

SUPREME COURT OF VERMONT

Knutsen v. Cegalis

191 Vt. 546 (2011) · Decided November 15, 2011

SUMMARY

The Vermont Supreme Court affirmed a family court order awarding primary custody of the parties' five-year-old child to the father. The court held that the family court properly weighed the statutory best-interests factors, including each parent's ability to foster the child's relationship with the other parent and meet the child's developmental needs. The court also rejected the mother's claims that the family court's findings were unsupported, that it improperly considered her conduct, and that it was biased or unfair.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Vermont
JURISDICTION	Vermont
DECIDED	November 15, 2011
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Mother appealed the family court's post-rehearing order awarding primary custody of the parties' child to father.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The family court has broad discretion in custody matters. Its factual findings will not be overturned unless clearly erroneous, and findings supported by any credible evidence will not be disturbed. The court's conclusions will be upheld when supported by the findings, and its custody determination will be affirmed unless the exercise of discretion is clearly erroneous or arbitrary rather than reasoned. The Supreme Court does not reweigh evidence or reevaluate witness credibility de novo.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Mother v. Father

TOPICS

- child custody
- family law procedure
- standard of review
- appellate procedure
- preservation of error

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the family court abused its discretion or clearly erred in awarding primary custody to father under the statutory best-interests factors.
2. Whether the family court's conclusions concerning mother's ability to foster the child's relationship with father were supported by the findings and evidence.
3. Whether alleged unfairness, bias, evidentiary errors, and irrelevant or erroneous subsidiary findings required reversal.

HOLDINGS

1. The family court did not abuse its discretion by awarding primary custody to father because it contemporaneously weighed the statutory best-interest factors and reasonably concluded that father was better able to meet the child's developmental needs and foster the child's relationship with mother.
2. The Supreme Court will not reweigh evidence, reevaluate witness credibility, or substitute a different interpretation of conflicting evidence for the family court's supported findings and conclusions.
3. The identified subsidiary error concerning a skiing proposal and the family court's allegedly irrelevant description of mother's demeanor did not require reversal because neither was dispositive and the remaining custody conclusions were supported by the evidence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The family court has broad discretion in awarding custody, and its findings will not be overturned unless clearly erroneous. Given its unique position to assess the credibility of witnesses and weigh the evidence, we will not set aside the [family] court’s findings if supported by the evidence, nor its conclusions if supported by the findings.” (at 550)

“What was missing in the court’s first custody order is present in the instant case — a weighing of the circumstances outlined in § 665(b) contemporaneously to the award of actual custody.” (at 551)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The parties had one child, born in 2005, and shared custody on an alternating-week basis after the prior appeal. In anticipation of the child's need for a primary residence for kindergarten, the family court evaluated the statutory best-interest factors and found that both parents were affectionate, capable, and able to provide positive environments. The court nevertheless found father better able to meet certain developmental needs and, particularly, to foster the child's positive relationship and frequent contact with the other parent. It relied in part on mother's recording of exchanges, conflict during custody transitions, resistance to communication with father's fiancée, and other conduct reflecting an antagonistic attitude toward father.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

After the parents' separation, the family court initially awarded mother primary custody until a prospective automatic transfer to father in March 2010. The Supreme Court previously reversed the automatic prospective transfer as insufficiently grounded in a contemporaneous determination of the child's best interests and remanded for further proceedings. Following a rehearing, the family court again awarded primary custody to father, and mother appealed. The Supreme Court affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Knutsen v. Cegalis, 2009 VT 110, ¶¶ 5, 6, 10, 17, 187 Vt. 99, 989 A.2d 1010
- Payrits v. Payrits, 171 Vt. 50, 52-54, 757 A.2d 469, 472-73 (2000)
- Mullin v. Phelps, 162 Vt. 250, 261, 647 A.2d 714, 720 (1994)
- Omega Optical Inc. v. Chroma Tech. Corp., 174 Vt. 10, 20-21, 800 A.2d 1064, 1071 (2002)
- Kasper v. Kasper, 2007 VT 2, ¶ 5, 181 Vt. 562, 917 A.2d 463 (mem.)
- Trahnstrom v. Trahnstrom, 171 Vt. 507, 507, 756 A.2d 1242, 1244 (mem.)
- Porcaro v. Drop, 175 Vt. 13, 18, 816 A.2d 1280, 1285 (2002)
- Bergman v. Marker, 2007 VT 139, ¶ 8, 183 Vt. 68, 944 A.2d 265