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# Divorced families get lifeline online

"Virtual visitation" is now the law in Wisconsin and Utah. But some warn that webcams are no substitute for direct contact.

**Chuck Haga**, Star Tribune  
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Thanks to visitation rights spelled out in his divorce decree, Michael Gough saw daughter Saige jostle her first loose tooth. He watched and listened, offering encouragement, as she started to read.

The "visits" all happened online via a court-approved webcam system connecting Gough in Utah with his daughter in Wisconsin, where Saige's mother had moved after the divorce gave her primary parental responsibility.

His ex-wife opposed the "virtual-visitiation" arrangement when he proposed it, but Gough said he "made a presentation in court with two laptops showing how easy it was."

The judge was persuaded, but Gough wanted to make sure other distant parents could seek the same rights.

"I'm a computer security consultant," Gough said, "so I'm very technical."

In part because of Gough's efforts, Utah passed the nation's first virtual-visitiation law in 2004.

Gough since has moved to the Milwaukee area to be closer to Saige, and he took his ideas to the Wisconsin Legislature. On Wednesday, Gov. Jim Doyle signed legislation making Wisconsin the second virtual-visitiation state.

Noting that several states are pondering similar proposals, Gough added: "We're looking for a sponsor in Minnesota."

### 'See my missing teeth?'

Saige, who was 4 when her parents divorced, is nearly 7 now.

Her virtual visits with her father last 20 minutes to two hours. "She reads me stories quite often, and we play games," Gough said.

"She loves it. She uses the web camera to talk with her grandparents and great-grandparents, too. The last time she showed them her two missing front teeth, and she told them about her visit to Disney World with her mom."

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around the world, kids at college or globe-trotting retirees, he said. So why not a parent who can't afford airline tickets and the other expenses of interstate travel?

Most American homes have computers, Gough said, and most have the high-speed Internet connections required for virtual visits.

"You add the headset and webcam, maybe \$100 for each side," he said. "It's hardly expensive."

Is it dangerous?

"There are predators and pedophiles out there, and that's led to a lot of bad press about webcams and kids," Gough said. "But as a parent who leads efforts for safe surfing, I don't see a problem as long as you monitor" how a child is using the computer and camera.

"That's called 'Parenting 101,'" he said. "You have an obligation to monitor."

Noncustodial parents are more likely to pay child support if they feel connected with their children, Gough said. Another advantage: fewer spats between parents at handoff time.

### **Can't be a substitute**

Some child advocates have expressed concerns about virtual visitation.

"We don't oppose such arrangements, but we just don't want to see them become a substitute for real contact," said David L. Levy, director of the Children's Rights Council, a child-advocacy organization based near Washington, D.C.

"This is a real child here," he said. "One thing all researchers agree on is that a child with two parents is more likely to do better with regard to drugs, academics and staying in school. That means two real parents, not long-distance parents."

Christina Huson, an attorney with the Twin Cities law firm Butler, Huson & Allen, said that she sees "both good and bad" in virtual visitation.

"It's starting to come up in divorce and custody cases more and more as the technology advances and people become more familiar with it," she said. "Just five years ago, it would have been fairly rare.

"When people live on opposite sides of the country -- and people are moving more for their jobs -- it can be a great thing. The custodial parent cannot use distance to alienate the child from the other parent. The downside would be if people say, 'Hey, it's no big deal for me to move away because we have this virtual visitation capability.' As anyone who's a parent will tell you, it's not the same thing as direct contact."

Huson said the issue was raised about a year ago in a divorce case in which she represented the father.

"Mom wanted to move the kids to Madagascar," she said. "Part of her argument was, 'I'll get a webcam and you can still see the kids that way.' The father said, 'No way, that's not the same thing.' "

The mother relented.

### **Nothing like a hug**

The legislation that Gough promoted in Utah and Wisconsin includes

a provision that the availability of electronic visitation may not be used by a custodial parent to justify a move to a distant place.

"Nothing can take the place of a hug," he said.

"When I realized my daughter really needed me and wanted me around more, I moved so I could be closer. I traded some virtual time for real time, and now I see her every Monday and Wednesday and every other weekend.

"If a dad is going to be involved in his kid's life, he's going to be involved. If he thinks he'll just use this to keep in touch, he probably wasn't going to stay involved anyway."

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