

Have a Problem?  
Hire a special master as decision-maker  
By Matthew J. Sullivan

Increasingly, parents with ongoing custody and co-parenting conflicts are agreeing to submit their differences to a co-parenting arbitrator or special master. A special master is an experienced mental health professional or attorney, depending on the needs of the case. A special master is appointed by the court and has the authority to make recommendations or orders subject to judicial review. Appointment of a special master is an effort to accomplish one or more of the following goals:

1. Reduce the conflict and the need for court appearances.
2. Monitor a serious family situation and/or deter the basic underlying problem
3. Initiate therapeutic intervention and teach effective conflict-resolution skills.
4. Provide a readily available, court-sanctioned decision-making process in what would otherwise be an escalating and chaotic situation.
5. Enhance the safety and stability of the family in a way that serves the best interests of the children.

A special master has the authority to intervene directly and is empowered to make immediate, binding court orders. Long-term, intimate exposure to the family allows the special master to understand the dysfunctional patterns and provide consistent, intensive intervention.

The special master acts as a mediator, encouraging the parties to reach custody and co-parenting agreements. When parents reach an impasse, the special master can resolve the issue by rendering a timely and well-informed decision. Generally, a special master is appointed for one or two years.