

SENATE BILL NO. 250

INTRODUCED BY T. MANZELLA

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT ADOPTING THE SAFETY OF THE CHILD FIRST ACT; PROVIDING REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMITTING EXPERT TESTIMONY AND EVIDENCE OF PAST CONDUCT IN CHILD CUSTODY PROCEEDINGS IN WHICH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR CHILD ABUSE IS ALLEGED; PROVIDING THAT CONTACT BETWEEN A CHILD AND A PARENT WITH WHOM THE CHILD IS BONDED MAY NOT BE RESTRICTED IN ORDER TO IMPROVE A DEFICIENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHILD AND ANOTHER PARENT; RESTRICTING THE USE OF REUNIFICATION TREATMENT TO ESTABLISH A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD AND AN ESTRANGED OR REJECTED PARENT; REQUIRING TRAINING REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE FOR PERSONNEL IN CHILD CUSTODY PROCEEDINGS; PROVIDING DEFINITIONS; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE."

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

NEW SECTION. Section 1. Short title. [Sections 1 through 7] may be cited as the "Safety of the Child First Act".

NEW SECTION. Section 2. Purpose. The purpose of [sections 1 through 7] is to:

- (1) increase the priority given to child safety in any child custody proceeding;
- (2) strengthen the ability of courts to:
 - (a) recognize and adjudicate domestic violence and child abuse allegations based on valid, admissible evidence; and
 - (b) enter orders that protect and minimize the risk of harm to children; and
- (3) ensure that professionals involved in child custody proceedings containing domestic violence or child abuse allegations receive trauma-informed and culturally appropriate training on the dynamics, signs, and impact of domestic violence and child abuse, including child sexual abuse.

1 **NEW SECTION. Section 3. Definitions.** As used in [sections 1 through 7], the following definitions

2 apply:

3 (1) (a) "Child custody proceeding" means a dissolution, separation, visitation, paternity, support,
4 custody, or civil protection order proceeding between the parents of a child involving the care or custody of the
5 child.

6 (b) The term does not include:

7 (i) a child protective, abuse, or neglect proceeding under Title 41, chapter 3;

8 (ii) a juvenile justice proceeding under Title 41, chapter 5; or

9 (iii) a child placement proceeding in which the state or a tribal government, a designee of the state
10 or a tribal government, or a contractor of the state or a tribal government is a party to the proceeding.

11 (2) "Reunification treatment" means a treatment or therapy aimed at reuniting or reestablishing a
12 relationship between a child and an estranged or rejected parent or other family member of the child.

13

14 **NEW SECTION. Section 4. Admissibility of expert testimony -- past conduct.** In a child custody
15 proceeding in which a parent has been alleged to have committed domestic violence or child abuse, including
16 child sexual abuse:

17 (1) expert testimony from a court-appointed or outside professional relating to the alleged abuse
18 may be admitted only if the professional possesses demonstrated expertise and clinical experience in working
19 with victims of domestic violence or child abuse, including child sexual abuse, that is not solely of a forensic
20 nature; and

21 (2) in making a finding regarding any allegation of domestic violence or child abuse, including child
22 sexual abuse, in addition to any other relevant admissible evidence, evidence of past sexual or physical abuse
23 committed by the accused parent must be considered, including:

24 (a) any past or current protection or restraining orders against the accused parent;

25 (b) sexual violence abuse protection orders against the accused parent;

26 (c) arrests of the accused parent for domestic violence, sexual violence, or child abuse; or

27 (d) convictions of the accused parent for domestic violence, sexual violence, or child abuse.

28

1 **NEW SECTION. Section 5. Prohibitions on parental contact -- reunification treatment.** (1) A
2 court in a child custody proceeding may not, solely in order to improve a deficient relationship with the other
3 parent of a child, remove the child from or restrict contact between the child and a parent or litigating party:

4 (a) who is competent, protective, and not physically or sexually abusive; and

5 (b) with whom the child is bonded or to whom the child is attached.

6 (2) In a child custody proceeding a court may not order a reunification treatment unless:

7 (a) there is generally accepted and scientifically valid proof of the safety, effectiveness, and
8 therapeutic value of the reunification treatment; and

9 (b) the reunification treatment is not predicated on cutting off a child from a parent with whom the
10 child is bonded or to whom the child is attached.

11 (3) Any order in a child custody proceeding to remediate the resistance of a child to have contact
12 with a violent or abusive parent must primarily address the behavior of that parent or the contributions of that
13 parent to the resistance of the child before ordering the other parent of the child to take steps to potentially
14 improve the relationship of the child with the parent with whom the child resists contact.

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16 **NEW SECTION. Section 6. Training required in child custody proceedings.** (1) Any judge
17 presiding over child custody proceedings and any other relevant court personnel involved in child custody
18 proceedings, including guardians ad litem, counsel for children, custody evaluators, standing masters, and
19 mediators, shall complete:

20 (a) not less than 20 hours of initial training; and

21 (b) not less than 15 hours of ongoing training every 2 years.

22 (2) The training required under this section:

23 (a) must focus solely on domestic and sexual violence and child abuse, including:

24 (i) child sexual abuse;

25 (ii) physical abuse;

26 (iii) emotional abuse;

27 (iv) coercive control;

28 (v) implicit and explicit bias, including biases relating to parents with disabilities;

- 1 (vi) trauma;
- 2 (vii) long-term and short-term impacts of domestic violence and child abuse on children; and
- 3 (viii) victim and perpetrator behavior patterns and relationship dynamics within the cycle of violence;
- 4 (b) must be provided by:
 - 5 (i) a professional with substantive experience in assisting survivors of domestic violence or child
 - 6 abuse, including a victim service provider as defined in 34 U.S.C. 12291; and
 - 7 (ii) if possible, a survivor of domestic violence or child physical or sexual abuse;
 - 8 (c) must rely on evidence-based and peer-reviewed research by recognized experts in the types of
 - 9 abuse described in subsection (2)(a);
 - 10 (d) may not include theories, concepts, or belief systems unsupported by the research described in
 - 11 subsection (2)(c); and
 - 12 (e) must be designed to improve the ability of courts to:
 - 13 (i) recognize and respond to child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and
 - 14 trauma in all family victims, particularly children; and
 - 15 (ii) make appropriate custody decisions that prioritize child safety and well-being and are culturally
 - 16 sensitive and appropriate for diverse communities.

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18 **NEW SECTION. Section 7. Uniformity of application.** The standards described in [sections 1
 19 through 7] are uniform required standards that:

- 20 (1) apply to a neutral professional appointed by a court during a child custody proceeding to
- 21 express an opinion relating to abuse, trauma, or the behaviors of victims and perpetrators of abuse and trauma;
- 22 and
- 23 (2) require that a professional described in subsection (1) possess demonstrated expertise and
- 24 clinical experience in working with victims of domestic violence or child abuse, including child sexual abuse,
- 25 that is not solely of a forensic nature.

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27 **NEW SECTION. Section 8. Codification instruction.** [Sections 1 through 7] are intended to be
 28 codified as a new part in Title 40, chapter 4, and the provisions of Title 40, chapter 4, apply to [sections 1

1 through 7].

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3 NEW SECTION. **Section 9. Effective date.** [This act] is effective July 1, 2023.

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