

Virtual Visitation...What a Great Idea!

By James A. Latour

Recently I read an excellent article about virtual visitation for children of divorce. It's an interesting concept. The article spoke of a father who had "virtual visitation" rights placed in his divorce agreement. He was moving overseas and was concerned that his daughter would not get to know him and would eventually forget him altogether.

So what is virtual visitation? Since I am a person of the technology age, I realized that I already use it. I recently bought a new cell phone for my soon to be 18 year old daughter. Firstly I was concerned that there would be times as with most teens, that she would be in situations where she wouldn't be able to safely get home when out with friends etc... Secondly, I wanted to start establishing a more personal line of communication with her before she left home. And thirdly, I was looking for an MP3 player for her for Christmas anyhow. So it was a combination of a few things.

So now we talk quite a lot on MSN Messenger, e-mail, the cell phone, text messaging, the land phone, as well as our regular weekly visitation on weekends.

Since I don't live in the house with my kids anymore, and she is more responsible than the younger ones still, it has worked well. I know that they want the same privilege but the deal we have is that I supplied the phone and added her to a family plan, but she has to maintain the cost of her part. I also wisely blocked any extras like web access and long distance, except to my cell phone (which is free anyhow).

As for my other two kids, we use the land phone and sometimes they talk to me via their mother's cell phone or their older sister's phone, as well as MSN Messenger, e-mail and regular weekly visitation.

The article I read raised a very interesting question: Should virtual visitation be written into divorce orders, especially when the relationship between the parents is strained? This way the non-custodial parent and the child have access set up and maintained by them without the stress of meeting or dealing with the ex-partner. The downside of this could be that "virtual" replaces "real" visitation. We need to be ever vigilant that we are not replacing personal contact with out kids and parent/grandparents.

When most homes now have multiple computers armed with gadgets like webcams, mics and speakers; most people carry cell phones, PDA's and other messaging devices; is it not just a given that we can communicate with our children this way anyway? I say yes and no. It greatly depends on the relationship strain between the parents, too. If there is any degree of alienation happening between the parents, any type of contact becomes difficult, even virtual contact. So perhaps this situation deems the necessity for the order to contain virtual visitation. We also need to keep in mind that sometimes when parents split the "reasonable and generous access" clause works. But as time goes by things do happen that make two "reasonable" adults less so. So it is important to have these clauses added or specific to protect not so much the parents as it is to protect the children who may potentially lose access to a parent due to alienation.

When I was a kid I couldn't even imagine carrying a "personal phone" let alone text messaging & emailing and doing business and personal stuff on the go like that. Mind you when I was a kid I imagined that my life would look like the Waltons (maybe with not so many kids). But it isn't and I use whatever means I can to keep up with my kids. In fact as I type up this article at work, I am chatting with my eldest via MSN.

Which leads me to the next issue: Can we convince our employers to let us have access to our kids via things like MSN as long as it doesn't interfere with our work? I am fortunate, since I work in a place that promotes the family, that this is good. But I also have good enough boundaries to shut off MSN when I need to really get down to brass tacks. I guess some people don't.

Virtual Visitation! Where will this lead us? What is the next techie thing to come down the line? Whatever it is I say....do it...use it...be a part of your kids life....they need you. And you know what? You need them too.