

## Parenting 'refs' solve yuletide disputes

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One parent insisted the Christmas Day "transfer" of the children take place at noon. The other demanded it happen at 7 p.m.

In an amicably divorced family, a six-hour difference would be a straightforward dilemma, the kind solved with a phone chat and a dash of compromise.

But for this pair, the lingering hostility from a nasty break-up made it so difficult for them to be in the same room that they had to summon Gary Direnfeld, their personal parenting referee, for a \$300 session to hammer out an agreement.

"It took two hours before the parents finally came to agree on 1 p.m.," Mr. Direnfeld says. "And I gotta tell you, their rationales were reasonable. The problem was each wanted their own way. That's unreasonable."

Christmas is Mr. Direnfeld's busiest season.

He is a parenting co-ordinator, a new and steadily expanding profession that blends social work, mediation and arbitration to solve the day-to-day disputes of high-conflict couples who would otherwise soak up a disproportionate share of family court resources.

Unlike social workers or mediators, however, parenting co-ordinators have the power, granted to them by the court, to make binding decisions in favour of one parent or the other on everyday disputes.

Parenting co-ordinators like Mr. Direnfeld are swamped at the holidays, a time when fights over access -- and other strange irritants, such as the veracity of Santa Claus --are especially intractable.

"Christmas is a nightmare," said Mr. Direnfeld, a jovial, bearded 50-year-old from Hamilton, Ont., who lets out a long, deep belly laugh. "I start getting busy about mid-November, and it doesn't stop until Christmas Eve, up to and including lawyers' faxes on Christmas Eve day where they say, 'My client now wants this, that client wants this, now they're saying they're not coming back with the kids.' "

Toronto parenting co-ordinator Linda Chodos is equally busy. "Put it this way. Last night I worked until midnight and I was back in the office at 8 a.m.," she says during an interview this week.

Ms. Chodos's time is absorbed by couples like Robert and Heather, a divorced Toronto couple who turned to her for help with a fight over how their five-year-old daughter, Erica, should celebrate Christmas. (Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the family's privacy.)

Heather wanted to maintain Erica's belief in Santa Claus.

Robert disagreed. It was his turn to host Erica for Christmas Eve and Christmas morning.

"[Heather] was concerned he would spoil the magic for the child," explained Ms. Chodos, a social worker by training who has worked with high-conflict families since 1980.

Ms. Chodos brought the former spouses together for a face to- face meeting and suggested

a deal: If Heather was willing to prepare a stocking, fill it with presents and give it to Robert, would he agree to lay out the stocking for Erica? The compromise worked.

Compromise is not always possible, however.

When feuding parents cannot reach a solution--as was the case with a mother who booked a Christmas vacation with the children that began on the last day of the father's designated week with the kids -- Ms. Chodos simply makes a decision for them.

In that case, she ruled in the mother's favour, cutting the father's time short by a day and allowing the vacation to proceed.

Parenting co-ordination is just beginning to find its legs in Canada. It does not have a governing body or official registry, meaning it is difficult to say how many people actually work the field. Plus, most parenting co-ordinators do the job as a sideline to their primary work in counselling, social work, psychology or family law, the fields from which parenting co-ordination sprung.

Dr. Barbara Fidler, a Toronto clinical psychologist and pioneer in the parenting co-ordination movement in Canada, says the process provides "the finality these people need."

"Whether [the children] go to that family celebration or they don't go to that family celebration, it's probably not going to make a huge difference one way or another negatively or positively," she said. "But the conflict that results from that and the way the child is brought into the conflict will damage the child."

Dr. Fidler was one of a dozen Canadian and American members of a task force who spent two years drafting guidelines for parenting co-ordinators in both countries. The task force was convened by Justice George Czutrin, a Hamilton family court judge.

Research on parenting co-ordination is sparse.

New data is expected soon, from a pilot project in Washington, D.C. that has seen supervised doctoral candidates in clinical psychology act as parenting co-ordinators for low-income, high-conflict families.

The project began in August, 2004, with three students and seven families and has grown to accommodate five students juggling 10 cases, says Dr. Stephen Lally, an Argosy University professor who helped launch the program.

"People have said they found it helpful and the court is interested in expanding it," Dr. Lally says.

Roberta Eisen is a student participating in the program. The 59-year-old professional counsellor has 13 years of experience in private practice and is handling two cases for the pilot project.

One is particularly unique. It involves a 10-year-old girl living with her paternal grandmother.

The child's mother lost custody when a three-month-old sibling died in the mother's care, although it was later determined the mother was not at fault. The child's father is in prison.

In that case, Ms. Eisen says, the thorniest disagreements have been about the mother and grandmother, such as a persistent clash over the transfer of social security payments.

"Most of the things parents struggle with are about power and control," she says. "It has little to do with the kids. It's about the adults."

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