VIRTUAL PARENT TIME

BY MICHAEL SAINI, PHD & SHELY POLAK PHD(C)
FACTOR_INWENTASH FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

High Prevalence of Internet Use

An estimated 80% of households now have access to the internet in North America. It is therefore not surprising that children and youth use online technologies and the internet more than any other medium to communicate and socialize (Kaynay & Yelsma, 2000)

Virtual Parenting Time

Virtual Parenting Time is the use of electronic communication tools to enable contact between a parent and his/her children.

Types of Technologies

- Text messaging,
- E-mail,
- Facebook,
- Facetime,
- Skype

Increase use of VPT in the courts

Judges supporting the use of virtual visitation methods as a way of maintaining contact between a child and a non-custodial parent, particularly when it comes to mobility.

There is a current debate about whether VPT should replace or enhance in-person contact.

What does the academic literature say?

There is very little direct research on this specific area.

Research is extrapolated from broader contexts such as a children having virtual contact with a parent that is in the military overseas, incarcerated parents as well as children living in University residences.

It was found that telephone communication is considered the main form but video chatting, e-mail, and text messaging are rapidly on the rise.

Did you know?
- IM provides more opportunities to communicate and facilitates intimate self disclosure
- Using virtual technology can enhance parent-child relationships by providing a parent the opportunity to engage with their children

Benefits of VPT:

Children felt closer to their parent when using technology.

Parents "friending" their children on social networking sites will allow them access into facets of the child's life that may not otherwise be accessible to them.

Limitations of VPT:

Conflicts can arise by children or parents deleting comments or responding to messages promptly, children or parents finding upsetting information online about one another and children resisting communication by virtue of feeling monitored by their parent.

When is Virtual Visitation Ordered?

80% of cases were virtual visitation was ordered are mobility cases (petition by one parent to relocate with the child (ren) to another city, province or country).

The use of virtual visitation in mobility cases is inexpensive, global and allows for the maintenance of the parent-child relationship.

On the other hand, the use of only virtual visitation can leave non-custodial parents feeling dissatisfied and frustrated.

Evidence gathered generally supports the use of technology to maintain parent-child relationships when physical contact with a parent is limited.

What are actual children saying?

After conducting interviews with children of divorced parents recurring themes were identified.

1) Import for parents to "get with the times" and learn how to use Facebook, BBM, text messaging while at the same time giving them their own space.
2) Kids preferred text messages or emails when they just needed to provide factual information
3) To develop more "closeness" or "bonding" with a parent, Skype is the best method since both "need to be fully engaged in the conversation" whereas its easy to focus on other things when using instant messaging.
4) Aside from real "face-to-face" contact, Skype is the next best thing to ensure parent and children can keep in contact –

While online communication was reported to be steadily increasing, kids reported feeling as if virtual visitation even using Skype should not replace real contact.

Kids felt a barrier in developing emotional closeness and higher quality relationship if it was just limited to online methods.

Considerations in Drafting VPT Plans

- Structuring contact so that children are not exposed to parental conflict;
- Clear parenting plans that ensure no interference between the child and access parent
- Consistent and predictable dates and times for parent-child virtual contact
- Clear expectations about the contact between children and parents

Summary of Developmental Considerations for Virtual Visitation

Developmental Stage	Consideration	Parental Assistance Required	Relevance to Virtual Visitation
Toddler Child (18 months - 3 years of age)	• Beginning to use computers for educational and non-educational games with assistance.	• Highest degree of parental assistance required for toddler to participate in virtual visitation.	• Cognitive, emotional, language, physical, and moral development in this stage suggest that virtual visitation can occur, since the toddler is beginning to make links between self and family, put words together to form sentences, etc.
Preschool Child (3 – 5 years of age)	• Computer use for educational and non-educational games.	• Child has more ability to operate basic technology, but would still require parental assistance for tasks such as typing.	• Likely to get good use out of video conferencing where typing is minimally required. • Use of technology is increasing in this developmental stage; better ability to initiate interactions, engage, participate, and expand on virtual visitation interactions.
School-age Child (6 - 8 years of age)	• Use of computers in home (homework and video games). • Increased use of computer in school curriculum.	• Moderate degree of parental support required. • Parents still required to arrange virtual visitation times and ensure child is present.	• Instant messaging and email can be introduced, given children's ability to type, read, and write. • Greater emotional expression during virtual visitation.
Pre-adolescence (9-12 years of age)	• Proficient use of TV, DVDs, and video games. • Very adept at computer use (homework and video games). • Increased use of social networking such as Facebook.	• Child could be more involved in the scheduling of virtual visitation times. • Children of this age would have an increased ability to use messaging, email, Facebook, Skype, and have independent use of a phone for phone calls and texting.	• Virtual visitation can easily be maintained at this stage as children use the internet and often have extensive knowledge on how to use it. • Opportunity for elaborate discussions using virtual visitations; this can help child develop deep sense of loyalty to family and friends (even if parents are divorced/separated).
Adolescence (13 - 18 years of age)	• Adept at multi-tasking with a variety of technologies. • Significant increase in the use of social networking media, with this being the preferred method for adolescents to stay connected.	• Little to no parental assistance required for virtual visitation. • Teens are increasingly in charge of their own scheduling. • Teens likely require little to no assistance in operating the technology and programs required for virtual visitation.	• Important for other parent to maintain visitation to avoid negative consequences, or disruptions in parent-child relationships. • Ability to see perspective of other parent is an important concept for child when engaging in virtual visitation and in understanding the purpose and benefits of virtual visitation.

Types of VPT Activities

- Virtual field trip together
- Synchronous communication, instant messaging or video chats, can take place while looking at the webpages.
- Virtual time together
    - dinners
    - bedtime routines
- Parent can make a video and/or audio tape of them reading bedtime stories to send to their child along with the book
- Play Internet games together
    - Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune, golf, card games, chess, checkers
- Create an "add-on" story through email
    - Writing a paragraph in a word document, sending it to the child via email, and the child can write the next paragraph to the story saving the attachment and sending it back to his/her parent, continuing a back and forth writing of a story.
- An Internet crossword puzzle program made personalized
    - Clues could include special times together, memories, or each other's favorite activities. The puzzle can be done asynchronously or synchronously

Considerations in Drafting VPT Plans

Age and maturity of the child

Daily Schedules of Child and/or Adolescent

Schedule of Virtual Visits and Types of Communication

Financial Considerations

Behavior of Custodial and/or Non-Custodial Parent

Supervision / Monitoring Required

Importance of Privacy