

Establishing Effective Supervised Parenting Time
By
Daniel H. Swerdlow-Freed, Ph.D.

Along with the rising level of acrimony in custody disputes, we note an increase in motions for restricted and supervised parenting time. These requests occur most often in cases with high levels of chronic discord and a history of unremitting litigation. Motions assert the need for supervision based on a variety of claims including child sexual or physical abuse, drug or alcohol addiction, serious emotional disturbance on the part of one parent, failure to provide a safe environment, and the use of harmful, inappropriate comments directed at the child.

Often such motions prompt investigations to determine the veracity of the complaining party's allegations. Since overburdened courts do not have the resources to investigate each complaint, some are referred to mental health professionals for evaluation. Our office routinely receives referrals of this type, which include requests for evaluation of the parents' and child's emotional stability and for recommendations regarding the need for supervised parenting time. This article discusses some features and goals of supervised parenting time as well as other relevant factors.

A comprehensive evaluation will include a thorough developmental history of each parent and child. Given the purpose of the evaluation, it is extremely important to determine whether personality characteristics or response tendencies exist within the accused parent that are consistent with the alleged misbehavior. For example, evaluations involving allegations of alcohol or drug abuse need to include a thorough history of the parent's past and present use of these substances. Likewise, allegations of physical abuse ought to include evaluation of how this parent manages anger and expresses other strong emotions.

It is equally important to evaluate the veracity of the allegations. This includes assessing the accusing parent's potential to overreact and/or misinterpret situations or to experience unwarranted levels of anxiety about the ex-spouse and whether negative attitudes are being communicated to the child. Additionally, it is necessary to evaluate the child's psychological well being and whether s/he manifests behavior problems or symptoms consistent with the allegations presented. Observing interactions of the child with the accused parent may also provide useful information about the nature and dynamics of that parent-child relationship.

Contacting teachers, therapists, physicians, Child Protective Services workers, and child care providers may also shed valuable information on the psychological functioning of the parties as well as the quality of the parenting that the child is receiving. Both parents and possibly the child should undergo psychological testing which includes a screening for emotional problems, an assessment of each parent's attitudes toward parenting and toward the child, and an investigation of situations that may create stress for the parents and lead to unwanted or problematic behavior which requires supervision.

Supervised parenting time is warranted when a parent's behavior poses a potential threat to the child. The purposes of supervision include: providing continuity in the child's relationship with the parent, while simultaneously protecting the child from harm; avoiding a child's feeling of abandonment by abruptly interrupting contact with one parent; providing the supervised parent with a means of receiving guidance regarding appropriate parent-child interaction; providing the supervised parent an opportunity to develop more appropriate parenting skills, while maintaining continuing contact with the child; protecting the supervised parent from false allegations of misconduct while providing assurance to the custodial parent that the child is adequately protected¹.

It is important that recommendations identify the specific behaviors that are considered inappropriate and that warrant supervision of parenting time. Recommendations need to be as specific as possible and should identify the actual behaviors that are deemed potentially harmful to the child. For instance, if a parent is ordered to not discuss certain issues with a child, the supervisor knows it is important to monitor that aspect of parent-child interaction. Likewise, if a parent is directed not to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol when in the presence of the child, this can be evaluated through careful behavioral observation.

Behavioral specificity identifies the behaviors which are not to be tolerated under supervision. This enables the supervisor to adequately perform his/her role as well as to provide the court with relevant feedback about the supervised parent's behavior. Behavioral specificity also provides a standard against which the need for continued supervision can be measured.

No parent wants to be supervised, and when this occurs, most parents are motivated to correct the circumstances that gave rise to its need. Parents under supervision need to have some means of showing the court that they have resolved their problems and no longer need to be watched. This objective is simplified when the behaviors warranting supervision are clarified in advance and when a reliable supervisor can verify that, over a reasonable period of time, they no longer occur.

Securing comprehensive psychological evaluations in complex custody or parenting time disputes is sometimes essential to help insure that the outcome protects the best interests of the child while also offering both parents fair and even handed treatment.

Reference:

1. James, B. & Gibson, C. (1991). Supervising Visits Between Parent and Child. *Family & Conciliation Court Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 73-84.

For more information or to make an appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at (248) 539-7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.