ONLINE AND SOFTWARE PROGRAMS TO FACILITATE PARENTING TIME ARRANGEMENTS, SUPPORT OBLIGATIONS AND PAYMENTS

by Douglas J. Sanderson
dsand@mccandlishlawyers.com

Our separating and divorcing clients who are unable comfortably and reliably to coordinate with their former partners can often benefit from tools that can reduce their stress in dealing with their former or soon-to-be former partners and co-parents. Many different online and software programs exist to facilitate or enhance separated parents’ abilities to arrange their children’s schedules with each parent, but many of us have had very little first hand experiences with any of them. To help family law attorneys, and related professionals such as parenting coaches and child development specialists in the mental health and therapy fields, to make more informed suggestions to our clients and patients, this article assembles an extensive list of these programs and software, though others may also exist, in order to invite further investigation by or for professionals who represent or counsel individual clients (or patients, as the case may be), or even by the clients themselves, depending on their needs and comfort levels using such programs and software.

As Kelly Vickers wrote in her blog, “Meditations on Mediation:”

Good communication is the key to successful parenting after a divorce or other division of households. Unfortunately, the issues that led to the demise of the parents' relationship can make effective communication challenging. A frequent complaint I hear is that the other parent uses the guise of talking about the children to spew once again accusations, complaints and digging into the old wounds. A goal for me then, as a parenting coach, is to create new pathways of communication that keeps the focus wholly on the child/children.

(kellyvickers.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/co-parenting-success-using-google-calendar)

The purpose of this article is not to review comprehensively, or advocate for or against, any of these in a professional, software-reviewer manner. Rather, it seeks to achieve only the far more modest objective of creating a reference list, with a few comments added from others about some of the software and programs listed, of programs and software that can assist in improving communication and scheduling for separated or divorced parents (and even for just plain busy parents who need to ensure that their children’s schedules are coordinated and “covered”). It should be considered only as a starting place for inquiry. For those who wonder about reference to “software and programs,” this recognizes that some of the items listed are downloadable software, while others are entirely, or almost entirely, web-based programs. This is a distinction without a consequence, for purposes of this article, and therefore in the remainder of this article, for simplicity, reference will be made only to “programs.”
The two most-cited, and perhaps most used, programs in the category of facilitating parenting schedules are, in my experience, **Our Family Wizard** (found at [ourfamilywizard.com](http://ourfamilywizard.com)) and **Google Calendar** ([calendar.google.com](http://calendar.google.com)). I have known of many people using one of these two programs, but due to my lack of experience with most of the programs listed I cannot compare them, and thus do not endorse as "best" any program mentioned in this article.

Ms. Vickers recommends Google Calendar, as “an ongoing diary and schedule of important events in the lives of the children, especially because it is free. Shifting the emphasis to the joint creation of an easily searchable record pulls attention away from the parents and towards the needs and lives of each child.” As many of you may already know, Google Calendar is an excellent web-based calendar program for any normal calendar needs, which is beneficial for use by separated parents because it can be shared and edited (or not, if one parent is to “look only”) and can accept notes about particular entries easily, though that function need not be used. The notes, if used, can be edited without notice by either party, which if evidence will be needed, depending on the parent’s needs, can be a problem as to the notes function. This writer uses Google Calendar to share a work calendar with his legal assistant, and maintains a separate calendar “file” for his social and family obligations, and it works well for those uses, but those are not the uses that are the focus of this article. For the limited but important uses that it has, Google Calendar works very well. But it is not as full-featured as most of the other programs named in this article.

**Our Family Wizard** is a far more full-featured program. It generally costs around $99 per year per parent. It has often received very positive reviews, as being both very functional and a great way to cut down on nasty emails and conversations. See, for example, Tina Swithin’s blog, “Divorcing a Narcissist,” ([see review at onemomsbattle.com/Our+Family+Wizard+Review](http://onemomsbattle.com/Our+Family+Wizard+Review)). It received extreme kudos from Barbara M. Meyer, a retired Cook County, IL (i.e., Chicago area) Domestic Relations Division judge, writing in Family Lawyer Magazine at [familylawyermagazine.com/articles/top-software-picks](http://familylawyermagazine.com/articles/top-software-picks), who wrote that:

> During my tenure as a domestic relations judge, I heard many cases where parents were not able to communicate with one another appropriately. This ... often adversely affected the children. In these cases, I would order the parties to exclusively (barring an emergency) utilize Our Family Wizard for communication and scheduling. I ... [i]ncluded in my court order ... authorization for the guardian ad litem or child representative to review all communications and to report to the court at each monthly court date. In my experience, communication improved, and as a result there was a positive focus on the children. ... Everyone involved in these cases felt that Our Family Wizard was a benefit in placing the emphasis on the children rather than the animosity between the parents.

Ms. Vickers also looks favorably upon **Our Family Wizard**, which she “particularly likes,” and the program was mentioned favorably in the article, “8 Apps
That Make Post-Divorce Parenting A Little Easier,” in the Huffington Post (huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/09/divorce-apps_n_4915314.html).

Other programs include, in alphabetical order:

2Houses (2houses.com): This is an online tool that works by allowing divorced parents to share information without interacting in person, as do all of the other programs listed in this article. Either parent can initiate a joint calendar that each can then add to and edit. Parenting time schedules can be created and tracked, and extracurricular information about the children can also be uploaded and followed by both parties. It costs $120 per year per family. 2Houses has been recommended favorably at The Online Mom’s article entitled, “Apps to Help with Co-Parenting” (theonlinemom.com/apps-help-co-parenting):

[It] offers a calendar to organize custody and events, share information about school or doctor’s appointments, a photo album, a journal to record notes and important reminders like food allergies or sensitivities, and an expense module to manage child related expenses for both parents.

Cozi Calendar (cozi.com): One review/description appears at clothforall.com/cozi-a-family-app and contains the following description:

Cozi is essentially a daily planner app for families. It is available as a free app and (ad-free) premium app (Cozi Gold). What makes Cozi unique is its ability to help you keep track of each family member’s individual calendar, shopping lists and to do lists all in one place and access them from multiple devices.

From this it appears to be the functional equivalent of Google Calendar, and oriented more toward ALL families needing to keep track of schedules rather than just separated parents – though this could be said of Google Calendar, too, which many people apparently use. The premium version is said to cost $19.99 per year.

Custody Junction (CustodyJunction.com): Reportedly it is designed to facilitate custody arrangements functioning better, from pre- to post-divorce. Through the calendar and tracking features, parents can schedule current and future visitation and support arrangements for up to two years in advance, which could a significant help in planning vacations and holidays. Customized reports on visitation, support payments, expenses, and hours spent with children are generated for both parents and can be shared with third parties such as lawyers or court monitors. This program has a free initial trial period, after which a it costs $47 per year. (See more in The Online Mom’s above-mentioned article entitled, “Apps to Help with Co-Parenting,” at theonlinemom.com/apps-help-co-parenting/#sthash.j3ZPAHSH.dpuf.)

Custody XChange (custodyxchange.com): Its website describes it as follows:
Custody X Change is a powerful tool that helps divorced, separated, or single parents create and track professional-quality parenting plans. ... You can use our software to:

- Create a parenting plan using our library of over 100 provisions and stipulations
- Quickly generate and print easy-to-read calendars and reports.
- Be prepared and organized for attorney meetings, mediation, and court dates.
- Track your plan and keep notes about what actually happens going forward.
- Accurately calculate percentages, overnights, and total hours.
- Export your calendar to Outlook, Google Calendar, or your iPhone/Android mobile device.

It asserts that it is for professionals as well as parents. A reviewer at custodyxchange.com/reviews/custody-x-change.php gave it a very positive review, as did the reviewer at divorcerecoverysuite.com/blog/parenting-plan-review, who wrote that Custody XChange is one of the “two best on-line parenting plan providers,” along with Optimal™ On-Line Parenting Plan (see below). Two caveats, however: It appears to operate only on Windows systems, and its prices are one-time charges (not subscriptions) that vary from $67 to $297, depending on the features desired.

Joint Parents (JointParents.com) appears to present a comprehensive approach to most of the same components as do others mentioned in this article. It also appears to be over a decade old, with little evidence of its having been updated. However, anyone may visit its website and determine if this is accurate or not. If it has been updated, then it likely is a good option. Its cost is believed to be approximately $99.50 per year.

Kidganizer (kidganizer.com) is another program that The Online Mom blog recommends. Though its website is quite basic, it does provide an information email address for reference. From its self-description it looks good but is not as full featured as some of the other apps mentioned in this article, including Our Family Wizard and 2Houses, among others. However it does state that it handles and simplifies date/scheduling management, due dates of and receipts for payment obligations, and even provides an “alert” option for items that a parent wishes to be notified about in advance, and it appears to be very inexpensive (a $1.99 payment for the download). Kidganizer works only on or for an iOS system (Apple devices).

Optimal™ On-Line Parenting Plan (parentingtime.net) states that OPTIMAL™:

is an online tool that allows you to easily schedule and track parenting time as well as monitor compliance with your custody arrangement. ...
Whatever kind of parenting arrangement you have ... OPTIMAL can help make communicating with the other parent and managing your parenting time easier. ... OPTIMAL is perfect for divorced or separated parents, joint or sole custody arrangements, shared parenting, co-parenting, restricted contact or family reunification cases, and out-of-state or long-distance parenting situations. OPTIMAL is also recommended by mediators and therapists....

While the web site does appear to be a bit of a “hard sell,” it also appears to cover the bases very thoroughly. This may be why it was reviewed very favorably at divorcerecoversuite.com/blog/parenting-plan-review/2/, along with Custody XChange, listed above. It is an online program only, and its cost is $149 “per family” per year.

SasiTime (sasitime.net): This program facilitates parents tracking time with children, contains a calendar and scheduling function, an expense log (but I saw no reference to evidence of payments or receipts), a secure online journal, and has various other useful features. Its web site contains the following description:

SasiTime’s child custody calendar can be used to help divorced and separated parents with co-parenting and joint custody time management. Our shared calendar software makes it easy to manage custody and visitation agreements between co-parents. Helping to make your blended family operate efficiently and peacefully, our family online calendar is a co-parenting tool meant to make divorced parenting easier. SasiTime’s collaborative parenting approach makes managing your kids’ calendar simple and hassle-free.

Its cost may be $149 per year, after a free trial period.

For tracking support obligations only:

Support Pay (supportpay.com) seeks to make things easier for divorced couples in tracking expenses related to their children and support payments, etc. and in establishing a calendar of due dates and record of payments made. It describes itself as:

... the first fully automated child support payment platform that allows you to schedule, track and monitor child support payments. But it also protects parents by having records of payments right in the platform.

Parents that use SupportPay are 90% more likely to pay child support. That means no fees, penalties, or worries – and child support is paid on time, easily, every month.
We also have a flex pay feature, which allows parents to make partial payments and meet their obligations when they can, instead of missing them altogether. And we have a financial tool that makes tracking your routine payments much easier – especially if you’re sharing childcare expenses. There is no better way to pay child support.

I do note, however, that some of these features appear to be available on the base program, which is free, while the more substantive features come with the Premium level program, which costs $119 per year.

**Talking Parents** ([TalkingParents.com](http://TalkingParents.com)) is an “add-on” to this article. It is not oriented either toward facilitating schedule, nor to listing or tracking expenses or payments, and it appears to be free. It asserts that it is designed solely to keep communications civil and avoid hostile communications, by allowing conflicted, separated, or divorced parents to communicate only through this program, which keeps track of all communications between parents who use it. At its web site it explains that it:

> keep a complete record of communications between parents. We maintain the record as an independent third party, making sure parents cannot delete or alter anything they have said. In addition to what is said, we also keep track of exactly when each communication is made, when each parent signs in or out, and even when each parent actually views a new communication.

**Conclusion**

The author gives credit to attorneys Brigid Duffield and Renee Lazar, who provided many of the above programs of which I had not previously known, though they, too, did so without recommendation as to any in particular.

As a Virginia attorney, I would provide two cautions about some of these programs:

1. As to those components of the above programs that automatically calculate the time that children spend with each parent, those calculations may not calculated the same way in the programs as VA law requires in [Va. Code § 20-108.2(G)(3)(c)](http://Va. Code § 20-108.2(G)(3)(c)), or as other states’ laws may require, though it may still be helpful.

2. The function in a few of these programs that prepares without use of counsel “a custody agreement and parenting plan” may also result in complications, depending on the extent to which the plan it creates does or does not conform to Virginia (or other states’) typical or feasible practices.

Even despite these cautions, these components may prove helpful to parents, and at least launch a proposal for parenting time/visitation that can facilitate
finalization by an attorney. Despite these few cautions, these programs all are worth a look, and worth consideration, for the purposes stated in the introductory paragraph. Parents should always be encouraged to inform, if not consult with, their attorneys and/or other pertinent professionals, regarding their intended use of these programs.

[NOTE: THE AUTHOR WELCOMES UPDATES AND ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS OR APPS ADDRESSING THESE ISSUES THAT ANY READER MAY SUGGEST.]