

Proponent Testimony for SB157

House Judiciary Committee

March 9th 2020

My name is Maddie Conner. I'm sixteen years old. I'm a Senior at Lathrop High School in Lathrop, Mo, and I'm a member of Americans For Equal Shared Parenting. I'm here today to represent the children of members of Kansas Chapter of Americans for Equal Shared Parenting, many of whom share similar stories to mine.

I was seven months old when my parents separated and got divorced. From the beginning, I have always spent approximately equal time with both of my parents. This has given me the chance to build relationships with all of my family. It allows me to spend time with both of my parents, my half-siblings and step-siblings at my mom's house, my grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles on all three sides of my family. It has allowed me to spend time with my friends at both houses. I have always watched my dad, mom and step-dad do the best they can to work together to take care of me and support me.

When I was six years old, my mom married my step-dad, Shawn. At first I was excited. He has three daughters, and I was excited to have sisters. We all got along very well. We spent time doing things as a family like movie nights, carving pumpkins, going to the park, making blanket forts and spending time with our extended family. My step-sisters are the same age as me, so we all had a lot of fun together.

Then when I was eight or nine things started to change. My step-sisters weren't coming to our house as much. We didn't have as much time to do things as a family like before. When they were at our house there was a lot of fighting between my sisters and I, sometimes even physically. They started telling me that they didn't have to listen to their dad or my mom. I would watch them hit my step-dad and yell at him. They would say bad things to me about my mom and step-dad that weren't true. They stopped wanting to spend as much time with our family. They stopped talking to me, my step-dad and my mom when their mom was around. There were times that I overheard or saw my step-sisters mom screaming and cussing at their dad, even though he and my mom tried to protect us from seeing or hearing things.

By the time I was in middle school, I started struggling with depression and anxiety because of everything that was happening. I didn't understand why our family had changed so much. I didn't understand why people were treating each other that way, when we have always been taught to work together, be kind, and take care of each other and other people. What I understand now is that this all started because of a custody modification. My step-sisters mom didn't want them coming to our house, anymore. Over the last couple of years, as I have continued to fight against my depression and anxiety, one of my step-sisters started to understand what had happened to her. She started struggling with depression and anxiety, had several hospitalizations and two suicide attempts. This was also a direct result of things that went on during that time.

Even though things have gotten a little better over the last couple of years, things will never be the same. My sisters don't have bonds with our family like I was given the opportunity to have. I lost great relationships with them. They lost great relationships with all of our family.

My step-great-grandpa passed away last month. He was a long time resident of the state of Kansas. He was one of my biggest supporters over the last two years as I've advocated to change things for kids like us. I got the chance to have a good relationship with him, because my parents have always worked together and put me first. My step-sisters didn't have that same chance, and it's a chance that they can never get back. I believe if they would have had the chance to have more time with both their mom and dad from the beginning, it would have mitigated the effects of this on all of us, including our two little half-sisters and our older half-brother

I am here today on behalf of children throughout the state of Kansas who have been affected by divorce or their parents not being married. CHILDREN deserve a chance of equal time with both sides of their family. We NEED our mom's, our dad's, our siblings, our step and half siblings, our adopted siblings, our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. We deserve to be loved by ALL of our family, not just one side. I'm asking you to pass this law to protect children's relationships with both of their parents, and all of their family, from the beginning. I believe that all children deserve the right to have their entire family support them like mine does today. My hope is that by encouraging parents to work together from the beginning, it will help keep kids like us off of a battleground that we should never be a part of to begin with.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Maddie Conner