KEY FINDINGS

◊ Dependency mediation increases the efficiency and timeliness of case processing.
◊ Mediation is associated with a reduction of judicial workload and can be an effective cost-saving tool.

BACKGROUND

Child protection mediation has been used for more than 25 years to improve case processing and outcomes in juvenile dependency cases and is considered a “best practice” in child abuse and neglect case processing.¹ Mediation is an alternative dispute resolution technique involving a neutral third party who helps parties reach an amicable resolution.² Prior research finds that mediation increases parental satisfaction, engagement and compliance and has a positive effect on permanency outcomes. Mediation has the potential to increase court efficiency by decreasing the time between court events and reducing the number of court events.

SUMMARY

The PPCD conducted a study of a mediation pilot program in King County, Washington to examine early case mediation as a tool for improving case efficiency. A focus on early case mediation is important because of the need to identify means of improving efficiency in the juvenile dependency court system. NCJFCJ’s assessment of the King County mediation pilot program compared case processing and efficiency outcomes between mediated and non-mediated child abuse and neglect cases. The analysis revealed that, on average, mediated cases reached adjudication 34 days sooner than non-mediated cases, and that mediated cases experienced fewer continuances at adjudication than non-mediated cases. Mediated cases also tend to have fewer hearings and are more likely to reach agreements on orders to be issued by the court.

IMPLICATIONS

The assessment found that court processing of mediated cases is timelier and more efficient. Cases are more likely to be scheduled and heard within federal and state-mandated timeframes. Mediation increases the likelihood that judicial officers will conduct fewer hearings.

Because mediation has been demonstrated to increase agreement, improve case processing timeliness and reduce the workload of the judges, mediation is an effective cost-saving tool.

The average time from petition filing to adjudication for mediated cases was 51 days, compared to an average of 85 days for non-mediated cases.

26% of mediated cases reached agreement before or during the 30-day hearing, compared to zero agreements by the 30-day hearing in non-mediated cases.

† An article on this research is currently in press in the Journal of Juvenile Justice (2011).
†† This research was conducted in partnership with the Washington Administrative Office of the Courts.