

Successful Families Inc.

Settlement Focused Parenting Plan Consultation (SFPPC)¹

1 For more information see article by Daniel B. Pickar and Jeffrey J. Kahn* (in press, Family Court Review) Settlement-Focused Parenting Plan Consultations: An Evaluative Mediation Alternative to Child Custody Evaluations

SFPPC is an evaluative mediation process and while equivalent to a child custody assessment, it is an alternative. It is conducted by parenting plan consultant (PPC) who has the combined experience of a mediator and child custody assessor. This is a hybrid model that is more expedient and less expensive than a child custody assessment, while also preserving the mediation principles of self-determination. SFPPC is distinguished from a “mediative assessment”, where an assessor conducts a comprehensive assessment and then assists the parties to mediate a resolution. In a SFPPC, the traditional facilitative and interests-based mediation, with an emphasis on self-determination and confidentiality, is combined with an evaluative process that provides parents with expertly gathered information that may be used in creating a parenting plan that meets the children’s best interest. The SFPPC typically costs about half of what a child custody assessment typically costs and can be completed in 4 to 6 weeks, a much shorter time that it takes for most assessments to be completed.

The PPC has expertise in mediation and child custody assessments as well as child custody laws in his or her jurisdiction and the psychological and developmental needs of children. The PPC has an understanding of empirically based knowledge regarding the effects of separation and divorce on children, on the social science literature and research regarding children’s adjustment in various living arrangements following a separation/divorce, and developmentally appropriate parenting plans. Further, the consultant has expertise in assessing, interviewing, observing children and adults and using the best practice methods that are used in child custody assessments. Referrals are accepted from parents, lawyers or the court. Both parents must consent to participate. We recommended that the PPC proceed upon the consent of the parents and a formal order of the court. The PPC conducts a series of interviews with all family members and may gather additional information from reviewing records, interviews, and collateral sources. Psychological testing and may be conducted upon the request of both parents. Once all the information is obtained, the PPC engages with the parents and their lawyers in a 5-way settlement meeting with the primary goal being a settlement and agreeing to a parenting plan.

The procedures are as follows:

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1. Joint conference call with the lawyers
2. Completion of intake questionnaires
3. Joint meeting with the parents OR individual meetings as required ²
4. Individual interviews with each parent
5. Individual interviews the child (usually a total of 2)
6. Collateral contacts
7. 5-way feedback and settlement meeting with parents and lawyers.

As this is a confidential process, there would be no report describing the data collected and no custody recommendations. Rather, if an agreement has been reached, the parents can jointly opt for the PPC to complete a written parenting plan which can serve as a basis for their agreement to be adopted as a court order.
