

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

In re Child Danielle F.

207 A.3d 1193 (Me. 2019) · Decided May 7, 2019

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court affirmed a judgment terminating a mother's parental rights based on her inability to protect the child from jeopardy and inability to take responsibility for the child. The court held that proceeding with the termination hearing in the mother's absence did not violate due process and that termination, rather than a permanency guardianship, was in the child's best interest.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	May 7, 2019
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The mother appealed from a District Court judgment terminating her parental rights, arguing that the court violated her due process rights by commencing the termination hearing in her absence and abused its discretion by ordering termination rather than a permanency guardianship.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed the due process challenge and the decision to proceed with the hearing without the mother's physical presence for abuse of discretion. It reviewed the appropriateness of a permanency guardianship for abuse of discretion and gave substantial deference to the trial court's best-interest determination.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published
PARTIES	Danielle F. v. Department of Health and Human Services

TOPICS

termination of parental rights

guardianships

due process

appellate procedure

family law procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the mother's due process rights were violated when the District Court commenced the termination hearing as scheduled in her absence, although the court knew she would arrive several hours later.
2. Whether the District Court abused its discretion by terminating the mother's parental rights instead of ordering a permanency guardianship.

HOLDINGS

1. A parent's due process rights are not violated merely because the parent is physically absent from part of a termination hearing when the parent received adequate notice and had an opportunity to be heard through counsel, including the opportunity to examine witnesses and respond to claims and evidence.
2. The District Court did not abuse its discretion by terminating the mother's parental rights rather than ordering a permanency guardianship because the evidence supported the finding that termination was in the child's best interest and the child needed permanency promptly.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“In termination cases, where fundamental interests are at stake, due process requires: notice of the issues, an opportunity to be heard, the right to introduce evidence and present witnesses, the right to respond to claims and evidence, and an impartial fact-finder.” (¶5)

“Due process, however, does not require that a parent be physically present at the termination hearing, as long as notice of the hearing was given in a manner calculated to give actual notice and the parent had an opportunity to be heard.” (¶5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The child was a very young boy who had spent most of his life in the Department of Health and Human Services' custody and had experienced multiple placements. The mother had longstanding substance-abuse, domestic-violence, housing, mental-health, and parenting problems; continued using marijuana and other drugs, violated group-home rules, and maintained contact with a violent man despite restrictions. After more than two years to address her parenting issues and reunify, she remained unable to protect the child from jeopardy or take responsibility for him, and the trial court found that termination was in his best interest.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The District Court for Portland terminated the mother's parental rights after finding, by clear and convincing evidence, statutory grounds of parental unfitness and that termination was in the child's best interest. The mother timely appealed to the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine, which affirmed the judgment.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- In re Child of James R., 2018 ME 50, ¶ 17, 182 A.3d 1252
- In re Child of Tanya C., 2018 ME 153, ¶ 10, 198 A.3d 777
- In re Adden B., 2016 ME 113, ¶ 9, 144 A.3d 1158
- In re G.W., 2014 ME 30, ¶ 9, 86 A.3d 1228
- In re Child of Domenick B., 2018 ME 158, ¶¶8, 10, 197 A.3d 1076
- In re Cameron B., 2017 ME 18, ¶ 13, 154 A.3d 1199
- In re David W., 2010 ME 119, ¶ 10, 8 A.3d 673
- In re Michaela C., 2002 ME 159, ¶ 27, 809 A.2d 1245
- In re C.P., 2016 ME 18, ¶¶30, 34, 132 A.3d 174
- In re Child of Ronald W., 2018 ME 107, ¶ 7 n.2, 190 A.3d 1029

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

PER CURIAM [¶1] Danielle F. appeals from a judgment of the District Court (Portland, Powers, J.) terminating her parental rights to her child.¹ 22 M.R.S. § 4055(1)(B)(2)(a), (b)(i)-(ii) (2018). She contends that (1) her due process rights were violated when the court commenced the termination hearing, as scheduled, in her absence, and (2) the court abused its discretion by terminating her parental rights rather than imposing a permanency guardianship.

We affirm the judgment. [¶2] Based on clear and convincing evidence in the record, the court found that *1195the mother is (1) unable to protect the child from jeopardy within a time which is reasonably calculated to meet the child's needs, and (2) unable to take responsibility for the child. See *id.* § 4055(1)(B)(2)(b)(i)-(ii).

The court also found that termination of the mother's parental rights is in the child's best interest. See *id.* § 4055(1)(B)(2)(a) (2018). [¶3] The court based its decision on the following findings of fact, all of which are supported by competent record evidence. This is a tragic situation involving a very young mother who experienced substance abuse, domestic violence, housing, and mental health problems which overwhelm her and seriously affect her ability to parent [the young child].

[The mother] unfortunately at times refused services that she needed and did not understand or acknowledge the parenting deficits she has had that negatively affected her son. Furthermore, she lied repeatably about her ongoing contact with [the child's father], who also had serious parent[ing] issues, when no contact was permitted. This had a detrimental effect on her as well as this child.

[The mother's] insistence on seeing [the child's father] resulted from poor decision making on her part, recognizing that she is young and had numerous life stresses. Her credibility with the court is limited, though she appeared more straightforward at the hearing. [The mother] continues her regular use of marijuana, has been to drug counseling off and on, has used other drugs in recent months, has violated group home rules enough to lose her housing, and has continued to see a man who was violent with her in [the child's] presence or otherwise.

She has had just over two years to reunify and accept necessary services. Her child's trial placement did not end well. Her efforts to reunify can be described as "poor" to "fair." [The mother's] life itself has been stressful and chaotic with many unresolved parenting issues remaining. Her love of this child is not sufficient to remedy her deficits. All the above supports that she is, by clear and convincing evidence, unable to meet this child's needs and protect him from the longstanding jeopardy within any reasonable time to meet his needs as a 2½ year old boy....

This child has been in custody for all but a few months of his life.[2] [He] needs stability, consistency, and permanency. He cannot benefit from more uncertainty related to this case and his mother's inability to be a safe and proper parent. His best chance for success requires termination of this parent's rights, followed by adoption. [The child] has had several placements in the last two years, and many transitions and disruptions are not good for a still developing and needy toddler.

His current home is meeting his basic needs and has [done so] for several months in total. This home is pre-adoptive and may result in permanency in that way, though this court is not deciding any adoption issue at this point. *1196[The mother] has had two years to understand and deal with her parenting issues outlined in the petition and the August 2016 jeopardy order.

She has been largely unsuccessful and has not always given the full effort needed to reunify. She has been unable to prioritize being a good, safe parent for her son, instead focusing on substance use and her unsafe relationship with... the father. It is sadly but clearly in [the child's] best interest for the court to terminate [the mother's] parental rights to him. [¶4] Following the issuance of the judgment terminating her parental rights, the mother timely appealed.

See 22 M.R.S. § 4006 (2018); M.R. App. 2B(c)(1). [¶5] The mother first argues that the termination judgment should be vacated because she was denied due process when the court commenced the termination hearing-as scheduled-in her absence, although it was aware that she would be arriving in a few hours. "In termination cases, where fundamental interests are at stake, due process requires: notice of the issues, an opportunity to be heard, the right to introduce evidence and present witnesses, the right to respond to claims and evidence, and an impartial fact-finder."

In re Child of James R., 2018 ME 50, ¶ 17, 182 A.3d 1252. Due process, however, "does not require that a parent be physically present at the termination hearing, as long as notice of the hearing was given in a manner calculated to give actual notice and the parent had an opportunity to be heard."

In re Child of Tanya C., 2018 ME 153, ¶ 10, 198 A.3d 777. [¶6] Because the mother had the opportunity-through her attorney-to examine witnesses and respond to claims and evidence, see In re Adden B., 2016 ME 113, ¶ 9, 144 A.3d 1158, and because she has failed to demonstrate on appeal how her participation in the part of the trial where she was not present could have affected the court's findings, see In re G.W., 2014 ME 30, ¶ 9, 86 A.3d 1228, the mother's due process rights were not violated, and the court did not abuse its discretion in determining that the hearing could proceed without her presence. [¶7] The mother next contends that the court should have ordered a permanency guardianship rather than termination of her parental rights.

The mother fails to recognize, however, that (1) the grandparents with whom the child was placed were not open to a permanency guardianship, (2) the guardian ad litem expressly recommended against a permanency guardianship as well, (3) there were tensions between the mother and the grandparents, and (4) the court found that the child needs permanency now, not years down the road, see 22 M.R.S. § 4050(2)-(3) (2018).

See In re Child of Domenick B., 2018 ME 158, ¶ 10, 197 A.3d 1076; In re Cameron B., 2017 ME 18, ¶ 13, 154 A.3d 1199; In re David W., 2010 ME 119, ¶ 10, 8 A.3d 673. [¶8] "We review the court's determination regarding the appropriateness of a permanency guardianship for an abuse of discretion."

In re Child of Domenick B., 2018 ME 158, ¶ 8, 197 A.3d 1076; see In re Michaela C., 2002 ME 159, ¶ 27, 809 A.2d 1245 ("The District Court's judgment on the issue of best interest is entitled to substantial deference because that court is able to directly evaluate the testimony of the witnesses."). [¶9] Before a court may terminate a parent's parental rights, the court must find at least one ground of parental unfitness, which the mother does not contest here, and determine, "by clear and convincing evidence... that termination is in the child's best interest." *1197 In re C.P., 2016 ME 18, ¶ 30, 132 A.3d 174; see also 22 M.R.S. § 4055(1)(B)(2). [¶10] Contrary to the mother's contentions, the evidence is sufficient to support the court's finding that termination is in the child's best interest, and, as such, the court did not abuse its discretion in terminating the mother's parental rights instead of ordering a permanency guardianship.

See In re C.P., 2016 ME 18, ¶ 34, 132 A.3d 174; In re David W., 2010 ME 119, ¶ 10, 8 A.3d 673. The entry is: Judgment affirmed. On August 6, 2018, the District Court (Portland, Powers, J.) entered a judgment terminating the father's parental rights after the father consented in writing to the termination of his rights.

The father initially appealed, but later voluntarily dismissed his appeal. The child had been in the Department's custody for approximately eighteen months at the time of the hearing, but was in the mother's custody for approximately twelve months.

Because the record here contains other ample evidence for the court to base its parental unfitness and best interest determinations on, this factual error is harmless. See *In re Child of Ronald W.*, 2018 ME 107, ¶ 7 n.2, 190 A.3d 1029 ("A factual error in a child protection order is harmless if it is highly probable that the error did not prejudice the parents or contribute to the result in the case.").