

Kluwer Mediation Blog

There's an app for that! The use of technology in developing parenting plans

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Wednesday, October 8th, 2014

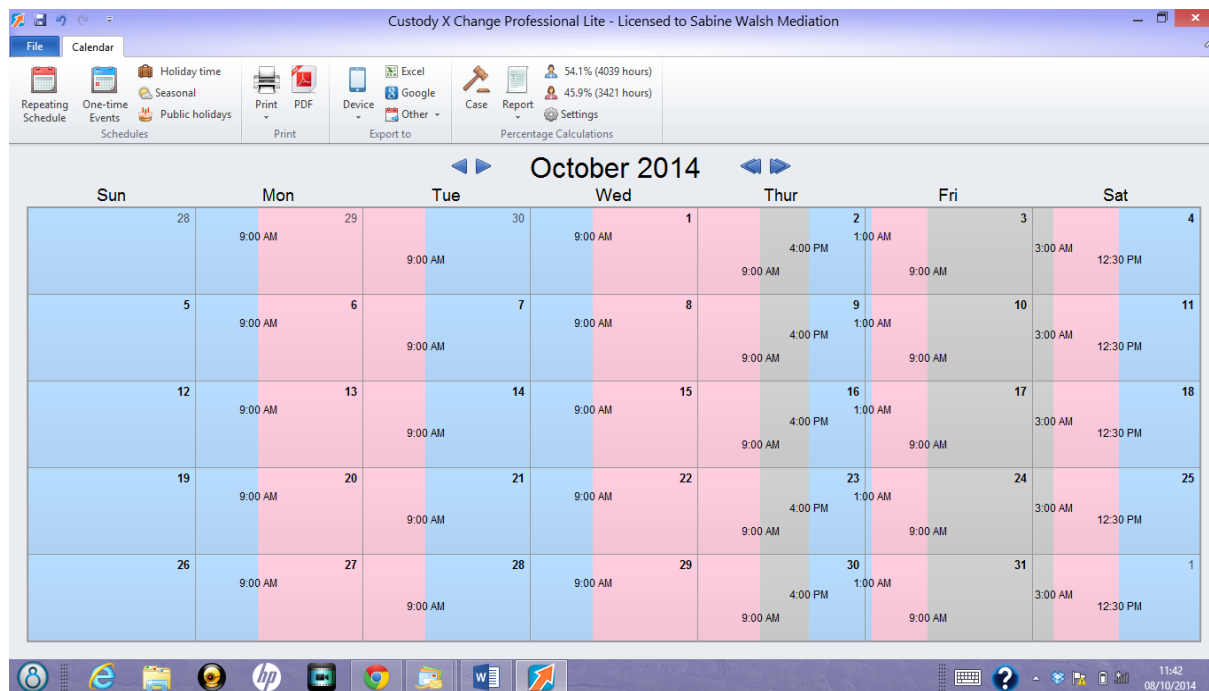
Never one to turn down the opportunity to try out new technological developments, I was interested to come across software designed to assist in formulating parenting plans earlier this year. This may sound rather “out there” to many mediators, so bear with me while I try to set out how it works and how I have used it.

The programme I have been using is Custody X Change, written by Ben Coltrin at the ripe old age of 21 in 2003. Over the past 11 years, the software has been refined and updated to result in what is now a very efficient, user friendly and innovative product. In essence, the software assists parents, and professionals working with separating parents, in creating a parenting schedule that suits their needs and in particular the needs of their children. It is important to state at the outset that the software does not in any way set or recommend certain schedules to parents, even though there are templates that can be used as a starting point, but its beauty is in how customisable it is to suit the individual needs of the family with whom one is working.

The basis of the programme is a calendar, into which you can enter the time the children spend with mum and with dad, which are indicated separately in pink and blue. (Minor gripe – I'd love slightly less stereotypical colours, even green and red, which would also make the software more attractive to same sex couples). By either entering times or dragging a bar in either direction, the exact times of handover between one parent and the other can be marked. Time spent with neither parent, for example in school, childcare or with grandparents can be indicated in grey. Any number of variations of schedules can be created – weekly, fortnightly, monthly, repeating or completely irregular. Into these schedules you can then enter all information needed to make the plan work, such as the childrens' activities, special occasions, holidays and any variations to the family's routine. These calendars can be saved as PDF documents, e mailed, printed and also exported to iPhone or Android calendars.

From a functionality point of view, one can quickly tell that the software is designed by a professional. Its use is intuitive, bug free and quick for professionals and lay people to grasp. Its real beauty however lies in its usefulness for emphasising and encouraging collaboration in devising a parenting plan. The language used can be changed from custody/visitation to lives with/spends time with, though I'd love to more variations to this terminology used in England and Ireland. When working with the software and the parties, both parents can see the reality of how the arrangements they propose might actually work in practice. A schedule such as the one below might, for example, appear “fair” to the parties as both get to spend almost equal time with the

children, however on looking at it one might ask how it would work in practice for the children? Might all those transitions be a bit much?



I used to facilitate discussions around such questions with the assistance of rough calculations and different coloured scribbles on a flip chart but the clarity of this type of schedule has certainly made matters more comprehensible to myself and the parties. It can flag issues such as unworkability of plans and can point out potentially “unreasonable” positions.

The schedule will also highlight previously ignored gaps in the schedule or organisational issues which need to be taken into account such as school and activity runs, the need for babysitting or regular medical appointments that might need to be factored in. Not only will it give clarity to both parents, and any professionals with whom they are working – in the US some judges are now working with computer generated schedules and reports – but it is also clear enough to print out and pin to the fridge so the children themselves can see it and gain some predictability and certainty in their new living arrangements.

One aspect of the software which I am still a little uncertain about is the function that shows the exact percentage of time the child/children are spending with each parent. While I have found it very useful to reassure parents about just how much time they are getting with the children, I wonder whether it might serve to put the focus on quantity rather than quality of time and encourage adherence to often unworkable position such as “everything has to be 50-50”. The software can of course be adjusted to distinguish between daytime and night-time, for example, but I have always had a small concern in using it that drawing attention to percentages might lead the parties to thinking along those lines and absolute equality of time rather than the practicalities and most importantly, what will work for the children, particularly if they are very young and constant change might be stressful for them.

The solution to this, of course, is in the hands of the user and that is what I would emphasise in relation to this or any other software or technology. We must never let technology, however clever, overshadow our human skills as mediators. It is essential that we first of all learn to use the technology properly – there is nothing as frustrating as working with a mediator on very emotional

issues when they are diverting all their attention to their malfunctioning laptop – and the to learn how to use it to complement, but not supplant their mediation skills. That being said, I can say I have embraced this particular mediation aid enthusiastically and, more importantly, my clients have done so too.


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