NOTICE
This Order was filed under Supreme Court Rule 23 and is not precedent except in the limited circumstances allowed under Rule 23(e)(1).

2026 IL App (4th) 260673-U

NOS. 4-26-0673, 4-26-0674 cons.

FILED
October 30, 2026
Carla Bender
4th District Appellate
Court, IL

IN THE APPELLATE COURT

OF ILLINOIS

FOURTH DISTRICT

In re V.M. and S.M., Minors	)	Appeal from the
	)	Circuit Court of
(The People of the State of Illinois,	)	Sangamon County
Petitioner-Appellee,	)	Nos. 23JA156
v.	)	23JA157
Mehkii J.,	)	
Respondent-Appellant).	)	Honorable
	)	Sierra Senor-Moore,
	)	Judge Presiding.

JUSTICE ZENOFF delivered the judgment of the court.
Justices Grischow and Cavanagh concurred in the judgment.

ORDER

¶ 1 *Held*: The appellate court affirmed the trial court's order finding respondent unfit, as it was not against the manifest weight of the evidence, and lacked jurisdiction over the court's best interests/termination order, as respondent failed to identify that order in her notice of appeal.

¶ 2 Respondent, Mehkii J., appeals from the trial court's judgment terminating her parental rights as to her minor children, V.M. (born in 2021) and S.M. (born in 2022). On appeal, respondent argues that the court erred in finding that she was unfit and that it was in the best interests of the minors to terminate her parental rights. The father of the minors surrendered his parental rights and is not a party to this appeal. For the following reasons, we affirm the court's judgment finding respondent unfit, and we lack jurisdiction to review the court's finding that termination of respondent's parental rights was in the best interests of the minors.

¶ 3 I. BACKGROUND

¶ 4 On August 14, 2023, the State filed a petition for adjudication of wardship as to respondent's two minor children, alleging that (1) their environment was injurious to their welfare in that illicit substances, including cocaine, were accessible to V.M. while in the care of their father, Verlon M., who had substance abuse issues (705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(b) (West 2022)) and (2) the minors were not receiving the proper care and supervision necessary for their well-being in that respondent allowed the father to have unsupervised contact with V.M. (705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(a) (West 2022)). At a shelter care hearing on August 17, 2023, the trial court found that there was probable cause to believe the minors were neglected and there was an urgent and immediate necessity to remove the minors from respondent's and the father's custody. On November 9, 2023, based on the father's stipulation that cocaine was accessible to V.M. while he was in his custody, the court adjudicated the minors neglected. On December 6, 2023, the court entered a dispositional order, finding that respondent and the father were unfit and it was in the best interests of the minors to be made wards of the court and be placed in the custody and guardianship of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). In this order, the court noted that the parents' "progress will be evaluated as a unit due to them being in a relationship" and that respondent "indicates that she is no longer in a relationship with father [and] is now residing with grandmother."

¶ 5 The trial court entered a permanency order on May 8, 2024, stating that all prior orders remained in effect and again reminding respondent that "her service progress will be evaluated as a unit with [the father] if they remain in a relationship." The court further entered permanency orders maintaining the same permanency goal on October 9, 2024, and March 12, 2025. On June 4, 2025, the permanency goal was changed from return home to substitute care

pending court determination of termination of parental rights.

¶ 6 On July 14, 2025, the State filed a petition for termination of respondent's parental rights as to both minor children. The State alleged that respondent was unfit because she (1) failed to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility as to the minors' welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2024)), (2) failed to make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions which were the basis for the minors' removal during the two nine-month periods alleged following the adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(i) (West 2024)), and (3) failed to make reasonable progress during these two nine-month periods (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West 2024)). The two nine-month periods alleged were November 9, 2023, to August 9, 2024, and August 9, 2024, to May 9, 2025.

¶ 7 On October 9, 2025, the father voluntarily surrendered his parental rights. In a permanency order entered that day, the trial court noted that respondent "states she has no further relationship with [the father]," and the court "admonishes her to follow through with that." In an order entered on January 28, 2026, the court noted that respondent "states her relationship with [the father] ended 2 weeks after October hearing."

¶ 8 A. Unfitness Hearing

¶ 9 The trial court held a hearing on the State's petition to terminate respondent's parental rights on May 21, 2026. The following evidence was presented.

¶ 10 Nicholas Johnson testified first. He was the caseworker from the Center for Youth and Family Solutions (CYFS) assigned to respondent's case. He began working on her case in the middle of 2024. He explained that the case opened because the father was "previously reprimanded by a court judge before this case opened up that he was not allowed to have custody or, you know, supervision over the two minors," but DCFS found the children in his custody in a hotel room,

where the father was high and there was a bag of cocaine accessible to V.M.

¶ 11 As part of her service plan, respondent was required to complete parenting classes, domestic violence classes, and mental health services. When Johnson began working on the case in mid-2024, respondent had not successfully completed any of these services. Johnson testified that respondent had been referred to parenting classes and counseling but had been unsuccessfully discharged from counseling. There were also ongoing issues of domestic violence between the parents.

¶ 12 Johnson evaluated the parents' progress in August 2024, after the first nine-month period following the adjudication of neglect had ended. The service plan he prepared was admitted into evidence. He testified that at that point in time, the parents "were struggling *** to really get involved" and were being referred to new services. Respondent was rated unsatisfactory on parenting classes because she had been unsuccessfully discharged from The Parent Place and needed to be rereferred. Parenting classes were important because respondent hit S.M. during visits.

¶ 13 Respondent was rated satisfactory on substance abuse, as the agency never believed substances were an issue for her. She was rated unsatisfactory as to visits, as she was expected to bring items such as money, snacks, food, toys, and water and neglected to do so. Johnson described times when the kids were hungry at visits and he had to go to the store to purchase snacks or toys. The father was reported to be coming to visits under the influence.

¶ 14 Respondent was rated unsatisfactory on maintaining appropriate housing, as she was being evicted from the housing where she and the father lived together. The agency had provided financial assistance, but she and the father were still behind on rent and had a rodent issue. The agency assisted in obtaining new housing for them. Respondent had been working but

lost her job.

¶ 15 She was also rated unsatisfactory in August 2024 regarding domestic violence services, which she had not engaged in in some time. In July 2024, she texted Johnson that she was "fed up" living with the father. Johnson thus came up with a plan for respondent to live with her mom, who had custody of her children. However, respondent did not want to go through with this plan, as she was not comfortable living with her parents and felt that they were going to "hold it over her head."

¶ 16 The father was in treatment for substance abuse in August 2024 but only completed about a quarter to a third of his required drug drops, and the ones he completed came back positive for cocaine. He was rated unsatisfactory across the board. Johnson said respondent and the father "lived together for almost the entirety of the case," even though she had been told that they would be judged as a unit and that the children could not return to her custody "while a risk or safety factor is present." Johnson testified that he was never close to being able to return the children while respondent was living with the father.

¶ 17 Johnson again evaluated the parents' progress in February 2025, in the middle of the second nine-month period. That service plan was admitted into evidence. Johnson testified that respondent was combative and uncooperative. He explained that she and the father were often dissatisfied with him or the agency, which would "result in threats," "aggressive behavior," and an "unpleasant attitude." Johnson was unsure whether respondent had reengaged in counseling at this time after being discharged from her previous counselor. She had completed a parenting class. She was rated unsatisfactory as to housing because she reported being homeless in January 2025. At that time, she and the father were living in a hotel or out of their car. The agency was again able to help them obtain housing using agency funding in early to mid-2025, according to Johnson.

Respondent had completed three domestic violence classes with Sojourn, but they were insufficient to fulfill the service plan requirements. Johnson testified that there continued to be concerns about respondent's relationship with the father, as there had been multiple incidents of domestic violence. There was an incident in November 2024 where the father became aggressive with family members and another incident where he and respondent got in an altercation in the presence of the children and foster parents, which resulted in the involvement of the Sangamon County Sheriff's Office. Additionally, in "early to mid-2025," there was a police report generated after an incident where the father "grabbed [respondent's] phone, he threw her phone to the ground and pushed her to the ground." After visits, the children's clothing had "come back cut *** or marked in some way" three or four times, and the support worker supervisor reported that respondent had done it. The father continued to be unsatisfactory as to each of the requirements of the service plan, though he had been referred to a parenting class.

¶ 18 Johnson prepared a third service plan in June 2025, after the end of the second nine-month period following the adjudication of neglect. It was admitted into evidence. Respondent had again been discharged unsuccessfully from counseling in March 2025, after missing three sessions. Johnson also noted that respondent "did not have high marks on the anger management portion of her progress reports" from the counseling sessions she did attend, and in Johnson's experience, she still "escalates pretty quick when she's upset." Respondent was rated satisfactory as to housing, employment, and visitation.

¶ 19 Respondent was not engaged in domestic violence services as of June 2025. Johnson believed respondent and the father were still in a relationship at that time because the agency had assisted them in obtaining housing and "figured out that they were staying [there] together." When asked, "she said what does it matter if we're together?" Respondent had lost her

job again. The father had not made any progress on his services and had not completed substance abuse treatment.

¶ 20 At the hearing in October 2025 where the father surrendered his parental rights, respondent indicated that she planned to end her relationship with him, though they then left the courthouse in the same car. At a court hearing in January 2026, respondent had to be removed by security for behaving aggressively. That same month, she was evicted from her housing for being behind in rent. Johnson was able to delay the eviction by 14 days. In the process, he reviewed her lease, which listed the father and the children as living there half of the time or more. Because the agency was concerned the children were living there, they performed two home safety inspections in February 2026, one involving the police department, and they found the father's medical records, mail, and clothing. At the time of the termination hearing in May 2026, Johnson did not know where in Urbana, Illinois, respondent was living. The father also resided in an unknown location in Urbana. Johnson was told by his supervisors not to perform any further home inspections due to safety concerns, as the father had threatened him at the October 2025 hearing. In April 2026, Johnson received a report from the receptionist at the agency's office that respondent was dropped off at visitation by a Black male who resembled the father, though they could not confirm if it was indeed him. Johnson testified that over the duration of the case, respondent capped out on the financial assistance available to her from the agency.

¶ 21 Johnson further testified that since October 2025, respondent had made progress on visitation, as Johnson could see that "she's far more invested in the children *** without the presence of [the father]." There was one incident at a visit in April 2026 where S.M. bit respondent and respondent bit her back.

¶ 22 Johnson testified that other than the brief period where respondent considered

leaving the father in July 2024 and potentially living with her parents and her children, there was no other time that he was close to being able to return the children to her due to her continued relationship with the father.

¶ 23 Respondent testified next. She described the incident that caused the case to open and acknowledged that the father was left alone with V.M., used cocaine, and then left that cocaine accessible to the minor. She denied ever being instructed by a court not to leave the children with the father unsupervised. She acknowledged that she received referrals for services from the previous caseworker prior to May 2024, when Johnson took over the case. She agreed that the service plan required her to engage in parenting classes, counseling, domestic violence services, a substance abuse evaluation, and visitation, as well as to cooperate with the agency and maintain stable housing. She testified that she was discharged from parenting classes because she missed two classes.

¶ 24 She testified that she began attending counseling in September or October 2024 but was discharged in February 2025 for missing three sessions. Johnson then rereferred her to a new service through Central Counties Health Centers, but they did not contact her until June or July 2025. She had her first session in September 2025. She discontinued counseling with Central Counties Health Centers in March 2026 because her counselor "hadn't got anything from [Johnson], so she didn't feel like there was anything to continue."

¶ 25 She was evicted from her residence in January 2025 for unpaid rent and was homeless until June 2025, when Johnson obtained new housing for her using agency funding. Between January and June 2025, she was living in a hotel. She then relocated to Urbana in February 2026 for a job.

¶ 26 As to visitation, respondent testified that Johnson brought snacks to some visits

because she did not have the funds to bring them herself. She also acknowledged that Johnson had to buy diapers on one occasion because she did not bring additional clothes or diapers for the children. She admitted that she bit S.M. back when she bit her but stated, "[I]t wasn't like a big bite, it was just a playful bite." She said S.M. screamed because she "is very dramatic." She denied deliberately damaging the children's clothes.

¶ 27 Respondent believed that throughout the case, she consistently communicated with Johnson. She attended monthly child and family team meetings with him and testified that they were "usually more directed at [the father]," though she acknowledged that Johnson "also would stress to [her] about [her and the father] being in a relationship, how it could possibly affect [her]." She acknowledged that she is "very passionate about things that upset [her]" and that the agency was "concerned about that." She denied being "combative" but described herself as "very frustrated and very opinionated" at times. She claimed that other than that, "it was never stated to [her] directly that there was something that [she] needed to improve on."

¶ 28 Regarding domestic violence, she testified that she attended three classes at Sojourn but was then told they would not be accepted. She was referred to another agency, which was not a good fit because "their main focus is perpetrators, not victims." She was willing to participate in an alternate service, but one was not available until August 2025, at which point she started attending a new CYFS class. She stated that she finished that domestic violence class through CYFS in January or February 2026. She acknowledged that there had been a history of domestic violence between her and the father. She intended to separate from him when she texted Johnson in 2024 and even filed for an order of protection, but it was dismissed when she did not appear in court because she "was afraid." She acknowledged that Johnson would have been ready to return the children to her custody had she left the father and moved in with her mother, but she declined

to do that because she and her mother "weren't on speaking terms at all" and "don't have a good relationship, and it stems from [the father]." She initially denied that her relationship with the father was "extremely violent." However, she then acknowledged that in the petition for an order of protection she described several incidents of domestic violence that occurred between them that were extremely violent, such as the father throwing her clothes on the stove and setting them on fire, putting a hole in the wall from trying to break into her room, beating her with a metal pot, pulling her hair, stealing her phone and money, beating her with a cup holder from the children's stroller, beating her in the face with a metal Stanley cup, and threatening to suffocate her in her sleep, set her on fire, kill her and chop up her body so her family could not find her.

¶ 29 She admitted she had been in a relationship and living with the father until October 2025. She acknowledged that she had been told numerous times by the agency that if she remained in a relationship with him, she would not get her children back, and that she nonetheless remained with him throughout the two nine-month periods. She confirmed that at the October 2025 hearing, she intended to end the relationship, but that they left and drove together because the father "had no ride, and [she] dropped him off at his family's house." She ultimately ended the relationship a week after the hearing. He moved out on October 19 or 20 of 2025, but he left some of his personal belongings in the residence in a closet, which she then threw on the floor. She denied that her lease listed the father but acknowledged that it listed the children because she was trying to get home visits at the time that she signed the lease. She denied seeing or speaking with the father since October 20, 2025. She stated that it was not the father she was seen with in April 2026 but another man who resembled him.

¶ 30 She stated that she was "devoted to [her] kids" and does "realize and understand *** now that [she] was in a domestic violence relationship," and now that she was not in that

relationship, “there’s nothing *** [she] want[s] more than [her] children.” She testified, “I learned from the mistakes that I have been doing, and I have changed those, and I would hope that everyone here can see that I have changed those, and that’s really it.”

¶ 31 When announcing its ruling, the trial court noted the “significant domestic violence between [the] parents” and that respondent was repeatedly told that her progress would be judged based upon her and the father’s progress if they were going to continue being in a relationship. The court stated that “it does appear that [the] parents have been together” after October 2025 based on his belongings being found in respondent’s residence in early 2026, thus rendering respondent’s claim that the relationship ended in October 2025 not credible. The court explained that while respondent had completed parenting classes, it “took multiple times for her to be referred.” She was unable to maintain consistent employment and housing and was evicted twice due to unpaid rent, despite repeatedly receiving funding from the agency. She was initially discharged from counseling, and though she claimed to later reengage in counseling, she only had two documented visits in April and May 2025. While she cooperated with the agency by providing paystubs when necessary to obtain housing funds, she was otherwise “routinely combative and aggressive with the caseworker.” The court noted that it was present for one of those instances, when respondent had to be removed from the courtroom because she “got extremely aggressive, extremely loud.” The court believed that respondent was “not taking accountability for her actions.” The court noted that domestic violence was the biggest concern in this case, but respondent never successfully engaged in domestic violence services and remained in an abusive relationship with the father.

¶ 32 At this point in the trial court’s ruling, respondent interrupted the court, saying, “At this point, I don’t care. I’m not going to sit here and listen to you all. I’m not,” and, “I don’t care.

I'm sick of this shit." She then left the courtroom. The court noted that she "continued to yell and cuss, which continues to show that even if she is participating in counseling, she is not making any reasonable progress in her mental health counseling."

¶ 33 The trial court ultimately found that respondent was unfit because she (1) failed to make reasonable efforts in both nine-month periods, (2) failed to make reasonable progress in those same periods, and (3) failed to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility where she "continued to remain in that relationship with father, even acknowledging to the Court in the [order of protection] filings that there was a very violent history."

¶ 34 B. Best Interests Hearing

¶ 35 The trial court held a best interests hearing on June 4, 2026. That day, the court entered an order finding it was in the minors' best interests to terminate respondent's parental rights. For the reasons explained below, this court lacks jurisdiction to review this order and therefore does not need to delve into the details of the evidence presented at this hearing. At the conclusion of the hearing, respondent's attorney indicated that he discussed respondent's appeal rights with her and that she would like the clerk of the court to file a notice of appeal on her behalf.

¶ 36 That notice of appeal was filed on June 5, 2026. It listed the unfitness order entered on May 21, 2026, but did not list the best interests order entered on June 4, 2026.

¶ 37 II. ANALYSIS

¶ 38 Respondent argues on appeal that the trial court erred in finding that (1) she was unfit and (2) it was in the best interests of the minors to terminate her parental rights.

¶ 39 A. Jurisdiction

¶ 40 The State contends that we lack jurisdiction over the trial court's order that it was in the best interests of the children to terminate respondent's parental rights, as respondent only

specified in her notice of appeal the unfitness order entered on May 21, 2026. Respondent did not file a reply brief and thus did not respond to the State's argument concerning jurisdiction.

¶ 41 Under Illinois Supreme Court Rule 303(b)(2) (eff. July 1, 2017), the appellant is required, in the notice of appeal, to "specify the judgment or part thereof or other orders appealed from and the relief sought from the reviewing court." "[N]otices of appeal are to be construed liberally," which means that "the failure to specify a particular order in a notice of appeal does not preclude our review of that order so long as the order that is specified directly relates back to the judgment or order from which review is sought" or the unspecified judgment is a "step in the procedural progression leading to the judgment specified in the notice of appeal." (Emphasis and internal quotation marks omitted.) *In re F.S.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d 55, 68-69 (2004). In *F.S.*, the appellate court found that the adjudication order specified in the notice of appeal "cannot directly relate back to the disposition order because the adjudication order preceded the disposition order," and thus, the unspecified disposition order "cannot be said to be a step in the procedural progression leading to the [adjudication order that was] specified in the notice of appeal." (Internal quotation marks omitted.) *F.S.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d at 69. The court emphasized that because the orders "were the product of separate hearings and contained different and distinct findings, it cannot be inferred from respondent's specified appeal from the adjudication order in her notice of appeal that respondent was also appealing from the disposition order." *F.S.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d at 71.

¶ 42 In this case, when respondent filed her notice of appeal on June 5, 2026, she only identified in her notice the unfitness order entered on May 21, 2026, and did not include the best interests/termination order entered June 4, 2026. The unfitness order cannot directly relate back to an order entered in the future; likewise, the best interests order cannot be construed to be a step in the procedural progression leading to a previous order. See *F.S.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d at 69. Similar to

what happened in *F.S.*, the unfitness and best interests orders were "the product of separate hearings and contained different and distinct findings" (*F.S.*, 347 Ill. App. 3d at 71), and thus, it cannot be inferred from respondent's specified appeal from the unfitness order in her notice of appeal that respondent was also appealing from the subsequent best interests/termination order. The State is therefore correct that because respondent failed to specify that she was appealing the best interests/termination order entered on June 4, 2026, we do not have jurisdiction over it.

¶ 43 B. Unfitness

¶ 44 The involuntary termination of parental rights involves a two-step process pursuant to section 2-29(2) of the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (705 ILCS 405/2-29(2) (West 2024)). The State must first prove by clear and convincing evidence that the respondent is unfit. *In re C.M.*, 305 Ill. App. 3d 154, 163 (1999).

¶ 45 We will not reverse a trial court's finding of unfitness unless it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *In re Dar. H.*, 2023 IL App (4th) 230509, ¶ 54. A court's finding is against the manifest weight of the evidence "when the opposite conclusion is clearly apparent." *Dar. H.*, 2023 IL App (4th) 230509, ¶ 54. Under this standard, "we give deference to the trial court as the finder of fact because it is in the best position to observe the conduct and demeanor of the parties and the witnesses and has a degree of familiarity with the evidence that a reviewing court cannot possibly obtain." *In re D.F.*, 201 Ill. 2d 476, 498-99 (2002). We "must not substitute [our] judgment for that of the trial court regarding the credibility of witnesses, the weight to be given to the evidence, or the inferences to be drawn." *D.F.*, 201 Ill. 2d at 499.

¶ 46 The trial court found that respondent was unfit on all grounds alleged in the petition, including failure to make reasonable efforts or progress during both specified nine-month periods. Importantly, "[a] parent's rights may be terminated if a single alleged ground for unfitness is

supported by clear and convincing evidence." *In re D.C.*, 209 Ill. 2d 287, 296 (2004). Thus, we need only address whether the court correctly found that respondent failed to make reasonable progress toward the return of the children during either of the relevant nine-month periods. We conclude that it did as to both periods.

¶ 47 Reasonable progress, which is assessed under an objective standard, exists when a parent's compliance with the service plan and the trial court's directives "is sufficiently demonstrable and of such a quality that the court, in the *near future*, will be able to order the child returned to parental custody." (Emphasis in original.) *In re L.L.S.*, 218 Ill. App. 3d 444, 461 (1991). A parent fails to make reasonable progress toward the return of the child when the parent fails " 'to substantially fulfill his or her obligations under the service plan and correct the conditions that brought the child into care.' " *In re C.N.*, 196 Ill. 2d 181, 217 (2001) (quoting 750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West Supp. 1999)). Importantly, there is "a significant difference between going through the motions, checking off the boxes, and mechanically doing what is asked of the parent and actually changing the circumstances that brought the children into care." *In re Ta. T.*, 2021 IL App (4th) 200658, ¶ 56. A finding of unfitness is appropriate if "the court will not be able to return the child[ren] home in the near future, despite ample time and opportunity for compliance with the court's directives." *Ta. T.*, 2021 IL App (4th) 200658, ¶ 55. Importantly, our review of the evidence of respondent's unfitness must be confined, under section 1(D)(m) of the Adoption Act, to the nine-month periods alleged by the State in the petition to terminate respondent's parental rights. *In re J.L.*, 236 Ill. 2d 329, 341 (2010).

¶ 48 The first nine-month period in this case ran from November 9, 2023, to August 9, 2024. Johnson testified that during this period, both parents struggled to become involved. Respondent was referred to but discharged from parenting classes. She failed to bring necessary

items and demonstrated problematic discipline during her visits. She failed to maintain appropriate housing and employment, as she was evicted from her residence and lost her job. She had not yet engaged in domestic violence services or counseling. She lied to the trial court at the dispositional hearing in December 2023, as she represented that she had ended her relationship with the father but admitted at the termination hearing that their relationship continued until October 2025. Although she indicated that she wanted to leave the father in July 2024, she ultimately did not go through with ending the relationship, obtaining an order of protection, and moving in with her mother and children, which she was told would allow her to regain custody of her children. Instead, knowing that it was impeding her reunification with her children, she remained in a relationship with the father, who continued to use cocaine, abused her, and failed to engage in any services. Respondent therefore did not make reasonable progress during this first nine-month period.

¶ 49 The second nine-month period ran from August 9, 2024, to May 9, 2025. During this period, respondent was combative toward Johnson. She was again evicted from her residence in January 2025 and was homeless between January and June 2025. Though she began attending counseling in September or October 2024, she was discharged in February 2025 for nonattendance. She did not restart counseling until September 2025, well after the end of this period. She was observed by the visitation specialist to be damaging the children's clothes during visits and continued to fail to bring necessary items. She completed three domestic violence classes through Sojourn, though she was later told they would not be sufficient. She claimed to have started a new domestic violence class in August 2025, but again, this was after the end of this period. There continued to be domestic violence incidents between respondent and the father, which she admitted were extremely violent. She remained in a relationship with the father, despite having been told for almost two years that he was the obstacle to regaining custody of her children.

¶ 50 There was additional evidence presented about events occurring after August 2025. Respondent claimed to have restarted domestic violence services in August 2025 and counseling in September 2025 and ended her relationship with the father in October 2025 (although the trial court found that this claim was not credible given the evidence suggesting the relationship continued until at least February 2026). Johnson reported that respondent made some progress in visitation after the father stopped attending. On the other hand, she was evicted from her residence again in January 2026 and then failed to provide her address to Johnson when she moved to Urbana in February 2026. She also had to be removed from a court hearing by security in January 2026 due to her aggressive behavior. However, this evidence pertains to events occurring after the conclusion of the two nine-month periods alleged in the State's petition to terminate parental rights, and we thus cannot consider it in evaluating her progress. *J.L.*, 236 Ill. 2d at 341. Although she may have made some additional progress after August 2025, it was too little, too late under the Adoption Act.

¶ 51 In light of the evidence pertaining to the two nine-month periods at issue, we cannot say that the trial court's finding that respondent was unfit was against the manifest weight of the evidence. The only service respondent completed during these periods was a parenting class. Even if her ability to engage in counseling and domestic violence services was limited by availability, not her willingness—as she claimed that the counseling service did not reach out to her until June or July 2025 and there were no relevant domestic violence classes available to her until August 2025—the prevailing issue throughout the case was her relationship with the father. Although she was repeatedly told that she would be judged as a unit with him as long as they were together and that he was impeding her ability to regain custody of her children, she failed to prioritize her reunification with her children and continued to be in a relationship with him until October 2025,

if not later. The only time that she was even close to regaining custody was when she was considering leaving the relationship in July 2024, but she failed to do so and remained in the relationship for over a year afterward. She was therefore no closer to regaining custody of her children in August 2025, at the end of the second nine-month period, than she was when the case opened two years earlier, in August 2023. The court was thus correct in finding that she failed to make reasonable progress towards the return of her children.

¶ 52 III. CONCLUSION

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

¶ 54 Affirmed.