

Icebreaker Meeting Information

What are icebreakers?

The Icebreaker is a facilitated conversation between birth and resource parents, often with contributions from the child, about a child's needs.

Icebreakers are child-focused, face-to-face meetings held between birth parents and resource parents as soon as possible after a child is placed in out-of-home care.

Ideally such meetings are held no later than three to five days after placement. Icebreakers should also be held whenever a child experiences a placement change — from home to a foster home, from foster home to adoptive home, from a group home to a relative. An Icebreaker benefits a child, the birth parents, and caregiver anytime there is a placement change.

The purpose of the Icebreaker meeting is twofold:

To share important information about a child and to be the first step in building a relationship between the child's birth parents and the new caregivers. Both of these purposes are critical in reducing the trauma the child has experienced as a result of placement.

Icebreakers open the door for communication. The meetings allow birth and foster parents to exchange information about the child: What foods does he like? What helps her fall asleep? Does he like pets? What helps her get to school in the morning?

(Meetings also allow for an exchange of information about home settings and schedules: What does a typical day consist of? Who else lives in the home?)

Important procedures/practices about Icebreakers:

- Generally, Icebreakers include the child, birth and foster parents, and caseworker. Whether or not siblings are included should be decided on a case-by-case basis.
- Icebreaker meetings require careful preparation of all three parties—birth and foster parents and the child—so each can think about what he or she wants to say, share, or ask. The preparation and the meeting itself are facilitated by the caseworker.
- Icebreakers are brief—no longer than 30-45 minutes.
- The subject of the Icebreaker is the child and his or her needs. Discussion of other matters—the reasons the child is in care, when reunification may happen, case planning or services—should be saved for later.
- If a face-to-face meeting is not feasible, Icebreakers can be held via Skype, conference call, or other alternative methods of communication.
- During the meeting, foster parents, birth parents, and the child each have an opportunity to ask questions or contribute information.
- During the meeting, the caseworker shares visitation information.

- After the meeting, the caseworker debriefs participants privately to find out whether they have further questions or concerns and to get a sense of whether the Icebreaker met their needs.

The most difficult part of an Icebreaker is likely to be the initial introduction of the birth parent and foster parent, as both may be wary and nervous. Foster and birth parents need to be open to meeting one another because the child needs to observe both sets of parents together and understand it is okay to trust the foster parents. All participants need to trust that the caseworker will, above all else, be concerned about everyone's safety and not put anyone in harm's way.

Why are Icebreaker Meetings important?

Foster care is a very complex system that touches multiple parties. It can have unintended negative consequences, even when the best services are provided. Children might feel dislocated and afraid, their sense of identity and belonging deeply affected. Birth parents' confidence and hope for the future can be damaged; foster families might feel ill prepared to meet a child's needs, especially when they have little information about those needs.

That is where Icebreakers come in. These meetings can help:

- Reduce the trauma of foster care placement for children;
- Introduce parents and caregivers in order to share information;
- Build alliances among adults when children are in congregate care, too;
- Begin relationship building and a sense of teamwork; and
- Improve everyone's ability to help a child, including the caseworker.

Reducing the Trauma of Placement

A Child's Perspective: The removal of a child from his or her birth family can be traumatic, disruptive, and scary to a child and birth parents. A child's removal from home also affects siblings and extended family.

After a removal, a child is often disconnected not only from family, but from everything familiar: neighborhood, friends, pets, school, and familiar people such as doctors. Daily routines are disrupted, such as morning and bedtime rituals, chores, mealtime habits, as well as rules around privileges and discipline.

Most profoundly, the parent/child relationship is disrupted, which can deeply affect identity, trust, and self-esteem. If a child is not living with family anymore, then who is he or she? A child may blame himself for the removal and take on a great deal of guilt. A child may suffer from fear of the unknown. Delays in transferring educational and medical records—or missing information about a child's educational and medical history—can lead to gaps in services. If a child moves from one caregiver to another while in foster care, these gaps can get even wider.

A Parent's Perspective: When a child is removed from home, parents are likely to be coping with an array of feelings. They will have lost control over how, when, and how often they see

their child. Parents may be in shock or denial; they may feel angry and guilty. Parents may feel a deep sense of failure and a loss. Not knowing the whereabouts of their child, if they are safe or being well cared for is overwhelming to a parent whose child has just been placed in foster care. ***A Foster Parent's Perspective:*** When a child is placed in a resource family's home (even a group home), the new family naturally experiences change. While they may have opened their door to a child, often this child is a stranger to them. The caregiver is often not provided with much information about the child, their habits, or routines. Even if the child is a relative, living in the home is not the same as visiting periodically. Everyone has adjustments to make. Resource families may feel stressed about meeting the needs of the child. They may struggle with cultural differences, with different family values and practices, and they may worry about the birth parent's reaction to the child living in their home.

Introducing Parents and Caregivers to Share Information

Icebreakers are designed to help ease the transition of a child into a resource family home. The meetings may also help remove any negative misunderstandings or preconceptions birth and foster parents may have about one another and begin to build a relationship beneficial to all.

How to Handle Safety Concerns, Untreated Substance Abuse, or Mental Health Issues

Your agency will need to develop policies and practices that assist caseworkers in minimizing the risk of unsafe situations. Often an agency's first reaction is to not hold an Icebreaker meeting when there are safety concerns or parents have untreated substance abuse and mental health issues. However, each family is different and Icebreakers may be helpful as first steps toward rehabilitation. Caseworkers must assess on a case-by-case basis whether Icebreaker meetings are appropriate given each specific situation.

Safety

Caseworkers should prepare birth parents for Icebreaker meetings with care and, always, attention to a child's physical and emotional safety. In cases where birth parents have previously exhibited violent or overly aggressive behavior, extra security measures should be taken. If any party displays inappropriate behavior during the meeting, the meeting should be immediately terminated. The incident should be documented in accordance with agency policy and procedures. A subsequent meeting can be re-scheduled if the agency deems it appropriate and feasible. Or an alternative means such as a conference call or videoconferencing could be used as well.

Sibling Considerations

There will be times when siblings are placed separately with some children in foster care, others in kinship care. How will the Icebreaker be conducted when there is a single birth parent and multiple caregivers? The decision on how to proceed must be made on a case-by-case basis.

Factors such as sibling group size, number of placements, birth parent strengths, etc. will assist in making a plan for the icebreaker. Options include:

- If the birth parent is comfortable with a group meeting, all caregivers can meet with the birth parent in a single Icebreaker. The key is not to make the birth parent feel outnumbered in the meeting.
- Two Icebreakers could be scheduled back to back.
- Two Icebreakers could be scheduled for multiple children with all caregivers overlapping for a short period of time, no more than 10 minutes. This could encourage partnerships between caregivers that could lead to greater sibling contact.

The Icebreaker Meeting Agenda

The meeting agenda is an important document but it should not be overly complex. A simple agenda should include an outline that allows for the sharing of information, keep the meeting on track, and help to manage time. An agenda will also help provide consistency in meetings and ensure the Icebreaker is informal, comfortable, and non-threatening. The agenda may include the following types of activities:

- **Introductions** (everyone go around the table and introduce themselves)
- **State the purpose of the meeting**
 - To share important information about a child
 - To be the first step in building a relationship between the child's birth parents and the new caregivers.
- **The foster parents share information about themselves and their home**
 - Example: share commitment to working with birth parent, how the child is doing in their home, assure parents they are not trying to take their place, when did they become foster parents, why did they become foster parents, how many other adults and children live in their home, do they have pets, what are the rules in the home, what does a day in their home look like, etc.
- **The birth parent shares information about the child**
 - Example: special needs, medical, dental and educational needs, food preference, religious traditions or affiliations, extra-curricular activities, bedtime and routines, school or neighborhood friends, behaviors, fears, anxieties, hair care, how to comfort the child, etc.
- **The child has an opportunity to ask questions or contribute information important to him or her.**
- **The caseworker shares guidelines around visitation and helps coordinate next steps for visit or other contact**

Encouraging Effective Icebreakers

As with any child welfare family meeting, effective Icebreakers involve organization, careful preparation, strong group meeting skills on the caseworker's part, and a case management process that supports family engagement work. The meeting will benefit the child most if the caseworker and both sets of parents can share important information about the child, such as:

- Special needs, including medical, dental, behavioral, and educational needs (does the child have an IEP? Any academic strengths or deficits?);
- Important relationships, such as school or neighborhood friends or relatives;
- Preferences, particularly related to his or her comfort, such as food preferences, fears and anxieties, favorite extra-curricular activities, bedtime routines, comfort routines, hair care and clothing preferences, and any other special objects or routines; and
- Religious, cultural, and family traditions or affiliations.

In addition, the birth parent will have many questions about the foster family. Caseworkers should be prepared to elicit information from foster parents such as:

- A status update: How is the child doing in their home?
- Background information on the home and the family. How many other adults and children live in their home? Do they have pets? What are the rules in the home and what does a day in their home look like? Who watches the child when the foster parents are not home?
- Information on family values and habits. What is the foster parent's disciplinary style? What types of music, languages, food, or religious influence are in the house?
- Background information on the foster parent's fostering role. When did they become foster parents and why? How long they have been foster parents? How many children they have parented biologically or otherwise? Is the foster parent willing to co-parent my child with me as a part of a team?

Caseworker Tips to Ensure Effective Icebreakers

- Have a written agenda.
- Open the meeting with introductions, ground rules, and a description of what will happen during the meeting.
- Encourage the relationship between the parent and foster parent.
- Ask questions about child's development. This can help start a conversation between birth and foster parents.
- Listen carefully; steer the conversation away from blaming, case planning details, and discussions of why the child came into care.

FYI: Understanding What Birth Parents May be Feeling

Some thoughts or feelings expressed by birth parents before, during, or after Icebreakers meetings:

- "The foster parent may already be attached to my child and want her as their own."

- “The foster parent may tell the child negative things about me that will make the child dislike me.”
- “I don’t need anyone to show me how to take care of my child.”
- “If I get a little irritated during the meeting, will that postpone reunification with my child?”
- “How I communicate with the foster parent will be scrutinized during the meeting. They will use any negative behavior or information against me.”
- “The foster parents have more resources for the child; I can’t compete with that. I am inadequate as a parent.”
- “The foster parent just wants my child for the money and does not actually want to help him.”
- “The foster parents will treat my child like a maid or butler and make him do all the work around their house.”