

Judges Use On-line Tool to Resolve Conflicts in Divorcing Families

By Chuck Tombarge
Court Information Office

So much of what happens in Judge James Swenson's Hennepin County Family Court courtroom is "he said, she said." It's common. A parent who blames the other parent for failing to inform him of the child's play or sporting event.

"Those people who have built up animosity come back frequently for contempt motions *or other court actions that clog up court calendars and make matters worse for the children involved in divorce, Judge Swenson said.

But he and other Hennepin County Family Court judges have found a solution:
www.Ourfamilywizard.com.



"It's a phenomenal tool," said Judge Swenson, who has led a Hennepin County pilot project using the website for the past year-and-a-half. The program was recently highlighted in *The Christian Science Monitor* and the *Washington Post*.

Ourfamilywizard.com helps parents coordinate schedules by using color-coded on-line calendars, email messages and family message boards. The

website was created by Paul Volker of Minneapolis, who wanted to find a better way for his family and all divorced families to keep track of visitation schedules. A child's day spent with dad is shaded in one color, while visits with mom are shaded in another. The calendar also lists the child's activities, and specifies whether mom or dad will pick up the child.

The site also features an expense log and an information bank that includes a record of vital statistics, school schedules and contact information for teachers and child-care providers. Following a divorce, the decree and agreement terms are also posted on the couple's private site. Parents can communicate on-line with each other, preventing the "he said, she said" arguments that often accompany divorce.

Judge Swenson has used the site in two different ways: For cases that involve people who will be sharing parenting responsibilities and who could benefit from the site, Judge Swenson provides them with information about the program and who they can call to register. However, sometimes parents are unable to communicate. If the children are stuck in the middle and are being harmed by the parents' communication problems, or if the parents are coming back to court on a regular basis to the point of clogging court calendars, Judge Swenson orders the parents to use Ourfamilywizard.com.

"In the cases I've ordered it to be used, to my recollection, I haven't seen any of those people again," Judge Swenson said. "What I don't know yet is whether that is attributable to the fact that they are using it and that eliminates their need to come back, or they know better not to come back if they're not using it because I'm not going to be a happy camper."

As part of the Hennepin County pilot project, Ourfamilywizard.com asks parties who use the service to complete a survey, the results of which will be shared with the judges.

The encrypted and password-protected website costs \$99 a year for each parent. Grandparents or others who need to keep track of a child's schedule can buy third-party viewing access to the calendar for \$25 a year. Because Hennepin County Court is a pilot county and is willing to refer families to Ourfamilywizard.com, the service is available to Hennepin County users at a decreased rate.

"It's only about one hour's worth of lawyer time," said Judge Swenson. "So it's a very cost-effective tool."

Judge Swenson said he thinks Ourfamilywizard.com could be used to help others keep track of lives. He is considering how this service might be made available to pro se litigants and other court users who could benefit from the technology.

"There are even some lawyers using it that aren't involved in dissolutions but who want help with their busy lives," Judge Swenson said, admitting that he would have used it in his own family if it had been available while his children were teenagers. "It's a very good resource for parents to organize their lives."