

2019: Notable tech innovations in U.S. Family Law

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2018 was a tipping point year for innovation in Family Law.

We all know that 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce but what most people don't know is about 85% of those involve children. A lesser-known stat according to Pew research, is 41% of children born in America in 2016 were born to unwed parents.

And 82% of ALL children born in 2016, were born to Millennial moms, bringing the number of Millennial moms in the U.S. to 17M.

Yes, Millennials are less inclined to get married but they're coupling, having kids and, in classic Millennial form, they're uncoupling. And there are a lot of them. In fact, they have already overtaken Baby Boomers as the largest generation. Statistically speaking, they're just about to enter the family court system, adding to an already high number of cases being filed per year in an already dramatically under-funded, antiquated and complicated court system.

In this day and age, can you think of anything more ripe for disruption than a system that expects you to drive to the courthouse, stand in line, fill out dozens of complicated court forms, and wait 18 months to see a judge?

Over the past few years, U.S. courts have been implementing new standards using basic digital systems to transform a judicial system steeped in paperwork. This process has been happening for years court by court, county by county. Los Angeles trial courts, the largest metropolitan court system in the U.S., will be transitioning to e-filing in 2019. While it is not streamlining the legal process itself, it is providing a much-needed layer of paperless efficiency, saving time, money and trees. Digitizing existing processes is all well and good (points for reducing wait times from 18 months to 6 but emerging predictive technology will also allow users to recognize and resolve disputes before they boil over and into the court system. And with 80% of family law cases focusing on co-parenting issues, not legal disputes, there is an opportunity to not only reduce the cases that end up in court but also to reduce the acrimony and conflict that hurts families and puts kids in the middle.

So, how can tech disrupt the cycle of conflict that comes with separation, divorce and co-parenting to streamline the process in the U.S. Family Law system?

Enter the Digital Disruptors.

SELF HELP:

For low-conflict uncontested divorces, there are apps that will help you file and in some cases submit with your local court either through e-filing or courier service. These basic platforms are great low-cost options for organizing mandatory forms and streamlining processes, with increased levels of service that provide access to experts.

There is technology for couples considering divorce like 'It's Over Easy', HelloDivorce (online platform for CA residents) and iSplit. 'It's Over Easy', launched in 2018 by divorce lawyer to the stars, Laura Wasser of Wasser, Cooperman & Mandles, will help you fill out and file divorce papers either through local e-filing or courier service.

"What we (lawyers) say is, the more you fight, the more money we make," explains Ms. Wasser. "Tools like 'It's Over Easy' work as a great solution for low/no conflict divorce. (The app) saves time and demystifies the process with step-by-step e-filing and/or expedited courier service depending on what your court system accommodates and more importantly, saves you money. Money better used for your child's college education, or your retirement."

Even though these platforms offer a solid self-help approach, once child-related issues or other contested complexities arise, things can get expensive, fast. Platforms like 'It's Over Easy' typically offer multiple pricing structures that give the user access to a legal professional. The more time you need, the more expensive things can get. But with a 200% increase in registrations and a healthy 53% increase in revenue Q3/Q4, Ms. Wasser is

proving that a significant market exists for people looking to get divorced, simply and quickly — without lawyer involvement.

CO-PARENT MANAGEMENT:

We all know that co-parenting is hard, and 2018 saw a dramatic increase in tools to make it easier. From documenting communication to checking in for pickups and dropoffs, many new players have entered the market seeking to help parents manage and organize their co-parenting responsibilities. But be wary, as family law judge, Hon. Lisa Abrams says, “Many of the tools available are often misused. Instead of helping parents learn to communicate effectively, parents manipulate the tools and use them to gather evidence against one another. This completely negates the purpose of the app. Instead of minimizing the need for court-involvement and empowering parents to make decisions on their own, the tool has unwittingly been transformed into a cyber-exhibit which leads to increased acrimonious and costly court battles.”

Still, it’s helpful to keep your co-parenting life organized and documented and now there are plenty of options. Our Family Wizard (OFW) is a website that has been on the market for years and is used to document communication. It’s now being challenged by competitors like FAYR, AppClose and Talking Parents, to name a few. Each addition offers enhanced functionality and different business models to help co-parents get and stay organized with documented communication, shared calendars, expense tracking, and child info. Better user design and enhanced functionality are driving these emerging apps to the forefront.

FAYR, a Florida startup that offers a beautifully designed co-parenting tool and counts Gwyneth Paltrow among its advisors, is one of the most formidable competitors to enter the field. “Month over month the percentage of active users has been increasing 7-10%,” explains FAYR CEO, Michael Daniels. “And with court systems catching on to how these apps can serve the public and help relieve backlogs, I only think they’re going to become more commonplace.”

The mountain of decisions married couples face can be staggering, post-divorce with a child in the mix and things become even more complicated. Things you never thought about — like custody, visitation, child support, parental rights, holiday schedules — are now part of everyday life; decisions about education, healthcare, dietary choices, and even bedtimes, which you and your co-parent once made together, are now a catalyst for conflict and disagreement.

INTELLIGENT DISPUTE RESOLUTION (IDR):

Enter Intelligent Dispute Resolution (IDR). IDR is a game changer because it is designed to empower parents to take critical decisions involving their children into their own hands, reducing the need for courts and lawyers. IDR brings together features like communication tools, schedules, calendars and document libraries with predictive technologies that help users troubleshoot for conflict before it even occurs. More advanced IDR platforms

incorporate the basic management and organizational tools found on stand-alone apps, but layer in technology that helps parents predict and prevent conflict from happening in the first place. And when conflict *does* arise (parents *are* human, after all), users can connect with a live, on-demand co-parenting professional who can help the parties resolve the dispute, draft agreements or coach either parent towards more child-centric decisions.

One of the early pioneers of IDR technology is Los Angeles-based HYPHENUS Inc., whose flagship platform, coParenter, launched in 2018. It has been gaining traction with judges and court professionals in the US and Canada, who report decreases in post-divorce cases where parties are resolving co-parenting issues.

coParenter is available on [iOS and Android](#) and is designed specifically to help parents save money, save time and stay out of court. The platform was launched by former presiding Judge and family law veteran, Hon. Sherrill Ellsworth, along with a number of reputable family law, mental health, and child wellbeing professionals.

Users can create an entire co-parenting plans, holiday plans and specific agreements that outline their co-parenting ground rules. And because life happens, co-parents can modify, alter and request changes to the schedule, keeping everyone on the same page. All of which is tracked and synchronized to each account, ensuring seamless cooperation and collaboration that puts children first.

Like other platforms, expenses can be tracked, but with coParenter, users will be able to easily transfer funds, make child/spousal support payments and even reimburse each other for shared expenses.

Technology might not be one of the first things you think of in terms of bringing happiness and civility into your co-parenting life, but you'd be surprised. Co-parenting can be hard. And depending on your situation, these apps, platforms, and technologies can shave months off your the legal process and put thousands of dollars back in your pocket. But beyond the time and money, technology can help you keep focused on what matters most, your kids.