parenting plans. The PCs strive to take into account power imbalances when providing mediation and arbitration to the parties. The appropriateness and implementation of parenting arrangements, either ordered or stipulated, are carefully considered in view of the emotional and physical safety of any children or parents who may have experienced, may be exposed to, or may be the target of threatened or actual abuse. The PC may utilize various methods (e.g., parallel parenting) to minimize safety risks in the parenting plan. The PC understands the duty to inform the appropriate authorities of suspected incidents of child abuse or neglect and/or risk to self or another that meet mandatory reporting standards for their jurisdiction.

## Ethical Considerations

**Guideline 5a. Psychologists strive to be familiar with sources of ethical and professional guidance that may be relevant to the provision of parenting coordination services, including the APA "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct."**

**Rationale.** PCs use knowledge of ethical principles to maintain structure, compliance, and professional integrity in a role that may be challenged or questioned by the clients, lawyers, and/or courts.

**Application.** Knowledge of sources of ethical guidance will assist the PC's efforts to avoid dual or sequential roles that may result in perceived or real compromises of professional impartiality or effectiveness.

When serving in the role of PC, the PC refrains from providing formal evaluations or psychotherapeutic or counseling services to any of the parties or family members, including parent, guardian, child, stepparent, grandparent, or other family member (APA, 2002, Standard 3.05a). Following termination of the PC role, the PC generally does not enter into a sequential role of mediator, custody evaluator, psychotherapist, or counselor with any member of the family (AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, 2006). If the PC has served as a custody evaluator or mediator for the family, any decision about undertaking the PC role is done with caution and careful consideration of the changed requirements pertaining to issues such as limits to confidentiality, the orders of the court, informed consent, and the agreement or contract with the court and/or clients. The PC endeavors to be aware of the ethical risks in doing so and considers consultation with other professionals to help the PC avoid potential conflicts or adverse outcomes as a result of changing roles.

The PC strives to ensure that parties are adequately informed about all aspects of the PC role per court order or private consent agreement, as specified in Guideline 2b, including the limits of confidentiality (APA, 2002, Standard 4.02). The PC also strives to ensure that all parties adequately understand that when parents are not able to make essential joint decisions about their children, they may effectively delegate the decision making to the PC (APA, 2002, Standard 3.10; see also Guideline 5b next).

As in all psychological services, prior to providing services, PCs ordinarily explain to parents that in cases of suspected child abuse or neglect, by requirement of law, psychologists must report their concerns to the appropriate authorities as governed by state law. Likewise, the obligation to report endangerment to one's self or others is explained.

Psychologists aspire to be aware of and conduct research in this new area of practice following APA's ethics code (APA, 2002, Standard 8). In addition to usual ethical concerns in conducting and disseminating research, psychologists are aware of the litigious nature of high-conflict divorce and the limits to confidentiality of the PC process.

**Guideline 5b. Psychologists strive to recognize and respond to relevant sources of professional guidance about multicultural and diversity issues in the provision of parenting coordination services.**

**Rationale.** Consistent with the APA's "Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists" (APA, 2003), PCs endeavor to engage in culturally informed and competent practices. Lack of awareness and understanding of these issues may influence the PC's professional judgment and decision making.

**Application.** PCs strive to develop and maintain their awareness of, respect for, and responsiveness to the diversity of families' cultural contexts. Specifically, PCs consider how factors and personal biases pertaining to age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity,

culture, religion, disability, language, and socioeconomic status influence the parties' and the PCs' values and expectations regarding family dynamics and parenting. PCs endeavor to understand expectations and behaviors regarding parenting practices that are based in frameworks different from their own and to integrate this knowledge into their interventions. They are aware of the legal frameworks pertaining to marriage, custody, and adoption that may present unique challenges for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer parents. Additionally, consideration of the impact of stigmatizing familial and societal dynamics is critical when parents and/or children have a disability. PCs strive to be knowledgeable about sources of information and guidance relevant to culturally specific issues presented by each parent and child. PCs seek appropriate professional consultation and/or other sources of information as they work with parties with differing experiences and identities.

## Record Keeping

**Guideline 6. Psychologists aspire to create and maintain professional records that are appropriate for the specialized role of parenting coordinator while conforming to the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" and the procedural requirements of the law.**

**Rationale.** Psychologists have an ethical and professional responsibility to develop and maintain records in accordance with APA's ethics code (APA, 2002, Standard 6.01) and APA's "Record Keeping Guidelines" (APA, 2007). PCs strive to create and maintain adequate records that provide a sufficient foundation for any decisions, changes in the parenting plan, or other parenting coordination interventions regarding the parents' functioning and that satisfy requirements of the legal process.

**Application.** Parenting coordination records form the basis for guiding high-conflict parents toward settlement of disputes and, when permitted by court order or private agreement, for arbitrating or making decisions to settle such disputes. All records are generated with the understanding that the records may be accessed through court order, subpoena, or other means and reviewed by lawyers, the court, and/or the clients. The level of detail included in the records is sufficient to enable other professionals and the court to analyze and understand the PC's decisions. Sufficiently detailed records promote higher quality professional work and enhance the psychologist's credibility and accountability if records are accessed by court order or subpoena. The psychologist strives to protect the security of paper and electronic documents as described in APA's "Record Keeping Guidelines" (APA, 2007) and to be aware of applicable laws and regulations regarding the security and retention of records.

When the term of service of the PC ends, some parents may continue to need the services of a PC and may select a new PC to fulfill the role. The prior PC strives to ensure continuity of service by transferring appropriate records and documents to the newly appointed or engaged PC, if



authorized by the initial court order or private consent agreement or by parents' written consent following termination of parenting coordination services.

Confidentiality of records in the provision of psychological services is mandated for psychologists by law, regulation, and/or ethical standards (APA, 2002, Standard 6.02). Parenting coordination is ordinarily intended to be a model of service in which traditional rules and expectations of confidentiality are modified such that the PC, with the backing of a court order, signed acknowledgement or stipulation, or releases by parents, can speak with all family members and potentially to anyone who is familiar with the family and may have relevant information to assist in dispute resolution. PCs nevertheless maintain the responsibility to safeguard, store, and dispose of records in a manner consistent with APA's "Record Keeping Guidelines" (APA, 2007), APA's ethics code (APA, 2002, Standards 6.01 and 6.02), and relevant laws and regulations.

Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to provide parents and/or their legal representatives with reasonable access to records reflecting the activities of the PC. PCs, however, may consider limiting the access of parents to notes from or regarding children or the other parent or to collateral interviews or other materials when there is substantial risk that such access may cause potential harm to the child or the persons involved. If necessary, the PC may seek court guidance regarding access to records.

## Case Management

### ***Guideline 7. Psychologists strive to engage in responsible parenting coordination case management and billing practices.***

**Rationale.** PCs take reasonable steps to assure their ability to give each case the time and attention it requires. Timeliness is particularly important in parenting coordination work given the high level of conflict between parents and the significant issues affecting children's adjustment. To promote effective case management, PCs' policies regarding payment are typically outlined in advance in their written agreement.

**Application.** PCs seek to manage their workloads so that services can be provided in a comprehensive, competent, and timely manner. When allowed by court order or stipulated agreement to make decisions, the PC seeks to respond expeditiously and to notify the parents of the timeline and process for decision making or arbitration. The PC strives to gather all necessary information to make carefully considered decisions.

The court or the legal representatives for the parents, rather than the PC, ordinarily makes the determination of the appropriate division regarding payment for parenting coordination services. The PC endeavors to clearly explain to the parents and their legal representatives the basis of fees and costs, including any fees associated with cancellations or postponements. Fees are set and work conducted with awareness of and sensitivity to issues surrounding limited financial means when parents have been court ordered to receive services.

Because parenting coordination services are distinct from clinical assessment and treatment, there may be differences in billing procedures. Psychologists acting as PCs are not providing health care and do not bill insurance for any services provided in the PC role. When billing, PCs accurately represent the nature of their services (APA, 2002, Standards 6.04a, b, c, d, and 6.06). Thus, all charges for parenting coordination services reflect the actual time expended in direct face-to-face services, in other activity directly related to the case, or as directed by law, regulation, or rule governing the PC role in that jurisdiction. PCs maintain awareness of the potential financial impact on each parent of parenting coordination services.

PCs may notify parents in advance of their unavailability for extended periods of time. PCs ordinarily contract their services for a specified period of time in stipulated agreement with the parties or are appointed by the court for a defined time period. If, prior to the end of the contracted term or court appointment, the PC is no longer able to work with the parties in a productive and/or unbiased manner or must discontinue services for personal reasons, the PC provides written notice giving a reasonable time period or specifying the period before termination as determined by state law or local rules. If appointed by the court, the PC requests the court to vacate the order of appointment. The PC ordinarily makes reasonable efforts to explain to parents the mechanism for vacating the PC appointment. Prior to terminating services, the PC suggests alternative service providers as appropriate. If termination of services is initiated because of financial limitations or disagreements, PCs discuss this issue with the parties as early as possible and consider referrals to community services that may help meet the immediate needs for parenting plan support of the parents, children, and/or court (APA, 2002, Standard 6.04d).

The stipulation, agreement, or order ordinarily includes a clearly stated grievance process to be followed in the event of a disagreement between the PC and either or both parties about services, fees, termination, or other substantive aspects of the case. The PC endeavors to make this grievance process clear to parents at the start of the case.

## Collaborative Relationships

### ***Guideline 8. Psychologists strive to develop and maintain professional and collaborative relationships with all other professionals involved in the case.***

**Rationale.** Parenting coordination work is interdisciplinary in nature and typically involves collateral contacts with other professionals who have knowledge of or provide services to family members. To facilitate this aspect of their work, PCs strive to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with other professionals, including those in the legal, medical, mental health, and educational communities that serve the parents and children.

**Application.** The PC ordinarily has access to many professionals involved with family members, includ-

ing custody evaluators, lawyers, school officials, day care providers, clergy, and providers of mental health, medical, and dental care. The PC strives to establish and maintain productive collaboration with other professionals, whether coordinating professional services or developing consensus on how to meet the needs of the family.

In making requests for information that might involve the confidentiality or privilege rules of other professionals, the PC considers the constraints under which these professionals may be operating in their roles and, especially, the safety and protection of all parties. When properly released information is received from other professionals, the PC assumes responsibility for its use, maintaining confidentiality especially of information that does not bear directly on coparenting or is not otherwise needed for acting effectively as a PC.

## Conclusion

Parenting coordination is a nonadversarial dispute resolution role that is court ordered or privately agreed on by high-conflict divorced or separated parents. Its purpose is to promote the best interests of the children while reducing levels of parental conflict and litigation and the resulting negative impact on children. Parenting coordination is designed to help parents implement and comply with their parenting plans, make timely decisions in a manner consistent with children's developmental and psychological needs, and reduce the amount of damaging conflict between caretaking adults to which children are exposed. The role of the PC differs in significant ways from the usual roles of psychologists and requires specialized psychological and legal knowledge, mediation and arbitration skills, familiarity with the relevant legal contexts, skilled attunement to professional boundaries germane to the PC role, and experience in assisting high-conflict parents. Although both clinical experience and forensic experience provide useful skills for the practice of parenting coordination, additional specialized training is needed to function competently in the PC role.

These guidelines describe best practices for ethical and competent functioning as a PC. They are not inclusive of all considerations and are not intended to take precedence over psychologists' judgment in any particular case. Although designed for psychologists, many aspects of these guidelines may be relevant to other professionals as well. These guidelines are aspirational and are intended to promote the continued systematic development of this area of practice and to facilitate a high level of practice by psychologists.

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