

ICEBREAKER MEETINGS:

A Tool for Building Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parents



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more directly meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

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Appendices can be found online at: www.aecf.org/icebreakers

INTRODUCTION



INVOLVING FAMILIES TO IMPROVE RESULTS FOR KIDS

Gone are the days when child protection systems “saved” children by whisking them away from struggling families. Today, much more is known about the protective qualities of family relationships. For this reason, the Annie E. Casey Foundation believes that working to keep birth families involved in caring for their children while in foster care is an essential role for child welfare systems. When a child is removed from his or her home, agencies now seek to build connections between birth and foster families to provide continuity of relationships, to help meet the full spectrum of a child’s ongoing needs, and to improve the family’s likelihood of reunification.

At every step, agencies can work to facilitate family support for children. Families can:

- Be partners in planning and decision making for their children;
- Help prevent placement away from home;
- Find familiar placement resources;
- Support a child in out-of-home care;
- Support a child in a long-term placement in another family; and
- Ensure excellent care of the child by exchanging vital information.

Icebreakers: One Type of Family Meeting

Once a child is in foster care, child welfare agencies often use one or more types of family meetings to keep parents involved, such as Team Decision Making or Family Team Conferences. Some meetings occur at specific stages of a case; other meetings are part of a process that includes multiple opportunities for involving parents and families in a child’s care.

This publication describes one particular type of meeting, the Icebreaker, a stand-alone meeting developed by Family to Family, an innovative child welfare reform initiative developed and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation from 1992 through 2009. While many resources exist that describe Team Decision Making (TDM)—the initiative’s signature family meeting—less has been published about Icebreakers. Yet these meetings can play a crucial role in building the critical connection between birth parents and the foster parents who are caring for a child.

Icebreakers can be used in systems that already employ one or more type of family involvement meetings. The goal of Icebreaker meetings is to build a relationship between the birth and foster parents to support a child who has either just entered out-of-home care or who has just changed placements. While other meetings may focus on making decisions, Icebreaker meetings focus on initiating a relationship between a child’s parents and the person serving as his or her out-of-home caregiver. Icebreaker meetings serve many purposes, allowing:

- A new caregiver to learn about a child’s habits and needs, whether the new caregiver is a family member, family friend, foster parent, or institutional custodian;

- A parent to meet and talk to the person caring for his or her child; and
- A child to see his parents and caregivers focusing on his or her comfort, needs, and best interests.

The Importance of Relationship Building

Icebreaker meetings give child welfare agencies a chance to focus on relationship-building in the whirl of logistical, administrative, and legal activities that come with a child's entry into the system. Relationship building can be a key protective factor for a child, birth and foster parents, and caseworkers alike, all of whom are striving to familiarize themselves with a challenging new set of circumstances involving new players and issues.

Of course, one meeting does not a relationship make. Icebreaker meetings alone are not enough; they are but one of many ways an agency can focus its resources on supporting children and families whose daily routines and relationships have been disrupted.

Connecting the Dots: Using a Practice Model

No specific family involvement meeting or process will improve the long-term prospects of children unless the agency as a whole has policies, practices, staff, and incentives that consistently and constructively involve families and focus on children's needs, including safety, well-being, and stable family relationships. To minimize the sense of dislocation that invariably accompanies a child's entry into the child welfare system, agencies need relationship-building elements in their toolbox of interventions so that children and their families—birth, extended, and foster—feel safe and respected enough to take stock, work to solve problems together in a child's best interest, and move forward.

Often, a comprehensive, family-involvement-focused practice model is the vehicle for connecting the dots—for ensuring that any meetings that take place are meaningful and focused on a child's best interests.

Using This Guide

Building working relationships between birth parents, foster parents, and caseworkers can be extremely important for foster children, and using Icebreaker meetings can be an effective mechanism for doing that. However, to be successful, an agency seeking to introduce Icebreakers must understand how the practice works. This publication is designed to:

- Give agencies an overview of Icebreaker meetings;
- Describe a work group process for planning and implementing Icebreaker meetings;
- Identify common barriers and roadblocks to successful implementation of Icebreaker meetings;
- Identify implementation steps that are often overlooked or missed;
- Share successes and examples of agencies using Icebreaker meetings;
- Share samples of Icebreaker documents and materials developed by agencies from across the country; and

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- Provide a self-assessment tool to guide your planning and implementation.

In addition, agencies that desire to review and revise their current Icebreaker meetings may find different components of this toolkit useful in revamping or expanding their Icebreakers.

Family to Family and Beyond

The Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group is building on the rich trove of lessons offered by Family to Family and other Foundation efforts aimed at improving outcomes for children and families. This guide, originally developed for Family to Family sites, has been published with the hope that it will offer food for thought for family-focused child welfare agencies. Building alliances between birth and foster families can be crucial to the well-being of a child in foster care. We hope this publication gives your agency ideas about how such critical relationships can be built and maintained.

SECTION I



ICEBREAKER MEETING OVERVIEW

The Icebreaker is a facilitated conversation between birth and resource parents,¹ 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 child² 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.
- 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.

¹ 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.

² For the purposes of this publication, the term “child” will include children from birth to age 18.

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.

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.

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.

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.

When birth parents have exhibited or expressed violent behavior toward any potential Icebreaker participants, caseworkers should consider extra safety measures. Agency policy should address what to do if any party displays inappropriate behavior during the Icebreaker, such as immediately terminate the meeting, document the incident, and re-schedule the meeting once concerns have been addressed.

Whether the issue is substance abuse, mental health issues, or safety, describing the Icebreaker and its purpose to all participants—children, birth and foster parents—can relieve anxieties and fears. For birth parents, knowing that they can meet their child's caregiver and provide input into his or her care may lessen strong feelings that could lead to unpredictable behavior. However, the social worker must make a careful assessment of the birth parents' capacity to participate in the icebreaker meeting.

Bottom line: Many parents with these issues have successfully participated in court hearings and family team meetings. If building an alliance between birth and foster parents would benefit the child, finding a safe way to hold an Icebreaker can improve, not worsen, a challenging situation.

Icebreakers in Group or Residential Homes? Absolutely!

Often when children or teens are placed into congregate care facilities like group homes, shelters, or residential treatment centers, building alliances between parents and staff is not considered. If that is how your agency thinks, think again. Family involvement that starts at the day of placement can offer many benefits. For example, Icebreakers in these settings can:

- Support the child;
- Expand the facility's knowledge of the child;
- Maintain, build, and/or repair the parent/child relationship;
- Allow the parent to be a part of the child's program;
- Help the parent gain insight into the child's needs; and
- Provide a venue for the parent to gain important parenting skills.

Who Facilitates?

Whenever possible, the child's caseworker should facilitate the congregate care Icebreaker. Doing so will:

- Initiate the team-building process;
- Allow the caseworker to support healthy, productive relationships between adults in the child's life;

- Allow the caseworker to continue to assess child and family needs and hear information first hand; and
- Allow the caseworker to negotiate appropriate ground rules and boundaries based on the circumstances of the case at the time.

Permitting facility staff to conduct the meeting can be very confusing. Agreements about contact may be made that the caseworker does not agree with; information shared could be forgotten or confused.

The Process Remains Essentially Unchanged

The process for scheduling and facilitating an Icebreaker in a congregate care facility is essentially the same as when birth and foster parents meet. A staff member, preferably one responsible for the child's day-to-day care, meets with the parent and caseworker. Information shared by the child's parent should be placed into the child's record so that each staff member on the child's unit can become familiar with the child's habits and routines. In addition to sharing information about the child, information should be shared about the facility: the child's daily schedule; guidelines for visiting the facility; facility rules about phone calls, emails, contact persons, etc.

Whenever possible, the Icebreaker meeting should occur at the facility so the parent can be given a tour and meet key staff in person.

Icebreakers Can Help Build Relationships

As your agency implements Icebreaker meetings, consider whether your mix of team meetings creates a coherent set of relationships that drives results for kids, or simply a series of scattered meetings. Take time to make sure your entire family involvement strategy makes sense, and includes everyone involved in the case as part of the team, such as birth parents, resources families, extended family members, children, and professionals.

Successful Icebreaker meetings can begin a long-running, relationship-building process. Icebreakers, given their brevity and sharp focus on the child, cannot produce miracles. But they can initiate relationship building with short- and long-term benefits both for the child and the adults.

Improving the Ability of Caseworkers to Help Parents Support a Child

An Icebreaker meeting offers benefits to caseworkers responsible for trying to maintain relationships between birth families and foster parents. Open lines of communication can reduce the chance that the caseworker is caught in the middle between birth and foster parents. Also, setting up the expectation that it is a caseworker's job to encourage a regular exchange of information will help both sets of parents understand the caseworker's role is not to take sides, but to help adults help the child.

While caseworkers need to do some paperwork related to Icebreakers, there are direct benefits to the paperwork:

- *Administrative.* Paperwork not only lets supervisors know meetings were held, but also ensures that information central to ensuring the well-being of a child can be located easily.
- *Evaluative.* Did Icebreaker participants find the meeting useful? While a "yes" answer is great, a "no" answer also provides crucial information. It means much more work will be necessary to build relationships.

SECTION II



PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure the successful implementation of Icebreaker meetings, develop a planning and implementation process that involves multiple levels of staff because it is far too much work for one person. Plus, a work group engages a broad spectrum of staff, resource families, and partners. This not only spreads responsibility, but it also spreads an understanding of the new practice.

Creating and Using Work Groups

There are several ways to develop a work group. Examples from agencies currently using Icebreaker meetings include:

- *A large tent strategy.* Convene a large group of 20-24 individuals representing staff, private agencies, community members, and other stakeholders. A large group allows for subgroups that can take on specific assignments.
- *A dedicated worker strategy.* If a staff member is available to head up this effort—perhaps a program coordinator on special assignment—you might consider convening a smaller, time-limited work group.

Some agencies have used existing work groups to plan Icebreaker implementation. Others have created new work groups. We recommend a work group dedicated specifically to Icebreaker implementation. That way, participants can focus specifically on the Icebreaker project and keep appropriate community members and private agencies in the loop.

Choosing Team Members

Naturally you want as team members individuals who will support implementation, help you find other champions of the approach, and test ideas and strategies prior to implementation. They can help identify barriers and obstacles to implementation and brainstorm solutions. The more diverse the group the better, including:

- Children and youth who have been in foster care, and who can speak to the importance of having birth and resource parents form a relationship;
- Birth parents whose cases have been closed and who can talk about the needs of birth parents when a child is taken away; and
- Foster/adoptive/kin parents who can share their perspectives about the whole placement process.

It is also important to engage staff with a variety of experiences, including:

- Emergency response and investigations staff who can talk about strategies for implementing Icebreakers early in the placement process;
- Staff with ideas on how Icebreakers could be effective when children change placements, are reunified, or are adopted;
- Staff with foster care licensing experience and who know how to support and educate foster parents; and
- Data/MIS staff, staff training, and staff development personnel who can consider tracking and training issues and needs.

Other participants to consider:

- Supervisors in the public system, as well as supervisors and staff in participating private agencies; and
- Union representatives who can assist in communicating the practice changes to peers to help ensure smooth implementation.

One Way to Organize Subgroups

The following is one example of how subgroups and their tasks might be created. While this example includes five subgroups, your agency may choose to organize the work in a different way. You know what would work best in your agency. An important factor in organizing your subgroups is to consider how to best spread the work around so that it does not fall on one or two people's shoulders. Organize the work into five subgroups, including:

- Protocol and Policy
- Written Materials
- Data Collection and Evaluation
- Training and Education
- Rollout Planning

The Protocol and Policy Subgroup can:

- Create Icebreaker policies and protocols;
- Determine when in the agency's process Icebreakers should occur;
- Determine any exceptions to the rules; and
- Develop a plan and a process for preparing parents and children to participate in Icebreaker meetings.

This subgroup can also address such questions as: Where and when will Icebreaker meetings take place? Who will staff them? Who will reach out to private agencies to discuss the Icebreaker model and engage them in planning and implementation? How can staff and stakeholders at all levels be included in developing and promoting this new type of meeting?

The Written Materials Subgroup can create brochures and handouts that explain and promote Icebreakers, perhaps including FAQs and tips on Icebreakers for each of the various stakeholders, including children, birth parents, foster parents, caseworkers, private agency staff, etc. They will need to prepare materials that:

- Describe the purpose of Icebreakers;
- Identify steps in the Icebreaker process;
- Describe Icebreaker policy and protocols, making sure roles and responsibilities of participants are clearly spelled out, including which caseworkers handle the meetings;
- Design necessary forms, such as agendas and evaluations in collaboration with the Data and Evaluation subgroup, and also work with administrators to figure out who will record information and where it will be filed; and

- Promote Icebreakers to Guardians Ad Litem, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and other court and community partners, as well as foster parents, and also brainstorm ways to reach these groups, including through training, newsletters, Foster Parent Associations, support groups, mailings, and agency staff, etc.

The Data Collection and Evaluation Subgroup can create an evaluation plan and decide how to collect, analyze, and respond to data. How will data be collected and used to evaluate the effectiveness of meetings? What needs to be measured to determine whether Icebreakers help children? What data collection methods will create the least administrative load while providing useful feedback? Who will receive reports, and what long term data needs should be requested of the administration? This subgroup can also estimate how many Icebreakers the agency is likely to hold each month and identify what resources will be needed to meet that estimated number.

The Training and Education Subgroup can develop a training plan, schedule, and materials. They can address such questions as: How will staff be trained? How will the agency involve and train birth parents, foster parents, private foster family agencies, their foster families, and other community partners? Are both an initial training and ongoing training needed? How will information about Icebreaker meetings be woven into new worker orientation and foster parent pre-service training? How will supervisors be trained so they can coach caseworkers on how to conduct Icebreakers?

The Rollout Planning Subgroup can plan a timeline for the Icebreaker rollout, develop a publicity campaign and kick-off event, and work with other subgroups to identify dates and deadlines. This may also be the subgroup that addresses working with unions. For instance, how can union leaders at all levels — staff, caseworkers, and supervisors — be involved early on in the development of the work group? How will agency leaders address significant concerns raised by the unions early in the planning process?

Helpful Hints for a Successful Work Group

- Be inclusive when selecting work group and subgroup members;
- Select responsible, self-motivated people from all levels of the agency;
- Set a schedule to meet as a full work group every four to six weeks;
- Set agendas with topics, timeframes, and speakers for each meeting;
- Send minutes from each work group to all group members. Include any assignments and deadlines; and
- Plan for large workgroup time to be used for the subgroups to report out on their tasks and gain feedback from others.

Learn From Others

We learned from several sites that struggled with implementing Icebreaker meetings that they missed critical steps along the way. You can also learn from mistakes made by others. For example, one site learned that not including line staff in their workgroup created barriers to implementation. Another site failed to include private providers in the planning process. To assist you in your planning and implementation, we have provided a guide to ensure that you have not forgotten essential details. (See Appendix 1: “Icebreakers: Things to Consider Before or During Implementation.”)

SECTION III



CREATING INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT ICEBREAKERS

To create an infrastructure to support Icebreakers, your agency will need to:

- Develop a detailed implementation plan including timeline;
- Develop written Icebreaker policies and procedures;
- Develop a data collection and tracking strategy;
- Determine how children will be involved in Icebreakers;
- Engage private providers and community partners;
- Infuse Icebreaker knowledge into all agency training; and
- Create materials and forms to support Icebreakers.

Developing a Detailed Implementation Work Plan

To keep the implementation work moving forward, it is helpful to develop an implementation timeline. If you are using a workgroup process, this would be the work of the Protocol and Policy team.

The obvious way to do implementation planning is by working backwards from your implementation date, determining by what date each task must logically be completed. For example, Icebreaker protocols have to be in place before the training curriculum can be developed.

Creating work plans is another way to keep implementation on track. A work plan should clearly define each step that must be finished in order to complete work group goals. Each task is assigned to a work group participant along with a due date. If you have a technology enthusiast in your work group, they may be able to capture plans, goals, and timelines using project management software for all to see.

As you begin work on an implementation plan, look carefully at all the changes that will need to take place to ensure that Icebreaker meetings, like other family involvement meetings and strategies, are supported in all agency policies, practices, and regulations.

Sample Work Plan Goal: Create Internal Staff Training Plan		
Task	Assigned to	Due Date
Prioritize trainings by program area	Mitch	9/22
Consult with staff development to determine available training resources	Julie	9/20
Determine number of staff (including supervisors and managers) needing training	Michael	10/1
Determine number of foster parents as of 9/15 needing training	Betty	9/30

Gathering Initial Input and Promoting Buy-in

An important first step in implementing Icebreakers is gathering initial input and promoting buy-in. To gather input from and create buy-in among supervisors, staff, youth, birth parents, foster parents, and private foster care agency staff:

- Create a plan to engage child welfare managers and supervisors early in the implementation process.
- Solicit input from staff, youth, birth parents, foster parents, and private foster care agencies regarding implementation barriers and solutions and make an effort to:
 - Find and support internal experts and champions;
 - Find and support youth, birth parent, foster parent and foster family agency champions.

Through focus groups, work groups, interviews, and surveys:

- Address the fears and anxieties about the meetings among caseworkers, birth parents, foster parents, and private foster care agency staff.
- Share success stories at staff and agency-wide meetings, foster parent association and private agency meetings, on bulletin boards and in newsletters.

Recruit foster parents, birth parents, and caseworkers who have experienced successful Icebreakers as spokespeople.

Developing Written Icebreaker Policies

The Icebreaker policy document is key to ensuring Icebreaker meetings are integrated into your agency's standard practices. The policy should outline all staff members' roles and responsibilities as clearly as possible and clearly provide clarity the steps involved, timeframes, and accountability.

Two important cautions:

- Do not wait to engage supervisors in this process; and
- Do not forget to engage community partners, especially private foster care agencies. Make them equal partners in the entire process.

One of the most critical elements in developing an agency's Icebreaker policy is identifying in which department ultimate responsibility for Icebreakers lies. The nature of your child welfare system and how cases flow through the agency will determine who is accountable for ensuring that an Icebreaker meeting occurs. For example, the responsibility may lie with the investigative worker, depending on how long he or she holds the case. If your agency immediately transfers cases, it could be the ongoing caseworker's responsibility to plan and facilitate the Icebreaker. Regardless of how your system works, determine these matters prior to implementation and present them in a clearly written policy statement. The policy must also provide direction on the roles and responsibilities of the various players who will be involved in Icebreaker meetings. Delineate what specific individuals are expected to do before, during, and after the Icebreaker meeting.

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.

Icebreaker Scheduling

- Specify when the meeting will be scheduled, by when the meeting must take place, who is in charge of scheduling the meeting, and who will invite participants. Will the meeting be scheduled at the team decision making meeting? At the court hearing, or the day after the placement? A team decision making meeting or incidental meetings between staff and family members are not Icebreakers.
- Describe how children will be involved in, invited to, prepared for, and debriefed about the meeting—and who is responsible for each these aspects of the work.
- Identify where the meeting can occur and whether (and by whom) transportation will be provided if needed.
- Specify that the meeting should be no longer than 30 to 45 minutes.

The timing of the Icebreaker meeting (within three to five days of placement) will be a hotly debated issue and is likely to generate the most resistance. Leadership must take a strong stance in support of the policy and challenge members of the work group to identify strategies to eliminate barriers to timely Icebreakers.

Icebreaker Format

- Specify each participant's role and responsibilities. (See Appendix 2 for a sample grid of roles and responsibilities.)
- Specify that the meeting must be planned and facilitated by the child's caseworker to permit him or her to hear the information exchange firsthand and provide continuity for the child and the families.
- Specify that both the birth parent and foster parent must be prepared in advance of the meeting and are to be allowed time to share information and ask questions before, during, and after the meeting.
- Describe how Icebreaker meetings are to be documented and by whom.
- Describe the content and scope of the meeting, and that its purpose is to discuss the child's needs and establish a parent-to-parent relationship. Specify that the meeting should not include discussion of case planning details, services, the reason the child is in care, questions about reunification, and other issues.

Icebreaker Troubleshooting

- What if a birth parent or foster parent decides not to participate in the Icebreaker? The agency should develop a protocol to handle such situations.
- Describe what to do if it is determined a face-to-face Icebreaker meeting is not safe. When and how can an alternative-format Icebreaker occur?

Administrative and Practice Issues

- Address administrative details such as who will complete the meeting documentation and who will develop and manage the evaluation tools or surveys completed by participants. Who will enter the meeting information into the database? Where will the documents be filed? Will copies of the meeting documentation be given to participants? Who will be responsible for that?
- Address practice details such as who will develop the agenda outline and establish meeting ground rules? What is the supervisor/manager role in supporting Icebreakers?
- Be clear that Icebreaker meetings do not eliminate a caseworker's responsibility to gather information to provide to foster parents at the time of placement.
- Address how the public agency will work with private agencies to implement and support Icebreakers. For instance:
 - Identify who at each private agency is responsible for scheduling Icebreaker meetings. It is important that accountability for setting up meetings is clearly established. Private agencies should move as quickly as public agencies to schedule meetings and should keep public agencies informed of meeting status.
 - Include in your policy who, if anyone, from a private agency will be invited to attend Icebreaker meetings. In most cases, private agency workers would not attend Icebreaker meetings. Icebreaker meetings should not be overloaded with staff, but there are times when it makes sense for private agencies to be represented.

As you develop your policies, additional questions will invariably arise. As Icebreakers evolve be sure to make the attendant changes in your written Icebreaker policy.

Determining How Children Will be Involved in Icebreaker Meetings

Your policy/protocol should include guidance about including children and youth in Icebreaker meetings. There are many good reasons to include children. They can benefit from seeing supportive interactions between their birth parents and foster parents. It can also give children some sense of control and, in many cases, the child is able to provide information about themselves and ask questions. (See Appendix 3: "All About Me.")

For additional information about including children and youth in Icebreaker meetings, see Section IV, Engaging and Preparing Icebreaker Participants.

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 key is to do what is best for the children and what is most comfortable for the families involved.

Creating Materials and Forms to Support Icebreakers

The work group will make recommendations regarding the written materials needed for Icebreakers, and also who should create such documents. Written materials, as well as specific direction on who is responsible for completing and filing forms and other tasks, should be included in the overall Icebreakers protocol.

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
- State the purpose of the meeting
- 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

One suggestion is to combine the meeting agenda and the meeting information/report into one document.

Meeting Information/Report Form

The meeting report form is designed to record important information about the meeting, both for the agency and for the birth and foster parents. Be sure to collect all the important information you need, but be careful only to ask for relevant information. Consider how this information will be used for implementing, tracking, and sustaining case management. At a minimum, the meeting information/report form should include:

- *Basic information*, such as the meeting date, case number, the caseworker's name; the facilitator's name (if different than caseworker); the child's name; the child's mother's and father's names; the foster parent's name; the date of placement.
- *Information about the Icebreaker status*, such as whether the meeting was held. If not, why? Who approved the exception? If an alternative Icebreaker meeting format was used, explain what format was used and why. Did any party decline to participate and why? It is important to be able to document and track any barriers to Icebreakers so they can be identified and overcome.
- *Prompts for collecting information shared at the meeting*. For instance, the form might include prompts and space for detailing a child's medical and dental information; dietary needs and preferences; daily routines, including bedtime routines and sleeping patterns; bathing routines; hair care; developmental milestones, strengths, or challenges; how to comfort child; school information; school and neighborhood friends; religious preferences; extra-curricular activities; phone/internet use; unsafe behaviors or safety concerns; concerns related to substance abuse; other concerns.

Important note: The Icebreaker meeting does not eliminate the caseworker's responsibility to gather information to provide to the resource parent at the time of placement.

Collecting and Using Icebreaker Data

You will need to collect and analyze data on Icebreakers to continually improve the process and understand how these meetings work for children, birth and foster parents, and staff. More specific detail on data collection can be found in Section III. But in your initial planning, you should consider some preliminary questions, such as:

- What software program will you use to input the data?
- What data will you collect and how will it be used? Do not overlook longer-term issues such as the potential impact of Icebreakers upon long-range family well being.
- Who will collect and analyze the data?
- How often and through what means will data be shared with staff, foster parents, and the community?
- How will the data be used in future Icebreaker planning and development?

One of the most important questions to ask is: How will you ensure Icebreaker meetings take place as required? Some possible answers:

- Use data as a management tool to assess practice consistency.
- Explore linking Icebreakers to some other important step in the case management process to encourage compliance.

Icebreaker Evaluation

A critical part of Icebreaker implementation is to establish an evaluation protocol to answer these questions:

- Did every child who was supposed to have an Icebreaker meeting have one in a timely manner?
- Did everyone who was needed at the Icebreaker meeting attend the meeting?
- Did birth parents and foster parents exchange information important to the child's care at the meeting?
- Were the birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker satisfied with what the meeting accomplished?

For each of these areas you must decide what information you will collect, how and when each data element will be collected, what type of data system will be used to store the data, and the types of information that you would like to examine on a regular basis through regular reports.

Each of these questions is discussed below:

Did every child who was supposed to have an Icebreaker meeting have one in a timely manner?

During the early implementation phase of Icebreakers, this question should be tracked monthly. This will ensure that the practice is implemented in a timely way for all children in the agency.

This analysis requires a list of children who entered a foster home during the month and the date of entry. If possible, this list should be generated as a digital file that contains the child's name, the unique identification number attached to the child in your data system, the case number (or family identification) attached to the child's family in the data system, and the date the child entered the foster home. The list should be sorted so that all children in one family appear on the list in consecutive order. All of this information should already be collected in your agency's child welfare information system. You will match this information to information collected on each individual Icebreaker meeting to determine if all children had a meeting in a timely way. The description of the information needed on each meeting is described in the next section.

Some agencies have also created a place in their existing data collection system to indicate if and when an icebreaker meeting occurred.

Did everyone who was needed at the Icebreaker meeting attend the meeting? Did birth parents and foster parents exchange information important to the child's care at the meeting?

To answer these questions, a form will need to be developed that is completed for each Icebreaker by the caseworker immediately after the meeting. Some SACWIS systems already have a systematic way to input these data. If this is not available in your site, an electronic application will need to be developed. Microsoft Excel or Access can be used to track this type

of data. The following information is needed for each Icebreaker meeting:

- Family name and family unique identification number (or case number);
- List of children in the family who entered foster home with child unique identification numbers and date of entry to foster home for each child;
- Name of foster parents attending the Icebreaker (and for which child, if sibling group);
- Meeting date;
- Meeting location;
- Whether each of the following attended the meeting: caseworker, mother, father(s), foster parent(s); and
- Topics discussed at the meeting.

(See Appendix 4 for a sample summary form.)

Were the birth parent, foster parent and caseworker satisfied with the meeting?

An important piece of information to gather is feedback from meeting participants about their experience. This can be gathered on a regular basis after each meeting with a simple one-page form. (See Appendix 5 for examples.)

Icebreaker Data Files, Reports, and Analysis

If you are unable to include Icebreaker data in your agency's existing information systems, software such as Excel and Access can be used to develop "standalone" databases to track Icebreaker meetings. Before deciding which software package is best for your agency, you should consult with your agency's information systems staff to determine how they can support the implementation process.

It is important to begin looking at Icebreaker data early in the implementation process. Early Icebreaker data can provide information on areas where you have successfully implemented the protocol and on areas that remain challenges. The first report developed should be a monthly report that summarizes the number of children entering foster homes this month, the number of Icebreaker meetings held, the percentage of children who had an Icebreaker meeting, and the average number of days between entry to foster home and Icebreaker meeting. This report provides information on whether all meetings are being held. (See Appendix 4 for a sample summary report.)

After you have successfully implemented the Icebreaker protocol, you should consult with the self-evaluation analyst to determine what other analyses can be done using these data. You may want to examine whether children who have an Icebreaker meeting achieve reunification more quickly or whether children who have an Icebreaker have fewer placement moves. Because you recorded the unique identification number of all children who had an Icebreaker meeting in your Icebreaker database, these types of analyses can be implemented electronically by linking data file.

Infuse Icebreaker Knowledge into Agency Training

Reinforcing your agency's commitment to family involvement strategies as a way of improving results for young people is crucial to the success of all family meetings, including Icebreakers. The theme of engaging families of all types—birth and foster families included—must be interwoven in work groups, staff and foster parent training, and in agency communications. Some examples of the training supports needed by staff are included in the next section.

As you implement Icebreaker meetings, your agency will need to: incorporate Icebreaker content into both pre-service and in-service training for foster parents and staff; develop specialized training for managers and supervisors; and find ways to include the perspectives of birth and foster parents in staff Icebreaker training sessions.

Redesigning Professional Development for Foster Parents and Staff

It is critical that all parties are adequately trained to understand the agency's desire to involve parents in many more aspects of agency planning and decision making than in the past. Make sure contract agencies are well trained on this approach as well. In addition to training on Icebreakers, make sure to cover other topics that are affected by this new approach, such as visitation, crisis intervention, mediating conflict, and teamwork.

Some specific suggestions:

Include Icebreaker information in birth family orientations and materials. Some agencies provide their birth families with an orientation. Part of that orientation should focus on creating collaborative relationships with the caseworker and foster parent. A panel that includes a foster parent, birth parent, and caseworker who partnered on the same case is an excellent way to illustrate such relationships.

Some agencies give birth parents a booklet that provides an overview of the agency, services and resources. *Integrating information about birth parent/foster parent relationships and collaboration can help.*

Offer families several opportunities to receive information about Icebreaker meetings. For instance, the child protection worker might give an Icebreaker brochure to the parent. The Icebreaker meeting could be discussed in the initial team decision making meeting. When the agency intake worker contacts the birth parent to set up the Icebreaker, any initial questions the parent has could be answered then. When the caseworker contacts the parent to prepare for the Icebreaker, that offers another opportunity to explain the agency's desire for birth and foster parents to work together in the child's best interest. Information about the partnership approach, and the Icebreaker in particular should be provided to birth parents once placement has occurred or is planned, and on an ongoing basis thereafter. The opportunity to participate in a group orientation process facilitated by parent advocates would be ideal.

When designing your Icebreaker program, include foster parents on the work group—birth parents, too, if possible. Having parents as well as foster parents collaborate in the design of your Icebreaker program can help everyone get used to policies that call for more direct interaction

between birth and foster parents. Concerns about such policies can be aired and addressed before Icebreaker rollout.

Meet with the Foster/Adoptive Parent Association (FAPA) to gain their support. Including a representative from such organizations on the Icebreaker work group is an effective way to keep the FAPA informed, and to enlist their support. Such associations can also be an effective avenue through which to spread the word about Icebreakers.

Think Icebreakers when hiring and orienting new staff. When advertising, interviewing, and hiring new staff, information about the expectation that caseworkers will promote the development of collaborative relationships between birth parents and foster parents should be included.

During staff orientation, a panel consisting of a birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker from the same case could go a long way to modeling desirable behaviors. One way that supervisors can support new staff in the whole concept is to conduct practice Icebreaker meetings, along with role playing the various interactions that might take place. Additionally, supervisors can sit through a staff member's first Icebreaker meeting and offer feedback.

Update agency publications to include the new Icebreaker policies. For example:

- If your agency's foster parent recruitment brochures and materials still include language that sends a negative message about birth parents, those materials need to be changed. Find language that reflects the agency's family involvement, such as: "Lend a helping hand to children and their families," "It takes a village to care for a child but it takes a family to support their family," or simply, "Families helping Families."
- Any written materials for birth parents and children needs to explain clearly the agency's perspective on building alliances between birth and resource families and relay the agency's commitment to involve them in as many aspects of planning and making decisions for and with the child as possible.
- For more ideas about spreading the news about Icebreakers, see Section VI, "Launching Icebreakers."

Update your pre-service training for foster parents and your staff orientation and training programs. Do your staff and foster parent training programs promote building alliances between birth and parents? Improve pre-service and staff training by:

- Including on the agenda birth parents who can talk about their relationships with foster parents to help dispel any misconceptions held by prospective foster parents. (See Appendix 6 "Use of Birth Parents in Pre-service Training.")
- Asking foster, adoptive, and kinship parents to talk about their experiences connecting with birth families. Another variation would be to put together a training session that includes a birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker to describe their collaboration on a specific case.
- Asking children to share ways in which having birth parents working collaboratively with foster parents helped ease anxiety and smooth transition. Likewise, children can also talk

about how difficult it was when their birth parents did not meet their resource parents. (See Appendix 7 “Use of Youth in Pre-service Training.”)

- Weaving examples of foster parent/birth parent relationships throughout in-service and staff training curricula, including:
 - Offering examples of how birth and foster parent alliances can be helpful in resolving discipline issues and meeting children’s educational and emotional needs;
 - Discussing the value of sharing developmental and cultural information about the child to help the foster parents better understand the child’s behaviors and needs;
 - Discussing the key role foster parents play in supporting a continuing relationship between the child and birth parents;
 - Giving the handout “The Bridge” to foster parents to explain the continuum of a child’s parental connections. (See Appendix 8 for samples of the “Bridge” handouts.)

Include information about Icebreakers in pre-service training and discuss the role of the foster parents in Icebreaker meetings so new foster parents can learn about Icebreaker concept well in advance of the real thing.

Prepare caseworkers to respond to resistance from Icebreaker participants. Make sure they can handle tough questions they might get by foster parents, birth parents, community partners, or even other staff. (See Appendix 9 for a sample training outline.)

Provide staff with additional training if needed, whether in the form of classroom, online, or one-on-one training with the supervisor or the training department. There are also videos and DVDs that discuss the birth parent-foster parent relationships that are readily available. (See Appendix 10 for a list of staff training materials.)

Consider developing in-service training aimed at veteran foster parents. If you have a lot of “legacy” foster parents unfamiliar with working closely with birth parents, consider co-sponsoring one of more refresher courses on Icebreakers. The courses could include foster and birth parents who have successfully collaborated on reunification.

Practice Guidelines, Advice, Input, and Training

Provide specific written guidance to caseworkers and supervisors about preparing all participants for Icebreakers, preparing Icebreaker agendas, and understanding what should happen before, during, and after Icebreaker meetings. Describe not only who is responsible for certain tasks, but also how the work should unfold to build alliances between parents. Materials might provide tips and practice wisdom related to accomplishing work at each step of the process. In addition, it is important that Icebreakers be included in all aspects of the agency’s work and routines, from training to in-services and performance reviews. For more detail on the kinds of information that should be in written practice guidelines, see Section IV, “Engaging and Preparing Icebreaker Participants.”

SECTION IV



ENGAGING AND PREPARING ICEBREAKER PARTICIPANTS

The Icebreaker is a facilitated conversation between the parent of origin and resource or foster parent about the child's history and needs while in care or when returning home. Involving Icebreaker participants as constructively as possible is crucial to building an alliance between birth and foster parents that benefits the child. Written Icebreaker practice materials and policies should describe the meeting process in detail, incorporating many of the considerations described in this section.

This section includes information about:

- Encouraging effective meetings; and
- Working with meeting participants before, during, and after the meeting.

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?

Some obvious but important caseworker tips for running meetings that build parental alliances that benefit children include:

- 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.

Working with Birth Parents

The benefits of an Icebreaker for the birth parent are gaining the opportunity to meet the person caring for his or her child, learning how the child is faring, sharing information about the child that could help him or her settle into the foster home, and building relationships with both the caseworker and foster parent. Also, knowing that a well-informed adult is caring for his or her child can allow a birth parent to focus on what needs to happen so that parent and child can reunify.

Preparation is essential to minimizing risk. Describing the Icebreaker and its purpose can relieve anxieties and fears. For birth parents who may be feeling disenfranchised, worried, and angry, preparation time allows them to express those concerns prior to the Icebreaker. Meeting their child's caregiver may help neutralize the sorts of strong negative feelings that can lead to unpredictable behavior. However, caseworkers must follow agency safety protocols and make a careful assessment of the birth parents' capacity to participate safely and productively in any Icebreaker meeting.

In working with birth parents, caseworkers will want to think about several things:

- Preparing the birth parent for the Icebreaker;
- Understanding the birth parent's feelings about the situation, the foster parents, and the caseworker;
- Helping the birth parent decide what to share and ask during the meeting; and
- Supporting the parent during and after the meeting.

Preparing for the Icebreaker

Prior to the Icebreaker, the caseworker should call or meet with the birth parent to prepare him or her for the meeting. Some practice tips for caseworkers include:

- Encourage the parents to be open to building a relationship with the foster parents.
- Make sure parents are aware of the meeting's purpose, which is to share information about the child to smooth the transition between parents.

- Describe the Icebreaker process, what will happen during a meeting, and whether the child will be there.
- Emphasize that there will be time to talk with the caseworker after the meeting about any concerns or issues.
- Describe what can and cannot be discussed in these brief meetings:
 - The focus is on exchanging information about the child’s needs and comfort, not discussing why the child is in placement;
 - It is okay to ask questions or talk about basic lifestyle and habits like sleeping, playing and eating, or about school activities, grades, medical needs or appointments, etc.
 - Discourage the parents from making any promises to the child or caregiver during the meeting.
 - Have the parents write down anything they would like to ask or share with the foster parents so their child’s needs can be better met.
 - Explain whether the child will be at the meeting, discuss how the child’s involvement will shape the flow and structure of the meeting and that the child will be given the choice to leave the meeting at any point.
 - Be clear that the meeting will start and end on time and that they are expected to call in advance when tardy or to cancel/reschedule the meeting.
 - Suggest that parents bring:
 - a toy, picture, or something from home for the child.
 - a planner or calendar to record upcoming visits and note any other important dates.

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.”

Some feelings birth parents have shared about their caseworker:

- “She probably doesn’t have her own children, so she doesn’t understand what I’m going through.”
- “He will treat me like a perpetrator.”
- “She is the law, so I must do what she says, even if I don’t believe it’s right, because she has my children in care.”
- “Most caseworkers are on a power trip.”
- “Maybe she can help me.”

Supporting the Birth Parent During and After the Icebreaker

Some tips for helping parents process what is happening before, during, and after the Icebreaker:

- Find ways to encourage the birth parent when you know he or she is managing something particularly difficult. During the meeting, for instance, give a “thumbs up” (or some other signal).
- Make strengths-based observations such as. “It was great when you asked a question about ...”
- Ask the parent if there is anything she found difficult to communicate with the foster parent or any information that did not get shared.
- Ask if the parent felt comfortable during the meeting.
- Ask what you could have done to make the birth parent feel more comfortable.
- Ask if the meeting seemed helpful.

Working with Foster Parents

Standard practice in the past has been to discourage interaction between birth and foster parents. That often led to animosity that spilled into children’s already overburdened lives. The benefits of an Icebreaker for foster parents are in meeting the child’s parent and understanding the child in a family context; learning information that will help the foster parent create a safe, stable, comfortable home for the child; helping the child stay connected to important family relationships whenever possible; and building relationships between caseworkers and birth parents to benefit the child.

It is important to make clear to all foster parents that your agency will assess every situation on a case-by-case basis to decide whether or not an Icebreaker meeting is appropriate. Many foster parents are naturally reluctant to meet birth parents. It is important that your agency addresses all of the concerns and fears that foster parents may have about participating in Icebreakers.

In working with foster parents, caseworkers will want to think about several things:

- Consider all the same preparation issues as those detailed in the section above.
- Talk with the foster parents about their role in the Icebreaker and more generally as persons

who want to help a child experience the least instability as possible and to support family relationships important to the child and family.

It is also important for the caseworker to talk frankly with the foster parent about the strengths and challenges of his or her new role in supporting the birth parents. Caseworkers can underscore the importance of the foster parent's role in supporting the birth parent during the Icebreaker meeting. Some example of steps a foster parent can take to reassure a birth parent during the Icebreaker meeting:

- Reassure the birth parent that they strongly support reunification.
- Bring pictures of the child during special occasions that the parents may have missed during the first few days of placement: first steps, birthdays, holidays, school field trips, etc.
- Talk about some of the child's funny, cute, or noteworthy moments.
- Invite the parent to a school function or doctor's appointment to help with relationship building, if appropriate.
- Reassure the parent that caring for the child is a team effort and that there is a continuing place for him or her on the team.

Here are some helpful strategies to prepare resource parents:

1. *Include a variety of resource parents on your workgroup to gain their perspective.* Having new and veteran families, some who have had experience working directly with birth parents—even having some families who have not had any experience working with birth parents—will be helpful. Remember that not all of their experiences with birth parents may be positive but it is useful to analyze those interactions to determine what support or intervention could have made them turn out differently.

2. *Meet with the Foster/Adoptive Parent Association (FAPA) to gain their support.* Including a representative from the organization on the Icebreaker workgroup is an effective way to keep the FAPA informed. With the endorsement of the FAPA, you will be able to spread the word, with their support, in their newsletters, through their leadership, and at their meetings about the implementation of Icebreakers.

3. *Change recruitment materials to include the expectation of connections between resource parents and birth parents.* If the agency's recruitment brochures and materials use messaging about "rescuing" children from their abusive parents or situations, no new resource parent will be motivated to work with birth parents. Messages that include birth families in the concept of foster parenting will be more effective. Try slogans like these:

- "Lend a helping hand to children and their families"
- "It takes a village to care for a child but it takes a family to support their family"
- "Families helping families"

These will let prospective resource parents know from the start that working with birth parents is an expected part of their role.

4. *Review your pre-service training program and ensure that it promotes resource parent-birth parent relationships.* Some strategies for improving pre-service training include:

- Include birth parent speakers who can talk about having relationships with foster parents. This will dispel many of the myths that prospective parents often have about birth parents. (See Appendix 6 “Use of Birth Parents in Pre-service Training.”)
- Weave examples of resource parent/birth parent relationships throughout the entire curriculum. Here are some examples:
 - Show how birth parents can be helpful partners in solving discipline issues with the child.
 - Share how useful it will be to have developmental and cultural information about the child to help the resource parents understand the child’s behaviors and needs.
 - Discuss the role of the resource parent in supporting the child and birth parents.
 - Give “The Bridge” as a handout to the resource parents, explaining the continuum of connections between foster parents-foster parents, adoptive parents-foster parents, and kinship parents-birth parents (See Appendix 8 for the “Bridge” handouts.)
- Integrate a section of content into the curriculum that outlines the policy and protocol for the icebreaker meeting and discuss the role of the resource parent in the meeting.
- Use foster, adoptive, and kinship parents on the panel who can positively talk about their experiences in connecting with birth families. Another variation would be to have a panel of a birth parent, foster parent, and social worker who collaborated effectively and tell their story.
- Use youth as speakers who can share how having their birth and foster parents working collaboratively helped them while in care. Likewise, it can be powerful to have youth speak about how difficult it was that their foster parents did not meet their birth parents. (See Appendix 7 “Use of Youth in Pre-service Training.”)
- Help trainers to be positive, knowledgeable, and motivating when sharing information and examples of birth parent-resource parent relationships.

5. *Develop in-service training that assists veteran resource parents in learning new knowledge and skills to encourage them to work collaboratively with birth parents.* Co-sponsor it with the Foster/Adoptive Parent Association and use incentives to encourage people to come. Set a date to ensure that every family is trained. Take the training to the community and hold it on different days at a variety of times. Use experienced resource parents as co-trainers and on panels during the training. One site used an in-class survey to gather insight from the class regarding their concerns, hopes, and fears.

6. *Publish success stories and anecdotes* from staff and resource families in the agency newsletter, FAPA newsletter, and on the agency's website.

7. *Publish the agency's Icebreaker policy and protocol in the FAPA's newsletter.* Share it in pre-service and in-service training.

8. *Ensure that all in-service training supports birth parent-resource parent relationships.* In one site, it was discovered that some contracted trainers were providing training content that was counterproductive to Icebreaker meetings. The trainers were discouraging resource parents from meeting birth parents and shared only horror stories with participants.

9. *Most importantly, ensure that every agency staff member is familiar with and supportive of the Icebreaker policy and protocol.* Their support and encouragement of resource parents and birth parents to participate in Icebreaker meetings are keys to its success.

Working with Children

When is it appropriate to involve children in Icebreaker meetings? This matter should be addressed by your agency's Icebreaker policy. Generally speaking, children age 12 and over can be included for most or part of the meeting, while younger children can be included at the discretion of the caseworker, when there is no court order prohibiting face-to-face contact between parent and child. If a child is not able to participate directly in the meeting, the caseworker can work with birth and foster parents and the child in the preparatory sessions to find ways to represent the child's feelings, concerns, and questions in the meeting. Remember, the purpose of including a child is to reassure and comfort him or her and to allow the child to see the birth parent and foster parent engage in a positive way.

Preparing Younger Children (Under age 12)

There are many options for including a child under age 12 in the Icebreaker meeting. The child may come for the first few minutes and then be asked to complete a simple and fun document about themselves in another room while the parents talk. The child can come in at the end to share the information about him or herself with the birth and foster parents. Or the child can work ahead of time with the caseworker on a letter or picture that can be shared with birth and foster parent at the Icebreaker, whether the child attends part of the meeting or not.

Preparing Older Children and Youth (Age 12 and Older)

Youth age 12 and older should be asked if they would like to attend the Icebreaker meeting. Youth should be given the opportunity to be a part of this meeting and to share pertinent information about themselves and their family. If the youth chooses to attend, the caseworker has the responsibility to prepare and support the youth during the meeting.

When preparing a child or youth for the Icebreaker, the caseworker should clearly:

- Communicate the purpose of the meeting with the child and help him or her figure out what information would be helpful to share at the meeting.
- Discuss the options and ground rules for participating. They can attend or not; speak or not; and choose methods other than speaking to communicate key information to parents. For example, they could prepare a letter or picture, or draw up an “interests inventory,” listing their likes and dislikes.
- Describe how much of the meeting the child will attend, what will happen when he or she is there and during the part of the meeting he or she will not attend.
- Work with the child to choose what to say or how to participate, with special attention to figuring out what information would be most helpful to communicate, and when.
- Discuss with the child whether he or she would like to introduce birth and foster parents to one another.

It is also important to debrief the children after the meetings. The caseworker should talk to children after meetings about how they felt during the meeting—feelings, concerns, issues that need to be addressed—and make sure to follow up as needed. (See Appendix 11 for “Tips for Youth Participating in Icebreakers.”)

Preparing Caseworkers for Their New Roles as Icebreaker Facilitators

Some caseworkers may be comfortable and good at facilitating Icebreakers from the start; others may be less so. It is important for caseworkers to understand their role in Icebreaker meetings and to be skilled in their role as facilitator. Some possible strategies for preparing caseworkers for their role in Icebreaker meetings:

- *Start with supervisors.* The role of the supervisor in any child welfare agency is, of course, pivotal. Supervisors are key to ensuring that staff members understand the importance of Icebreaker meetings and have the skills they need to do the job.
 - Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that caseworkers fully understand their responsibilities before, during, and after Icebreaker meetings and they understand that involving all participants is key.
 - The role of the caseworker in Icebreaker meetings should be clearly defined and supervisors must understand their part in supporting this aspect of the caseworker’s job.
- *Create in-service training.* A training curriculum is necessary to present information on both the benefits and challenges of Icebreaker meetings from the perspectives of all participants.
 - Make sure all in-service training supports birth parent-foster parent relationships. Scan all your training, both in-house and any you may contract for, to make sure the concept of building birth and resource family alliances is included and portrayed positively.

- *Publish and promote new policy and procedures.* Make sure any promotional materials that include references to the Icebreaker policy outline the roles, responsibilities, procedures, and engagement expectations of all participants. Having all Icebreaker information in one place, including all associated forms and documentation, is helpful.
- *Present case studies to improve staff buy-in.* Numerous agencies have found that bringing in a foster parent, birth parent, caseworker, and child to describe their experience with an Icebreaker can be particularly helpful in getting staff buy-in.
- *Include information about Icebreakers in new staff orientation.* The agency's focus on building birth and foster parent relationships must permeate all aspects of the agency's work, including new staff orientation. Again, using birth parents and foster parents as guest speakers can help.
- *Share Implementation updates.* Offer staff progress reports on the status of Icebreaker meeting implementation. Short updates at staff meetings, flyers on bulletin boards, weekly e-mail blasts, etc., can keep staff in the know.
- *Provide additional caseworker mentoring as needed.* Again, some caseworkers will immediately be comfortable with and supportive of the Icebreaker concept while others may struggle with it or need extra mentoring for skill development.

Other suggestions for supporting staff in this new role:

- *Assess where staff members are struggling.* Do they lack commitment to the values of birth parent-foster parent relationships? Do they lack facilitation skills? Is time management an issue? Do they require additional training?
- *Provide additional training,* as described in the training section.
- *Ask supervisors to attend Icebreaker meetings as coaches and mentors.* Having supervisors sit in on Icebreaker meetings can be extremely helpful to caseworkers. It offers the supervisor the chance to observe the worker in action, and gives the supervisor an opportunity to serve as a role model for the caseworker. A debriefing after the Icebreaker between the caseworker and supervisor is also critical.

(See Appendix 12 for “10 Tips for Social Workers for Supporting Children During Icebreaker Meetings;” “10 Tips for Resource Parents to Support Youth During Icebreaker Meetings;” and “10 Tips for Birth Parents to Support Youth During Icebreaker Meetings.”)

SECTION V



BUILDING ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES TO SUPPORT ICEBREAKERS

There are a variety of tasks that will require attention when planning and implementing Icebreaker meetings, including:

- Addressing administrative tasks and responsibilities;
- Working with unions; and
- Working with private agencies or foster care agencies.

Administrative Tasks and Responsibilities

Strong, supportive leadership is key to the success of any new program or policy in any agency. The child welfare agency administrator's role is critical to achieving full implementation of an Icebreaker program. The administrator creates the expectation for the practice within the agency, and holds staff accountable. In addition, administrators must be willing and able to move structure, policy, people and money to ensure successful implementation of new policy, procedures, and practice.

The following factors are important to address in the administrative planning stage.

Confidentiality

Some staff may try to use the issue of confidentiality to avoid scheduling an Icebreaker meeting. But when individuals such as foster parents and birth parents freely share their own information, there is no violation of confidentiality.

Furthermore, because foster parents may already be involved in the case planning process, the issue of confidentiality is not a valid reason for failing to convene an Icebreaker meeting. For their part, foster parents often have previously signed confidentiality agreements allowing for the sharing of information as part of the licensing process.

However, there are strategies that should be employed to ensure that everyone's privacy is protected. Icebreaker meetings should be held in locations where confidentiality and privacy can be ensured. The meetings should not occur in areas that are accessible to staff or others who have no involvement with the case.

Participants in the Icebreaker meetings should be reminded of the parameters of confidentiality.

Staffing

Many child welfare agencies across the country are still experiencing staffing shortages. Icebreaker meetings might be viewed by staff as another task thrown onto their already overflowing work schedules. In both the long- and short-run, however, Icebreaker meetings arguably save time. Icebreakers can accelerate reunification in the long run, and in the short run can help save time by reducing unnecessary phone calls, minimizing conflict and

jealousy, and eliminating the need to run down information because birth and foster parents are communicating with one another.

Where staffing levels are a serious issue, the situation should be brought to the attention of the case manager's supervisor or designated management representative. It is expected that supervisors will either grant an extension to the timeframe for the Icebreaker meeting, or assign a peer case manager to conduct it. In addition, the foster care licensing staff may, in a pinch, facilitate the Icebreaker meeting.

Restructuring

Child welfare by its very nature often requires restructuring the organization and shifting staff responsibilities. When restructuring occurs, its impact on Icebreaker meetings should be considered. Will the new structure impact who has responsibility for the meeting? Will timeframes change? As much as possible, consider Icebreaker meetings when planning reorganization of your agency.

Staff Resistance

As with any new policy or procedure, resistance from staff is to be expected. Resistance can be minimized in a number of ways:

- By including staff and local union leaders in the planning and development stages of Icebreaker policies and procedures.
- By ensuring that agency leadership takes an active role in communicating the goals and necessity of Icebreaker meetings.
- By getting first line supervisors to step up in support of Icebreaker meetings, and to reinforce the importance and the benefits of the meetings.
- By reminding staff that Icebreaker meetings can reduce the length of time in care, as well as reduce phone calls, parent-parent conflicts, placement disruptions, and moves.
- By directly acknowledging and addressing staff concerns and fears.

Safety Concerns

Safety for all those who are involved in an Icebreaker meeting is paramount. Whenever possible, the meetings should take place at locations where all parties feel comfortable and safe. A conversation in the parking lot between foster and birth parents does not constitute an Icebreaker meeting and puts participants at risk.

Preparation of all parties is essential to minimize the risk of any violent or physical outbursts. Describing the icebreaker and its purpose can relieve anxieties and fears. For birth parents, who may be feeling totally disenfranchised, providing them the opportunity for input and to meet their child's caregiver may neutralize strong feelings that can lead to unpredictable behavior. However, the social worker must make a careful assessment of the birth parents' capacity to participate safely in the icebreaker meeting.

In cases where birth parents have exhibited violence or expressed potential assaultive behavior toward any parties related to the case, extra security measures should be taken. If any party displays inappropriate behavior during the Icebreaker meeting, the meeting should be immediately terminated for the safety of all involved. The incident should be documented in accordance with agency policy and procedures. A subsequent meeting can be rescheduled once the concerns have been addressed or an alternative method can be utilized.

Voluntary/Mandatory Placements

Regardless of whether children are in voluntary or mandatory care, Icebreaker meetings should still occur whenever practicable. Whatever the child's status, separation invariably results in emotional trauma to children.

Working with Unions

Unions should always be viewed as partners in implementing Icebreakers. Informing union representatives early on, and letting them know that you intend to include their social work staff/union representatives in the planning and implementation of Icebreakers can go a long way toward defusing opposition. This will also help ensure the practice is implemented with input from people on the front line of working with families and people with the best ideas of how to fit the meetings in with their existing work. Depending on the relationship between the union and your agency, you may want to offer to the union the opportunity to choose which caseworker and clerical representative should participate in the work groups.

Working together with unions from the very beginning can go a long way toward smoothing full implementation of Icebreaker meetings, and you may even find that you have created some champions for change in the process.

Common concerns that may be raised by the union leadership include the impact of Icebreakers on caseworker workload; the fact that instituting Icebreakers is a change in current working conditions; and safety concerns.

Once the work group has begun to meet, it is also important to provide union leadership with periodic updates on the planning and implementation process.

Working with Private Agencies or Foster Care Agencies

Public social service agencies, with whom legal custody of children resides, frequently work closely with private child placement agencies. Ideally, both public and private agencies follow similar procedures, so it is reasonable to ask private providers to learn about and participate in Icebreaker meetings. Some ways to encourage private partner participation:

Involve private agency representatives (staff, foster parents) in the Icebreaker planning process. This may require public agency staff meeting with a coalition of private agencies to ask them to appoint representatives to participate in planning meetings. Or your agency may already have

a monthly or quarterly meeting with private providers, making it easier to put Icebreakers on the agenda. Another option in smaller jurisdictions with fewer private agencies might be to ask all private agencies to designate one person to participate on the Icebreaker work group. To ensure private agency buy-in, whoever is designated to work with your agency should:

- Have the authority to effect change in their agency, e.g., a supervisor, program coordinator, etc.
- Commit to attending every meeting. Having a different staff member participate at different meetings thwarts the consistency needed to move the process along.
- Recognize their responsibility to fully participate in the work group process, including taking on assignments, working with a subgroup, etc.

Include private agencies in all training and development offered to public child welfare agency staff and parents. Consider training public and private agency staff and caregivers together. This approach creates more training opportunities for everyone.

Incorporate measures that support foster parent-birth parent collaboration into contracting, monitoring, and utilization review processes. Icebreaker meetings should be integrated into private agencies' contracts and should include language about who at private agencies is responsible for scheduling and attending Icebreaker meetings. Be sure to specify the protocols and policies for Icebreaker meetings in the contract language. Tracking compliance with Icebreaker meeting protocols is critical to ensuring that the practice has been integrated into the private agency's way of doing business.

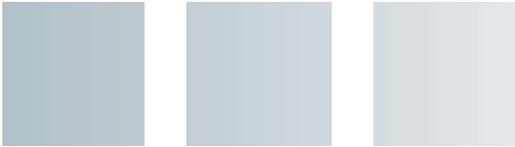
The public child welfare leader must reach out to the private agency leader to inform, respond to anticipated fears and concerns, remove objections, describe benefits of new practice, and get buy-in. In many instances, private agency certified foster parents have had less exposure to birth parents than county/state licensed foster parents. Private agency foster parents may have a greater distance to travel to overcome the belief that birth parents are "bad" or "dangerous" people. Hence it is critical to take the time to overcome these concerns before attempting to implement the new practice. A meeting between the public agency director and private agency director to discuss their perceptions, concerns, and fears about birth parent-foster parent relationships is an important step to gaining the cooperation and collaboration of the private agency.

Include in the protocol, information regarding who is the contact at the private agency to be informed when scheduling Icebreakers. In order to expedite scheduling the icebreaker in a timely manner, it is critical for the lines of communication to be very clear. The call/fax/e-mail/text message requesting the Icebreaker is made immediately to the proper staff member and the foster parent is informed quickly. Since the public agency staff generally must call the private agency administrator or social worker when dealing with a private agency, there is an increased possibility of delays or drops in the communication getting to the appropriate foster parent.

Include in the protocol who, if anyone, from the private agency (other than foster parent) will be invited to attend Icebreaker. In most cases, the private agency worker does not attend the Icebreaker meeting. The meeting is composed of the birth parent, foster parent, and child's social worker, who facilitates the meeting. However, if the protocol states that the child's social worker will facilitate, what about including private agency resource parent's social worker? Can both be present without over-loading the room with agency staff? Some jurisdictions have chosen to invite both, with the child's caseworker serving as the facilitator and the private agency worker as a support to the caregiver. However, the private agency worker must serve as a silent support so the birth parent does not feel outnumbered by staff members.

Some child welfare systems use private agencies to fulfill case management responsibilities. The caseworker who manages day-to-day case activities is the person who schedules and facilitates the Icebreaker meeting.

SECTION VI



LAUNCHING ICEBREAKERS

The strategies outlined in this section focus on promoting Icebreaker meetings, including:

- Getting the word out;
- Developing an Icebreaker brochure; and
- Planning a kick-off event.

Getting the Word Out

When it comes to informing people about Icebreakers, the more the better. This not only includes agency staff but also foster parents, birth parents, private foster care agencies, community partners, guardians ad litem, CASAs, judges, and others in the greater community.

It may be helpful to include your agency's public information officer or the staff member responsible for news releases about your Icebreaker work group, so that you can gain their assistance in telling the story of Icebreakers in building alliances between birth and foster families.

Some suggested strategies include:

- Share news releases and human interest stories with the media.
- Publish success stories, anecdotes, and Icebreaker updates from staff and resource families in the agency newsletter, Foster/Adoptive Parents Association's (FAPA) newsletter, and the agency's website.
- Publish the agency's Icebreaker policy and protocol in the FAPA newsletter. Share it in pre-service and in-service training.

The Icebreaker Meeting Brochure

Create a brochure as a simple, inexpensive method of informing others about Icebreakers. The brochure should provide basic information about Icebreakers meetings. It can be used by caseworkers to prepare themselves for meetings and can be handed out to other staff, caregivers, parents, private agencies, and community partners.

Be sure to solicit information from as diverse a group as possible about what should be included in the brochure, including birth parents, foster parents, staff, and community members. Include the brochure with existing newsletters for your department and other departments, as well posting it on bulletin boards. You can also pass out brochures at Birth Parent Orientations, Foster/Adoptive Parent Association meetings, family decision-making meetings, staff unit meetings, juvenile court, and community events.

The brochure should be free of child welfare and agency jargon and include the following information:

- Your agency's contact information so that participants can reach someone should they have questions.

- The purpose or goal of the meetings—to begin to build the parent to parent relationship and to share information about the child.
- Why Icebreaker meetings are important and how this will benefit the child.
- A brief description of each person’s role in the meetings.
- A few examples of what might be shared at the meeting.

You might also include information about:

- How Icebreakers benefit each participant.
- Key elements of an effective meeting.
- Testimonials/quotes from staff and families.

The brochure should be attractive, positive, easy to read and include graphic art or photographs of families and children from various racial/ethnic groups. At times, agencies have created some specialized brochures for specific populations such as youth, birth parents, and kinship caregivers. (See Appendix 13 for a sample brochure.)

The Kick-Off Event

Once you are ready for implementation, it is time to plan the kick-off event. This event must be well-advertised, informative, and well-attended by agency leaders. A short speech endorsing Icebreaker meetings and encouraging staff would be an excellent way to utilize the agency’s director in your kickoff event.

The purpose of the kick-off is to:

- Provide basic education and awareness;
- Begin to build buy-in;
- Create energy and excitement;
- Set agency expectations;
- Forge team relationships through cross training;
- Introduce the implementation plan, and;
- Highlight benefits to all participants.

Use the kick-off to:

- *Provide basic information about the logistics of Icebreaker meetings.* This may be a good time to introduce the policy and protocol.
- *Introduce the 10 Benefits of Icebreaker Meetings.* Create a list of the 10 most important benefits to your staff, foster parents, birth parents, and children to share during the kickoff.
- *Briefly discuss challenges and plans to overcome challenges.* This is the place to outline common fears and concerns. A caseworker and foster parent who participated on the work group would be excellent choices as speakers.

- *Inform everyone of their roles and responsibilities.* Use your new Icebreaker brochure to share this information. Or have a birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker from the work group describe their respective roles and responsibilities.
- *Conduct a mock Icebreaker meeting.*
- *Present a panel with an Icebreaker team.* A birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker from a single closed case can share their experiences of building a relationship and working together;
- *Provide an implementation plan and timeline.* This information can be shared by leadership of the work group or could be presented by the agency director to demonstrate their commitment to the implementation of Icebreaker meetings.

The kick-off event should include all staff so that they become knowledgeable about the new practice. Include foster parents; CASAs; guardians ad litem; juvenile court judges; community partners; and private agency staff, foster parents, and birth parent advocates to help get the message out to many people at the same time.

Prepare packets ahead of time that include the kick-off agenda, Icebreaker brochures, policy/protocol, roles/responsibilities, FAQs (frequently asked questions), additional opportunities for training, etc.

SECTION VII



SUSTAINING THE ICEBREAKER MEETING PROCESS

This section discusses strategies an agency can employ not only to sustain Icebreakers as a practice, but move beyond the meetings to develop more substantial working relationships between the birth parent, foster parent, and caseworker. Sustaining work involves weaving the values of teamwork, partnership, and parent engagement into the fabric of the agency. Indeed, Icebreaker meetings can be the first step in shifting the culture of the agency.

Additional strategies to advance this work are:

- Maintaining collaborative Icebreaker work groups;
- Developing social and learning activities to support birth/foster parent alliances;
- Providing professional development for resource parents and staff;
- Including Icebreaker information in birth family orientations;
- Hiring, orienting, and evaluating staff; and
- Continuing public relations.

Maintaining Collaborative Icebreaker Work Groups

Develop a standing work group that focuses on forging foster parent/birth family/caseworker partnerships, with representation from birth parents as well as foster parents. This work group can provide a forum to promote and support strong working relationships, participate in evaluation activities, and make program recommendations. This group could also assist in guiding related efforts such as those described below.

Developing Social and Learning Activities

Providing birth parents and foster parents opportunities to get to know each other outside of the usual case plan activities can support the development of positive relationships. Here are some ways to do that:

- Sponsor social gatherings and recreational events for children, their birth families, and resource families.
- Offer training sessions, visiting speakers, etc., on topics that both foster parents and birth parents will benefit from, such as bedwetting, school issues, or discipline.
- Create collaborative support groups co-led by foster parents and birth parents.
- Create teams of experienced foster parents and successful birth parents to support birth parents or foster parents who are new to collaborative relationships.

Providing Professional Development for Resource Parents and Staff

It is critical that all parties are adequately educated about the “ins and outs” of collaborative relationships. Offer training, supervision, and coaching regarding the partnership approach and specific interventions, such as Icebreakers, to birth parents, resource parents, and staff. In addition, topics such as visitation, crisis intervention, mediating conflict, and teamwork

as well as methods to build partnerships over the life of a placement are important training topics. Here are some suggestions to further education:

- Incorporate icebreaker content into pre-service and in-service training for staff and caregivers.
- Develop specialized training for managers and supervisors.
- Include birth parents and resource parents in the delivery of training to both staff and parents.
- Include attention to openness and continuity of relationships in cases where adoption or kinship occurs.

Including Icebreaker Information in Birth Family Orientations

Some agencies provide their birth families with an orientation for working with the agency. Part of that orientation should focus on creating collaborative relationships with the social worker and resource parent. A panel of a foster parent, resource parent, and social worker that were partners on the same case is an excellent way to model these relationships.

Other agencies give birth parents a booklet that provides an overview of the agency, services, and resources. Integrating information about birth parent/foster parent relationships and collaboration, including examples and helpful hints, into this booklet can go a long way to preparing the birth family for the icebreaker meeting.

There should be several opportunities to prepare families for the icebreaker meeting. These should be identified by the workgroup and specific roles and messaging tools should be provided. For instance, the child protection worker can give a brochure to the parent or the Icebreaker can be discussed in the placement decision meeting if it has been decided that the children would come into care. Information about the partnership approach, and specifically the Icebreaker, should be provided to birth parents once placement has occurred or is planned, and on an ongoing basis thereafter. The opportunity to participate in a group orientation process facilitated by parent advocates would be ideal.

Hiring, Orienting, and Evaluating Staff

When advertising, interviewing, and hiring new staff, information should be provided about the expectation that social workers will promote the development of collaborative relationships between birth parents and resource parents.

During staff orientation, a panel consisting of a birth parent, resource parent, and social worker from the same closed case will help model desirable behaviors. Supervisors of new staff must support them through mentoring and coaching. One way that supervisors can do this is to conduct a practice Icebreaker and role play the interactions. Or supervisors can sit through the first Icebreaker and give the new social worker feedback on their performance.

Both staff and foster parents must undergo a performance appraisal regularly. For staff this is the annual employee evaluation and for foster parents this is the annual recertification process (some agencies may do more frequent recertification). This is the agency's opportunity to identify the staff/family's strengths and areas in need of growth and development. Incorporating measures that support partnerships into the agency's performance evaluation/recertification process is critical to sustaining them.

In addition, building and supporting partnerships should be a factor in promotion and merit pay among staff. A special award for resource parents can be given for those families that have reached out to birth parents.

Continuing Public Relations

Spreading the word about Icebreakers does not end with full implementation. There will be countless human interest stories about how the collaborative relationships forged through Icebreakers have benefited children, families, and staff. These can be shared in print and electronic media as well as in agency newsletters, publications, websites, and at staff or unit meetings.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

We hope that this information has been helpful to you and your agency as you work to implement Icebreaker meetings. Agencies that have adopted the Icebreaker protocols describe the process as more of a marathon than a sprint. But despite the many challenges that invariably arrive with Icebreaker implementation, we believe that the end product—a healthy working relationship between the families involved in the child’s life—is critical to the success of the placement and the overall adjustment of the child.

More importantly, the relationship begun during the Icebreaker meeting can contribute to the overall stability of the child’s placement by reducing conflicts, sharing vital information about the child’s needs and care, and reducing tension between the families. When experiencing permanency through reunification, kinship placement, or adoption, the child is likely to feel less stress, to feel free to establish new relationships, and able to focus on important developmental tasks which will enhance their overall well-being while in placement and beyond.



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