

# Why Can't We Be A Family Again?

A Film by Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel

## Discussion Guide

Developed by Outreach Extensions



Danny, Raymond, and their grandmother Erslena

*"I believe documentaries can have as much drama and pathos as the best fiction features. The kind of realism and raw emotion that we were fortunate enough to capture in **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** is what motivates me to make nonfiction films. This one family's courage and candor enabled us to tell an intimate and inspirational story about how two brothers and their grandmother were able to redefine what it means to be a family.*

*"Although the film will reach a broad national television audience, this portrayal of a family torn apart by addiction should have particularly strong appeal to social workers, child welfare professionals, counselors, family therapists, and those training in the helping professions." -- Roger Weisberg, Public Policy Productions*

Generous funding for the outreach campaign for **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** and this **Discussion Guide** is provided by

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The Hite Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation also provided partial support for the production of **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?**

## The Film

Nominated for an Academy Award®, this emotionally-wrenching story reveals how two brothers who were devastated by their mother's addiction and neglect found a way to thrive and redefine what it means to be a family.

**WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** is a cinema vérité portrait of the bond that develops between two brothers who long to be reunited with their mother. Shot over a three-year period, the film chronicles their mother's agonizing battle with crack addiction and their grandmother's struggle to keep the family together.

Kitten Jacob has been struggling with drug addiction for most of her adult life. As the film opens, fourteen-year-old Danny and eleven-year-old Raymond Jacob still hold on to the hope that their mother will kick her drug habit so that the family can be reunited. Over the past ten years, the brothers have had to rely on their grandmother, Erslena, for guidance and love. They have also been able to turn to a unique family support organization called the Center for Family Life. Danny's jobs as a counselor at the Center's after-school and summer camp programs helped build his confidence and gave him the chance to be a role model to younger children, including his brother Raymond. The Center became one of the strongest forces in the boys' lives, keeping them grounded despite the turmoil at home.

In one particularly poignant scene, Danny reveals to his supervisor at the Center how he and his brother ended up in the custody of their grandmother. He describes how his mother left them to fend for themselves in their apartment for an entire week. When the food ran out, five-year-old Danny and one-year-old Raymond made a harrowing journey on buses and on foot to their great-grandmother's house. The courts declared Kitten an unfit mother and gave temporary custody of the boys to their grandmother.

The child welfare authorities warned Kitten that she had one last chance to complete a drug treatment program or they will take away her parental rights. She enrolls in a residential treatment center in upstate New York and appears to be making great progress. However, after four months, Kitten drops out of the program and resumes her drug use. Kitten also falls into a deep depression and worries that she will never overcome her addiction. Danny and Raymond are devastated about losing the opportunity "to be a family again." After allowing the boys to remain in the limbo of kinship foster care for nearly a decade, the Family Court initiates legal procedures to terminate Kitten's parental rights.

Recognizing the added stress these developments were placing on both Erslena and the boys, one of the directors of the Center for Family Life's after-school program begins counseling the family at home. Erslena is happy to get this added support as she struggles with her daughter's losing battle with addiction and the challenge of rearing her grandsons.

After failing to appear in Family Court, Kitten is given 90 days to re-enter a drug treatment program and take responsibility for her children. Once again, Kitten tries but fails to complete a drug rehabilitation program. Danny loses hope of ever having a real relationship with his mother, feeling she will always be addicted to drugs. Raymond, younger and more optimistic, says he will never give up on his mother.

The film ends on the day the Family Court is scheduled to decide the fate of Danny and Raymond. Ultimately, the judge decides to respect Danny and Raymond's wishes and does not terminate Kitten's parental rights. The boys remain in the custody of their grandmother.

There is no Hollywood ending to this story, no easy solutions to a difficult situation. But despite the heartbreaking nature of this scenario, **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** isn't just a cautionary tale of the dangers of drug abuse; it's also a source of inspiration, a testament to human determination in the face of impossible odds.

**WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** is narrated by Ossie Davis. It will air nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Don Cheadle, on **Tuesday, January 27, 2004 at 10 P.M.** (Check local listings).

### **Featured Appearances**

Epilogue notes were provided by the producers in December 2003.

**Erslena Jacob**, Daniel and Raymond's grandmother and Kitten's mother. Erslena is also Daniel and Jacob's foster parent.

**Epilogue:** Erslena continues to devote her time to rearing Raymond and looking after her mother who is bedridden.

**Daniel Jacob**, Raymond's older brother and Kitten's oldest son.

**Epilogue:** Danny has taken this year off from college to gain the experience of living independently. He is working part-time as a youth supervisor in an after-school program in Brooklyn. As a result of the film's high profile, he has been asked to speak to many youth groups about his experiences in foster care. He is also active as a youth leader in his community, particularly in his role as basketball coach.

**Raymond Jacob**, Daniel's younger brother and Kitten's youngest son.

**Epilogue:** Raymond is in the 10th grade and continues to do extremely well at school, both academically and at sports.

**Kitten Jacob**, Daniel and Raymond's mother and Erslena's daughter. Kitten has been battling her addiction to drugs for years and frequently lives on the streets.

**Epilogue:** Kitten is drug-free (i.e., off crack) and living in a shelter. She visits the family periodically.

**Florence Jacob**, Daniel and Raymond's great-grandmother and Erslena's mother.

**Sharoya Llopiz**, Center for Family Life after-school program director.

**Jose Cordero**, Daniel's friend and a counselor in training at the Center for Family Life.

**Trell Salley**, Daniel and Raymond's uncle.

**Lolita Jackson-McLeod**, Daniel and Raymond’s Administration for Children’s Services case worker.

**Dodd Terry**, Daniel and Raymond’s Legal Aid Society attorney.

### **Meeting Danny and Raymond**



Raymond and Danny

*“We met dozens of young people including Danny and Raymond in Sunset Park, Brooklyn at an after-school program run by an extraordinary family support organization, the Center for Family Life. We were struck by Danny's charisma and candor. When Danny introduced us to his family, it became clear that the two brothers were desperately hoping to be reunited with their mother who was battling crack addiction. We spent several months getting to know the family before we began filming. By the time we showed up with cameras, we had established a great rapport with the family. We were in touch with them almost every week for two years and became such a permanent fixture in their lives that they began to lose their self-consciousness in the presence of the cameras.”*

– **Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel**

## Child Welfare and Social Work Discussion Questions

The following questions were developed to support discussions about **WHY CAN'T WE BY A FAMILY AGAIN?** by social work students and faculty as well as by social work practitioners and child welfare professionals. Key areas of concern include permanency planning and substance abuse. Other issues include grandparents rearing their grandchildren and kinship care. We invite you to create additional discussion questions about the film that are relevant to your research, educational goals, social work practice, or community setting.

### *Permanency Planning Questions*

These questions on permanency planning and social work were developed by Barbara Pine, professor of social work at the University of Connecticut, and Anthony Maluccio, professor of social work at Boston College, drawing from their extensive research, teaching, and agency consultation in the area of child and family services.

*Permanency planning, the underlying philosophy of child welfare services has been described as “the systematic process of carrying out, within a brief time-limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish life-time relationships” (Maluccio & Fein, 1983:197).*

1. As a social worker working on this child welfare case, how would you define permanency? How would you work toward permanency with Danny and Raymond? What would you do? Whom would you involve? How would you define their family? What evidence is there of continuity of nurturing and life-time relationships within their family? How would you help them to redefine the family they have as “permanent”?
2. In the film, the primary relatives portrayed are the children’s grandmother, Erslena Jacob, and their mother, Kitten Jacob. How would you help the family to identify other family members who might provide support to the family and to the children? How might you help them to identify an informal kinship network for support such as friends and neighbors? Who might some of these people be?

*Along with the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L.-96-272), which codified the concept of permanency planning into federal law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89), passed in 1997, is seen as landmark legislation in child welfare. ASFA, as the act is called, seeks to improve child safety and promote permanency through adoption and other means. Among its provisions are new time lines for reunifying families, shortening to 15 months the time a child can be in foster care before a state child welfare agency must begin proceedings to terminate a birth parent’s parental rights (Child Welfare League of America, 1997).*

3. How realistic is this new time frame for providing services toward reunification for parents such as Kitten who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol?
4. State agencies can be exempted from adherence to this requirement if a child is being cared for by a relative, or if the agency can make a compelling case to the court (which must review all cases) that filing for termination of parental rights is not in the best interest of the child or children. Do you think filing to terminate Kitten's parental rights to Raymond and Danny is justified at this time? Why? Why not? Should the court have delayed this proceeding as portrayed in the film, or not in this case?
5. As the children's social worker, how might you have explained termination to the children? How would a termination of Kitten's rights contribute to the spirit of permanency for Danny and Raymond? How might it not?
6. Concurrent planning, another provision of ASFA, is a recent innovation in child welfare practice that includes a comprehensive family assessment and frontloading of services and supports. Through concurrent planning, family members and others providing supports, such as school personnel, work together as a team to determine a priority plan for permanency as well as a contingency, or next best plan (Pecora et al., 2000). As the social worker involved with this family, how would you see concurrent planning operationalized in this case? Whom would you try to involve on the planning team?
7. Another provision of ASFA is the requirement that state agencies check all prospective foster and adoptive parents for criminal backgrounds. How might an agency meet this requirement in the Jacob's case that would not jeopardize the placement or family integrity? Do you think kinship foster and adoptive placements should be exempt from such checks? How might these interfere with achieving permanence in some cases?

*Family reunification has been redefined in recent years, from a traditional notion that children should either be reunified with birth parents or placed in another permanent family. The newer, more expanded and flexible view is that reunification aims to "help each child and family to achieve and maintain...their optimal level of reconnection – from full reentry of the child into the family system to other forms of contact such as visiting, that affirm the child's membership in the family" (Maluccio et al., 1993).*

8. Does this redefinition apply to the Jacob case? If so, how? How might this redefinition help the Jacob family reframe its situation, especially Danny and Raymond? How might it affect Kitten? Erslena? Do you think it would help this family to feel successfully re-connected instead of feeling like a failed family reunification? How might this reframing affect you as their worker? How might it affect your agency?
9. In most cases where children cannot be reunified with their birth parents, adoption by another family is viewed as the next best option. What are the likely effects of

Erslena's adoption of Danny and Raymond on the family members portrayed in the film? What other options would support the spirit and philosophy of permanency for Danny and Raymond?

10. Resilience has been defined as "the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 1998:4, cited in Maluccio, 2002:596). What evidence of resilience or adaptive behaviors do Danny and Raymond exhibit in dealing with their disappointment about their mother's behavior? How could you, as their social worker, enhance their resilience in dealing with their family situation?
11. The Center for Family Life is a community based family support program portrayed in the film. What role did the Center play in this family's life? Are there other ways the Center might support the family? As the family's child welfare social worker, how would you approach the family and the Center about engaging family members earlier and more actively?

### **References**

Child Welfare League of America (1997). *Washington Social Legislation Bulletin, P.L. 105-89, The Adoption and Safe Families Act*. Washington, DC: Author.

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Maluccio, A.N. (2002) Resilience: A many-splendored construct? *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 72 (4): 596-599.

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### **Substance Abuse Questions**

The following questions pertaining to substance abuse were developed by the **Veritas Therapeutic Community, Inc.**, a family-focused substance abuse treatment program in New York. Incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1973, Veritas offers residential drug treatment, substance abuse prevention for children and families, developmental work with infants and toddlers of addicted parents, and work with substance abusing parents involved with the child welfare system. Veritas' special focus on children and families makes it a one-of-a-kind drug treatment program.

1. In the film, after the mother relapses, we see a crisis intervention home visit by an after-school counselor with the grandmother. What other interventions might constitute best practice in this situation? What, if any, might be the roles of the substance abuse treatment program, the foster care agency, or the Family Court?

2. Examine the relationships of the family members with one another. What were the role discrepancies? How did these discrepancies interact with the mother's addiction? How might these discrepancies place the children at risk for substance abuse in the future?
3. Given the situation at the end of the film, what services should the family receive, and by whom? Who is in the best position to intervene with the mother to return to treatment? What form might this intervention take? What services might the children receive, in a substance abuse prevention context?
4. Do you think that the Family Court's decision, to defer to the wishes of the children and not terminate parental rights, upheld the spirit of the Adoption and Safe Families Act legislation? Do you think the Court's decision affected the prognosis for the mother entering and completing a substance abuse treatment program? If so, how?
5. Assuming the mother enters and completes a substance abuse treatment program, what services might this family – as individuals and as a family unit – need to promote a healthy and stable re-unification?
6. Do you think that any co-existing disorders might have had an impact on the substance abuse? How would you discern this?
7. Analyze the effect of the mother's self-termination from treatment and relapse on herself and the other family members? If the mother were to enter treatment again, are there ways these effects might be discerned and used to support and strengthen the treatment process?
8. What specific services might constitute best practice in a residential substance abuse treatment program for women with children?

### ***Social Anthropology Questions***

The following questions, developed by Murray Nossel, are designed to open up an inquiry into the social, cultural, and historical elements underlying the film. These questions also focus on the particular perspective that you, as a viewer, bring to the film. Murray Nossel is a producer / director of **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?**

1. What pre-existing ideas do you bring to this story with regard to the following issues? Where did these ideas come from (i.e., media, personal experience, and academic sources)?
  - The roles of grandparents
  - The roles of fathers
  - The roles of mothers
  - African Americans
  - Substance abuse



2. How do your own cultural, social, and historical backgrounds affect the way you look at the issues presented in this film?
3. One way of understanding drug addiction is to view it from the perspective of individual pathology. How can drug addiction be understood as a social epidemic? In other words, what may be the social and economic conditions that contribute to addiction?
4. Danny and Raymond attend a structured after-school program. What is the social function of an after-school program (i.e., providing structured activities for children and teenagers after school)?
5. What is the role of Erslena, the grandmother, in this film?
6. What did you learn about yourself by watching this film?

### ***Questions About Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren and Kinship Care***

The following questions were developed by **Generations United**. Based in Washington, DC, Generations United is the only national membership organization focused solely on promoting intergenerational strategies, programs, and policies. Its mission is to advance intergenerational understanding, which strengthens inclusive, caring, and civil communities, and reinforces the social contract between the generations.

1. Today, 2.4 million grandparents are rearing their children's children. The numbers of these families have steadily increased since 1990. One of the reasons that Danny and Raymond are being reared by their grandmother is due to their mother's substance abuse problem. What other factors may lead to this caregiving situation? How can the root causes of this trend be changed?
2. The vast majority of grandparents and other relatives who rear children do so informally, that is, without legal custody. What are some of the reasons for the prevalence of this informal caregiving arrangement?
3. In what ways does Erslena provide a stable environment for Danny and Raymond? What other roles do grandparents play in providing a stable environment for children in troubled homes?
4. Compared with living with a nonrelative, research has shown that residing with a relative helps children maintain stronger family and community bonds. Why do you think this is so? What are some examples of this in the film?
5. Kinship care arrangements are also more likely than the foster care system to keep sibling groups intact. What are the benefits to keeping siblings together?

6. Erslena, the grandmother, talked emotionally about feeling “cheated.” She said that her life “is being taken from me.” What did she mean by these statements? The after-school counselor who visited Erslena from the Center for Family Life asked, “How can we find things for you?” What supportive services for kinship caregivers could help the grandmother to feel less burdened by her role?
7. Danny and Raymond showed resilience in the face of difficult circumstances. Their courageous behavior is not always the outcome for children in kinship families. What are some of the emotional and health-related difficulties these children face?
8. After she dropped out of her rehabilitation program, Kitten spoke very honestly about feeling hopeless and suicidal. The majority of supportive services for kinship care families focus on the caregiver and the child. Is it also important to include the parent? Why?

## Film Production Notes

### About the Filmmakers

**Roger Weisberg (Producer / Director)** joined Thirteen/WNET in 1977 as a producer of the Emmy-winning series, *Help Yourself*. He produced dozens of programs on a broad range of subjects including aging, domestic violence, juvenile justice, consumer fraud, health care, the environment, child welfare, and urban poverty. Since 1980, he wrote, produced, and directed 22 PBS documentaries through his independent production company, Public Policy Productions. These documentaries have won over 80 awards including Peabody, Emmy, and duPont-Columbia awards. Some of Weisberg's films are vérité style documentaries with no narration. Others are narrated by prominent actors including Meryl Streep, Helen Hayes, and James Earl Jones, as well as distinguished journalists including Marvin Kalb, Jane Pauley, and Walter Cronkite. While all of Weisberg's documentaries ultimately were broadcast on national public television, his 1993 documentary, *Road Scholar*, and his 1999 documentary, *Sound And Fury*, had broad theatrical releases before airing on PBS. Weisberg received an Academy Award® nomination in 2001 for *Sound And Fury* and in 2003 for **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** His current productions are *Breaking The Cycle*, about the struggles of low-wage workers to lift their families out of poverty, and *Aging Out*, about teens making the transition from foster care to independent living.

**Murray Nossel, Ph.D. (Producer / Director)** was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he trained and practiced as a clinical psychologist. He emigrated to the United States in 1990. His foray into ethnographic filmmaking began with a two-year project (1994-96) documenting the stories of persons with AIDS in New York.

Nossel is on the teaching faculty of the Columbia University School of Social Work. In 1996, he embarked on an ethnographic inquiry into the Center for Family Life, a family support program in Brooklyn, New York. This research culminated in his doctoral dissertation about the anthropological implications of time in social work practice. In 1997, Nossel teamed up with Roger Weisberg to make a documentary about the Center for Family Life. This collaboration resulted in two films: *A Brooklyn Family Tale* and the Academy Award® nominated **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?**

Nossel is also producer/director of *Paternal Instinct*, a vérité documentary that chronicles a gay couple's efforts to have a child with a surrogate mother. It will be aired on BBC and HBO in 2003/2004.

Apart from his role as a documentary filmmaker, Nossel is a founding member of *2 Men Talking*, a storytelling performance that deals with issues of harassment, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and AIDS. He has performed *2 Men Talking* in theatrical settings in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Italy. In 2003, *Two Men Talking* will become part of an initiative to address issues of secrecy in South Africa's HIV/ AIDS epidemic.

## **About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion Web sites, national publicity, and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

## **About ITVS**

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web, and the weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens, and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue, and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org). ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.

## **About PBS**

PBS, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is a private, nonprofit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation's 349 public television stations. Serving nearly 90 million people each week, PBS enriches the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services on noncommercial television, the Internet, and other media. More information about PBS is available at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet.

## **Film Credits**

### **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?**

Directors	Roger Weisberg and Murray Nossel
Cinematography	Edward Marritz
Music	Mark Suozzo
Editing	Lisa Shreve
Sound	Juan Rodriguez
Producers	Roger Weisberg, Murray Nossel, and Julie Sacks
Production Company	Public Policy Productions

## Resources

### **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?**

Visit the Web site at: [www.pbs.org/whycantwebeafamilyagain](http://www.pbs.org/whycantwebeafamilyagain).

The program's companion Web site features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, cast and crew biographies, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a "talkback" section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more. This **Discussion Guide** is available at: [www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi](http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi).

### **Generations United**

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Washington, DC 20005-4752  
Telephone: 202.289.3979  
Web site: [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)

### **Veritas Therapeutic Community, Inc.**

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Web site: [www.veritas-inc.org](http://www.veritas-inc.org)

## Outreach Campaign

The national outreach campaign for **WHY CAN'T WE BE A FAMILY AGAIN?** is designed and managed by Outreach Extensions. Founded in 1992, Outreach Extensions is a national consulting firm that specializes in comprehensive, high profile educational and community outreach campaigns for media projects.



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