

MEMORANDUM

Date: December 22, 2021

TO: Directors, Local Departments of Social Services
Assistant Directors, Local Departments of Social Services

FROM: Michelle L. Farr, LICSW, LCSW-C *MLF*
Executive Director, Social Services Administration

RE: Promoting Partnerships Between the Family of Origin and Resource Parents- Guidance on Comfort Calls and Icebreakers and Continuum of Contact.

This memo is provided by the Department of Human Services/Social Services Administration (DHS/SSA) to the State of Maryland Local Departments of Social Services' (LDSS) leadership and staff to offer guidance regarding Comfort Calls and Icebreakers. This guidance is intended to replace policy SSA-CW 21-04. Guidance promotes best practice with families and children who are receiving services from the Local Department of Social Services. Attachments A, B, C, and D are included in this guidance as additional tools to promote engagement between the parents and resource parents. 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 as soon as possible 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.

In most situations, the 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.

General Guidelines for Comfort Calls:

- Whenever possible and prudent, the Comfort Call should 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 should include the parents, resource parents, caseworker, and when age and developmentally and situationally appropriate, the child.
- Ideally, Comfort Calls should 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 should 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 should thank everyone for participating, for remaining focused on the child, and for taking the first step toward creating a positive partnership.
- If applicable to the situation, comfort calls also apply to youth in congregate care settings. a three-way call should be facilitated from the caseworker's phone to the congregate care staff and the parents.
- The parents and congregate care staff should be introduced by providing first and last names, unless specific safety issues exist, then utilize first names only.

Preparation:

- In order for Comfort Calls to be successful, the caseworker should 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 should 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 English or Spanish.
- The caseworker should 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 with 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 should be educated about Comfort Calls during pre-service training and at annual reconsiderations.
- The caseworker should 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:

- Initiates and promotes immediate communication between the parents and the resource parents.
- Minimizes the trauma of separation for the child and the parents by providing a smoother transition into out-of-home care.
- 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 Comfort Call Barriers:

It is to be expected that circumstances will arise that may delay or prevent the utilization of Comfort Calls. Caseworkers should make every effort to support and adhere 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. 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. Staff are advised to use their clinical judgment to ensure the child remains safe and should always adhere to court ordered practice such as “no contact” between parent and child.

- For parents who are hospitalized or incarcerated, caseworkers should contact the facility and ask if a Comfort Call can be arranged.
- For parents without access to a phone, the caseworker should 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 should be facilitated as soon as the parent is located.

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ICEBREAKERS

Icebreakers are another important step in building an authentic partnership between parents and resource parents. An Icebreaker is a facilitated, child-focused, face-to-face meeting that includes the caseworker, parents, resource parents, and if appropriate, the child. The child should be considered for participation as this allows them an opportunity to observe the positive interaction between the parent and resource parent.

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.

General Guidelines:

- Icebreakers should 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 should 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 should 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 should 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 should 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 should 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 should communicate with the program staff regarding the Icebreaker and coordination.
- Resource parents should 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 Icebreaker 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 should 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 should 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 life book.
- 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.



Documentation:

- All attempted and completed Comfort Calls and Icebreakers should be documented in a contact note in the child's case in CJAMS by selecting the appropriate drop down indicating the type of contact. When a Comfort Call or Icebreaker does not occur, the caseworker should 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 should be scanned into the document tab 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 \(Spanish\)](#)

