

1 SENATE BILL NO. 250

2 INTRODUCED BY T. MANZELLA

3
4 A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT ADOPTING THE SAFETY OF THE CHILD FIRST ACT;
5 PROVIDING REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMITTING EXPERT TESTIMONY AND EVIDENCE OF PAST
6 CONDUCT IN CHILD CUSTODY PROCEEDINGS IN WHICH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR CHILD ABUSE IS
7 ALLEGED; PROVIDING THAT CONTACT BETWEEN A CHILD AND A PARENT WITH WHOM THE CHILD IS
8 BONDED MAY NOT BE RESTRICTED IN ORDER TO IMPROVE A DEFICIENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
9 THE CHILD AND ANOTHER PARENT; RESTRICTING THE USE OF REUNIFICATION TREATMENT TO
10 ESTABLISH A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD AND AN ESTRANGED OR REJECTED PARENT;
11 REQUIRING TRAINING REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE FOR PERSONNEL IN
12 CHILD CUSTODY PROCEEDINGS; PROVIDING DEFINITIONS; AND PROVIDING AN-EFFECTIVE DATE
13 DATES AND A RETROACTIVE APPLICABILITY DATE."

14
15 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

16
17 NEW SECTION. Section 1. Short title. [Sections 1 through 7] may be cited as the "Safety of the
18 Child First Act".

19
20 NEW SECTION. Section 2. Purpose. The purpose of [sections 1 through 7] is to:

- 21 (1) increase the priority given to child safety in any child custody proceeding;
- 22 (2) strengthen the ability of courts to:
- 23 (a) recognize and adjudicate domestic violence and child abuse allegations based on valid,
24 admissible evidence; and
- 25 (b) enter orders that protect and minimize the risk of harm to children; and
- 26 (3) ensure that professionals involved in child custody proceedings containing domestic violence
27 or child abuse allegations receive trauma-informed and culturally appropriate training on the dynamics, signs,

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1 and impact of domestic violence and child abuse, including child sexual abuse.

2

3 **NEW SECTION. Section 3. Definitions.** As used in [sections 1 through 7], the following definitions

4 apply:

5 (1) (a) "Child custody proceeding" means a dissolution, separation, visitation, paternity, support,
6 custody, or civil protection order proceeding between the parents of a child involving the care or custody of the
7 child.

8 (b) The term does not include:

9 (i) a child protective, abuse, or neglect proceeding under Title 41, chapter 3;

10 (ii) a juvenile justice proceeding under Title 41, chapter 5; or

11 (iii) a child placement proceeding in which the state or a tribal government, a designee of the state
12 or a tribal government, or a contractor of the state or a tribal government is a party to the proceeding.

13 (2) "Reunification treatment" means a treatment or therapy aimed at reuniting or reestablishing a
14 relationship between a child and an estranged or rejected parent or other family member of the child.

15

16 **NEW SECTION. Section 4. Admissibility of expert testimony -- past conduct.** (1) In a child
17 custody proceeding in which a parent has been alleged to have committed domestic violence or child abuse,
18 including child sexual abuse:

19 ~~(1)(A)~~ expert testimony from a court-appointed or outside professional relating to the alleged abuse
20 may be admitted only if the professional possesses demonstrated expertise and clinical experience in working
21 with victims of domestic violence or child abuse, including child sexual abuse, that is not solely of a forensic
22 nature; and

23 ~~(2)(B)~~ in making a finding regarding any allegation of domestic violence or child abuse, including child
24 sexual abuse, in addition to any other relevant admissible evidence, evidence of past sexual or physical abuse
25 committed by the accused parent must be considered, including:

26 ~~(a)(I)~~ any past or current protection or restraining orders against the accused parent;

27 ~~(b)(II)~~ sexual violence abuse protection orders against the accused parent;

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- 1 ~~(c)(III)~~ arrests of the accused parent for domestic violence, sexual violence, or child abuse; or
2 ~~(d)(IV)~~ convictions of the accused parent for domestic violence, sexual violence, or child abuse.
3 (2) A PREVIOUS DENIAL OF AN ORDER OF PROTECTION AGAINST THE ACCUSED PARENT DOES NOT
4 PRECLUDE THE ADMISSION OF EVIDENCE UNDER THIS SECTION.

5
6 NEW SECTION. Section 5. Prohibitions on parental contact -- reunification treatment. (1) A
7 court in a child custody proceeding may not, solely in order to improve a deficient relationship with the other
8 parent of a child, remove the child from or restrict contact between the child and a parent or litigating party:

- 9 (a) who is competent, protective, and not physically or sexually abusive; and
10 (b) with whom the child is bonded or to whom the child is attached.
11 (2) In a child custody proceeding a court may not order a reunification treatment unless:
12 (a) there is generally accepted and scientifically valid proof of the safety, effectiveness, and
13 therapeutic value of the reunification treatment; and
14 (b) the reunification treatment is not predicated on cutting off a child from a parent with whom the
15 child is bonded or to whom the child is attached.
16 (3) Any order in a child custody proceeding to remediate the resistance of a child to have contact
17 with a violent or abusive parent must primarily address the behavior of that parent or the contributions of that
18 parent to the resistance of the child before ordering the other parent of the child to take steps to potentially
19 improve the relationship of the child with the parent with whom the child resists contact.

20
21 NEW SECTION. Section 6. Training required in child custody proceedings. (1) Any judge
22 presiding over child custody proceedings IS STRONGLY RECOMMENDED TO COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING TRAINING,
23 WHICH MUST BE ADMINISTERED AND OVERSEEN THROUGH THE BOARD OF CRIME CONTROL. and any other OTHER
24 relevant court personnel, WHO ARE NOT JUDGES, involved in child custody proceedings, including guardians ad
25 litem, counsel for children, custody evaluators, standing masters, and mediators, shall complete:

- 26 (a) not less than 20 hours of initial training; and
27 (b) not less than 15 hours of ongoing training every 2 years.

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1 (2) THE INITIAL TRAINING REQUIREMENT UNDER SUBSECTION (1)(A) MUST BE COMPLETED BY RELEVANT
2 COURT PERSONNEL BEFORE JANUARY 1, 2024.

3 ~~(2)~~(3) The training required under this section:

4 (a) must focus solely on domestic and sexual violence and child abuse, including:

5 (i) child sexual abuse;

6 (ii) physical abuse;

7 (iii) emotional abuse;

8 (iv) coercive control;

9 (v) implicit and explicit bias, including biases relating to parents with disabilities;

10 (vi) trauma;

11 (vii) long-term and short-term impacts of domestic violence and child abuse on children; and

12 (viii) victim and perpetrator behavior patterns and relationship dynamics within the cycle of violence;

13 (b) must be provided by:

14 (i) a professional with substantive experience in assisting survivors of domestic violence or child
15 abuse, including a victim service provider as defined in 34 U.S.C. 12291; and

16 (ii) if possible, a survivor of domestic violence or child physical or sexual abuse;

17 (c) must rely on evidence-based and peer-reviewed research by recognized experts in the types of
18 abuse described in subsection ~~(2)(a)~~ (3)(A);

19 (d) may not include theories, concepts, or belief systems unsupported by the research described in
20 subsection ~~(2)(c)~~ (3)(C); and

21 (e) must be designed to improve the ability of courts to:

22 (i) recognize and respond to child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and
23 trauma in all family victims, particularly children; and

24 (ii) make appropriate custody decisions that prioritize child safety and well-being and are culturally
25 sensitive and appropriate for diverse communities.

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27 NEW SECTION. Section 7. Uniformity of application. The standards described in [sections 1

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1 through 7] are uniform required standards that:

2 (1) apply to a neutral professional appointed by a court during a child custody proceeding to
3 express an opinion relating to abuse, trauma, or the behaviors of victims and perpetrators of abuse and trauma;
4 and

5 (2) require that a professional described in subsection (1) possess demonstrated expertise and
6 clinical experience in working with victims of domestic violence or child abuse, including child sexual abuse,
7 that is not solely of a forensic nature.

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9 NEW SECTION. Section 8. Codification instruction. [Sections 1 through 7] are intended to be
10 codified as a new part in Title 40, chapter 4, and the provisions of Title 40, chapter 4, apply to [sections 1
11 through 7].

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13 NEW SECTION. Section 9. — Effective date. [This act] is effective July 1, 2023.

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15 NEW SECTION. SECTION 9. EFFECTIVE DATES. (1) EXCEPT AS PROVIDED IN SUBSECTION (2), [THIS ACT] IS
16 EFFECTIVE ON PASSAGE AND APPROVAL.

17 (2) [SECTION 6] IS EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 2023.

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19 NEW SECTION. SECTION 10. — RETROACTIVE APPLICABILITY. [SECTIONS 1 THROUGH 5 AND 7] APPLY
20 RETROACTIVELY, WITHIN THE MEANING OF 1-2-109, TO DETERMINATIONS IN CHILD CUSTODY PROCEEDINGS.

21 - END -