

ICEBREAKER MEETING INFORMATION FOR FOSTER PARENTS

What is an Icebreaker Meeting?

An Icebreaker meeting provides an opportunity for biological parents or other caregivers to meet each other and talk about the needs of the child. The biological parents, foster parent and prior custodian, if applicable are able to share information about themselves and their family routines and traditions.

Icebreaker meetings are most effective when they occur early in a child's placement, preferably within the first week. The child's Family Services Specialist facilitates the meeting, which lasts about 30-40 minutes.

Why is an Icebreaker Meeting helpful?

When biological parents and foster parents have contact with each other, the child will adjust more easily in the foster family, better maintain the bond with his or her birth parents and do better in school. Contact with foster parents helps biological parents feel better about their child's safety and well-being.

How can we have a good meeting?

Everyone should arrive on time, stay focused on the child's needs and how you can work together to meet them, respect feelings, opinions, cultural differences and ideas of others, recognize the important role that each person has in the life of the child and keep what is said in the meeting private.

What is my role?

The foster parent's role is to ask for specific information about the child from the biological parents such as routines, favorite things and medical needs. Foster parents are important team members and contribute greatly to the child's well-being. The foster parents will also ask questions about cultural traditions and other information that will help you care for the child. In addition, the foster parent can talk about why you are a foster parent and your desire to help reunite the biological family.

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?***

The Family Services Specialist 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 as such a meeting. On contrary, experience has shown that when treated with dignity and respect, birth parent will return the same treatment to those people attending the meeting. The Family Services Specialist 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 become unsafe and 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.

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 Family Services Specialist 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 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 is personal information that you are not comfortable sharing. The Family Services Specialist could help you think through how you might respond. Answering the birth parent's 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.

Concerns related 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 concerns, 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 respectfully 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.