

Colorado Lawmakers Pass Kids' Independence Bill

Colorado kids should be getting on their sneakers. Thanks to their state legislators, they will soon be able to play outside, stay home alone a bit, and enjoy some freedom without their parents worrying this could get them investigated for neglect.

On Tuesday, the Colorado Senate followed the lead of the House and passed the "Reasonable Childhood Independence" bill unanimously. Now it goes to Gov. Jared Polis, who is expected to sign it into law.

A front page *Denver Gazette* story by Hannah Metzger quoted one of the citizens who testified in favor of the bill: 12-year-old Brinley Sheffield.

When Brinley was 7, she first decided to take up running. Unfortunately, Day One of her new pursuit ended in terror when a car followed her the few blocks back to her home. Soon afterward, a policeman came knocking.

She thought he was coming to say he'd caught a criminal. But no. He told Brinley and her mom that a citizen had spotted a child alone outside—and called the cops. While no charges were filed, Brinley told the legislators that after that, "I didn't want to run around my block."

To prevent just such incidents, and to reassure parents they can give their kids some independence, and to stop the over-investigation of decent parents in poverty who literally cannot afford to helicopter their kids, the bill was introduced by two Democrats and two Republicans: Sen. Janet Buckner (D) and Rep. Mary Young (D), and Sen. Jim Smallwood (R), and Rep. Kim Ransom (R).

The *Gazette* quoted Young saying, “When youth are given independence they grow, learn and thrive and we’re pleased to pass legislation that empowers their right to independence.”

This bill had been introduced in 2020 and sailed through the Colorado House. It was expected to do the same in the Senate when COVID-19 closed the legislature. Back then, it had just two sponsors.

This year, in the House itself, 27 representatives asked to sign on as co-sponsors.

Yes, 27.

While similar bills passed in Utah, Texas, and Oklahoma, Colorado is the first “blue” state to pass what was originally dubbed the “Free-Range Parenting” law. Let Grow, the nonprofit promoting childhood independence that I helm, has been building stakeholder coalitions and popular support for these measures for four years. Currently Illinois, Nebraska, and South Carolina are considering such bills. (If you’d like to get involved, please visit Let Grow’s website: <https://letgrow.org>.)

As the sponsors of the 2020 bill, Buckner and Ransom, wrote in *The Colorado Sun*:

Parents know their children best and there are children 8, 9, 10 that are perfectly capable of walking to school by themselves. But the parents load them up and drive them because they’re afraid to be charged with neglect.

This “defensive parenting” hurts parents and stunts kids.

Sen. Buckner remembered how “proud and grown up” she felt when she ran her first errand—to get baking powder. But now, too many perfectly fine unsupervised kids are being reported to the authorities. About a third of all kids will be reported at some point in their childhoods, and that number soars to 53

percent for African American kids.

In Colorado, Rep. Young reported, 82 percent of parents reported to the child abuse hotline will have their cases “unsubstantiated.” That’s a lot of excess investigations—and trauma.

Thankfully, those days are becoming a thing of the past as parents demand the right to raise their kids with the independence they need to grow up confident, capable—and happy.

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