

SENATE BILL NO. 27
INTRODUCED BY J. ESP

BY REQUEST OF THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES, HEALTH, AND HUMAN SERVICES INTERIM COMMITTEE

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT CLARIFYING THE RIGHT OF A GRANDPARENT TO HAVE CONTACT WITH A GRANDCHILD IN LIGHT OF DECISIONS BY THE U.S. SUPREME COURT AND THE MONTANA SUPREME COURT; REQUIRING THAT A CUSTODIAL PARENT WHO OBJECTS TO GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD CONTACT BE SHOWN TO BE AN UNFIT PARENT BEFORE A PETITION FOR GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD CONTACT MAY BE GRANTED BY A DISTRICT COURT IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD; AMENDING SECTION 40-9-102, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN APPLICABILITY DATE."

WHEREAS, the Legislature enacted the principal grandparent-grandchild contact statute, section 40-9-102, MCA, in 1979 and has not amended that statute since 1997; and

WHEREAS, since 1997, the statute has provided that a grandparent wanting to have contact with a grandchild could petition a District Court to grant that contact and that the court must grant the petition if it found that the contact was "in the best interest of the child"; and

WHEREAS, since 1997, the United States Supreme Court and the Montana Supreme Court have both held that a parent's right to the custody, care, and control of a child is founded upon a parent's constitutional right to liberty and have also held that it is the constitutionally protected right of a fit parent to determine who the parent's child may or may not associate with; and

WHEREAS, the Montana Supreme Court held on May 9, 2006, in the case of Polasek v. Omura, that a District Court for Cascade County committed reversible error when the District Court granted a petition for grandparent-grandchild contact under section 40-9-102, MCA, against the wishes of the custodial parent who had not been found to be an unfit parent, based upon the single statutory criteria that the contact was "in the best interest of the child"; and

WHEREAS, the Montana Supreme Court held in Polasek v. Omura that before a District Court could use the "best interest of the child" standard, the District Court must first determine whether the child's parent was a fit parent or, in other words, whether the parent had been guilty of child abuse or neglect; and

WHEREAS, because of the rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court and the Montana Supreme Court, section 40-9-102, MCA, is now misleading to grandparents in that the statute implies that a grandparent may petition a

District Court to award, and the District Court may grant, grandparent-grandchild contact without consideration of the wishes of a custodial parent, or even over the objection of a custodial parent, and without consideration of the fitness of that parent; and

WHEREAS, the Legislature believes in the constitutional right of parents to control the actions and conduct of their children and believes that third parties should not be allowed, through the courts, to control the actions of those children if the parents are fit and proper parents; and

WHEREAS, the Legislature believes that both parents and grandparents must have a clear understanding or "road map" of parental rights and a grandparent's right to contact with a grandchild and that those rights should be clear in state law and easily located in state statutes by both parents and grandparents alike.

THEREFORE, it is the purpose of the Legislature to make Montana statutes reflect the holding of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Troxel v. Granville* and of the Montana Supreme Court in *Polasek v. Omura* regarding the constitutional rights of custodial parents to determine who a child may or may not have contact with by providing that before a District Court may grant grandparent-grandchild contact over the objection of a custodial parent, the District Court must inquire into the fitness of the parent and approve the petition for contact only if the parent is found to be unfit and if the contact petitioned for is in the best interest of the child.

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

Section 1. Section 40-9-102, MCA, is amended to read:

"40-9-102. Grandparent-grandchild contact. (1) Except as provided in subsection (5), the district court may grant to a grandparent of a child reasonable rights to contact with the child, including but not limited to rights regarding a child who is the subject of, or as to whom a disposition has been made during, an administrative or court proceeding under Title 41 or this title. The department of public health and human services must be given notice of a petition for grandparent-grandchild contact regarding a child who is the subject of, or as to whom a disposition has been made during, an administrative or court proceeding under Title 41 or this title.

(2) (a) Grandparent-grandchild contact granted under this section over the objections of a custodial parent may be granted only upon a finding by the court, after a hearing and based upon clear and convincing evidence, that the objecting parent is an unfit parent and that the contact would be in the best interest of the child.

(b) An unfit parent, as used in subsection (2)(a), is a parent who has committed child abuse or neglect, as defined in 41-3-102, or whose parental rights have otherwise been lawfully terminated.

(3) A person may not petition the court under this section more often than once every 2 years unless there has been a significant change in the circumstances of:

- (a) the child;
- (b) the child's parent, guardian, or custodian; or
- (c) the child's grandparent.

(4) The court may appoint an attorney to represent the interests of a child with respect to grandparent-grandchild contact when the interests are not adequately represented by the parties to the proceeding.

(5) This section does not apply if the child has been adopted by a person other than a stepparent or a grandparent. Grandparent-grandchild contact granted under this section terminates upon the adoption of the child by a person other than a stepparent or a grandparent."

NEW SECTION. Section 2. Applicability. [This act] applies to a petition for grandparent-grandchild contact filed in accordance with Title 40, chapter 9, part 1, after October 1, 2007.

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