

SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

In re G.B.-1, G.B.-2, and G.B.-3

No. 15-0830 (W. Va. Feb. 16, 2016) · No. 15-0830 · Decided February 16, 2016

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia affirmed the termination of a father's parental rights to three children in an abuse and neglect proceeding. The Court held that the circuit court did not abuse its discretion in denying a post-adjudicatory improvement period because the father failed to demonstrate that he was likely to fully participate, and that termination was supported by findings that the conditions of abuse or neglect could not be substantially corrected.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Chief Justice Menis E. Ketchum; Justice Robin Jean Davis; Justice Brent D. Benjamin; Justice Margaret L. Workman; Justice Allen H. Loughry II
JURISDICTION	West Virginia
DECIDED	February 16, 2016
DOCKET	15-0830
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Father appealed the Roane County Circuit Court's order terminating his parental rights, arguing that the court should have granted him a post-adjudicatory improvement period instead.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Conclusions of law are reviewed de novo; factual findings in a bench-tried abuse and neglect case are reviewed for clear error. The denial of a post-adjudicatory improvement period is reviewed for abuse of discretion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished memorandum decision; nonprecedential
PARTIES	G.B., petitioner father v. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, G.B.-1, G.B.-2, G.B.-3

TOPICS

termination of parental rights

parental rights

family law procedure

appellate procedure

standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

family law

juvenile law

child welfare

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the circuit court erred by terminating Father's parental rights rather than granting him a post-adjudicatory improvement period.
2. Whether the circuit court properly found that there was no reasonable likelihood that the conditions of abuse or neglect could be substantially corrected in the near future and that termination was required by the children's welfare.

HOLDINGS

1. The circuit court did not abuse its discretion in denying Father a post-adjudicatory improvement period because he failed to demonstrate by clear and convincing evidence that he was likely to fully participate.
2. Termination of Father's parental rights was proper because the circuit court found that there was no reasonable likelihood that the conditions of abuse or neglect could be substantially corrected in the near future and that the children's welfare required termination.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Although conclusions of law reached by a circuit court are subject to de novo review, when an action, such as an abuse and neglect case, is tried upon the facts without a jury, the circuit court shall make a determination based upon the evidence and shall make findings of fact and conclusions of law as to whether such child is abused or neglected." (at 2)

"Termination . . . may be employed without the use of intervening less restrictive alternatives when it is found that there is no reasonable likelihood . . . that conditions of neglect or abuse can be substantially corrected." (at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The DHHR alleged that Father failed to provide the children with necessary food, clothing, shelter, supervision, medical care, or education. Father stipulated that his substance abuse impaired his ability to care for the children. During the proceedings, he tested positive for drugs six times, missed six drug screens, participated in a three-day methamphetamine binge, failed to participate in other services, failed to visit the children, failed to undergo a psychological evaluation, and did not attend the dispositional hearing.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The DHHR filed an abuse and neglect petition in March 2015. Father stipulated at the adjudicatory hearing that his substance abuse impaired his ability to care properly for the children, and the circuit court adjudicated the children abused and neglected. After a dispositional hearing at which evidence showed continued drug use, missed drug screens, failure to participate in services, failure to visit the children, and failure to undergo a psychological evaluation, the circuit court terminated his parental rights by order entered July 28, 2015. The Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- In Interest of Tiffany Marie S., 196 W. Va. 223, 470 S.E.2d 177 (1996) (Syl. Pt. 1)
- In re Cecil T., 228 W. Va. 89, 717 S.E.2d 873 (2011) (Syl. Pt. 1)
- In re Emily, 208 W. Va. 325, 339, 540 S.E.2d 542, 556 (2000)
- In re Travis W., 206 W. Va. 478, 525 S.E.2d 669 (1999) (Syl. Pt. 1, in part)
- Michael D.C. v. Wanda L.C., 201 W. Va. 381, 388, 497 S.E.2d 531, 538 (1997)
- Gebr. Eickhoff Maschinenfabrik Und Eisengieberei mbH v. Starcher, 174 W. Va. 618, 626 n. 12, 328 S.E.2d 492, 500 n. 12 (1985)
- In re Tonjia M., 212 W. Va. 443, 448, 573 S.E.2d 354, 359 (2002)
- In re Katie S., 198 W. Va. 79, 479 S.E.2d 589 (1996) (Syl. Pt. 7, in part)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS FILED February 16, 2016 In re: G.B.-1, G.B.-2, and G.B.-3 RORY L. PERRY II, CLERK SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA No. 15-0830 (Roane County 15-JA-14, 15-JA-15, & 15-JA-16) MEMORANDUM DECISION Petitioner Father G.B., by counsel D. Kyle Moore, appeals the Circuit Court of Roane County's July 28, 2015, order terminating his parental rights to one-year-old G.B.-1, three-year old G.B.-2, and five-year-old G.B.-3.1 The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources ("DHHR"), by counsel Lee Niezgoda, filed its response in support of the circuit court's order.

The guardian ad litem ("guardian"), Anita Harold Ashley, filed a response on behalf of the children also in support of the circuit court's order. On appeal, petitioner argues that the circuit court erred in terminating his parental rights instead of granting him an improvement period.² This Court has considered the parties' briefs and the record on appeal.

The facts and legal arguments are adequately presented, and the decisional process would not be significantly aided by oral argument. Upon consideration of the standard of review, the briefs, and the record presented, the Court finds no substantial question of law and no prejudicial error.

For these reasons, a memorandum decision affirming the circuit court's order is appropriate under Rule 21 of the Rules of Appellate Procedure. In March of 2015, the DHHR filed an abuse and neglect petition against petitioner alleging that he failed to provide the children with the necessary

food, clothing, shelter, supervision, medical care, or education. Thereafter, the circuit court ordered petitioner to submit to drug screens.

In April of 2015, the circuit court held an adjudicatory hearing. Petitioner stipulated that his substance abuse impaired his ability to properly care for the children. Accordingly, the circuit court found that the children were abused and neglected. Subsequently, the guardian filed her report, which indicated that petitioner had “taken some drug tests, all of which have been positive for substances, and missed multiple screens.”¹ Because all of the children in this case have the same initials, we have distinguished each of them using numbers 1, 2, and 3 after their initials in this Memorandum Decision.

The circuit court case numbers also serve to distinguish each child.² We note that West Virginia Code §§ 49-1-1 through 49-11-10 were repealed and recodified during the 2015 Regular Session of the West Virginia Legislature.

The new enactment, West Virginia Code §§ 49-1-101 through 49-7-304, has minor stylistic changes and became effective ninety days after the February 19, 2015, approval date. In this Memorandum Decision, we apply the statutes as they existed during the pendency of the proceedings below.¹ In July of 2015, the circuit court held a dispositional hearing.

The DHHR presented evidence of petitioner’s drug abuse history, his excessive drug use, and failed drug screens. A Child Protective Services (“CPS”) worker testified that petitioner tested positive six times and failed to submit to six drug screens. Further, the CPS worker testified that petitioner participated in a three-day “methamphetamine binge,” failed to participate in any other services, and failed to visit the children since the underlying petition was filed.

The circuit court also heard evidence that petitioner failed to undergo a psychological evaluation. Petitioner did not attend the dispositional hearing. At the conclusion of the hearing, the circuit court found that there was no reasonable likelihood that the conditions of abuse or neglect could be substantially corrected in the near future and the children’s welfare required termination.

By order entered on July 28, 2015, the circuit court terminated petitioner’s parental rights to the children. This appeal followed. The Court has previously established the following standard of review: “Although conclusions of law reached by a circuit court are subject to de novo review, when an action, such as an abuse and neglect case, is tried upon the facts without a jury, the circuit court shall make a determination based upon the evidence and shall make findings of fact and conclusions of law as to whether such child is abused or neglected.

These findings shall not be set aside by a reviewing court unless clearly erroneous. A finding is clearly erroneous when, although there is evidence to support the finding, the reviewing court on the entire evidence is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed.

However, a reviewing court may not overturn a finding simply because it would have decided the case differently, and it must affirm a finding if the circuit court's account of the evidence is plausible in light of the record viewed in its entirety." Syl. Pt. 1, *In Interest of Tiffany Marie S.*, 196 W.Va. 223, 470 S.E.2d 177 (1996). Syl. Pt. 1, *In re Cecil T.*, 228 W.Va.

89, 717 S.E.2d 873 (2011). Further, our case law is clear that "in the context of abuse and neglect proceedings, the circuit court is the entity charged with weighing the credibility of witnesses and rendering findings of fact." *In re Emily*, 208 W.Va. 325, 339, 540 S.E.2d 542, 556 (2000) (citing Syl. Pt. 1, in part, *In re Travis W.*, 206 W.Va. 478, 525 S.E.2d 669 (1999)); see also *Michael D.C. v. Wanda L.C.*, 201 W.Va.

381, 388, 497 S.E.2d 531, 538 (1997) (stating that "[a] reviewing court cannot assess witness credibility through a record. The trier of fact is uniquely situated to make such determinations and this Court is not in a position to, and will not, second guess such determinations.").

On appeal, petitioner assigns error to the circuit court's termination of his parental rights instead of granting him a post-adjudicatory improvement period.³ We have explained that West Virginia Code § 49-4-610(2) provides circuit courts with discretion in determining whether to grant or deny a post-adjudicatory improvement period to petitioner in these proceedings.

See 3 Because the dispositional hearing in this matter took place on July 6, 2015, after the new version of West Virginia Code §§ 49-1-101 through 49-7-304 went into effect, the Court will apply the revised versions of those statutes on appeal. 2 *Gebr. Eickhoff Maschinenfabrik Und Eisengieberei mbH v. Starcher*, 174 W.Va. 618, 626 n. 12, 328 S.E.2d 492, 500 n. 12 (1985) ("An elementary principle of statutory construction is that the word 'may' is inherently permissive in nature and connotes discretion." (citations omitted)); see also *In re Tonjia M.*, 212 W.Va.

443, 448, 573 S.E.2d 354, 359 (2002) (stating that "[w]e have held that the granting of an improvement period is within the circuit court's discretion."). Pursuant to this statute, a circuit court may grant an improvement period to a respondent parent who demonstrates by clear and convincing evidence that he is likely to fully participate in the same.

In the instant case, we find no error in the circuit court's denial of petitioner's motion for an improvement period. It is clear from the record on appeal that petitioner has an extensive history of substance abuse.

In this case sub judice, the circuit court was presented with evidence that petitioner tested positive for drugs throughout this proceeding and failed to undergo a psychological examination. The circuit court also heard testimony that petitioner participated in a three-day "methamphetamine binge," failed to participate in any other services, and has failed to visit the children since the underlying petition was filed.

Importantly, petitioner also failed to attend the dispositional hearing. Based on the record before this Court, we find that petitioner failed to satisfy his burden to demonstrate by clear and convincing evidence that he was likely to fully participate in an improvement period.

As such, we find no abuse of discretion in the circuit court's denial of an improvement period herein. Further, we have often explained that "[t]ermination... may be employed without the use of intervening less restrictive alternatives when it is found that there is no reasonable likelihood... that conditions of neglect or abuse can be substantially corrected." Syl.

Pt. 7, in part, *In re Katie S.*, 198 W.Va. 79, 479 S.E.2d 589 (1996). Here, the circuit court found that there was no reasonable likelihood that the conditions of neglect or abuse could be substantially corrected in the near future and that the child's welfare required termination. Pursuant to West Virginia Code § 49-4-604(b)(6), circuit courts are directed to terminate parental rights upon such findings.

Therefore, we find no merit to petitioner's assignment of error on appeal. For the foregoing reasons, we find no error in the circuit court's July 28, 2015, order, and hereby affirm the same. Affirmed. ISSUED: February 16, 2016 CONCURRED IN BY: Chief Justice Menis E. Ketchum Justice Robin Jean Davis Justice Brent D. Benjamin Justice Margaret L. Workman Justice Allen H. Loughry II 3 4