

Utah governor signs law legalizing 'free-range parenting'

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SALT LAKE CITY — So-called free-range parenting will soon be the law of the land in Utah after the governor signed what appears to be the country's first measure to formally legalize allowing kids to do things on their own to foster self-sufficiency.

The bill, which Gov. Gary Herbert announced Friday that he'd signed, specifies that it isn't neglectful to let kids do things alone like travel to school, explore a playground or stay in the car. The law takes effect May 8.

Utah's law is the first in the country, said Lenore Skenazy, who coined the term free-range parent. A records search by the National Conference of State Legislatures didn't turn up any similar legislation in other states.

Utah lawmakers said they were prompted to pass the law after seeing other states where parents had been investigated and in some cases had their children temporarily removed when people reported seeing kids playing basketball in their yards or walking to school alone.

Headline-grabbing cases have included a Maryland couple investigated after allowing their 10- and 6-year-old children to walk home alone from a park in 2015.

Republican Sen. Lincoln Fillmore of South Jordan has said allowing kids to try things alone helps prepare them for the future, though some have raised concerns the law could be used as defenses in child-abuse cases if not carefully deployed.

The law states the child must be mature enough to handle those things but leaves the age purposely open-ended so police and prosecutors can work on a case-by-case basis, Fillmore has said.

Skenazy, who wrote the book "Free Range Kids" after writing about letting her 9-year-old ride the New York City subway alone, has said the law is a good way to reassure parents who might be nervous about their parenting decisions.

Arkansas lawmakers considered a similar bill last year but ultimately rejected it.

On the federal level, another Utah politician, U.S. Sen. Mike Lee, added an amendment to a 2015 federal education bill supporting the concept. It said kids shouldn't be stopped from biking or walking to school alone with a parent's permission, and parents shouldn't face charges for letting them.