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STATE OF MICHIGAN

COURT OF APPEALS

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In re KNIGHT, Minors.

No. 379837
Wayne Circuit Court
Family Division
LC No. 2025-000931-NA

Before: M. J. KELLY, P.J., and O'BRIEN and LIEVENSE, JJ.

PER CURIAM.

Respondent appeals as of right the order terminating his parental rights to his three adopted children, ADK, ATK, and AIK. On appeal, respondent argues the trial court clearly erred when it found that there were statutory grounds to terminate his parental rights and that termination was in the children's best interests. We disagree and affirm.

I. FACTS AND PROCEEDINGS

In April 2025, Children's Protective Services (CPS) received a complaint alleging that respondent sexually assaulted ATK years prior when she was between the ages of 9 years old and 11 years old. During a later forensic interview, ATK stated that on one occasion, respondent gave ADK and AIK sleeping pills. While they slept, respondent sexually assaulted ATK by vaginally penetrating her with his penis. ATK also reported that, on separate occasions before the sexual assault, respondent inappropriately kissed and touched ATK, including touching her vagina, breasts, and thighs. ATK stated that respondent threatened to sexually assault her again if she disclosed the abuse to anyone. It turned out that, before CPS received the complaint related to ATK's allegations, respondent had not seen the children since March 2024 because an order suspending parenting time with ATK had been entered by a different court, and respondent had not provided financial support since about November 2024. Also, the children indicated they had no interest in attending parenting time with respondent. ADK also informed a CPS caseworker that respondent touched him but did not share details of the incident.

Separate from the 2024-25 events, CPS had investigated respondent in 2018 relating to physical abuse of the children. Respondent denied hitting ATK in the mouth, as was alleged,

although he admitted to hitting ATK with an open hand once. Respondent also denied a claim contained within the petition that he choked ADK, and he asserted that he never hit AIK. That investigation substantiated the allegations of physical abuse and resulted in CPS providing parenting services to respondent.

Following the CPS investigation of the newer allegations, in early August 2025, petitioner, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), submitted a petition requesting that the court terminate respondent's parental rights, citing MCL 712A.19(b)(3)(b)(*i*), (g), (j), and (k)(*ii*) as the grounds for termination. The petition included allegations related to CPS's 2018 investigation of respondent and the 2024-25 sexual abuse and abandonment allegations. The children remained in the care of their nonrespondent mother who at the time was divorced from respondent. The trial court authorized the petition after a hearing on August 25, 2025.

Over about five hearings spanning November 2025 to February 2026, the trial court held a combined adjudication trial and dispositional hearing on the statutory grounds for jurisdiction and termination. ATK testified about the sexual assault and several instances of inappropriate touching. For example, in March 2024, ATK told her mother she did not want to continue going to respondent's home because she felt uncomfortable there. ATK stated further that she initially did not tell mother about the sexual assault because she "was afraid that he was going to try to hurt my family." Mother confronted respondent about ATK feeling uncomfortable, and he reacted in a manner that frightened ATK. In response, mother moved to suspend parenting time and filed for a change of custody. ATK, who had been previously diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sought therapy and then disclosed the abuse described above. She testified that the abuse had made her suicidal and that she had attempted suicide "many times." In response to ATK's testimony about suicide, respondent testified that, during two occasions when ATK had indicated that she intended to harm herself, he called mother because he did not know how to handle the situation instead of seeking medical attention for ATK.

Also, ATK explained that she had been hospitalized several times in 2023 for self-harming. She also has special needs relating to a genetic mutation called MELAS syndrome,[1] and ADK and AIK also have special needs that are managed with prescription medications. On these topics, respondent admitted he did not consistently give the children their medication as prescribed.

At trial, respondent maintained the allegations of inappropriate touching and sexual assault were false. He also denied giving the children "extra medication to knock them out," noting they took medication to calm down before bed. Respondent asserted ATK was lying, but he did not know why she would fabricate these allegations. He stated that he was investigated by police but

[1] "MELAS syndrome is a mitochondrial disease that mostly affects [the] nervous system and muscles." The acronym stands for "mitochondrial encephalomyopathy, lactic acidosis and stroke-like episodes. Symptoms of MELAS syndrome may include neurological issues such as changes in behavior, confusion, and seizures. The syndrome can also cause intellectual disability. Cleveland Clinic, *MELAS Syndrome* <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/25149-melas-syndrome> (accessed August 5, 2026).

no criminal charges were filed. In contrast, mother testified that ATK had no reason to lie, and there was no reason to disbelieve ATK's testimony.

On February 2, 2026, the trial court issued an oral ruling and found a statutory basis to exercise jurisdiction under MCL 712A.2(b)(1) and (2) by a preponderance of the evidence. It also held that the four statutory grounds listed above were established by clear and convincing evidence to terminate respondent's parental rights. In a later written order, it determined ATK's account of the sexual assault was credible, consistent, and plausible. The court also cited respondent's knowledge that the children have special needs but that he failed to meet them by not giving them medication as prescribed, and that he failed to meet ATK's medical needs during episodes of self-harm. The trial court made these findings and applied them to both its jurisdiction and statutory grounds for termination analyses.

Next, on February 9, 2026, the trial court reconvened and held a separate hearing to determine whether termination was in the children's best interests. MCL 712A.19b(5). At the best-interests hearing, the parties agreed to use the testimony from the combined jurisdiction trial and statutory grounds dispositional hearing. The trial court also took additional testimony, including from a CPS ongoing treatment specialist who had worked with ATK, who testified that that she had "consistently said she has no interest in visiting with her father." ATK had not expressed an opinion on whether she wanted respondent's rights terminated, but "always" said "she does not want to see him, talk to him, [or] be around him." AIK consistently said he had no interest in seeing or talking to respondent but expressed no opinion on whether respondent's parental rights should be terminated. ADK also testified and was asked at the hearing whether he had a preference regarding termination of respondent's parental rights, and he replied that he did not want to see respondent even if his rights were not terminated. ADK added that he would not feel safe in respondent's care.

ADK also stated that his ADHD and oppositional defiance disorder medication helped him, and he testified respondent did not give ADK the medication or let him take it during previous parenting time. Instead, respondent would tell ADK he withheld the medication because it made ADK sleepy. However, according to ADK, not taking his medication made him feel hyper and out of control. ADK stated further that respondent only gave AIK his medication when AIK "act[ed] up," and did not give ATK her medication. ADK also recalled respondent punching and slapping him as a form of discipline. He reported seeing respondent hit ATK and AIK as well. This physical discipline "was a problem" every weekend. ADK also noted he and the other children did not have sufficient food when they were with respondent.

The court also heard from two witnesses who testified on respondent's behalf. Thereafter, the trial court stated in an oral ruling that it was its obligation to determine the best interests of the children while considering "a lot of factors." It stated that the children were similarly situated for the best-interests analysis outside of the children's individual special needs and the sexual assault on ATK. Regarding the parent-child bond, the court noted ADK and ATK wanted "nothing to do" with respondent. It stated that any bond that existed had diminished because respondent had not seen the children for approximately two years.

Next, the court commented on respondent's credibility, noting respondent suggested ADK was hyperbolic in saying that respondent physically disciplined them "every time" they were

together. However, although respondent's witnesses testified that they never saw any physical discipline, respondent admitted to physically disciplining his children. As such, the trial court stated that it believed the physical discipline had occurred.

The court addressed respondent's parenting abilities, emphasizing respondent's refusal to give his children medication and his decision to call the children's mother in emergency situations rather than handling them, referring to ATK's suicide "attempts." Additionally, respondent did not communicate with doctors about his concerns with the children's medication. The court concluded that respondent's parenting ability was "not zero," but it was "not good" given what he did or did not do in certain situations.

The trial court stated that the children enjoyed permanence, safety, and stability with their mother, and opined this factor was neutral while referencing ATK's need for finality. The court commented that the children's well-being "should be considered immensely," emphasizing ATK's emotional fragility. The court determined termination of respondent's parental rights was in the children's best interests and entered an order to that effect. This appeal followed.

II. STANDARD OF REVIEW

"If a trial court finds that a single statutory ground for termination [under MCL 712A.19b(3)] has been established by clear and convincing evidence and that it has been proved by a preponderance of the evidence that termination of parental rights is in the best interests of a child, the court is mandated to terminate a respondent's parental rights to that child." *In re Mota*, 334 Mich App 300, 320; 964 NW2d 881 (2020) (citations omitted). "This Court reviews for clear error the trial court's ruling that a statutory ground for termination has been established and its ruling that termination is in the children's best interests." *Id*. (citations omitted). "A finding of fact is clearly erroneous if the reviewing court has a definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed, giving due regard to the trial court's special opportunity to observe the witnesses." *In re Miller*, 347 Mich App 420, 425; 15 NW3d 287 (2023) (quotation marks and citation omitted).

III. STATUTORY GROUNDS FOR TERMINATION

Respondent first argues that the trial court clearly erred by finding that a statutory ground for termination was established by clear and convincing evidence to terminate his parental rights. We disagree.

The record properly established a statutory ground to terminate respondent's parental rights as to all three children under MCL 712.19b(3)(b)(*i*). Termination is proper under MCL 712A.19(b)(3)(*i*) when the trial court finds the following by clear and convincing evidence:

> (b) The child or a sibling of the child has suffered physical injury or physical or sexual abuse under 1 or more of the following circumstances:
>
> (*i*) The parent's act caused the physical injury or physical or sexual abuse and the court finds that there is a reasonable likelihood that the child will suffer from injury or abuse in the foreseeable future if placed in the parent's home.

Notably, MCL 712A.19(b)(3)(*i*) permits termination of parental rights as to multiple children when the sexual assault only involved one child. See *In re Jenks*, 281 Mich App 514, 517-518; 760 NW2d 297 (2008) (holding that the trial court did not err in concluding that sexual abuse of one child meant there was a reasonable likelihood that other children would suffer such abuse in the future if placed in the respondent's home).[2]

The trial court concluded ATK's testimony asserting respondent sexually abused her was credible. Although respondent denied the allegations and no criminal charges were filed, "[i]t is not for this Court to displace the trial court's credibility determination." *In re HRC*, 286 Mich App 444, 460; 781 NW2d 105 (2009). A respondent's denial of allegations related to sexual abuse does not preclude that statutory grounds exist under MCL 712A.19b(3)(b)(*i*) when the trial court believed the testimony of a child alleging sexual abuse. *Id*.

Thus, the trial court's finding that ATK suffered sexual abuse at respondent's hand and experienced repeated instances of inappropriate sexual touching mean that its findings that the children "suffered physical injury or physical or sexual abuse," and that there was a reasonable likelihood it would happen again in the foreseeable future, were not clearly erroneous. MCL 712A.19b(3)(b)(*i*). See *In re HRC*, 286 Mich App at 460-461 (a respondent's treatment of one child is probative of how he will treat his other children). Because "MCL 712A.19b(3)(b)(*i*) specifically states that it applies to a child on the basis of the parent's conduct toward the child's siblings[,]" respondent's sexual abuse of ATK is sufficient grounds for termination of respondent's parental rights to the other children. *Id*. at 461. The trial court did not clearly err when it found that there was clear and convincing evidence to establish MCL 712A.19b(3)(b)(*i*) as to all three children. *In re Jenks*, 281 Mich App at 517-518.

The trial court is only required to find that one statutory ground for termination has been established through clear and convincing evidence before it proceeds to a best-interests determination. *In re Mota*, 334 Mich App at 320. For this reason, we need not analyze the other statutory grounds that the trial court held were established by clear and convincing evidence to terminate respondent's parental rights.[3]

IV. BEST INTERESTS

Once the trial court finds the statutory grounds for termination, it must also find by a preponderance of the evidence that termination is in the children's best interests before it can

[2] The record indicates that ADK also informed a CPS caseworker that respondent "touched" him. However, ADK provided no more details, so we do not know whether this physical contact rose to the level of abuse under MCL 712A.19(b)(3)(*i*).

[3] Respondent also argues that the trial court "committed clear error and abused its discretion by taking permanent custody of the children from appellant." Respondent's argument, however, simply repeats respondent's argument that the trial court erred in finding the statutory grounds to terminate his rights. Having not developed his argument further, we decline to consider it. See *In re Toler*, 193 Mich App 474, 477; 484 NW2d 672 (1992) ("A party may not merely announce his position and leave it to us to discover and rationalize the basis for his claim.").

terminate a respondent's parental rights. *In re Sanborn*, 337 Mich App 252, 276; 976 NW2d 44 (2021). The focus at the best-interests stage of the proceedings is on the child, not the parent. *In re Moss*, 301 Mich App 76, 87; 836 NW2d 182 (2013). Further, "the trial court has a duty to decide the best interests of each child individually." *In re Olive/Metts Minors*, 297 Mich App 35, 42; 823 NW2d 144 (2012). But a trial court does not err if it "fails to explicitly make individual and—in many cases—redundant factual findings concerning each child's best interests." *In re White*, 303 Mich App 701, 715-716; 846 NW2d 61 (2014). The trial court has to explicitly address the individual children only when their best interests significantly differ. See *id*. at 715. The court may consider the whole record in making its determination. *In re Sanborn*, 337 Mich App at 276. Factors relevant to the children's best interests in this case include the parent-child bond, respondent's parenting ability, the use of inappropriate parenting techniques, the children's need for permanence, stability, and finality, and the children's ages. *Id*. at 276-277.

In this case, the trial court acknowledged that, aside from ATK's allegations of sexual assault and their individual special needs, all three children were "similarly situated" for best-interests analysis purposes. The record supports this finding. Concerning respondent's bond with the children, the court found that any bond that previously existed had "decreased" as ATK, ADK, and AIK each indicated they had no desire to continue a relationship with respondent. ADK stated: "If it is where he would get his rights back, I wouldn't wanna go over there, but I'm just hoping that he gets his rights taken away." ADK did not anticipate wanting any contact with respondent in the future. While ADK acknowledged there were good times with respondent, he indicated he would not feel safe if returned to respondent's care, "especially after what happened to [his] sister." According to the CPS specialist who testified at the best-interests hearing, "[ATK] has consistently said she has no interest in visiting with her father." She has "always" said "she does not want to see him, talk to him, be around him." AIK also consistently said he has no interest in seeing or talking to his father, although the specialist testified that she had not specifically asked whether AIK wanted respondent's rights terminated.

Respondent said he loved his children equally, but he made no effort to contact ADK or AIK after the March 2024 order suspending his parenting time with ATK and he did not attempt to clarify whether the order extended to the other children. Consequently, respondent had no contact with the children for almost two years at the time of the best interests hearing in February 2026, and none of the children indicated they missed respondent. The lack of a parent-child bond and the children's preferences support the trial court's determination that termination of respondent's parental rights was in the children's best interests. *In re Sanborn*, 337 Mich App at 276.

In addition to ATK's assertions regarding sexual assault involving penetration and inappropriate touching, ADK's testimony describing his treatment of the children at respondent's home supports the trial court's finding as to respondent's deficient parenting ability. All three children have special needs that are treated with prescription medication, but respondent failed to consistently administer the medication as prescribed. ADK testified that he believed his prescribed medication helped him, but that respondent withheld it because of the side-effects. He also testified that not taking the medication made him feel hyper and out of control. ADK stated further that respondent did not give ATK her medication and only gave AIK his medication when he "act[ed] up."

Respondent's own testimony also indicates that he failed to seek urgent medical attention when ATK ingested medication not prescribed for her, which he testified was an effort to harm herself. He stated that he deferred to mother, who took ATK to the hospital, because he did not know "how to handle the situation with [ATK]." Similarly, when ATK "was in a depressed mode" and put a hanger around her neck, he called mother instead of seeking emergency medical assistance or mental health services. Respondent has not demonstrated that the trial court clearly erred when it found that he was incapable of properly caring for the children given their special needs.

Moreover, the petition included allegations of physical abuse that were substantiated by ADK's testimony. ADK did not feel safe in respondent's home. He stated that respondent punched and slapped him as a form of discipline, and he saw respondent hit ATK and AIK. ADK claimed "it was a problem" every weekend and happened "like every time" ADK got in trouble. ADK also recalled being choked once when he was between 8 years old and 10 years old. Lastly, ADK stated neither himself nor the other children were properly fed when they were with respondent.

The trial court considered the witnesses who provided testimony on respondent's behalf, who described him as a responsible father and godfather, who took care of his children, ensured they were fed, and engaged in a variety of activities with them. However, the court noted both witnesses said they never observed respondent physically disciplining his children, which respondent admitted he did. We must defer to the trial court's assessment of the witnesses' testimony, *In re Miller*, 347 Mich App at 425, and it evidently found that termination was in the children's best interests despite the favorable testimony from the witnesses who testified on his behalf.

Finally, the record indicates that respondent's sexual abuse of ATK negatively affected her and the other children. ATK testified that the sexual assault led her to attempt suicide several times in the subsequent years. The trial court referenced this testimony when it found that ATK was "extremely fragile emotionally" and that placement with mother provided stability. ADK expressly stated that he did not want to return to respondent's care "especially after what happened to [his] sister." This Court has acknowledged that sexual victimization of one child can result in lifelong repercussions for that child and her siblings. *In re Hudson*, 294 Mich App 261, 268-269; 817 NW2d 115 (2011).

Overall, the trial court did not clearly err in reaching that conclusion that the testimony during the combined adjudication trial/statutory grounds hearing and best-interests hearing established by a preponderance of the evidence that termination of respondent's parental rights was in the best interests of the three children.

Affirmed.

/s/ Michael J. Kelly
/s/ Colleen A. O'Brien
/s/ Andrew J. Lievense