FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

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About this booklet

This booklet is designed to help parents prepare children for supervised visitation. Parents often have many questions when beginning supervised visitation. Adult orientation is designed to help familiarize parents with policies and procedures so that visits can be as successful as possible, and this booklet provides additional generalized information that adults can use when explaining supervision to their children. It is not intended to be used as legal advice, and speaks of children in general terms. Please consult with our staff if you have specific questions regarding supervised visitation, or with your legal or mental health professional if you need consultation regarding other case related issues.

"Supervised visitation is distinguished…by its emphasis on neutrality; that is, the observer makes no interventions that would actively support or encourage the relationship between the parent and child, but would intervene if the emotional or physical safety of the child were threatened. […] It is the visit supervisor's responsibility to remain impartial and to observe and hear every interaction between a parent and child." From the *NYSPCC Professionals' Handbook on Providing Supervised Visitation*	Additional resources for parents and children are available on the ***Supervised Visitation Network*** web site: www.svnetwork.net

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Preparing children for supervised visitation

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. This pamphlet is designed to help parents through the process of introducing and explaining supervised visitation to their children.

Logistics of supervised visitation

The most important thing that parents can do for the children involved in supervised visitation is explain that ***nothing going on is the children's fault.*** Indeed, whether this relates to supervised visitation, the parents' separation, or (if the children are aware of litigation issues) what is occurring in court, it should be clear for the children that these are adult issues the parents are working on resolving (even if such resolution is through the courts) and that nothing the children have said or done has caused the situation. Children often feel overburdened when parents divorce or engage in litigation related to them – this is a natural effect of children being unable to understand the complex adult issues that lead to such situations. Clear communication to the children that they will be told about the parents' decisions regarding what will occur removes the inappropriate burden of responsibility from the children.

Children involved in visits will need an age-appropriate explanation of why the supervised visitation is occurring. In general, any explanations provided should be focused on positive ideas, rather than on trauma or difficulties. While it is important to not dismiss negative events the children may have experienced regarding one or both parents children do not process information in the same way as adults.

Where there has been abuse, neglect, domestic violence, or other trauma in a child's life parents may find the involvement of a skilled family therapist helpful; supervised visitation is not a substitute for therapeutic intervention and may not always be appropriate when children lack professional support to help deal with their emotional and developmental needs.

It is also important that answers be forthright. Children may understand more than parents give them credit for, and will find evasive answers very frustrating. Parents and staff can work together to prepare to respond to the harder questions kids ask about visits in a way that is safe for the children, age appropriate, and does not discount or deceive them.

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.

Activities tip:
Talk to the children about what activities are restricted (swimming, driving, telephone, or having visitors over) and allow the children to come up with a list of alternatives (i.e. writing a letter instead of calling or visiting) or activities that they would enjoy during the visit and share that information with the other parent.

It is also import for parents to be clear that supervisors are not parents' friends, although supervisors are working with both 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 a 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 their 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.

Finally, both parents are aware of the planned schedule for visitation – please see that the children are informed of this information as well. Depending on the age of your children and the specifics of your schedule you may find different levels of specificity helpful. Younger children may lack a solid understanding of time, while older children may remember the schedule without reminders; some children may become anxious if they are not clear when the next visit will be or if the schedule is inconsistent; even children in the same family may have different levels of understanding what is going on. You know your child best and how to work with them in providing this information.

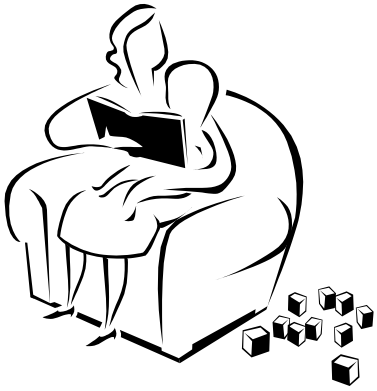
Time tips:
Use concrete visual reminders of the visitation schedule such as a calendar with their various activities, including supervised visits, to help make future plans less abstract.

Considerations for various ages

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 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, "time out" 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 – they 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 was 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 of parental involvement. Parents can demonstrate appropriate behaviors by taking responsibility for their choices adopting conciliatory, rather than confrontational, approaches to problem solving.

For some children there may be a regression to less mature behaviors. They may seem shut down or on edge at times. Each child will respond differently and there is no single "right" way for a child to behave. The most important consideration is to respond to your particular child's needs, whatever developmental stage they are at.