POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Tough Love
A Film by Stephanie Wang-Breal

www.pbs.org/pov
On January 24, 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 the voice of one group 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 Administration for Children’s Services (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 onesided. 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/Producer, Tough Love
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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, vérité 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.
**Tough Love** is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to family, Child Welfare, foster care, adoption, including, *Wo Ai Ni (I Love You) Mommy, In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee, Off and Running,* and *First Person Plural*
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the “Key Issues” section
- High school students, youth groups, and clubs
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Drug counselors, social workers, and medical professionals who deal with addiction
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions, and museums
- Civic, fraternal, and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries.

**Tough Love** is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- adoption
- Child Welfare Services
- family
- family treatment court
- foster care
- homelessness
- legal issues
- parenting
- parent advocates
- poverty
- reunification

**USING THIS GUIDE**

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.pov.org/engage](http://www.pov.org/engage).
THE FACTS

$22 BILLION
amount of money foster care costs nationwide annually.

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

Foster care costs, on average, $25,000 per child per year...

Preventative services could save approximately $16,000 per child, per year.

Parents in family treatment courts are up to 50% more likely to be reunified with their families.

Substance abuse is a factor in nearly 9x more foster placements than in other placements.

Homeless families are nearly 60% more likely to have their children placed in foster care.

Substance abuse is a factor in nearly 60% of all placements in out-of-home care.

Sources:
http://www.childwelfare.gov/national-dataArchiveChildAbuseNeglect,2012; (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012);
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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 support, 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

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.
Selected People Featured in **Tough Love**

Hasna “Hannah” Siddique  
Phillip “Philly” Toribio  
Patrick Brown  
Judge Patricia Clark  
Judge Julia Garratt
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- What did you learn from this film?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- If you could show this film to one person, who would that person be and what do you hope their “takeaway” would be?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

- **Tough Love** explores an intense and complicated subject. How did you 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 had your feelings changed 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.
- 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?
- What did you feel about parents with children in foster care before watching **Tough Love**?

EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARDS FOR PARENTS

- At the end of the film, Patrick is reunified with his daughter and Hannah and Philly are not reunified with their children. Were you surprised by the outcomes of these cases? What do you think constitutes justification for reunification or lack there of?
- 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?
- 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?
ROLE OF THE PARENT’S ATTORNEY AND PARENT ADVOCATES

• In the film, Hannah’s attorney was court-appointed, while her ex-boyfriend and Patrick both had institutional attorneys (see definition on Page 8). How, if at all, do you think the quality of representation parents receive is impacted by whether or not their attorneys are an institutional versus non-institutional attorneys?

• 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?

• 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?

ROLE OF THE COURT

• In the film Hannah is enrolled in regular family or dependency court and Patrick is enrolled in Family Treatment Court (FTC), an alternative, therapeutic court model system. What differences did you notice in each program? Which system do you think served the parent better? Why?

• 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?

• 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?
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.

• 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?

• How do you think Patrick and Hannah’s childhoods affected their parenting abilities? Given both of their upbringings, how do you think the state’s required services could be more effective?

• During the meeting with CWOP parent advocates, Hannah and 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?

• During the film, Patrick relapses and drinks “a glass of Chardonnay with a fillet mignon dinner.” How do you think Natalya’s child welfare case affected Patrick’s recovery and his ability to stay sober?
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENTS

• What did you think of 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?

• How could this film be used as a tool to strengthen relationships between birth parents and foster parents?

• 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 their paternal grandmother?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
• 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 areas.

• 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.

• Publicize the efforts of support groups for families who are or have been 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.

• 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.
WEBSITES

CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY
www.childwelfare.gov
Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families by connecting child welfare, adoption, and related professionals as well as the public to information, resources, and tools covering topics on child welfare, child abuse and neglect, out-of-home care, adoption and more.

CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS
www.casey.org/resources
Casey Family Programs is the nation’s largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America.

ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION: KIDS COUNT DATA CENTER
www.datacenter.kidscount.org
A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT is the premier source for data on child and family well-being in the United States.

CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA (CWLA)
www.cwla.org/our-work/advocacy
CWLA leads and engages its network of public and private agencies and partners to advance policies, best practices and collaborative strategies that result in better outcomes for children, youth and families that are vulnerable.

CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT (CWOP)
www.cwop.org
CWOP provides resources and support to families affected by the Child Welfare system in New York City.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILD WELFARE EXCELLENCE (NCCWE)
www.nccwe.org
A part of the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, NCCWE produces research and provides education and training to Child Welfare professionals.

RISE: STORIES BY AND FOR PARENTS AFFECTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM
www.risemagazine.org
Founded in 2005, Rise combats pervasive negative stereotypes of child welfare-affected families. Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Original Online Content on POV

To enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The Tough Love website—www.pbs.org/pov/toughlove—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with filmmaker; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

FILMMAKER WEBSITE
www.toughlovefilm.com
Information about the film and resources for parents.

POV PARENT RESOURCE GUIDE
Figuring out what you need to do to get your child(ren) home is one of the most challenging experiences in life. POV and Tough Love created a guide to help child welfare involved parents have a better experience with the system and find the resources and services they need to help them get their kids home.
HOW TO BUY THE FILM


Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television's premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world's boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 32 Emmy® Awards, 18 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, two IDA Awards for Best Continuing Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS's first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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Front cover: Hannah at baby shower. Photo courtesy of eyeWANG Pictures