

To: Members of the House Judiciary Committee
From: Dana Hepper, Oregon resident
Date: Tuesday, March 31, 2015
Re: Support for House Bill 3503, relating offenders with minor children

Chair Barker and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 3503. My name is Dana Hepper. For the last decade I've dedicated my professional career to political advocacy on children's issues. Prior to that, I was an elementary school teacher.

Many students in my classroom had a parent currently incarcerated or previously incarcerated. One former student I still talk with spent ages 0-4 with grandparents while her mother (who was 16 at the time of incarceration) completed her sentence. When young woman was 4 years old, she was placed back in the custody of her mother, but neither she nor her mother had built a foundational maternal-child bond. When her grandparents passed, her subsequent childhood was shaped by a series of foster care placements and informal arrangements resulting from the poor foundational relationship with the person who should have been her primary caretaker. At 19 years old, she refers to her biological mother by her first name and has no one she calls mother. She has never met her father.

I share this story to reinforce the potential negative long-term consequences of unnecessarily separating parents and children.

We don't often talk about the impact of public policy on child brain development, but the reality is that the choices made in Salem do have an impact on the developing brains of young children across the state. A full 75% of women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility are mothers. Children are destabilized when a parent is incarcerated.

Youngest children stand to benefit the most from policy that promotes stable, high quality early environment. Before children enter Kindergarten, a child's brain grows to 90% of its adult size. The quality and continuity of a child's early experiences during this sensitive period of brain growth is particularly important as it sets the foundation for all future learning. Research demonstrates that children have better educational and developmental outcomes when they have continuity in their education and care arrangements. Children can thrive when they have a strong positive relationship with a consistent caregiver. While young children's brains are developing, constant adjustment to new surroundings and routines can negatively impact cognitive development. With older children, instability at home impacts young people's ability to thrive at school.

Keeping children with their parents while providing additional supports to their parents is completely in line with what science tells us is best for children and for society. House Bill 3503 supports that goal, and I ask you to vote yes on this legislation.

RESOURCES

Wallen, M. & Hubbard, A. (2013). Blending and Braiding Early Childhood Program Funding Streams Toolkit: Enhancing Financing for High-Quality Early Learning Programs. Chicago, Illinois: The Ounce. <http://www.ounceofprevention.org/national-policy/Blended-Funding-Toolkit-Nov2013.pdf>