

Reunification Spotlight



Icebreakers: Tapping into the Power of Families Supporting Families

In the not-too-distant past, contact between foster parents and birth parents was actively discouraged by child welfare professionals. However, increasing recognition of the important role foster parents can play in supporting the parents and their reunification efforts has led to new practices encouraging communication and partnership between families. One practice that has been successfully used to open communication channels between birth parents and foster parents¹ is holding initial meetings known as Icebreakers.

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Icebreaker Meetings as a First Step in Creating Foster-Birth Parent Alliances

Developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative, Icebreaker meetings are designed to be the first step in building a connection between birth parents and foster parents and preparing them to work together to ease the child's transition between families. The main purposes of Icebreakers are to allow the birth and foster parents to share information about the child, such as daily routines, food preferences, favorite toys, and medical needs, and to make preliminary plans for visitation. The child is usually included in the meeting so that he or she can also share information and ask questions.



¹ While the term "foster parents" is used throughout this article, an Icebreaker can be held with the caregiver in any new placement for a child. Additionally, the terms "birth parent" and "parent" are used, but Icebreakers can be held with any relative, and even during transitions from one foster family to another or from foster family to adoptive family.



What Are the Benefits of Icebreakers?

On the most basic level, Icebreaker meetings bridge the gap between foster parents and birth parents by getting everyone in the same room to discuss the child's needs shortly after placement with the new caregiver. Icebreakers can make the transition easier for all participants by helping foster parents understand the specific needs of the child, by allowing birth parents to meet and provide input to their children's new caregivers, and by letting the child see the parents working together as a team on their behalf. The meetings can also be a first step in maintaining or strengthening the bonds between parents and their children during separation. For these reasons, Icebreakers can help a child feel more secure during the transition of care, which can reduce stress and allow the child to focus on normal tasks like school work and making friends. This can also lead to greater placement stability and a reduction in moves.

Just as important, Icebreaker meetings can ease parents' minds by providing an opportunity to see that the foster parents are not trying to take away their child, which can help the parents focus their energy on reunification. In an interview conducted by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, one foster parent shared that initial meetings "can be a great opportunity for [birth parents] to see that the foster caregiver is really concerned about their child and doesn't want to replace them. It lets them know right off the bat that you are on their side."² Conversely, direct communication can also dispel preconceived notions the foster parents may have about the parents.



Icebreakers also help foster parents successfully fulfill their roles by providing an opportunity to learn what will make the child feel safe and comfortable in their home. The meetings also promote positive communication with the parents which can allow for collaborative parenting and help foster parents learn how to best support the parents on the path to reunification, such as through increased contact and visitation with the child or by being available to answer questions or give parenting advice.

Because of these positive effects, Icebreakers can help reduce the length of time children spend in care and be a first step towards speedier reunification.

² Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Partnering with Parents to Promote Reunification*, CHILD. BUREAU 2 (2019), https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/factsheets_families_partnerships.pdf.



But children and families are not the only ones who reap benefits from Icebreakers – they are beneficial to caseworkers too. Open communication between the birth and foster parents can make caseworkers’ jobs easier by reducing conflict, increasing placement stability, helping visitations go smoothly, and encouraging cooperation with and mentoring of the parents. In the short term, Icebreakers may add more to caseworkers’ already full plates but in the long run, they can help caseworkers spend less time on mediating and assist in achieving their main objectives: ensuring children’s well-being and promoting family reunification.

How an Icebreaker Meeting Works

Ideally, the Icebreaker should occur as close to the time of placement as possible but no longer than one week later, and it should re-occur whenever there is a change in placement. Icebreaker meetings are short in length, generally 30-45 minutes, and usually occur in person, although Skype or other conferencing technology can be used if needed.

Because meeting each other can be stressful and anxiety-inducing for birth and foster parents, the caseworker should carefully plan for the meeting and take time to talk with each participant in advance to make sure they understand the purpose of the meeting. The caseworker should also discuss ground rules such as the importance of focusing on the child, not on the allegations. The participants should be asked to prepare the specific information they want to share at the meeting, whether through creating a list or filling in a questionnaire.

During the Icebreaker, the caseworker will facilitate the conversation between the participants and actively manage the meeting to keep it safe, productive, and child-focused. The flow of the meeting generally looks like the following:

- State purpose of the meeting
- Introduce the participants
- Ask foster parents to share information about themselves, their family, their home, and how the child is adjusting
- Invite the parents to provide information about the child and to ask any questions they may have about the foster parents and home
- If the child is present, give him or her the opportunity to share additional information and ask questions
- Help create a plan for communication between the families and arrange short-term visitation

The caseworker should also debrief the participants after the meeting to see if there are any other questions or issues that were not covered.



Icebreakers in Practice: Bridging the Gap in Northern Virginia

Bridging the Gap (BTG), a Northern Virginia Foster Care and Adoption Initiative, was an inter-agency collaboration that focused on promoting relationships between birth and foster parents. One important part of the initiative still in practice today are Icebreakers.

Before Icebreaker meetings were introduced as part of BTG, foster families were discouraged from contacting parents, to the extent that different entrances and exits were used for the parents so that they would not interact with each other during supervised visits. For Chauncey Strong, a former Foster Care Supervisor in Fairfax County, Virginia, Icebreakers not only prepare families to work together but help get rid of a “toxic atmosphere” in which children are caught in the middle between two families. He says, “ultimately, most children want to be with their parents – and we make sure to help prepare the foster parents for this – even if their parents are not perfect.”³ Icebreakers give foster parents a chance to show their support for the parents, alleviating this stress for the child. Chauncey has also found that Icebreakers are extremely beneficial when a mentoring relationship forms between the foster and birth parents, especially for young parents who are still learning how to parent and care for a child.

BTG has seen firsthand how open communication between birth and foster parents can lead to the reunification of families. In one case several years ago that Chauncey shared, a father called social services out of concern for his children, who were in the care of their mother. The children were removed from the mother and, instead of being placed with the father, were placed in foster care. Despite not being given visitation, the father was persistent in asking for it and trying to show that he could care for his children. Finally, after the father met with the foster parents and social services during an impromptu Icebreaker, the foster parents were open to supporting the father’s relationships with his children. By working together as a team, the foster parents were ultimately able to help the father reunify with his children. Even after reunification, the father and the foster parents still have a close relationship and the foster parents sometimes provide respite to the father by watching the children on the weekend.

One lesson that other agencies can learn from BTG’s experience involves the evaluation of Icebreakers. Chauncey shares that while data collection started out strong, after the first year the efforts fell off. Although anecdotal stories can be used to point to the success of Icebreakers, data linked to positive outcomes such as increased reunification rates or shortened time to reunification would be even more helpful to agencies seeking continued support and funding. This makes a strong case for considering evaluation from the start of Icebreaker meetings and making it a part of normal practice.

³ Telephone Interview with Chauncey Strong, MSW, Executive Director, Strong Training and Consulting (June 7, 2019).



The Basics of Implementing Icebreakers

Just like a successful Icebreaker meeting, implementation of Icebreakers requires careful planning. For a brief overview of the steps of the implementation process, agencies can start with Appendix I of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Icebreakers Toolkit, which provides a complete “To Do” list.⁴ Some of the key steps include:

- Creating a working group to develop an implementation work plan and timeline, written policies or protocols, and an evaluation plan for data collection and gathering feedback
- Developing Icebreaker materials such as an agenda, brochure, handouts for participants, and a documentation form for staff
- Training supervisors and staff on Icebreakers meetings
- Revising foster family recruitment materials to reflect the expectation that foster parents will work with parents to support reunification
- Updating foster parent training with information on Icebreakers and how they support reunification



The multi-step process may seem daunting but fortunately agencies new to Icebreakers can draw on helpful resources, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Icebreakers resource page, and save time by adapting existing Icebreaker protocols and materials.⁵ Agencies may also consider visiting or partnering with an agency experienced with Icebreakers to learn what worked well and what did not. By taking the time to plan out the process on the front end, agencies can help make the Icebreaker implementation process smoother and ensure that the practice will be sustained over the long term.

Conclusion

While the process of implementing Icebreaker meetings may take time, resources, and training, jurisdictions where Icebreakers are used report improvements in foster-birth parent relationships and reunification as a result of their efforts. Along with recruiting and training foster parents so that they understand from the beginning that reunification is the primary goal, Icebreakers can be a small change that results in big impacts in both the short and long term by easing a stressful transition for children and, ultimately, encouraging the preservation of families.

⁴ Appendix I: Things to Consider Before or During Implementation is available at <https://www.aecf.org/blog/resources-for-holding-icebreaker-meetings-between-birth-and-foster-parents>.

⁵ See the following page for the Annie E. Casey Foundation Icebreakers resources page link and other helpful materials.



For More Information and Questions

For the most in-depth information on Icebreakers, including a tool kit with example meeting forms, agendas, and brochures, please visit the Annie E. Casey Foundation's resource page on Icebreakers at <https://www.aecf.org/blog/resources-for-holding-icebreaker-meetings-between-birth-and-foster-parents/>. For questions on the Bridging the Gap Initiative, please contact Chauncey Strong at chaunceystrong78@gmail.com.

Example Icebreaker Protocols & Other Materials

BRIDGING THE GAP, FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND FOSTER PARENTS (2008), <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/family-engagement/BTGFrequentlyAskedQuestionsfinal4-22-08.pdf>.

BRIDGING THE GAP, ICEBREAKER MEETING PROTOCOL (2008), <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/family-engagement/BTGIcebreakerProtocol4-21-08final.pdf>.

DEL. DEP'T OF SERV. FOR CHILD., YOUTH AND THEIR FAM., FOSTER CARE ICEBREAKER MEETING BROCHURE, http://www.friendsofsussexcasa.org/uploads/8/7/1/0/87103474/dfs_brochure_-_ice_breaker_.pdf (last visited June 6, 2019).

PLACER COUNTY DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUM. SERV., WHY HAVE AN ICE BREAKER MEETING?, <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/IcebreakerPlacer.pdf> (last visited June 6, 2019).

QPI LOUISIANA, ICEBREAKER MEETINGS PRACTICE GUIDE, <http://www.dcms.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Icebreaker%20Meetings%20Practice%20Guide.pdf> (last visited June 6, 2019).

Sources

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Resources for Holding Icebreaker Meetings Between Birth and Foster Parents, ANNIE E. CASEY FOUND. (Mar. 29, 2012), <https://www.aecf.org/blog/resources-for-holding-icebreaker-meetings-between-birth-and-foster-parents/>.

Va. Dep't of Social Serv., Division of Fam. Serv., *Virginia Practice Model Spotlight*, PERMANENCY MATTERS 8 (2018), https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/fc/intro_page/permanency_matters_newsletters/permanency_matters_reunification.pdf.



June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm

