

# Parent & Foster Parents Working Together To Create A Bridge Back Home

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## **What is shared parenting?**

- Shared parenting comes from the recognition that it is critical to reunification for parents to continue to be parents even if their children are not living at home.
- Shared parenting is a continuum of activities.
- Shared parenting is a commitment between the worker, the foster parent and the birth parent to work together to share the day to day and long term parenting responsibilities of children in care from the day they enter to the day they return and beyond.
- Shared parenting starts with an icebreaker meeting and sometimes evolves into a lifelong family type bond between parents and caregivers.

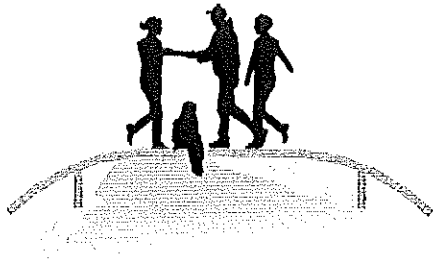
## **Examples of Shared Parenting**

- Attend the icebreaker meeting
- Share information about the child's adjustment in foster care
- Share information about parenting, grooming, the child's food preferences, etc.
- Ask questions about the child's adjustment in foster care
- Attend Family Team Meetings
- Talk on the phone, Exchange photos
- Send a snack or activity to a visit
- Share copies of school work with parent
- Tell foster parent about school progress or challenges
- Exchange letters
- Foster parent can encourage the parent's progress: verbally, in meetings, on the phone, in letters
- Talk with each other at the beginning or end of a visit
- Foster parent can help the parent find community resources
- Set up times when parent and child can talk on the phone
- Ask for the worker to support the development of a shared parenting plan
- The foster parent should learn about understand and respect the birth parent's culture.
- Offer to host a sibling visit, Take or pick up for visits
- Offer transport to meetings when needed (go together to MTM's)
- Attend child appointments together (when possible)
- Attend school events or sporting activities together
- Take training to be a visit coach, Serve as a mentor
- Debrief before and after visits

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- Welcome the parents into your home (Sunday dinner, a visit, a movie night)
- Attend parenting classes together, Have joint family activities
- Help develop reunification plan
- Serve as a support following reunification
- Provide respite care after reunification
- Include the parent in farewell activities/reunification celebration



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## ICEBREAKER MEETING PROTOCOL

- I. Icebreaker Meeting Guidelines
- II. Meeting Process and Agenda
- III. Icebreaker Meeting Report
- IV. "All About Me" Questionnaire
- V. "Fast Facts" Sheet

## I. ICEBREAKER MEETING GUIDELINES

### **Definition:**

An icebreaker meeting is a facilitated, child-focused meeting held shortly after a child is placed (or replaced) in out-of-home care to provide an opportunity for birth parents and foster parents (or other caregivers) to meet each other and to share information about the needs of the child. This meeting is the beginning of establishing communication and building a relationship between the child's parents and caregivers.

### **Purpose:**

- To provide an opportunity and setting for the foster parents and birth parents to meet.
- To begin establishing communication and a relationship between the child's parents and caregivers.
- To share information that will help the foster parent or other caregivers to support the child in care.
- To reduce parents' anxiety about their child's placement and well-being.
- To reinforce the parents' role(s) as "parent" and establish caregivers as part of the team working to support the child and reunify the family.
- To initiate a care team that will work together on behalf of the child(ren) and birth family.
- To reassure children that their parents and caregivers are all working together to provide for their care, giving children permission to adjust positively to their placement while maintaining their relationship with their parents.

### **An Icebreaker Meeting is held when:**

- a child is placed in out-of-home care for the first time (foster or kinship), or
- a child is making a placement change.

### **Attendees:**

Parent(s), foster parent(s) or other caregiver, child's social worker, child placing agency social worker, and possibly the child. The meeting is considered completed if at least one of the child's parents attend; however, it is considered a best practice for both parents to participate in the same or separate meetings.

### **Children:**

Children may attend the meeting, as appropriate. This decision is made by the social worker in consultation with the child and other participants. Regardless of whether a child is to attend or not, he or she is to be informed of the meeting and should be helped to understanding that the meeting does not determine if the child is to return home, rather that it is focused on sharing information about the child's needs. The social worker can have the child fill out the "All About Me" form in advance of the meeting.

Issues to consider when deciding whether a child should attend:

- Child's physical and developmental age
- Child's desire to attend
- Parents' ability to stay positive and child-focused during the meeting
- Child's comfort level regarding meeting with his/her parents, including ability to separate from the parents at the end of the meeting.

**Meeting Logistics:**

- Scheduled by the child's social worker.
- Takes place within 7 days of the ongoing placement.
- For temporary/emergency placement, a supervised conference call is held within the first 72 hours.
- Takes place at the agency or a neutral location.
- Lasts about 30 minutes.
- Meeting is scheduled to be held before the placement when the placement is a planned transition.
- Alternate form of a meeting (phone, in writing) is arranged if a face to face meeting is not viable.
- "Fast Facts" or a similar informational form will be completed within 48 hours of any placement.

**Safety:**

The social worker will implement alternate methods for sharing information if there are serious safety concerns for any party.

**Participant Participation:**

The social worker (public agency/CPA) is responsible for preparing participants for the content of the meeting, including information they may not want to share, prior to it being held. Issues to be discussed include:

- Purpose of the meeting.
- Importance of staying child-focused.
- What the meeting is not (not a discussion of the allegations or whether or not a child will return home).
- The meeting is an opportunity to share vital information about their child and for all parents to form a partnership.
- Specific information parents may want to share. (Parents may want to fill out the "All About..." questionnaire prior to the meeting.) Parents may wish to bring a favorite toy or book for the child.
- Short-term visitation plan.

## II. MEETING PROCESS AND AGENDA

### Meeting Introduction

Facilitator

Review the purpose of the meeting

### Introduction of Participants

Facilitator

Introduce each participant and clarify roles and responsibilities of each

### Foster Parent Information

Foster Parent

The foster parent is invited to share information with the birth parent including:

- How the child is doing in their home so far
- Assurance that, "I am not trying to take your place"
- Other adults and siblings (birth/adoptive/foster) in the home
- Where the child sleeps.
- What the child calls the foster parent
- Basic structure/rules of the home
- Daily routine
- Experience or goals as a foster parent.

### Child Specific Information Sharing

Parent / All

The parent(s) will be invited to share information about the child using the "*All About My Child*" questionnaire as a guide.

### Opportunity for Questions from the Child

Child

The child will be given an opportunity to ask questions or to express his/her desires regarding on-going activities and contact with important people.

### Communication and Short-term Visitation Plan

Social Worker

The social worker and participants will discuss a communication plan that is appropriate and is comfortable for all parties, including the method(s) of communication. The arrangements for the short-term visitation plan will be discussed.

### Meeting Evaluation Form

The social worker distributes the evaluation form to the birth parents and foster parents and asks them to complete it before departing.

**III. ICEBREAKER MEETING REPORT**

(Provide to all attendees at completion of meeting)

Case Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Case Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_ Social Worker: \_\_\_\_\_

Names of Child/Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Attendees (name/title/role)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Items Discussed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Follow-up Needed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Visitation Arrangement:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Communication Plan:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Attach the "All About..." questionnaire(s) to this report.

Attach any other notes from the meeting to this report.

## Interpreting Behaviors of Young Children and Parents During Visits By Victoria Youcha

The following scenarios offer guidance on interpreting behaviors of young children and parents during visits.<sup>1</sup>

### Example 1

*Case:* A toddler avoids eye contact and resists his mother's touch for the first 20 minutes of a weekly visit. He and his mother then engage in mutually enjoyable play, only to have the visit end with the child going into a hysterical tantrum.

*Question:* Should visits be increased or curtailed?

*Discussion:* In the absence of physical or emotional abuse, this pattern of avoidance, engagement, and distress at separation can indicate a positive relationship between the toddler and his mother. The mother's ability to read his cues by allowing him time to warm up to her and reestablish their relationship can indicate that the visit is going well. Even the child's extreme distress at the end of the visit could be a healthy protest against another separation from the mother with whom he maintains a strong connection.

### Example 2

*Case:* A foster parent reports that the eight month old in her care does not eat and wakes frequently for several nights following the weekly one-hour visit with her mother. She asks that visits be curtailed because they are upsetting the baby.

*Question:* What information does the judge need to decide whether visits are in this child's best interest?

*Discussion:* Absent documented physical abuse or erratic behavior by the visiting parent, the judge might ask for the following additional information:

1. What does the interaction between parent and baby look like during visits? Is there a pattern of warmup, engagement, and mutual delight followed by increased upset at the end of the visit?
2. What is the relationship between the parent and the foster parent? Is it possible that the foster parent's bond with the baby is so strong that she consciously or unconsciously resents the time the baby spends with the mother?

If mother and baby seem to have a strong attachment, increasing the number of visits per week might reduce the child's distress because there will be less time between contacts. Ideally, the mother and foster parent should work together to help ease the baby's transition into and out of each visit.

If the baby seems fearful of his mother or is unable to be comforted by her, the judge can order an evaluation of the relationship between mother and baby by a clinician with specific training in infant mental health. The results can provide critical information to help the court decide whether visits are in the child's best interest.





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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND FOSTER PARENTS

#### FROM THE BIRTH PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE:

**1. What will we talk about at the icebreaker meeting?**

This is a chance to begin to get to know each other. This first meeting will be brief, probably lasting about thirty minutes. It will be an opportunity for you to share your knowledge of your child to help the foster parents do their job. You will discuss things such as your child's health, likes and dislikes, hobbies, medical needs, school, sports, etc. You will also have an opportunity to ask the foster parents about themselves, such as who is in their family and what they enjoy doing as a family. Visitation arrangements for you and your child will also be discussed.

**2. How will the foster parents treat me during the icebreaker meeting?**

With dignity and respect. Foster parents take care of children because they enjoy children and want to see them reunited with their families. They will treat you kindly and will ask you questions about your child that will help with your child's adjustment in the foster home.

**3. Do I have to answer all of the foster parent's questions at the icebreaker meeting?**

Both you and the foster parents may be a little nervous about meeting for the first time, but that is normal. You may each be unsure about what you may be asked and how comfortable you will be in responding. If you are unsure about answering a particular question, let the foster parent know that you need to think about the question and are not ready to answer it. As your social worker, I could help you think through how you might respond. Answering the foster parent's questions will help them be sensitive to your child and provide him/her with the best care.

**4. May I call my child at the foster home?**

I (social worker) will let you know whether this can happen. I will be talking with all of the involved people to determine whether that is possible.

**5. How will my child and I remain connected?**

We are all going to work hard to keep you and your child well connected while he/she is living with a foster family so that you will continue to know your child well. You and your child will visit regularly, and you will receive updated information from your social worker and the foster parent. Your communication and relationship with the foster parents will help with this. When it comes time for return home, the transition back into your family will likely be gradual to give everyone an opportunity to make any needed adjustments.

**6. Can I tell the foster parent how to take care of my child?**

Your child will have a smoother adjustment to his/her foster home if you and the foster parents communicate openly about your child. If you have a specific request, the foster parents will give you an honest response about what they are able or not able to do. You can use me, as your social worker, to help talk out any major differences.

**7. Will my child love the foster parents more than me?**

No one can take the place of a child's birth parents. Your child will miss you and will continue to love you. We want communication and a comfortable relationship between you and the foster parents so that your child will not feel divided loyalties to two families. Your child's heart will be big enough to embrace two families who care about him/her.

**8. I am worried that the foster parents will turn my child against me.**

Foster parents are specially trained to care for children who are experiencing living away from their families. They understand how difficult and emotional it is for children and their parents to be separated from each other (and from siblings). They also know how important it is to remain non-judgmental toward birth parents so that the child will not suffer from conflicted feelings about two families.

**9. Will the foster parents support my value system (religion, racial/cultural, food, etc.)?**

Yes, but there may be differences between your two families. It will be important for you and the foster parents to discuss what those differences may be and what accommodations the foster parents will be able to make. The foster parents are raising their own family within their own cultural and value systems, so it may take compromising to reach a mutual understanding.

**10. Will the foster parents take my child to their school, sports events, etc.?**

They will incorporate your child into their family routine and will also support your child's special interests. Your child will go to the public school assigned to the location of the foster home. When you meet the foster parents, ask them what activities they enjoy doing and tell them what the child enjoys. We will attempt to maintain your child's school placement and special activities when possible.

## **FROM THE FOSTER PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE:**

### **1. Structure of the icebreaker meeting**

- How is the meeting structured? How long is the meeting?
- Who will be present at the meeting? Will I have to lead it?
- What should I talk about in the meeting?

The meeting is a chance for you and the birth parents to begin to get to know each other. This first meeting will be brief, probably lasting not more than thirty minutes. It will be held soon after the child is placed in your home, most likely within the first week. The meeting is informal in nature and includes you (foster parents), the birth parents, the child placing agency (CPA) social worker (if there is one), the child's social worker, and possibly the child. The meeting is facilitated by the child's social worker. You will be told in advance who will be attending and what will be on the agenda. In general, this is a casual meeting where the birth parents will provide you with information about the child, you can exchange information about your families, the short range visitation plan can be discussed, and any other questions or concerns relating to the care of the child.

### **2. Time concerns; why is the icebreaker meeting important?**

- Is this mandatory? What if I do not want to attend?
- Why is it important to meet the birth family so quickly?
- We already have so many meetings to attend, why one more?

Foster parents are important treatment team members and contribute greatly to the child's well-being. Therefore, attendance at the icebreaker meeting is expected unless, in rare instances, there are safety concerns which prohibit the meeting from occurring. It is important that you express any general or safety concerns to the social worker (or CPA) in advance so that they can be addressed. The icebreaker meeting is important to hold right away because it will bring forth important information to help you in providing care to the child and to help in allaying everyone's worries from unanswered questions. This meeting begins the process of you and the birth parents building a comfortable and respectful relationship and communication that will serve the child well throughout his or her placement.

### **3. Concerns about meeting the birth parents**

- What if the birth parent is mentally ill?
- What happens if I feel unsafe in the meeting?
- What if the birth family is hostile towards me?
- Why would I want to meet the persons who may have seriously hurt their own child?

Your social worker is going to assess the advisability of holding an icebreaker meeting in person. With rare exception, birth parents will not pose a danger to foster parents at such a

meeting. On the contrary, experience has shown that when treated with dignity and respect, birth parents will return the same treatment to those people attending the meeting. The social worker will be present to facilitate the meeting and to redirect any inappropriate interactions, should they occur. One of their roles in the meeting is to assure respectful communication and appropriate behavior on the part of everyone. The meeting will be discontinued if at any time should the situation becomes unsafe or unproductive. Although you may have some concerns, it is important for you to engage the child's birth family and begin forging a relationship with them for the well being of the child. Children adjust better to their foster home placement when they feel connected to their birth families. They see this connection not only through visitation but also through the relationship among all the parents. This connection will most likely result in greater stability in the child's overall functioning while he or she remains in foster care.

#### **4. Sharing information**

- What if I don't want the birth parents to know my address and phone number?
- What if the birth parents ask a question that makes me feel uncomfortable?

The birth parents may ask for your address and phone number and how they may reach their child. If you are not comfortable in allowing the birth parents to know your address and or phone number, tell them that you would like to get to know them and the child better before giving out that information. Be sure that the social worker talks with all of you about how the child will have communication with the parents, at least for the near future. Both you and the birth parents may be a little nervous about meeting for the first time, but that is normal. You may each be unsure about what you may be asked and how comfortable you will be in responding. If you are unsure about answering a particular question, let the birth parent know that you need to think about the question and are not ready to answer it or that it is personal information that you are not comfortable in sharing. Your social worker could help you think through how you might respond. Answering the birth parents' questions will help lessen their anxiety over the loss of their child by satisfying their natural curiosity about with whom their child is living and what kind of care the child will be receiving.

#### **5. Concerns relating to the child**

- What if the child doesn't want me to meet his/her family?
- How will this meeting affect the child's behavior in my home?

Most children will not be concerned about you meeting their parents, especially if they are younger and if the icebreaker meeting is viewed by the adults as a natural thing to occur. For children who do have a concern, ask them specifically what is worrying them. Gently reassure them that the meeting is going to help you and their parents work together to help the family and to help you in taking care of them while they live away from their parents. As the adults slowly forge a respectful relationship and communication, the child's anxiety will decrease as he or she sees the two worlds connected and sees an acceptance of the birth family members. If any behavioral problems appear to be the result of the parties meeting, communicate with the child to discover the thoughts and feelings behind the behavior.

**FROM THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE:** (geared toward the teen)

**1. What will be talked about during the very first meeting?**

When your parents and foster parents meet for the first time, they will get to know each other a little bit and will talk about things that will help your foster parents take care of you. They may talk about how you have been doing in school or whether you are taking some medication or need to see a doctor. They might discuss the things you like to do and do not like to do. The parents might talk about rules they have in each of their households and how these may be similar or different. Your social worker will talk with you about whether you will be present at this meeting. If you attend, think ahead of time about what questions you want to ask or what you would like your parents and foster parents to talk about.

**2. What if my parents and foster parents do not get along?**

All parents differ to some extent in how they parent their children and how they take care of their households. When you are in foster care, you have two sets of parents who care for you and are responsible for your well-being. Sometimes, all of those adults do not agree on what is best for a child. This is not your fault, and it is not your responsibility to help the adults in your life get along. If you are comfortable, talk to your foster parents, birth parents, and/or your social worker about how it makes you feel when they do not get along. The adults need to know if you are troubled or worried so that they can work harder to get along well.

**3. What if I don't want my parents and foster parents to meet?**

When children (youth) must leave their families and move to a foster home, it is normal and important for the parents and foster parents to meet each other. When they do, they have a chance to exchange some helpful information and begin to work cooperatively together on your behalf. We hope that, if your parents and foster parents speak comfortably with each other, you will stay better connected to your parents and relatives while you are in foster care. If you would not want your parents and your foster parents to meet and talk with each other, think about why that is and share those thoughts with your social worker.

**4. Who will decide my visitation with my parents?**

Your social worker will be making most of the decisions about visitation in consultation with your parents, foster parents, and others who know you and your family, such as your therapist. When your parents and foster parents first meet, they will be talking about visitation arrangements including when the first visits will occur, where, and who might be present, such as your social worker.

**5. May my parents visit me in my foster home?**

At first, your visits with your parents will most likely take place in the social services office. If these visits go well, the visits might take place in other locations. Your parents and foster

parents may need some time to get to know each other and feel comfortable before they consider having visits take place at your foster home.

**6. Can my foster parents come with me to visit my parents in their home?**

At the point your social worker gives permission for visits to take place in your parents' home, foster parents may go with you to the visit. This will happen if all the adults are comfortable and in agreement with the arrangement.

**7. I think my Mom is upset that I get along so well with my foster Mom. How do I deal with this?**

I am glad that you are letting me know what you are thinking. Your mother wishes that you were back home and that she was taking care of you because she loves you. It may be difficult for her to share you with another mother. She may feel badly that she is not in a position for you to return home right now. I will talk with your Mom and foster Mom to help them understand these feelings that may be happening. You cannot help how your mother feels. She needs to work it out. Let your social worker help you to express your honest feelings to your mother and foster mother.

## **FROM THE SOCIAL WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE:**

- 1. Will the icebreaker meetings and other responsibilities of bridging the gap mean more work for me?**

Initially, it may. Organizing the icebreaker meeting, preparing the parties, facilitating the icebreaker meeting, and supporting the beginning communication between the birth and foster families may, in fact, be time consuming. However, the benefits of doing this up front in the case process can greatly reduce the amount of time you spend later as the go-between and in resolving conflicts. As an example, foster and birth parents who are relating well might be able to make visitation arrangements without the direct involvement of the social worker.

- 2. What if the birth parent is emotional and volatile?**

You will assess each case situation to determine the appropriateness of holding a face to face icebreaker meeting. With rare exception, birth parents will not pose a danger to foster parents at such a meeting. On the contrary, experience has shown that when treated with dignity and respect, birth parents will return the same treatment to those people attending the meeting. Prepare the birth parents for the purpose of the meeting and what will be covered. If needed, help them formulate some of their questions to the foster parents. If you have safety concerns about the birth parents attending, begin the contact in another way such as through telephone calls or writing. The important thing is for the contact to occur.

- 3. Do I have to attend the icebreaker meeting?**

Yes. You will want to be there not only to facilitate the meeting and support the participants, but also to observe firsthand the interaction amongst the attendees. You have a responsibility to help both families begin to open the lines of communication and establish a respectful relationship.

- 4. What if the foster parent does not want to meet the birth parents?**

Foster parents are taught in pre-service and in-service training that it is their responsibility to help the children maintain a connection with their birth family and to understand who their family is and its history. This enables the child to make a better adjustment to foster care. They need to know how bridging the gap will benefit them, as foster parents, and that it is all right to take small steps. If foster parents will not meet birth parents, placements in their home may be limited to those rare cases in which birth parents are unavailable or unknown.

**5. What if the birth parent and foster parent do not get along?**

Some relationships are easy to form, and others are not. Acknowledge that building relationships and trust takes time. Talk with each parent about why the relationship is not going well, and what would improve it. Facilitate a discussion between the parents to share their thoughts and suggestions. Help them to take small steps and point out the benefits as they occur. If the birth parent is not open to forming a relationship or having open verbal communication, identify other creative ways for the two families to communicate.

**6. After the icebreaker meeting, may the foster family begin to supervise the visits between the child and birth parents?**

The social worker will use good judgment in determining what supervision arrangements are needed for visitation. The foster parents and birth parents will need to establish a relationship with each other before visits are supervised by someone other than the social worker. This will take time. At the icebreaker meeting, talk with the parties about what form of communication they will be comfortable in having. Revisit with them the nature and quality of their communication and relationship and whether visitation arrangements may be handled in a different way.



## V. CONFIDENTIAL "FAST FACTS"

(Information social worker needs to present regarding child/children to prospective parents)

Name of Children

Birth Dates

Race

Why are children being placed?

What type of placement is this?

Is placement confidential?

Parent information: (are the parents violent? Can the parents contact the child, etc.)

Are there brother and sisters?

Where are they?

Will they visit?

Will there be pre-placement visits?

Previous placement experiences of the children

Visitation Plan

Special transportation needs

Are there any immediate appointments scheduled?

What is the plan for the children/length of placement?

Religion of children

Do the children have health issues, if so what?

Explain medications or allergies

What grade are children in school?

What school?

Are there any school problems?

Do children have any special behavioral problems or unusual habits? Bedwetting/fire setting, sexual acting out, etc.

Collateral Services? Wrap Around, Mental Health, CASA, Early Intervention, drug & alcohol, etc.

What will make children feel most at home (food likes, dislikes, favorite toys etc.)?

Does the child have enough clothing?

Will there be a clothing allowance?

Social Worker

Phone #

Supervisor

Phone #