

My name is Ally Toyos and I am a child survivor of the family court system and the founder of the youth advocacy initiative, Center for Judicial Excellence Youth Speak. I am submitting my testimony in the hope that, through it, you will see why passing SB 365 is a necessary step toward protecting children in family court and preventing life-long trauma.

My parents divorced when I was eight years old and I watched as my father quickly transformed into a different person. He hated my mom for leaving him and as time went by, my father became violent and he waged a war against my mom using me and my younger sister as pawns. When my mom remarried and moved out of the state, my sister and I expressed to the guardian ad litem our desire to move with her. Our father's anger boiled over and his physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of me and my sister worsened.

For years I had been silent about the abuse that I endured, not understanding why my father was doing this to me and terrified of making him angrier, but I couldn't stand by while the court condemned me and my sister to live with our abuser. So I reported my father's abuse, believing that once the court knew what was happening, they would protect us. Instead, our guardian ad litem refused to address our abuse and then my father began defending his actions in court by falsely claiming that our mom had alienated my sister and I from him. Instead of investigating or acting to protect me and my sister, the court ordered that my sister and I be subjected to intensive reunification therapy and no contact with our mom. When my sister and I refused to live with our father out of sheer terror of what he would do to us, our court-appointed case manager threatened us with rape as well as with being separated and sent to juvenile detention and foster care. This "therapy" was ineffective because the problem in the relationship with my father wasn't that my sister and I were brainwashed into hating him, it was that he repeatedly hurt us and we feared for our lives in his home.

A year later, the court again refused to prioritize mine and my sister's safety above the wants of our father and, with the help of our case manager, the judge ordered that we be trafficked into our father's custody through a reunification camp called Family Bridges and be completely cut off from our mom and anyone associated with her for an indefinite period of time. Transport agents were hired to kidnap me and my sister from a courthouse in Kansas and take us across the country to Bozeman, Montana where the camp was run out of a hotel room. We didn't eat, we didn't sleep, but this weakened state allowed the reunification camp leaders to more effectively threaten us into submission. My sister and I were interrogated and threatened relentlessly during the camp. If we refused to live with our abuser, we would be separated and sent to wilderness camp, institutionalized, or sent to foster care where it was guaranteed that we would be separated from each other and our mom until we each turned 18. We were forced to say that our mother was abusive and that our father was a victim and forced to say that we loved our abusive father. Worst of all, we were punished for trying to protect ourselves and speaking out about our father's abuse which was allowed to continue well after the camp had ended. In fact, the constant threat of being sent away or extending the no contact order with our mom ensured that my sister and I were the perfect, silent victims for our father.

It has been more than four years since I was able to escape my father's abuse by aging out of the family court system, but I continue to struggle with the effects of this trauma. I have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder which permeates every aspect of my life including school, work, and relationships. Not only was this precipitated by the years of abuse I endured at the hands of my father, but also by the trauma of being ignored by the court professionals who were supposed to protect me, being told I was lying about my abuse, that I was problematic for speaking up. The subliminal rhetoric that even the institution charged with protecting children did not deem me and my sister worthy of safety, was drilled into me over and over again throughout our ten year long experience in the family courts. Before this experience, I would have never believed that the family court system would condone and encourage my abuse, much less participate in their own form. My sister and I were kidnapped, trafficked across the country, and threatened into our abusers home all while court officials ignored our abuse and made money off of catering to our abuser. Unfortunately, our case is not unique and children across the country are forced into their abuser's custody through reunification therapies and camps recommended by custody evaluators and ordered by courts that do not have adequate training to protect children in abuse situations. Please pass SB 365 to protect children in family court.