



Parallel Parenting By Jodi Wyman

When parents separate there is usually either a sole custody or a joint custody arrangement in place.

Sole custody means that one parent is able to make the majority of decisions about the child with limited to no input from the other parent. Joint custody means that both parents are to consult and discuss major decisions about the children, and both are entitled to input and information.

In extremely high conflict situations, some Judges have been imposing a “parallel parenting” arrangement. While parents complain that this allows them very little flexibility, in certain cases the extremely high conflict between the parents leaves the Judge with few options.

Parallel parenting involves a very high level of detail incorporated into the parenting arrangements. For example, in a custody fight in Ontario, the Judge imposed a extremely specific time sharing arrangement which included not only what the children would be

doing from hour to hour, but which parent would be picking up and dropping off the children, how the parents would address the children and each other in the presence of the children and how information about the children would be relayed between the parents.

In a parallel parenting situation it is the Court that makes the decisions. Larger issues about children relating to their education, health, religion etc. are decided by a Judge, and not the parents.

There is absolutely no flexibility built into a parallel parenting order. Judges clearly view this only as a last resort where conflict is very high and there should be no contact between the parents at all.

A parallel parenting arrangement puts the parents on equal footing, as instead of one parent having more authority than the other, the Judge has more authority than either parent. It can often be one option to put an end to unreasonable conduct by a parent which is negatively

affecting the children. The hope is that by eliminating things for the parents to discuss or resolve on their own, it will eliminate the conflict.

Although the theory is a good one, the issue is whether it is practical. People engaged in high conflict over their children normally do not have difficulty finding things to argue about. Even in a very detailed, highly specific parenting arrangement imposed by a Court, the parents are forced to interact to some degree.

It could be in those cases it is in fact preferable to have one parent with sole custody, and therefore the decision making authority, putting an end to the idea of parenting cooperatively altogether. One parent will make all the decisions, the other parent will have a very detailed visitation schedule. By exchanging the children at school or daycare, the parents can have very little interaction with each other.

The unfortunate part is what sort of role modeling these high-conflict parents are doing

for their children with this sort of behaviour.

With custody situations there is no one right answer or best arrangement that will work for every family. Each case is very different. The Judge's obligation is to try to determine the arrangement that is in the best interest of the child, not the parents. While parallel parenting will certainly not always be the answer, it is yet another option the Courts have in trying to do what is best for the children.