

Jacquelin DiMenna
Ohioans for Child Protection
Proponent Testimony HB 322
December 2, 2024

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Judicial Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 322.

My name is Jacquelin DiMenna. I am an Ohio mom of 2 teens, and an advocate with Ohioans for Child Protection. I also have 10+ years' experience as a licensed professional clinical counselor (MS, LPCC). As a therapist, my specialties included couple counseling, personality disorders, and trauma treatment. This routinely led me to work with victims of sexual abuse and rape in our community. Child sex abuse and rape are traumas that underlie a whole world of mental health problems including PTSD, domestic violence, homelessness, addiction, suicidality, depression, divorce, sexual dysfunction, and teen pregnancy.

The CDC estimates 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys are sexually abused before they reach adulthood. Moms and mental health providers cannot heal all this trauma and fix this problem. We need the help of our community and our lawmakers to prevent child sex abuse, to hold predators accountable, and to support victims and their families in their search for healing and justice.

A strategy used by some perpetrators of child sex abuse is the "grooming" of the child in order to manipulate and gain access to the child, normalize and prepare a child for abuse, and prevent disclosure of the abuse as it is occurring. This is often done through lies and manipulation, entrapment, rewards and punishments, and desensitization, all aimed at getting the child to tolerate the abuse and keep the abuser's secret. This grooming process can be so effective, that it works quite reliably to prevent disclosure, even long after the abuse has ended. Grooming and PTSD seem to share a symbiotic relationship in that PTSD involves a cycle of re-experiencing parts of the trauma, and some mechanism for avoidance of the very disturbing and traumatic event(s). For instance, grooming desensitizes the victim to the unwanted and increasingly inappropriate sexualized behaviors, and that can become part of the victim's own denial and avoidance

mechanisms in PTSD. According to Child USA, the average age to disclose child sex abuse is 52 years old. Some clients only understood what happened to them once they had children the same age that they were when abused.

Grooming is also something that is usually ongoing throughout the abuse, as a means to prevent disclosure, and the offender seeks continued access to the victim. 1 in 6 kids will experience online abuse. Of those children, 62% actually know their offender in their offline life. Between the easy access that the internet provides and the science of delayed disclosure, today's children remain at serious risk. We cannot force victims to come forward before their brains and nervous systems are capable of coping with the trauma of the abuse, nor can we wait and do nothing. Criminalizing the damaging sexualized parts of grooming will likely expedite discovery for victims, and provide material evidence that may include identifying additional victims and child sex abuse material (CSAM) (formerly child pornography). This has the potential to significantly reduce the timeline that an offender can have access to abuse children. Most importantly, felony grooming will appear on background checks and prevent their access to children in schools and youth serving organizations.

Grooming a child for sex abuse is a serious and damaging behavior. There is significant research on how child predators use this strategy to manipulate and maintain secrecy around their crimes. Unfortunately, despite this term being used properly in law, in the mental health and medical communities, by advocacy groups, and more, there have been attempts to misappropriate the term "grooming" and use it as a fad insult against vulnerable populations, such as those in the LGBTQ community, and even teachers and librarians. This is confusion that puts children in danger and provides extra cover to real predators. I hope I was able to provide some additional clarity about grooming and why I want to see HB322 passed. We are hopeful Ohio can stand out as a clear example of how to protect children. Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony.

Respectfully,

Jacquelin DiMenna

Additional Resources

Follette, V. M., & Vechiu, C. (2017). Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse: Review of theoretical and empirical literature.

Gupta, M. and Campagnolo, D., 2021. High Prevalence of Early Onset Deeply Infiltrative Endometriosis Without Infertility in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Patients With Severe Abuse Prior to Age 10 Years. *Biological Psychiatry*, 89(9), pp.S332-S333.

Steine, I. M., Winje, D., Skogen, J. C., Krystal, J. H., Milde, A. M., Bjorvatn, B., ... & Pallesen, S. (2017). Posttraumatic symptom profiles among adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse: A longitudinal study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 67, 280-293.