

When You Can't Be There in Person

Virtual visitation can open a door into your child's world

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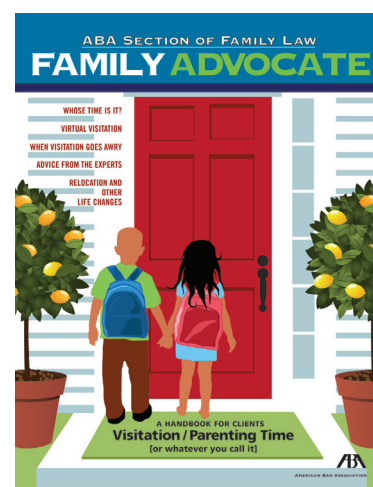
Separation and divorce will change a parent's lifestyle in a multitude of ways, but most profoundly, in the amount of time spent with children. With so many divorces in the United States and so many couples deciding to have children, but not to marry, more and more children will live apart from at least one parent, more commonly the father, at some point in their lives. The growth in the number of noncustodial fathers (that is, the parent who lives apart from the children) has been accompanied by concerns that a father's absence can have severe and long-lasting consequences for a child's well-being. A noncustodial parent's access can be even more problematic when the child lives far away.

The good news is that modern technology, in the form of virtual parenting time, offers at least a partial solution to the problem of long-distance parenting. Virtual parenting time allows a parent to stay connected with his or her children electronically through e-mail, instant messaging, texting, phone calls, and video conferencing. It is intended to supplement, not substitute for, face-to-face time with a child.

One sector of our society that makes very resourceful use of virtual parenting time is military families, when one parent is deployed overseas. Military families have whole-heartedly adopted the use of video conferencing and can teach us a great deal about how productive and rewarding it can be. We spoke with the wife of an Air Force Tech Sergeant deployed to Afghanistan about finding virtual ways for the children, ages four and six, to spend time with their dad. They use Skype (a video conferencing program) and set aside time almost every evening for a session, incorporating it into the children's evening routine. The children have become so accustomed to it that even the four-year-old knows how to turn on the computer, click on the Skype icon, and call her dad.

The nightly contact has enabled their dad to maintain a close bond with the kids and participate in things like reading bedtime stories, helping with homework, and listening to the children talk about their day. The oldest child, who is learning to read, enjoys practicing on the phone with his dad. Both kids look forward to this time with their dad. Skype is free, easy enough for a four-year-old to learn, and is available for mobile devices. This family uses a cell phone when their deployed dad doesn't have access to a computer.

It is probably not realistic for every noncustodial parent to expect nightly contact with the children. However, when both parents are committed to making the arrangement work, as in the example above, virtual visits can be scheduled around the parents' and the children's schedules. Virtual parenting time, just like regular parenting time, should be scheduled to accommodate everyone in the family. In the absence of cooperation, it can be court ordered, and most judges are open to creative, safe ways to accomplish long-distance visits.



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Teens

For today's teens, video technology and social media are a way of life. Who doesn't recognize that quintessential teenager with face plastered to the screen of a mobile phone? Teens are preoccupied with their sense of self and steeped in the development of autonomy. Living away from a parent may magnify the natural separation from parents—emotionally and physically—during the teen years. A teen may prefer texting, which is instant and doesn't need to be scheduled. With less direct contact, a teen may feel more in control and freer to experiment with intimacy and engage in difficult conversations, revving-up or tamping down the flow of information to his or her comfort level.

Interactive online games (like World of Warcraft or Final Fantasy XIV) and some Xbox or PlayStation games may be the medium of choice for parenting time with a teen. Playing games together can be fun, low stress, and a way to enjoy being connected. By all means, also try to schedule some video face time with your teen at least once a week.

Elementary-school-age children

For younger school-age children, virtual parenting time should be frequent and scheduled so that the child can count on having contact and stay attached and bonded to the long-distance parent. Video conferencing, which enables a child to engage in activities with the parent, is especially effective at this age. With video conferencing, the child can settle into familiar, comfortable surroundings at home and engage naturally with the parent, discussing day-to-day issues or going over homework, allowing the parent to participate more fully in the child's life and development.

It is the parent's job to find activities to engage the child. A young child can sit in front of a computer screen for only so long. Encourage children to engage in activities they enjoy: coloring, building Legos, or reading aloud—which is great practice for a child—and most children enjoy being read to as well.

Through screen sharing, you can watch favorite videos together or play online interactive games with a younger child. Always allow your child to determine for how long to engage. Doing so will make virtual parenting time something to which the child looks forward.

Infants and toddlers

For infants and toddlers, parents may use video conferencing to observe the child's development and to provide the child with more visual and auditory interaction. Interactions that convey smiles, laughter, and exaggerated facial expressions are stimulating for babies and fosters bonding.

Video conferencing will require parents to cooperate in finding the right schedule that is frequent, of shorter duration, and does not interrupt sleeping or nap time. As the child ages, the duration of the call can increase to accommodate new, age-appropriate activities. Ideally, parents should text or instant message each other before logging on to make sure that the baby/toddler is comfortable, available, and not distracted during the scheduled parenting time.

We spoke with a father who has been using virtual visitation for a little over a year. He started when his daughter was two. Because the mother and child were in another country for the first two years of the child's life, this father had not met his daughter in person until three months after initiating virtual visitation. What he found most gratifying was that when they met in person for the first time, his daughter immediately recognized and ran to him.

This father and child have continued their virtual visits three times a week (from different states), and the child, who is now three, loves these visits. Father and child

play games, watch cartoons and movies together, and talk about their day. This father stressed that this level of interaction with a young child would not be possible by telephone. It is the interaction afforded by video conferencing that has enabled him to keep his daughter engaged and interested and to have a meaningful relationship with her. This father prefers Google Hangouts because it is high quality, free, can be accessed from a computer or a phone, and can include multiple people.

Regardless of the ages of the children, virtual parenting time requires parents to work together to establish the means and mode of contact, taking into consideration the age, maturity, and number of children involved. For example, asking multiple young ones to sit in front of a computer terminal will certainly require supervision by the custodial (live-in) parent to safeguard the hardware and software. It will require that parents cooperate and strive for a positive relationship with each other, reinforcing healthy parent-child relationships with both parents.

For the custodial parent, being positive about the virtual parenting time is essential to helping children develop an ongoing, stable relationship with the distant parent. The custodial parent also can use virtual parenting time to stay in touch when the child goes to visit the distant parent. For the noncustodial parent, virtual parenting time allows participation in the children's upbringing and education and, most important, to show them love, warmth, and affirmation, even from a distance. **FA**

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Video Conferencing Options

All video conferencing programs require either a smartphone with video capability and Internet access or a computer with a webcam and microphone, plus reliable, fast Internet access.

Google Hangouts is possibly the most popular video chat program among young adults and teens at this time. It connects friends and family through texting, group texting, photo sharing and video calls for up to 10 people at once. It is a free program and available for Android or Apple devices. The software can be downloaded from google.com or from the applications store for your mobile device. You will be required to create a Google account.

Skype is possibly the best-known video chat program and has been around the longest. It has both free and paid-for features. Free features include video and voice calls to anyone else on Skype and instant messaging and file sharing. There are low-cost fees for calls to mobile phones and landlines worldwide, text messaging and online access at more than two million public hotspots worldwide using Skype WiFi. To use Skype, download the software to your device and have the person you are trying to contact do the same (skype.com).

FaceTime is popular with Apple users (iPhone, iPad, etc.). It enables video calls and audio calls for parties with iOS devices interacting with others on iOS devices. Connection is via Wi-Fi or a cellular data plan. FaceTime is available for the iPhone 4 or later, iPad 2 or later, iPad mini, and iPod touch. You can download the app from the Apple App Store. FaceTime may not be available in all countries.

Facebook Video Calling allows you to talk with friends and family face to face for free. Both parties must have a Facebook account. There is a quick, one-time set up required through Facebook. The time and date of each video call will be listed in your Facebook ongoing message history, but the calls are not recorded or saved. You can

continue using other Facebook features during your video call.

Viber is a free program that enables you to have free contact with other Viber users on any device and network, in any country. You can make voice calls, video calls, text, and send photos. Both participants to the conversation must be using Viber or, if the person you are calling is not a Viber user, there is a charge. Viber syncs your contacts, messages, and call history with your mobile device. You can install the software from the Viber website (www.viber.com). You must have a mobile device to participate because your cell number is what identifies you. While Viber does not charge for its use, all calls, texts, etc., may utilize your mobile device data plan.

Tango is a free download that allows free text messaging and video and phone calls from computers and mobile devices. It is available online at www.tango.me, and in your mobile device app store. Texts, calls, and video chat made on mobile devices may utilize your mobile device data plan.

— C.S.G. & D.H.

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