

March, 2018

Co-Parenting Woes: There's An App For That

Darla W. Jackson
Jim Calloway

ALSO INSIDE: Solo & Small Firm Conference
Professional Responsibility Commission Annual Report

THE OKLAHOMA BAR Journal

Volume 89 — No. 7 — March 2018



FAMILY LAW

Co-Parenting Woes: There's an App for That

By Darla Jackson and Jim Calloway

Ask any parent and they will likely agree that parenting is a difficult job in the best of circumstances. Co-parenting during and after a divorce, where negative feelings and miscommunication have often been the case, increases the difficulty of focusing on the interest of the children. In today's app-filled world, you would expect there to be apps to help with clear communication, documentation and scheduling between co-parents, and there are.

This article covers six apps that can assist with co-parenting. The use of these apps may be ordered by a court.¹ Sometimes family law attorneys or other professionals recommend the apps to their clients. Divorced or separated parents may locate these tools on their own.

The relationship between the parents, the technological competence of the parents, the device and platforms the apps utilize, the likelihood the parents will use the app and available budget are all factors to be considered when choosing such an app.

FEATURES

While not an all-inclusive list, some of the features of co-parenting apps are:

- 1) Calendars with embedded tools to create parenting schedules, record upcoming events and make requests for trades in parenting time
- 2) Expense and payment

tracking tools that allow parents to communicate about parenting costs and to attach virtual receipts

- 3) A banking feature that allows for transfers between parents' banking accounts for parenting-related costs such as child support or medical expenses
- 4) A feature to maintain a record of vital family information that both parents and caregivers have access to, such as medical insurance, medication, Social Security numbers, etc.
- 5) A message board or message feature where important topics can be discussed
- 6) An accountability tool that dates and timestamps all messages sent as well as the date and time when those messages were viewed²

APPS

We focus on six apps. There are others and, many of the others are

discussed in the articles and blogs referenced.

OurFamilyWizard

OurFamilyWizard (OFW) is perhaps one of the most often recommended³ co-parenting apps. One attorney-authored blog about the app differentiates OFW from other similar apps, indicating that "[w]hile some co-parent communication tools only facilitate messaging, the OurFamilyWizard website offers a full suite of tools to help parents create parenting schedules, log expenses, send reimbursements, and share important family information."⁴ One of the more unique features offered by OFW is its ToneMeter. The ToneMeter, sometimes referred to as an "emotional spellchecker," will "identify and flag emotionally charged sentences within your OurFamilyWizard message. As intuitive as grammar or spell-check, ToneMeter goes beyond sentiment to gauge words and phrases against eight levels of

connotative feeling, allowing the end user to make real-time corrections and adjust the overall tone of messages.”⁵ However, ToneMeter is currently available only for communications in English.

OFW is also favored by some attorneys because it “makes it easy for professionals to work with clients. OFW Family Law Practitioner provides a way to oversee parent activity and access court-ready reports at no cost.”⁶ Yet, while OFW is “one of the oldest and most established of the co-parenting apps [that] ... has been developing and refining their program for the last 15 years”⁷ it received only a 2.2 average rating in the App Store. One attorney has suggested that although he recommended OFW for several years, in part, because of the cost, he has had few clients use the app and had received no feedback from those who did.⁸

The cost of OFW depends on the period of subscription and the package selected. The basic subscription is \$99 per year for each parent.⁹ A professional account is free. As described by OFW, the “professional account gives you the ability to create parent accounts, manage a database of your clients, store important client documents



online (judgment and decree, court orders, etc.), communicate with your clients, create client to do lists, and much more. This account gives you the ability to see what is actually going on in your cases. All of the information is directly tied to the parent accounts that you create.”¹⁰

If you already use a practice management solution with a client portal feature, you can share documents, events and information with your client. However, a practice management solution will not facilitate communications between co-parents. For attorneys wanting to offer the app as part of the legal services provided, OFW offers volume discounts which may represent significant savings depending on the number of subscriptions purchased. For example, for a firm that provides accounts to 20 clients the package pricing is \$240 less than 20 individually priced accounts.¹¹

2Houses

2Houses has been described as “on par with Our Family Wizard and slightly less expensive.”¹² 2Houses offers a calendar to organize events, share information about appointments, a journal to record notes and important reminders and an expense module to manage child-related expenses for both parents.¹³ One of the features of 2Houses users appreciate is the ability to upload and export photo albums.

Even though it has many features, the app is described as “very user friendly, organized, and intuitive.”¹⁴ The cost of 2Houses is \$10 per month or \$120 per year for a family, regardless of the number of family members.

AppClose

AppClose is described on one law firm blog as:

It turned out to be my top choice ... First, it’s free. Second, it’s very user friendly and has most of the features to address common parenting disputes. It keeps track of messages and shows you the latest when you open the app. The shared calendar provides schedule templates, with descriptions like “Alternating weeks” and an explanation of how that schedule is followed. Parents can use a template with specified days/times and apply it to one or more children, or have the option to customize the entire parenting time schedule. Parents have the ability to create events, notify family members, and create reminders. Parents can request a parenting time trade or drop off/pick up change in the app. The reimbursement request has an option to attach an image and allows parents to keep track of their share of the expense and payments that are made.

This app includes a place to keep important, detailed information about each child, but parents will need to do some customization when it comes to organizing that information. I found this app easy to navigate and fairly intuitive after getting accustomed to it. This would be the best alternative to the subscription services ... Also, this app, available at appclose.com, has a separate side for attorneys to communicate with clients and accept electronic payments.”¹⁵

AppClose is a free download from the App Store or Google

Play. Additionally, as suggested previously, AppClose integrates with LawPay to allow electronic payments.¹⁶

Kidganizer

Kidganizer is suggested as “great for a couple who find it difficult to get together, either because of divorce, [difficulty communicating well face to face], or time constraints”¹⁷ or if you “have a number of people involved in the care of your children and need a central point for communication and record keeping.”¹⁸ The app provides parents with the ability to create profiles for each child and input information including scheduling and finances. Updates to the system are in real time, allowing all users of the system to have access to current information.

The cost of Kidganizer is \$1.99, but the app is not available for all platforms.

CustodyJunction.com

CustodyJunction.com is designed to facilitate co-parenting arrangements both before and after the divorce. The calendar and tracking features allow parents to schedule current and future visitation and support arrangements for a significant period of time in advance (up to two years). Custody Junction also generates customized reports on topics of concern such as visitation, support payments, expenses and hours spent with a child. The customized reports can be shared with third parties, including lawyers or court-appointed professionals.¹⁹

Custody Junction is a web-based service and the service cost “is an affordable \$47” for a one-year subscription.²⁰

Talking Parents

Talking Parents is a free service described as being “designed as a secure communication system for divorced and separated parents.”²¹ Talking Parents primary feature is a “secure” messaging system. The system is operated so that “conversations cannot be edited or deleted, allowing for both parents to maintain a verified record of past conversations. Files can be uploaded and attached to messages as well. The system tracks when messages are sent, when parents sign in and out of the system, and when parents view each message for the first time.”²² Additionally, the system has an export feature that, for a fee, allows parents to export a transcript of past communications to a PDF file.

A standard account is available for free. Parents can upgrade to a premium account for \$4.99 per month. “Premium accounts include unlimited access to PDF records; a totally ad-free experience across all devices; a 10 percent discount on printed records; and access to our new iPhone and Android apps which include new message notifications right on their mobile device. Parents can cancel Premium status anytime and their account will revert back to a Standard account.”²³

SECURITY CONCERNS

The discussion of “secure” systems brings to mind a caution regarding app security. While an in-depth discussion regarding the security measures included in these types of apps is beyond the scope of this article, before ordering, recommending or adopting an app, one should inquire about the security measures employed to protect the information and

carefully review the terms of service. Although Talking Parents emphasizes that the app provides a “secure” environment, its terms of service does not address encryption or legal requirements for systems containing medical records. Rather, the terms of service contain the following language:

TalkingParents.com will attempt at all times to keep your information confidential, subject to the other provisions of these Terms Any breach of our security measures will be the sole responsibility of the breaching party and TalkingParents.com will not be subject to any sort of liability as a result. In the event of a security breach, TalkingParents.com will make every reasonable attempt to re-secure our services and will provide an explanation of the breach upon written request.²⁴

It should also be noted that we did not test drive all of these apps. An extensive test drive of all features would be required before recommending the app to clients. At some point a client will ask the lawyer about some function of the app and the response of “I don’t know how to use the app” will not endear the lawyer to the client who had to learn how to use it.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous apps and online resources to assist with the woes of divorcing parents and their attorneys. While tools like client portals may help with communications between clients and attorneys, these tools facilitate more neutral communications between co-parents, reducing the temptation to use their children to carry important communications.

Divorcing and divorced parents are becoming more familiar with these tools and some family law attorneys are promoting and using them as evidenced by the number of reviews and blog posts we have cited. Lawyers with technology skills might develop their own tools, integrate existing resources with their practice management systems²⁵ or suggest use of other communication resources, such as Facetime and Google Calendar.²⁶

Lawyers who practice family law appreciate that the pain, both financial and emotional, of divorce often impairs parents’ ability to communicate and objectively consider what is in the best interests of the children. Knowing that communications are tracked and recorded should improve appropriate communication. Perhaps being “forced by the lawyers to use this app” will be the starting point for other types of cooperation. Cooperation and effective communication will help parents make the decisions about the care of their children and will likely make the work of attorneys and judges easier as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jim Calloway is the director of the OBA Management Assistance Program and manages the OBA Solo & Small Firm Conference. He served as the chair of the 2005 ABA TECHSHOW board. His Law Practice Tips blog and Digital Edge podcast cover technology and management issues. He speaks frequently on law office management, legal technology, ethics and business operations.

Darla Jackson is the OBA practice management advisor. She earned her J.D. from the OU College of Law. She also holds a Masters of Library Science from OU and an LL.M. in international law from the University of Georgia School of Law. She has practiced as an Air Force judge advocate and served as a law library director at the University of South Dakota School of Law.

ENDNOTES

1. "We have already seen technology assisting judges in family law cases. Parents have been ordered to provide Skype or Facetime to children so they can communicate with the other parent. They have also been ordered to use apps like "Our Family Wizard" to track parenting time, reduce divorce conflict and remove the "he said/she said" that keeps families returning to court over custody and coparenting issues." Sharon D. Nelson & John W. Simek, *Through a Glass, Darkly*, 74 Or. St. B. Bull. 62 (2013-2014). Two apps, OFW and Talking Parents, even provides language that parties may suggest in preparing orders for courts. The OFW suggested language includes the following: "All parents entries shall be viewable via a Professional Account to both parties' attorney(s) of record and the Judge / Commissioner / Minor's Counsel/ Parent Coordinator/ Special Masters /GAL) assigned." Our Family Wizard, Common Order Language. www.ourfamilywizard.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/Model_Language8.13.pdf. See also Talking Parents, *Court Enforcement*, www.talkingparents.com/court-enforcement.

2. This list of possible features is summarized from Lisa Brick, *A Must Have App to Co-Parent with Ease*, Huff Post Blog (Aug. 30, 2016 05:34 pm ET, Updated Aug. 31, 2017), www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-mcmahon/a-must-have-app-to-copare_b_11549114.html.

3. Natalie R. Kelly and Michael Monahan, *Legal Tech Tips*, Ga. B.J. 46, Oct. 2017, at 46, [digitaleditions.walworthprintgroup.com/publication/?i=441814#{"issue_id":441814,"page":48}](http://digitaleditions.walworthprintgroup.com/publication/?i=441814#{). recommends OFW as one of three coparenting apps. LawInfo, *Co-Parent App Helps Manage Kids' Lives*, LawInfo Blog (May 3, 2017), blog.lawinfo.com/2017/05/03/co-parent-app-helps-manage-kids-lives/, also list OFW as an app to

help with coparenting.

4. John Harding, *Our Family Wizard*, Family Law Lawyer Tech & Practice (Jan. 20, 2017), familylawyertech.blogspot.com/2017/01/our-family-wizard.html.

5. Our Family Wizard, *Frequently Asked Questions - ToneMeter, Your Emotional Spell-Check*, www.ourfamilywizard.com/help/tonemeter-your-emotional-spell-check.

6. *Id.*

7. Lisa Brick, *A Must Have App to Co-Parent with Ease*, *supra* note 2.

8. Seif & McNamee, *Getting the Most Out of Co-Parenting Technology*, Seif & McNamee Blog (Mar. 29, 2017), law-oh.com/2017/03/29/getting-the-most-out-of-co-parenting-technology/.

9. Our Family Wizard, *Plans and Pricing*, www.ourfamilywizard.com/plans-and-pricing_ (last visited Jan. 9, 2018).

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. Seif & McNamee, *Getting the Most Out of Co-Parenting Technology*, *supra* note 8.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. LawPay, *AppClose*, lawpay.com/appclose/ (last visited Jan. 9, 2018).

17. CoParents.com, *Three Useful Co-Parenting Apps*, CoParents.com Blog (Feb. 2, 2016), www.coparents.com/blog/three-useful-co-parenting-apps/.

18. Lucy Good, *5 Apps for Calm and Controlled Co-Parenting*, Beanstalk (Feb. 7, 2016, updated on Sept. 9, 2017), beanstalkmums.com.au/co-parenting-apps-for-calm-and-controlled-parenting/ (last visited Jan. 9, 2018).

19. Tracey Dowdy, *Apps to Help with Co-Parenting*, TheOnlineMom (www.theonlinemom.com/apps-help-co-parenting/ (last visited Jan. 9, 2018)).

20. *CustodyJunction, Pricing*, www.custodyjunction.com/pricing.shtml (last visited Jan. 9, 2018).

21. Grant Toeppen and Lora Grevious, *Co-Parenting Apps and Online Resources*, Toeppen & Grevious (Jan. 13, 2016), grantandlora.com/co-parenting-apps-and-online-resources/.

22. *Id.*

23. Talking Parents, *How it Works*, www.talkingparents.com/how-it-works (last visited Jan. 9, 2018).

24. Talking Parents, *Terms of Service*, Talking Parents (Sept. 15, 2017), www.talkingparents.com/terms-of-service.

25. Yet there are security concerns that need to be addressed when resources are integrated or linked. Juliana Hoyt, *Getting Up to Speed: Tech Savvy Tips for ADR Professionals - A Mile Wide, Inch Deep Review of Online Resources for Your Business*, Vermont B.J. (Fall 2010), at 45, www.riverstoneresolutions.com/files/ADR%20Getting%20Up%20To%20Speed%20Tech%20Savvy%20Tips%20for%20ADR%20Professionals%20Hoyt.pdf (web-based version does not reflect pagination of print original).

26. Brandie Weikle, *Divorced Parenting in the 21st Century — There's an App for That*, TheStar.com (Mar. 24, 2016), www.thestar.com/life/2016/03/24/divorced-parenting-in-the-21st-century-theres-an-app-for-that.html, suggests the use of Google Calendar, and Damien McKinney, *Co-Parenting In The Digital Age*, www.themckinneylawgroup.com/co-parenting-digital-age/, addresses the use of Facebook.



MUSCOGEE (CREEK) NATION DISTRICT COURT

Presents the 16th Annual



INDIAN LAW CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE

APRIL 26-27, 2018

RIVER SPIRIT & MARGARITAVILLE CASINO RESORT, TULSA, OK

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

TWO-DAY	\$150
ONE-DAY	\$100
ON-SITE	\$200

LODGING

FOR CONFERENCE RATE (\$93/NIGHT),
CALL 888-748-3731 BY 4/2/18
AND MAKE ROOM RESERVATION AS AN
"MCN DISTRICT COURT CLE ATTENDEE"

REGISTER NOW!

VISIT OUR WEBSITE OR CALL FOR MORE INFORMATION:

WWW.MUSCOGEECREEKTRIBALCOURT.ORG (918) 758-1400

THIS COURSE HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE OKLAHOMA BAR ASSOCIATION MANDATORY CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION COMMISSION FOR 12 HOURS OF CLE CREDIT, INCLUDING 1 HOUR OF LEGAL ETHICS CREDIT.