



ISSUE BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

How do initial calls and icebreakers support shared parenting?

The removal of a child is a traumatic experience for everyone involved. Children may feel isolated and afraid, their sense of identity and belonging deeply affected. Birth parents may experience shock, anger, and a profound sense of loss. Resource parents often feel unprepared to meet a child's needs, especially if they are given little information about the child, family, and the circumstances that led to the child's placement. Strategies to build trust and open communication between all involved are critical to ease the difficulty of separation and maintain family connections.

For decades, Louisiana's standard child welfare agency practices discouraged interaction between birth and foster parents, often leading to animosity and false assumptions about intentions. In 2016, Louisiana's Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) leadership decided to do more to build connections between birth and resource families to provide continuity of relationships, meet the full spectrum of a child's ongoing needs, and improve the likelihood and timeliness of reunification. The agency began consulting with the [Quality Parenting Initiative \(QPI\)](#), a [Youth Law Center](#) strategy to formalize the new path forward. By early 2018, Louisiana became the first state in the nation to adopt QPI statewide.

QPI is not a stand-alone program; it is a philosophical approach integrated into all levels of work to improve reunification outcomes for families. It represents a



How do initial calls and icebreakers support shared parenting?

fundamental culture shift from an “us-them” adversarial dichotomy to one of “shared parenting.” This ultimately raises expectations for resource parents, intentionally including biological parents in their children’s lives while they are in care, and improves communication among the children, their caregivers, and the agency.

For more information on QPI, please see [What is the Quality Parenting Initiative?](#) and [How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?](#)

Statewide adoption of QPI¹

DCFS implemented QPI in stages, beginning in 2017 with two regions before rolling it out to the rest of the state. The QPI approach is designed based on the unique needs of particular communities. To that end, communities hold their own kickoff events to learn about QPI, define “excellent parenting,” and identify the policy and practice changes necessary to align with that definition. In total, Louisiana brought together over 1,200 birth parents, resource parents, community stakeholders, agency staff, and other partners in regional kickoff meetings across the state.

Although each of the regions designed their own strategic approach, the overwhelming majority of participants recognized the need to improve communication and the exchange of information between resource parents and birth parents at the time of placement. As a result, **every region adopted two core strategies to facilitate effective shared parenting: initial calls and icebreakers.**

Bringing comfort to parents

Also known as “comfort calls,” an **initial call** is the practice of facilitating a conversation between the child’s birth parent and the child’s new resource parent as soon as possible following removal to confirm the safety of the child, introduce caregivers to one another and exchange critical information needed to best meet the immediate needs of the child. The goal is not only to share important details to help everyone navigate this transition, but also to build a positive and trusting co-parenting relationship between birth and foster parents focused on the unique needs of the child.

For these calls to be successful, it is important that everyone involved is well prepared. Caseworkers let birth parents know upfront that they will call them as soon as they arrive at the resource home, and emphasize that, although they are understandably upset about the removal, it is critical to establish a positive, shared parenting relationship for the child’s sake. Caseworkers stress that birth parents know their child best, and prepare them to discuss key topics – such as their child’s favorite foods and bedtime rituals – to help ensure his or her emotional and physical needs are met.

Caseworkers also prepare the resource parent for the call once they arrive at the home. They help resource parents understand the family context, the birth parent’s emotional state, and how this call is intended to alleviate everyone’s concerns and anxieties. For those resource parents worried about how the birth parent will react, caseworkers also convey that they will be there for support and guidance if the phone

QPI has helped me to grow as a worker.... QPI involves everyone from investigations, to foster care, to clerical staff, and even the security guards. Now that everyone is on board, it is making a huge difference in engaging families.

- KAYLA AUZENNE,
CHILD WELFARE SPECIALIST 3, LOUISIANA DCFS

How do initial calls and icebreakers support shared parenting?

call is not going smoothly. Resource parents can also use caseworker cell phones for these calls if they have concerns about the birth parent having their phone number. Caseworkers urge foster parents to begin the dialogue with birth parents by providing basic information about themselves, their family, general routines, and home environment.

Breaking the ice

Another practice strategy to build trusting relationships between resource and birth parents are 30- to 45-minute icebreaker meetings facilitated by the caseworker in the resource home. These meetings happen after the initial call, within three to five days of placement, and bring the resource parents, birth parents, and child together for a face-to-face, child-focused meeting. The purpose is twofold: to share important information about the child and continue to build shared parenting relationships between the child's birth and foster parents. The focus of icebreakers is the child and his or her needs, such as their favorite foods. Icebreakers are not discussions about other matters, such as the reasons for placement, reunification timelines, case planning, or referral for services. If a face-to-face meeting is not feasible, icebreakers are held via Skype or as conference calls.

Similar to the initial calls, icebreaker meetings require careful preparation of all three parties — birth parents, foster parents and the child — by caseworkers. Caseworkers are trained to reassure birth parents that they are the experts about their child and to emphasize the meeting purpose: to make sure that the resource parents have all the critical information that they need to care for the child properly, and that birth parents aren't left alone wondering if their child is well-cared for and safe. Caseworkers prompt birth parents to be prepared to discuss a range of topics related to medical conditions, behavioral needs, daily care and routines, and feeding habits/preferences. They also encourage birth parents to provide family history and identify relatives so the resource parent can help maintain ongoing extended family connections for the child.

Resource parents may also have some level of anxiety about the first face-to-face meeting with birth parents in their home, especially if their prior interactions with birth parents have been limited. They may struggle with differences in culture or rules, and may worry about the birth parent's reaction to seeing the child living in their home. Caseworkers remind resource parents of the purpose and value of these meetings and how important they are to the child in reducing the trauma of placement. Caseworkers also reduce anxieties by



How do initial calls and icebreakers support shared parenting?

assuring resource parents that they will be present throughout the meeting to facilitate discussion and navigate any uncomfortable moments. They encourage the resource parents to ask birth parents about rules, routines, and other questions about the child which may have arisen since the initial call.

Benefits

While DCFS is beginning to collect statewide outcome data on the impact of initial calls and icebreakers, surveys of resource and birth parents illustrate that QPI is having the intended impact on the following outcomes:

- **Establishing trusting relationships** by reassuring birth parents that their children are well cared for and creating positive, ongoing connections among everyone involved in caring for them.
- **Minimizing the trauma of placement** for both children and parents by preserving and nurturing children's relationships with their birth parents, siblings, and extended family.
- **Tailoring transitions** into the resource home, resulting in children being less likely to use defiant behavior to demonstrate loyalty to their birth families.
- **Improving birth family engagement** through the life of the case by immediately demonstrating to birth parents that caseworkers can be trusted to follow through on their promises and commitments.

Implementation considerations

Based on their experiences and lessons learned implementing initial calls and icebreakers, statewide DCFS staff identified the following considerations for other child welfare leaders interested in facilitating a shared parenting approach for birth and resource parents.

Anticipate initial resistance

It can take time for staff to embrace new policies and procedures. Early on, staff resisted initial calls and icebreakers because of concerns that they would add to their already heavy workloads. As a result, agency leadership took steps to communicate to all levels that QPI reflected a core value of the agency — to reduce the trauma that accompanies separation — and helped to reduce their workloads by supporting timely reunification. Once staff began to witness firsthand the benefits of initial calls and icebreakers, they started sharing success stories and champions emerged in each region. Ultimately, staff embraced shared parenting because they saw that direct communication between birth and foster families led to improved outcomes. According to DCFS staff, these practice changes ultimately became second nature to staff within three to six months after implementation.

Involve stakeholders and families

Another aspect of successful implementation was engaging families and other members of the agency and community in the design of the QPI Initiatives. The QPI approach is a “bottom-up” process that requires

QPI is helping in all areas. Children have more stability in placements now because resource parents have the information they need about the child upfront. And birth parents are more engaged and empowered, which is leading to quicker reunifications.”

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How do initial calls and icebreakers support shared parenting?

support from leadership, but the ideas and direction for change come from those most involved in and affected by the system: birth parents, youth, kin, foster parents, and caseworkers.

Design a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process

Louisiana's CQI process allows program managers across the state to share best practices, monitor performance, and make refinements throughout implementation. Currently, there are monthly phone calls between region leaders, state office administrators, and program managers to give updates, identify problems identified in the regional offices, and discuss solutions. In addition, supervisors hold caseworkers accountable for providing initial calls and icebreakers for each child that enters care. Staff must record every time a family has participated in an initial call or icebreaker and document the reason why and how it will be remedied for those that do not happen. Local offices then share those reports with the state office to inform statewide

practice and policy improvements. DCFS has also implemented an employee performance and supervisory [performance review tool](#) that measures how staff put QPI into practice.

Remain flexible and creative

Families involved in child welfare often have multilayered and complex issues, and a cookie cutter approach to practice does not work. Even with best laid plans, circumstances occur which require flexibility and creative strategies to stay true to the principles of QPI. In some situations, for example, parents may be hospitalized or incarcerated at the time of the removal and unavailable for a call or visit. Other times, parents may be homeless without access to a phone. In these circumstances, caseworkers should make every effort to be flexible and creative to support initial calls and icebreakers — such as having the initial call with a relative if the birth parent is unavailable — as they recognize QPI as an essential approach for establishing relationships, building trust, and reducing trauma for children.

1. Based on conversations on September 18, 2019, with Kayla Auzenne, Child Welfare Specialist 3, Louisiana DCFS, and Patricia McClinton, Child Welfare Specialist 1, Louisiana DCFS.

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