

Respondent appeals, arguing that (1) the trial court erred by terminating his parental rights prior to conducting a best-interest hearing and (2) the court's (a) fitness and (b) best-interest findings were against the manifest weight of the evidence. We disagree and affirm.

I. BACKGROUND

A. The Circumstances That Prompted the State's Motion To Terminate Respondent's Parental Rights

Initially, we note that because the report of proceedings contained within the record before us pertain only to respondent's parental termination hearing, the following facts are derived from (1) the parties' filings and (2) the trial court's corresponding docket entries and written orders.

In October 2003, the State filed separate petitions for adjudication of wardship, alleging that C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H. were neglected minors under the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (Juvenile Act) in that their environment was injurious to their welfare (705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(b) (West 2002)). The State's petition was based on a September 2003 incident in which then-four-year-old C.H. left the home respondent shared with the children's biological mother, Heather Hubble, and was later found wandering three blocks away, barefoot and unsupervised. Following a December 2, 2003, adjudicatory hearing, the trial court entered the following docket entry:

"[Heather] and [respondent] *** admit to the allegations contained in the [p]etitions. Based upon the same, the minors are adjudicated to be neglected minors ***. Based upon the agreement of the parties, [the] minors shall remain in the care and custody of

the parents under the terms and conditions as stated in Court.

Orders of Adjudication and Orders of Disposition as to each of the minors *** entered."

The trial court then entered an order, adjudicating C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H. neglected minors based on respondent's failure to supervise them. The court's dispositional order mirrored its oral pronouncements in that it adjudicated C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H. wards of the court but allowed the children to remain in the custody of Heather and respondent. In April 2004, Heather and the children moved from the home she shared with respondent to a neighboring city.

On August 10, 2004, the State filed separate petitions for supplemental relief, alleging that in July 2004 and August 2004 (1) C.H. and J.H. (then five and four years old) and (2) D.H. (then two years old), respectively, were found unsupervised on the railroad tracks near Heather's home. Following a review hearing held that same day, the trial court removed C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H., from Heather's custody and granted the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) temporary guardianship of the children. (Respondent was not present at that hearing.)

At an October 4, 2004, hearing at which respondent was present with counsel, Heather admitted the State's allegations contained within the petitions. The trial court then entered an order adjudicating C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H. neglected minors. That same day, the court entered the following docket entry:

"By agreement of [the] parties, [the] Court accepts the recommendation that the children remain in the guardianship and

custody of DCFS with the right to place with either parent and under the other terms as stated in Court and as contained in the Order of Disposition[.]"

The court's corresponding dispositional order required, in part, that respondent (1) establish and maintain an appropriate, clean, healthy, and stable residence; (2) immediately inform DCFS of changes in (a) his home address and (b) the number and identity of persons living with him; (3) cooperate with domestic-violence counseling; and (4) comply with his client-service-plan goals. (In March 2005, Heather moved to Missouri.)

The record shows that the trial court thereafter entered the following permanency review hearing orders at which respondent appeared or was represented by counsel: (1) April 6, 2005, setting a permanency goal of return home within 12 months and finding that respondent was "making progress"; (2) November 1, 2005, maintaining the permanency goal of return home within 12 months and finding that respondent had not made substantial progress in completing his client-service-plan goals because he (a) did not have a stable home, (b) was unemployed, and (c) failed to complete a psychological assessment; (3) June 26, 2006, changing the permanency goal to substitute care pending determination on termination of parental rights and finding that respondent failed to (a) visit his children and (b) complete his client-service-plan goals; (4) December 7, 2006, changing the permanency goal to substitute care pending a home study of Heather's Missouri residence; (5) June 5, 2007, maintaining the permanency goal of substitute care pending home study of Heather's Missouri residence; (6) September 5, 2007, changing the permanency goal to substitute care pending determination on termination of parental rights (neither the court's order nor the corresponding docket entry provide a reason for changing the

permanency goal); and (7) March 7, 2008, maintaining the permanency goal of substitute care pending determination on termination of parental rights.

In June 2008, the State filed separate petitions to terminate respondent's parental rights under the Adoption Act (750 ILCS 50/1 through 24 (West 2008)). In particular, the State alleged that respondent was an unfit parent in that he failed to (1) maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility as to his children's welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2008)); (2) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions that were the basis for the removal of his children within nine months after the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(i) (West 2008)); (3) make reasonable progress toward the return of his children within nine months after the adjudication of neglect, which the State later identified as October 4, 2004, through July 4, 2005 (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m) (iii) (West 2004)); and (4) make reasonable progress toward the return of his children during any nine-month period after the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(iii) (West 2004)), specifically the nine-month period from July 4, 2005, through April 4, 2006.

B. The Evidence Presented at Respondent's Fitness Hearing

1. *The State's Evidence*

Linda Lanier, the licensed clinical psychologist who performed respondent's November 2005 psychological evaluation, noted that during her initial interview of respondent, he (1) could not recall the ages of three of his four children, (2) did not know what grade level his children were in at school, and (3) blamed others for his children's placement with DCFS. Lanier administered to respondent the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), which assesses the existence of any mental-health issues, and the Parenting Stress Index Sentence

Completion, which measures parenting attitudes.

Lanier commented that respondent's MMPI results were invalid because he "responded to the measure in a way that showed he was very defensive to the point of misrepresenting himself" and was "purposely minimizing any problems or concerns." With regard to the parenting index, Lanier explained that respondent was required to provide written answers to a series of statements designed to reveal his parenting opinions. Lanier concluded that respondent's answers were brief and not revealing. Lanier surmised that respondent was "just putting something down to get it over with."

Based on her overall evaluation, which consisted of her interview, respondent's test results, and DCFS' social-history information, Lanier diagnosed respondent with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Lanier noted that (1) her interview observations; (2) respondent's prior ADHD diagnosis as a child (which Lanier opined does not diminish with age); (3) respondent's interview answers concerning his (a) employment and relationship instability and (b) difficulty with focus and follow-through, substantiated such a diagnosis. In addition, Lanier diagnosed respondent with "personality disorder with anti-social narcissistic traits", which she based primarily on DCFS' social-history information and her interview observations.

Lanier recommended that respondent attend group-therapy sessions so that the group could provide respondent input on his tendency to deflect blame instead of accepting responsibility for his actions. Relying on his historical reports of domestic violence, Lanier recommended domestic-violence group treatment. Lanier opined that based on her overall assessment, respondent would likely not possess the proper skills to parent children at that time. Lanier based her opinion on her conclusion that respondent was unable to adequately understand

or focus on the children's needs and the requirements of parenting.

Lanier acknowledged that (1) ADHD can be managed with medication; (2) significant changes in personality issues can be achieved through long-term treatment; and (3) she had not conducted a psychological evaluation of respondent since 2005.

Wayne Spicer, respondent's caseworker from December 2004 through July 2006, implemented three six-month client-service plans during that time. Each service plan required respondent to demonstrate (1) adequate parenting skills at weekly visits and (2) that he could provide for his children's safety and well-being. To that end, respondent was required to satisfy the following goals: (1) provide supervision by using trustworthy alternative caregivers; (2) provide supervision and child care; and (3) complete a psychological evaluation to determine if any underlying mental-health issues needed to be addressed.

Spicer evaluated respondent's overall progress in completing his first client-service plan (October 2004 through February 2005) as satisfactory. In particular, Spicer noted that despite respondent's failure to obtain a psychological evaluation, which Spicer attributed to confusion, respondent was making progress toward the return of his children to his custody.

Spicer then evaluated respondent's overall progress in completing his second client-service plan (March 2005 through August 2005) as unsatisfactory. Spicer documented that respondent did not comply with his psychological-evaluation appointment and was not demonstrating effective parenting skills. Spicer testified that (1) respondent did not consistently visit his children on a weekly basis and (2) as of April 2005, Spicer could not comply with his mandate to make monthly contact with respondent at his home because respondent's residence did not have any running water or natural gas. Spicer noted that respondent's housing deficien-

cies existed before he assumed control of respondent's case in December 2004. Spicer's report documented that respondent did not have steady employment, he had since been evicted from his home, and he was living with his paramour in her mother's home.

Spicer also rated respondent's overall progress on completing his third client-service plan (August 2005 through February 2006) as unsatisfactory. Spicer explained that respondent's living and working conditions remained unchanged, documenting that (1) since December 2005, respondent missed most of his weekly visits with his children; (2) respondent did not appear interested in visiting with his children; and (3) respondent made unrealistic promises to his children, such as (a) telling them he was moving into a big house and (b) that they would be coming home soon. Spicer recounted that from January 2006 until he transferred respondent's case in July 2006, he was unable to make monthly contact with respondent, noting that in June 2006 and July 2006, respondent would not permit him to enter his home for a monthly visit.

Spicer acknowledged that he was aware that respondent was having financial difficulty but stated that DCFS could not provide him financial assistance for his housing needs because respondent had to be employed--that is, show that he had a means to support himself--to qualify for such a grant.

Tory Daniels, who became respondent's caseworker in August 2006, implemented respondent's fourth client-service plan, which required respondent to complete the following goals: (1) provide supervision and child care; (2) demonstrate parenting skills; (3) complete a domestic-violence assessment; and (4) provide suitable housing, to include safe electrical fixtures, heating, and plumbing, for a minimum of six months.

Daniels evaluated respondent's overall progress in completing that plan (March 2006 through August 2006) as unsatisfactory. Daniels noted that respondent (1) failed to complete a domestic-violence assessment, (2) continued to refuse access to his home, and (3) did not visit with his children during the evaluation period. (At the State's request the trial court admitted into evidence the four aforementioned client-service plans.)

Daniels testified further that from September 2006 through January 2007, respondent began visiting his children weekly after DCFS provided him transportation. Daniels explained that DCFS stopped providing transportation in January 2007 because it was inconsistent with the trial court's June 2006 permanency order that changed the goal to substitute care pending termination of respondent's parental rights. After DCFS terminated the transportation, respondent did not visit his children until July 2007. Daniels also conveyed the details of the following monthly home visits he had with respondent: (1) a December 2006 visit at which respondent agreed to attend a meeting later that month regarding D.H.'s placement, but when Daniels arrived to pick him up, no one answered the door; (2) a February 2007 visit at which respondent informed Daniels that he would no longer participate in client-service plans or administrative case reviews; (3) a March 2007 visit at which respondent asked Daniels upon entry to his home if "any of the kids were dead yet?"; and (4) a June 2007 visit at which respondent informed Daniels that he planned to buy a car and resume his now monthly visits with his children but still refused to complete a domestic-violence assessment.

Betsy Henson supervised respondent's visitation with his children sporadically from October 2004 through November 2006 on what she approximated was a weekly basis. With regard to her tenure, Henson testified as follows: (1) respondent often cancelled his

visitation appointments, and during those occasions when he did visit with his children, he usually arrived late and with an angry demeanor; (2) respondent ended a visitation early after his anger caused him to repeatedly tell his children that they "were not coming home"; (3) respondent's interaction with J.H. and D.H. improved as time progressed, but C.H. and Z.H. usually did not interact with respondent during visits; (4) respondent's attempts at redirecting and disciplining his children "didn't always work well," specifically noting that Z.H. remained rebellious; (5) at an October 4, 2004, visit, respondent brought a cake to celebrate D.H.'s birthday but did not bring him a present; (6) respondent did not visit his children from (a) October 11, 2004, through December 13, 2004, and (b) February 2006 through August 2006; (7) at a December 23, 2004, visit, respondent failed to bring Christmas gifts for his children; (8) at a November 11, 2006, visit conducted at a fast-food restaurant, respondent claimed that he did not have money to provide snacks for his children, but he later purchased coffee for himself and his paramour; and (9) respondent seldom brought snacks to the visitations, as required.

Henson acknowledged that during the periods of (1) October 4, 2004, through December 31, 2004; (2) April 21, 2005, through July 31, 2005; and (3) December 1, 2005, through November 30, 2006--which encompassed a total of approximately 78 weeks--she supervised 19 weekly visitations that respondent had with his children. Henson testified generally that during those visits, respondent (1) showed affection to his children, (2) attempted to establish a parent-child relationship through positive interaction, (3) applied the appropriate amount of discipline on certain occasions, (4) provided encouraging guidance to his children, and (5) brought or bought snacks for his children on 8 occasions.

Lacey Warnhoff supervised respondent's weekly visitation with his children

sporadically from January through November 2005. Warnhoff described that respondent's visits with his children were fine initially, but they declined in quality over time. Warnhoff testified to six visitation dates during 2005 (January 27; June 22; August 3; and September 1, 15, and 29), generally describing how on the January 27, respondent interacted appropriately with his children, despite being an hour late for that visit. Warnhoff documented how respondent shortened his visitation period by either being late or leaving early for his June and August visits, respectively. Warnhoff also noted that respondent's demeanor changed during that period, describing how respondent (1) became upset over "silly things" and (2) started to withdraw from his children. During the September 1 visit, respondent became upset with Warnhoff after she asked the children to calm down. Respondent continued to direct comments to Warnhoff that gave her the impression respondent was trying to upset her. Warnhoff then noted that during his three September visits, respondent did not interact with his children but instead merely watched their activities. Warnhoff stated that respondent did not provide a reason why he did not visit his children during October 2005.

Warnhoff acknowledged that from (1) January 1, 2005, through April 14, 2005 (excluding the second week of February 2005), and (2) August 1, 2005 through November 30, 2005--a total period of approximately 30 weeks--she supervised 20 weekly visitations that respondent had with his children. On cross-examination, Henson testified consistent with her direct testimony, adding generally that respondent (1) voluntarily undertook to appropriately handle C.H.'s propensity to defecate during visitations, (2) showed affection to his children, (3) applied the appropriate amount of discipline on certain occasions, (4) provided encouraging guidance to his children, and (5) brought snacks for his children on 14 occasions.

Terry Hicks, a self-employed real estate manager, testified that for the past two years, respondent performed general maintenance work for him as a contracted employee. Hicks estimated that respondent worked between 30 to 35 hours per week, explaining that as part of respondent's compensation, Hicks provided him housing. Hicks characterized respondent's work as good and testified that he has never had a problem with him.

2. Respondent's Evidence

Teal Cunningham supervised respondent's visitation with his children on six different occasions (February 10, 2005; December 9, 16, 22, and 29, 2006; and January 6, 2007). Cunningham testified generally that the respective visits went well, explaining that respondent (1) showed affection to his children, (2) attempted to establish a parent-child relationship through positive interaction, (3) applied the appropriate amount of discipline, (4) provided encouraging guidance to his children, and (5) brought or bought snacks for his children on one occasion but did not bring Christmas presents due to financial difficulties. Cunningham acknowledged that during the visits that respondent did not bring a snack for his children, the children bought their own snacks with money their respective foster parents provided them.

Respondent testified about his initial difficulties with employment, transportation, and housing, noting that he tried to remain in the geographical area so that he could reacquire custody of his children. Respondent explained that he currently lives in a two-bedroom home on an acre parcel in Springfield with his paramour and continues to manage rental properties for Hicks. Respondent noted that if he received custody of his children he would be able to obtain appropriate housing based on Hicks' commitment to provide assistance in acquiring a four-bedroom home.

With regard to his client-service-plan goals, respondent testified that DCFS did not (1) accommodate his request to conduct visits in a library near his home or (2) provide him transportation to and from the visit locations until September 2006. Respondent summarized DCFS' assistance by stating that, "[DCFS] offered me absolutely no aid and no assistance at any point along the way, other than that time they gave me rides. That's it." Respondent stated further that Spicer delayed scheduling his psychological evaluation for two years despite his constant inquiry to schedule it sooner.

Respondent characterized his monthly visitation during 2009 as "going well," noting that he provided meals at every visit, ensured presents were delivered in a timely manner, and that he had the freedom to conduct the visits within a certain geographical area. Respondent concluded his direct testimony by stating that he wanted his children returned to his custody, and that for the past two years, DCFS has not assisted him but instead, has "created more hurdles and difficulties and made it harder than it ha[d] to be."

Respondent acknowledged that (1) domestic-violence incidents had occurred when he was living with Heather and (2) between January 2006 and September 2006, he was employed but did not attend visits with his children during that time because of transportation issues.

Thereafter, the trial court instructed the parties to file their written closing arguments.

3. The Trial Court's Determination

(We note that prior to entering a fitness determination in this case, the trial judge, Diane L. Brunton, was placed on administrative leave and subsequently retired. The case was

later transferred to Judge Patrick J. Londrigan. At a June 2010 hearing, the parties stipulated that Judge Londrigan could decide the issue of respondent's fitness by reviewing the report of proceedings at his fitness hearing before Judge Brunton.)

At a July 2010 hearing at which the trial court announced its fitness findings, the following exchange occurred:

"[THE COURT: The State] will prepare an order showing that the parental rights were terminated [on] today's date. You will then discuss the matter with counsel [and] get a date for the next hearing. ***

[HEATHER'S COUNSEL]: Your Honor, just to clarify your finding, both parents [are] unfit today and [we are] going to proceed to [a] best[-]interest hearing?

THE COURT: Correct. [The State] is going to prepare that order and then you are going to *** get a hearing [as soon as possible] for the best interest of the children.

* * *

[RESPONDENT'S COUNSEL]: I think before you terminate the rights, you are supposed to have a best[-]interest hearing. A[t] this point the rights have not been terminated, have they?

THE COURT: The rights have been terminated. There is a stay in effect, I believe. There will be a best[-]interest hearing. Your notice of appeal, you can check with [Heather's counsel],

who just went through this[,] is filed after the best[-]interest hearing, right[?]

[HEATHER'S COUNSEL]: Yes, Your Honor."

In August 2010, the trial court entered a written order, finding that based on the evidence presented, respondent was unfit in that he failed to (1) maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility as to his children's welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2008)); (2) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions that were the basis for the removal of his children within nine months after the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(i) (West 2008)); (3) make reasonable progress toward the return of his children within nine months after the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West 2004)); and (4) make reasonable progress toward the return of his children during any nine-month period after the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(iii) (West 2004)).

C. The Evidence Presented at Respondent's Best-Interest Hearing

1. *The State's Evidence*

At respondent's October 2010 best-interest hearing, Daniels noted that (1) C.H. and D.H., who were placed in the same foster home in August 2010 and December 2006, respectively, and (2) J.H., who was placed in another foster home in August 2004, were thriving in their respective placements. Daniels had "no concerns" about the foster-care placement of C.H., D.H., and J.H., noting that their respective foster parents were providing them permanency. Daniels also stated that the respective foster parents (1) were willing to continue to foster the children's sibling relationship as they had in the past and (2) expressed their interest in adopting

C.H., J.H., and D.H.

Daniels opined that it would be in the best interest of C.H., J.H., and D.H. to terminate respondent's parental rights. Daniels based his opinion on his observation that the children had been in DCFS' care for six years and had since established new routines for themselves with their foster families.

Daniels noted that Z.H.--who was then 15 years old--was currently residing in a specialized-residential center in Mundelein, Illinois, and had last visited with respondent in September 2008. In February 2010, Z.H. informed Daniels that he refused to visit with respondent, because respondent was an alcoholic and "a mean person" who was abusive to Heather and to his siblings when they lived together. Respondent informed Daniels that he had "given up hope" on having a relationship with Z.H., but believed that sometime in the future, Z.H. would seek out a relationship with him. Daniels stated that it would be in Z.H.'s best interest to terminate respondent's parental rights because of Z.H.'s refusal to have any contact with respondent.

Daniels described a May 2010 meeting he had with respondent at his home. During that visit, respondent informed Daniels that complying with his client-service-plan goals was pointless and further characterized Lanier as "crazy" based on her psychological recommendations. Respondent continued that he would not be "bullied" and that "he would rather lose his boys than to be bullied [into] doing things he didn't want to do[.]"

2. Respondent's Evidence

Respondent's testimony concerned his belief that his current home environment and employment situation provided him the ability to care for his children. Respondent

maintained that, given his desire to regain custody of his children, reuniting them under his care would be in their best interest. Respondent acknowledged that his paramour--whom he was currently living with--recently had her parental rights terminated as to her children.

Thereafter, the trial court instructed the parties to file their written closing argument.

3. The Trial Court's Determination

After considering the evidence and counsel's written arguments, the trial court entered a December 2010 order, terminating respondent's parental rights as to C.H., Z.H., J.H., and D.H. (The court's order also terminated Heather's parental rights as to C.H., J.H. and D.H.; however, she is not a party to this appeal.)

This appeal followed.

II. TERMINATION OF RESPONDENT'S PARENTAL RIGHTS

Respondent appeals, arguing that (1) the trial court erred by terminating his parental rights prior to conducting a best-interest hearing and (2) the court's (a) fitness and (b) best-interest findings were against the manifest weight of the evidence. We address respondent's contentions in turn.

A. The Timing of the Trial Court's Best-Interest Determination

Respondent argues that the trial court erred by terminating his parental rights prior to conducting a best-interest hearing. We disagree.

In *In re D.F.*, 201 Ill. 2d 476, 494-95, 777 N.E.2d 930, 940 (2002), the supreme court outlined the following two-step process a trial court must employ when addressing petitions

to terminate parental rights under the Adoption Act:

"The involuntary termination of parental rights upon the petition of the State is governed by the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 [citation], and the Adoption Act [citation]. A two-step process is mandated. First, the State must show, by clear and convincing evidence, that the parent is 'unfit,' as that term is defined in section 1(D) of the Adoption Act [citation]. *** If the court makes such a finding, it will then consider whether it is in the best interest[] of the child that parental rights be terminated."

In this case, the record shows that, to his credit, Heather's counsel clarified the trial court's finding at the conclusion of respondent's fitness hearing, confirming that (1) the court adjudicated respondent unfit instead of terminating his parental rights and (2) a best-interest hearing would follow. Thus, we reject respondent's argument that the trial court terminated his parental rights prior to conducting a best-interest hearing.

However, even if this court were to accept respondent's argument, such an error would have been remedied by reversing the trial court's parental termination finding and remanding with directions that it conduct a separate best-interest hearing. See *In re C.L.T.*, 302 Ill. App. 3d 770, 779-80, 706 N.E.2d 123, 130 (1999) (remanding with directions to conduct a separate best-interest hearing because the trial court found the respondent unfit and terminated her parental rights at the same hearing).

Here, the trial court conducted a separate best-interest hearing at which it considered the parties' respective evidence and written arguments and found that terminating

respondent's parental rights was in the best interest of the children. Having done so, respondent's argument--even if credible, which it is not--would have been rendered moot. See *Fisch v. Loews Cineplex Theatres, Inc.*, 365 Ill. App. 3d 537, 539, 850 N.E.2d 815, 818 (2005) (an issue on appeal is rendered moot "if events have occurred that make it impossible to grant the complaining party effectual relief").

B. The Trial Court's Fitness Finding

Respondent next argues that the trial court's fitness finding was against the manifest weight of the evidence. We disagree.

1. *The Applicable Statute, Reasonable Progress, and the Standard of Review*

Section 1(D)(m)(iii) of the Adoption Act provides, in pertinent part, as follows:

"The grounds of unfitness are any *** of the following:

* * *

(m) Failure by a parent *** (iii) to make reasonable progress toward the return of the child to the parent during any [nine]-month period after the end of the initial [nine]-month period following the adjudication of neglected or abused minor *** or dependent minor[.]" 750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(iii) (West 2008).

In *In re C.N.*, 196 Ill. 2d 181, 216-17, 752 N.E.2d 1030, 1050 (2001), the supreme court discussed the following benchmark for measuring "reasonable progress" under section

1(D)(m) of the Adoption Act:

"[T]he benchmark for measuring a parent's 'progress toward the return of the child' under section 1(D)(m) of the Adoption Act encompasses the parent's compliance with the service plans and the court's directives, in light of the condition which gave rise to the removal of the child, and in light of other conditions which later become known and which would prevent the court from returning custody of the child to the parent."

In *In re L.L.S.*, 218 Ill. App. 3d 444, 461, 577 N.E.2d 1375, 1387 (1991), this court discussed reasonable progress under section 1(D)(m) of the Adoption Act and held as follows:

" 'Reasonable progress' *** exists when the [trial] court *** can conclude that *** the court, in the *near future*, will be able to order the child returned to parental custody. The court will be able to order the child returned to parental custody in the near future because, at that point, the parent *will have fully complied* with the directives previously given to the parent." (Emphases in original.)

The supreme court's discussion in *C.N.* regarding the benchmark for measuring a respondent parent's progress did not alter or call into question this court's holding in *L.L.S.* For cases citing the *L.L.S.* holding approvingly, see *In re Daphnie E.*, 368 Ill. App. 3d 1052, 1067, 859 N.E.2d 123, 137 (2006); *In re Jordan V.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d 1057, 1068, 808 N.E.2d 596, 605 (2004); *In re B.W.*, 309 Ill. App. 3d 493, 499, 721 N.E.2d 1202, 1207 (1999); and *In re K.P.*, 305 Ill. App. 3d

175, 180, 711 N.E.2d 478, 482 (1999).

"The State must prove parental unfitness by clear and convincing evidence, and the trial court's findings must be given great deference because of its superior opportunity to observe the witnesses and evaluate their credibility." *Jordan V.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d at 1067, 808 N.E.2d at 604. A reviewing court will not reverse a trial court's fitness finding unless it was contrary to the manifest weight of the evidence, meaning that the opposite conclusion is clearly evident from a review of the record. *Id.*

*2. Respondent's Claim That the Trial Court's Fitness Finding
Was Against the Manifest Weight of the Evidence*

Respondent contends that he made reasonable progress because he (1) completed many of his client-service-plan goals, (2) visited with his children when transportation was available, and (3) sought assistance from DCFS. However, the record belies respondent's contentions.

In this case, the evidence showed that from July 4, 2005, through April 4, 2006--the nine months that immediately followed the initial nine-month period identified by the State--respondent received an overall unsatisfactory rating on two separate client-service plans. During that 39-week period, respondent failed to (1) complete a psychological evaluation and comply with treatment recommendations, (2) demonstrate effective parenting skills, (3) allow DCFS caseworkers access to his home to evaluate his living conditions, and (4) consistently visit with his children. Indeed, with regard to respondent's weekly visitation requirement, the record shows that during that 39-week period, respondent (1) visited with his children 15 times and brought snacks for his children on 8 of those visits.

More important, the evidence did not show that respondent had fully complied with his specific client-service-plan goals during the relevant nine-month periods such that C.H., Z.H., J.H., or D.H. could have been placed in respondent's care in the *near future*. Accordingly, reviewing the evidence pursuant to the applicable standard of review, we conclude that the court's unfitness finding was not against the manifest weight of the evidence.

Because we have concluded that the trial court's finding that respondent failed to make reasonable progress toward the return of his children during any nine-month period after the end of the initial nine-month period following the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(iii) (West 2008)) was not contrary to the manifest weight of the evidence, we need not consider the court's other findings as to parental unfitness. See *In re Katrina R.*, 364 Ill. App. 3d 834, 842, 847 N.E.2d 586, 593 (2006) (on review, if sufficient evidence is shown to satisfy any one statutory ground, we need not consider other findings of parental unfitness).

C. The Trial Court's Best-Interest Finding

Respondent next argues that the trial court's best-interest findings were against the manifest weight of the evidence. We disagree.

1. *The Standard of Review*

At the best-interest stage of parental termination proceedings, the State bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that termination of parental rights is in the child's best interest. *In re Jay H.*, 395 Ill. App. 3d 1063, 1071, 918 N.E.2d 284, 290 (2009). Consequently, at the best-interest stage of termination proceedings, " 'the parent's interest in maintaining the parent-child relationship must yield to the child's interest in a stable, loving home life.' [Citation.]" *In re T.A.*, 359 Ill. App. 3d 953, 959, 835 N.E.2d 908, 912 (2005).

"We will not reverse the trial court's best-interest determination unless it was against the manifest weight of the evidence." *Jay H.*, 395 Ill. App. 3d at 1071, 918 N.E.2d at 291. A best-interest determination is against the manifest weight of the evidence only if the facts clearly demonstrate that the court should have reached the opposite result. *Jay H.*, 395 Ill. App. 3d at 1071, 918 N.E.2d at 291.

2. Respondent's Claim That the Trial Court's Best-Interest Finding Was Against the Manifest Weight of the Evidence

In support of his claim that the trial court's best-interest findings were against the manifest weight of the evidence, respondent essentially calls into question (1) DCFS' care of the children, (2) the wisdom of DCFS' foster-care placements and (3) the ability of C.H.'s foster parent to care for him as a single person. Respondent asserts further that the trial court had "no real opportunity to observe and evaluate him" exercising his parental rights. In this regard, respondent renews his claim that DCFS had "done virtually nothing to permit him increased involvement with his children." However, as evidenced by the focus of his contentions, respondent misapprehends that the purpose of a best-interest hearing does not concern DCFS or respondent but, instead, the children's interest in a stable, loving home life.

To that end, the evidence presented at respondent's October 2010 best-interest hearing showed that C.H. and D.H., who were placed in the same foster home, and J.H., who was placed in another foster home, were thriving in their respective placements. The evidence also showed that along with the permanency those respective foster-home placements were providing them personally, their separation did not affect their sibling relationship, which was maintained through the efforts of their foster parents who had expressed their respective interest in adopting

C.H., J.H., and D.H. With regard to Z.H., the evidence showed that Z.H. (1) did not have contact with respondent for over two years and (2) had expressed a palpable animosity toward respondent based on Z.H.'s claims of abuse caused by respondent.

For his part, respondent admitted that he (1) had "given up hope" on having a relationship with Z.H., (2) would rather lose the children than comply with his client-service-plan goals, and (3) lived in a household with a paramour who had recently had her parental rights terminated.

Accordingly, we conclude that the trial court's best-interest finding was not against the manifest weight of the evidence.

III. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated, we affirm the trial court's judgment.

Affirmed.