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FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

## When Parents Divorce, Apps Can Reduce the Child-Custody Acrimony

Software can serve as intermediary between divorced parents; 'It took away a lot of stress from me'



By

*Julie Jargon*

April 30, 2019 5:30 a.m. ET

Divorce can bring out the worst in parents who are already accustomed to bickering with each other. Even an argument about whether a kid should join a soccer team—and who will pay—can end up in a courtroom.

To minimize discord and unnecessary court time, family-law judges increasingly order warring parents to use co-parenting apps. The new tools may not solve every problem, but experts say they can ease the stress on children caught in the crossfire.

Created by divorced parents, family-law attorneys and judges who saw a need to create a better way for families to communicate, the apps can allow parents to document their compliance with the parenting plan. Some have a check-in feature so parents can prove that they picked up or handed off their children when and where they were supposed to. Others use artificial intelligence to flag messages written in an aggressive tone, reminding parents to keep their communications civil. Most have calendars that help both parents keep track of their children's activities and appointments—no matter whose day it is.

Candis Lewis, a mother of three who lives on a military base near Tacoma, Wash., said the Talking Parents app she and her ex-husband were ordered to use has eliminated the stress of arguing over whether a text message or email was received. All messages in the app are time-stamped, and show exactly when the other parent read them.

Ms. Lewis said their parenting plan says she has to give written notice well in advance if, for instance, she wants to take the kids on vacation. The app, she said, allows her to provide proof that she's done that so there's no dispute later over whether she has complied. "This eliminates

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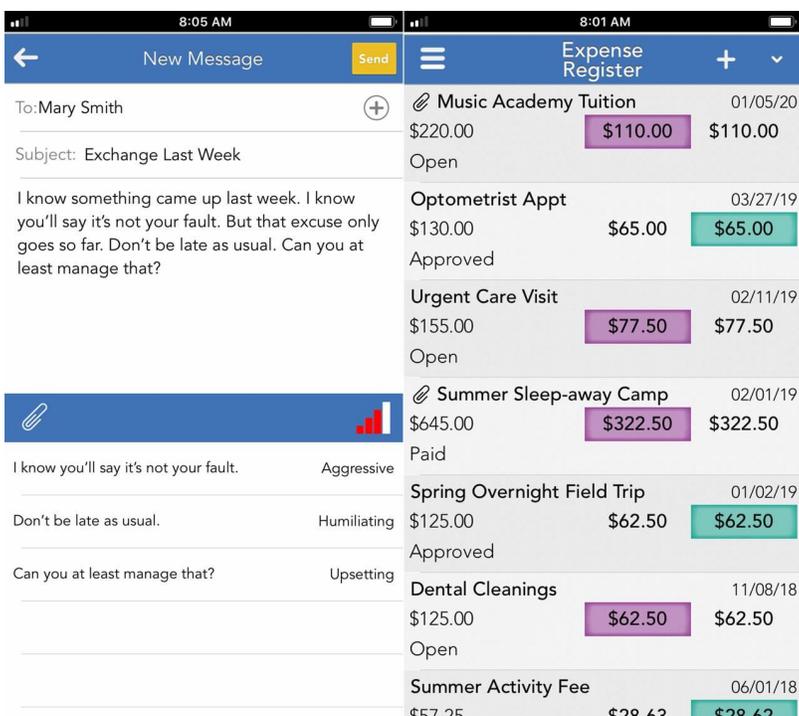
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*What tools do you and your ex use to effectively communicate as parents? Join the conversation below.*

the he-said, she-said,” Ms. Lewis said. The couple, divorced since last August, is still involved in a custody dispute. Ms. Lewis’s ex-husband declined to comment.

Lisa Abrams, a family-law judge in Arizona Superior Court in Pima County, said she’s seeing more young parents forgoing marriage—but even they end up in court, fighting over the kids. Half of American adults were married in 2017, down 8 percentage points since 1990, a trend driven in part by couples getting married later in life, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

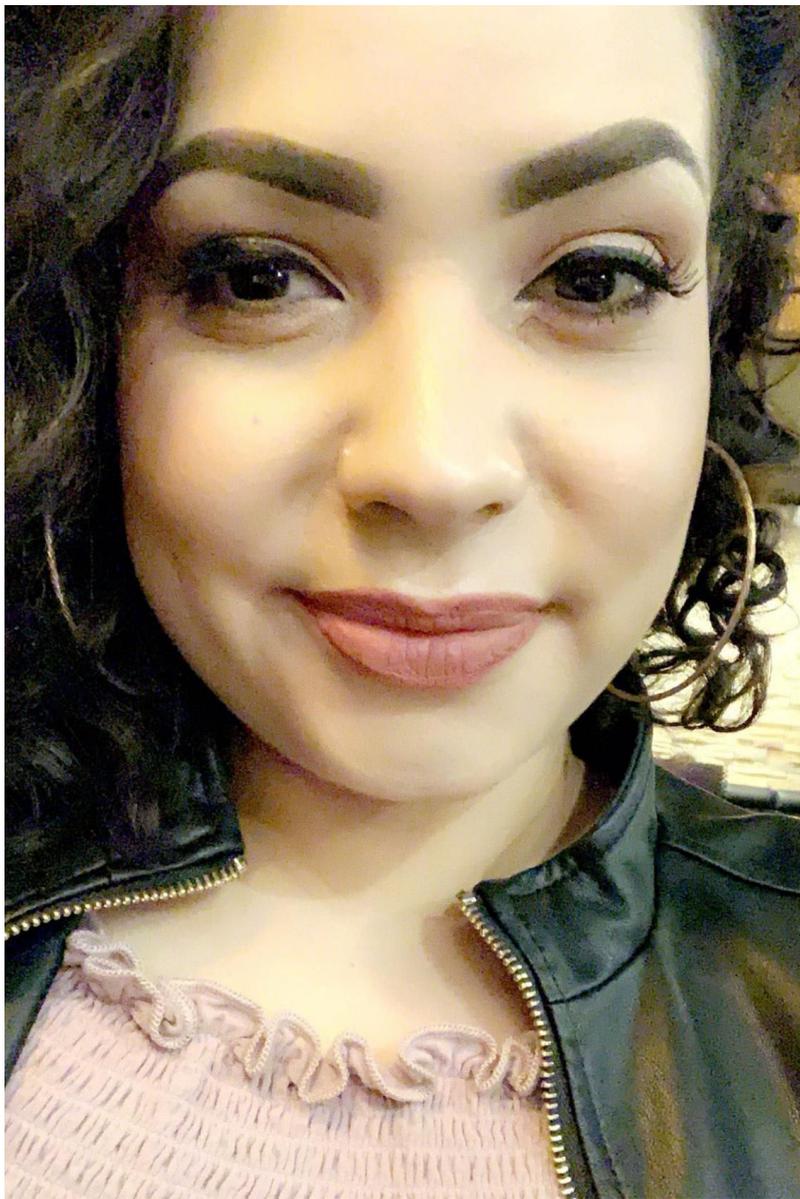


The OurFamilyWizard app includes a ‘ToneMeter’ that acts as a ‘spell check for your attitude,’ according to CEO Jai Kissoon. It also allows parents to track expenses and seek reimbursements from each other. PHOTO: OURFAMILYWIZARD

She can’t endorse any particular app but said she often orders families to choose one so they can keep track of communication and children’s schedules. “Even if people don’t have laptops or desktops, they have phones and they’re accustomed to using apps.” And she sees a marked difference when families use them. “When you see parents split and they’re effectively able to communicate and not put the other parent down, the kids acclimate so much better.”

When they were married, Amy and Jason Cooper began using a family-management app called Cozi, which features a calendar and shopping lists. They stuck with it after they began divorce proceedings, finding it aided their ability to manage their two children.

“My mom lives with me and we can all sign in,” said Ms. Cooper, an occupational therapist in Linden, Mich. Mr. Cooper, a plumber who lives in nearby Hartland, often works odd hours. He consults the calendar before scheduling a job so he can make sure he doesn’t miss his son’s baseball games.



Yaquiline Zarate has been using the coParenter app to improve communication with the father of her son. The app allows them to seek real-time professional mediation when parenting conflicts arise. PHOTO: YAQUILINE ZARATE

Yaquiline Zarate, a retail sales assistant in Manteca, Calif., began using the coParenter app last summer when communication with her ex-boyfriend became acrimonious.

The app, co-created by a retired judge, allows parents to text family-law professionals to mediate conflicts, rather than go to court. Earlier this year, when it was her ex-boyfriend’s night to take their son out for a visit, she urged him to let the boy stay home with her because he was sick and it was cold. The father didn’t agree, she said, so he tapped the “get help” button in the app. A mediator convinced him that it was in the boy’s best interest to stay put that night.

“They said the same thing as me, but when it comes from someone else, he takes it a different way,” Ms. Zarate said. Her ex-boyfriend didn’t respond to calls seeking comment.

Some parents like the fact that they can silo all communications with their ex. It’s better than having a message pop up in their regular inbox when they’re unprepared to deal with it.

“Whenever I get an email from my ex I assume the worst and this way I can leave it in the app and look at it when I’m ready,” said Simi Silver, a dentist in Ottawa who uses the OurFamilyWizard app. “If it comes to my inbox, it can ruin my day.”

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“When you get an email from the other side, you want to throw up,” said her ex-husband, Stephen Silver. But he said when he gets an email notification that an in-app message has arrived, it triggers the same response.

The apps aren’t a panacea. Mr. Silver admits he doesn’t always respond to the messages Dr. Silver sends him in the app. “The court order says we have to use OurFamilyWizard to communicate, but it doesn’t say we have to communicate,” he said.

Another complaint: When emailing doctors or teachers about their children, Mr. Silver can’t

copy in his ex-wife since he’s only supposed to communicate with her through the app. Although OurFamilyWizard allows parents to add third parties, Mr. Silver said school administrators have told him they don’t want to get involved. He said he wishes they could all just use Gmail.

Whatever the drawbacks, there’s evidence that these apps help the people who need it most: the children themselves.

David Handler, now 23 and living in Savannah, Ga., recalls a day when he was about five years old and living in Southern California. His mother came to pick him up at his father’s house. His father told her it wasn’t her day to have him.

“I remember them arguing over me and I decided on the spot to stay one more night with my dad,” he said.

That was before his parents began using OurFamilyWizard, a service that originated on the web in 2001 and later expanded to an app. Once his parents began keeping track of his schedule and their visits on the app, Mr. Handler said he was no longer put in the middle.



Stephen Silver uses OurFamilyWizard to communicate with his ex-wife about their son Ahron Ephraim Silver. PHOTO: STEPHEN SILVER

“It took away a lot of stress from me as a kid,” he said.



David Handler used to feel he was in the middle of disputes between his parents, Beth and Dennis Handler, before they used OurFamilyWizard to communicate directly. PHOTO: DAVID HANDLER

## When Parents Fight, Apps Can Help

**OurFamilyWizard**, [ourfamilywizard.com](http://ourfamilywizard.com)

*Plans start at \$99 a year*

Noteworthy feature: The founders of this app partnered with a semantic analysis firm to develop a “ToneMeter.” Not only does it look for swearing but red bars at the bottom of the message window increase as the words become increasingly aggressive. “It’s like a spell check for your attitude,” says CEO Jai Kissoon.

**coParenter**, [coparenter.com](http://coparenter.com)

*Plans start at \$120 a year*

**Noteworthy feature:** This app, co-founded by Sherrill Ellsworth, a retired judge in California's Riverside Superior Court, has six retired judges, therapists and attorneys on hand. They are available 24/7 to mediate conflicts with parents via text, without going to court. Judge Ellsworth said most disputes are resolved in a 20-minute text session. (Two such sessions a month are included in the basic plan, but parents can buy additional sessions for \$25 each.)

**Talking Parents, [talkingparents.com](http://talkingparents.com)**

*Free, but downloads cost extra*

**Noteworthy feature:** Parents who use this app can get a copy of every event that was created, edited or deleted on the calendar. "If a dad posts soccer practice is at 5 p.m. on Tuesday and at 4:45 p.m. he modifies it and then tells the mom she's late, she can see that," said CEO Stephen Nixon. "Knowing that will hopefully encourage people not to do that and be more civil."

**Cozi, [cozi.com](http://cozi.com)**

*Free, but \$30 a year for ad-free version*

**Noteworthy feature:** Targeted at all families—not just those going through divorce—this app is geared around its calendar, which can be shared with up to 16 people. Multiple people can also have access to shopping and to-do lists.

**AppClose, [appclose.com](http://appclose.com)**

*Free*

**Noteworthy feature:** Parents can submit requests for child-care expenses and can make payments to each other through the app, which also has a calendar and messaging. "At some point we might charge for the transaction, but we're debating that right now," said founder and CEO Igor Litinsky. "When people are going through a divorce, every penny counts."

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