Gathering Background Information: Tips for Working with Hostile Birth Parents

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A. Affirm the parent/child relationship with a sensitive and respectful invitation for a meeting.

"Hi, I’m Kathy and I’m working with your son, Jamie. He really misses you. We were talking about you on Wednesday and he has some questions. I wanted to get it right – it is important to Jamie. Could you meet with me to get this information together for him?"

B. Bring a gift made by the child.

During an earlier visit with the child, have him/her draw a picture to send to their parent(s). When you have the first information-gathering meeting with the birth parent, give him/her the child’s drawing. Now you and the birth parent(s) are connected through the child. The worker may want to offer bringing a current photo of the child as an additional or alternative suggestion to the birth parent.

C. Distance yourself from the court proceedings, affirm their situation, and acknowledge their loss.

"I don’t know a lot about what is happening in court, but your worker told me that you really love Jamie. Jamie tells me good things about you, too. I know what is happening is really hard for you. You and I can’t change any of that, but what we can do is make sure Jamie’s has what he needs to be happy and healthy."

D. Inquire about the child’s like and dislikes.

"What are some of Jamie’s favorite foods, his favorite TV program? What does he like to do for fun?"
A favorite question that always makes the parent feel like the worker is on their side is – "Kids always like to know why they have the name they do. Why did you pick the name 'Jamie' for your son?"

E. Recall pleasant, happy, important memories about the child.

"Can you tell me a funny story about when you were pregnant with Jamie or when he was very little? What kind of things did he do to make you laugh? What very special memory do you have of a birthday or holiday with Jamie that would be important to help him remember."

F. Recall pleasant, happy, difficult, or important memories about the birth parent’s (parents’) childhood experiences.

"Kids almost always want to know what their mom or dad were like when they were their age. What do you want me to tell Jamie about when you were young?" (Keep a pad and pen close so that each word the parent shares can be recorded.)

G. Ask the more difficult questions.

At this point, it is time to begin asking the more difficult questions – like prenatal and postnatal history, extended family medical history, educational background, talents and interests...

H. Ask to borrow pictures and suggest the possibility of making a video.

Ask the parent for pictures of birthdays, holidays, of themselves, and of extended family members. Promise to have them copied and returned to them in 10 days. Some parents will jump at the opportunity to make a video. They will make an effort to have the tape just right – so you may have to practice with them. Tell them what things the child needs to hear such as:

- They are doing ok
- The child is loved
- The child will always be remembered
- The child is wished well

Occasionally, parents cannot get the words together. You may have to ask questions and then have parents respond with a "yes" or "no." If
they respond inappropriately, start over again, after telling them what they just said will not be helpful to their child.

I. Leave on a positive note that will keep the door open for a return visit.

• Ask if they be recontacted if child needs more information;
• Ask them to contact you if they think of something they want the child to know.
• Be grateful on the child’s behalf.
• Offer something in return such as updated information about the child, current pictures (make sure promises made can be promises kept)
• Thank them and again acknowledge that you appreciate their time and effort in this difficult time.