



TOUGH LOVE

DISCUSSION GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	About the Film
4	Director's Statement
7	Take Action
8	The Facts
9	Discussion Questions
10	General Impressions and Reactions to Film
11	Expectations and Standards for Parents
12	Roles of Parent's Attorney and Parent Advocates
14	Role of the Court
15	Role of Poverty
16	Relationship between Birth and Foster Parents
17	Resources
18	Partners
19	Credits



“Tough Love raises more questions than it answers. Forcing us to reexamine our perceptions of what makes for good parenting, it delivers an invaluable portrait of an imperfect system that tries to do the right thing but sadly doesn’t always succeed.”

- Frank Scheck, The Hollywood Reporter

ABOUT THE FILM

TWO PARENTS NAVIGATE THE RED TAPE OF AMERICA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM AS THEY FIGHT TO REGAIN CUSTODY OF THEIR CHILDREN.



Offering a rare look at the inner workings of the American child welfare system, **Tough Love** chronicles the lives of two parents—one in Seattle and one in New York City—as each fights to be reunited with children taken out of their custody. Through intimate, verité footage of both families, we witness first-hand the complex and daunting bureaucracy of America's family courts. Moreover, we come to understand the powerful role poverty and prejudice play in keeping parents and children apart—and the challenges parents must overcome in order to put their families back together.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



“Stephanie Wang-Breal’s absorbing new documentary Tough Love puts viewers squarely into the shoes of two parents facing the truly staggering gauntlet that is America’s child welfare system.”

- Tony Kay, City Arts

ON JANUARY 24TH, 2011, I TOOK THE 6 TRAIN UPTOWN TO THE LEHMAN VILLAGE PUBLIC-HOUSING COMPLEX IN EAST HARLEM, NEW YORK. I WENT TO OBSERVE A WEEKLY PARENT SUPPORT GROUP MEETING AT THE CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT (CWOP). I HAD SPENT THE SIX MONTHS PRIOR MEETING AND INTERVIEWING FOSTER PARENTS, FOSTER CARE AGENCIES AND SOCIAL WORKERS, BUT THROUGHOUT MY RESEARCH I FOUND ONE VOICE ELUSIVE: **THE BIRTH PARENTS.**

 Inside the small, crowded room I met parents representing every borough and ethnicity of New York City. I met a mother from Guatemala who needed housing for herself and her kids so they could escape her abusive boyfriend. A single mother who suffered from PTSD after two tours in Iraq told the Guatemalan mother about a family shelter in Queens with a Spanish-speaking social worker on-site who could help her. Thanks to CWOP, this veteran was able to get her daughter home and she was now at this meeting to offer support to parents going through the system.

Parents flocked to CWOP because they felt safe there: safe to tell their stories without judgment, and safe to ask questions about a system in which they felt powerless. I was surprised and touched by these parents’ stories and their determination to turn their lives around so that they could get their kids home. But it seemed, even after years of compliance and changes, many of these parents felt trapped. Here they were fighting the biggest battle of their lives: getting their kids home. Yet they were fighting without the proper tools and information.

A few weeks later, I met Hasna “Hannah”

Siddique. Everyone noticed Hannah the minute she walked into the meeting. Her six-month pregnant belly, glowing skin and radiant smile reminded everyone of the excitement a mother carries when she is expecting a new baby. Hannah was frustrated by the lack of movement on her two-year case. Her ex-boyfriend's verbal and physical abuse brought her and her two older kids, AJ and Nia, into the system. When the other parents told her that her newborn was also at risk of entering the system, Hannah's smile disintegrated into tears. Her helplessness was palpable. Hannah's story showed the vexations of the birth parent, a side of adoption and child welfare that was rarely seen in the mainstream media. If I could document her attempt to keep her newborn and get her other two kids back, maybe others would start to see another side of these families.

I soon met Hannah's husband Philly, and was immediately taken by their world. Here was this young, mixed race couple who were so in love and excited about their future together, yet real world facts and demands constantly challenged their relationship. One minute, I'd see them dancing with the kids while making dinner; the next minute I'd find them hunched over Philly's paycheck, adding up how many more hours he needed to work in order for them to qualify for low-income housing.

It was clear that Philly loved Hannah and her kids from her ex-boyfriend, but it was also evident that the case scared him. His seven-day-work-week gave him a valid excuse to escape Hannah's court dates and conferences. He knew she felt helpless there, but he felt powerless in

giving her the necessary support.

Hannah desperately wanted to move her life forward, but her child welfare case kept reminding her of all her past mistakes. The more time I spent with Hannah, the more I could see how her childhood filled with shelters and abuse forced her to grow up too fast. She never had a chance to enjoy childhood, an experience she so badly wanted to give her kids.

I was able to develop relationships with Hannah's ACS caseworker, lawyer and ex-boyfriend. However, no matter how hard I tried to persuade them, they did not feel compelled to participate in this project. I knew no matter how observational and experiential this story felt, if it did not

include other observations of the system it would feel one-sided. That's when I decided to seek out other jurisdictions to see if I could document not just another parent's case, but also the court hearings that ultimately decided the case. Through CWOP, I discovered another parent advocate-training model in Seattle's child welfare system. I decided to fly out and meet the local child welfare players.

In Seattle, I observed Judge Patricia Clark's courtroom

and that's when I first met Patrick Brown. Patrick was a single father whose past included drugs, incarceration and working for the mafia. This colorful background, combined with his recovery and determination to get his three-year old daughter home, made him stand out to me as well as many Family Treatment Court (FTC) workers. In court, it was clear that Patrick was nervous but he was not entirely uncomfortable. He chatted and, at times, flirted



with Judge Clark. I never heard such laughter in the courtroom before. Judge Clark made him feel at ease, like she was rooting for him to get things straight so he could “one day be out there with his daughter.”

Patrick liked and hated the camera. He liked having it around when he thought about all the good things it could do to help other families going through this situation, but when it caught him trying to manage his packed work, treatment, court and daddy responsibilities, it made him feel embarrassed that he wasn't doing “good” enough. The only time he forgot the camera was when he was with Natalya. He adored his daughter. She took him to places he never knew existed. Together, they were a good team. He—and the foster parents—knew that his survival rested on her existence.

At times Patrick's FTC team loved him and other times they felt like “he just didn't get it.” No matter what mistakes he made, though, his FTC team never let him go. They held meetings and wraparounds to discuss the self-confidence issues that prevented him from moving forward. It was incredible to see the level of treatment the court provided Patrick and his daughter, and I strongly believe that this ultimately gave Patrick the second chance he so badly wanted.

I hope Tough Love gives audiences a glimpse of the lives inside the child welfare system, the lives of the families and workers who spend countless days navigating this complex bureaucracy. Because at the end of the day, it is a system made of people. People who are faced with complex issues like housing, welfare, domestic violence, and substance abuse. People who have to overcome unimaginable obstacles to have a family again. Too often, adoption is seen as the only option for children in foster care. Through Hannah, Philly, and Patrick's stories, I hope to show audiences that these children have parents who love them and are willing to do whatever it takes to get them home.

-Stephanie Wang-Breal, **Director**



“As an adoptive parent, I have a strong bias in favor of adoption as the best outcome for children whose parents cannot care for them. The film helped me understand that, even when an excellent adoptive family is available and the birth parent is flawed, reunification is sometimes the better option.”

- Audience Member

TAKE ACTION

1 SPREAD THE LOVE

We'd love to hear from you! Use the power of social media to connect with the film and other audience members. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and tell us what you think of the film.

 [Facebook.com/ToughLoveTheDocumentary](https://www.facebook.com/ToughLoveTheDocumentary)

 [@ToughLoveDoc](https://twitter.com/ToughLoveDoc)

2 TAKE THE SURVEY

After the screening, we ask that hosts direct audiences to our short survey on the **Tough Love** website. By filling out the below survey you can help us understand the impact **Tough Love** is having on audiences around the country and how we can use this film to affect change in the system.

Take the survey at www.ToughLoveFilm.com/survey

3 PUBLIC FORUM

Provide a public forum for families who are or have been in the child welfare system to share their stories. This can serve as a way to connect families dealing with similar issues, connect families with professionals and support groups, and help communities identify ways to support families in their area.

5 RESEARCH

Research local and/or national organizations that provide preventative services to help at-risk families avoid the child welfare system. Are there enough services available? Are there ways more resources could be allocated to help at-risk families? Convene a discussion group and share your thoughts with local representatives and organizations.

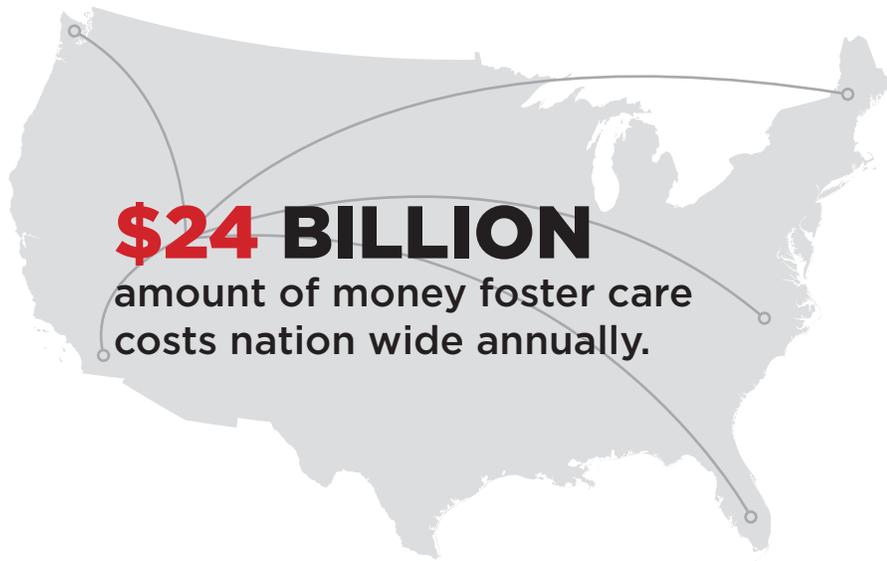
4 PUBLICIZE EFFORTS

Publicize the efforts of support groups for families who are, have been, or are at risk of being in the child welfare system. Encourage professionals, parents and their children to share with their peers the successes and frustrations that have arisen from their experiences, as well as any learnings that may help families and professionals going through similar experiences.

6 SUPPORT GROUP

Convene a peer support group with families in your community. Whether part of the child welfare system or not, having a support group can make a big difference for any family. A peer support group can be as formal as meetings with a set agenda, or as informal as potlucks, movie nights or play dates.

THE FACTS



30% OF CHILDREN
in foster care could be reunited with their parents if they had access to safe, stable, and affordable housing.



Homeless families are nearly 9x
more likely to have their children placed in foster care.

FOSTER CARE COSTS, on average, **\$25,000** per child per year...



...whereas **PREVENTIVE SERVICES** per family costs the state around **\$6,000**.



That's **\$16,000 in savings** per child, per year.

PARENTS IN FAMILY TREATMENT COURTS ARE 50% MORE 
likely to be reunified with their families.



CHILDREN OF PARENTS who grew up in foster care are **5x** more likely to enter the system.

40%
OF FAMILIES who experience domestic violence also face child welfare issues.



Substance abuse is a factor in at least **75%** of all placements in out-of-home care.

Sources: <http://socialworkers.org/practice/children/2009/sept2009.pdf>; <http://sparkaction.org/content/impact-substance-abuse-foster-care>; <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parentalsubabuse.cfm#1>; http://www.ncsl.org/documents/cyf/strategies_reducing_the_number_of_children_in_foster_care.pdf; (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007); https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic_violence/scope.cfm

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In the next section you will find a range of topics and questions to guide and facilitate conversations after screenings of **Tough Love**. As you can see, there are many different topics and issues covered. You can follow this guide's general line of questioning or you can choose one section and focus your discussion on this area.

NOTE TO FACILITATOR:



This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **Tough Love** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult. For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pbs.org/pov/engage.



GENERAL IMPRESSIONS AND REACTIONS TO FILM

1. **TOUGH LOVE** explores an intense and complicated subject. How did it feel as you watched the film? Anger, surprise, confusion? How did you feel about the two sets of parents—Patrick and Hannah/Philly—throughout the film? When the film ended did your feelings change towards the parents? Towards the systems? What influenced your reaction? Your connection to the system? Your role as a parent? Your connection to children? Explain.
 2. As you watched **TOUGH LOVE** , what scene or moment stood out to you more than others? What about that scene or moment was compelling to you and why?
 3. How did you feel about parents with children in foster care before watching **TOUGH LOVE**?
-

NOTES:



\$24 BILLION
amount of money foster
care costs nation wide
annually

EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARDS FOR PARENTS

1. At the end of the film, Patrick is reunified with his daughter and Hannah and Philly are not. Were you surprised by the outcomes of these cases? What do you think constitutes justification for reunification or lack there of?
2. At the beginning of the film, do you think Patrick and Hannah are equipped to parent their children? Why or why not? What about by the conclusion of the film?
3. During one scene in the film, after concerns of Patrick's financial security comes into question by Judge Garratt, Patrick's lawyer, Alena Ciecko, refocuses the team on the safety of his daughter, not the concerns of whether he's a "perfect parent." What did this statement mean to you?

NOTES:



30% OF CHILDREN

in foster care could be reunited with their parents if they had access to safe, stable, and affordable housing.

ROLE OF THE PARENT'S ATTORNEY AND PARENT ADVOCATES

Parents do not have a constitutional right to representation in child welfare cases, although many states have recognized the need for parents to be represented particularly in termination of parental rights hearings. Jurisdictions across the country handle the representation of parents in these cases in different ways.

JURISDICTIONS WITH THE INSTITUTIONAL MODEL OF REPRESENTATION

♥ A limited number of jurisdictions have an institutional body charged with representing parents in child welfare proceedings. There are many benefits to the institutional model of representation. Well-funded institutions can often provide their staff attorneys a range of supports including access to secretarial and administrative support, social workers and/or psychologists, regular training and good quality supervision, and outreach and community resources.

♥ Attorneys working at institutions are often mission-driven – dedicated to the cause of improving the child welfare system for children and parents – so there is a sense of camaraderie among the staff.

♥ Moreover, institutions usually provide their staff attorneys stable salaries and benefits. For all these reasons, institutions may be able to attract high caliber attorneys.



JURISDICTIONS WITHOUT THE INSTITUTIONAL MODEL OF REPRESENTATION

♥ Most jurisdictions across the country do not have an institutional representation model. Instead, these jurisdictions (when they provide low-income parents with attorneys at all) rely on volunteer attorneys and/or pay attorneys a fee for representing parents.

♥ Jurisdictions might have what's called a panel or a contract attorney model. Often, although not always, these attorneys receive little support and supervision, little pay, and an unpredictable workload. The quality of representation a parent client receives might suffer as a result.

ROLE OF THE PARENT'S ATTORNEY AND PARENT ADVOCATES

1. In the film, Hannah's attorney was court-appointed, while her ex-boyfriend and Patrick both had institutional attorneys (see definition above). How, if at all, do you think the quality of representation parents receive is impacted by whether or not their attorney is an institutional versus non-institutional attorney?
2. Do you think parents at-risk of losing their parental rights should have a "right" to counsel? Should poor parents have a right to a free or low-cost attorney to represent them?
3. Throughout the film Hannah meets with Bevanjae and Teresa, her CWOP (Child Welfare Organizing Project) Parent Advocates, to discuss her case. Increasingly, these types of parent-led support and advocacy groups are emerging across the country. These parent advocates, who themselves have been involved in the child welfare system, are charged with helping other parents navigate child welfare procedures and policies. How do you think, if at all, the parent advocates in the film served as a support—on both a practical and emotional level—for Hannah?

NOTES:

FOSTER CARE COSTS,
on average,
\$25,000 per child per year...



...whereas
PREVENTIVE SERVICES
per family costs the state
around **\$6,000**.



That's
\$16,000
in savings
per child,
per year.

ROLE OF THE COURTS

1. In the film Hannah is enrolled in regular family or dependency court and Patrick is enrolled in Family Treatment Court: an alternative, therapeutic court model system. What differences did you notice in each program? Which system do you think served the parent better? Why?
2. While watching the film, did you ever wonder how much a program like FTC costs the state? If yes, were you concerned that this was a costly program? And do you think the costs are warranted?
3. The majority of child welfare cases are closed to the public. Why do you think this is the case? What are the pros and cons of an open court? How do you think this contributes to the public's perception of families and parents involved in the child welfare system?

NOTES:

**PARENTS IN
FAMILY TREATMENT
COURTS ARE**

**50%
MORE**



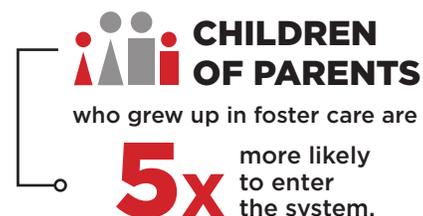
likely to be reunified
with their families.

ROLE OF POVERTY

As documented by researchers throughout the decades, poverty plays an important role in child maltreatment cases, particularly child neglect cases. (Child neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment, accounting for more incidents than either physical or sexual abuse combined.) The exact nature of the relationship between poverty and child neglect is debated, however. Additionally, how children living in poverty should be supported and protected by the state is a source of contention.

1. What role, if any, did poverty-related issues —employment, housing, family self-sufficiency— play in Patrick’s ability to be a good parent? What about Hannah and Philly? How can we ensure that parents are not penalized for being poor, while at the same time ensuring children living in poverty are not subjected to maltreatment and/or are not forced to live in unsafe conditions?
2. How do you think Patrick and Hannah’s childhood affected their parenting abilities? Given both of their upbringings, how do you think the state’s required services could be more effective?
3. During the meeting with CWOP Parent Advocates, Hannah & Philly were advised to move into a shelter because “their current housing situation might be deemed insufficient by ACS.” Were you surprised by this advice? Did it seem like good advice? Why or why not?
4. During the film, Patrick relapses and drinks “a glass of chardonnay with a filet mignon dinner.” How do you think Natalya’s child welfare case affected Patrick’s recovery and his ability to stay sober?

NOTES:



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENTS

-
1. What did you think of the Patrick's relationship with Natalya's foster parents, Enzo and Teresa Lombardi? How do you think it affected his case? How do you think it affected Natalya, and her long-term view of her foster parents?
 2. How could this film be used as a tool to strengthen relationships between birth parents and foster parents?
 3. Many states are trying to place children with kin or relatives instead of in foster care when they cannot remain safely at home. Hannah's children were placed in kinship care with their paternal grandmother and their father, whom Hannah had left due to domestic violence. Did you have concerns about this? Why do you think the children were placed with the paternal grandmother?

NOTES:



OF FAMILIES

who experience domestic violence
also face child welfare issues.

RESOURCES

WEBSITES

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov

Casey Family Programs: www.casey.org/resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation: www.datacenter.kidscount.org

Child Welfare League of America: www.cwla.org/our-work/advocacy

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP): www.cwop.org

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections:
www.nrcpfc.org/is/reunification.html

Rise Magazine: Stories By and For Parents Affected by the Child Welfare System:
www.risemagazine.org

BOOKS

What's Wrong with Children's Rights

by Martin Guggenheim:

www.amazon.com/Whats-Childrens-Rights-Martin-Guggenheim/dp/0674025466

Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx

by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

www.amazon.com/Random-Family-Drugs-Trouble-Coming/dp/0743254430

Another Mother: Co- Parenting with the Foster Care System

by Sarah Gerstenzang

www.amazon.com/Another-Mother-Co-Parenting-Foster-System/dp/0826515495

OUR PARTNERS



CONTRIBUTORS:

Melissa Friedman, Outreach Director

Christine Tappan, MSW, CAG

Stephanie Wang-Breal, Director/Producer

Carrie Weprin, Producer

Design by: OrangeStatic

www.ToughLoveFilm.com

ToughLoveDoc@gmail.com

 [Facebook.com/ToughLoveTheDocumentary](https://www.facebook.com/ToughLoveTheDocumentary)

 [@ToughLoveDoc](https://twitter.com/ToughLoveDoc)



PICTURES
eyewang 

© 2014 EYEWANG PICTURES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Other work by Stephanie Wang-Breal



www.woainimommy.com

www.stephaniewangbreal.com