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Divorced parents using virtual visitation

Laptop video conferences help keep families in touch

By Ofelia Casillas, Tribune reporter

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Greg Baddick helped his 9-year-old daughter learn the state capitals of the Midwest. Later, when he asked Isabella how her test went, she said she got an A-plus — though she almost forgot the answer for Nebraska.

"Congratulations," Baddick said via an Internet video link, the same way he helped her study. "I'm proud of you."

Because Baddick, a senior manager for a pharmaceutical company, is divorced from Isabella's mother, he helped his daughter study using their laptop computers and the Internet. The virtual visits are a weekly date for the pair, in addition to the in-person weekly visits and twice monthly weekend stays. Isabella lives in Elgin, Baddick in Chicago.

"It's been, honestly, a godsend," said Baddick, 39. "I feel like I'm there. I don't feel like I'm missing anything."

Language added to an Illinois law this month includes virtual visitation among the rights of noncustodial parents, making it enforceable by a judge. According to the measure, parents are entitled to electronic visits unless the court believes that contact would be harmful to the child.

The visits can be made by telephone, e-mail, instant messaging and video conferencing.

While some parents have long worked out such arrangements, the new language creates a legal right for cases when parents cannot agree.

"We really want parents to be invested in the daily lives of children and this gives them another venue," said state Sen. Pamela J. Althoff, R-McHenry, who carried the bill after it was introduced by a former colleague.

The law is similar to a handful passed in other states over the last six years, according to David Meyer, associate dean at the University of Illinois College of Law.

Meyer said the extent of visitation rights is still for a judge to determine.

"There's been some who have been wary of these laws either on the grounds that they will provide an excuse to bar in-person visitation or that they will be used to promote contact where it would not be good for children," Meyer said.



Larry Baum, 44, said texting has helped ease the stress of divorce for his 12-year-old daughter.

Baum, a sales manager, lives just 15 minutes from his three children, so he sees them most evenings. Still, two years ago Baum began texting with his eldest, even though it's not part of a formal settlement.

"It helps a ton," Baum said. Because of the constant contact with both parents, "the fact that she's living in two houses is not stressful for her," he said.

While Baum has not needed video conferencing yet to keep up with his kids, he took the idea into consideration when he bought a new laptop — just in case he ever needs to travel more for work.

"I'm acutely aware of how stressful some situations might be for my kids. ... Being able to communicate instantly takes the stress out of it," Baum added.

Chicago family law attorney Jeffery Leving, who said he helped write and lobby for the changes to the law, said he hopes the changes help noncustodial fathers and open up opportunities for children to be in contact with incarcerated fathers.

"The electronic visitation — primarily the cell phone and now the computer — in my opinion, is a psychological lifeline for the child," said Leving, whose firm specializes in fathers' rights.

Bruce Boyer, director of the Loyola Civitas ChildLaw Clinic, said virtual visitation has been helpful in custody cases involving parents who are great distances from each other or in cases where a parent should not have physical proximity to his or her children but would still like to visit and have a relationship.

But, he cautioned, virtual visits should not take the place of in-person interaction whenever safe and possible.

"It's a lesser alternative to face-to-face contact," Boyer said. "If you don't have a better alternative, it can be a very good way of maintaining contact."

Baddick and Isabella's mother divorced in 2003, and the father recalls the emptiness he felt when he first drove away from the family home. His daughter, he said, also remembers.

"It was horrible. It took me a while to get over it," he said. "I struggled for years and years."

But then the father and daughter adjusted, and in recent years, they discovered virtual visitation. In the Baddicks' case, the visits aren't part of an official custody agreement, but rather worked out informally between Isabella's parents.

Isabella likes the video phone.

"It's really cool that you get to talk to your dad and see him," she said.

Baddick recently called his daughter on Skype, an application that allows people to talk and see each other at the same time, from his hotel room at the Hyatt Regency O' Hare where he was preparing to begin a weeklong meeting.

"How was school?" Baddick asked into the computer screen. After having trouble hearing his daughter, he put her on speaker from his cell phone but kept the video going so he could see her face.

Baddick asked her which friends were coming over that night. She told him.

"You have to get your homework done first," Baddick reminded.

Isabella told him that she planned to join the soccer team. She promised to send her father a picture of her new horse, Gretta. (A photo quickly arrived over his cell phone.)

Then Isabella said that her best friend was moving away because of her parents' divorce.

"Like with me and Mommy, sometimes divorce happens," Baddick said. "It will be OK. You be strong."

Since Baddick remarried a Russian woman, Isabella and her father have a saying before they hang up: "Do svidaniia," goodbye in Russian.

On this particular evening, they both said it. They said they loved each other. Then they hung up.

ocasillas@tribune.com

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