



## **The Process of Passing Georgia's Reasonable Childhood Independence Law**

All eyes were on Georgia in the fall of 2024 due to the horrific story involving Brittany Patterson's arrest for allowing her 10-year-old son Soren to stay home (even though his grandfather was home at the time). Soren walked into town and safely returned, but his mother was arrested and charged with child endangerment. Let Grow's President Lenore Skenazy was the first to break the story that turned viral around the world. As a result of the outrage generated by the story, Lobbyist Jesse Weathington reached out to Let Grow and offered his expertise pro bono. Let Grow jumped at the opportunity to work to see a version of the Let Grow reasonable independence for kids' legislation passed in Georgia.

This effort followed two prior attempts to try to get Georgia lawmakers interested in supporting this legislation, which came in the wake of another story that Lenore Skenazy also wrote about: Beth Widner's then-7-year-old son Jason had repeatedly been stopped for infractions like stopping for a cookie on his way home from swim practice and biking in his neighborhood. These attempts in 2019, with a coalition of supporters assembled by Let Grow, and again in 2022 (with the help of government affairs specialist David Morgan and a group at Reason Foundation) enabled Let Grow to build on relationships and briefings we had done with some policymakers in the state.

With Weathington's expert assistance, Let Grow secured the lead sponsorship of Senate Bill (S.B.) 110 by Senate Majority Caucus Chair Jason Anavitate and co-sponsorship by Republican Senators Dr. Kay Kirkpatrick, who chaired the Senate Children and Families Committee. Randy Robinson, and Democrat Jason Esteves, with Republican Rep. Eddie Lumsen led the effort in the House. Let Grow assembled a group of strategic advisors from Home School Legal Defense Association, Parental Rights Foundation, long time family defense lawyer Georgia Darice Good, Beth Widner, and staff of the Barton Center at Emory Law School.

Attorney David Delugas, who represented Brittany Patterson following her arrest, together with Tom Rawlings (a past Director of the Department of Families and Children's Services ("DFACS")) sought to have a broader bill heard that would have dramatically changed child protection processes in Georgia heard. HB 552, called the "Brittany Patterson Act," was sponsored by Rep. Noelle Kahaian but was not called for hearing.

The Let Grow-backed bill passed the Georgia Senate on March 4, 2025, with a vote of 52 in favor to 1 opposed. In addition to lead sponsor Sen. Anavitate, members of the Let Grow coalition who testified in support of the bill included Darice Good, Beth and Jason Widner, Jesse Weathington, and numerous others presented written testimony. While the House vote was not as overwhelmingly positive (due to a symbolic objection by Democrats related to an unrelated Republican measures that had just passed over their strenuous opposition), the measure was supported by Democratic Chair of the Juvenile Justice Committee Mandi Ballinger., a sufficient number of Democrats, did vote in favor of the bill and it passed the House on May 25, 2025 with a vote of 100 to 69. Governor Kemp signed the bill into law on May 14, 2025, with an effective date of July 1, 2025.

For more information:

<https://reason.com/2024/11/11/mom-jailed-for-letting-10-year-old-walk-alone-to-town/>

(Note: there are dozens of national stories, including on national TV, about Brittany Patterson's ordeal, but this is the first and was authored by Let Grow President Lenore Skenazy).

<https://reason.com/2024/04/02/beth-widner-atlanta-georgia-kids-cps-parenting/>

(This is the story about Jackson Widner's being stopped for getting a cookie on his way home from swim team, also by Lenore Skenazy)

Summarizing the law after passage:

<https://imprintnews.org/top-stories/is-it-a-crime-to-let-your-kid-walk-alone-in-georgia-parents-see-new-legal-protections/262026>