
PARENTING PLAN MEDIATION HELPS KIDS

by Judge Paula Casey, retired



Discussion about parenting plan mediation generally focuses on the people at the table – the parents. Those parents who reach agreement express satisfaction. They save time and money by avoiding further action in court. They often appreciate the communication that the process facilitates. They leave mediation with a written document required by the courts and recognized by state law. But, the true beneficiaries of successful mediation are actually the children.

A considerable body of research indicates what most impedes good outcomes for children when their parents separate is ongoing conflict between the parents. And, the most consistent predictor of post-separation adjustment problems for children is parental conflict.

All parents want the best for their children. But, in time of separation those who get caught up in fighting can lose sight of what is best for the children and the impact of their conflict. Mediation means sitting down with neutral facilitators to work toward a solution to the conflict. In this process, mediators allow parents to express their needs and desires, require parents to listen to each other, and help parents consider what is best for the children. Mediators help parents to focus on problem solving – one issue at a time, to brainstorm solutions, and to reach agreement.

The Superior Court in Thurston County has required mediation of parenting plans in court actions since 1987. Since the separate Family Court opened in 1998, an even greater focus has been placed on diffusing court fights over children to do no harm. One key is catching separating parents early, before they lose sight of their children's best interests and yield to their

own anger, loss, need to “win,” desire to “hurt,” or other emotions that can accompany a break up. Parent education about how children are affected by their parents' separation is another key. “Consider the Children” is a 4-hour seminar required by the Court for parents developing parenting plans. The basic information can help parents focus on what is best for the children when they come together to create a plan. Of equal importance is recognizing when mediation is not appropriate, particularly for families with histories of domestic violence.

Thurston County is fortunate. A large cadre of mediators are available to assist with parenting plan development and modification: psychologists, therapists, lawyers, retired judges, and the Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County (DRC).

The DRC and its volunteers should be congratulated: for being well-trained in mediation skills, parenting plan development, and domestic violence screening; for providing a low cost resource for families; and for partnering with the Family Court for peaceful resolution of parenting disputes.

The DRC of Thurston County is helping kids when parents mediate! Mediation is a “win” for parents and kids.

This article was written for the Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County's October 2013 Newsletter. To download the entire newsletter, go to www.mediatethurston.org/about-us/newsletters. Retired Judge Casey was one of the original organizers who helped found the Dispute Resolution Center of Thurston County in 1991 and has served as an important partner to the agency throughout her tenure as a judge at the Thurston County Family Court.
