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What is Supervised Contact?

Supervised contact means that the Court wants a responsible third person present when a parent spends time with their child. This may be because the child has not seen the parent for a time, and the Court thinks that some gradual reintroduction will help. Or, it can be because someone claims that the child is afraid of the parent, or even because the child has asked to have someone else present. Sometimes, contact is supervised because the Court has fears about the child's safety in the parent's care.

What do I have to do?

Supervising involves being present throughout the contact, and keeping an eye on what is happening. This does not mean that you cannot leave the room for a single minute, but you will not be able to simply hand the child into the parent's care and leave them to it. For most of the time, you should be in the room. If you are not in the room, you should be nearby within earshot. At all times, the child should know where you are and should be able to communicate with you. You will have to intervene if the parent is behaving inappropriately toward the child, such as harming or scaring them. As supervisor, you are responsible for making sure that the contact is safe for the child.

However, it is not your role to direct the parent and child as to what they can do on contact. It should be the parent and, if they are old enough, the child who takes the initiative in suggesting activities. As long as the suggested activity is reasonable, you should co-operate. Supervised contact is primarily a chance for the parent and child to re-establish a close bond, and for the parent to practise good parenting. It is important that they have this opportunity, so that they can move on to unsupervised contact in due course.

Should I agree to supervise?

If you have been asked to be a contact supervisor, ask yourself these questions before you say yes:

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Can I support contact?

You should not agree to supervise contact if you personally do not agree with this parent having contact with this child. It may be hard to face up to this if the parent is your friend or relative. However, if you agree to supervise, you will put yourself in an impossible position. You may do harm to your relationship with both parents and with the child. It is better to decline.

Can I commit the time?

Usually, contact is a regular commitment of several hours at a time. It can be as frequent as every few days, or more commonly, once or twice a fortnight. Supervision may be short-term, but it can extend over many months. If the contact parent is employed, contact will usually be in the evening or on a weekend. Agreeing to supervise contact is a significant commitment of your time, so be realistic about whether you are willing. If not, it is better for another person to supervise all the way through, rather than having to change supervisors after a few weeks.

Am I prepared to say "NO" to the parent?

This is essential. Being a supervisor can involve setting limits on what the parent can do in the interests of the child. For example, you may have to stop a parent from doing something which is dangerous to the child. Or, you have to point out to a parent that something they are doing is scary or distressing to the child. This can be very difficult if the parent is your child, sibling or close friend. If you yourself are afraid of the parent, or do not feel able to stand up to them, you may not be an effective supervisor. Remember, the Court is relying on the supervisor to make contact safe for the child.

Am I willing to be a witness in Court?

Supervisors can be asked to report to the Court on how contact is going, and can be called to give evidence at trial. This may mean you will have to testify against your family member or close friend, if contact has not gone well. This can put a great strain on relationships.

Supervising contact is a serious responsibility. Think carefully before you say "YES".

Preparing to Supervise:

There are things you can do to help contact run smoothly. Have some ideas about what the parent and child can do in the contact time. For example, find out the opening times of the local library, swimming pool, or video store. Get timetables for local buses or trains, if contact is long enough to permit a journey, and work out which buses or trains will take you to the beach, zoo, museum, sports stadium or other attractions. It may be helpful to keep paper, and coloured pencils, paints or crayons in the house, if the child is of an age to enjoy drawing, as this is often an activity which parents and younger children can share. However, don't decide how the time will be used – this is for the parent to decide. Your role is just to have some ideas as backup.

There is no need, however, for special or elaborate treats.

Contact should be as normal as possible. Sometimes, separated parents feel that they need to compete for the child's love by spoiling him or her. This is not really helpful to the child (although when they are feeling unhappy, they may try to take advantage of it). Instead, contact is for the child to develop a normal, loving relationship with the parent. It is not a special occasion or a competition.

If the child has any medical conditions which may require attention during contact, it can be helpful to find out how to manage them. You may also want to keep a list of useful phone numbers, like the local doctor. However, again, your role is only as backup, and the parent is the appropriate person to take care of the child, as far as possible.

Records:

You will need to keep a record of how each contact goes. This should include the date, the duration of contact, and some brief notes about the activities and how contact went. If anything happens which concerns you, you should record it. If you are satisfied that the child enjoyed contact and things went well, record this too. Remember that your notes could become evidence for the Court so keep them in a safe place.

What if something goes wrong?

If you become concerned that the child is really not safe on contact, or the child is so distressed by the visits that contact is not in their interests, you should make this known to the Independent Children's Lawyer or the Court. You may have to refuse to supervise further contact. As a supervisor, you cannot stand by and see the child come to harm.

However, minor difficulties which do not put the child at risk can often be worked through. Allow for the fact that both the parent and the child are likely to be very emotional and that they may be out of practice at relating together. Also, most children find contact handovers very tense and can be grumpy or difficult at first. With patience, the parent and child may be able to work things out in their own way.

Keynote:

Finally, during contact, try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Remember that the contact has not been arranged for the child to see you, but for them to see the parent. Although you yourself may be keen to develop your relationship with the child, supervision is not really the opportunity for you to do this. Stay in the background unless there is something which calls for your intervention. It is easier for the child that way.

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