

SB 0365 Cocozzella, L. G.

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SB 0365 Session Family Law-Custody Evaluations-Qualifications and Training Support with Amendments

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Support with Amendments

My name is Laura Cocozzella, and I am addressing Senate Bill 365 – Family Law – Child Custody Evaluators – Qualifications and Training. Thank you for allowing me to share my perspective and personal experiences - all applicable to the current bill.

Although training is necessary to ensure children have safe access to their parents, this bill, if passed with its current language, omits the research criteria under the Daubert Standard used by trial courts to assess experts' methodologies and opinions. Furthermore, if peer-reviewed methodologies are ignored by custody evaluators, the bill fails to address the long-lasting emotional damages, which include unhealthy attachments, parent-child contact issues, and physical and psychological abuse and well-being. Therefore, I support the bill with amendments.

Regarding the Daubert Standard, I will refer to items from the following lines: 13-15, page 2; 1-8, page 5. These sections must be bolstered by the addition of Daubert criteria which include the following 5 standards:

- 1) Whether the technique or theory in question can be, and has been tested;
- 2) Whether it has been subjected to publication and peer review;
- 3) Its known or potential error rate;
- 4) The existence and maintenance of standards controlling its operation; and
- 5) Whether it has attracted widespread acceptance within a relevant scientific community.

The current bill emphasizes professional expertise and clinical experience for custody evaluators while failing to mention methodologies that have been peer reviewed, as referenced above. From a personal standpoint, my therapist lacked awareness of the specific family dynamics that had created an imbalance in my relationship with my children. During a family reunification session, the family therapist referred to me in front of my son and former spouse as “the animal abandoned by the pack.” My former spouse attended prior sessions with my son, whereas I was not permitted to participate. That unprofessional analogy further exacerbated the imbalanced family dynamics.

In a 2022 article titled “The Truth About Parental Alienation” in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Harper references a 2019 study where “. . . 22 million Americans . . . having a non-reciprocated alienated relationship with their offspring.” Furthermore, he adds that about 4 million children are alienated from a parent. My children and I fall under both groups. Without reliable expertise, custody evaluators will lack skills to observe these insidious behaviors and patterns, and the statistics will grow. Relying on research – tested and peer-reviewed – will enhance skill level of evaluators to ensure innocent parents, victims of abuse themselves, have access to their children.

Once such expert, Dr. Jennifer Harman, is the author of 21 peer-reviewed publications ([Publications | Jennifer J. Harman, PhD \(jenniferjillharman.com\)](#)). In the following study, “Power Dynamics in Families Affected by Parental Alienation,” published in 2021, Harman includes an assessment of the dynamic that destroyed the fabric of my family: asymmetric dependence, which is characterized by the following: “. . . gatekeeping, loyalty-inducing behaviors, and the strategic use of money and technology to control the targeted parent.” Had a trained therapist recognized the imbalance, I might not be in my current situation.

Relying on the use of the five criteria under Daubert will ensure evaluators are trained in research methods that allow a judge to assess a custody situation fairly and accurately.

Inadequately trained experts can prolong emotional damage in children, resulting in unhealthy attachments stemming from psychological abuse. Items in the bill to be amended to address the lasting effects of trauma are found in the following lines: 15, page 3; 26-27, page 3; 19-20, page 25, page 4; and 13-15, 16-18, page 5. These sections must reference the following: unhealthy attachments, parent-child contact issues, and physical and psychological abuse and well-being.

Asymmetric dependence is one of many situations affecting the following: custody arrangements, parent-child contact issues, and the physical and emotional abuse and well-being of children in divorce cases. Please read Harman's peer-reviewed study, referenced above, and advocate for its use in training sessions. A key component related to custody issues is the unhealthy attachment between child and coercive parent. Coercive measures, as stated by Harman, maintain dominance over the targeted parent. Dr. Amy Baker, in her co-authored article titled "Bonded to the Abuser: How and Why Children Form and Maintain Attachments with Abusive Caregivers," states: "It is common knowledge among those working with maltreated children that despite the abuse and/or neglect experienced at the hand of a parent, children generally want to maintain a relationship with the abuser." This is NOT the case for alienated children, which should be alarming to any well-trained therapist/evaluator, as it is the most prominent behavior in children who turn against a loving parent.

Many adult children awaken from this nightmare after having lost decades with a parent whose only fault was to become a victim of narcissistic abuse. Please visit the Anti-Alienation Project ([The Anti-Alienation Project - YouTube](#)), spearheaded by a young woman, Madison, who lost 20 years with her own father. These heartbreaking stories are told from the viewpoint of adult children who recognized they were weaponized by a coercive parent to harm the targeted parent.

I have shared custody with my former spouse. Yet despite our 50-50 arrangement, Christmas 2023 marked a year when I last spent time with my two children. I have nothing to lose in sharing my perspective, as I've already lost the two most precious people in my life, my teenage son and my college-aged daughter. I only wish to strengthen a bill that could potentially ensure the term, targeted parent, is erased.

Thank you again for your time.