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You have been asked to supervise contact between a parent and their child. Do you want to do this?

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This fact sheet is for adults who are thinking about supervising contact between a child and one of their parents.

It has information on how supervised contact usually works, things to consider before agreeing, preparation and where to get help.

What is supervised contact?

Supervised contact happens when the court wants a responsible independent person present when a parent spends time with their child. This may be because:

- the child has not spent much time with the parent and needs to be slowly re-introduced
- the child is afraid of the parent or has asked for someone else to be there
- there are fears about the child's safety when they are in the other parent's care.

What do I have to do during supervised contact?

You need to be there at all times when the child is with the parent. You cannot leave the child and the parent at any time, even if there are other people there.

If the parent is acting in any way which might harm, frighten or upset the child, you must step in to protect the child. You may need to end the time the parent is spending with the child.

As the supervisor, you must make sure that the contact is safe for the child.

You are in a position where you can help the parent and child to build their relationship.

Should I agree to supervise contact?

You need to feel comfortable and confident. Think about the following questions:

Do you support the contact?

Only agree to supervise contact if you agree with this parent having contact with this child.

If you disagree about contact, yet agree to supervise, you may harm your relationship with both parents and the child. It is better not to supervise contact.

Can you commit to the time involved?

Usually, contact is for several hours at a time. It may be every few days, or once or twice a fortnight.

Supervised contact can be short-term but it can go for many months. If the parent has a job, contact will usually happen in the evening or on the weekend.

Think about whether you can agree to supervising contact regularly. This may need to be ongoing for some time. It is better for one person to supervise all the way through, rather than changing supervisors every few weeks.

Are you prepared to say 'no' to the parent being supervised?

This is very important. You may have to set limits on what the parent can and cannot do, in the best interests of the child.

You may have to stop the parent from:

- doing something which may hurt the child
- doing something which may upset the child or is inappropriate in any way
- being with the child if the parent is affected by drugs or alcohol.

This can be very difficult if the parent is your friend or relative.

If you are afraid of the parent, or can't stand up to them, you are not going to be able to supervise contact. The court is relying on the supervisor to make contact safe for the child.

Are you willing to be a witness in court?

Supervisors may have to report to the court on how contact is going. You may have to give evidence against the parent, if contact has not gone well. This can strain relationships, especially if the other parent is a family member or friend.

Supervising contact is a serious responsibility. Think carefully before you say 'yes'.

How should supervised contact happen?

Contact should help the child develop a natural, loving relationship with the parent. It should be as normal as possible.

During contact, you should stay in the background as much as possible. You may want to develop your relationship with the child but supervision is not the place to do this. Stay out of the way, but where you can still see the contact, unless there is something that calls for you to step in. It is easier and better for the child.

How should I prepare to supervise contact?

You can do things to help such as:

- be aware of any medical conditions the child might have and know how to manage them
- keep a list of handy telephone numbers, such as the child's doctor and other important people
- know the opening times and any costs for places such as the local library, pool, museum, zoo or park. Have public transport timetables so you know how to get to these places
- keep paper and coloured pencils or crayons handy, so the parent and child can draw together.

Keep in mind however, that the parent should take care of the child (if they are able) and they should decide the activities that will happen. Your role is to give back-up ideas and supervise contact.

Do I need to keep a record of the contact?

Yes. This should include information about:

- the date
- how long contact went for
- brief notes about the activities
- any concerns you have about contact
- if the child enjoyed contact and things went well.

Remember, your notes could become evidence for the court. Keep them in a safe, private place.

What can happen during the first stages of contact?

The parent and child may be very emotional. They may be out of practice at being together. Most children find contact handovers very tense. They can be grumpy or difficult at first.

With patience, the parent and child may work things out in their own way. Small issues which do not put the child at risk can often be worked through.

What if something goes wrong during contact?

You should tell the independent children's lawyer (if the child has one) if you are concerned that:

- the child is not really safe during contact
- the child is so upset by the contact that it is not in their best interests.

You may have to refuse to supervise any more contact. As the supervisor, you cannot stand by and see the child come to harm.

Where to get help

Victoria Legal Aid

Legal Information Service

Tel: 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (country callers)

Open Monday to Friday, 8.45 am to 5.15 pm

Download or order free publications on family law, going to court and other legal issues from our website:

www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

Federation of Community Legal Centres

For your nearest community legal centre.

Tel: 9652 1500

www.communitylaw.org.au

Family Relationship Centres and advice line

For locations of Family Relationship Centres and other services that can help you reach agreement about the children.

Tel: 1800 050 321

Family Court/Federal Magistrates Court

For information on the family law courts. This number can be called 24 hours in emergencies.

Tel: 1300 352 000

www.familylawcourts.gov.au

Do you need this fact sheet in a different format? Please ring us on 9269 0223 so we can talk with you about what you need.

Acknowledgements: This information has been adapted from *Should I Supervise Contact?*, Legal Services Commission (SA)

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