

# Web site seeks to facilitate child custody communication

## Features e-scheduling to avoid visitation conflicts

**A** Web site developed by a Massachusetts divorce lawyer, custody lawyer, and judge that helps solve many of the communication problems that mothers and fathers face in trying to co-parent from separate households.

The idea for [custodytalk.com](http://custodytalk.com) came from Erika attorney Kathleen W. Ekason, who, after 20 years of practicing family law, became a law clerk about equalization, breakdowns between parents. But in reality, it took a really nasty Christmas custody problem in her court's family to crystallize the idea.

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"There was a Christmas when nobody was where they were supposed to be and everybody was unhappy," she recalled. "The kids don't remember what they got for Christmas that year, but they remember how upset everyone was. It was just a misunderstanding. Most people have their children every other weekend and when the holiday schedule coincides with the weekend schedule, some parents misunderstand. They don't know whether the schedule changes or if doesn't. That communication is not good. It just happens under the best of circumstances, and the impact can be felt in more than one household."

But as divorced parents and their lawyers know, sometimes that communication is purposeful and results from a lot of game-playing by one or both parents. The Web site can solve the problems of both types of families by simplifying a myriad of the communication, and allowing the best of both worlds: allowing the best of circumstances that can please both households.

"If we got rid of these concerns, I think we would have better results," said Ekason.

The parents now have a place to deal with family business in a calm, unburied and reflective way, Ekason said.

The site gets most of its traffic during the noon hour and between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., she noted, explaining that parents are using the site during their lunch hours or in the evening when they have time.

The site also allows parents to store their financial information in five different data centers, messages board, journal, information base and expense log.

A lot of information has to be entered initially, but it can be easily updated, Ekason said. Access to the encrypted site costs \$50 per year in

most cases. The site has been up for about two years but was significantly redesigned last March.

### Calendar

The site provides a color-coded calendar that will show the father's custody days in one color and the mother's days in another for up to three years in the future. (Past custody days also remain on the calendar.) The calendar features icons showing schedule change requests (a question mark) and conflicts (an exclamation point).

The children's activities are also listed on the calendar, with color-coded bars showing who should pick-up and drop-off. Clicking on the calendar box will take the user to a message box for more details.

Parents can easily click on a weekend results way to determine if they have parenting time then, said Ekason. If there is a conflict between holiday access and regular access, the computer will tell you so, she added.

### Message Board/Journal

The message board is a secure site that allows parents to communicate with each other. Scheduling issues, data, change requests, and expense log entries are listed on the message board. Parents can post information here without worrying that the children will read it.

More information can be posted in the journal which again is searchable to the children, and which, when it is printed, provides a complete history for each child.

### Information Bank

The information bank is a place to store all the family's vital information, such as those health insurance numbers that cause so much conflict between parents. Parents can also enter an entire school year of information, and can even view in

important documents, such as the Judgment and decree.

### Expense Log

The expense log allows parents to enter costs incurred, indicate which child the expense was for, and allows parents to approve or disapprove the expense. A running total of all approved expenses will be maintained. The site will also calculate each parent's share of the expense. Parents can also be allowed to do the expense log.

When a new expense is logged in, an entry will be posted to the message board. Although initially withdrawn and even started out as a resource for parents, many professionals who work with families have become interested, according to Ekason. She said that she is aware of 20 sets of parents across the nation who are using the site pursuant to court order. One judge that is entering use of the site is acting cases is Judge James Brennan in Hampden County, Swanton, who has been on the family bench for seven years, said that he sees a number of reasons to encourage or order the use of the software.

"It's quite a boon to the courts because it reduces down the litigation," he told Massachusetts Lawyer. "The best part is that they create to come back to court. It is also helpful to the court because it creates a record of the parties financial transactions and communications. One of the biggest problems in the court is he said she said."

Brennan said that the software is also good for children because it reduces the traditional sources of



The site uses electronic calendar for the use of visitation and expense log.

visit and provide a way for parents to communicate free of emotion.

**Solving problems**  
Ekason pointed out that the site is of use to family service professionals as well as to parents.

"The people who are really interested in it are judges, mediators, parenting coordinators and guardians ad dem," she explained. "The providers can use it to monitor the behavior of parents — if you have a guardian ad dem that usually means you need monitoring."

Ekason observed that a Canadian judge is exploring assessing the site from the courtroom and having parents fill out the calendar there. Ekason said she would love to see judges order parents bringing judgments motions to use the site for a while to see if it reduces their communication problems.

The lawyers representing the parents may also benefit when their clients use it.

"I've heard for family lawyers not to get burned out and it's hard to see what is happening to kids," said Ekason. **A**

— Barbara L. Jones