

Safe Time Supervised Visitation



Preparing Children for Supervised Visitation

This article is designed to help parents prepare children for supervised visitation. It is not intended to be used as legal or expert advice, and speaks of children in general terms. Please consult with your legal or mental health professional if you need more in depth material.

The Parent's Role..

Parents play an important role in fostering a safe and positive environment for children participating in supervised visits. One way parents can do this is to help children understand supervised visitation so they can be as comfortable as possible during visits. Supervision may be strange at first, meeting an unknown adult and being observed while interacting with a parent. There are activities that parents and children will be restricted from during visits (i.e. making telephone calls to friends or relatives or traveling outside of the designated visit area) and there will be a set schedule for when the visits happen. Children generally adjust rapidly to these changes, especially when they understand the 'ground rules' for visits.



Logistics of supervised visitation

The most important thing that parents can do for the children involved in supervised visitation is explain that this is NOT the children's fault.

Children often feel overburdened when parents divorce or engage in litigation related to them. Clear communication with children regarding what will occur can help remove the burden of this feeling.

Children involved in visits will need an age appropriate explanation of why the supervised

visitation is occurring. Children may understand more than parents give them credit for, and will find evasive answers very frustrating.

Travel Limitations

Parents should review and be thoroughly familiar with the guidelines for supervised visitation prior to the start of services. There are multiple restrictions on travel during supervised visits (generally limited to the immediate area of the visitation location), appropriate topics of discussion (focusing on the here-and-now, rather than what might happen down the road; avoiding talk of the litigation or other adult issues), and many other facets of parent-child interaction. The ultimate goal is for the supervised visitation to be as positive an experience for the children as possible despite the inherent limitations. By focusing on what can be done, rather than what is restricted, children are encouraged to engage as best possible with the visiting parent.

Supervisor Role

It is also important for parents to be clear that Providers/Supervisors are not friends of the parents. Children should be told that supervisors will be present in order to make sure that visits start and stop on time, and will be taking notes during the visits to make sure things go well. The supervisor is not there as a substitute parent or as babysitter, and while they will intervene if necessary it should be made clear to the children that everyone at the visit is expected to behave appropriately. Where children have witnessed inappropriate behavior on the part of a parent, the understanding that there is a third party present to intervene if necessary may be comforting to them, however great care should be taken in addressing this issue with children. It should be clear that the expectation is that parents will behave appropriately during the visits, and that the children should not have to worry about parents' issues. Supervisors are well aware that the courts do not order supervised visitation without clear concerns regarding parent-child contact. At times it is necessary to intervene during a visit to redirect a parent. That said, reducing children's anxiety regarding the interactions generally leads to more relaxed and positive supervised visits for the children.

Age Appropriate Exercises

Infants (birth to 2 years) need physical contact and close interaction – holding, rocking, and “floor time” are common interactions. Most enjoy bright toys that they can manipulate and explore. Special consideration should be taken in scheduling visits that take into account nap times. Communication regarding an infant's schedules and rapidly changing needs is critical. Often these children may dislike transitions between parents, as they do not want to leave either parent.

Toddlers (2 to 4 years) enjoy toys that help them exercise their developing motor and mental skills. In a group of siblings toddlers may engage in attention seeking behaviors even if they cannot articulate when they want a parent to focus on them. Toddlers may also want to do things

for themselves and resist being “babied” by others, including being held. They may test limits and need parents to set clear boundaries for them.

Preschoolers (4 to 6 years) are learning about social relationships and can think about things that are not immediately present, but continue to lack true abstract reasoning. They cannot conceptualize other peoples’ perspectives and think others see things the way they do. Their thinking is considerably influenced by fantasy, and preschoolers may change information to fit their preconceived ideas. Children this age respond to learning they are actively involved in. Positive reinforcement, and ignoring unwanted or challenging behaviors (rather than engaging in power struggles) can help preschoolers feel secure during visits.

Pre-adolescents (7 to 11 years) are “concrete” thinkers and can apply logical reasoning to specific examples, but abstract ideas continue to escape them. They generally respond well to structure but are also learning how to master many basic skills and need room to make choices (and mistakes). By providing healthy choices parents can help their children achieve a sense of mastery. Games, sporting activities, and other rule-based activities become more productive and interesting at this age.

Adolescents (ages 12 and up) are beginning the process of creating their own individual identity, and will continue to define themselves in new ways as they progress from junior high to high school and on to college or the workforce. They begin understanding abstract concepts and will often question parents’ explanations if they are inconsistent or contradictory. Adolescents need support from their parents, even when they appear to be disinterested or even rejecting parental involvement. Parents can demonstrate appropriate behaviors by taking responsibility for their choices and adopting conciliatory, rather than confrontational, approaches to problem solving.