

H. 173 An act relating to prohibiting manipulating a child for the purpose of sexual contact

Testimony

Hello, I am Dr. Marcie Hambrick the Director of Research and Programs in the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Department of Prevent Child Abuse Vermont

Thank you Chairman LaLonde and Committee Members for hearing testimony on this important matter.

I am here today to encourage you to take up the H.173 to expand the statute prohibiting luring a child to also prohibit manipulating a child to engage in sexual activity. I have two points to make today. Firstly, that the act of manipulation for sexual activity causes additional harm to the victim aside from the harm of the sexual abuse. Secondly, that legislation like this has been successfully implemented in other states to keep children safer.

Research by Winters and Jeglic in 2022 found that victims of sexual abuse who also endured manipulation prior to and during the abuse cycle experienced [quote] “more psychological manipulation, thus leading to more feelings of confusion, culpability for the abuse, guilt, and shame” [un-quote] and that as a result of the manipulation were less able to disclose abuse, which blocked pathways to access interventions to heal. Additionally, researcher Chouliara and colleagues found that when family members had been groomed, children’s disclosures were discounted so that protection was less likely (2014). Clearly, manipulation behaviors often referred to colloquially as grooming exact a separate and worse toll on victims of child sexual abuse.

Research by Wolf and Pruitt in 2019 with adult survivors of child sexual abuse found that offenders manipulate the child victim to [quote] “doubt the perceptions and experiences” [un-quote] in that they may know that they are experiencing harm and be convinced by the offender that there is no harm. Part of the manipulation is convincing an impressionable child that if they seek help they will be blamed, punished, or not believed. Additionally, offenders often confuse children to view the offender as a victim who should be shielded by the child from blame for their actions. Those researchers also found that verbal coercive manipulation was associated with statistically significant worse PTSD symptoms in adulthood. Manipulation that included threats was associated not only with worse PTSD symptoms, but also with worse anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and dissociative issues in adulthood at statistically significant levels.

Let me share with you some victim voices from a study by Plummer in 2018 to help you understand what manipulation can look like in real life and how this affects a child. One victim said [quote] “I was spending less and less time at home, more and more time with him, and. . . the trips continued, the water-skiing continued . . . I drifted away from my church, I stopped going to Sunday school, my school grades declined.” [un-quote] Here is a description from another victim, [quote] “Here’s me, young and naïve, and he’s giving me things I couldn’t imagine, going out for a trip, food and things . . . it’s more affection than you get from all of the rest of the world . . . it makes sense that you go after those things.” [un-quote] A third quote from a victim, [quote] “In the course of that process as well he became a friend of the family. I remember over a period of time he gave my parents a new stove and things like that.” [un-quote] A parent of a child who discovered that an adult had been manipulating her 14-year-old child for 5 months shared

that without any legal recourse, she felt “Livid, angry, terrified,” and “helpless”.

Although the legislature has already seen the importance of criminalizing luring a child to engage in a sexual act, manipulation is different in that it is a process that can last years. Evidence of luring is much more proximal to the sexual crime, but manipulation, which is much more deleterious than luring in terms of negative victim impact, would be evidenced months or even years prior to the act of sexual abuse. You can see from the quotes from victims that manipulation can involve socially isolating a child and the offender ingratiating themselves to the child or the child’s family over an extended period of time. This results in the cognitive dissonance when the abuse occurs and the increased psychological harm.

Other states such as Texas and Indiana have successfully enacted this type of legislation. Vermont has long been known for acting swiftly to protect children when new risks come to light. This is another one of those moments. Since manipulative practices used by offenders who sexually abuse children cause harm that compounds the negative mental health repercussions of the sexual abuse alone, society and specifically our children should be protected. Criminalizing the act of manipulating a minor for sexual abuse will give the court a way to punitively address the added harm to the victim. Children do not have a voice. You can be the voice of victims of child sexual abuse and victims of manipulation that facilitates child sexual abuse by taking up H. 173.

## References

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