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IN THE FAMILY COURT AT MANUKAU

I TE KŌTI WHĀNAU KI MANUKAU

FAM-2019-092-001241 [2023] NZFC 2435

IN THE MATTER OFTHE CARE OF CHILDREN ACT 2004BETWEEN[OFA SIKA]
ApplicantAND[ABBY FOSTER]
First RespondentAND[SALOTE SIKA]
Second Respondent

Hearing:	9 November 2022
Appearances:	A Tagi and A Motuliki for the Applicant J Haw for the First Respondent S Durlabh for the Second Respondent
Judgment:	24 March 2023

RESERVED DECISION OF JUDGE P S GINNEN

[1] [Siola'a Emma Sika] is the cherished daughter of [Abby Foster] and [Salote Fifita].¹ [Siola'a] lives with her mother and stepfather, [Mark Shearer] and her baby

¹ Court records document that his name is [Salote Fifita]. The parties and lawyers, including his lawyer, referred to him as both [Salote Sita] and [Salote Fifita]. He confirmed that [Fifita] is the

half-sister. Mr [Fifita] is in prison serving a life sentence for murder. His partner is [Vivian Mafi]. [Siola'a] has two younger half siblings [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina], who are the children of Mr [Sika] and Ms [Mafi].

[2] [Siola'a] has both Tongan heritage through her father and his family and English heritage through her mother and her family. She has been born and raised in New Zealand.

[3] It is agreed that [Siola'a] should remain in her mother's day-to-day care. There has been a hearing about what contact she should have with her father, and her paternal family members.

[4] The applicant in the proceedings, [Ofa Sika], is [Siola'a]'s paternal grandmother. Mrs [Sika] is Mr [Fifita]'s biological paternal aunt; however, she raised him since he was a year and a half year old and is culturally accepted as his mother.² [Siola'a] has only ever known her as her grandmother. [Siola'a] has a paternal aunt, her namesake [Emma Sika],³ who attended the hearing to support her mother but did not participate. [Emma Sika] has not had direct contact with her niece for a long time. That does not honour her cultural position as [Siola'a]'s paternal aunt. However, she has been willing to take a back seat for now and support her mother's application.

[5] Mr [Fifita]'s partner Ms [Mafi] attended the hearing. Although she had not filed an affidavit in the proceedings, I directed by consent that she could give oral evidence. It was also agreed that she should be joined as a party to the proceedings.

[6] Arrangements were made for Mr [Fifita] to attend the hearing by AVL.⁴ The prison restrictions meant he could only attend during the afternoons of the hearings. The other key witness was the court appointed psychologist Leanne Dunne, who was overseas at the time of the hearing. She also gave evidence by AVL.

name he uses.

² When deciding that Ms [Sika] is an eligible person to apply under the Care of Children Act, Judge Adams held that in [Siola'a]'s case recognition of the cultural relationship between her father and [Ofa Sika] is realistic and respectful to [Siola'a].

³ [Siola'a]'s middle name is [Emma].

⁴ Audio Visual Link.

[7] There were previous proceedings between Ms [Foster] and Mr [Fifita] in 2017. The proceedings concluded in early 2018 with a temporary protection order in Ms [Foster]'s favour being discharged by consent in favour of undertakings, and a parenting order that Ms [Foster] and Mr [Fifita] share care of [Siola'a] on a week about basis.

[8] In [month deleted] 2018 Mr [Fifita] was charged with murder of a man and attempted murder of his wife. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum parole period of 17 years and 6 months. He is at Auckland Prison at Paremoremo. Media reports at the time suggest that Mr [Fifita] was a patched member of the [gang deleted]; that the murder was a drug deal gone wrong; and had been ordered by the [gang] in Australia. Mr [Fifita]'s cousins were found guilty of their part in the attack. Mr [Fifita] confirmed in evidence that he remains a member of the [gang] in prison.

[9] Ms [Foster] did not know of Mr [Fifita]'s arrest and remand in custody for about 6 weeks. The paternal family continued to collect [Siola'a] in terms of the order. Ms [Mafi] eventually told Ms [Foster] that he had been arrested. Initially Ms [Foster] agreed to Ms [Mafi] having contact with [Siola'a] every second weekend, until July 2019 when she discovered that Mr [Sika]'s offending was gang related. She was concerned about [Siola'a]'s safety and her own safety and stopped contact.

[10] Ms [Foster] has felt that the paternal family were dishonest with her and have betrayed her trust.⁵ Having said that Ms [Mafi] is certain that she told Ms [Foster] about the [gang] connection at the same time as advising her of his arrest. The only finding I make about that dispute of evidence is that there has been a falling out between Ms [Foster] and Ms [Mafi], when previously they had gotten along quite well.

[11] The parties negotiated interim arrangements, whereby [Siola'a] lives in her mother's full-time day to day care; and has supervised monthly visits with her grandmother Mrs [Sika] at a professionally supervised contact centre. The funding

⁵ That compounded with historic issues that caused a rift in the relationship between [Siola'a]'s maternal and paternal families, including in mid-2017 when members of the paternal family attempted to uplift [Siola'a] from day-care; and another time from Ms [Foster]'s father's house; and members of the family had made reports of concern about Ms [Foster] to Oranga Tamariki.

for that contact ran out shortly before the hearing. The contact does not include Ms [Mafi] or [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina].

[12] Mrs [Sika] applied for a parenting order seeking contact with [Siola'a] every second weekend from Friday to Monday (from school to school). Ms [Foster] opposed that.

[13] Mr [Fifita] sought contact with [Siola'a] too, by telephone and AVL, and then in person visits in prison when covid restrictions allowed. He recognised it was not easy but said he did not want [Siola'a] to forget him, and he wanted her to know that her father loves and cares about her. Ms [Foster] is worried about [Siola'a] going into the prison however said she would facilitate visits, but only if [Siola'a] wanted to see her father.

[14] Leanne Dunne completed a s 133 social worker's report in the 2017 proceedings. She produced a second report for the current proceedings and gave oral evidence and was cross-examined on the first day of this hearing. Mr [Fifita] was also cross-examined on the first day.

[15] After hearing that evidence, on the second day of hearing the parties and their lawyers reached an agreement about most aspects of [Siola'a]'s future contact with her paternal family. In doing so they exhibited their careful consideration of Ms Dunne's evidence; and their commitment to putting [Siola'a]'s welfare and best interests ahead of their own concerns and needs.

[16] By consent, on the second day of hearing I made the following orders and directions:⁶

(a) Ms [Mafi] is joined as a party to the proceeding as a respondent under rule 133(1)(b) of the Family Court Rules 2002, as a person whose presence before the court is necessary to enable the court to effectively

⁶ The orders and directions were in terms of a consent memorandum of counsel dated 9 November 2022, recording agreements reached and seeking judicial determination on remaining issues.

and completely adjudicate on and settle all questions involved in the proceedings.

- (b) A referral for s 46G communication counselling for Ms [Mafi] and Ms [Foster].
- (c) A final parenting order granting day-to-day care of [Siola'a] to Ms [Foster].
- (d) A final parenting order granting contact in 3 stages (detailed below).
- [17] The order is subject to the following conditions:
 - (a) [Siola'a] will not be taken to Mrs [Sika]'s home at any time during the contact visits, unless otherwise agreed by Ms [Foster].
 - (b) Any gifts from the paternal family shall not exceed \$50k unless otherwise agreed beforehand by Ms [Foster].
 - (c) For contact during stages 1 and 2, contact will only include Ms [Sika], Ms [Mafi], [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina].

[18] [Siola'a]'s contact with her paternal family will gradually progress over three stages:

Stage 1

[19] In stage one [Siola'a] will have contact for three hours with Mrs [Sika] and Ms [Mafi] on the first Sunday of the month (except November) for three months, on days and times specified in the consent memorandum. The venue will be decided by email between Ms [Foster] and Ms [Mafi]. Mr [Shearer] will remain at contact for the first hour of the first and second visits. During this stage, Mr [Fifita] may write letters to [Siola'a], and she will be encouraged to respond.

Stage 2

[20] After three months, Mrs [Sika] and Ms [Mafi] will have four hours contact with [Siola'a] every month, on the first Sunday of the month, for three months on dates and times set out in the consent memorandum. The contact will be at a public, child friendly venue to be decided via emails between Ms [Mafi] and Ms [Foster]. During this stage, Mr [Fifita] may make phone calls or video calls to [Siola'a] during the contact visit.

Stage 3

[21] After a further three months, in May 2023 Mrs [Sika] and Ms [Mafi] will have contact with [Siola'a] for six hours from 10am – 4pm every month on the first Sunday of the month at Ms [Mafi]'s home.

[22] Thereafter, contact can occur at any other time by agreement. [Siola'a] is able to attend special occasions from 2023 with the immediate paternal family, and consent to attend those occasions will not be unreasonably withheld.

[23] The arrangements are subject to the following conditions:

- (a) [Siola'a] will not be taken to Mrs [Sika]'s home at any time during contact visits, unless otherwise agreed by Ms [Foster].
- (b) Any gifts from the paternal family shall not exceed \$50, unless otherwise agreed beforehand by Ms [Foster].⁷
- (c) For contact during stages 1 and 2, contact will only include Mrs [Sika], Ms [Mafi], [Ilisapesi], and [Carolina].

[24] After the agreed orders I heard evidence and cross examination of Ms [Mafi], Ms [Foster], and Mr [Shearer]. In that process it was apparent that there was a willingness to repair ruptured relationships for the sake of [Siola'a], especially between Ms [Mafi] and Ms [Foster]. I was pleased to read in Ms Curac, lawyer for

⁷ This addressed Ms [Foster]' concern that Mrs [Sika] and other paternal family members were buying [Siola'a] excessively expensive gifts.

child's submissions that after the hearing there was a meeting between Ms [Foster], Mr [Shearer], Ms [Mafi], and [Siola'a] at Ms Curac's offices, where they all explained the agreed stages 1 and 2 contact regime to her. [Siola'a] was very happy with the agreements reached. Ms Curac told her that a judge would decide if she should go to see her father in person. After the meeting Ms Curac took the girls to play and left Ms [Foster], Mr [Shearer], and Ms [Mafi] to talk, and they appeared to have productive discussion. Mr [Shearer] was later called away on baby duties and the two women continued their discussions. Ms Curac observed that it appeared that the repair to their ruptured relationship is well underway.

[25] This is an excellent development for [Siola'a]. She has a loving relationship with her mother, her stepfather Mr [Shearer], and her stepmother Ms [Mafi]. Her ability to maintain and strengthen her relationship with her paternal family is greatly enhanced by cooperation between these three key adults in her life.

- [26] I must decide:
 - (a) Should [Siola'a] begin in person visits with her father together with Ms[Mafi] and her children in prison?
 - (b) What sort of contact should [Siola'a] have with her father in stage 3 and beyond?

Should [Siola'a] begin in person visits with her father together with Ms [Mafi] and her children in prison?

[27] Ms [Foster] is understandably worried about [Siola'a] going into the prison environment to visit with her father. She has reservations about [Siola'a]'s relationship with her father at all, given that he is a patched [gang member] serving life imprisonment for murder and attempted murder. Several times she referenced the violence from him that she experienced in their relationship and her feeling she hadn't been listened to in the proceedings leading up to the temporary protection order being discharged and the shared parenting order being made by consent. [Siola'a] was having telephone calls with her father, but Ms [Foster] said they were upsetting for [Siola'a], who began having nightmares about her father in prison. [28] Ms [Mafi] has been regularly visiting Mr [Fifita] in prison together with their children [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina]. Their visits were interrupted for a year when the prison went into lockdown because of the Covid19 pandemic, but they are visiting regularly again. She gave a realistic account of her adjustment to being the partner of a life sentenced prisoner, which she had never expected to be. She did not know that Mr [Fifita] was a patched member of the [gang] until after he was arrested, he kept that part of his life hidden from his family. [Carolina] was three days old when she went to her first visit with her father, [Ilisapesi] was six years old. She described how she prepared the children for their visits and supported them throughout. She exhibited child focus and understanding in the careful arrangements, and the efforts to ensure the children have a relaxed, positive experience of visiting their father. She is a qualified early education teacher, which was evident in her understanding of child development and needs.

[29] She and Mr [Fifita] propose that in stage 3 of the agreed arrangements, that she take [Siola'a] with her and [Carolina] and [Ilisapesi] to visit their father once a month. She has thought about ways she can reassure and comfort [Siola'a] through what will initially be a formidable environment for her. She has previously enjoyed a close and loving relationship with [Siola'a] and hopes to do so again.

[30] Ms Curac met with [Siola'a] in preparation for the hearing. She described her as a kind, gentle, smart young girl, who was happy to talk with her alone at her school and did not want a school staff member to stay with them. Ms Curac was confident that she was able to freely express her views. [Siola'a] was adamant that she did not want to see her father, and adamant that she did not want to speak to him on the phone. She said the last time she did there were weird noises in the background, lots of banging and people talking and it scared her.

[31] I was greatly assisted by Ms Dunne's s 133 psychologist report and her evidence at the hearing. She is a clinical and forensic psychiatrist who is currently involved in ten cases where a parent is in prison.

[32] Ms Dunne spoke about social referencing, where a child reads the parent's signals. For example, when meeting her, if the mother smiles at her, the child learns

that she's a person that is ok for the child to go to and talk to. In this case [Siola'a] is not able to be socially referenced from her mother about contact with her father and some of her paternal family due to her mother's concerns and maternal vulnerability over what has happened. There could be involuntary clues⁸, for example her body language. Ms [Foster] acknowledged that could be so but emphasised that if she did exhibit body language like that it wasn't intentional.

[33] In explanation of Ms [Foster]'s position against contact, Ms Dunne referred to a parent who has "maternal vulnerability" for good reasons who is not able to reassure the child, which creates a situation where the child does not know what to do. Their anxiety doesn't come down and they realise that the parent is not particularly happy about other people, and they begin to drift away from that attachment, particularly over time. They start to contact refuse one party over the other, "opting out". The child who's stuck in the middle realises that this is an untenable position for them, so they must choose one side over the other. They tend to exclude the family connected to the person being excluded.

[34] Ms Dunne identified [Siola'a]'s relationship with her siblings [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina] as being key to her resilience. They have a shared experience of their father being in prison. The research shows the importance of that. As they grow older children can feel a strange sense of isolation that they're the only child at school, for example, who has a parent in prison. Sibling bonds are very important. [Siola'a] is naturally "okay with that and she can cope with that" so the best place to start is to repair sibling contact to build on that resilience.

[35] Ms Dunne acknowledged children's natural fear of prison because they are generally told that prison is a bad place and bad people go to prison. [Siola'a] has said at some point she will go when she is 18, which is an idea that has stuck as a way to please a parent. Ms Dunne said:

"That's a completely different discussion than for example [you] might say "your siblings go, your siblings are fine, you'll go with the stepmum, you'll be fine with her,

⁸ She gave the example of holding a baby and stiffening when someone not trusted comes along. Even at that young age a baby will learn to read theses cues and learn that person is not a safe person (or that is not a safe place to go or a safe thing to do). That is how children learn about safety.

you'll be reassured. There'll be people there that will keep you safe and happy". And actually promote and again socially reference that situations. So if noone's had that discussion with her, she's not really making an informed decision. She's making a decision based on what she has been told and on the fear that as a child she will probably have."

[36] Ms Dunne discussed [Siola'a]'s relationship with her father as a prisoner. She said:

"For her long-term understanding, not only about her relationship with her father who she had a close attachment to, which is critical, but also so that as she's older she can come to understand more about herself, her culture and the fact that her father is in prison. It's going to be easier for her to integrate that into her psychology if she's actually met him. And it is [far too late] at 18 [to] think: "What on earth do I do? I don't even know this person now". It'll be more scary, not less scary for her. The stigma is the other issue and there's a lot of research around the stigma for children when a parent is in prison. And that's why it's important to work with that and to understand that and again to build that sibling resilience".

[37] Mr [Fifita] will not be eligible for parole for another 15 years or so. Ms Dunne saw that as far too long for a child not to have some contact with their father, particularly because there was a good attachment there in the beginning. It would be different if there wasn't, but there was a very good attachment there.

[38] She thought the main gains for [Siola'a] would come from her seeing her siblings being okay with visits; normalising that; and by the parties giving her full permission verbally and non-verbally.

[39] She saw Ms [Mafi]'s role as being the person who can socially reference [Siola'a], the person who can reassure her that this is going to be ok. She can also promote sibling resilience. She noted the previous good relationship between Ms [Mafi] and Ms [Foster]; and that [Siola'a] had an attachment with Ms [Mafi] and was comfortable with her.

[40] Mr [Fifita] also had a role to help [Siola'a] make sense of what he had done. Ms Dunn said he is very clear about the mistakes he has made and what he should have done in hindsight and about how his offending occurred. She said he can actually offer some protection in terms of making the right decisions and making the wrong decisions. She said he did have some insight. [41] [Siola'a] will have to understand this at some point, it can't be avoided. She said:

"Children inevitably come to the conclusion that if this is half of my genetics then that is something that I do need to understand and perhaps she may feel shame from that. That needs to be integrated and worked through, and she's going to understand that and integrate that much better if she hears it from him, in my view".

[42] Ms Dunne suggested monthly visits with her father in prison for a couple of hours in duration, so it doesn't interfere too much with what else she is doing.

[43] In deciding whether [Siola'a] should visit her father in prison, her welfare and best interests in her particular circumstances must be my first and paramount consideration.⁹ Her welfare and best interests override Mr [Fifita]'s wish to see his daughter.

[44] The guiding principles when considering welfare and best interests are set out in s 5 of the Care of Children Act 2004:

5 Principles relating to child's welfare and best interests

The principles relating to a child's welfare and best interests are that—

- (a) a child's safety must be protected and, in particular, a child must be protected from all forms of violence (as defined in [[sections 9(2), 10, and 11 of the Family Violence Act 2018]]) from all persons, including members of the child's family, family group, whānau, hapū, and iwi:
- (b) a child's care, development, and upbringing should be primarily the responsibility of his or her parents and guardians:
- (c) a child's care, development, and upbringing should be facilitated by ongoing consultation and co-operation between his or her parents, guardians, and any other person having a role in his or her care under a parenting or guardianship order:
- (d) a child should have continuity in his or her care, development, and upbringing:
- (e) a child should continue to have a relationship with both of his or her parents, and that a child's relationship with his or her family group, whānau, hapū, or iwi should be preserved and strengthened:

⁹ Section 4 Care of Children Act 2004.

(f) a child's identity (including, without limitation, his or her culture, language, and religious denomination and practice) should be preserved and strengthened.

[45] In *Kacem v Bashir¹⁰* the Court of Appeal made the following observations of the s 5 principles:¹¹

- (a) Consideration must be given to each of the s 5 principles to determine which are relevant.
- (b) Having assessed which principle is relevant, evaluation should then be given as to how it should be taken into account.
- (c) There is no presumption that one principle is greater than any other, however firstly, the consideration of the principle concerning the child's safety is a mandatory one, and secondly some priority is to be given to relationships with both parents.¹²
- (d) The principles set out in s 5 are not exhaustive and all factors relevant to the child's welfare and best interests should be identified and assessed.

[46] [Siola'a]'s safety must be protected.¹³ I am satisfied that the proposed visits to see her father in prison together with Ms [Mafi] with her siblings adequately protects her safety. Ms [Mafi] is protective and has carefully navigated the prison visits for her young children in a way that mitigates the confronting aspects of prison and maximises their enjoyment of time with their father. I am confident that she can and will do the same for [Siola'a].

[47] [Siola'a]'s care, development and upbringing remains the responsibility of her parents.¹⁴ She is in the primary care of her mother and will have regular contact with

¹⁰ Kacem v Bashir [2010] NZCA 96 at [50] to [52].

¹¹ The observations remain relevant after the 2014 amendments to the Act.

¹² The Supreme Court later confirmed that relationships with parents are prioritised over relationships with wider family: *Kacem v Bashir* [2010] NZFLR 884 at [4] to [10].

¹³ Section 5(a).

¹⁴ Section 5(b).

her father, who wishes to remain engaged in her life despite his imprisonment. Although I am required to decide about [Siola'a] visiting her father in prison, her parents and wider family have exemplified consultation and cooperation by agreeing the 3 stage contact progression.¹⁵ There is continuity in the arrangements, in that she will continue to live in the primary care of her mother.¹⁶

[48] [Siola'a]'s continued relationship with her father, and with her family group will be preserved and strengthened if she can have visits to her father in prison together with her siblings and stepmother.¹⁷ She will gain far more from those experiences than she will from just telephone or video calls.

[49] Importantly, her identity will be preserved and strengthened if she can have regular visits with her father.¹⁸ Ms Dunne has noted her identity as the daughter of a parent who is in prison. She will have to make sense of what her father did and how that reflects on her. I am persuaded by Ms Dunne's evidence that she is better able to do that if she has an ongoing relationship with him.

[50] [Siola'a] is also Tongan. Her mother said that if you ask [Siola'a] what nationality she is, she'll pretty much tell you she's 50% Tongan, 50% English and 100% kiwi. An essential element of [Siola'a]'s lifelong wellbeing is for her to be confident in her cultural identity. She can easily access her English identity; she lives with her English mother and English stepfather. English is the most spoken language in New Zealand and many aspects of New Zealand day to day living is modelled on the English way of life.

[51] [Siola'a]'s confidence as a Tongan girl and later as a Tongan woman can only be gained through her relationships with her father and paternal family. Her relationship with her father's sister [Emma] is significant in Tongan culture but has not been maintained or strengthened. She is no longer regularly exposed to Tongan language or cultural practices. She has not connected with her extended family for years, who are also key relationships in the establishment of her identity. She needs

¹⁵ Section 5(c). ¹⁶ Section 5(d)

¹⁶ Section 5(d).

¹⁷ Section 5(e). ¹⁸ Section 5(f)

¹⁸ Section 5(f).

to understand where she fits in the family; cultural values, rules both spoken and unspoken, and rituals connected with all aspects of life.

[52] Both her mother and stepfather insisted that they could provide for her Tongan identity by supporting her to participate in cultural events at school and in the community and attending Tongan language classes with her. These are ways that they can show their approval and support of her claiming her Tongan identity but is not and cannot be a substitute for what [Siola'a] can gain from meaningful relationships with her paternal family.

[53] [Siola'a] is a New Zealand born Tongan English girl. She must be given the opportunity to explore what that means for her, from a base where she has the connections and relationships to understand all aspects of her identity. Her father has an important role in this. His family certainly does. As do her siblings. The principle that her identity should be preserved and strengthened is best served by her having regular visits with her father together with her stepmother and siblings.

[54] [Siola'a] must be given opportunities to express her views, and any views she expresses must be taken into account.¹⁹ Her views are not determinative however, because the paramount consideration must be children's welfare and best interests, which sometimes do not align with their views or their wishes.

[55] It is important for children to understand that while their views are important and will be considered, it is the adults who must decide their care arrangements. Their views are one of the many things to be considered. It is unfair to place the heavy weight of responsibility on children, requiring them to make what are essentially parental decisions that the adults should be making.

[56] I have considered [Siola'a]'s expressed views. [Siola'a] has already been told that I will make the decision about her visiting her father. My decision is that it is in her welfare and best interests for her to regularly visit her father in prison together with her stepmother Ms [Mafi] and her siblings [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina].

¹⁹ Section 6.

What sort of contact should [Siola'a] have with her father in stage 3 and beyond?

[57] I agree with Ms Dunne's suggestion that [Siola'a]'s visits to her father should be monthly to accommodate her busy life. I expect that beyond stage 3 [Siola'a]'s contact with her paternal family will be extended to include her extended family; and that she will be able to attend family events and celebrations.

[58] Accordingly, I order that during [Siola'a]'s monthly visits to Ms [Mafi]'s home in stage 3 of the agreed arrangements, that [Siola'a] may visit her father in prison together with Ms [Mafi] and [Ilisapesi] and [Carolina].

[59] I direct counsel to consider the duration and timing of the monthly visit in stage 3. The current agreement is for a 6 hour visit from 10am to 4pm. It may be that the logistics of travel time and prison visiting hours require an adjustment to the length and timing of the visit. If agreement cannot be reached, I reserve leave for Ms Curac to refer the matter back to me for further directions.

[60] I ask Ms Curac to file agreed draft orders for sealing. Her appointment will be terminated with the thanks of the court after she has informed [Siola'a] of my decision.

Judge P Ginnen Family Court Judge | Kaiwhakawā o te Kōti Whānau Date of authentication | Rā motuhēhēnga: 25/03/2023