

When the State Becomes the Parent: The Quiet Erosion of Parental Rights in America

By Dr. Christina Christopher Laster
NAACRO Political Affairs Chair

Across the country, an alarming trend is unfolding—not through executive orders or constitutional amendments, but through omissions, assumptions, and quiet shifts in how power is exercised over families. Parents who have not been found unfit—who are loving, present, and fully engaged—are discovering that their rights are being bypassed, ignored, or outright dismissed by government agencies, school systems, and health institutions.

This isn't a fringe issue. It's a growing, systemic problem that threatens the very foundation of the parent-child relationship.

A Dangerous Pattern of Omission

The U.S. Supreme Court has long affirmed the [fundamental rights of parents](#) to direct the upbringing, education, and care of their children. Yet, in practice, those rights are being hollowed out—not by direct challenge, but by omission.

When laws are passed without parental consent provisions...

When schools implement mental health screenings without informing families...

When CPS investigates on vague, anonymous tips with no real evidence of harm...

...the state assumes control. It steps in not because a parent has failed, but because it can.

This phenomenon is rooted in the ancient doctrine of [parens patriae](#), a Latin term meaning “parent of the nation.” Originally intended to protect children from genuine harm, it has been stretched to justify sweeping authority over children's lives—even in cases where parents are fit, engaged, and fully capable of making decisions themselves.

The Rise of the Surrogate State

The truth is, fit parents are increasingly being treated like guests in their own children's lives. They are expected to comply with decisions already made, to accept institutional

authority without question, and to trust that the system always knows best. This erosion is often masked as public service. It's done under the banners of safety, efficiency, or equity. But the consequences are serious. When the state normalizes decision-making without parental involvement, it sends a message: that parents are not the primary stewards of their children—the government is.

The Unspoken Concession

How did we get here?

Part of the answer lies in our culture's quiet conditioning. Over the last few decades, families have been nudged—subtly but consistently—toward compliance. Parents have been taught to defer to institutions, to suppress their instincts, to accept that “good parenting” means trusting the system without hesitation.

This mirrors a modern twist on the [social contract](#), where parents unknowingly trade away decision-making power in exchange for access to education, healthcare, and public programs. It's not a formal agreement, but a cultural expectation: cooperate or be flagged as a problem.

When a school enrolls your child in services [without your signature](#)... When a doctor discusses irreversible procedures [with your teen](#) behind closed doors... When a government agency can remove [your child](#) on a hunch, not a conviction... ..your silence becomes perceived consent. That perception then becomes precedent. And precedent reshapes policy.

Not Incompetent—Just Ignored

Let's be clear: the parents impacted by this trend are not neglectful or abusive. They are ordinary families—working parents, single mothers, immigrant fathers, and community caretakers—whose rights are being rewritten without a single vote cast.

When a fit parent's authority is removed by administrative policy, not court order, we are no longer protecting children—we are displacing families.

And when that becomes routine, we are dangerously close to erasing the role of parents altogether.

What's at Stake

The family is the oldest form of governance. Parents are not extensions of the state; they are the first and most vital defenders of a child's well-being. To bypass their rights is not just unconstitutional—it is unjust, unwise, and unsustainable.

If we accept this trajectory, we normalize a system where children belong to the government before they belong to their own families.

It's time to say no!!!

No to agencies that presume guilt before due process.

No to schools that override parental judgment.

No to health systems that treat children like wards of the state.

It's time to demand laws that explicitly affirm parental rights. Policies that require informed consent. Agencies that are held accountable when they overreach.

Most importantly, it's time for parents to reclaim what has been quietly taken.

Because if we don't, the erosion becomes erasure—and the next generation grows up with the state, not the family, as their first authority.