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Virtual Visitation - 10/19/2006 10:00 PM

VIDEO
10/19/2006

Virtual Visitation

The internet is building connections that have been split apart by divorce. Computers and webcams are keeping parents who live apart from their children in touch.

It's called "virtual visitation" and it's actually law in three states. Fifteen other states are working on bills to allow judges to order it.

But even without a designated law, judges in South Dakota say it can be a good idea.

Divorced dad Brett Kurth is working to keep connected to his two kids. He shares custody with their mother, but wants to be available whenever his children need him. Kurth says the way to do that is through computer technology.

Kurth says, "Courts state each parent will have phone access to children. This is just advancement in the technology of phones; just doing it over the internet and adding video."

Kurth is among many parents across the nation logging onto virtual visitation. All it takes is a webcam and high-speed internet connection.



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Kurth says, "I'll be able to help with homework. My son can hold homework out I can read it. I can go through math problems; or reading to my daughter at bed time. That would be so cool."

Divorce attorney Cathy Piersol has clients who are successfully using virtual visitation.

Cathy Piersol says, "A child grows away from the parent and the parent is unsure how to behave with that child. If you can have interaction with that child with a video camera, or speak several times a week, when you do see them face to face, there isn't that wall. There isn't that time you need to adjust to get to know one another again."

Experts say that kids can really benefit from the web cam used in virtual visitation because most kids don't like to talk on the phone until they're 11 or 12-years-old.

Brad Zell says, "Does it replace person to person contact? No absolutely not. No. But is it better than just a cold phone call where all you hear is a voice? Yes, because you can see emotions."

Circuit Court Judge Brad Zell says South Dakota visitation guidelines already open the virtual door for video visitation. "Courts already have jurisdiction to order it, if parties seek it. Many people haven't yet. But as time goes on and technology gets better, we're going to see more and more of it," says Zell.

Piersol sees all kinds of applications for virtual visitation, including for parents who are in prison. She says it will prevent children from feeling abandoned; whether it's because a parent can't or shouldn't, because of abuse, be around that child.

Piersol says, "There are a lot of options so a child can have interaction with the parent. The parent can have interaction with the child. No it's not a great situation. But it is communication and the child knows they do have a parent."

Judge Zell says younger children need more one-on-one contact with a parent to build a relationship. But he sees virtual visitation as a real option when it comes to teens already well-versed in cyber space.

"You see visitation with teens become more difficult; not because parent's lack of willingness to participate, but kids becoming busy, more independent. They have a life," says Zell.

But those who work in the court system caution it's not for everyone.

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"Is there potential for abuse? There is with anything. But anything that can aide in building a relationship between parents, especially when distance gets in the way, is a good idea," says Zell.

Kurth thinks so too. In fact this software engineer is coming up with his own program so it just takes a click of the mouse for his kids to stay virtually connected.

"It's going to give me another avenue of staying in their lives," says Kurth.

Virtual visitation could also be used in cases where the parent needs supervised visitation. The visitation center in Sioux Falls can't keep up with all the parents needing to use it and judges see virtual visitation as a possible way to help solve this problem.

Some opponents are worried it would also encourage parents to move more, but South Dakota has rules in place regarding relocation.

[For information about virtual visitation click here.](#)

[Angela Kennecke](#)

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