

Parenting Coordinators' Practice Recommendations: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to understand the experience of seven parenting coordinators in using parenting coordination practices that they have found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators to achieve the following goals: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic coding. Initial findings suggest that there exists useful practice techniques toward achieving these goals, and supports a practice model informed by practitioners' evaluation of the efficacy of their chosen methods in the context of their practices. Participants report promoting cooperative co-parenting, stress parental autonomy, and supported parental decision making over parenting coordinator recommendations. Practical implications are discussed.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

“Parenting coordination” is an emerging legal-psychological child-centered intervention in which “parenting coordinators” work with separated or divorced parents whose ongoing conflict can adversely affect parenting and place their children at risk. Among the primary goals of parenting coordination are: to aid such “high-conflict” parents in parental conflict, increase the quality of parenting, and promote positive outcomes for their children. Educating “high-conflict” parents on the potential impact of their conflict on their children is often also seen as crucial. Where parents cannot agree, some parenting coordinators may be authorized by a court to make recommendations or decisions for them.

In in-depth interviews of practicing parenting coordinators, seven participating mental health professionals report practices that they have found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators to be used in educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination. Participants report promoting cooperation in coparenting, stress parental autonomy in parenting, and supported parental decision making over parenting coordinator recommendations. Practical implications are discussed.

This study's importance lies in addressing the very limited knowledge of what practices have been found to be effective in achieving the goals of parenting coordination and in promoting its training and use. The results suggest that there exist useful practice techniques toward achieving its goals, and supports a potential model of practice informed by practitioners' evaluation of the effectiveness of their chosen methods in the context of their practices.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem and its Setting

The detrimental impact of ongoing parental conflict on children following separation and divorce has led mental health professionals, family law attorneys, and family court personnel to seek alternatives to traditional legal and psychological interventions that fail to ameliorate, and in some cases exacerbate, discord and consequent harm (Sullivan, 2013). The result has been a policy and procedural shift toward less adversarial and more collaborative approaches to child custody disputes. Studies have shown that the resulting addition of court provided parent education in developmental and other child-related issues for all divorcing parents (Deutsch, 2008) and court mandated mediation to support settlement of custody and access disputes outside of litigation (Emery, Sharra, & Grover, 2005) yield good results in encouraging some divorcing couples to recognize the risks of their actions, and refocus on the needs of their children (Thoennes & Pearson, 1999).

Meanwhile, changes in social and judicial policy based, in part, on evidence of the benefit of significant post-divorce contact with both parents, has led to the rejection of a “maternal preference” in custody adjudication and an increased frequency of joint legal and joint or “shared” residential custody even in high conflict cases (Nielson, 2014). Thus the problem of managing high-conflict families is more salient today, because more high-conflict parents are now sharing custody (Sullivan, 2013).

Shared custody is seen as providing a means for children to have continued access to both parents while allowing parents to divorce (Adam & Brady, 2013). It is generally agreed, however, that the quality of parent-child interactions is usually more important than the quantity of time spent (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Joint legal custody means joint decision making,

requiring greater parental communication. Joint or shared residential custody requires greater parental interaction. In high-conflict cases, children can suffer because of their legal custodial parents' inability to jointly make timely decisions in their best interest (Boyan & Termini, 2005). They may also be exposed to a toxic amount of hostile interactions resulting from the greater need for parental communication and custody exchanges related to joint or shared custody (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

Parenting Coordination. Parenting coordination emerged as a legal-psychological hybrid form of alternative dispute resolution for binuclear families that transcends parent education, mediation, and a multitude of other family services to meet the needs of children of separated or divorced parents who remain unable to retreat from battle, or protect them from its consequences (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Its perceived purpose is to aid in parental conflict resolution, reduce parental conflict, increase the quality of parenting and co-parenting relationships, and promote positive outcomes for otherwise at-risk children (Carter & Lally, 2014; Greenberg, 2010).

The role of a parenting coordinator originated with the concept of a therapist who can, on occasion, assume a more directive or authoritative role, hence: "coordinate" (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Since its introduction in the 1990's, judges and lawyers practicing in the area of family law have supported the involvement of parenting coordinators to provide accessible and knowledgeable professional interventions for high-conflict families (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

High conflict families make up approximately 8% to 12% of divorcing parents but can take up an estimated 90% of court time and resources in frequent litigation (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan & Sydlik, 2003; Neff & Cooper, 2004). Crowded dockets and limited

resources have handicapped courts' ability to adequately address the long-term consequences of parental conflict (Brewster, Beck, Anderson, & Benjamin, 2011).

Studies have found parenting coordination to be successful in reducing court dockets overwhelmed with post-divorce parenting issues (Brewster et al., 2011; Henry, Fieldstone, & Bohac, 2009). In a study of the effectiveness of parenting coordination in reducing the burden on Judges and other court personnel, Brewster et al. reviewed 21 archived Pima County, Arizona Court case files for the periods 2 years prior to and 2 years following the assignment of a parenting coordinator in each case. The results revealed a significant 56% reduction from an annual average of 18.4 legal documents filed by parents during the first 2-year time period to an annual average of 8.1 legal documents filed in the 2-year period following parenting coordinator assignment. The same study also showed a significant 83% reduction from an average of 6.38 hearings during the first time period to 1.10 hearings during the 2 years following the parenting coordinator's appointment.

An earlier study looked at case files and court records to compare the number of motions filed by 49 Florida couples in the year prior to and the year following the implementation of parenting coordination in each case (Henry, et al., 2009). Looking specifically at those motions requesting court intervention in child-related matters, the results demonstrated 75% fewer child-related motions, (29 as compared with 116) in the first year of parenting coordination compared to the prior year.

Most parenting coordinators are mental health professionals or family law attorneys, in private practice, who may use mediation, psycho-education, family systems, psychotherapeutic techniques, coaching, and, at times, arbitration skills, along with their knowledge of child development and relevant family law and family court procedures in a practice that is not, and

ethically cannot be, mediation, therapy, or the practice of law (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Greenberg, 2010). Parenting coordination is seen as a challenging role for practitioners because it presents a practice model requiring substantial knowledge, skill, and practice experience with high-conflict parents (Kelly, 2014).

Parenting coordination may be agreed to by the parties or mandated by the court. It has been distinguished from traditional post-divorce counseling or therapy by the potential to include client accountability, parenting coordinator monitoring, lack of confidentiality, and waiver of privilege allowing the parenting coordinator, in the best interest of the children, to communicate with third parties, provide court testimony, or seek court intervention (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Courts retain sole jurisdiction to make custody determinations and cannot defer decisions on substantial changes to an existing access schedule to a parenting coordinator. Where other parenting coordination interventions fail, however, judicial or legislative empowerment may also vest in a parenting coordinator the ability to make enforceable decisions for the parties regarding such things as transportation arrangements and time and place for pick-up or transfer of their children (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

Some experts see this authority as an essential element of parenting coordination (Sullivan, 2013). It has also been the cause of constitutional debate, leading to judicial and legislative limitations, and, in one instance, the controversial banning of parenting coordination practice in the State of Pennsylvania in 2013 (PA Rule of Civil Procedure 1915.11-1, 2013). The State of Maryland, for example, permits parenting coordinators, practicing under the auspices of the court, post-judgment decision making only on minor and temporary modifications to child access provisions and only if authorized by court order and such authorization is agreed upon by the parties in writing or on the record [Annotated Code of Maryland, Maryland Rule of Civil

Procedure 9-205.2(g)(9), 2014].

Parenting coordination is now practiced in over thirty states with, at last report, eleven states providing some form of general legislative authority (Kelly, 2014). Its growth has seen significant variations in implementation across jurisdictions (Sullivan, 2013). It has been suggested that there are even more distinctions among individual practices within those jurisdictions (Sullivan, 2013). Differences related to confidentiality and decision-making authority and lack of uniformity in other areas, such as prior professional experience and parenting coordinator training, may alter the dynamics of the process and lead to substantial variations among and within parenting coordination practices (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). Guidelines developed by the AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination in 2005, and by the American Psychological Association in 2011, are often cited but remain expressly “aspirational”, creating neither standards nor legal rules for practice (American Psychological Association, 2011; Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 2005).

A review of the literature also reveals a growing investment of time, effort, money, and hope into parenting coordination practices and projects. In 2009, for example, the District of Columbia Superior Court funded a unique parenting coordination program that had started as an American Psychological Association pilot project in 2005 (Lally, Higuchi, & Joyner-Hall, 2014). *The Parenting Coordination (PC) Project Implementation and Outcomes Study Report* (Scott et al., 2010) of the District of Columbia project reports promise in parenting coordination while cautioning that research on the effectiveness of these programs is still limited. The authors call for additional research that would include exploring what components of parenting coordination are most effective and the efficacy of parenting coordination on improving parents' communication and cooperation and reducing their level of conflict. Although research has

continued in the ensuing four years, little information is available as to how parenting coordinators use practice interventions to accomplish their goals (Fieldstone, Carter, King, & McHale, 2011; Hayes, 2010; Belcher-Timme, Shorey, Belcher-Timme, & Gibbings, 2013).

A study described by Hayes (2010) is among the few attempts to address this deficit. Using information obtained from fourteen semi-structured parenting coordinator interviews that included five case-based vignettes around commonly occurring ethical and legal dilemmas in parenting coordination practice, and the education, assessment, coordination, conflict management, and decision making functions of parenting coordination, the author's conclusions and implications reference practitioner reported client concerns about stagnation as against progress in the process and call for additional practice research to determine whether parenting coordinators are simply the custody police. Similarly, one reported justification for the need to explore actual practices of parenting coordinators raises the question as to whether it will ultimately be the parents or the parenting coordinator who will be making parenting decisions that circumscribe the life of a child (Greenberg, 2010). A scarcity of knowledge related to actual practices has compromised policy makers' and practitioners' abilities to respond to legal and ethical questions that have been raised about the practice or provide guidance to practitioners in what constitutes recommended practices (Hayes, 2010).

In the field of mental health, the term "best practices" has been used to describe methods and techniques that, through research or clinical experience, have shown results superior to those achieved through other means and may lead to benchmarks for other practitioners (Corcoran & Vandiver, 2013). The goal of the reported research was to explore those practices that participating parenting coordinators have found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators to achieve identified goals of parenting coordination. The parenting

coordination goals selected for the study were taken from existing studies and policy statements in parenting coordination literature suggesting that these are primary goals of parenting coordination (see e.g. Belcher-Timme et al., 2013). They include educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination.

This approach is unique in that few studies have looked at actual practice strategies and interventions, and none at this in-depth qualitative level in which parenting coordinators identify and discuss their recommended practices. The importance of this study lies in the increased risk to children of high conflict separation and divorce (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and the conception of parenting coordination as its best remedial opportunity through the dedicated work of legal and mental health professionals who have experienced the battlefield on which these children live. Its importance also lies in the number of children potentially at risk.

The impact of divorce on children. In the 1990's, over one million children each year experienced their parents' divorce (Amato, 2001). According to a 2009 U.S. Census survey, thirty-four percent of couples married in that same decade had divorced by 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). A 2013 American Community Survey found that only forty-six percent of children younger than eighteen years of age were living in a home with two married parents in their first marriage, down from sixty-one percent in 1980 and seventy-three percent in 1960 (Livingston, 2014). The remaining sixty-four percent of children seventeen years or younger resided with at least one parent who had remarried (15%), or with a single parent (34%), or had no parent at home (5%) with most of these latter children living with grandparents

While the divorce rate has declined from its 1990's fifty percent level, the projection remains that forty-three percent of marriages will end in divorce (Mitcham-Smith & Henry,

2007). Half of all births to young women are now outside of marriage (Sawhill, 2014).

The suggestion of a continuing downward trend in divorce (Miller, 2014) is counterbalanced by an increase in the more fragile cohabitation unions (Kelly, 2014).

Fifty percent of divorces involve children, with more than half of these children under the age of eighteen years, and coming, along with children of separated unmarried parents, within the jurisdiction of Courts assigned to protect their interests (Wang & Amato, 2000). Children and adolescents may be affected by divorce in almost every aspect of their lives, with potential impact on their social, psychological, and emotional adjustment as well as behavior and school achievement (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Ramsey, 2001). It is estimated that ten percent of children from continuously married families have serious psychological or social problems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This number rises to twenty to twenty-five percent of children affected by divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The level of conflict between divorcing parents has been identified as the best predictor of child adjustment (Amato, 2001). Research also indicates that it is not the presence of conflict, nor the structure of the post-separation custody arrangement, but the nature of post-divorce parenting, that makes the difference for a child (Beckmeyer, Coleman, & Ganong, 2014; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children in joint or shared custody arrangements do better if parents shield them from conflict, nurture and support them, value their relationship with the other parent even if solely for the sake of their child, and put aside their own negative feelings to make mutual decisions for their well-being (Boyan & Termini, 2005). It is the lack of these parental accommodations that typifies most high-conflict cases referred for parenting coordination (Fieldstone et al., 2011).

In a typical separation or divorce, children may experience adjustment issues related to

family transitions (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Family members, sometimes with the aid of belief systems, community organizations, and social networks, can help many of these children cope without undue adverse consequences (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Walsh, 1998). High stress conditions can overwhelm the effect of these services, however, rendering both mothers and fathers unable to effectively use supportive resources (Hetherington, 1989).

Children caught in the middle of a high-conflict divorce may become messengers, manipulators, mediators, and spies, or be called upon to “parent” their own father or mother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). A child may become estranged from a rejecting or distancing parent or aligned with a parent with whom the child empathizes or sympathizes (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). “Parent alienation” evidenced by a child’s alignment or enmeshment with one parent and his or her obdurate vilification of the other parent, with no apparent basis for the absolute rejection of the targeted parent, is seen as the most intractable consequence of extreme parental conflict (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Response to parental conflict can manifest in less dramatic variations on this theme, but still leave children caught in the maze created by their parents’ interactions and reactions. A parenting coordinator is generally authorized to recommend that family members may benefit from individual or family therapy for the parent-child subsystem in these instances (Hass, 2014). A qualitative study can best address, for example, parenting coordinators’ perceptions of, and experience with, recommended practices for convincing angry or hesitant parents to accept and follow through on such recommendations.

Even in less extreme patterns of behavior of high-conflict parents, officers of the court become frustrated with their inflexibility, intractable positioning relative to their children, and inability to communicate civilly (Fieldstone, Lee, Baker, & McHale, 2012). Judges lose patience with vindictive court filings and unending litigation (Fieldstone et al., 2012). This is especially

true when otherwise intelligent parents appear unaware, or dismissive, of the adverse impact of their actions on their vulnerable children. High-conflict parents have been seen as engaging in dualistic thinking (black and white, good or bad, all or nothing) so that their extreme negative behaviors are often viewed as personality disorders (Neff & Cooper, 2004). In high-conflict custody cases, parents have been known to squander their children's opportunity for a financially supported college education in irrational and vindictive legal battles.

Other discussions of parenting coordination policy further confirm the need for practice research by revealing among them a range of preferred practice emphases from, for example, parental empowerment to parenting coordinator control, while maintaining, in most cases, that the ultimate goal of parenting coordination is functional independent parenting (see, e.g. Bowen & Termini, 2005; Carter, 2011; Deutsch, 2014; Rozen, 2013; Sullivan, 2014). Parenting coordinators have the power to substantially influence the attainment of functional independent parenting with the parental patterns and family structures they support for their clients, their attitude and commitment to the process, and their acquired knowledge and skills that can be evidenced by and explored through their perceptions and use of recommended practices. Conceived as a relatively short-term solution to a seemingly impenetrable problem with children as victims, parenting coordination warranted taking this step in research toward greater understanding and efficacy.

Significance

Over the past decade, parenting coordination has come of age with varying mandates, models, training, and practice methods (Sullivan, 2013). The resultant cacophony has led to questions of how practitioners can fulfill its purposes and policy makers support successful practices (Greenberg, 2010; Lally & Deutch, 2014). There is a wealth of knowledge, a world of

practice, and abiding belief in the process. There has been, however, a lack of understanding of what practices parenting coordinators have found to be successful in their work and would recommend to others toward achieving its goals.

In the most recent comprehensive text containing contributions from acknowledged experts in the field of parenting coordination, Lally and Deutsch (2014) advocate for a move to a model of parenting coordination that can promote practices informed by evidence in the literature and by practitioners' evaluation of the efficacy of their chosen methods in the context of their practices. It is this lack of knowledge and understanding of recommended practices that remains a driving force for new research in parenting coordination (Lally & Deutsch, 2014).

Studies demonstrating reduction in the number of court filings and less need for judicial hearings since the introduction of parenting coordination may be seen as evidence that something meaningful to the family in the area of resolving immediate conflicts is being achieved. There appears to have been only anecdotal evidence, however, in the realm of parenting coordination's efficacy in other areas, such as reducing parental conflict, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting relationships, achieving functional independent parenting, and promoting positive outcomes for at-risk children (Belcher Timme, 2010; Belcher Timme et al, 2013; Bowen & Termini, 2005; Carter, 2011; Deutsch, 2014; Rozen, 2013; Sullivan, 2014). The exploration of parenting coordinators' recommended practices in parenting coordination provides important information relevant to these inquiries.

Rationale

Qualitative research employs an emerging approach subject to change in its inquiries, collects data in a manner that is sensitive to participants, and uses inductive analysis to establish patterns or themes (Creswell, 2007). Creswell submits that qualitative research befits the need

for a detailed understanding of an issue from participants whose stories need to be heard. The phenomenological ecological systems based study reported herein addressed the need for in-depth provider-focused information on recommended practices through a study of the lived experiences of practicing parenting coordinators.

The lived experiences of parenting coordinators working to persuade antagonistic joint custodial parents to put their children's needs before their own, for example, were apt subjects for qualitative inquiry (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013; Boyan & Termini, 2005). Interviews of parenting coordinators may have an impact on training by identifying and encouraging recommended practices to advance the promise of parenting coordination.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory for research on human development. In *the Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) reviews the earlier work of Hetherington and her colleagues in looking at the impact of divorce on the relationship between the dyadic subsystems of a formerly intact family, and at the ecological environment that impact divorced parents and their children. Bronfenbrenner offers a theoretical perspective for research in human development encompassing ecological as well as systemic considerations that the author sees as fitting well into Hetherington's observations of the consequences to a child deprived of the level of parental attention and support he had before his parents' separation.

Bronfenbrenner defines the complex of interrelations within a person's immediate ecosystemic environment as its *microsystem*. The second level, the *mesosystem*, is seen as a set of interrelations among two or more settings in which people may be active participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parenting coordination creates what Bronfenbrenner calls an N+2 system, inserting a third party who is capable of altering the behavior of the parental dyad in the

mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner explains that appearance in each setting (e.g. in his parents' homes and at parenting coordination) would make a child, as well as his parents who participate in the process, "primary links" in the mesosystem. The child whose interests are being served by parenting coordination, can also be seen as an "intermediate link" in a parenting coordination-parental mesosystem where his parents take part but he is not brought in as an active participant by the parenting coordinator.

Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that the potential for positive development in a mesosystem, for example, is enhanced where the roles, activities, and dyads in which a developing person engages "encourage the development of mutual trust, a positive orientation, goal consensus between settings, and an evolving balance of power in favor of the developing person" (1979, p. 212). In the context of parenting coordination, a positive development may be seen to occur where a participating parenting coordinator reports on a recommended practice toward achieving its goals that has resulted, for example, in the growth of trust, goal consensus between parents, a positive change in orientation, or a move in direction toward an evolving balance of power that refocuses on the needs of the child.

The third level, the *exosystem*, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), involves one or more settings in which a developing person is not an active participant but is affected by what happens in such settings. Influencing development in the context of an exosystem requires a causal sequence of two or more steps, the first connects events in an external setting to processes occurring in a developing person's microsystem, and the second links those processes in the developing person's microsystem to developmental changes in a person within that setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Examples provided by Bronfenbrenner, who states that some conclusions seem to assume some aspects of his theory, concern environmental conditions that

may be found to effect the treatment of children by their parents. The use of a recommended practice in parenting coordination may be seen to be or create such environmental conditions that may effect the treatment of children by his parents.

For Bronfenbrenner (1979), the outermost level of an ecosystem looks to context and is found in consistencies observed within the culture and subcultures of the three lower levels. Identified as the *macrosystem*, this level also looks to the belief systems and ideologies that motivate such consistencies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner posits that causing any substantial positive change in the psychological development of a child from a separated or divorced family may require altering existing institutions and ideological patterns. Parenting coordination is in fact a relatively recent alteration in long standing legal and psychological institutions and ideological patterns for dealing with high conflict separation and divorce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore from a qualitative methodology parenting coordinators' recommended practices for educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The overarching purpose of parenting coordination is to resolve and reduce conflict, increase the quality of parenting and co-parenting relationships, and promote positive outcomes for otherwise at-risk children (Carter, 2011). Couples often come to parenting coordination with an existing parenting agreement or custody order from the court. In high-conflict cases, it is not unusual for one or both parents to take issue with one or more of its provisions, or the way it is being implemented by the other parent, or seek to fill its inevitable loopholes with a provision to which the other party disagrees. A parenting coordinator may be called upon to assist the parents to resolve the issue, work with the parents to implement the existing custody order or agreement, alter a provision, assist the parents in constructing an appropriate parenting provision or agreement where one does not exist, or make a recommendation or decision, depending on the jurisdiction, related to custody or parenting where the parties cannot agree. In doing so, he or she may meet with the child, or involve third parties, or, where permitted, communicate with the court, while keeping in mind that beyond the instant issue, and in support of its resolution, is the ultimate goal of functional independent parenting.

The Impact of Divorce on Children

In 1991, Amato and Keith conducted a meta-analysis of 92 studies that compared children living in divorced single-parent families with children living in continuously intact two parent families. In 2001, Amato updated his prior collaboration, reviewing 67 studies published during the ensuing decade. The initial analysis, based on three theoretical perspectives (parental absence, economic disadvantage, and family conflict), covered studies conducted in the three decades between 1950 and 1989 (Amato and Keith, 1991). The results indicated that children

with divorced parents scored significantly lower on indicia of well-being that included academic achievement, internalizing problems (e.g., depression), externalizing problems (e.g. aggression, deviance), psychological adjustment, self-concept, social relations, and the quality of their relationships with their parents. Although the differences were significant, the magnitude was not large, with median effect size .14 of a standard deviation (Amato & Keith, 1991).

As to the parental absence perspective, the authors' analysis suggests that, at least during that time frame and for these studies, children living with a single divorced parent not only fared worse than children in intact families, but that death of a parent placed a child's well-being lower than that of children from intact homes, but still higher than that of children of divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991). The authors further suggest that parental remarriage can create its own consequences. From 21 studies that included stepfamilies, the meta-analysis reports a significant decrease in psychological adjustment and marginally significant decrease in conduct for children in stepfamilies as against those who continued to reside with a single parent (Amato & Keith, 1991). These earlier studies also demonstrate only weak support for the hypothesis that the amount of contact and the quality of the relationship with the non-custodial parent (at that time usually the father) was positively associated with children's well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991). This is not surprising given that the time covered preceded or paralleled the cultural change in parental role perception and fathers' growing involvement in the day-to-day lives of their children. It also may be that, in general, the more recent increase in time spent with fathers has proven beneficial to intact families, increasing father-child bonding and yielding a measurably greater level of loss when diminished by divorce.

Economic decline appeared to account in the early studies for some of divorce's negative consequences, but the differential between the samples remained, even after equating

for income (Amato & Keith, 1991). By far the greatest support was found for the theoretical perspective of family conflict, with strong significant findings supporting the hypothesis that children's well-being inversely correlates with the level of post divorce conflict persisting between their parents (Amato & Keith, 1991).

In the 2001 update covering the 1990s, Amato reports similar findings to the earlier results, with children of divorced parents scoring significantly lower in adjustment, achievement, and well-being than those whose parents had remained married, and with effect sizes comparable to the prior decade. The author suggests, however, that given the more sophisticated methodology, effect sizes should have been smaller, and opines that a 1990's increase in divorce rates in outwardly good marriages was more distressing to children or that economic expansion in the 1990s benefited intact families more than single parent families, thus producing what amounts to a greater differential (Amato, 2001). One new finding in the second meta-analysis presaged the changes that were to occur in post divorce parenting policy; results from the 1990's studies now evidenced a positive correlation in the quality of parenting for *both* the custodial and noncustodial parent with adjustment of children following divorce (Amato, 2001).

Around the same time, the impact of divorce on children reached the bestseller list. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) report on a 25-year qualitative longitudinal comparison study that began with 131 children and adolescents from 60 recently separated families in Marin County, California in 1971, involving what Wallerstein describes as the first generation in the culture of divorce. The purpose of the study was to compare the quality and nature of these children's experiences and adult relationships as against reports from a comparison group of 47 adults who grew up in intact families in the same neighborhoods and attended the same schools (Wallerstein et al., 2000). The authors conclude

that divorce is a cumulative traumatic experience that in adulthood adversely affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations in relationships, and abilities to cope with change, and that children raised in divorced families are less well adjusted as adults than those raised in intact homes. Post divorce parental conflict and the perceived loss of the attention and nurturing from parents is seen to play crucial roles in the degree of trauma to the child (Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Two years later, in *For Better or For Worse, Divorce Reconsidered*, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) reported on the results of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage, a comparison study that had started with 144 divorced families, and expanded over the ensuing 20 years to 450 families with 900 children, and two other similar large scale studies conducted by Hetherington around the same time, each through a family systems framework, analogous constructs, and the same or similar measures, ultimately involving in total nearly 1400 families with over 2,500 children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It is in this text that Hetherington reports that 25% of young adults from divorced families as compared to 10% from non-divorced families did have serious emotional, social, or psychological difficulties, but also that most were comparable to their peers from non-divorced families, and, for the first time, that a minority actually emerged enhanced as a result of their experiences.

Hazards to children of divorce revealed in these studies include loss of authoritative parenting, parentification, and continued parental conflict that divide loyalties and obstruct parents' ability to focus on their needs. Hetherington warns that although in the short run divorce is usually severely painful to a child, its long-term consequences had been exaggerated, creating what she describes as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Hetherington's findings are often repeated in the literature, her more hopeful note itself potentially self-fulfilling (see e.g. Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Data from Hetherington's

Virginia Longitudinal study have also been reported to suggest that a supportive, predictable parent-child relationship plays a critical protective role against the stressors of divorce, that a close relationship with one parent is the best protection against the rejection or emotional disturbance of the other parent, and that a temperamentally difficult child will have a harder time with divorce, attributable in part to transactions with a stressed parent (Hetherington, 1989). The juxtaposition of Wallerstein's and Hetherington's inconsistent findings, reported within two years in two best selling books, created a maelstrom of debate, but it also drew attention to the reality that courts, family law attorneys, and helping professionals could not ignore the impact of divorce on children (Usher, 2002). Utilizing relevant research is one means to this end.

Based on their clinical experience with hundreds of high-conflict families over a period of 12 years, Johnston and Campbell (1988) describe ecosystemic processes that can disable coparenting in high-conflict cases. These authors theorize that there are impasses stemming, at an intrapsychic level, from loss, humiliation, and shame; at an interactional level, from ongoing marital conflict or ambivalent or traumatic separation; and at an external-social level, from the existence of "tribal warfare" involving parents' extended family and social networks, as well as parents' interactions with mental health professionals, attorneys, and the court (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). As a trainer, practitioner, and contributor to the APA Guidelines, Deutsch (2014) has suggested that parenting coordinators should assess those impasses that contribute to a client couple's conflict.

Shared Residential Custody

In her aptly titled article, *The Cleavers Have Left the Building*, recounting more than 30 years' experience as a judge in juvenile and family court, Adam describes the end of the tender years doctrine that established a maternal preference in custody until the 1970s and the more

recent shift, starting in the mid-1990's, from sole custody awards to a preference for post separation co-parenting (Adam & Brady, 2013). Judge Adam attributes this most recent change to supportive pronouncements on shared custody in social science, enabling legislation, and expert witness testimony. From the court's perspective, successful shared custody arrangements serve to benefit divorced families (Adam & Brady, 2013).

Research on the effects of shared residential custody (defined as at least 35% of the time with each parent) has considered such things as its feasibility, children's well-being, retrospective perceptions of adolescents and young adults, and its comparative effect as against maternal residences on parent-child relationships (Nielson, 2011; Nielson, 2014). Nielson (2011) summarizes 20 studies addressing one or more of these issues and reports that most of the children in shared residential custody fare at least as well as those in maternal residences, particularly in the quality and endurance of their relationships with their father. In describing her methodology, Nielson (2011) reports that she chose not to include studies involving divorced parents who have been deemed high-conflict. Nielson attributes this choice to the level of conflict that consumes inordinate court time; challenges in designing parenting plans for high conflict cases; the potential for inter-parental aggression, violence, or abuse; and her perception that much of the discussion against shared parenting had focused on high-conflict parents.

Yet in a 2014 summary of 40 studies comparing children in shared residential custody with children in maternal custody during the preceding 25 years, the same author no longer excludes high-conflict families (Nielson, 2014). In 2014, Nielson reports that overall, except where violence exists or the child does not like or get along with the father, children in shared parenting arrangements demonstrate better outcomes in emotional, behavioral, and psychological well-being, better physical health, and better relationships with their fathers and mothers, and

highlights that these benefits remain even in the presence of high levels of conflict between their parents. The author cites this finding from a report on 1984-1988 Stanford Custody Project data collected from 1,100 divorced families with 1,406 children also mentioned in her 2011 article (Nielson, 2011; Nielson, 2014). Nielson's altered perspective, and the reported findings, suggest that by 2014, for this author at least, even high conflict cases were caught up in the prevailing custody paradigm shift from sole custody to shared parenting.

Patterns of Co-Parenting

Post separation and divorce co-parenting is in but the jury is still out on the impact on children of the nature of binuclear co-parenting relationships (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). Coparenting typologies have been described in terms of communication, cooperation, and conflict, themes that are echoed in the targets of parenting coordination (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). Common patterns of post divorce coparenting identified in the literature are "cooperative" (involving frequent communication about their children's needs, cooperation with infrequent disagreements related to caregiving, and few attempts to undermine the other's parenting), "conflicted" (moderate communication, little caregiving cooperation, and moderate to frequent caregiving conflict), and "disengaged" (virtually no communication; few, if any, attempts to coordinate care; and few opportunities for conflict) (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). The term "parallel" coparenting (conflicted or disengaged), as against cooperative coparenting, is also used (see e.g. Hayes, 2010).

Cooperative coparenting, with its frequent communication and low conflict, is usually viewed as the adaptive choice (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). Court mandated post separation and divorce parent education programs often promote its development to improve a child's adjustment (Ahrons, 2007). Unfortunately, research shows couples recommended to parenting

coordination to be high on conflict, low in cooperation, and skilled in triangulation (Fieldstone et al., 2011). Hostile couples may maintain their emotional engagement through conflict, which becomes their vehicle for communication (Johnston & Campbell, 1998). One study suggests that high-conflict post divorce couples have primitive object relations that disable their ability to live with the ambivalence or tolerate the mixed feelings of divorce and are subject to splitting and projection that can obstruct third party intervention (Cohen & Levite, 2012).

Parenting coordinators differ on the potential to reach a cooperative goal under such circumstances. Sullivan (2014), for example, recommends that high-conflict parents nearly always require a parallel rather than cooperative model of co-parenting, whereby the parenting coordinator disengages the parents as much as possible. Boyan and Termini (2005) list the disadvantages of parallel parenting in the sacrifices a child must make, such as decreased continuity between homes, diminished chance of participating in coordinated extracurricular activities, and residing in a compartmentalized world. They conclude that, notwithstanding the purpose of parallel parenting being reduction of conflict by significantly decreasing parent interactions, it should never be the parenting style of choice (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

In one study questioning whether the nature of a coparenting relationship directly influences children's adjustment, a cluster analysis of data from 270 parents taking part in a divorce related court-ordered cooperative coparenting education program was used to classify each parent's perception of his or her coparenting relationship with the other parent (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). The study addressed whether the parents' perceptions of their child's psychological, behavioral, and social adjustment were dependent upon how they perceived their coparental relationship and whether parents perceive greater adjustment where they perceive cooperative coparenting. The authors found no substantial difference in parents' perceptions of

their children's adjustment based on their perceptions of the parental arrangement, and proffered that a direct link between coparenting patterns and children's adjustment appears tenuous. What they did find, however, was significant bivariate inverse correlations between children's adjustment and coparent conflict and communication. Using family systems theory, the authors suggest that the impact of coparenting style on children's adjustment is indirect in that the nature of the coparenting relationship influences parental behavior that in turn impacts their children. The authors caution that more research is needed to make a definitive statement, but suggest that divorce educators, which include parenting coordinators, work on strengthening individual parenting, parent-child relationships, and appropriate means to prepare children for divorce (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). The subjective nature of this study, performed at a time when many parents may be experiencing the psychological stress of divorce, may call into question the direct results, but the indirect result is well established (see e.g., Hetherington, 1989). It is one reason why increasing a child's opportunity for even one emotionally available and nurturing parent supports the goals of increasing the quality of parenting and promoting positive outcomes for the at-risk child.

Parenting Coordination

Much has been written about the development of parenting coordination as a unique professional role whose primary functions may include, according to the literature: education, mediation, conflict management, conflict reduction, improving parenting, interacting with third parties, and building functional, enduring coparenting relationships (Carter, 2011; Coates et al., 2003; Henry, Fieldstone & Bohac, 2009; Hayes, 2010; Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Models of parenting coordinator training vary. For example, as trainers and authors of a seminal text on the subject, Boyan [LMFT] and Termini [LPC] (2005)

recommend that parenting coordinators have training and experience in family systems theory, developmental psychology, adult psychotherapy, parent alienation, mediation, and conflict resolution as well as legal aspects of divorce, parenting options, domestic violence, substance abuse, and, while acknowledging that parenting coordination is not therapy, psychotherapeutic techniques designed for high-conflict parenting coordination. Boyan and Termini's Cooperative Parenting Institute's Parent Coordination Model (CPI) focuses on communication between parents and the interactional interdependence of the child, immediate family, the legal system, outside agencies, extended family, and the community (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

In *Parenting Coordination, A Practical Guide for Family Law Professionals*, Carter (2011) describes another model of parenting coordination, incorporating training and experience in evaluation, as well as mediation, education, and family law. Citing the need for case conceptualization that includes a well-thought-out plan of interventions for parents and children involved in parenting coordination, Carter discusses intervention strategies such as confronting parents' blame-defense cycle to help couples disengage from conflict and highlighting the difference between perception and fact toward building parental consensus. Carter proffers that identifying and using different approaches at appropriate times is part of the "art" of the process of parenting coordination and predicts the emergence of additional parenting coordination training models with the expansion of its use.

Parenting coordination research supports its acceptance by the judicial and legal community (Brewster, Beck, Anderson & Benjamin, 2011; Fieldstone et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2009). Studies have also explored contextual factors such as statutes and other legislative mandates, demographic characteristics of practitioners, practitioner perception of the general characteristics of their clients, and the preferred structure of their practices (Fieldstone et al.,

2011; Hayes, Grady, & Brantley, 2012; Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

In a seminal survey of practice variables containing 20 questions concerning the background, years of practice, means of employment, fees, malpractice insurance and related issues, 54 parenting coordinators provided an early look at the developing practice of parenting coordination as a legal psychological hybrid process (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). Hayes et al. (2012) used a Person-Process-Context-Time theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) with the parenting coordinator as a unit of analysis in an on-line survey questionnaire of contextual factors such as statutes, rules, dynamics of clients, and background characteristics of practitioners. The most significant results reported by the 49 responding parenting coordinators included that 94% used email at least weekly to maintain contact with clients and that the most salient contextual factors are legislative mandates, personality disorders or socioeconomic factors among parents, and the education and experience of practitioners (Hayes et al.). Although aimed at context, the survey also asked for general information about the nature of interventions and reported that problem identification, communication training, education, and mediation were used by 90% of respondents and that, although therapy is not part of the process, some respondents favored conducting coparent therapy (Hayes et al, 2012). Fieldstone et al. (2012) also used an on-line survey to assess the attitudes and expectations of 17 judges, 94 attorneys, and 23 Parenting Coordinators in Florida's 11th Judicial Circuit towards the process of parenting coordination. Major findings showed that a majority of respondents from the three groups thought further training in the process would be useful and most judges and attorneys found the process to be helpful.

Research into the use of interventions has been limited. An on-line survey of 67 parenting coordinators practicing in the State of Florida provided participants with lists of options, with no

open ended questions, in order to compare responses of those with mental health backgrounds to those with family law backgrounds (Fieldstone et al., 2011). Respondents were asked, for example, to rate enumerated items identified by the authors who report that they had additional field practitioners and university researchers with backgrounds in item construction meet with them as a Committee to prepare the survey (Fieldstone et al., 2011). As a result of practitioner responses to a request for percentage ratings of items provided by the researchers, respondents report that, irrespective of discipline, over 80 % of the time respondents seek to educate coparents in the harm conflict has on their children, facilitate resolution of issues or a change in a coparenting arrangement in order to breed less conflict, teach parents about win-win agreements or to treat their relationship as they would those they had with co-workers, teach parents good e-mail manners, and contact one or both of their clients' attorneys (Fieldstone et al., 2011). Respondents report that they had continued to pursue a cooperative coparenting structure in just over half their cases, with a ratio between mental health to legal professionals of 54/51% (Fieldstone et al., 2011). In their other cases, with a ratio of 32/39%, mental health and family law professionals respectively had chosen to work to develop functional parallel coparenting (very little communication between parents and mostly by email) or, with a ratio of 14/10%, disengaged coparenting (with no contact between parents, and all child-related communication through the parenting coordinator). Given the traditional preference for cooperative coparenting following divorce or separation (Beckmeyer et al., 2014) especially toward a long term solution when a parenting coordinator will no longer be involved to coach or referee, it is notable that, unlike the Florida survey, the qualitative study reported herein was able to explore recommended practices toward an appropriate coparenting structure and, where possible, ultimately achieving a more cooperative structural change.

In the same survey, as a result of parenting coordinator's ratings from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5, Fieldstone et al. (2011) also report a greater use by mental health professionals (but not family law professionals) of meetings with children, coaching negotiation skills, and caucusing separately with parents in cases with destructive conflict (Fieldstone et al., 2011). They posit, but the survey could not explore further, that the purpose of these practices was to gather in-depth information in order to employ differentiated techniques to enhance parental communication and the process of coparenting (Fieldstone et al., 2011). Nor was there a way to learn why some respondents chose to caucus or involve children and some did not or how that choice might influence their subsequent interventions in such cases.

The survey also asked parenting coordinators to rank, in terms of participants' perceived importance for success, items including years of experience, parenting coordinator training; skills and interventions as a parenting coordinator; clients' cooperation, or lack thereof; and court support, or lack thereof, (Fieldstone et al., 2011). For success, the top average importance ratings were given to years of parenting coordinators' experience and parenting coordination skills and interventions, with no way to identify or explore such skills; for lack of success, clients' refusal to let go of unresolved issues was by far paramount, begging the question that the survey could also not explore, as to recommended practices to deal with this issue (Fieldstone et al., 2011). Fieldstone et al. (2011) expressly proffer that the survey was unable to shed light on the micro-events of parenting coordination that distinguish the success of cases, that such research is needed, and will most likely result from qualitative studies of both parenting coordinators and clients.

A qualitative study of 14 North Carolina parenting coordinators (3 with law degrees, 10 mental health degrees, and 1 with both) conducted by Hayes (2010) explored participants'

perceptions of their roles and functions in the context of common ethical and legal issues. Hayes collected demographic information that disclosed that respondents had an average of 24 hours of Parenting Coordination specific training and an average of 3.5 years experience in the field. Participants reported their perception of three major roles: parenting plan implementation; obtaining parental compliance, and resolving issues in a timely manner (Hayes, 2010). Most agreed that enforcement was their primary objective and mediation their preferred approach, with decision-making used as a last resort (Hayes, 2010). A number of participants reported being uncomfortable with assessment in parenting coordination, unsure as to what and how much information would be needed from others, and insecure about involving children in the process (Hayes, 2010). Mental health professionals were more likely to use mediation, education, investigation, and enforcement; attorneys were more likely to use mediation, enforcement, decision-making, and to involve the judicial system (Hayes, 2010). The majority of participants agreed that the primary issue in their work was educating the parents in the consequences of their ongoing conflict and accompanying behaviors on their children (Hayes, 2010). Reportedly a number of participants were most comfortable in their implementation and enforcement roles (Hayes, 2010). It is thus not surprising that more than one participant used the role analogy of being a “street cop” rather than an investigator (Hayes, 2010). It is possible in this case that their described level of training and experience accounts to some extent for these findings. The State of Maryland, for example, requires its experienced licensed attorneys and mental health professionals have at least 20 hours of training in family mediation and 40 hours of accredited specialty training in parenting coordination before starting to practice as parenting coordinators [Annotated Code of Maryland, Maryland Rule of Civil Procedure 9-205.2 (b)(2), 2014].

The third report, in 2013, presents a survey of AFCC members with experience as

parenting coordinators, n=79, conducted for a doctoral dissertation completed in 2010 (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013). Participants were asked to respond by rating their perception of the effectiveness of identified interventions on a Likert-Type seven-point scale ranging from somewhat effective, through effective, to highly effective (Belcher-Timme, 2010). The assessment and case conceptualization interventions addressed in this study included parenting coordinators' reviews of evaluations, identification of individual parental strengths and weaknesses, appraisal of general co-parenting skills, and consideration of parents' functioning and the needs of their children (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013). The mean response for all but the parenting coordinators' review of evaluations is reported in the highly effective range (between 6 and 7), with review of evaluations between somewhat and highly effective at 5.27 (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Time et al., 2013). Respondents were also asked to rate their perceptions of the effectiveness in reducing parental conflict and aiding in case resolution (defined by clients' compliance with their parenting plan and having no contact with the parenting coordinator for 90 days) of the parenting coordinator's contacting caretakers and family members, communicating with other professionals, interpreting court orders and parenting agreements, and facilitating communication as an objective third party (Belcher-Timme, 2010). Respondents are reported as having perceived their third party role as very effective, interpreting court orders and parenting agreements similarly so, communicating with other professionals between somewhat and very effective, and communicating with family members and caretakers less than somewhat effective (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013).

As to the perceived efficacy of parent education and providing information in reducing parental conflict and resolving cases, the Belcher-Timme survey (2010) listed teaching child

development, teaching effective communication skills, and informing parents of the effects of high parental conflict on children. Notably, here, mean scores were only in or slightly above the somewhat effective range (Belcher-Timme, 2010; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013). The authors note that other practitioners may differ, reference possible technical problems with survey implementation, and reflect that this is a relatively new field. It is not surprising nonetheless that the presence of a neutral third party is perceived as a strength of parenting coordination, nor apparently that it is not easy to reach hostile parents with education and communication skills. For some, who may suffer from intractable personality vulnerabilities, these latter efforts may be in vain (Sullivan, 2014). For many others, who will eventually be left to parent their children without parenting coordinator intervention, it should not be. As noted by Fieldstone et al. (2011) in their report of the results of their survey, an appropriate next step toward sought after resolutions is the qualitative study of parenting coordinators' recommended practices in parenting coordination reported herein.

Research in the methods of practice of parenting coordination, as distinguished from unrelated contextual studies, had thus identified potential practitioner roles, such as educator or mediator, and their functions, such as to educate or to reduce parental conflict; it had scanned the surface of interventions by identifying interventions such as meeting with children or caucusing with parents; and dipped a fingertip into the question of recommended practices in considering practitioner skill as paramount to success, in texts discussing models of training, and in a survey listing some potential practices. There had been little knowledge or understanding of what parenting coordinators experience as effective and recommend as practices to achieve the goals involved in the work of a parenting coordinator.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory for research on human development

Bronfenbrenner (1979) speaks to the need for multilevel supportive settings to attempt to ease the developmental disruptions to a child of divorce. Bronfenbrenner's most salient general premise relevant to the framework of the proposed study may be that events outside any immediate setting containing a person can have a profound influence on that person's behavior and development within the setting. In the reported study these events include recommended practices capable of having profound influence on the behavior and development of parents and their children. In addition to the microsystemic and mesosystemic implications of parenting coordination practices, are the potential effects at exosystemic and macrosystemic levels.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that there are few studies that meet the double requirement of an exosystem model because researchers usually just assume one or another link, such as the positive effect on a developing person. Bronfenbrenner describes one example, however, that he states approaches "a full exosystem model to the extent that the assumption of developmental effects appears quite justifiable" (1979, p. 241). It is a study of environmental factors conducive to or preventative of child neglect among low income families that found the existence of a functioning family network and church attendance to be preventative of abuse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Giovanoni & Billingsley, 1970). The reported study may similarly be seen as an exosystem model if the use of a recommended parenting coordination practice, or a result of such use, is appropriately and sufficiently linked to changes in parents' interactions with, or that effect, their child and a developmental change in the child can be similarly justifiably assumed. At a macrosystemic level, the move from the courtroom to the parenting coordinator is an institutional and ideological change that may similarly be seen to affect the psychological growth of parents or children through the use of recommended practices.

Research Question

The study set out to answer the following research question: What practices have participating parenting coordinators found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators to achieve the following goals: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination?

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Qualitative Study

To explore this research question, the study used a semi-structured qualitative interview administered to all participants. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative methodology allows the researcher to collect rich, in-depth information toward a complex, detailed understanding of an issue. Such intense, in-depth information holds the capacity to advance knowledge of effective and recommended practices in the use of interventions in the context of parenting coordination.

Participants

As reported by Fieldstone et al. (2011), differences have been observed between mental health professionals and attorneys practicing as parenting coordinators. This may be due to their professional training and experience in their underlying fields. For this reason, researchers chose to look first at mental health professionals having the requisite training and experience, including specific parenting coordination training, to practice parenting coordination under the legislative or other mandates of their respective jurisdictions. Recruitment was from a multidisciplinary family law listserv of legal and mental health professionals with approximately 1000 members and from recommendations and referrals relating thereto. The listserv includes mental health professionals practicing as parenting coordinators in the State of Maryland and surrounding metropolitan area encompassing the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia. To insure requisite post training experience, the minimum level of experience for mental health professionals practicing as parenting coordinators was 3 years.

Procedures

The study's design, procedures and instruments were submitted for Institutional Review Board approval and approval was obtained (Memorandum of August 6, 2015 attached hereto).

Subjects were identified through the listserv of family law professionals, constituting attorneys, therapists, parenting coordinators, and others in and beyond the Washington Metropolitan area. A Participant Recruitment Email (Attachment B) containing pertinent study-related and researcher contact information was distributed through email to the targeted population. Contact information—phone and email address—was obtained to facilitate follow-up. A \$35 Starbucks gift card was offered as incentive to participate.

Participants were contacted by telephone to schedule an interview. During this initial conversation a screening was conducted to ensure that each participant met the inclusion criteria set forth above (Appendix C). A face-to-face interview was scheduled with each participant at his or her office which each indicated was a convenient location that protected confidentiality. Confidentiality and the participant's right to end the interview at any time were assured (Appendix D). To protect confidentiality, all information about participants was secured in a password-protected computer file in the researcher's home. The purpose of this study was explained, questions related to the study were answered, and each participant was provided with, discussed, and signed a consent form (Appendix E). A series of demographic questions were asked, followed by the primary research questions, a process that lasted for each participant between 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio taped by the researcher, transcribed, and coded for confidentiality. Similarly coded field notes were written during and following the interviews.

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire. A short questionnaire (Appendix A) was used to collect basic relevant demographic information including professional background, parenting coordination practice jurisdiction(s), relevant training completed, years of experience as a

parenting coordinator, source of parenting coordination cases, average number of parenting coordination cases, percentage of practice devoted to parenting coordination, and duration of a usual parenting coordination case.

Semi-Structured Interview. The semi-structured interview set forth below was conducted individually with each participant. Questions focused on the individual experience of each participant in using what they identified as effective practices in parenting coordination and would recommend to other practitioners for use toward the following goals: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination. In each case “recommended practices” was defined as perceived by the participants. As befitting a qualitative study, where indicated by a participant’s response, similar information was gathered related to participants’ identification of recommended practices related to other functions or goals of parenting coordination. Probes were used to explore concepts and extract deeper meaning. Both sets of questions were completed within 60 to 90 minutes.

Introduction. I am curious about your experience in your work as a parenting coordinator with interventions that you have found to be successful and would recommend to other parenting coordinators. These may be things that you find yourself doing again and again in your practice because they appear to make a positive difference toward reaching a goal. During this interview, I will be asking you questions related to some parenting coordination goals that have been discussed in the literature, and also welcome your thoughts and feelings as to any additional recommended practices that come to mind.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. When you find parents who are unable to manage their conflict, what do you do to

help them that you would recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Probes: Specifically, to resolve conflict as it arises? Generally, to reduce parents' conflict?

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this with a couple, what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful in resolving [reducing] conflict?
- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to parental conflict to other parenting coordinators?

2. What do you do in cases that involve substantial conflict between a parent and a child that you would recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Probes: In parent alienation, in parent-child estrangement, in other substantial parent-child conflict.

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this, what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful in working with substantial parent-child conflict [parent alienation] [parent-child estrangement]?
- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to working with substantial parent-child conflict [parent alienation] [parent-child estrangement] to other parenting coordinators?

3. When you find a couple that needs help with parenting, what do you do that you would recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Probes: Co-parenting: choosing, creating, or implementing an appropriate co-parenting arrangement. Improving individual parenting skills: through caucus, referrals, creating motivation. Toward providing children with functional independent parenting, for

termination when parenting coordinator will no longer be available.

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this with a couple [individual] [family members], what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful in helping with parenting [co-parenting] [(choosing), (creating) (implementing) an appropriate co-parenting arrangement] [improving individual parenting skills]?

- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to improving the quality of parenting [co-parenting] [individual parenting] to other parenting coordinators?

4. What do you do that you find effective in educating parents that you would

recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Probes: Relevant child developmental issues. The impact their hostile actions have on their children. Other issues.

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this with a couple, what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful in educating parents?

- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to parent education to other parenting coordinators?

5. When you feel it is appropriate to involve children or other family members in

parenting coordination, what do you do that you find to be effective that you would recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Probes: making the decision to do so, getting cooperation from the parents and child/family members, considering information about the child, meeting with the child/family member.

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this, what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful in involving children [other family members] in parenting coordination?

- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to involving children [or other family members] to other parenting coordinators?

6. Do you have any additional thoughts and feelings related to recommended practices?

- a. Probes: Have I covered all of the areas related to recommended practices that you wish to share?

Follow up questions:

- a. If I were to watch you doing this, what would I see?

Tell me what that would look like.

- b. What do you think makes this approach successful?

- c. Under what conditions would you recommend, or not recommend, this approach to other parenting coordinators?

Design and Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and the tapes transcribed for the researcher. Before analysis began, the transcripts were read three times for errors in transcription and to allow the researcher to become fully familiar with the material.

As described by Corbin and Strauss (1990), data were analyzed by a process of open coding with each transcript segmented into categories of information. Significant statements,

sentences, quotes, or other indicators were marked and then categorized until all relevant data were placed within a conceptual heading. The researcher kept a journal, in which she recorded her own experiences throughout the process, their contexts, and any thoughts or questions that arose during the analysis.

All requisite effort was made to insure trustworthiness and credibility in this study. Bracketing was crucial because the researcher herself has been a licensed practicing attorney for over 30 years, specializing in family law for at least 25 of those years; has recently completed all requisite training, including mediation and parenting coordination specific courses, for the practice of parenting coordination in the State of Maryland; and is also a candidate for a Masters degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. On a personal level, the researcher has raised two sons (now 44 and 40 years of age) and she and their father divorced when they were 9 and 6 years old. As was typical at that time, the researcher was granted legal and primary physical custody of the children, subject to a visitation schedule with their father. It is for these reasons that the researcher was mindful of when her professional and personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings might have colored perceptions or jeopardized objectivity.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure reliability, a review of coding was used throughout the research process. Multiple readings of the data and cross-coding by the principal investigators helped ensure reliability. Findings and researcher interpretations were run past participants to insure a ring of truth. Validity was established through member checking, where participant input was sought regarding preliminary analyses and constructs that may emerge following the first interview. This ensured that participants' experiences were reflected accurately in the data. Participants were notified during the first interview of the potential for a brief follow-up interview.

CHAPTER 1V: MANUSCRIPT

Parenting Coordinators' Practice Recommendations: A Qualitative Study

The detrimental impact of ongoing parental conflict on children following separation and divorce has led mental health and family law professionals to seek alternatives to traditional legal and psychological interventions (Sullivan, 2013). The result has been a shift toward less adversarial and more collaborative approaches to child custody disputes. Studies have shown that court-provided parent education (Deutsch, 2008) and court-mandated mediation (Emery, Sharra, & Grover, 2005) encourage some divorcing couples to recognize the risks and refocus on the needs of their children (Thoennes & Pearson, 1999). Those who fail to benefit from court mediation and parent education are often high conflict families, who make up approximately 8% to 12% of divorcing parents but can take up an estimated 90% of court time and resources (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan & Sydlik, 2003; Neff & Cooper, 2004).

Meanwhile, changes in policy have led to the rejection of a “maternal preference” and an increase in joint legal and joint or “shared” residential custody, even in high-conflict families (Nielson, 2014). Joint legal custody means joint decision-making; shared residential custody requires greater parental interaction. Children in high-conflict families suffer from toxic parental exchanges and obstructed parental decision-making (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

The level of conflict between divorcing parents has been identified as the best predictor of child adjustment (Amato, 2001). Research also indicates that it is not the presence of conflict, nor the structure of a post-separation custody arrangement, but the nature of post-divorce parenting that makes the difference for a child (Beckmeyer, Coleman, & Ganong, 2014; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Identifying effective ways to address these issues is more salient today because more high-conflict parents are sharing custody (Sullivan, 2013).

Ecosystemic impasses to co-parenting. Based on clinical experience with hundreds of high-conflict families over a period of 12 years, Johnston and Campbell (1988) describe ecosystemic processes that can disable co-parenting in high-conflict cases. The authors posit impasses stemming, at an intrapsychic level, from loss, humiliation, and shame; at an interactional level, from ongoing marital conflict or ambivalent or traumatic separation; and at an external-social level, from the existence of “tribal warfare” involving parents’ extended family and social networks, as well as parents’ interactions with mental health professionals, attorneys, and the court (Johnston & Campbell, 1989). Deutsch (2014) has suggested the need to assess those impasses that contribute to the failures in parenting in high-conflict cases.

Parenting coordination. Parenting coordination emerged as a legal-psychological hybrid form of alternative dispute resolution for binuclear families (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Its perceived purpose is to aid in parental conflict resolution, reduce parental conflict, increase the quality of parenting and co-parenting relationships, and promote positive outcomes for otherwise at-risk children (Carter & Lally, 2014; Greenberg, 2010). Studies have found parenting coordination to be successful in reducing court dockets overwhelmed with post-divorce parenting issues (Brewster et al., 2011; Henry, Fieldstone, & Bohac, 2009).

Goals of parenting coordination aimed at educating hostile parents to make parenting decisions for the benefit of their children have been favored in the literature as consistent with the philosophy of dispute resolution in advancing and selecting effective methods that honor parents’ self-determination (Greenberg, 2010). Reports of studies and other policy statements in parenting coordination literature further suggest that educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination when relevant and appropriate to do so are primary goals

in parenting coordination (Carter & Lally, 2014; Deutsch, 2014; Kelly, 2014; Belcher-Timme et al., 2013).

Most parenting coordinators are mental health professionals or family law attorneys who may use mediation, psycho-education, family systems, psychotherapeutic techniques, coaching, and, at times, arbitration skills, along with their knowledge of child development and relevant family law and family court procedures in a practice that is not, and ethically cannot be, mediation, therapy, or the practice of law (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Greenberg, 2010).

Parenting coordination may be agreed to by the parties or mandated by the court. It has been distinguished from traditional post-divorce counseling or therapy by the potential to include parenting coordinator monitoring, lack of confidentiality, and waiver of privilege allowing third party communication, court testimony, and court intervention (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

Courts retain sole jurisdiction to make custody determinations and cannot defer decisions on substantial changes to an existing access schedule to a parenting coordinator. Where other parenting coordination interventions fail, however, judicial or legislative empowerment may vest in a parenting coordinator the ability to make recommendations or enforceable decisions for the parents regarding other child welfare matters (Boyan & Termini, 2005).

Parenting coordination is a child-focused intervention aimed indirectly, through working with parents, at reducing the risks to their children. Children may be affected by divorce in almost every aspect of their lives, with potential impact on their social, psychological, and emotional adjustment as well as behavior and school achievement (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Ramsey, 2001). It is estimated that ten percent of children from continuously married families have serious psychological or social problems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This number rises to twenty to twenty-five percent of children affected by divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

A parenting coordinator's role may include helping clients engage in an appropriate co-parenting style (Greenberg, 2010; Beckmeyer et al., 2014). "Cooperative co-parenting" with frequent communication, infrequent disagreement, and few attempts to undermine the other's parenting is the generally favored goal (Boyan & Termini, 2005). "Parallel parenting" with moderate to no communication, little cooperation, and more frequent caregiving conflict, or no engagement, has been argued to be the norm in parenting coordination cases (Sullivan, 2013).

Parenting coordination has been seen as a forum to address "parent alienation" in the context of improving parenting and co-parenting (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Parent alienation is evidenced by a child's alignment with one parent and baseless rejection of the other parent and experienced as the most intractable consequence of extreme parental conflict (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Response to parental conflict may be less dramatic, but still leave children hostage to ecosystemic impasses that disable their parents. (Fieldstone, Lee, Baker, & McHale, 2012; Johnston & Campbell, 1989).

Children in joint or shared custody arrangements do better if parents shield them from conflict, nurture and support them, value their relationship with the other parent even if solely for the sake of their child, and put aside their own negative feelings to make mutual decisions for their well-being (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Most high-conflict cases referred for parenting coordination are lacking these accommodations (Fieldstone et al., 2011).

Moving to a model of "informed" practices in parenting coordination. Guidelines developed by the AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination in 2005, and by the American Psychological Association in 2011, are often cited but remain expressly "aspirational", creating neither standards nor legal rules for practice (American Psychological Association, 2011; Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 2005). *The Parenting Coordination (PC)*

Project Implementation and Outcomes Study Report (Scott et al., 2010) of a District of Columbia Superior Court funded program that had started as an American Psychological Association pilot project in 2005 (Lally, Higuchi, & Joyner-Hall, 2014) reports promise in parenting coordination while cautioning that research on effectiveness is still limited. Although research has continued, little information is available as to how parenting coordinators use practice interventions to accomplish their goals (Fieldstone, Carter, King, & McHale, 2011; Hayes, 2010; Belcher-Timme, Shorey, Belcher-Timme, & Gibbings, 2013).

A study described by Hayes (2010) is among the few attempts to address this deficit. Using information obtained from fourteen semi-structured parenting coordinator interviews that included five case-based vignettes around commonly occurring ethical and legal dilemmas in parenting coordination practice, the author's conclusions and implications reference practitioner reported client concerns about stagnation as against progress in the process and call for additional practice research to determine whether parenting coordinators are simply the "custody police". Similarly, one reported justification for the need to explore actual practices raises the question as to whether it will ultimately be the parents or the parenting coordinator who will be making parenting decisions that circumscribe the life of a child (Greenberg, 2010).

In a recent comprehensive text containing contributions from acknowledged experts in the field of parenting coordination, Lally and Deutsch (2014) advocate for a move to a model of parenting coordination that can promote practices informed by evidence in the literature and by practitioners' evaluation of the efficacy of their chosen methods in the context of their practices. It is the lack of knowledge and understanding of recommended practices that remains a driving force for new research in parenting coordination (Lally & Deutsch, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory for research on human development. In *the Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) offers an ecosystemic perspective in human development encompassing considerations useful in considering parenting coordinator's practices aimed at reducing adverse consequences to a child. Bronfenbrenner defines the interrelations within a person's immediate ecosystemic environment as its *microsystem*. The *mesosystem* is seen as a set of interrelations among microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parenting coordination creates what Bronfenbrenner calls an N+2 system in a mesosystem, inserting a third party capable of altering the behavior of the parental dyad to benefit the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The child is considered a link in the mesosystem, present in fact or through the parenting coordinator who serves his interests (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The third level, the exosystem, involves one or more settings in which a developing person is not an active participant but is affected by what happens in such settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that the potential for positive development is enhanced where the roles, activities, and dyads in which a developing person engages "encourage the development of mutual trust, a positive orientation, goal consensus between settings, and an evolving balance of power in favor of the developing person" (1979, p. 212). In addressing its education, parenting, and conflict goals, as well as involving children and other family members in the process, parenting coordinators work to regain the trust, consensus, and positive orientation lacking in the ecosystemic environment of parents and help them to act in favor of their child toward positive change at each of these three ecosystemic levels.

Identified as the *macrosystem*, the outermost level of the ecosystem looks to the belief systems and ideologies that motivate the context and culture of the lower three levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner posits that causing any substantial positive change in

the psychological development of a child from a separated or divorced family may require altering existing institutions and ideological patterns. Parenting coordination is a relatively recent alteration in long-standing legal and psychological institutions and ideological patterns focusing on children of high conflict separation and divorce.

It has been said that parenting coordination is “coming of age” (Sullivan, 2013). Reports on its practice have informed us of its role as an intervention in high-conflict separation and divorce, its professional and training requirements, and have enumerated and prioritized its goals. We know that parenting coordinators have been successful in reducing court dockets by providing a venue to address the devastating effects high-conflict separation and divorce can have on parents and children and can describe them in ecosystemic terms. We know that the primary goals of parenting coordination are aimed at educating hostile parents to make parenting decisions for the benefit of their children. We know that these goals include: educating parents, improving the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving the children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination when it is relevant and appropriate to do so. We do not know how to meet these goals in terms of actual practice.

We know that there are reports of stagnation in the actual practice of parenting coordination, and calls for practice research to determine whether parenting coordinators are simply the “custody police”, whether, instead of the promise of parents who will be able to independently parent their children, it will be parenting coordinators, and not those parents, who will be making parenting decisions that circumscribe the life of a child until the child himself comes of age. We know that there has recently been a call from experts in the field for a model of parenting coordination that can promote practices informed by evidence in the literature and by practitioners' evaluation of the efficacy of their chosen methods in the context of their

practices - and that this has not been done. What we do not know and need to know to start to fill this gap in parenting coordination is which practices parenting coordinators have found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators toward achieving its goals.

The Present Study

This study sought to explore practices that participating parenting coordinators find to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators to achieve the following goals: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination. The goals selected for the study, consistent with its purpose, were taken from referenced studies and policy statements in parenting coordination literature suggesting that educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members, when relevant and appropriate to do so, are primary process goals.

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of parenting coordinators in their use of practices to reach these goals (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research employs an emerging approach subject to change in its inquiries, collects data in a manner that is sensitive to participants, and uses inductive analysis to establish patterns or themes (Creswell, 2007). Creswell submits that qualitative research befits the need for a detailed understanding of an issue from participants whose stories need to be heard. This ecological systems based study addressed the need for in-depth provider-focused information on recommended practices heard through the lived experiences of practicing parenting coordinators.

The purposes of phenomenological inquiry are description, interpretation, and critical self-reflection, and the ideas of intentionality and caring are central to its framework (Van Manen, 1990). Because this study sought to elicit, through in-depth semi-structured interviews,

recommendations from practitioners that call for description, interpretation, and critical reflection, a qualitative method- in this case phenomenology- is well suited to this goal. This study may inform individual practitioners, parenting coordinator training and education, and contribute to the evolution of potential practice standards or, perhaps one day, best practices.

Methods

Participants

As reported by Fieldstone et al. (2011), differences have been observed between mental health professionals and attorneys practicing as parenting coordinators. This may be due to their professional training and experience in their underlying fields. For this reason, researchers chose in this study to look first at mental health professionals practicing as parenting coordinators. Seven parenting coordinators were interviewed for this study. Each met the study criteria of having the requisite training and experience to meet the legislative and judicial mandates to practice in their respective jurisdictions and each had practiced for at least three years.

Participants were recruited through a multidisciplinary family law listserv of approximately 1000 professional members from metropolitan Washington. The participant recruitment email included information about eligibility criteria, requirements of participation, and compensation in the form of a \$35 Starbucks gift card.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in the study was voluntary. Each participant was given an Informed Consent form to read and sign. Fifteen mental health and legal professionals expressed interest in participation; of these, seven were eligible and completed the phone screening, demographic questionnaire, and in person interview of 60 to 75 minutes.

The demographic questionnaire contained inquiries about each participant's age, gender,

professional background, professional organizations, practice jurisdictions, number of years of practice, training as a parenting coordinator, percent of practice as a parenting coordinator, and the number of families each had worked with in the capacity of parenting coordinator to date.

Semi-Structured Interview.

An in-person semi-structured interview lasting between 60 and 75 minutes was conducted individually with each participant. Each participant was asked to identify and describe effective practices in parenting coordination that he or she would recommend to other practitioners for use toward the following goals: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of parenting coordination. Participants were asked under what conditions they would or would not recommend these practices, and what they believed made them successful. Additional recommendations, thoughts, and feelings on parenting coordination were elicited.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a hired transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement. The principal researcher reviewed each transcript for accuracy and to remove any identifying data, and took steps to ensure confidentiality throughout the process.

Analysis

Before analysis began, transcripts were read three times for errors in transcription and full immersion in the data. Data analysis involved a process of open coding described by Corbin and Strauss (1990), with each transcript highlighted into categories of information. A process of Thematic Analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) was also used. In addition to immersion, Thematic Analysis provided systematic analysis of the data to generate initial codes that are then grouped into themes. Cross coding by the two principal investigators (BPH and MKF) was used to ensure reliability. Themes capture something important about the data relative to the research

question and embody a level of patterned response within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This analysis served to identify themes that were relevant to answering the specific questions in this study. Themes were reviewed by checking them against the data, and modified, merged or eliminated if found to be an inappropriate fit. To further ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researchers discussed final themes and subthemes, which informed the results of the study.

Demographics

Of the seven participants interviewed for this study, six were psychologists holding doctoral degrees practicing in Northern Virginia and one was a Maryland licensed certified social worker-clinical (MSW). Participants' experience in professional practice ranged from eighteen to forty-eight years, with a median of thirty-six years. Their number of years of practice as a parenting coordinator ranged from four to thirty years, the portion of their professional practice devoted to parenting coordination between 10% and 30%. By the time of their interviews, three of the participants had each worked with seventy-five families as a parenting coordinator, one with seventy families, and the others with thirty, fifteen, and six. Ranging in age from forty-two to seventy-four years, six had amassed considerable experience in their respective mental health fields prior to including parenting coordination in his or her practice. The seventh had practiced parenting coordination for 30 of 36 professional years. Three women and four men participated. Each participant was white, as were the researchers. See Table 1.

	<u>Gen der</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Profession</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>Jurisdiction</u>	<u>No. Years in Profession</u>	<u>No. Years as PC</u>	<u>PC is what Percent of Practice</u>	<u>Total No. of PC Cases to Date</u>
1	F	42	Social Work	MSW	Maryland	18	4	15%	30
2	M	65	Psychologist	PhD	Virginia	40	25	15%	75
3	M	62	Psychologist	PhD	Virginia	31	20	20%	75
4	M	70	Psychologist	PhD	Virginia	36	30	25%	75
5	M	74	Psychologist	PhD	Virginia	48	7	10%	15
6	F	65	Psychologist	EdD	Virginia	38	10	30%	70
7	F	59	Psychologist	PhD	Virginia	31	7	10%	6

Researcher Characteristics

The primary researcher conducted the interviews and kept a journal throughout the process to bracket experience and bias and ensure the findings accurately portrayed participants' experiences. The researcher bracketed her perceptions of parenting coordination, parenting coordinators, and families experiencing high conflict divorce by making note of her own assumptions regarding their experiences and challenges. The researcher took special note of biases previously acquired in her thirty years of practice as a family law attorney, work as a clinical intern with divorced families, and her own experience as a divorced mother of two sons. This bracketing was done prior to interviewing participants, prior to the first coding, and after the coding to keep objectivity in analyzing data and writing the results. The second researcher is married with two children.

Findings

This study sought to explore participant's recommended practices in achieving the following goals of parenting coordination: educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the

process of parenting coordination. Conversations during recruitment for this study with professionals who ultimately did not participate revealed that some former parenting coordinators had chosen to cease or modify their practices and elicited the speculation that parenting coordination had fallen out of favor with the court in one local jurisdiction.

What follows are the goals about which participants were questioned and the themes and subthemes that emerged in participants' descriptions of their recommended practices used in striving to achieve these goals.

Educating Parents

One primary goal of parenting coordination about which participants were questioned is: "educating parents" for example, teaching parents about the impact of their hostile interaction on their children. Three themes emerged in participants' descriptions of recommended practices in response to this inquiry. They include: "know and cite authority", "introduce educational material that is relevant to the child", and "bring in other families' experiences."

Know and cite authority. Six practitioners saw the benefit of citing authority in educating parents. "It's powerful to bring names...of people who are involved in research to talk about what the child needs, the regular, predictable, consistent...the child's developmental needs and how they change." (Participant 4) One participant noted that the need to stay "cognitively well founded" is why he recommends parenting coordinators "keep up with the literature and go to conferences." (Participant 2)

Introduce educational material that is relevant to the child. Three practitioners suggested that parents are more open to educational materials when they are relevant to their children. One participant recommended staying attuned to parents' needs while teaching parents to be attuned to their child:

Someone once said there are two tasks in parenting: reading the need of the child accurately and then meeting the need appropriately. And that changes over the cycle and also the situation...I'll educate in terms of "at his age...this is what you could expect to see or not, and this is the best way to attune to that." (Participant 3)

Bring in other families' experiences. Four participants told stories of "others" to remove parents a step from their own situation and view it more objectively. "I might ask...do you think there are any similarities here...If I do, I will tell them what it is." (Participant 5).

Increasing the Quality of Parenting and Co-parenting

The second primary parenting goal about which participants were questioned is: "increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting." aimed at helping parents to make mutual and appropriate parenting decisions for the benefit of their children. Participants were also asked to address parenting and co-parenting related practices they found to be effective and would recommend to address "parent alienation" and parent-child estrangement. Seven themes emerged in participants' descriptions of recommended practices in response to these inquiries. The first four were reported to be effective toward both individual and co-parenting goals. They included: "encourage each parent to 'play your position'", "provide parents with perspective", "encourage support for the other parent", and "use therapeutic skills". Three additional themes were recommended practices to address both parenting and co-parenting but specifically aimed at parent alienation and parent-child estrangement. They included: "support the marginalized parent", "talk with the 'alienating' or 'reluctant' parent", and "refer to a therapist."

Encourage each parent to "play your position". Four participants recommended encouraging parents to focus on their own behavior to address parenting and co-parenting.

I joke around. You know, I have these phrases like "play your own position. Just play

your position.” Be the best teacher, the best person you can, the best example for your kid, and don’t worry about it. Just do that. Stop worrying about what he’s doing, she’s doing, just play your position. (Participant 3)

Another participant expanded on this metaphor with a chance to model its message:

...one of my colleagues calls it, “playing their position”. “You’re the mommy, you’re the daddy. I’m the expert on child development”...and I think if we clarify our role of what it means for us to play our position, we’re simultaneously defining for them and helping them play theirs. (Participant 2)

Provide parents with perspective. Participant 7 moved her hands to demonstrate a path, explaining that she saw herself on a journey with parents wandering where they wanted to go but pointing them in certain directions...and providing perspective. “Life is long...how do we want to get through the rest of the phases with their children?” (Participant 7) Three participants recommended finding ways to provide perspective in the context of improving the quality of individual parenting and co-parenting that could move parents’ attention from the little things, such as an hour of access or an article of clothing that are outlets for their frustrations with each other and hurtful to their child. One suggested:

The other thing I say...this is long term--this is a long game...this is a lifelong building of a relationship...you know, you don’t have “rights” to your child, you have responsibilities. And your responsibility is, of course, to build the smartest, safest, sanest environment now that we have two homes...that’s your job individually, okay, as a parent, as a teacher...if you teach them to be the people you want them to be, and you model that, the kids are going to be fine. (Participant 3)

Participant 6 reflected a supportive perspective on parenting after divorce. “Somebody said, oh,

how could that mother do that? Well, you know she probably did not always look like that..."

Encourage support for the other parent. Speaking to increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting, five participants recommended encouraging parents to support each other. "The challenge I set for my parents...is for your child to know that she has your permission to love the other parent in your presence. That is our goal." (Participant 2)

Participant 4 provided a metaphor for doing so:

That is when I am going to use my two trees and a hammock...where I talk about these two trees that are holding up this hammock. And you guys are each a tree and your kids are in the hammock. And if one of you is setting about trying to hack down the other tree. You've got to hold up the other tree. Otherwise, it gets real bad.

Use therapeutic skills. All seven participants contributed to this theme. Participant 5 reported using a therapeutic skill in trying to help a parent consider her underlying emotion related to the other parent that clouded her judgment in making a parenting decision:

"This may be sounding more like a therapist than a parent coordinator, but it's part of educating...there's an overlap...you do it in bits and pieces...repetition ... you hope the process is therapeutic even though you're not functioning as a therapist.

It was clear that all participants carefully guarded themselves away from "that slippery, slope into therapy" (Participant 2). It was also clear that each found effective ways to use his or her therapeutic skills toward increasing the quality of parenting and co-parenting and recommended them to others. Participants mentioned validating, empathizing, joining, coaching, brainstorming, teaching relaxation techniques, using solution focused techniques, child development, attachment theory, and psycho-education, among others. Often recommended practices were reflective of participant's underlying training. Participant 3 offered: "I would

focus on skill building...I am a family therapist and I do much parent coaching.”

Reflecting that a psychologist who is a parenting coordinator might be more inclined to use therapy tools, one participant recommended an intervention that uses empathy and validation to promote joining and moving forward she found effective in parenting and co-parenting:

I talk about...”ghosts in the nursery”...the idea that when you are parenting you have these values and thoughts about what happened to you when you were parented...So I might go backwards with each parent and find out more about them as a kid...and allow them to be different but not one good and one bad...and they can compliment the other...

I do it together if I feel I can, they ... hear each other. (Participant 7)

Participant 7 also recommended, as a means of validation and joining with parents, the acknowledgement of a “paradigm shift”...[recognizing that] “nobody goes into parenting thinking “I’m going to get to be a half-time parent and not see my kids all the time...”

Participant 6 reported that she found it helpful, related to parenting and managing conflict, to speak to parents about John Gottman’s four horsemen and to recommend that a parent read Gottman’s *Emotional Coaching* or Daniel Siegel’s *Parenting From the Inside Out*. Asked if he had a technique to determine if parents have successfully completed their parenting related goals, another participant offered: “Yes...having mindfully established criterion along the way which I think most of us parent coordinators do because it’s so problem focused...it’s behavior therapy in terms of a therapy model because it is problem focused.” (Participant 2)

Support the marginalized parent. Four participants recommended intervening to support the alienated or marginalized parent. One participant spoke of the likelihood in an alienation case that “the parent who is being marginalized is so despairing about what’s happening” he or she is likely to return to court. (Participant 5) Another participant

recommended talking with the alienated or marginalized parent and revisiting “life is long”.

...ok, wait, let me think down the road a little bit...you can't force yourself on your kid.

You can't make it a certain way. So you've got to kind of hang in there...with the

knowledge that at some point they may be ready for more. But that if you force it and a

kid's already got this alliance with the other parent, you're going to just bump up that

alliance and make it more negative for yourself...so slowing it down...with gradual

building up of...small amounts of fun time, neutral time...[with the child] (Participant 7)

Participant 2 added a cautionary note shared by all: With estrangement it may be worth some teaching and trying. With alienation, it's I think probably not a good idea to lead folks to believe that this is going to solve that problem.”

Talking with the “alienating” or “reluctant” parent. Six participants recommended talking with the “alienating” or “reluctant” parent to listen, validate, assess, and warn: “I have to listen, validate, and try to see the point of view and actually ask...‘you understand the repercussions for not supporting [the other parent’s access]?’” (Participant 3) Another recommended a conversation with the “alienating” parent about child development and a warning--life is long.

...it might be hard for a mother to imagine that when a daughter is 14, she's going

to be developmentally naturally hateful of the mother. And she wouldn't want the father

then to scoop that up and say: “Oh, now she's with me and we hate Mom”. We want

both parents to support her through that phase. (Participant 7)

In a case involving estrangement, one participant recommended his practice of meeting with each parent, and the child if given a release to do so, then coming back to the parents or their therapist with a recommendation.

It isn't always successful. But what can make it successful is because parents do care about their kids...So if somebody neutral that they are starting to have some faith in says to them...“I think that there is a problem and this is the way I see it”, one hopes, and this is sometimes the case, not always, that again the desire to help your child, really do what's in your child's best interest supersedes all the rancor and animosity you have toward the other parent. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. (Participant 5)

Another participant saw an opportunity to separate judgment and planning from emotion when speaking with a reluctant parent:

I'm going to try to move their focus away from how angry they are to the importance of the child as loudly as I can. I'm going to try to encourage the father and the mother to parallel parent, to fight the battles they have to, and to leave go of the battles they can...And if you can help somebody realize...theoretically it's easier than getting it done, but if you can help somebody realize that they don't really have control over [the other parent] anymore... and you accept the emotion, and you understand why she would never want to have him around.... and be respectful of the emotion...(Participant 4)

Refer to a therapist. Participants were unanimous in advocating that in an alienation or estrangement case the parenting coordinator recommend therapy. “I certainly know of situations in parent coordinating where we've been able to help a parent be less alienating, but that does not replace reconciliation therapy or good therapy for the child or parent/child family work.”

(Participant 2) Another participant, who recommended family therapy for the estranged parent and child, or perhaps both parents and the child, spoke of what makes this approach successful with parent-child conflict:

I believe [family therapy] works on communication and problem solving and...helps

parents in particular to work on empathy and listening...to help work through the new changes in the marital situation, family situation, work through the grief. (Participant 3)

This does not apply however where an alienating parent is opposed...“that’s a real alienating situation. I wouldn’t recommend it there because it’s an opportunity for further frustration and further trauma. It’s not going to go well.” (Participant 3)

One participant raised the concern that estrangement could spread to the other children and recommended being proactive to avoid permitting time for a child to become more “anxious-avoidant”. “What I try to do is get a real good therapist involved...as fast as possible...getting a really good family therapist.” (Participant 6)

Managing Conflict

The third primary goal of parenting coordination about which participants were questioned is: “managing conflict” aimed at managing the conflict of hostile parents for the benefit of their children. One theme that emerged was the recommendation to “provide a forum to keep conflict out”. Seven subthemes emerged: “clarify the role and goal of parenting coordination”, “have an agenda for each session”, “promote parenting coordination as a safe place”, “set limits for parents’ conduct at meetings”, “redirect parents away from conflict to focus on their child” and “help parents to be forward looking”. Participants presented a second theme in recommending: “establish rapport to enhance parents’ acceptance of interventions and recommendations.” Two subthemes included “build a relationship of trust with each parent” and “present as fair and unbiased.” The third theme was the recommendation to “manage conflict by managing communication.” Two subthemes were developed: “monitor and mediate electronic communication” and “conduct parenting coordination separately when necessary.”

Provide a forum to keep conflict out. This unanimous theme recommends parenting coordinators create a positive structure to manage conflict. These may include affirmative and preventative measures. “We might talk about things that might trigger them as we’re meeting so that they know what that would be, and then they could calm themselves.” (Participant 7)

Clarify the role and goal of parenting coordination. Three participants recommended manage conflict by clarifying what parenting coordination is and what it is not.

I’m pretty clear to tell people that this is not your therapy, this is not couples therapy, marital therapy, this is not a divorce autopsy, this is not a trial. This is about making good decisions for your children, and that is why we are here. And I am assuming that from the beginning. And the focus will come back to that always. (Participant 3)

Have an agenda for each session. Five participants recommended the use of an agenda to focus meetings away from conflict. “They’ll bring their agenda of three hot items about the kids and we’ll focus on those...and not revert back to five years ago when they did this or that to them...” (Participant 1) One participant also saw this as a conflict assessment tool:

I do believe it’s very important for the parenting coordinator to be structured and have an agenda and stick to that agenda. It cannot be Rogerian, it’s on task, which is how I assess a couple’s, two parents’ ability to work together. If they can remain properly detached from history, personal pathology, feelings about the other, and focus on the child that is a lot to ask. (Participant 2)

Promote parenting coordination as a safe place. Three participants emphasized the need for parenting coordination to be a safe place to reach its goals that included managing conflict. One described it as “essential”

...people don’t understand often what you’re supposed to do in there. So you really have

to kind of lead them through and say, "I'll do my best to make this a safe environment just like a therapy place is safe"...it's fine to be honest, but it's about being civil, empathic, and effective. There are ways to disagree agreeably. (Participant 3)

Another explained its success in reducing conflict by helping regain parents' mutual trust:

It's just a matter of giving them the platform... a safe space to be heard... to be given a voice... they need to slowly regain that trust of the other party." (Participant 1)

Set limits for parents' conduct at meetings. Toward managing conflict, five participants recommended setting limits for parents' conduct. Participant 2 recommended: "I just jump right on that when parents start to judge or criticize." Four participants included altering the structure of meetings as part of setting limits.

I don't permit people to yell at each other, to have interchanges that just get increasingly volatile and out of control. So I will end a meeting...if I'm not able to bring it back to... something that is somewhat productive or promising of being productive, then I will say... "I think we need to do this separately, and we can always change." (Participant 5)

Redirect parents away from conflict to focus on their child. Five participants recommended techniques to move parents away from their anger by focusing on their child, with the caveat that other practitioners may differ in their comfort with using them. Participants recommended viewing photographs of their children with the parents, keeping a child's photograph in the meeting room, and 'redirection'. "I find always redirecting back to: 'how is that going to play out with your son or daughter?' I say that." (Participant 3) Participant 4 found he had success using metaphors, props, and a bit of humor and described and recommended their use for others:

...issues that create lack of trust are elephants in the room. And I'll call them

elephants, and I'll sometimes move them around...I'll say things like "the room is becoming crowded, but we need to sort of segregate the elephants over there because they're getting in the way"—and I'll put the "baby" [stuffed animal or doll] in the center—"they're getting in the way of that. I can't see the baby!"...Sometimes I'll say..."there's an elephant on your foot right now."...somebody will laugh, breaking the tension a little bit. If you can be a little silly sometimes, it's helpful and entertaining.

Participant 2 prescribed a provocative approach:

Well, frankly, I do a little bit of Carl Whitaker on the issue of parent conflict. I tell them up front I'm really not interested in or devoted to their personal comfort or the conflict between them. I wish they would stay disengaged so we can be child-focused. That the notion I promote is child welfare and child focus...which really nicely permits to kind of dismiss and table their constant complaints.

Help parents to be forward looking. Three participants recommended directing parents away from past conflicts by focusing on future expectations.

I think another thing to start with is sort of hopes and wishes ...framing it around where they want to be and how they're going to get to that place...we might put up a big sticky note and write down each of the goals that each of them have about their kids...most want their kids to be successful in school...go to college...be good citizens. And then we find this common ground between the two of them. (Participant 7)

Establish rapport to enhance parents' acceptance of interventions and recommendations. All seven participants recommended that practitioners must establish rapport with each parent in order to be effective in managing conflict that can adversely affect the process. Citing rapport and consistent with the fact that participants rarely mentioned the

court or attorneys related to a recommended practice, Participant 1 recommended caution in involving attorneys in a dispute, despite the lack of confidentiality. Subthemes, as recommendations, included: build trust and maintain fairness.

Build a relationship of trust with each parent. Five participants recommended the need to build trust to dispel hostility. One explained:

What I can get away with in terms of being directive and active of course comes back to relationship. If I have nurtured the kind of relationship and had the success at that ... they will let me chair the meeting. (Participant 2)

One participant recommended that parenting coordinators learn to meet with parents individually to get background information and to allow them to tell their story and not permit a fear of 'ex parte' communications to cause them to miss this opportunity. "And I think there's a privacy, there's a protection that people do need and an ability to build a trust and build a rapport. They have to have that, I think." (Participant 3)

Present as fair and unbiased. Four participants recommended parenting coordinators wishing to manage conflict give rigorous attention to evenness. Participant 4 explained: "[T]hey have to think you're neutral and they have to think you're fair. Until such time as that, you don't have the street cred to be making heavy recommendations." Referencing his call for individual meetings with clients, Participant 3 added, "And I just have a couple of rules about that to maintain...my neutrality. One is full disclosure [that] I am going to meet with the other party...and that other person has the opportunity to have equal time."

Manage conflict by managing communication. The need to help parents communicate appeared as a theme related to managing conflict, recommending helping parents communicate "civilly, efficiently, and effectively" (Participant 5) Seven participants provided

recommendations for two subthemes within this common theme:

Monitor and mediate electronic communication. Four participants spoke of monitoring and mediating emails. One participant described her practice: "I make all my clients use Online Family Wizard, which is an online communication tool...so all their communication is being monitored through me" (Participant 1) Another participant offered a pragmatic recommendation:

One thing that is very useful, people tell me all the time, is "copy me on your emails"...If it's more than four lines and it upsets me, I'm going to charge you...if you keep it - this is positive, this is productive, this is kid-focused, this is intelligent, it's complimentary and supportive, I will not bill you. Seriously. And I'll say that is my deal. (Participant 3)

Conduct parenting coordination separately when necessary. Three participants recommended conducting parenting coordination separately where the attempt to communicate together generates "more heat than light." Most were reluctant to do so but saw inevitability in some situations. Participant 4 explained, "I start with couples together, but one needs to appreciate that sometimes people...are going to be parallel parenting and not cooperatively parenting. And sometimes, regardless of how much authority I'd like to bring to bear, you can't do it."

Involving Children and Family Members

The fourth and last goal of parenting coordination about which participants were questioned is: "involving children and family members" when a participant deemed it relevant and appropriate to do so. Three themes emerged in participants' descriptions of recommended practices that include: "interview children only in the context of problem solving", "meeting with

children can help the process”, and “respect parents’ role in considering meeting with other family members.”

Interview children only in the context of problem solving. Four participants recommended that parenting coordinators interview children only in the instance of “data gathering” toward problem solving – and only with the agreement of the parents and with parents sharing transportation equally. One participant explained that this is not family therapy; he does not want children enmeshed in the process. (Participant 3) Another agreed:

...you aim to having it be in the context of some decision [the parents] made about solving a problem rather than having it come from on high over here because I know the answers. It’s better to say, “you know, we’re struggling with this. How are we going to figure it out?” (Participant 4)

Meeting with children can help the process. Three participants recommended parenting coordinators meet with children—but only with the agreement of the parents. One participant explained that she believes that meeting with the children approximately once each year makes it more “real” when she meets with their parents. (Participant 6). Another participant agreed that it makes sense to meet with client-parents’ children, with the caveat that the child should not be misled to believe he has power. “I might say to the parents, let me meet [the child]...so I understand who he is and have a little bit of a relationship with him.” (Participant 7)

Respect parents’ role in considering meeting with other family members. As for other family members, although several participants said they might call a grandmother or an aunt for collateral information, the only family member who might be brought in was a new spouse, and that seemed unlikely. One participant stated that to involve a new spouse “undermines the idea that [the clients] are the parents [who have] responsibility for the children.”

(Participant 4) One participant said she might bring a new spouse in if the parents agree...”they are the Greek chorus and they are affecting [the process].” (Participant 6) All agreed that they would only meet with a stepparent if both parents agreed.

Discussion

Children whose parents remain in high conflict during or after divorce are more likely today to be placed in the joint legal and shared physical custody of their parents at substantial potential developmental risk (Boyan & Termini, 2005). Parenting coordination provides trained mental health and legal professionals to work with separated or divorced parents to promote positive outcomes for their at-risk children (Carter & Lally, 2014; Greenberg, 2010). Practice goals aimed at educating hostile parents to make parenting decisions for the benefit of their children are favored as consistent with the philosophy of dispute resolution in advancing and selecting effective methods that honor parents' self-determination (Greenberg, 2010).

The framework provided by Urie Bronfenbrenner for the impact of a child's ecological environment on his or her development, innovative and pioneering at the time, underscores to this day the devastating potential of his parents' marital dissolution (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Custody arrangements can be seen as creating two microsystems, each crucial to a child's development. Bronfenbrenner posited that positive or negative interactions between a child's microsystems are in direct correlation with their impact on the child, so that a child's parent's positive relationship with his teacher, for example, would have a positive impact on the child's development, with negative relationships yielding negative results (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The literature suggests that the potential negative consequences to a child in the joint legal and shared physical custody of high-conflict parents may be ameliorated where (1) his parents successfully shield him from their conflict, (2) nurture and support him, (3) encourage

his relationship with the other parent, and (4) set aside their negative feelings to make mutual decisions for his welfare (Boyan & Termini). Impediments to parents' ability to do so have been described in terms of ecosystemic impasses (Johnston & Campbell, 1989). It is the role of a parenting coordinator to find ways to break down and remove those impasses.

Participants reported and recommended establishing a safe and conflict free parenting coordination structure using individual interviewing and practitioner- parent rapport while empathizing with and validating parents' concerns, along with additional therapeutic and other techniques toward identifying and alleviating parental impasses at an intrapsychic and interactional level. Practitioners emphasized a focus on the child, the individual and mutually supportive role of parents, and the autonomy of the parental structure against other family members. Through their recommended practices, participants worked to safeguard parents against external-social impasses and to help them to prioritize their parental roles to shield their child from conflict, accept their child's relationship with the other parent, and set aside negative feelings to make mutual decisions for their child. Themes and subthemes emerged as participants shared their practices they found to be effective and would recommend to other parenting coordinators.

This study provided a unique opportunity to investigate recommendations for effective practice techniques toward enumerated education, parenting, and conflict related goals of parenting coordination, and toward involving children and family members in its practice, through in-depth interviews of practitioners. Its significance lies with the children, families, practitioners, and institutions relying on parenting coordination's success in meeting these goals.

One unique result of this study was participant's opportunity to report, and their colleagues and the parenting coordination community's opportunity to hear, as themes and

subthemes, recommended practices participants found to be successful in educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, improving individual parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process. These are the primary goals addressed by this study. What follows is a discussion of the themes and subthemes for recommended practices that were found in each of these goals.

Educating parents. Themes related to the goal of educating parents that emerged from participants' recommendations were knowing and citing authority, introducing educational material that is relevant to the child, and sharing other families' experiences. These educational practices are responsive to the literature recommending parenting coordinators honor parents' self-determination and consider their needs and impediments toward parenting their children (Deutsch, 2014; Greenberg, 2010; Johnston and Campbell, 1989). The themes suggest obtaining expert information and providing parents with knowledge related to their child, and with an objective opportunity to step away from emotion and find the message in another family's experience - to teach them to fish and not to provide the fish for them. These themes can impact parents at intrapsychic and interactional levels that can lead to a change in their child's microsystemic level due to changes in the mesosystem and exosystem of the parental dyad. The uniqueness among these themes lies in it being a recommended practice that appears not to be discussed in existing literature.

Improving the quality of parenting and co-parenting. Themes related to improving the quality of parenting and co-parenting that emerged from participants' recommendations each addressed parenting and co-parenting. Participants spoke of parents being "teachers" and recommended helping parents focus on their own behavior with "play your position". Reflecting that "life is long", participants recommended providing perspective to move parents' attention

from exaggerated frustrations, and encourage them to support each other. One recommended a metaphor that placed children in a hammock supported by two parental trees, and considered the consequence of trying to “hack down the other tree.”

Practitioners use of “we” in speaking with parents: of the path they travel, the construction of two homes, and problem solving for their children suggested a deference to parents held by participants who consistently sought to educate through joining and empathy, and in the words of one participant, did not want to be seen as making recommendations from “on high”. Unique in these recommendations were the specific creative metaphors and images supplied by participants. Increasing individual parenting skills can effect parents at an intrapsychic level but also effect their interactions and the way they handle their external-social environment. Improved parenting and co-parenting enhance parents at an interactional level and yield positive change for the child in the two microsystems that constitute his homes with his parents.

The use of therapeutic techniques in parenting coordination has been discussed in the literature (Boyan & Termini (2005). Participants reported using therapeutic skills that were often consistent with their underlying training. References to colleagues and conferences indicated an outlet and resource for sharing techniques that may not have been previously identified. One participant stated that, while not therapy, the hope is that parenting coordination can be therapeutic. These themes were consistent with honoring parents' self-determination and being considerate of their needs and impasses in raising their children (Deutsch, 2014; Greenberg, 2010; Johnston and Campbell, 1989).

Related to parent alienation and estrangement, participants recommended support of the marginalized parent, which was one of the few times they mentioned the potential of having to

return to court. Participants emphasized the need to be respectful of the underlying emotion of an alienating or reluctant parent. Perspective sharing with an alienating parent spoke to warnings, including discussing child development that foretells a time when an alienated child could turn to the alienated parent and “we hate dad”, for example, could become “we hate mom”.

Participants were unanimous that therapy should be recommended for the child and the parent-child dyad unless an alienating parent's unwillingness to agree would lead to further frustration and trauma. One participant who had worked with 70 families expressed the need to act fast to avoid alienation spreading to the other children and “anxious-avoidant” exacerbation. One participant advanced family therapy as the best venue, acknowledging an impasse not often mentioned in working with recalcitrant alienating parents, the overcoming of “grief.” The potential for parenting coordination to address parent alienation and estrangement has been discussed in the literature. Especially given the intractable nature of parent alienation, and the loss and pain involved in parent-child estrangement in divorce, the suggestions of success in the recommended themes was unique. The recommendations to consider grief and act fast in parent alienation hold the potential for new directions in parenting coordination. Parents could see change at their interactional level to the benefit of the child in his microsystems.

Managing conflict. Themes related to managing conflict that emerged from participants' recommendations included the need for structure in parenting coordination. This has been identified in the literature (Sullivan, 2014). The specific techniques related to practitioners' recommendations to use catchwords and phrases to reassure parents and get their attention have not. Participants recommended that parenting coordinators clarify their role, while advising that parents would not be revisiting their grievances with “this **is not** a divorce autopsy...it **is** about making good decisions for your child.” There was a recommendation to promote “civil,

empathic, and effective” discourse and to tell parents that they can learn to “disagree agreeably.”

The need to provide for safety in a potentially hostile parenting coordination environment has been identified (See, e.g. Carter, 2011). Here participants added their recommended practices of promising and providing parents a “safe space” as a subtheme in order to obtain background information, to allow parent expression, and to provide an opportunity for parents to regain mutual trust. Participants also recommended reinforcing limit setting with the discussion of triggers to manage conflict in parenting coordination as a successful intervention.

Considering triggers prior to meetings appears not to have been mentioned in the literature.

Focusing on the child is a primary goal of parenting coordination (Higuchi & Lally, 2014). For participants it was set in unique themes to dispel conflict. The message was to find what fits for yourself and your client. It was the three participants with 20, 25, and 30 years experience respectively, each having coincidentally worked with 75 couples, who may have explained their longevity in describing what works for each of them (1) asking “how is that going to play out with your son or daughter?” (2) introducing into the room a stuffed animal as “the baby” at risk of being trampled by elephants representing lack of trust, and (3) introducing “a little bit of Carl Whitaker” in pretending not to be interested in or devoted to parents’ personal comfort or the conflict between them, and stating that he wished “they would stay disengaged so we can be child-focused”, all the while working on their personal comfort and conflict. These recommendations related to managing conflict in the context of parenting coordinators’ suggestion that they may be successful based on practice experience are unique.

Challenging stagnation, participants recommended helping parents to be forward looking. Boyan & Termini (2005) discuss mutual goals for your child as a co-parenting intervention. One participant with 31 years experience as a psychologist working with families and children

recommended finding common ground with an intervention framed as “hopes and wishes”.

Establishing rapport has positive implications at an intrapsychic and interactional level. The recommendation whether or not to meet individually with clients has been debated (Sullivan, 2014). One practitioner urged that colleagues overcome their fear of *ex parte* communication that could lead to claims of preference and meet individually with each client to allow for privacy to tell their story. Along with focusing on the child and respecting parents, maintaining rapport appeared to be a *sin qua non* of participants' recommended practices.

Practice tips for parents email communication, with potential impact at their interactional level and addressing managing conflict, have been discussed in the literature, as has meeting separately (Sullivan, 2014). One participant presented a unique “deal” he makes with clients in mediating and monitoring email communications that he reported people find useful, of not charging for reading parents' email exchanges that “do not upset” him because they are “positive, productive, kid-focused, intelligent, complimentary, and supportive.” Discussing conducting parenting coordination separately where communication makes doing otherwise impossible, participants demonstrated reluctance to separate their clients and preference to move forward cooperatively. One long-time participant was adamant about promoting cooperation but recommended understanding that sometimes people are going to be parallel parenting no matter how much he tries. Participants recommended continuing to support each parent and the parental dyad toward independent parallel parenting.

Involving children and family members. Participants cited their belief in parents as the primary support for their children in their recommendation to refuse to involve other family members in the process except with the consent of both parents as to a stepparent or child. Absent an agreed upon problem-solving task, the majority did not meet with the children.

Meeting with children has been promoted in the literature as a means to expand through direct conversation with the child, parenting coordinators' knowledge of their needs and wishes (Kelly, 2014). Three participants, who happened to be the three women interviewed, suggested that meeting a child with the agreement of their parents just to gain insight to aid in working with their parents is helpful.

The results of this study were themes that suggest that the initial need for structure and control in parenting coordination may give way to creativity and dedication where building trust, rapport, and focusing on the child, along with considering the ecosystemic impasses to their parents, can promote positive results for an at-risk child. Themes emerged whereby participants suggested parenting coordinators may educate, improve parenting and co-parenting, and manage conflict in ways that will allow parents the autonomy to independently parent their children whether cooperatively or parallel. Themes also showed that for these participants, the involvement of others was undertaken only with consent and for a purpose that honored the parents to promote the binuclear family. Conversations during recruitment for this study with professionals who ultimately did not participate revealed that some former parenting coordinators had chosen to cease or modify their practices and elicited the speculation that parenting coordination had fallen out of favor with the court in one local jurisdiction. One result of this study might be to change someone's mind.

Lastly, participants expressed their gratitude for giving them the opportunity to discuss their practices. Several participants described their interviews as helpful in raising issues that led them to think about their own practices.

Limitations

Although recruitment reached out to a larger population, limitations of this study include

its small sample with coincidental demographic consistencies. Six of the seven participants were psychologists from Northern Virginia and one was an MSW from Maryland. All were white and a substantial number had practiced for some time. Although the last factor was helpful, in order to gain a more comprehensive view of parenting coordination recommendations, data from other jurisdictions in these and other states, other professional backgrounds, age, length of practice, and culture would be beneficial. As a qualitative study of only seven participants its findings cannot be generalized. Obtaining parent coordinators recommendations for effective techniques is possibly best pursued by in-person interviews. Notwithstanding bracketing, the breath of knowledge and experience of the interviewers may also have an influence on results.

Practice Implications

The themes identified in this study offer useful implications for marriage and family therapists whose specialized training provides them an opportunity to support parenting coordination in a therapeutic capacity or work as parenting coordinators using therapeutic, problem solving, solution focused and other identified skills. The generally creative, proactive, and positive nature of participants' recommendations to meet the goals of educating parents, improving parenting and co-parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and others in the process of parenting coordination focus practitioners on moving clients forward toward a potential future of independent parenting, cooperative where possible or parallel with ways to manage conflict, and improved parenting and co-parenting skills. Practitioners' recommendations imply enthusiasm in the practice that belies the frustration and stagnation that has been reported. Practice implications further include expanding the potential of sharing recommended practices through future studies, peer support, practitioner education, promoting familiarity with evolving methods, and attendance at conferences specifically addressing

recommended practices. Particular effort may be given to dealing with grief as a motivating factor in the most intractable issue of parent alienation, and in addressing the conflicting recommendations for fairness and the need to refer one parent to therapy to help a child.

Future Research

In this limited study, “recommended practices” were defined as perceived by the participant. This left unanswered the question as to how a recommended practice by one might be perceived by another. Future research may include similar in-person interviews in other venues and the consideration of effective practices in terms of setting standards of practice in the field. It is expected that any standards would be flexible given the apparent efforts of the participants in this study. The field of parenting coordination may ultimately need “best practices” but not at the expense of effective creativity.

CONCLUSION

Children whose parents remain in high conflict during or after divorce are subject to potential developmental risk. The seven participants in this study had worked as parenting coordinators in a total of 340 cases at the time of their interviews in a range of length of practice between 4 and 30 years. The results of this study suggest that the children whose parents met with these participants were afforded a substantial opportunity to benefit from the process. Participants recommended the creation of a structure and the use of recommended practices to support parents that assessed and addressed the ecosystemic impasses that adversely affect parenting in high-conflict separation and divorce. Effective recommended practices have the potential of yielding positive changes in the ecosystemic environment of the child. Participants reported and recommended remaining current with developments in the field, and spoke of peer support and conferences. Participants reported that they promoted cooperative co-parenting,

stressed parental autonomy and supported parental decision making over parenting coordinator recommendations. Whether working with parents together, finding it necessary to work separately, or a combination of both, participants in this study painted a picture of joining, respecting, empathizing, problem solving, and moving forward that belies stagnation and presents these participants as parenting coordinators to be far more than the custody police.

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Appendix A

Demographic and general survey questions

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Male __ Female __ State _____ Parenting Coordination Practice Jurisdiction(s) _____

1. Which of the following best describes your professional background?

- Attorney _____
- Psychologist _____
- Social Worker MSW _____
- Marriage and Family Therapist _____
- Counselor LPC _____
- Bachelor degree level PC _____
- Other (please describe) _____

2. To the best of your ability, please indicate which of the following topics were a part of your Parenting Coordination specific training, or of training you have otherwise received:

- PC roles and functions _____
- Mediation training _____
- Arbitration/decision making _____
- Impact of divorce on children _____
- Parent education _____
- Parent alienation _____
- Assessment _____
- Evaluation _____
- Interviewing children _____
- Family systems theory _____
- Attachment theory _____
- Individual parenting styles _____
- Parental relationship patterns _____
- Custody options in divorce _____
- Child development _____
- Conflict resolution _____
- Conflict management _____
- Reducing parental conflict _____
- Domestic violence _____
- Substance abuse _____
- Coaching _____
- Teaching communication skills _____
- PC intervention skills/technique _____
- Referral to proper resources _____
- PC communicating with attorneys _____
- PC communicating with the Court _____
- PC communicating with mental health professionals _____

Other Parenting Coordination related training (please describe) _____

3. Please indicate, to the best of your ability, the following:
- Number of years in mental health related or legal practice _____
 - Number of years in Parenting Coordination practice _____
 - Percentage of practice devoted to Parenting Coordination _____
 - Average number of Parenting Coordination cases _____
 - Average duration of Parenting Coordination cases _____
 - Percentage of PC cases pursuant to Court Order _____
 - Percentage of private PC cases (no Court Order) _____
 - Number of Parenting Coordination cases to date _____
4. Do you belong to a professional organization? If so which one(s) _____
-

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Listmate,

My name is Barbara Palmer Hirsch and I am currently working toward an M.S. in human development at Virginia Tech with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy. For my thesis, I am exploring methods and techniques used in Parenting Coordination and focusing on the recommendations of Parenting Coordinators for effective practices to achieve Parenting Coordination goals. I am currently recruiting for this study.

You are eligible to participate if

- You are a licensed attorney or mental health professional.
- You have the requisite training and experience to be appointed by the Court to practice Parenting Coordination under the laws of your jurisdiction.
- Your training has included mediation and Parenting Coordination specific training.
- You have practiced as a Parenting Coordinator for at least three (3) years.

What is involved in participating in the study?

- A 10-minute screening over the phone.
- A brief demographic questionnaire.
- A face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview asks you about methods you employ and recommend as a Parenting Coordinator to deal with matters that typically arise in Parenting Coordination. Interviews will occur at a location and in a manner that is convenient and confidential for you.

Participants will receive a \$35 Starbucks gift card at the conclusion of the interview process.

If you are, or anyone you know is, interested in this study, please contact me at

barbphi@vt.edu or (301) 509-8375. Thank you.

Appendix C

Telephone Screening Questions

Participant ID _____

Date _____

1. Are you a licensed attorney or mental health professional?
2. Do you have the training and experience to qualify to be appointed by the Court to practice as a Parenting Coordinator under the laws of your jurisdiction?
3. Did your training include mediation and the use of interventions in Parenting Coordination?
4. Have you practiced as a Parenting Coordinator for at least 3 years?
5. Have your experiences with practice methods or interventions ever led you to consider which are more likely to be successful in your practice?
6. Have your experiences with practice methods or interventions ever led you to consider which you would likely recommend to other parenting coordinators?

Appendix D

Confidentiality Agreement



VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Human Development
Northern Virginia Center
7054 Haycock Road, Falls Church, Virginia 22043-2311
703 538-8470 Fax: 703 538-8465

Confidentiality Agreement for Interview Data

I, _____ agree to safeguard the identity of participants enrolled in the *Parenting Coordinators' Understanding of Their Best Practices* study. I will not disclose or discuss participant-related material outside of meetings with the research team. I will protect the confidentiality of all participants by safeguarding participant related-materials, which includes identifiable information disclosed in participants' interviews.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

Research Informed Consent**Informed Consent for Participants
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

Title of Project: Parenting Coordinators' Practice Recommendations.

Principal Investigators:

Mariana Falconier, Ph.D., Assistant Professor/Committee Chair, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Barbara P. Hirsch, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

I. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to explore, from a qualitative methodology, Parenting Coordinators' recommended practices for educating parents, increasing the quality of parenting, managing conflict, and involving children and other family members in the process of Parenting Coordination.

II. Procedures

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and an in-person interview lasting approximately one hour. In-person interviews will take place in a location that is convenient and confidential for you and agreed upon by you and the researcher.

III. Risks

You may feel emotional discomfort when being interviewed about your personal experiences. The researcher will have mental health referrals available should you wish to further process thoughts or emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

IV. Benefits

The answers you provide will help us learn about the experience of Parenting Coordinators in the use of interventions and identification of recommended practices that can be valuable to others practicing in the field. Talking about your experience may provide some therapeutic or professional benefit to you. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for participation in this study.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

- All of the information provided during the interview and over-the-phone screening is confidential.
- At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent.
- All identifying information provided during the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from coded data.
- All data will be kept in a locked and secured location.
- If you wish to delete any information that may violate your or a client's confidentiality, you can bring that to the researcher's attention for omission. If you do not respond by the designated date for your review, the researcher will assume that you have no changes to submit.
- The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript will be the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. If outside transcriber services are used, the Co-Investigator will request that the transcriber sign a confidentiality agreement.
- The audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked.
- Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project and/or in subsequent publications. No identifying information will be associated with any part of your interview that may be used.
- The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive a \$35 Starbucks gift card upon completion of a demographic questionnaire and interview.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You do not have to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, you can decide to stop participating at any time without penalty.

VIII. Participant's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

I will complete a demographic questionnaire. I will complete an in-person one-hour interview. The interview will take place at a location agreed upon by me and the researcher.

IX. Participant's Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name (please print)

Researcher's Signature

Date

If you have any questions about this research study or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, you may contact:

Mariana Falconier, Ph.D

Investigator

Barbara P. Hirsch, M.S. Candidate

Investigator

Dr. David M. Moore

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance

703-538-8461/marianak@vt.edu

Telephone/e-mail

301-509-8375/barbphi@vt.edu

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540-231-4991/moored@vt.edu

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