

# Columbus Dispatch (Columbus, OH)

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## **Family Connections: Divorced Parents can Stay Close to Children through Video Conferencing**

Editorial – The breakup of a marriage is always traumatic for the children involved. The resulting separation from one parent can make the situation even more difficult, for parents and the children. But technology can help salve those wounds, and judges who preside over divorce cases should take advantage of it whenever possible.

Last year, Utah became the first state to proclaim a parental right to so-called virtual visitation. The law allows the judge in a divorce case, if both parents have periods of physical custody and it is in the best interest of the child, to mandate the parents' right to electronic communication with the child while he or she is with the other parent.

That communication includes telephone, e-mail, instant messaging and video conferencing.

The video-conferencing option seems to offer the most benefit. The visual element most closely approximates an in-person visit. Instead of merely describing that new outfit she picked out for the first day of school, a youngster can show it off. Instead of only hearing the words mom or dad is reading from his favorite picture book, a child can look at the illustrations. Instead of just hearing mom or dad's voice, a child can see the smile that goes along with it.

That visual element helps enrich the parents' experience, too, whether they are living down the block or across the country.

The drafters of Utah's law were careful to specify that virtual parenting time should supplement, not replace, in-person time. It's also important that virtual visits are for a reasonable amount of time, conducted at reasonable hours.

They also stipulated that the separated parents must agree on whether the communications equipment needed is reasonably available to both parents; the equipment includes a computers, video cameras, headphones with microphone, video and voice software and a broadband connection. If the parents can't agree, it's up to a judge to decide.

While virtual visitation can be an important addition to a divorce decree, it should never be used as an excuse to allow a parent to move a child long distances.

Michael Gough, a divorced father whose ex-wife moved from Utah to Wisconsin and took their daughter with her, was the driving force behind the Utah law. He has since moved to Wisconsin to be closer to his daughter and is pushing for a similar law there.

Three other states are considering or drafting virtual-visitation legislation. It's a good idea that can make a world of difference for parents and children.

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