

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Online and Software Programs to Facilitate Parenting Time Arrangements, Support Obligations, and Payments

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Our separating and divorcing clients who are unable comfortably and reliably to coordinate with their former partners can often benefit from tools that can reduce their stress in dealing with their former or soon-to-be former partners and co-parents. Many different online resources and software programs exist to facilitate or enhance separated parents' abilities to arrange their children's schedules with each parent, but many of us have had very little first-hand experiences with any of them. To help family law attorneys and related professionals such as parenting coaches and child development specialists in the mental health and therapy fields make more informed suggestions to our clients and patients, this article assembles an extensive list of these programs and software. Others may also exist, and I take this opportunity to invite further investigation by or for professionals who represent or counsel individual clients (or patients, as the case may be), or even by clients themselves, depending on their needs and comfort levels using such programs and software.

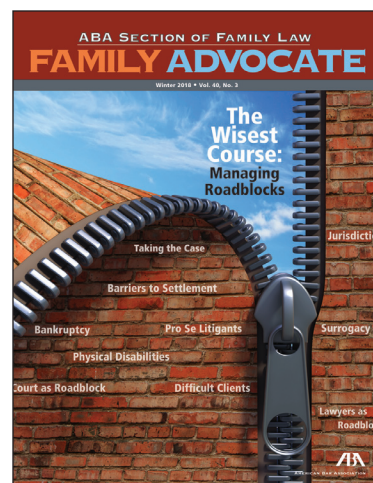
As attorney Kelly Vickers wrote in her blog, *MEDITATIONS ON MEDIATION*:

Good communication is the key to successful parenting after a divorce or other division of households. Unfortunately, the issues that led to the demise of the parents' relationship can make effective communication challenging. A frequent complaint I hear is that the other parent uses the guise of talking about the children to spew once again accusations, complaints and digging into the old wounds. A goal for me then, as a parenting coach, is to create new pathways of communication that keeps the focus wholly on the child/children.

Co-Parenting Success Using Google Calendar, *MEDITATIONS ON MEDIATION*, <https://kellyvickers.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/co-parenting-success-using-google-calendar> (Jan. 21, 2013).

The purpose of this article is *not* to review comprehensively or advocate for or against any of these options in a professional, software-reviewer manner. Rather, it seeks to achieve only the far more modest objective of creating a reference list, with a few comments added from others, of programs and software that can assist in improving communication and scheduling for separated or divorced parents (and even for just plain busy parents who need to ensure that their children's schedules are coordinated and "covered"). It should be considered only as a starting place for inquiry.

For those who wonder about reference to "software and programs," this article recognizes that some of the items listed are downloadable software, while others



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are entirely, or almost entirely, web-based programs. This is a distinction without a consequence for our purposes, and therefore in the remainder of this article, for simplicity, reference will be made only to “programs.”

The two most-cited and perhaps most used programs in the category of facilitating parenting schedules are, in my experience, Our Family Wizard and Google Calendar. I know many people use one of these two programs, but due to my lack of experience with most of the programs listed, I cannot compare them, and I thus do not endorse as “best” any program mentioned in this article.

Google Calendar (calendar.google.com): Ms. Vickers recommends Google Calendar, as “an ongoing diary and schedule of important events in the lives of the children, especially because it is free. Shifting the emphasis to the joint creation of an easily searchable record pulls attention away from the parents and towards the needs and lives of each child.” As many of you may already know, Google Calendar is an excellent web-based calendar program for normal calendar needs, which is beneficial for use by separated parents because it can be shared and edited (or not, if one parent is to “look only”). It can also accept notes about particular entries easily, though that function need not be used. The notes, if used, can be edited without notice by either party, which, if evidence will be needed, can be a problem.

I use Google Calendar to share a work calendar with my legal assistant, and I maintain a separate calendar “file” for my social and family obligations. It works well for those uses, but those are not the uses that are the focus of this article. For the limited but important uses that it has, Google Calendar works very well. But it is not as full-featured as most of the other programs named in this article.

Our Family Wizard (ourfamilywizard.com): Our Family Wizard is a far more full-featured program. It generally costs around \$99 per year per parent. It has often received quite positive reviews as being both very functional and a great way to cut down on nasty emails and conversations. It received kudos from Hon. Barbara M. Meyer, a retired Cook County, Illinois (i.e., Chicago-area) Domestic Relations Division judge, who wrote in *Family Lawyer Magazine*:

During my tenure as a domestic relations judge, I heard many cases where parents were not able to communicate with one another appropriately. This ... often adversely affected the children. In these cases, I would order the parties to exclusively (barring an emergency) utilize Our Family Wizard for communication and scheduling. I ... [i]ncluded in my court order ... authorization for the guardian ad litem or child representative to review all communications and to report to the court at each monthly court date. In my experience, communication improved, and as a result there was a positive focus on the children. ... Everyone involved in these cases felt that Our Family Wizard was a benefit in placing the emphasis on the children rather than the animosity between the parents.

www.familylawyermagazine.com/articles/top-software-picks (Dec. 23, 2016).

Ms. Vickers also looks favorably upon Our Family Wizard, which she “particularly likes,” and the program was mentioned approvingly in the article, *8 Apps that Make Post-Divorce Parenting a Little Easier*, by an author writing under the name “Deja Vow” and reprinted from DIVORCEDMOMS.COM in the *Huffington Post* at www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/09/divorce-apps_n_4915314.html (Mar. 9, 2014).

2Houses (2houses.com): This online tool works by allowing divorced parents to share information without interacting in person, as do all of the other programs listed in this

article. Either parent can initiate a joint calendar that each can then add to and edit. Parenting time schedules can be created and tracked, and extracurricular information about the children can also be uploaded and followed by both parties. It costs \$120 per year per family. 2Houses has been recommended favorably by Tracey Dowdy in *Apps to Help with Co-Parenting*, THE ONLINE MOM, <http://www.theonlinemom.com/apps-help-co-parenting> (last visited Nov. 27, 2017).

[It] offers a calendar to organize custody and events, share information about school or doctor's appointments, a photo album, a journal to record notes and important reminders like food allergies or sensitivities, and an expense module to manage child related expenses for both parents.

Cozi Calendar (cozi.com): One review contains the following description:

Cozi is essentially a daily planner app for families. It is available as a free app and (ad-free) premium app (Cozi Gold). What makes Cozi unique is its ability to help you keep track of each family member's individual calendar, shopping lists and to do lists all in one place and access them from multiple devices.

Amanda La Bell, *Cozi: A Family App Review*, THE REBECCA FOUNDATION, <http://www.clothforall.com/cozi-a-family-app> (May 15, 2015). From this description, it appears to be the functional equivalent of Google Calendar and oriented more toward *all* families needing to keep track of schedules, rather than just separated parents, although this could be said of Google Calendar, too, which many people apparently use. The premium version is said to cost \$19.99 per year.

Custody Junction (CustodyJunction.com): Reportedly, this program, also reviewed by Tracey Dowdy in THE ONLINE MOM (*see supra*), is designed to facilitate custody arrangements from pre- to post-divorce. Through the calendar and tracking features, parents can schedule current and future visitation and support arrangements for up to two years in advance, which could be a significant help in planning vacations and holidays. Customized reports on visitation, support payments, expenses, and hours spent with children are generated for both parents and can be shared with third parties such as lawyers or court monitors. There is a free initial trial period; after that, it is \$47 a year.

Custody X Change (custodyxchange.com): The home page of its website describes it as follows:

Custody X Change is a powerful tool that helps divorced, separated, or single parents create and track professional-quality parenting plans. ... You can use our software to:

- Create a parenting plan using our library of over 100 provisions and stipulations;
- Quickly generate and print easy-to-read calendars and reports;
- Be prepared and organized for attorney meetings, mediation, and court dates;
- Track your plan and keep notes about what actually happens going forward;
- Accurately calculate percentages, overnights, and total hours;
- Export your calendar to Outlook, Google Calendar, or your iPhone/Android mobile device.

It asserts that it is for professionals as well as parents. In *Is Custody X Change the right custody software for you?*, CUSTODY X CHANGE at www.custodyxchange.com/reviews/custody-x-change.php (Feb. 10, 2012), reviewer April Bowen gave it a very positive review. So did reviewer Michael Thomas in *Which On-Line Parenting Plan Provides The Best Value?* on DIVORCE RECOVERY SUITE BLOG, at divorcerecoverysuite.com/blog/parenting-plan-review (last visited Nov. 27, 2017). Thomas wrote that Custody X

Change is one of the “two best on-line parenting plan providers,” along with OPTIMAL On-Line Parenting Plan (see below). Two caveats, however: it appears to operate only on Windows systems, and its prices are one-time charges (not subscriptions) that vary from \$67 to \$297, depending on the features desired.

Kidganizer (kidganizer.com): This program is another one recommended by Tracey Downy on THE ONLINE MOM (see *supra*). Though its website is quite basic, it does provide an information email address for reference. From its self-description, it looks good but is not as full-featured as some of the other apps mentioned in this article, including Our Family Wizard and 2Houses, among others. However, it does claim that it handles and simplifies date/scheduling management and due dates of and receipts for payment obligations, and it even provides an “alert” option for items that a parent wishes to be notified about in advance. It appears to be very inexpensive (a \$1.99 payment for the download). Kidganizer works only on or for an iOS system (i.e., on Apple devices).

OPTIMAL On-Line Parenting Plan (parentingtime.net): This program is described on the website’s home page as:

an online custody calendar that allows parents to easily schedule and track *parenting time* as well as monitor compliance with their custody arrangement. ... Whatever kind of parenting arrangement you have ... OPTIMAL can help make communicating with the other parent and managing your parenting time easier. ... OPTIMAL is perfect for divorced or separated parents, joint or sole custody arrangements, shared parenting, co-parenting, restricted contact or family reunification cases, and out-of-state or long-distance parenting situations. OPTIMAL is also recommended by mediators and therapists. ...

While the website does appear to be a bit of a “hard sell,” it also appears to cover the bases very thoroughly. This may be why it, like Custody X Change, was reviewed very favorably by Michael Thomas in the DIVORCE RECOVERY SUITE BLOG (see *supra*). It is an online program only, and its cost is \$149 “per family” per year.

SasiTime (sasitime.net): This program facilitates parents’ tracking of time with children, contains a calendar and scheduling function, and provides an expense log (but I saw no reference to evidence of payments or receipts) and a secure online journal, and it has various other useful features. Its home page indicates that:

SasiTime’s child custody calendar can be used to help divorced and separated parents with co-parenting and joint custody time management. Our shared calendar software makes it easy to manage custody and visitation agreements between co-parents. Helping to make your blended family operate efficiently and peacefully, our family online calendar is a co-parenting tool meant to make divorced parenting easier. SasiTime’s collaborative parenting approach makes managing your kids’ calendar simple and hassle-free.

Its cost may be \$149 per year, after a free trial period.

For tracking support obligations only, the following programs may be useful.

SupportPay (supportpay.com): SupportPay seeks to make things easier for divorced couples in tracking expenses related to their children and support payments, etc., and in establishing a calendar of due dates and record of payments made. It describes itself as follows:

SupportPay is the first fully automated child support payment platform that allows you to schedule, track and monitor child support payments. But it also protects

parents by having records of payments right in the platform.

Parents that use SupportPay are 90% more likely to pay child support. That means no fees, penalties, or worries—and child support is paid on time, easily, every month.

We also have a flex pay feature, which allows parents to make partial payments and meet their obligations when they can, instead of missing them altogether. And we have a financial tool that makes tracking your routine payments much easier—especially if you’re sharing childcare expenses. There is no better way to pay child support.

See <https://supportpay.com/easy-pay-child-support> (Jan. 13, 2017). I do note, however, that some of these features appear to be available in the base program, which is free, while the more substantive features come with the premium level program, which costs \$119 per year.

TalkingParents (TalkingParents.com): TalkingParents is an “add-on” to this article. It is not oriented either toward facilitating scheduling or to listing or tracking expenses or payments, and it appears to be free. It asserts that it is designed solely to keep communications civil and avoid hostile communications by allowing conflicted, separated, or divorced parents to communicate only through this program, which keeps track of all communications between parents who use it. Its home page explains that:

We keep a complete record of communications between parents. We maintain the record as an independent third party, making sure parents cannot delete or alter anything they have said. In addition to what is said, we also keep track of exactly when each communication is made, when each parent signs in or out, and even when each parent actually views a new communication.

Conclusion

I would like to credit attorneys Brigid Duffield and Renee Lazar, who referred me to many of the above programs, although they did so without recommendation as to any in particular.

As a Virginia attorney, I would provide two cautions about some of these programs. (1) As to those components of the above programs that automatically calculate the time children spend with each parent, those calculations may not be calculated as Virginia law requires in Va. Code § 20-108.2(G)(3)(c) or as other states’ laws may require, although the calculations may still be helpful. (2) The function in a few of these programs that prepares without use of counsel “a custody agreement and parenting plan” may also result in complications, depending on the extent to which the plan it creates does or does not conform to Virginia (or other states’) typical or feasible practices.

Despite these cautions, these components may prove helpful to parents because they may at least provide a basis for a proposal for parenting time/visitation that can facilitate finalization by an attorney. These programs all are worth a look. Parents, however, should always be encouraged to inform, if not consult with, their attorneys and other pertinent professionals regarding their intended use of these programs.

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