



## **Initial Calls Practice Guide**

### **QPI Principles:**

*Children deserve foster parents and kinship caregivers who convey love and acceptance and who strive to co-parent with and demonstrate support of birth parents' efforts to be successful.*

*All partners and stakeholders in our child welfare system possess unique value and acknowledge their roles and responsibilities in reducing trauma and its' effect, and in achieving successful outcomes for Louisiana's children.*

Whenever a child must be removed from his/her home, the situation is most often an emotionally charged situation with parents and children experiencing significant trauma and loss. Even in the best of situations which may superficially appear calm, it is well known that most often, trauma and feelings of tremendous loss, anger and mistrust are present. In order to establish a positive working relationship as soon as possible, it is critical to focus on strategies and actions that are targeted to developing trust and open and honest communications. The caseworker must utilize skills that will demonstrate to the parent and other team members that they are trustworthy, open and honest and will follow through on their commitments and promises. One such strategy that assists in developing a trusting relationship is the utilization of Initial Calls when a child is removed or replaced.

### **Best Practice:**

The initial call is the practice of contacting the child's previous caregiver (birthparent, relative, and/or foster parent) as soon as possible following removal (or replacement) to convey the safety of the child, to exchange critical information needed to best meet the immediate needs of the child, and to introduce caregivers. The initial call should always occur within a couple of hours, if at all possible, otherwise, as soon as it can be done once the child is placed. In committing to the birthparent or caregiver to quickly contact them, this will serve to alleviate their safety concerns and enable them to provide information about their child. Following through with this commitment provides a unique, initial opportunity to establish a working relationship focused on the child.

### **Outcomes of Initial Calls:**

- Demonstrates immediately that caseworker can be trusted to follow through on their promises and commitments
- Sets stage for ongoing focus on the child
- Reinforces that parent is the expert on their child
- Initiates and promotes immediate communication between foster parents and birth parents – humanizes “stranger” foster parents
- Minimizes trauma of separation for both child and parents
- Reinforces commitment to maintaining connections and contact
- Sets in motion the working relationship with the agency; initial trust with cps and then sets stage for caseworkers who follow
- Provides for smoother transition into foster home by allowing foster parent to ask about specific information pertinent to their home environment and routines

- Provides birth parent the opportunity to convey in their own words information they feel is critical for care of their child

### **Steps To Support Successful Initial Call**

Ideally, cps workers and assigned foster care caseworkers should jointly place the child in their new placement. As the child's only connection is to the cps investigator, in the child's perspective, the cps investigator is the only person who knows where their parent is and how to contact them. By having both caseworkers participate in the placement, this can reduce fear/anxiety of child, facilitate the child's transition to a new caseworker, and allow the child to witness the sharing of important information about him/herself and birthparents and family.

It is recognized that both caseworkers may not be able to jointly participate in every placement, however, that is a practice for which the agency should strive and support. When not possible, it is critical that the removing worker honestly convey to the child what he should expect over the first few hours, who the foster care caseworker will be, if known, and when contact will occur. Every effort should then be made for the cps worker to introduce the child to the foster care worker to reassure the child and to facilitate the transition to their new worker.

If the parent is unavailable at the time of placement to conduct the initial call, the cps worker should attempt the following day if at all possible, or confirm with the foster care worker to conduct the call. Again, the critical elements are to follow through on commitment and to exchange critical information known by the parent about the child, and introduce the foster parent or caregiver.

Best practice also supports use of initial calls whenever a child must be replaced within foster care. In these circumstances, foster care caseworkers would handle the call to the birth parents, as well as to the previous caregiver, as appropriate to exchange critical information.

### Preparing Birthparents

In order for these calls to be successful, it is important that all parties are prepared. Caseworkers must help prepare birth parents recognizing that although they are very upset about the removal and circumstances, it is critical and their child is relying on them, to provide their foster care-giver with all information necessary to make sure the child is safe, his emotional/physical needs are met, and to establish a relationship focused on the child. Providing the birth parent examples of key topics they can prepare to discuss will help them focus on the child, while also acknowledging and reinforcing the vast amount of information they possess about their child.

Example: "I know you are still very upset and concerned about your child and where he is going. I will call you as soon as I get to the foster home and your child has had the opportunity to meet the family who will be caring for him for the time being. I will let you know how he is doing. There are many things only you know about your child; so at that time, it is important for you to pass on any information you have not given me about your child directly to the foster parent. You may want to think about:

- sleep/bedtime routines
- does he need assistance in toileting?
- food or medical allergies
- does she bathe or shower, alone, or needs assistance?
- any specific fears, soothing/calming strategies
- food likes/dislikes, favorites

Remind the birth parent that the call is to give them direct contact with the caregiver and discuss their child, but that if they cannot remain calm and focused on the child, the call will have to be terminated

and the discussion held another day. If this should occur, the call should then be attempted the next day with either the cps worker or foster care worker facilitating the call.

### Preparing Foster Parents/Caregivers

We must not assume that this will be either easy or difficult for any foster parent. Initially some foster parents may be more comfortable than others, and undoubtedly after participating in a couple of these, they will probably feel better equipped and better recognize the value of the call beyond just the factual information sharing. Again, the goal is to not only share important information, but, also to provide the expectation and opportunity for these partners to establish a positive and trusting relationship focused on the child.

The caseworker should share all known information already received from the parent or known about the child with the foster parent prior to initiating the call. It would be helpful to discuss that the foster parent may need to begin the dialogue with the birthparent and can do so by providing basic information about themselves, their family, general routines, home environment, and information provided about child. Review with the foster parent any gaps in information received about the child that would be necessary or helpful to them, including strategies used by birthparent in addressing any specific behaviors or needs of child. Assist them with preparing a couple of sample questions in case they need to begin the dialogue with the birth parent. These questions should be based on the child's age and information known thus far, such as asking for names of family members, pets, school, favorite foods, etc. Help the foster parent understand the emotional circumstances of the parent at this time which may make the call uncomfortable for them, however, also convey support that should the birthparent become hostile or threatening on the call, the phone should be turned over to the worker and the call terminated and rescheduled, if they cannot participate appropriately.

### Preparing the Child

Following the birth parent and foster parent's discussion, based upon the age and developmental ability of the child, the child and birth parent should have the opportunity to talk for a few minutes to alleviate concerns they share about the current status of the other or of other family members. Help prepare the child that the call will be for a few minutes and they can tell their parent about the foster family and home and also convey if there is anything else they need from their own home. If the first visit is known, be sure the child is aware and is able to confirm that with the parent. Otherwise, if the call is proceeding well, another call could be set up in a day or two depending upon the needs of child and participation of birth parent.

### Unique Circumstances

As is the nature of child welfare work, even with the best of plans, situations occur and circumstances present which require flexibility and alternative strategies to stay true to the principles of quality child welfare practice and quality parenting. With the initial call practice, it is to be expected that circumstances will arise that will prevent or impede the utilization of initial calls as described in this best practice guideline. This is when caseworkers must make every effort to support and stay true to the principles and belief that utilization of initial calls is a critical step and facilitator of establishing relationships, building trust, and reducing trauma for children.

For example, there will situations when birth parents may not be immediately available to participate in the initial call.

### Hospitalized or Incarcerated birth parent(s):

- Depending upon the hospital, treatment facility, detention facility, criminal charges, etc... contact with and explanation of the purpose and procedures of the initial call with the physician,

nurse, social worker, jail warden etc... may allow for a brief or modified call - it doesn't hurt to ask.

- Identify a relative or friend of the parent who will be in touch with the parent and conduct the initial call with that individual. That contact may be able to provide information about the child and/or parent, and equally important, follow through on the caseworker's commitment to conduct the call, exchange information about the child's status, and introduce the foster parent to the relative or friend.
- If the call cannot be conducted immediately due to incarceration, the initial call should be made as soon as possible once the birth parent is released or able to have such a call.

#### Parent's Whereabouts Unknown:

- Attempt to locate/identify a neighbor, relative or someone who may either be in contact with the parent or whom the child may identify as a support or friend. Often the child will be able to identify someone whom the child trusts or with whom he has a positive relationship.
- Under these circumstances, extra caution will be needed to ensure confidential information is not disclosed to these individuals. Approaching these individuals requesting information about the child or parents and assuring them of the child's safety would be the appropriate parameters to use.
- When parent(s) are located, the initial call with the foster parents should be done immediately to exchange information, reduce trauma for the child, and demonstrate trust and establishment of relationship between caregivers.

#### Safety Concerns:

Unfortunately, there may be rare situations where there are confirmed significant safety issues and risks which may preclude the initial call or require modification to the call procedures. When such situations exist, the caseworker shall discuss with his/her supervisor the specific safety concerns, jointly assessing options, and possible procedural modifications which would ensure the safety of all and allowing for the call to be held.

#### **General Guidelines**

- Call should be made from the worker's cell phone and within an hour or so of placement. Be sure to update birth parent if call is delayed or the scheduled call time should change.
- Begin call by reminding each that the purpose is to provide important information that may only be known by the parent to make sure the foster parent has the information necessary to provide the best care possible to the child.
- Introduce birth and foster parents by providing first and last names, unless specific safety issues exist, then utilize last names only.
- Encourage foster parent to acknowledge positive attributes, appearance, manners, etc. of child.
- Caseworker should remain near the phone or utilize speaker 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 removal or other issues.
- In concluding the call, acknowledge with each the difficulty they may have experienced but, by participating, they were able to share important information about child, alleviate some of their fears and anxieties, and their first meeting will be much easier having had this conversation. Thank each for their participation and their commitment focusing on their child.