

Supervised Visitation: 20 Tips for Success

Jean McBride, M.S. LMFT

If you have been ordered into supervised visitation with your children, you may be feeling a variety of emotions. Some parents feel punished about having to see their children with a supervisor watching. It doesn't feel normal or natural to them. Other parents feel singled out and manipulated by the other parent. Still others may think that the supervised visitation is just a ploy used by the other parent to improve their court case. The parent who is required to participate in supervised visits with children may resent the entire process and subtly or not so subtly sabotage the visits.

Supervised visitation is based on two premises. The first is that research tells us children do best when they have ongoing relationships with both of their parents. When this relationship is interrupted because of a separation or divorce, children are placed in jeopardy. And second, it is vital that children's emotional and physical safety is always guaranteed. Children are the innocent bystanders when adults divorce. They have no control over the choices that their parents make.

If you and your children have been assigned to supervised visitation, it is up to you to make it a positive experience. Prepare yourself that it is not the same as unsupervised time. There are obvious limitations on your activities and the amount of time you may spend together. This can be frustrating for adults and children. If you are feeling this frustration, remind yourself how important it is for your children to have regular contact with both parents. If supervised visits are the only way to maintain contact, learn to welcome them and make the most of the time together.

Here are some tips to ensure successful visits for you and your children.

If you are the visiting parent:

1. Follow the schedule set up for your visits. Cancel only for the direst of emergencies. Routine is all- important for children.
2. Be sure to arrive on time.
3. Spend the time focusing on your children. This is their time to enjoy being with you. Clear your mind of other distractions and shower your children with your attention.
4. Be prepared. Plan on talking and playing with your children. Bring games, toys, books etc. that your children will enjoy. Be sure to check this out with the supervisor ahead of time. Have a general plan in mind for how to spend the time, but also be open to what your children may want to do.

5. Talk with your children about what you are doing. Give them general details about your life just as you would do if you were in the same house. Ask questions about their activities and show an interest in the things that matter to your children. Please note – asking questions isn't the same thing as grilling them for information. Take their lead on this. If you ask a few questions and get no response, move on.
6. Be scrupulous with your word. If you say you are going to do something, do it. Be very careful to only make promises that you can keep.
7. Avoid talk about the divorce, the other parent, and Court. This is a time for you and your children to share time together, build connections, and have fun. Keep your conversations positive and light.
8. Make only positive or neutral comments about the other parent. Anything else places your children in a terrible loyalty bind and has the potential of negatively influencing your time together.
9. Remember to say those 3 powerful words – “I love you.”
10. Relax and enjoy yourself. Your relaxation will carry over to your children and significantly contribute to the success of the visit.

As the other parent, you also play a role in the success of these visits for your children. Here are some things you can do:

1. Follow the schedule for your children's visits with the other parent. Only cancel for emergencies.
2. Arrive on time.
3. Prepare your children for the visit. Mark the visitation days on a calendar. Help gather toys and activities for the visit. Use what you know about your children's temperaments to help them transition to the visit. For example, allow enough time to get ready so that they aren't frantically rushing out the door. Provide down time after the visit rather than immediately going to another activity.
4. Be positive. Demonstrate through your words and actions that you want your children to have this time with their other parent.
5. Avoid talking about the divorce, the other parent, and Court.
6. Do everything you can do to make sure that your children are not placed in the middle of conflict that may be ongoing between you and the other parent.

7. Make only positive or neutral comments about the other parent. Anything else places your children in a terrible loyalty bind that they simply do not have the psychological resources to handle.
8. If having your children spend time with the other parent is a problem for you, don't ignore your feelings. Talk with a therapist, a friend, your pastor or someone who can be supportive and objective. It is never appropriate to share those feelings with your children. Maintain good boundaries and keep adult issues between adults.
9. When the visit is over, be a good listener. Remain positive and light. Let your children set the pace of not only what they tell you about the visit, but when. Children are extremely intuitive and they know when a parent is going to get upset about something they say. Your job is to not get upset. Respond with what I call listening noises like "oh, hmm, un huh" or neutral comments like "That's great" or "Sounds like fun." You get the idea. After a visit, your children shouldn't feel like the CIA is interrogating them.
10. Watch your non-verbal language. Your children are tuned in to everything you do. Sighs, head shaking, clicking your tongue and comments muttered under the breath all send a message to your children that you are not pleased. Learn to control these non-verbal cues. Your children will benefit greatly.