

Before I begin, it is important that you know how critical this issue is. In the past couple of months, my husband has suffered two heart attacks and been diagnosed with a metastatic lung cancer that we are told will be terminal. I have been accompanying him to all his medical appointments since there is so much information to absorb. He was originally scheduled for a medical appointment today, and even though it was ultimately canceled, we had made a decision that giving this testimony is more important.

I am Susan Robinson, a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor in Ohio, in practice for the past 17 years. It is important that you know that my only offspring is a 47 year old son, and I have no grandchildren. So I will not personally benefit or lose anything as a result of whatever happens to this bill. I will, however, have to live in a world in which our children are treated with even less respect and less protection than they are now, and that is not acceptable.

The last time I testified about issues involving custody was around 1992; I testified in favor of children continuing to be allowed to choose which parent they would live with. A compromise was reached at that time, in which the age of election was eliminated, but children of any age were allowed to express an opinion and have that considered. I had a friend whose young daughter wanted to talk to the judge and it went very well. That judge was Ronald Solove, whose reputation was of course impeccable. Meantime, a bill was being proposed way back then to force shared parenting on anyone who could not agree. I laughed, thinking there was no way anything so ridiculous could go through.

And here we are.

As a counselor, I have seen children used by abusive parents as a weapon to extend the abuse beyond the breakup of the parents' relationship. There was a research article I stumbled across that interviewed 6 mothers of young children, all divorced from the children's abusive fathers. Two of the six indicated that if they had it to do over again, they would have stayed with their abusers because that was the only way they could protect their children, as their divorce agreements forced them to routinely leave the children in the abusers' sole care. Unprotected.

There is even a Post-Separation Power and Control Wheel, which cites various ways that the abusive former partner undermines the ability of the other to act in the child's best interest. In

other words, the abuser gets in the way of the protective parent's ability to provide their children with a safe, secure and loving environment. Look it up. You can find it by Googling just about any domestic abuse website.

You might also read just about anything by Lundy Bancroft, a prominent expert who has counseled abusers for at least the past 30 years.

It is important that you understand I do not oppose shared parenting; what I am firmly opposed to is shared parenting being forced on children with one or both parents who are unwilling to do it. That is a setup for failure. From my experience as a counselor, I have seen shared parenting succeed when both parents wanted it for healthy reasons. I emphasize the term "healthy reasons" because far too many parents suddenly discover the appeal of shared parenting at the exact minute that they learn it will reduce their child support obligations.

Parenting arrangements need to be in the best interest of the children. It is not in the best interest of any child to be passed back and forth between parents who are constantly at war. It is definitely not in the best interest of a child to be passed back and forth between parents who reside in different school districts that are an hour or two apart—and yes, I have seen this happen.

And the biggest issue here: It is absolutely not in a child's best interest to be subjected to a shared parenting agreement when one parent is hugely irresponsible or downright abusive to the child. I had one instance in which a mother was ordered to allow her extremely young children to have unsupervised visits with their father who kept guns all over the house. Yes, he was ordered to lock them in a safe when the children were around. And yes, he stood up in court and said he would do that. But this man lied about everything else too, and the children went home and started talking about their father's "trophies," which once described turned out to look exactly like guns. This was not even a shared parenting arrangement.

Can you imagine if the person with all the guns lying around had equal decision-making power? No one could prove abuse. Yet if one of the children gets curious and picks up a gun the wrong way, it will be too late for any legal action to matter. Oh yeah, except for maybe suing the gun owner for funeral expenses.

You have surely figured out by now that I am not a young woman. I am 74 years old, and grew up in the era when children chose which parent to live with once they were 14; then that age was lowered to 12. There were always exceptions, but the children's opinions were considered, as they should be. Many children did not want to be responsible for that decision, and that was respected too. Believe it or not, from the time of my divorce when my son was 6 years old until he became of age, my custody agreement was "reasonable visitation." The only problem I ever had with that was that his father didn't bother to see him enough.

I notice that HB 508 includes provisions to penalize parents who make false allegations of abuse. First, let me remind you that we already have laws on the books against filing false reports. And second, people who have been victimized or seen their children victimized are the last ones to file even a valid report. They fear retaliation, and that is in the cases where the abuse is so clear that they cannot be talked out of realizing they saw what they saw and heard what they heard. A lot of gaslighting goes on around abuse issues, plus a lot of people don't recognize abuse for what it is until they have gotten a safe distance away and been educated more about the dynamics.

Let me give you an example from my own life. I had a rather abbreviated second marriage, in which I was routinely cursed, called names, and accused of having sex with any male I came into contact with, no matter how remotely. Extreme jealousy ruled the day. But he never threatened me physically. Had anyone asked me at that time if I was in any danger, I would have said absolutely not. And I held a college degree in Women's Studies. About a week after I filed for divorce, things started getting scary, and I ultimately stayed at various friends' homes because I feared for my life if I returned to my own. I later learned that the signs of an abuser had been clear, but like many, I had no idea what to look for.

Likewise, many victims going into court are not yet even aware of how to define what is going on. They do, however, have a strong sense that their children need and deserve protection—the protection they cannot get in a shared parenting situation. The only way children are protected in a shared parenting situation is if BOTH parents have entered into the arrangement WILLINGLY, and have a desire to cooperate in the best interests of their children.

Anything less is a travesty.