

PROPONENT TESTIMONY - HB508

TESTIMONY OF SARAH SCHOPPE-SULLIVAN, Ph.D.

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CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 134TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

MARCH 8, 2022

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB508.

My name is Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, and I am a professor in the Department of Psychology at Ohio State University and the Director of the Children and Parents Research Laboratory. I must first make it clear that my affiliation with Ohio State University and the Department of Psychology *does not imply* university or departmental approval or disapproval of the views I express here.

I have a Ph.D. in Developmental (Child) Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I have been conducting research on the roles of parents in children's development for 25 years. My specific expertise is in the areas of father-child relationships and coparenting relationships (those between parents who share responsibility for raising children) and how the quality of these relationships affects children's social and emotional development.

HB508 is critical for Ohio children and families. What too often happens when marriages end, or when parents break up a romantic relationship, is that the child suffers from the diminishment or loss of a close relationship with the parent who has less time with the child after divorce or separation.¹ Decades of research have shown that this type of loss is especially likely to happen with father-child relationships after divorce, dissolution, or separation, because of the strong presumption that mothers are primary parents.² Fathers often do not receive equal parenting time, which puts fathers in a position in which their relationship with their child may depend heavily on their relationship with their child's mother.³

Some mothers may act as “gatekeepers” by controlling fathers’ access to children and influencing the quality of father-child relationships.^{4,5} Thus, after a divorce or dissolution, often the child loses the benefit of a close, continuous relationship with one parent, most typically with their father.

My research and that of many others suggests that fathers’ direct involvement in parenting is beneficial to children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development,^{6,7} extending to children’s mental health and academic success as they grow up.⁸ These benefits of involved fathering go beyond the provision of financial and educational resources, and are beyond those contributed by close mother-child relationships. Critically, the benefits of involved fathering are not limited to fathers who live in the same household with their children; non-resident fathers’ involvement with children promotes children’s social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and behavioral adjustment.⁹

Children benefit from regular, direct interactions with fathers or other caregivers with whom they have formed close relationships, or attachments.¹ Time with children is necessary to learn their unique personalities, or temperaments, and to learn how to meet their needs and help them to learn and grow.² These interactions and experiences are those that help establish a strong parent-child bond. But time when children are infants is not enough to sustain close parent-child relationships as children progress through subsequent stages of development. Maintaining strong parent-child relationships necessitates spending time with children, especially given children’s rapid development both within and across developmental periods.² If a parent only sees their child every other weekend, for example, they will miss many opportunities to learn about their child’s changing interests, abilities, and emotions. They will have less opportunity to be present to hug a toddler who received a mild scrape on the playground or to take advantage of a car-ride conversation about a popular song their teen likes. Sure, they might be present for important events, like birthdays, holidays, or sporting events, but they might miss the chance to meet the friend their child brings home after school, or to help their child through their last difficult math homework problem before bed. It is by navigating the seemingly mundane day-to-day experiences of daily life together, and handling both the routine and the unexpected, that parents and children learn to understand one another better and further grow and consolidate their relationships.

My research and that of others also suggests that mothers and fathers often provide complementary experiences for children. For example, a greater proportion of fathers’ time with children is spent in play activities versus routine caregiving activities, and this “playtime with fathers” is critical to children’s development.^{10,11} Fathers use more sophisticated language with young children—for example, asking them more “*wh-*” questions—which challenges them thereby spurring their language development.¹² Fathers are also more likely than mothers to engage in physical or rough-and-tumble play with children,¹³ in which fathers’ fun and stimulating yet challenging behaviors help children learn to control their emotions and behavior and to develop social competence.¹⁴

Finally, a 2018 report¹⁵ by 12 experts in my field whose research has focused directly on the benefits of shared parenting time for children after a parental divorce or relationship dissolution concluded that shared parenting is beneficial to children across a number of important domains of development, including stronger mental and physical health and better academic performance. These experts believe this is because one skilled parent can compensate for a less-skilled other parent, and that who is the

“more-skilled” parent can change across the child’s development; thus, children who maintain close contact and relationships with two parents stand a better chance of receiving the high-quality parenting they need across infancy, childhood, and adolescence. These 12 experts also largely concurred that shared parenting should be a rebuttable legal presumption, consistent with the proposed changes outlined in HB508.

In sum, shared parenting is a priority for Ohio’s children and families, and I support HB508 because its rebuttable presumption of shared parenting is consistent with the research literature on father-child relationships, coparenting relationships, and children’s social-emotional development, which has been a focus of my academic work for 25 years. It is my view that HB508 will help preserve close parent-child relationships for the benefit of Ohio children and families.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you again for allowing me to provide testimony on HB508. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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