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Chairman Manning and my fellow members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for your time and attention to my testimony on Senate Bill 277, also known as the Let Children Grow Act.

Children and young adults today face challenges that few of us, and certainly not our parents or grandparents, could have imagined as we made our way through adolescence and into adulthood.

Children today face challenges that are unique to our time, including excessive screen time, a growing mental health crisis, an overload of information and misinformation, shifting family dynamics, and increasing academic and economic pressures. Perhaps most concerning is that many parents are unable or unwilling to let their children fail. These are defining realities of childhood in our generation.

Like everyone on this committee, I have experienced failure. It is an essential part of being human. Those who achieve success, personally, financially, or professionally, have done so not in spite of failure but because of it. They have learned from it, grown from it, and developed the resilience that failure uniquely teaches.

The idea for this legislation arose from many conversations with a former aide of mine. He has two children, one of whom I am proud to be godparent to, and a third on the way. As he sees it, his main responsibility as a parent is to raise his children to become independent, self-sufficient, tough, and productive adults. Many of you know my former long-time aide Andrew Uxley's colorful vocabulary, so I have softened his phrasing to "tough" rather than his more biting description. He told me how determined he is to prepare them not just to succeed but to be ready for the inevitable setbacks life will bring, to know how to fall and, more importantly, how to get back up.

It was during those conversations that we discussed the further emergence of "helicopter parenting," a term that entered the mainstream in the 1990s to describe parents who hover constantly over their children, determined to prevent any mistake, discomfort, or disappointment. While born from love, this mindset has unintentionally deprived many young people of the experiences that build confidence, independence, and grit.

As a quick aside, I recommend anyone remotely interested in this legislation read, 'The Anxious Generation.' That book documents how overprotection combined with the rise of digital technology and social media has led to the current generations of children who are more anxious,

less resilient, and less prepared for adulthood than ever before. The author's research reinforces what many of us have observed firsthand: in our effort to protect children from harm, we have too often shielded them from growth.

Parenting expectations today are often unreasonably high, and so is the number of people who believe that children cannot handle anything on their own. Across the country, when a passerby sees a child walking to a park, playing outside, or running an errand, too often the reaction is fear rather than trust. Calls to authorities sometimes follow, and perfectly safe, loving parents find themselves investigated simply for allowing their children age-appropriate independence.

Before I go any further, I want to state clearly that this legislation is not an attack on Child Protective Services in this state. I think every legitimate instance of child abuse or neglect should be pursued and the perpetrators punished to the full extent of the law. But too many times in Ohio and across the country, the valuable resource of CPS is being diverted from critical cases, and, in some cases, weaponized in neighbor disputes.

One of many powerful examples of this comes from Emily Fields, a mother from Virginia. Emily and her husband were repeatedly visited by Child Protective Services because she allowed her children to play in their own yard and the neighboring yards, a safe, open space where they were welcome. Investigators found no evidence of harm, neglect, or danger, yet they were told that their children could not be unsupervised, even in their own bedrooms, until age thirteen.

Objectively, that is crazy response and the perfect caricature of what adolescence has turned into across this country.

Fortunately, Emily, other parents and an organization which you will hear from soon called Let Grow, have partnered with legislators across the country to pursue a simple legislative change.

And that is why I am here for Senate Bill 277. This bill makes clear that a parent, guardian, or custodian who allows their child to engage in independent activities such as walking or biking to school, playing outdoors, staying home for a reasonable time, or traveling to nearby places, cannot, for that reason alone, be considered abusive or neglectful, as long as those activities are appropriate to the child's age, maturity, and abilities, and the parent's decision does not amount to gross negligence.

In other words, SB 277 restores common sense and trust to how we view parenting. It recognizes that independence, in safe, age-appropriate settings, is not neglect. It is vital preparation for life.

Legislation like this is rapidly being passed in state legislatures across the country. Last I checked there are 13 or14 states that have passed similar legislation. So although I'd like Ohio to lead the way on issues like this, I think being in the first 20 is better than the last 20!

We cannot, nor should we, legislate parenting styles. But we can ensure that our laws do not punish parents for doing what generations before us took for granted: letting children explore, take small risks, occasionally fail, and develop the judgment and confidence that lead to true maturity.

By passing the Let Children Grow Act, we send a clear message. We believe in parents, and we believe in children. We trust families to know their children best. And we are committed to building a society where kids can grow, learn, and thrive, not in fear but in freedom.

Thank you for your time, your attention, and your commitment to ensuring that every child in our state is better prepared for adulthood.