

Policy Subject:	Promoting Partnerships Between the Family of Origin and Resource Parents
Effective Date:	June 1, 2021
Approved By:	Michelle L. Farr, LICSW, LCSW-C Executive Director Social Services Administration 
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Legal Information & Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to promote partnerships between the family of origin and resource parents. Reasonable efforts shall be provided to preserve or reunify a family to make it possible for a child to return home or finalize permanency. Reasonable efforts are services and supports to a family of origin to increase family strength and stability, increase parent confidence and competence, and enhance child development. **Effective partnership in the child welfare system, including partnerships between families of origin and resource parents, improves outcomes for children and families.** Research shows parenting partnerships benefit all team members, but mostly the child by reducing stress and anxiety. In this policy, the term family of origin refers to the caregiver of the child at the time of separation and the terms family of origin and parent are used interchangeably.

Policy

This policy directs each LDSS to (1) initiate Comfort Calls on the day the child enters out-of-home care, (2) conduct an Icebreaker meeting between the parents and the resource parents within five business days of the child entering out-of-home care and within five business days of any placement change, and (3) establish a Continuum of Contact between parents and resource parents. This policy provides guidance on the procedures for Comfort Calls, Icebreakers, and Continuum of Contact. This policy provides brochure attachments to be shared with the family of origin when a child is separated from their family as well as Icebreaker About Me forms, Icebreaker Meeting Report, and Icebreaker Co-parenting and Sharing of Information Agreement.

The practice of initiating contact with the parents as soon as possible through a Comfort Call allows exchange of information between the parents and resource parents about the immediate needs of the child, alleviates safety concerns of the parents, and begins a relationship between the parents and the resource parents. The Comfort Call reinforces that the parent is the expert on their child, focuses on the needs of the child, immediately promotes communication between the parents and resource parents, minimizes trauma of separation, reinforces commitment to maintaining connections and contact, demonstrates that caseworkers can be trusted to follow through on the commitment, and provides a smoother transition for the child by allowing parents and resource parents to ask questions. In the majority of situations, the CPS worker placing the child will initiate and facilitate the Comfort Call at the time of placement. It is expected there will be circumstances when a Comfort Call may not be able to take place; however, every effort to conduct a Comfort Call will reduce trauma, facilitate the parenting partnership, and build trust. Barriers to Comfort Calls are addressed in the procedural guidance.

The Icebreaker is an opportunity for the parents and resource parents to meet face-to-face and have a facilitated conversation. The focus of the Icebreaker is on the child's needs, but there shall also be an opportunity for the parents and resource parents to share information about themselves to help in establishing an authentic partnership.

Procedural Guidance

The LDSS will implement the practice of Comfort Calls, Icebreakers, and Continuum of Contacts as noted below:

COMFORT CALLS

A Comfort Call is the practice of facilitating a phone conversation between the child's parents and the resource parents, treatment resource parents, or kinship family immediately following separation to confirm the safety of the child, to introduce caregivers to one another, and to exchange critical information necessary to best meet the immediate needs of the child (medical needs, medication, allergies, fears, comfort items). The goal is not only to share important details to help everyone navigate the transition, but also to build a positive and trusting co-parenting relationship between the parents and the resource parents.

General Guidelines:

- The Comfort Call shall occur on the same day that the child enters out-of-home care and ideally within a few hours after separation.
- Comfort Calls are intended to be brief phone calls that are not longer than 15 minutes.
- The Comfort Call shall include the parents, resource parents, caseworker, and when age and developmentally appropriate, the child.
- Ideally, Comfort Calls shall be made while in the resource parent's home during the placement using the caseworker's agency cell phone unless the resource parent is comfortable using their personal phone. The caseworker should remain near the phone or utilize a speaker phone option to monitor information shared and to intervene, if necessary. The caseworker can assist in re-directing conversations as needed to support continuation of the call and to maintain focus on the child and not on the reasons that led to the child entering care.
- If the caseworker is unable to complete the Comfort Call while in the resource home, a three-way call shall be facilitated from the caseworker's phone to the parents and the resource parents.
- The parents and the resource parents should be introduced by providing first and last names, unless specific safety issues exist, then utilize first names only.
- In concluding the Comfort Call, the caseworker shall thank everyone for participating, for remaining focused on the child, and for taking the first step toward creating a positive partnership.

Preparation:

- In order for Comfort Calls to be successful, the caseworker must prepare the parents and the resource parents to ensure they understand the purpose and value of the call as well as their roles.

- The caseworker shall provide the parents with the brochure “Things to Know if Your Child Is in Out-of-Home Care” when they are separated from their child. This brochure and all other written material related to Comfort Calls and Icebreakers shall be provided to the parents in their own language.
- The caseworker shall inform the parents that they will call them when they arrive at the resource home or when they return to the office, and emphasize that, although they are understandably upset about the separation, it is critical to establish a positive relationship for the child’s sake.
- The caseworker should acknowledge that the parents know their child best and prepare them to discuss key topics — such as their child’s medical needs, bedtime rituals, fears, and comfort items — to help ensure their emotional and physical needs are met.
- It may be helpful to remind the parents that the purpose of the Comfort Call is to give them direct contact with the resource parents to discuss their child, but that if they cannot remain calm and focused on the child, the call will have to end and the discussion held another day.
- Resource parents shall be educated about Comfort Calls during pre-service training and at annual reconsiderations.
- The caseworker shall help the resource parents understand the family context, the parent’s emotional state, and remind them that the Comfort Call is intended to alleviate everyone’s concerns and anxieties. The caseworker shall encourage the resource parents to begin the dialogue with the parents by providing basic information about themselves, their family, and home environment.

Benefits of Comfort Calls:

- Minimizes the trauma of separation for the child and the parents by providing a smoother transition into out-of-home care.
- Initiates and promotes immediate communication between the parents and the resource parents.
- Helps ensure that the resource parents receive the information necessary to meet the child’s immediate needs and reinforces that the parent is the expert on their child.
- Establishes an authentic co-parenting partnership focused on the child.
- Reinforces the commitment to maintaining connections and contact with the family of origin.

Addressing barriers:

It is to be expected that circumstances will arise that may delay or prevent the utilization of Comfort Calls. Caseworkers shall make every effort to support and stay true to the principles and belief that the utilization of Comfort Calls is a critical step in establishing relationships, building trust, and reducing trauma for the child. For parents who are hospitalized or incarcerated, caseworkers shall contact the facility and ask if a Comfort Call can be arranged. For parents without access to a phone, the caseworker shall ask the parents if they have a family member or friend’s phone number to call and have the parents be with the person with a

telephone for the call at an arranged time. There is still a benefit even if the call has to be brief or modified. If a parent's whereabouts are unknown, a Comfort Call shall be facilitated as soon as the parent is located. In rare situations when safety issues are present, the caseworker will implement alternate methods for sharing information and establishing a relationship between the parents and resource parents.

ICEBREAKERS

Icebreakers are another important step in building an authentic partnership between parents and resource parents. The main purposes of Icebreakers are to allow the parents and the resource parents to share information about the child and their family and to make preliminary plans for family time and ongoing communication. If appropriate, the child can be included in the meeting so that they can share information and ask questions.

General guidelines:

- Icebreakers are to be facilitated by the caseworker within five business days of the child entering out-of-home care and within five business days of any placement change, to include treatment foster homes and kinship homes.
- Icebreakers generally last an hour or less, and ideally occur in person at a neutral location. Video conferencing technology can be used if needed.
- Icebreakers shall include the caseworker, parents, resource parents, and if appropriate, the child.
- The caseworker is responsible for facilitating the conversation between the participants and actively managing the meeting to keep it productive and child focused.
- The About Me forms, Icebreaker Report, and Co-Parenting and Sharing of Information Agreement shall be used to help facilitate and document the meeting, but it is helpful to also encourage a natural flowing conversation between participants. See attachments for the Icebreaker forms.

Preparation:

- Preparation is critical for a successful Icebreaker and the caseworker shall take time to talk with each participant to make sure they understand the value and purpose of the meeting as well as their roles.
- All participants shall be provided with the appropriate About Me form prior to the meeting to give them an idea of what information will be shared. The caseworker shall include the About Me-Child/Youth form and the About Me-Resource Parent form in the child's health passport.
- If a child is in a treatment foster home or congregate care placement the caseworker shall communicate with the program staff regarding the Icebreaker and coordination.
- Resource parents shall be educated about Icebreakers during pre-service training and during annual reconsiderations.

Benefits of Icebreakers

- Provides the parents and resource parents with an opportunity to meet in person to share information and to discuss the child's specific needs.
- Helps create an authentic co-parenting partnership between the parents and resource parents.
- Creates an opportunity for shared goals and collaborative parenting.
- Reinforces that the parents are the experts on their child.
- Demonstrates to the child that both families are working together with the same goals.

Addressing barriers:

- Hospitalization and incarceration should not automatically mean an icebreaker cannot occur. If a face-to-face meeting is not feasible, Icebreakers can be held virtually, by conference call, or other alternative methods of communication.
- If a parent is unable to participate in the initial Icebreaker due to situations including unknown whereabouts, unconfirmed paternity, incarceration, or hospitalization, the caseworker shall facilitate an Icebreaker within five business days of the parent's ability to participate.
- If a parent is unwilling to participate in an Icebreaker, the caseworker shall discuss their concerns and attempt to develop a plan for how and when an Icebreaker can be held in the future. Parents may be unwilling to meet the resource parents right after separation, but they may feel differently one month later. Additionally, some parents may refuse to participate in an in-person Icebreaker but may be willing to participate in a virtual Icebreaker.

CONTINUUM OF CONTACT

Resource parents play a critical role in supporting the family of origin, which cannot be done without initiating and maintaining contact with them. The caseworker shall facilitate ongoing discussion around the type of contact there will be between parents and resource parents. The caseworker will ensure there are no safety concerns or issues regarding court orders.

Caseworkers and resource parents must be knowledgeable about the variety of ways in which resource parents can work with parents. In addition, the resource parents must possess the skills to develop and maintain positive relationships with the child's parents.

When a child enters out-of-home care, the resource parents should be expected and encouraged to start taking steps to initiate a supportive relationship with the parents. Having reasonable expectations and establishing clear boundaries are necessary when considering when and what type of contact is appropriate to initiate. The type of contact and communication between resource parents and parents will evolve over time. Below are examples of the many ways that resource parents can develop a Continuum of Contact with parents, as appropriate and in conjunction with the caseworker.

- Participate in Comfort Calls and Icebreakers with a non-threatening and non-judgmental attitude.
- Attend court hearings and family team meetings and show your support of the parents by talking to them, sharing pictures or updates about their child, or asking to sit near them as opposed to across from them.
- Refer to the child as “your child” when communicating with the parents.
- Request pictures of the parents to display in the child’s room and to include in their lifebook.
- Ask about, learn about, and respect the parent’s culture.
- Exchange contact information and maintain communication with parents through telephone calls, video calls, text messages, emails, journals, and by sending pictures, cards, and letters.
- Share copies of the child’s school pictures, artwork, homework, and report cards with their parents.
- Talk to the child about their parents in a positive way and acknowledge their accomplishments.
- Support family time by being on time, talking positively about it, packing a diaper or activity bag with snacks, and sharing pictures and updates with the parents in a journal.
- Arrange and host sibling time.
- Encourage parents to remain in contact with their child through family time, phone calls, letters, and emails.
- Initiate and maintain contact with parents who are incarcerated, or hospitalized, or live out of state.
- Invite the parents to their child’s extracurricular activities, school plays, and birthday celebrations.
- Keep parents updated regarding their child’s medical and school appointments and encourage them to participate in these meetings.
- Participate in training sessions regarding supporting parents, the plan of reunification, and the parent/child relationship.
- Offer to drive parents to a meeting or appointment.
- Volunteer to attend parenting classes with the parents or ask about other ways you can support their progress toward reunification.
- Serve as a support to the parents after reunification through mentoring or by providing respite care.
- Welcome parents into your home.

Definitions

Caregiver – a person who has permanent or temporary care, custody, or responsibility for supervision of a child.

Child – an individual younger than 18 years old or between 18 and 21 years old if the court retains jurisdiction over the child in out-of-home care.

Comfort Call – a phone call made by the caseworker, resource parents, and if appropriate, the child to the parents shortly after a child is placed in out-of-home care. This is the first step in establishing a positive co-parenting relationship between the resource parents and parents and provides an opportunity to discuss vital information needed to meet the child's immediate needs.

Continuum of Contact – The different types and levels of interactions that occur between parents and resource parents.

Family of origin – the people that cared for or parented a child. For example, a child may have been raised by grandparents, an aunt or uncle, a family friend, or their parents.

Icebreaker – a facilitated, child-focused, face-to-face meeting that includes the caseworker, parents, resource parents, and if appropriate, the child. Icebreakers are an important step in developing a co-parenting partnership between parents and resource parents.

Family time – meaningful and frequent contact with parents and children which honors the attachment and bond between child, parents, siblings, and family.

Out-of-home care – temporary placement of a child in an approved foster care or kinship care placement due to abuse or neglect.

Parent – the birth or adoptive mothers and fathers of the child.

Separation – the removal of a child from the family of origin due to safety concerns and placement in out-of-home care.

Resource Parent – includes foster parents, foster-to-adopt families, and kinship caregivers (Children's Bureau).

Youth – a child between the ages of 14 and 21 years old.

Alignment with Practice Model and Desired Outcomes

The Maryland Department of Human Services is responsible for helping families stay safe, stable, and healthy and for protecting children, youth, and vulnerable adults from abuse and neglect. Maryland's Integrated Practice Model (IPM) is based on values of CARE: Collaboration, Advocacy, Respect and Empowerment. The IPM identifies being community focused as a key principle. This is described as building partnerships within communities and neighborhoods to ensure meeting individual and family needs is a shared responsibility.

Documentation

- All attempted and completed Comfort Calls and Icebreakers shall be documented in a contact note in the child's case in CJAMS. When a Comfort Call or Icebreaker does not occur, the caseworker shall document the reason and the steps that were taken to address the barriers.
- The completed Icebreaker Meeting Report and the Co-Parenting and Sharing of Information Agreement shall be scanned into the file cabinet in the child's case in CJAMS.

Forms/Attachments

- Attachment A: [Things to Know if Your Child Is in Out-of-Home Care Brochure](#)
[Things to Know if Your Child Is in Out-of-Home Care Brochure \(Spanish\)](#)
- Attachment B: [Icebreaker Meeting Report](#)
[Icebreaker Meeting Report \(Spanish\)](#)
- Attachment C: [Co-Parenting and Sharing of Information Agreement](#)
[Co-Parenting and Sharing of Information Agreement \(Spanish\)](#)
- Attachment D: About Me forms for the [parents](#), [resource parents](#), and [child](#)
About Me forms for the [parents \(Spanish\)](#), [resource parents \(Spanish\)](#), and [child \(Spanish\)](#)

Related Information

- Icebreaker Meetings: A Tool for Building Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parents; Annie E. Casey, Karrie Biechle, Denise Goodman, Ph.D. 2012
- Bridging the Gap; Continuum of Contact: Denise A. Goodman, PhD
- Comfort Calls: National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs
- Reunification Spotlight - Icebreakers: Tapping into the Power of Families Supporting Families; ABA Center on Children and the Law
- Louisiana QPI Initial Calls Practice Guide

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Your Child Protective Services (CPS) worker is:

CPS Worker phone number and email:

The Supervisor is:

Supervisor phone number and email:

Your foster care worker is:

Foster care worker phone number and email:

COURT

It is important for parents to attend court hearings and to arrive early to allow time to speak with your attorney and/or caseworker.

Your CPS caseworker can provide you with details about the hearing, including the date and time.

More information about the role of the court, hearings, and people you will meet can be found at <https://mdcourts.gov/legalhelp/childabuseneglect>.

This 3 part series is for parents whose children have been removed from the family home. These videos offer a guide to the court process in child welfare cases, including the court hearings likely to take place and the people involved in these cases.



www.dhs.maryland.gov

Things to know if your child is in Foster Care



*A Moment in Time
Does Not Define a Family*





Children in Foster Care

Foster Care is intended to be a temporary service for you and your child until you can be reunited as a family.

Foster Care is not a substitute for parents. Your child(ren) may be placed with Resource Parents, sometimes referred to as Foster Parents. Resource parents have completed an extensive training and home study approval process to care for children and support parents.

Resource Parents are here to support your child and you during this temporary separation and to share in the co-parenting responsibilities with you.



Comfort Call

A Comfort Call is a phone call you will receive from the caseworker and resource parent. In most cases, the Comfort Call will occur on the day your child enters foster care, but if this cannot happen, one will be scheduled as soon as possible. The purpose of a Comfort Call is for you to have an opportunity to speak with the resource parent to share important information about your child. This will allow the resource parent to provide your child with the best care possible. You should tell the resource parent if your child has any allergies or takes medication. You can also discuss your child's routines, favorite food, etc. You are the expert on your child and should share what you think is important for the resource parent to know about your child. You may also have an opportunity to speak with your child, when age and developmentally appropriate.

Icebreaker Meeting

An Icebreaker is a face-to-face meeting that is scheduled by the Department of Social Services within 5 business days of your child entering foster care or moving to another placement. Icebreakers are facilitated by the caseworker and provide an opportunity for you to meet the resource parent, share information, and discuss the needs of your child. Your child may also attend the Icebreaker, when age and developmentally appropriate. Icebreakers provide an opportunity to continue to build a co-parenting relationship between you and the resource parent until your child can be reunified with you. You are encouraged to bring personal items for your child such as pictures, toys, a special blanket or stuffed animal, clothes, or other special items. It is important to arrive on time and feel comfortable sharing important information about your child's routine, health needs, education needs and likes and dislikes.



Family Time

Family time is critical to maintaining your relationship with your child. Your case worker will discuss family time and make arrangements for you and your child to see each other. Family time will also be discussed in the Icebreaker meeting. Family time includes face-to-face time together as well as other forms of communication and activities. Some other examples may include phone calls, attending medical appointments, school meetings, and extracurricular activities. There may be virtual time, communication via text, and sharing of pictures. Family time is strongly recommended and the resource parent caring for your child will help with family time. You and the resource parent will be co-parenting your child. The resource parent is here to support as much family time as possible. The court will make decisions about the type and frequency of family time that is permitted throughout the process.



About Me: Parent



My/Our name(s) are: _____

Most people call me/us: _____

My/Our preferred pronouns are: _____ My/Our religious affiliation is: _____

I/We are of the following race(s) and our cultural backgrounds are: _____

I/We have ____ # of children and their ages and genders are: _____

My/Our child(ren) calls me/us: _____

I/We have the following pets: _____

My/Our favorite TV show or movie is: _____

My/Our favorite sport or activity is: _____

The typical weekday routine for our family is (ie., work outside the home, stay at home parent, child care, dinner time, bedtime, etc.): _____

The typical weekend routine for our family is (extracurricular activities, religious services attendance, visits to family and/or friends, etc.): _____

The typical rules, expectations and chores for the children consist of (cell phone and computer use, homework, etc.): _____

Our family enjoys (activities, television shows, music, sports, etc.): _____

Other family members who my child has a close connection with: _____

Other things you should know about our family are: _____



My/Our name(s) are: _____

Most people call me/us: _____

My/Our preferred pronouns are: _____ My/Our religious affiliation is: _____

I/We are of the following race(s) and our cultural backgrounds are: _____

I/We have been a resource parent for _____ (months or years) and have cared for _____ # of children.

I/We have _____ (#) of children and their ages and gender are: _____

I/We have the following pets: _____

My/Our favorite TV show or movie is: _____

My/Our favorite sport or activity is: _____

The typical weekday routine for our family is (ie., work outside the home, stay at home parent, child care, dinner time, bedtime, etc.): _____

The typical weekend routine for our family is (extracurricular activities, religious services attendance, visits to family/friends, etc.): _____

The typical rules, expectations and chores for the children consist of (cell phone and computer use, homework, etc.): _____

Our family enjoys (activities, television shows, music, sports, etc.): _____

Other things you should know about our family are: _____



My name is _____

My preferred pronoun is _____

I like to be called _____

I am ____ years old. I am in ____ grade.

My race is _____

My cultural background is _____

My religious affiliation is _____

My brothers and sisters are _____

My best friends are _____

My pets are _____

My favorite thing to do for fun is _____

My favorite subject in school is _____

My favorite book is _____

My favorite foods are _____

I do not like to eat _____

It is really important I stay connected with these people while I am here

My favorite sport is _____

My favorite music is _____

When I feel sad, some things that will cheer me up are

CO-PARENTING AND SHARING *of* INFORMATION AGREEMENT



- We agree to work together and ensure that all important information is shared with one another.
- We agree that the sharing of important information can involve a journal or other agreed upon modes of communication. Information such as upcoming medical appointments, school activities, health and behavioral changes, and other pertinent information should be shared.
- We agree that we will communicate frequently in order to ensure that all important information is shared on a timely basis.
- We agree to respect each other's boundaries. We will honor one another as caretakers for the child(ren) and protect the confidential information that is shared.
- We agree to be kind and patient with one another.
- We agree that we will address partnership challenges with each other in a respectful and solution-focused manner.
- We agree that we will respect family time schedules to ensure consistency and predictability for child(ren).
- We agree to speak positively about each other in front of the child(ren) and will model cooperative partnerships to decrease confusion and anxiety.

Parent/Caregiver Signature

Parent/Caregiver Signature

Resource Parent Signature

Resource Parent Signature

Date Signed



Name(s) of Children:	Date of Icebreaker:
Caseworker:	Telephone #:

Participants:

Name	Role	Name	Role

Child-specific information discussed:

-
-
-
-

Communication plan:

-
-
-

Family time arrangement:

-
-
-

Follow-up needed:

-
-
-

