

PARTICIPANT HANDOUTS

CWS3021W: Promoting Birth and
Foster Family Partnerships
(Online Version)



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

WDS Workforce Development
and Support

COURSE COMPETENCIES AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

COURSE COMPETENCIES:

- The participant can promote cooperative relationships with the child's family and foster parent in the parenting role and build a partnership with stakeholders to help the child or youth placed in foster care.
- The participant can identify the various roles and responsibilities involved in Shared Parenting and the process of "Bridging the Gap" strategies of meeting the needs of the child or youth in foster care.
- The participant can demonstrate specific skills and techniques to engage the birth parents in the permanency planning process and build on the child's family and foster parents' strengths to develop effective parent-child interaction opportunities beyond supervised visits.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES: Following the training, participants will be able to:

- Recognize the positives and challenges in developing partnerships in "Shared Parenting".
- Explain the roles and responsibilities of birth parents, foster parents, and workers in promoting birth and foster family relationships.
- Demonstrate ways in which foster parents can work with the child's birth family and how Family Services Specialists can support these relationships.
- Identify ways to promote successful relationships.
- Describe, prepare for and conduct an icebreaker meeting with Birth and Foster Parents and other case managers of private agencies who work with the foster parents.
- Formulate more opportunities for and effective goal-specific visitation, including "Bridging the Gap" activities.
- Identify what could work in one's own agency after reviewing other agency practices to utilize Foster Parents more on the team in building relationships and preventing foster care.

COURSE AGENDA

ACTIVITY A: INTRODUCTION

ACTIVITY B: SHARED PARENTING

ACTIVITY C: SHARED PARENTING MEETINGS

ACTIVITY D: BRIDGING THE GAP

**ACTIVITY E: STRATEGIC RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER PARENTS THAT
PROMOTES POSITIVE BIRTH FAMILY/FOSTER FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS**

ACTIVITY F: EQUIPPING FOSTER PARENTS TO ACTIVELY SUPPORT

REUNIFICATION

Activity G: WRAP UP

Virginia Children's Services Practice Model

The Virginia Children's Services System Practice Model sets forth a vision for the services that are delivered by all child serving agencies across the Commonwealth, especially the Departments of Social Services, Juvenile Justice, Education, Behavioral Health and Developmental Services and the Office of Comprehensive Services. The practice model is central to our decision making; present in all of our meetings; and in every interaction that we have with a child or family. Decisions that are based on the practice model will be supported and championed. Guided by this model, our process to continuously improve services for children and families will be rooted in the best of practices, the most accurate and current data available, and with the safety and wellbeing of children and families as the fixed center of our work.

We believe that all children and communities deserve to be safe.

1. Safety comes first. Every child has the right to live in a safe home, attend a safe school and live in a safe community. Ensuring safety requires a collaborative effort among family, agency staff, and the community.
2. We value family strengths, perspectives, goals, and plans as central to creating and maintaining child safety, and recognize that removal from home is not the only way to ensure child or community safety.
3. In our response to safety and risk concerns, we reach factually supported conclusions in a timely and thorough manner.
4. Participation of parents, children, extended family, and community stakeholders is a necessary component in assuring safety.
5. We separate caregivers who present a threat to safety from children in need of protection. When court action is necessary to make a child safe, we use our authority with respect and sensitivity.

We believe in family, child, and youth-driven practice.

1. Children and families have the right to have a say in what happens to them and will be treated with dignity and respect. The voices of children, youth and parents are heard, valued, and considered in the decision-making regarding safety, permanency, well-being as well as in service and educational planning and in placement decisions.
2. Each individual's right to self-determination will be respected within the limits of established community standards and laws.
3. We recognize that family members are the experts about their own families. It is our responsibility to understand children, youth, and families within the context of their own family rules, traditions, history, and culture.
4. Children have a right to connections with their biological family and other caring adults with whom they have developed emotional ties.

5. We engage families in a deliberate manner. Through collaboration with families, we develop and implement creative, individual solutions that build on their strengths to meet their needs. Engagement is the primary door through which we help youth and families make positive changes.

We believe that children do best when raised in families.

1. Children should be reared by their families whenever possible.
2. Keeping children and families together and preventing entry into any type of out of home placement is the best possible use of resources.
3. Children are best served when we provide their families with the supports necessary to raise them safely. Services to preserve the family unit and prevent family disruption are family-focused, child-centered, and community-based.
4. People can and do make positive changes. The past does not necessarily limit their potential.
5. When children cannot live safely with their families, the first consideration for placement will be with kinship connections capable of providing a safe and nurturing home. We value the resources within extended family networks and are committed to seeking them out.
6. When placement outside the extended family is necessary, we encourage healthy social development by supporting placements that promote family, sibling and community connections.
7. Children's needs are best served in a family that is committed to the child.
8. Placements in non-family settings should be temporary, should focus on individual children's needs, and should prepare them for return to family and community life.

We believe that all children and youth need and deserve a permanent family.

1. Lifelong family connections are crucial for children and adults. It is our responsibility to promote and preserve kinship, sibling and community connections for each child. We value past, present, and future relationships that consider the child's hopes and wishes.
2. Permanency is best achieved through a legal relationship such as parental custody, adoption, kinship care or guardianship. Placement stability is not permanency
3. Planning for children is focused on the goal of preserving their family, reunifying their family, or achieving permanency with another family.
4. Permanency planning for children begins at the first contact with the children's services system. We proceed with a sense of urgency until permanency is achieved. We support families after permanency to ensure that family connections are stable.

We believe in partnering with others to support child and family success in a system that is family- focused, child-centered, and community-based.

1. We are committed to aligning our system with what is best for children, youth, and families.
 - a. Our organizations, consistent with this practice model, are focused on providing supports to families in raising children. The practice model should guide all of the work that we do. In addition to practice alignment, infrastructure and resources must be aligned with the model. For example, training, policy, technical assistance and other supports must reinforce the model.
 - b. We take responsibility for open communication, accountability, and transparency at all levels of our system and across all agencies. We share success stories and best practices to promote learning within and across communities and share challenges and lessons learned to make better decisions. - Community support is crucial for families in raising children.
2. We are committed to working across agencies, stakeholder groups, and communities to improve outcomes for the children, youth, and families we serve.
 - a. Services to families must be delivered as part of a total system with cooperation, coordination, and collaboration occurring among families, service providers and community stakeholders.
 - b. All stakeholders share responsibility for child safety, permanence and wellbeing. As a system, we will identify and engage stakeholders and community members around our practice model to help children and families achieve success in life; safety; life in the community; family based placements; and life-long family connections.
 - c. We will communicate clearly and often with stakeholders and community members. Our communication must reinforce the belief that children and youth belong in family and community settings and that system resources must be allocated in a manner consistent with that belief.
3. We are committed to working collaboratively to ensure that children with disabilities receive the supports necessary to enable them to receive their special education services within the public schools. We will collaboratively plan for children with disabilities who are struggling in public school settings to identify services that may prevent the need for private school placements, recognizing that the provision of such services will maximize the potential for these children to remain with their families and within their communities.

We believe that how we do our work is as important as the work we do.

1. The people who do this work are our most important asset. Children and families deserve trained, skillful professionals to engage and assist them. We strive to build a workforce that works in alignment with our practice model. They are supported in this effort through open dialogue, clear policy, excellent training and supervision, formal and informal performance evaluation and appropriate resource allocation.
2. As with families, we look for strengths in our organization. We are responsible for creating and maintaining a supportive working and learning environment and for open, respectful communication, collaboration, and accountability at all levels.
3. Our organizations are focused on providing high quality, timely, efficient, and effective services.
4. Relationships and communication among staff, children, families, and community providers are conducted with genuineness, empathy, and respect.
5. The practice of collecting and sharing data and information is a non-negotiable part of how we continually learn and improve. We will use data to inform management, improve practice, measure effectiveness and guide policy decisions. We must strive to align our laws so that collaboration and sharing of data can be achieved to better support our children and families
6. As we work with children, families, and their teams, we clearly share with them our purpose, role, concerns, decisions, and responsibility.

MEETING PROCESS AND AGENDA

Meeting Introduction

Facilitator

Review the purpose of the meeting

Introduction of Participants

Facilitator

Introduce each participant and clarify roles and responsibilities of each

Foster Parent Information

Foster Parent

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

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

Child Specific Information Sharing

Parent/All

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

Opportunity for Questions from the Child

Child

The child will be given an opportunity to ask questions or to express his/hers desires regarding ongoing activities and contact with important people,

Communication and Short-term Visitation Plan

Social Worker

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

Meeting Evaluation Form

Social Worker

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

Shared Parenting MEETING REPORT
(Provide to all attendees at completion of meeting)

☐ Icebreaker Meeting

☐ Other _____

Case Name: _____

Case Number: _____

Date of Meeting: _____ **Worker:** _____

Names of Child/Children:

Attendees (name/title/role):

Items Discussed:

Follow-up Needed:

Visitation Arrangement:

Communication Plan:

Attach the “All About Me” questionnaire and any additional notes to this report.

Developed by Northern Virginia Bridging the Gap 07/30/08, Excerpts taken with permission from Denise Goodman’s “Working with the Child’s Family: A Foster Parent Training Curriculum” 1996.

ALL ABOUT ME

My name is:	My birthday is:
I like to eat:	My favorite toy/activity is:
I don't like:	I am good at:
I need help with:	Please don't:
My family members:	My house:

Tips for Making Shared Parenting Work

Tips that Family Services Specialists can use:

- Ask foster parents and the child's parents at placement how they would like to meet (consider facilitating a conference call or web meeting if distance prevents a parent from attending a face to face meeting)
- Describe shared parenting meetings in positive terms.
- Serve as positive role model to foster parents and the child's parents.
 - Talk positively about the child's parent to foster parent.
 - Talk positively about foster parent to birth parent.
 - Maintain confidentiality.
 - Describe foster parent in non-identifying terms at placement.
- Brief foster parents on the child's parents' fears and needs and help foster parents understand these needs.
- Talk openly with all about their concerns.
- Share information essential to shared parental responsibilities with foster parents and the child's parents, i.e., medical information, school progress, goals, and the child's strengths and needs.
- Set clear boundaries and ground rules for contact that include input from the birth family, the foster family, and the agency.
 - Address personal and emotional safety issues for the child, the child's family, and foster family.
 - Set ground rules regarding phone calls, visitation, and transportation.
- Assist foster parent/ the child's parent in managing conflict.
 - Recognize fears of both parties.
 - Focus on strengths.
 - Look beyond behaviors to identify needs.
 - Develop interventions that meet needs.

- Assist foster parent/ the child's parent in understanding cultural differences.
 - Cultivate a mutual understanding and appreciation of religious beliefs and practices.
 - Openly discuss differences in rituals, family experiences, dress and appearance preferences, etc.
- Convey the benefits of aligning around parenting and discipline practices to insure consistency for the child.
- Facilitate conversations between the child's parent/foster parent.
 - Discuss non-threatening topics.
 - Find common areas of interest.
 - Recognize both families' strengths.
 - Use of self-disclosure.
 - Reflect feelings.
 - Encourage exchange of information between birth parent and foster parent, i.e. favorite foods, toys, sleep behaviors, pictures, school progress, etc.
- Encourage foster parent and birth parent to attend all school and medical appointments.
- Encourage the two families to work on the child's life book together with the child.
- Encourage the two families to attend parenting classes together.
- Initiate discussion with families about strategies that they may use that will support the child's relationship and attachment with both sets of parents to avoid dividing the child's alliance.

Shared Parenting Topics to Consider for Discussion

Hygiene <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer Shower/ Bath • Hair Care (when/ how) • Dental Care • Assistance Required? • Schedule (night/ morning) 	Bedtime <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine • Storytime • Schedule
School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutoring • Routine • Special Needs • Assistance Req.? 	Fears <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unusual Fears • Typical Childhood Fears
Medical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allergies • Medications • Appointments • Immediate Med. Needs • Vaccinations 	Clothing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Style of Dress • Assistance Getting Dressed Clothing Not Allowed
Meals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favorite Foods • Disliked Foods • Food Allergies • Routine (time/ location) • Assistance 	Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favorite Activities • Prohibited Activities
Comfort <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort Items • Stuffed Animal • Blanket • Ways to Comfort 	Behavior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reactions to Stress • Unusual Behaviors?
Discipline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What Works? 	Routine in Home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child's Room • Meals • Up for School

Other:

ICE-BREAKER PROTOCOLS AND PROCEDURES

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?

Ask the social worker about that. The foster parents may want to get to know you and your child better before they give out their phone number.

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 causal 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. A 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 service 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. You may need to do some work with experienced foster parents who have not met birth parents in the past to help them see how important it is to have personal experience with the birth parents. 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 other than the social worker or other professional. 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.

ICEBREAKER MEETING GUIDELINES

Definition:

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

Purpose:

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

An Icebreaker Meeting is held when:

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

Attendees:

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

Children:

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

Issues to consider when deciding whether a child should attend:

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

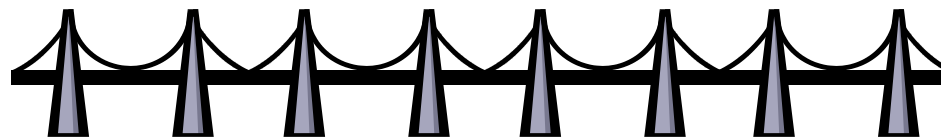
Safety:

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

Participant Participation:

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

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



BRIDGING THE GAP – A CONTINUUM OF CONTACT

SUPPORTING THE CHILD'S FAMILY Bridging the Gap Without Direct Contact	HELPING THE CHILD'S FAMILY Bridging the Gap When There is Contact Between Resource Families and Birth Families	TEACHING THE CHILD'S FAMILY Bridging the Gap by Working With Birth Parents as Part of Service Plan	PARTICIPATING WITH THE FAMILY Bridging the Gap by Serving as a Mentor to the Birth Family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send pictures of child to parent; ask for pictures of parent • Send snack or activity for visit • Prepare child for visit • Remember child's family in prayers or through family rituals • Request cultural info from birth family • Share Life book with family • Share copies of school papers and report cards with family • Share child's artwork with family • Exchange letters/notes with child's family via worker • Speak positively and openly about child's family • Learn about child's family, community, and culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take child to visits and talk positively about the visit • Talk with parent at visit about child's day to day life • Encourage parent to phone child and child to phone parent • Meet child's family at time of placement or prior to placement • Ask for the parent's advice • Attend meetings and reviews when parent is present • Reassure parent of child's love • Attend training to learn ways to work with the birth parent • Refer to child as "Your child" when speaking with birth parent • Share parenting information with parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host visits in your home • Attend visits in the parent's home • Support child's transition back to their family • Involve birth family in visits to doctors, therapists, or school conferences • Assist in planning child's return to birth family; support family's reunification efforts • Include birth parents in farewell activities • Attend training to learn about mentoring a birth parent • Assist birth parents with transportation to treatment related appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome parents into your home • Coordinate and discuss discipline efforts together • Attend parenting classes with parents • Advocate for needed services for family and provide assistance in obtaining services • Support and encourage birth family's involvement in treatment • Provide feedback to birth parents on parenting skills • Model and teach parenting skills in your home • Provide respite care for birth parents after child returns home • Serve as support to birth family after child returns home

THE CONTINUUM OF BRIDGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

***Note:** This chart is not intended to cover all of the roles and responsibilities of the parties but, rather, focuses on those that relate specifically to the communication, contact, and relationship between the foster parent and birth parent. Many of the responsibilities of the birth parent or prior custodian will apply to other relatives of the child who have contact and a relationship with the foster parent. This chart does not address the communication and relationship between the foster parent and adoptive parent, although many of the responsibilities will be similar.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
Ice Breaker Meeting (meet & greet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Prepare and debrief BP/FP/ child by discussing purpose/benefits of meeting and roles/relationships of participants. Answer their questions and concerns. ▶ Prepare agenda with input from CPA and other players. ▶ Prepare foster parent (i.e., how FP can show support and encouragement of birth parent achieving goal of return home). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Prepare foster parent (i.e., how FP can show support and encouragement of birth parent achieving goal of return home). ▶ Tell the foster parent that there will be an evaluation of the icebreaker meeting. ▶ Attend/ensure attendance by FP and child. ▶ Assist with meeting facilitation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend and participate. ▶ Be open and accepting of the BP. ▶ Verbally recognize the concerns of the BP. ▶ Be supportive and encouraging of the BP in accomplishing their goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend and participate. ▶ Think ahead of time and be prepared with specific questions; give honest information. ▶ Be open and accepting of the FP. ▶ Bring useful information that will be helpful to the FP (child's likes/dislikes, medical history, educational information). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend and participate as deemed appropriate by the SW. ▶ Think ahead of time and be prepared with specific questions; give honest information.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
<p><i>continued</i></p> <p>Ice Breaker Meeting (meet & greet)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Schedule meeting location/time/place /transportation. ▶ Tell the FP that there will be an evaluation of the icebreaker meeting. ▶ Facilitate meeting. ▶ Debrief as needed with the BP, FP, and CPA after the meeting. Ask what could have been improved. Communicate with anyone who did not attend. Follow up as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide information to the BP on the CPA's program services (i.e., child's participation in CPA after school program, treatment plan protocols) and CPA contact information. ▶ Follow up and debrief as needed with the SW and FP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Find creative ways to help keep the BP connected with the child; information sharing (photos, letters, journal-activities, follow up on school/medical information). ▶ Be prepared with specific questions and give honest information. ▶ Share information about your family and household. ▶ Communicate the child's concerns & questions. ▶ Be realistic with agreeing to future contact between the FP and BP (nature, frequency, type, coordination). 		

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
Foster Care Service Plan Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Elicit feedback from the BP, FP, child and CPA on content of plan and progress. ▶ Ensure that the BP, FP, and child are fully understanding of the plan. ▶ Periodically review the plan with BP and FP together; include the CPA. ▶ Make sure the BP and FP are informed of the final arrangements (how, when where) for how services will be provided and their expected participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ensure that the FP and child are fully understanding of the plan. ▶ Encourage the FP to support the service plan. ▶ Make sure the treatment plan addresses the communication and relationship between the FP and BP and is aligned with the service plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Be flexible and honest in assisting in the development of the FP's responsibilities in the service plan, and promise only that which can be delivered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Actively participate in developing the service plan by identifying needs and possible sources of help. ▶ Be flexible and honest about ability to honor the FP's requests in regard to the service plan. ▶ Provide accurate information and history about the child or self including past services and service providers. ▶ Share information about relationships that are important to the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Share your opinions about relationships that you need to sustain. ▶ Ask any questions you have about how your BP and FP are communicating and carrying out visitation.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
Foster Care Service Plan Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Monitor the compliance with the service plan as it relates to the BP and FP communication and cooperation. ▶ Periodically review the plan with the BP and FP together; include the CPA. ▶ Elicit feedback from the BP, FP, child, and CPA on the content of the plan and the progress; make sure any of the questions or concerns about the communication and relationship between the BP and FP get addressed. ▶ Publicly give credit to the BP and FP for their work/progress on the plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make sure that the FP's questions/concerns about the communication and relationship with the BP get addressed. ▶ Publicly give credit to the BP and FP for their work/progress on the plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Updates BP on child's progress, activities and questions when visitation occurs or through other contacts. ▶ Encourage the BP's efforts. (pat on the back, "way to go!") ▶ Discuss next steps in building the relationship with the FP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discuss next steps in building the relationship with the BP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask any questions you have about how your BP and FP are communicating and carrying out visits.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
Medical/Dental Appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Communicate with all parties (CPA, FP, BP) about medical/dental needs and appointments. ► Ensure that FP keeps accurate and up to date information on medical/dental care in order to elicit BP's feedback about the care. ► Offer transportation to the BP in order to participate in the appointments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Ensure that the FP keeps accurate and up to date information on medical/dental care in order to elicit the BP's feedback about the care. ► Encourage the FP to include the BP in attending the appointments and to prep and debrief with the BP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Invite/request that the BP accompany child to an appointment. ► Take into account the BP's schedule when setting appointments. ► Share medical information with the BP and SW. ► Elicit the BP's feedback about the child's medical care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Share needed medical history information with the FP. ► May request to accompany the child along with FP to a medical appointment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Tell your SW and FP if you want your parent to participate in the appointments.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
School Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encourage the BP and FP to communicate about and participate in school related activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encourage the FP to be open to communicating with and participation by the BP in school related activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Share school information, grades, and class assignments with the BP. ▶ Invite the BP to school functions including teacher conferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Attend/participate in school meetings and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Keep the BF and FP informed of school progress.
Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Educate themselves about different, appropriate discipline strategies in order to serve as a support to the BP and FP. ▶ Assure that the FP and BP understand how each other is disciplining the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Assure that the FP and BP understand how each other is disciplining the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Inquire of the BP what discipline methods that have worked well in the past. ▶ Share their discipline methods (rules, restrictions, consequences, rewards) with the BP. ▶ Share with the BP any discipline problems experienced. Problem solve with the BP when new discipline issues arise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Share their discipline methods (rules, restrictions, consequences, rewards) with the FP. ▶ Share with the FP any behavioral or discipline problems experienced during visitation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If there is any question about the rules in the BP or FP home, ask for clarification.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
Ongoing Relationship and Information Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Serve as a clearinghouse of information for the BP and FP. ▶ Ensure that all parties have the necessary and required information and are updates on the progress of the case. ▶ Support information sharing between and FP and BP. ▶ In consultation with the CPA, provide direction to the FP and BP on modifications that need to be made to their communication, contact, and relationship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide needed names, numbers, etc., including changes to the FP, and BP. ▶ Support information sharing between the FP and BP. ▶ In consultation with the SW, provide direction to the FP and BP on modifications that need to be made to their communication, contact, and relationship. ▶ Coach the FP with any of their mentoring activities with the BP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Form a friendly relationship with the BP that can help them feel that they are important people who are valued. ▶ Encourage the BP to do the hard work when they feel like giving up. ▶ Take time out at least once in a while to meet with the BP over lunch, coffee, or some other arrangement to communicate with, mentor, and encourage the BP's continued efforts. ▶ Give the BP a pat on the back when able to. ▶ Share information and reports about the child's progress with the BP at least before or after visits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Be open to forming a relationship with the FP. ▶ Share information and reports about child and his background with the FP. ▶ Update FP on any changes in family circumstances that would be helpful for FP to know. ▶ Raise any questions, concerns, or comments about the communication and relationship with the FP so that they can be addressed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Bring forward any questions or confusion about the communication and contact between the BP and FP. ▶ Keep the FP's contact information private unless given consent to share.

	Social Worker (SW)	Child Placing Agency Social Worker (CPA)	Foster Parent (FP)	Birth Parent (BP) or Prior Custodian	Child
<i>continued</i> Ongoing Relationship and Information Sharing	<p>► Coach the FP with any of their mentoring activities with the BP.</p>		<p>► Share stories of times when the FP has struggled or made mistakes to give BP hope and a sense that they are not all “bad”, but are human too.</p> <p>► Raise any questions, concerns, or comments about the communication and relationship with the BP so that they can be addressed.</p> <p>► Maintain confidentiality of the BP’s personal information and background.</p>	<p>► Be open to the FP who is mentoring them.</p>	

Developed by Northern Virginia Bridging the Gap 07/30/08, Excerpts taken with permission from Denise Goodman’s “Working with the Child’s Family: A Foster Parent Training Curriculum” 1996.

Potential Scaling Questions for Use with Foster Parents and Birth Parents

Foster Parents

- **How willing are you to work in cooperation with the birth families of the children you foster?**
 - 10- I am very willing and can't imagine not including them in their children's lives.
 - 1 - I am not willing and do not see the importance of working closely with birth families.
- **How important is the birth parent's role in parenting this child?**
 - 10- I see the birth parent as vital and an integral part in parenting this child.
 - 1- I don't see that the birth parent plays any part of parenting this child/ I don't see their role as important.

Birth Parents:

- **How open are you to partnering with the foster parents around the care of your child?**
 - 10- I feel very open toward working with the foster parents and am willing to work in partnership.
 - 1 - I am not willing to work in partnership with the foster parents and do not plan to be cooperative with them.
- **How confident are you about working in partnership with foster parents?**
 - 10- I feel very confident that we can find a way to work together for the good of the child.
 - 1 - I am very uncomfortable working closely with foster parents and am not sure that we can find ways to work together.

Follow up questions for birth & foster parents:

- What do you think would help you feel more comfortable working with the foster parents/ birth parents?
- What might help you to move up the scale one point?
- What makes you a 2?
- What do you think would help you get to a 3 on the scale?
- What would it look like if you were a 3 or 4?

Keep in mind when you are asking families what it might take for them to move along the scale that you should only ask them about moving one or two points on the scale.

You may also want to assess how the foster parents feel about Shared Parenting before and after additional in-service training as a potential measure of training effectiveness.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

WORK AS A TEAM - It is critical that the foster parent be a strong team player and encourages the child's parent to participate actively in team meetings. This will reinforce roles and responsibilities, maintain focus on goals and objectives and build working relationships between all participants. There are many "players on the team" such as the social workers, therapist, medical personnel, school, community partners, foster parents, court, GAL, CASA, birth parents, extended family, adoptive family, friends of the family, etc.

DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A POSITIVE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP - Many conflicts arise when individuals are suspicious and distrustful of each other. This leads to poor communication and misperceptions of each other's intentions. When individuals work collaboratively, goals are met more readily and conflict is more easily resolved.

SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES - It is important that team members are explicit regarding their own role and be well versed on other team member's roles and responsibilities. The foster parent should receive support from the social worker in setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES - With support from the social worker, the foster parent and birth parent should develop with the basic ground rules for phone calls, visits, etc. This includes the time, place, duration, and how the participants will relate to each other during visitation. When both families agree at the onset to their work together what the ground rules will be, future conflicts are less likely to arise.

REASSURE THE BIRTH PARENT THAT THE GOAL IS REUNIFICATION - In many cases, the child's parents are fearful that the child will never return. This may create anxiety, which may inhibit progress in the case plan. However, when parents are reassured by the child's caregiver, this may reduce the inherent tension of the relationship.

ENCOURAGE THE BIRTH PARENT AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROGRESS THAT THEY HAVE MADE - This gives parent a sense of control over the situation. In addition, the responsibility for the success of the case plan rests with the child's parent not the foster parent.

COLLABORATE WITH THE SOCIAL WORKER - The social worker has the ultimate responsibility for the child, the family and the case plan. The social worker should be regularly consulted to minimize confusion and miscommunication regarding activities between the child and his/her family. The social worker can also be used as a liaison with the child's family if conflicts with the foster family arise.