

CHILD WELFARE PLACEMENT REVIEW AMENDMENTS

2024 GENERAL SESSION

STATE OF UTAH

Chief Sponsor: Kera Birkeland

Senate Sponsor: Michael K. McKell

LONG TITLE

General Description:

This bill amends provisions of the Utah Juvenile Code related to the termination of parental rights.

Highlighted Provisions:

This bill:

- addresses the analysis a juvenile court undertakes when evaluating whether to terminate parental rights; and
- makes technical and conforming changes.

Money Appropriated in this Bill:

None

Other Special Clauses:

None

Utah Code Sections Affected:

AMENDS:

80-4-104, as renumbered and amended by Laws of Utah 2021, Chapter 261

80-4-301, as last amended by Laws of Utah 2022, Chapter 335

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the state of Utah:

Section 1. Section **80-4-104** is amended to read:

80-4-104 . Judicial process for termination -- Parent unfit or incompetent -- Best interest of child.

- (1) Under both the United States Constitution and the constitution of this state, a parent possesses a fundamental liberty interest in the care, custody, and management of the parent's child. For this reason, the termination of family ties by the state may only be done for compelling reasons.

- (2) The juvenile court shall provide a fundamentally fair process to a parent if a party moves to terminate the parent's parental rights.
- (3) If the party moving to terminate parental rights is a governmental entity, the juvenile court shall find that any actions or allegations made in opposition to the rights and desires of a parent regarding the parent's child are supported by sufficient evidence to satisfy a parent's constitutional entitlement to heightened protection against government interference with the parent's fundamental rights and liberty interests.
- (4) (a) The fundamental liberty interest of a parent concerning the care, custody, and management of the parent's child is recognized, protected, and does not cease to exist simply because:
- (i) a parent may fail to be a model parent; or
 - (ii) the parent's child is placed in the temporary custody of the state.
- (b) The juvenile court should give serious consideration to the fundamental right of a parent to rear the parent's child, and concomitantly, of the right of the child to be reared by the child's natural parent.
- (5) At all times, a parent retains a vital interest in preventing the irretrievable destruction of family life.
- (6) Before an adjudication of unfitness, government action in relation to a parent and a parent's child may not exceed the least restrictive means or alternatives available to accomplish a compelling state interest.
- (7) Until parental unfitness is established and the children suffer, or are substantially likely to suffer, serious detriment as a result, the child and the child's parent share a vital interest in preventing erroneous termination of their relationship and the juvenile court may not presume that a child and the child's parents are adversaries.
- (8) It is in the best interest and welfare of a child to be raised under the care and supervision of the child's natural parents. A child's need for a normal family life in a permanent home, and for positive, nurturing family relationships is usually best met by the child's natural parents. Additionally, the integrity of the family unit and the right of parents to conceive and raise their children are constitutionally protected. For these reasons, the juvenile court should only transfer custody of a child from the child's natural parent for compelling reasons and when there is a jurisdictional basis to do so.
- (9) The right of a fit, competent parent to raise the parent's child without undue government interference is a fundamental liberty interest that has long been protected by the laws and Constitution of this state and of the United States, and is a fundamental public

63 policy of this state.

64 (10) (a) The state recognizes that:

65 (i) a parent has the right, obligation, responsibility, and authority to raise, manage,
66 train, educate, provide for, and reasonably discipline the parent's child; and

67 (ii) the state's role is secondary and supportive to the primary role of a parent.

68 (b) It is the public policy of this state that a parent retain the fundamental right and duty
69 to exercise primary control over the care, supervision, upbringing, and education of
70 the parent's child.

71 (c) The interests of the state favor preservation and not severance of natural familial
72 bonds in situations where a positive, nurturing parent-child relationship can exist,
73 including extended family association and support.

74 (11) This chapter provides a judicial process for voluntary and involuntary severance of the
75 parent-child relationship, designed to safeguard the rights and interests of all parties
76 concerned and promote their welfare and that of the state.

77 (12) (a) Wherever possible, family life should be strengthened and preserved, but if a
78 parent is found, by reason of the parent's conduct or condition, to be unfit or
79 incompetent based upon any of the grounds for termination described in this part, the
80 juvenile court shall then consider the welfare and best interest of the child of
81 paramount importance in determining whether termination of parental rights shall be
82 ordered.

83 (b) In determining whether termination is in the best interest of the child, and in finding,
84 based on the totality of the circumstances, that termination of parental rights, from
85 the child's point of view, is strictly necessary to promote the child's best interest, the
86 juvenile court shall consider, among other relevant factors, whether:

87 (i) sufficient efforts were dedicated to reunification in accordance with Section
88 80-4-301; and

89 (ii) pursuant to Section 80-3-302, the efforts to place the child with ~~[kin who have, or~~
90 are] a relative who has, or is willing to come forward to care for the child, were
91 given due weight.

92 Section 2. Section **80-4-301** is amended to read:

93 **80-4-301 . Grounds for termination of parental rights -- Findings regarding**
94 **reasonable efforts by division.**

95 (1) Subject to the protections and requirements of Section 80-4-104, and if, based on the
96 totality of the circumstances, the juvenile court finds termination of parental rights, from

the child's point of view, is strictly necessary to promote the child's best interest, the juvenile court may terminate all parental rights with respect to the parent if the juvenile court finds any one of the following:

- (a) that the parent has abandoned the child;
- (b) that the parent has neglected or abused the child;
- (c) that the parent is unfit or incompetent;
- (d) (i) that the child is being cared for in an out-of-home placement under the supervision of the juvenile court or the division;
- (ii) that the parent has substantially neglected, willfully refused, or has been unable or unwilling to remedy the circumstances that cause the child to be in an out-of-home placement; and
- (iii) that there is a substantial likelihood that the parent will not be capable of exercising proper and effective parental care in the near future;
- (e) failure of parental adjustment, as defined in this chapter;
- (f) that only token efforts have been made by the parent:
 - (i) to support or communicate with the child;
 - (ii) to prevent neglect of the child;
 - (iii) to eliminate the risk of serious harm to the child; or
 - (iv) to avoid being an unfit parent;
- (g) (i) that the parent has voluntarily relinquished the parent's parental rights to the child; and
- (ii) that termination is in the child's best interest;
- (h) that, after a period of trial during which the child was returned to live in the child's own home, the parent substantially and continuously or repeatedly refused or failed to give the child proper parental care and protection; or
- (i) the terms and conditions of safe relinquishment of a newborn child have been complied with, in accordance with Part 5, Safe Relinquishment of a Newborn Child.

(2) When determining whether termination of parental rights is strictly necessary to promote the child's best interest, the court shall:

- (a) undertake the analysis from the child's point of view;
- (b) focus on finding the outcome that best secures the child's well-being;
- (c) include, as applicable, the considerations described in Sections 80-4-303 and 80-4-304; and
- (d) explore whether other feasible options exist that could address the specific problems

131 or issues facing the family, short of imposing the ultimate remedy of terminating the
132 parent's rights.

133 (3) The juvenile court may not terminate the parental rights of a parent because the parent
134 has failed to complete the requirements of a child and family plan.

135 [(3)] (4) (a) Except as provided in Subsection [(3)(b)] (4)(b), in any case in which the
136 juvenile court has directed the division to provide reunification services to a parent,
137 the juvenile court must find that the division made reasonable efforts to provide those
138 services before the juvenile court may terminate the parent's rights under Subsection
139 (1)(b), (c), (d), (e), (f), or (h).

140 (b) Notwithstanding Subsection [(3)(a)] (4)(a), the juvenile court is not required to make
141 the finding under Subsection [(3)(a)] (4)(a) before terminating a parent's rights:

142 (i) under Subsection (1)(b), if the juvenile court finds that the abuse or neglect
143 occurred subsequent to adjudication; or

144 (ii) if reasonable efforts to provide the services described in Subsection [(3)(a)] (4)(a)
145 are not required under federal law, and federal law is not inconsistent with Utah
146 law.

147 Section 3. **Effective date.**

148 This bill takes effect on May 1, 2024.