



Icebreaker Meetings Practice Guide

QPI Principles:

Children deserve foster parents and kinship caregivers who convey love and acceptance and who strive to co-parent with and demonstrate support of birth parents' efforts to be successful.

Foster parents and kinship caregivers are part of a compassionate, respected, and informed professional team that partner to put the child's best interests first.

Whenever a child must be removed from his/her home, the situation is most often an emotionally charged situation with parents and children experiencing significant trauma and loss. Even in the best of situations which may superficially appear calm, it is well known that most often, trauma and feelings of tremendous loss, anger and mistrust are present. In order to establish a positive working relationship as soon as possible, it is critical to focus on strategies and actions that are targeted to developing trust and open and honest communications. As with the Initial Call at the time of placement, another such strategy that assists in developing a trusting relationship is the utilization of Icebreaker Meetings when a child is removed or replaced.

Best Practice:

Utilization of the Icebreaker Meeting is the practice of scheduling and facilitating a meeting between the birth parent(s) and foster caregiver(s) for the primary purposes of:

- sharing information about the child to support quality care for the child;
- reinforcing that birth parent is the expert about their child;
- initiating and building a relationship between the caregivers with a common focus on the child.

The Icebreaker meeting provides a unique opportunity at the earliest moments in a case, for the child's caseworker to demonstrate from the very beginning of the case that the primary focus will always be on the child and that each of the parties, birth parent, foster caregiver, and caseworker share a common goal to support actions and decisions based on the needs and best interest of the child.

Outcomes of Icebreakers:

- Reinforces that the care of child is primary concern by foster caregiver
- Reinforces that parent is the expert on their child;
- Provides parent with unique opportunity to share information, directly and in their own words, information they feel is critical for the safety and care of their child.
- Reinforces that caseworker will follow through on commitments made
- Foster caregivers will have increased information as to care, traits, needs, and child's history to assist in providing quality care.
- Establishes observable connection for child between birth parents and foster parents
- Creates opportunity for shared goals and collaborative parenting
- Establishes initial face to face contact and relationship based on shared concern about child.
- Sets in motion the working relationship with the agency; initial trust with foster care worker
- Provides for supportive transition for child by allowing foster parent to ask about specific information pertinent to their home environment and routines

Steps for Successful Icebreaker Meeting

It is important that the caseworker explain the importance of, as well as providing support of the Icebreaker Meeting. Both the birth parent and foster parent should be advised that the Icebreaker meeting is one of the most important meetings that will be held, as it will provide the opportunity for information to be shared that will support the care of the child, and create the foundation for a positive and successful working relationship between the individuals who will be caring for the child.

Birth parents and foster caregivers should be prepared that their individual levels of participation, openness, and honesty could have great impact on the care the child receives, the reduction of trauma for the child, and the child's adjustment to the foster family. Icebreaker meetings will have greater success if all parties are prepared and understand that the purpose of the meeting is to focus on the child through exchange of information between the birth parent and foster parent.

Again, the critical elements are to follow through on commitment, exchange critical information known by the parent about the child, and introduce the foster parent or foster caregiver.

Preparing Birthparents

Icebreaker meetings will have greater success and serve as a greater resource if caseworkers help prepare birth parents to understand that the initial goal for everyone is to assure the child is receiving the best care possible, and that can only occur if his/her foster caregiver knows as much about the child as possible. Acknowledging and reinforcing to birth parents that they are the only ones who possess critical information about the child places them in a unique role to help ensure their child receives the care he/she needs.

As with the Initial Call, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that the birth parent, in all likelihood, will still be very upset about the removal and circumstances. It is very important that the birth parent understand that there will be discussions about that in the very near future and plans will be developed to focus on reunification with their child (or other goals as appropriate), but at this time, the initial focus for all is to ensure that the foster child's caregiver has all the information necessary to meet the child's needs.

Helping the birth parent to recognize their value and critical role, and that their child is relying on them, will also assist in assessing the parent's ability to meet the needs of their child, regardless of their own needs at the time. Caseworkers may need to prompt the birth parent with types of information to gather and be prepared to discuss, especially related to medical conditions and treatment, allergies, behavioral needs and interventions successfully employed by parents, daily care and routines, feeding habits/preferences, educational needs and supports utilized, etc... It is also important for birth parents to provide family history and identification of relatives so the foster caregiver may appropriately discuss relatives to maintain connections and ease fears of child. Providing a checklist or discussion guide for the parent may assist them in providing comprehensive information. This information may also be of assistance in later case planning as related to relative supports and connections for the child and birth family.

Regardless if an Initial Call was held between the birth parents and foster parents at the time of the child's placement, detailed information should again be covered during the Icebreaker Meeting. Utilization of guides or forms which focus on gathering a detailed history about a child can help clarify information as well as providing written documentation.

Gathering the following types of information can help a parent focus on the child's needs and prepare for the Icebreaker Meeting.

- sleep/bedtime routines
- does he need assistance in toileting?
- food or medical allergies
- does she bathe or shower, alone, or needs assistance?
- any specific fears, soothing/calming strategies
- school status, homework/study habits and routines
- social, extracurricular activities of child
- concerns or limitations on peer activities, social media, etc.

Preparing Foster Parents/Caregivers

Just as with birth parents, foster parents may most likely have some level of anxiety about the first face to face meeting with the birth parent. Assuring the foster parent that you will be there to ensure the discussion remains focused on the child will assist to alleviate some of their anxieties, especially if they are new to the Icebreaker Meeting practice. As with participation in Initial Calls, foster caregivers' comfort level will increase as they participate in more Icebreakers, feeling better equipped and better recognizing the value of the meeting for them as the child's caregiver. Again, the goal is to not only share important information, but also to provide an opportunity for these parenting partners to establish a positive and trusting relationship focused on the child.

Have the foster parents/caregivers prepare to discuss the child's placement to that point, observations, etc.. Encourage foster caregivers to ask birth parents about rules, routines, and other questions about the child which may have arisen since the Initial Call.

Preparing the Child

Following the birth parent and foster parent's discussion, based upon the age and developmental ability of the child, the child and birth parent should have the opportunity to talk for a few minutes to alleviate concerns they share about the current status of the other or of other family members. Help prepare the child that the call will be for a few minutes and they can tell their parent about the foster family and home and identify if there is anything else they need from their own home. If the first visit is known, be sure the child is aware and is able to confirm that with the parent. Otherwise, if the call is proceeding well, another call could be set up in a day or two depending upon the needs of child and participation of birth parent.

Scheduling the Meeting

Scheduling the Icebreaker Meeting within 3 – 5 days of the child's placement in foster care provides the best opportunity to maximize its' benefits and successful outcomes – early sharing of critical information and establishment of a positive working relationship. It is also critical that the meeting be scheduled at a time that supports the attendance and allows for sufficient time for the parent and foster parent to engage in meaningful dialogue about the child.

General Guidelines

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?

The format is straightforward:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Icebreakers are brief—no longer than 30-45 minutes.¹

Sample Agenda

Introductions

Explanation of Purpose – child focused, information sharing for care of child

Foster Parents' Description of Home, Household Members, Child's Adjustment

Birth Parent asked to provide Information about Child -Medical Needs, Behavioral, Social Activities, Daily Routines, Educational Status and Needs, etc- Use of All About Me Form or other Child Assessment forms may be helpful to guide conversation and document information.

Child Asked to Provide any Additional Information or Ask Questions

Review and Clarification of Information Shared and Immediate Needs of Child

Confirmation of Next Contact or Visit

¹ Icebreaker Meetings: A Tool for Building Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parents; Annie E Casey. Karri Biehle, Denise Goodman, Ph.D. 2012