



## Icebreaker Meeting Overview

The Icebreaker is a facilitated conversation between birth and resource parents<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup> 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. (Detailed information about who to involve and how to provide them is provided later in this publication.)
- ▶ 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term "resource parent" refers to the child's caregiver while in custody of the agency, such as foster, adoptive, relative, kinship parents, or group care staff.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this publication, the term "child" will include children from birth to age 18.

- ▶ 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 Icebreaker Meetings?**

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.

### **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.

It is not helpful if caseworkers and foster parents make global assumptions about the birth family, or if birth families hold stereotypes about resource families or caseworkers. Some of the most frequent and hurtful assumptions: that the majority of birth parents do not love or care about their children, and that foster parents only care for children for financial gain — or because they want to “steal” children away from birth families. Direct contact and communication can dispel these assumptions.

Any success in building relationships and improving communication between birth and foster parents can significantly improve everyone's experience with the child welfare system. With open communication, adults are able to do a better job in their respective roles and responsibilities. And if children are allowed to voice their concerns or feelings, adults have a clearer idea of how to proceed in the best interest of the child.

## Preparation is Key

Specific details on preparing Icebreaker participants are presented in Section IV, but the importance of preparation cannot be overstated. As your agency implements Icebreaker meetings, you will need to consider how to make time for caseworkers to prepare Icebreaker participants to get the most out of each meeting.

Caseworkers will need time and coaching to:

- ▶ *Assess participants' readiness* to meet each other and participate in the meeting. Ideally, this assessment can happen on a face-to-face basis, such as court hearings or family team meetings.
- ▶ *Prepare the participants.* Caseworkers will need to use every opportunity to prepare the child's birth and foster parents for their first meeting, including before and after court hearings, family team meetings, school meetings, and other contacts.
- ▶ *Help the birth and foster parents think of what to share at the meeting.* Others can help and support the caseworker with preparation. For example, if your agency has parent advocates, they can help the birth parent draw up a list of important information to share; they can help calm nerves, too. Likewise, staff working with the foster parents can help them understand the birth family's situation, share family information, and think of ways to connect with the child's parent beyond the Icebreaker meeting.

## REFERENCE

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Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012, January 1), [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org), pp 7-9 excerpt, *Icebreaker meetings: A Tool for Building Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parents*, <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-IcebreakerMeetingsToolkit-2012.pdf#page=9>

For full toolkit, *Resources for Holding Icebreaker Meetings Between Birth and Foster Parents*, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/resources-for-holding-icebreaker-meetings-between-birth-and-foster-parents/>

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