



bridging the gap

Families
Working Together

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND FOSTER PARENTS

FROM THE BIRTH PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. How will my child and I remain connected?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FROM THE FOSTER PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE:

1. Structure of the icebreaker meeting

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

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

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

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

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

3. Concerns about meeting the birth parents

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

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

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

4. Sharing information

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

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

5. Concerns relating to the child

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Who will decide my visitation with my parents?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FROM THE SOCIAL WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE:

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

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

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

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

3. Do I have to attend the icebreaker meeting?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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