



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on March 31, 2023

Virginia Makes It Legal for Kids to Play Outside

Children in Virginia can now play outside without their parents getting investigated for neglect. Imagine that!

Sunday night, Gov. Glenn Youngkin signed what is colloquially called the “Reasonable Childhood Independence” bill — and was formerly known as the Free-Range Parenting bill. It passed both houses unanimously.

Wait — Democrats and Republicans **AGREED** on a **PARENTING** issue in Virginia? **YES.**

The bill narrows the state’s neglect laws, which had been so vague and broad that parents were getting investigated simply for letting their kids walk or play outside.

Now the new law states clearly that “neglect” is when you put a child in serious and obvious danger — not simply anytime you take your eyes off them, or anytime a disapproving neighbor or official can dream up a far-fetched peril.

This is great news for everyone, but especially people like Elsa Hackel, 12. She testified to the legislature about the time she was walking home from the bus stop in Falls Church, Virginia, at age 9. Four police officers showed up at her door, she said, “before I could get my coat off! They said they got a call about a kid alone in the cold seen going into this house.”

Elsa was terrified her parents would be taken away. “Since then,” she said, “I haven’t wanted to go outside very often.”

Her mother, naval architect Evelyn Hackel, testified, “I never imagined there would be more police involved for that, than for when my neighbor was assaulted by a fugitive.”

Anna Fields from rural Pearisburg, Virginia, testified, too. She’s 9. About a year ago, she said, “My brother, sister, and I were all playing outside and a neighbor said we weren’t safe because we didn’t have any grown-ups around.”

The siblings were playing next door to their own home, Anna’s mom, Emily Fields, testified. But thanks to that neighbor’s call, “Child Protective Services showed up at our door. We were accused of neglect for letting the children play in the front yard. I was told that I personally have to be visible to my neighbors so that they know that my children are supervised.”

Would you call that a war on moms, kids, fun, freedom — or all of the above?

Let’s just say that forcing parents to supervise their kids when their kids are capable, trustworthy and enjoying some independence to boot is not “child protection.” It was bullying by bureaucrat.

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Jill Vogel, R, with chief co-patron Sen. Jennifer Boysko, D, and co-sponsor Jennifer McLellan, D, changes that. It was supported by experts across the political spectrum, from parents’ rights and conservative women’s groups to anti-poverty and racial justice advocates.



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These included Will Estrada, president of the Parental Rights Foundation, and Valerie L’Herrou from the Virginia Poverty Law Center, with leadership by Debra Rodman, a former Democratic member of Virginia’s House. Other supporters included Families Forward, ALEC Action, the Independent Women’s Forum and the Legal Aid Justice Center. Let Grow — the nonprofit that I run that grew out of Free-Range Kids — helped coordinate these efforts.

The sponsors testified that the bill will let Virginia parents breathe easier, especially families in minority communities, who have a higher rate of Child Protective Services investigations.

Vogel told her fellow legislators that this law saves precious resources by allowing Child Protective Services to focus on children in true danger, and it also saves families from “investigations that are unnecessarily traumatic or disruptive.”

And thus, Virginia becomes the fifth state to pass such a law, following Utah, Oklahoma, Texas and Colorado.

“This is a family rights and human rights issue whose time has come,” said Diane Redleaf, a longtime child and family advocate and Let Grow’s legal consultant. “We need to stop believing that whenever parents allow their children out of their sight, they are endangering them.”

Amen, and a salute to Virginia!

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