

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

In re Richard M.

2017 ME 211 (2017) · No. And-17-244 · Decided October 31, 2017

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court affirmed a District Court judgment terminating the parental rights of Richard M.'s mother and father. The court held that competent evidence supported findings of parental unfitness and that termination, with adoption as the permanency plan, was in the child's best interest.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Saufley, C.J.; Mead, J.; Gorman, J.; Jabar, J.; Hjelm, J.; Humphrey, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	October 31, 2017
DOCKET	And-17-244
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The mother and father appealed from a District Court judgment terminating their parental rights to Richard M. under 22 M.R.S. § 4055.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Findings on parental unfitness are reviewed for clear error; the determination that termination is in the child's best interest is reviewed for abuse of discretion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion; precedential
PARTIES	Mother of Richard M., Father of Richard M. v. Maine Department of Health and Human Services

TOPICS

termination of parental rights parental rights family law procedure appellate procedure standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

family law termination of parental rights appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether competent evidence supported the District Court's findings of parental unfitness under 22 M.R.S. § 4055.
2. Whether the District Court abused its discretion in determining that termination of both parents' parental rights was in Richard M.'s best interest.
3. Whether the District Court sufficiently linked the parents' parenting deficiencies to specific risks of harm to the child.

HOLDINGS

1. Competent record evidence supported each of the three statutory bases for parental unfitness found by the District Court, including failure to take responsibility, inability or unwillingness to protect the child from jeopardy within a time reasonably calculated to meet his needs, and failure to make a good-faith effort toward reunification.
2. The District Court properly linked the parents' parenting deficiencies to specific risks of harm to Richard M.; the lack of a sexual-abuse conviction and the legal status of recreational marijuana did not negate the risks identified by the court.
3. The District Court did not abuse its discretion in determining that termination of the mother's and father's parental rights, with a permanency plan of adoption, was in the child's best interest.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Competent record evidence supports each of the three bases for termination found by the court and its determination of the child’s best interest.” (¶ 3)

“The mother and father have refused to acknowledge the risks to their son that stem from allegations of the father’s sexually deviant behavior and their continued substance abuse.” (¶ 5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Richard M. had been in foster care for more than a year when the termination hearing occurred. The District Court found that both parents had made only marginal progress toward reunification and had failed to take responsibility for the child or make a good-faith effort to address jeopardy. The findings included the father's violence, mental-health concerns, alleged sexually deviant behavior, substance abuse, inconsistent visitation, and failure to participate in services, as well as the mother's mental-health and intellectual-functioning concerns, failure to complete drug screens and counseling, and failure to protect the child from risks associated with the father.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Lewiston District Court terminated both parents' parental rights after finding parental unfitness and determining that termination was in the child's best interest, with a permanency plan of adoption. The parents appealed, challenging the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the unfitness findings and the court's best-interest determination. The Supreme Judicial Court of Maine affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- In re Alana S., 2002 ME 126, ¶¶ 13, 21-23, 802 A.2d 976
- In re Logan M., 2017 ME 23, ¶¶ 3, 5, 155 A.3d 430
- In re Hope H., 541 A.2d 165, 166-67 (Me. 1988)
- In re Sarah C., 2004 ME 152, ¶ 13, 864 A.2d 162
- In re Serena C., 650 A.2d 1343, 1345 (Me. 1994)
- In re Jesse B., 2017 ME 90, ¶¶ 6-8, 160 A.3d 1187

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

MAINE SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT Reporter of Decisions Decision: 2017 ME 211 Docket: And-17-244 Submitted On Briefs: October 24, 2017 Decided: October 31, 2017 Panel: SAUFLEY, C.J., and MEAD, GORMAN, JABAR, HJELM, and HUMPHREY, JJ. IN RE RICHARD M. PER CURIAM [¶1] The mother and father of Richard M. appeal from the District Court's (Lewiston, Dow, J.) judgment terminating their parental rights to their son, pursuant to 22 M.R.S. § 4055(1)(A)(1)(a), (B)(2)(b)(i)-(ii), (iv) (2016).

The parents challenge the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the court's findings on parental unfitness and its discretionary finding that termination is in their son's best interest. Contrary to the parents' contentions, competent record evidence supports the court's findings and its discretionary determination; therefore, we affirm.

I. BACKGROUND [¶2] The court found that, despite the parents having made marginal progress toward reunification, they have failed to take responsibility for their son; they are unwilling or unable to protect him from jeopardy within a time reasonably calculated to meet his needs; they have failed to make a good faith effort toward reunification; and termination of their parental rights is in the child's best interest.¹ See 22 M.R.S. § 4055(B)(2)(b)(i)-(ii), (iv); In re Alana S., 2002 ME 126, ¶¶ 13, 21-23, 802 A.2d 976.

After over a year, the parents' minimal progress toward reunification was totally inadequate to address the jeopardy facing the child were he to return to their care. The court based this determination on the following findings of fact: [The father] has a history of violence and mental health concerns that present a risk to his son.... There are concerns about sexually deviant behavior over a period of years by [the father].

[The father's] continued substance abuse presents a risk of harm to his child. [The father] has been very inconsistent in visiting his child [and] has missed visits for reasons the court finds utterly inadequate justification for missing visits.... [The majority of the father's] intellectual abilities were in the borderline range [and] make it likely that [he] is likely to need significant support in order to meet a child's daily living needs.

[The father] has also failed to attend random drug screenings, failed to engage in mental health counseling, failed to consult with a psychiatrist.... All the while he has maintained an attitude that there is nothing about him that needs fixing or changing. 1 At the time of the termination hearing, the child had been in foster care for over a year. 3 [The mother] has ongoing mental health issues that pose a risk to her consistent parenting of the baby.

[She] has a history of low intellectual functioning that has impaired her parenting of older children and presents a risk for this baby.... [She] consented to [a] petition to terminate her rights regarding [her older son]..... [The mother] went along while [the father] stayed in the house night after night in violation of the [initial] safety plan. She stuck with him as he called out of visits with the child and blew off his counseling....

She has consistently chosen [the father] over the child. [The mother] has also failed, independently of [the father], to make progress necessary to alleviate jeopardy and take responsibility for the child. She failed to complete drug screens. She failed to be in individual counseling for much of the duration of the case. II. DISCUSSION ¶3 Competent record evidence supports each of the three bases for termination found by the court and its determination of the child's best interest.

We review the court's findings on parental unfitness for clear error and its conclusion that termination is in the child's best interest for an abuse of discretion. See *In re Logan M.*, 2017 ME 23, ¶¶ 3, 5, 155 A.3d 430.

The court rationally found that the parents' deficits make serious harm to their son highly probable and that termination of their parental rights is in his best interest. ¶4 The mother and father, relying on *In re Hope H.*, 541 A.2d 165, 166-67 (Me. 1988), argue that the court failed to properly link their parenting 4 deficiencies to specific risks of harm to their son.

However, the parents' reliance on *In re Hope H.* is misplaced because here the court drew numerous connections between their parenting deficiencies and the attendant risks to their son's well-being. Cf. *Id.*; see *In re Sarah C.*, 2004 ME 152, ¶ 13, 864 A.2d 162. ¶5 In addition, the lack of a sexual abuse conviction on the father's record and the legal status of recreational marijuana—which the parents suggest are inoculants for some of their deficiencies—are irrelevant to a court's inquiry into the jeopardy that these behaviors pose to a child.

See *In re Serena C.*, 650 A.2d 1343, 1345 (Me. 1994); *In re Jesse B.*, 2017 ME 90, ¶¶ 6-8, 160 A.3d 1187. The mother and father have refused to acknowledge the risks to their son that stem

from allegations of the father's sexually deviant behavior and their continued substance abuse. Given the support of competent evidence in the record for all of the court's findings, the court did not err in its determination of unfitness nor did it err or abuse its discretion in determining that termination of the mother's and father's parental rights, with a permanency plan of adoption, is in the child's best interest.

See *In re Logan M.*, 2017 ME 23, ¶¶ 3, 5, 155 A.3d 430. 5 The entry is: Judgment affirmed. Lorne Fairbanks, Esq., Lewiston, for appellant mother Richard Charest, Esq., Lewiston, for appellant father Janet T. Mills, Attorney General, and Meghan Szylvian, Asst. Atty. Gen., Office of the Attorney General, Augusta, for appellee Department of Health and Human Services Lewiston District Court docket number PC-2015-60 FOR CLERK REFERENCE ONLY