

# Why Can't We be a Family Again? Leader's Guide

**Subjects:** Social Issues, Drug Abuse Prevention, Family Life

**Audience Level:** JH, HS, Adult

**Length:** 27 mins.

**Objectives:** *After viewing, viewers should be able to:*

- Characterize the situation in which Daniel, Raymond, Erslena and Kitten find themselves
- Understand the losses each person feels and the emotionally draining cycle of hope and despair
- Contrast their disrupted lives with their determination to persevere
- Recognize the destructive nature of drug abuse on the abuser and all her family
- Bring compassion and personal understanding to the lives of these people and consider this documentary's implications for their own lives

## **Content:**

From the time they were very young children, Daniel and Raymond have been immensely affected by their mother's drug addiction. Now living with their grandmother, they alternate between hope, anger and despair. Each time their mother, Kitten, enters drug rehabilitation, the children envision a rosy future in which they can be a family again. Each time Kitten quits the programs, the children's hopes are dashed and anger surfaces. Their grandmother, though supportive and nurturing, also feels anger and cheated out of her own life. The love that the family members feel towards each other is palpable, yet love is not enough for Kitten to quit drugs, for Daniel and Raymond to live a normal life with their mother again, or for their grandmother to continue to be unconditionally supportive of her daughter. There is no happy ending in this uncompromising look at the destruction and pain that drug abuse causes, but there is resilience, determination, inspiration and hope.

## **Before viewing:**

Introduce this video as a documentary—a real story of a family deeply affected by a mother's drug abuse. Initiate a discussion about how we direct our lives. What is it that determines the course of our lives and, in the long run, the lives of our families? Steer the discussion to a consideration of the decisions we make, whether we make them consciously or not.

## **After Viewing:**

- Consider the "Before Viewing" question again and ask the audience to identify what decisions the people in the video have made. Discuss, for example, Kitten's "decision" to use drugs, to enter, then leave rehab, and to fail to appear at a court hearing; the boys' decision to refuse adoption; the grandmother's decision to raise the children and therefore change the course of her life.
- Each member of this family lives with the repercussions of drug abuse. In what ways has it affected them all?
- Hope is a vision of the future. Raymond and Daniel hope for their mother's rehabilitation, but are disappointed at every turn. What happens to their hope? Is their anger more productive than their hope? Have they come



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to terms with reality? (their refusal to have their mother's parental rights terminated suggests that they still hold out the possibility of being a family again.) What does their decision seem to mean about how they really feel and view their future?

- Kitten has moments of very lucid understanding about what she is doing to her family. Why then can't she change? What is the tight hold that drugs have on a person?
- What effect might the youthful responsibility demanded of Daniel have on his life? How has he, more than his brother, run the course from expectation to anger?
- Notice the careful attention Raymond pays to what Daniel says, and Daniel's toast to his grandmother at his graduation party. How would you characterize this family? What has caused their unusual reliance on each other? What are its benefits and problems?
- Each of these people has experienced deep loss. For Daniel and Raymond, it is the loss of their mother. Erslena has lost her daughter and her freedom. Kitten has lost her life as a mother and her will to live. Can a person find strength as well as sadness in loss? Can you see any strength in Daniel, Raymond and Erslena? How do you think their losses and strengths will surface in their future lives?
- What does the grandmother mean when she says that when her daughter visits, then leaves, Erslena feels that she is the one who should be able to walk out the door?
- Daniel tells his mother that she was wrong not to show up at the hearing and wonders if she really wants them. Raymond talks about keeping his mother in his heart. Erslena says that she sometimes wishes that her daughter was completely out of their lives, and Kitten says she hates herself and would rather be dead. Each of these reactions

is based on a combination of love, despair and confusion. How does one live with such contradictions? How can one make good decisions when one's life is so disrupted?

- Erslena, the grandmother, is alternately depressed and strong, determined to keep her grandchildren but understands that, in doing so, she is giving up her own independence. A caretaker like Erslena also needs care and support. From where can that support come? Research and report on social services available for caretakers and whether or not they are accessible to people such as Erslena. What recommendations can you make to fill these needs?
- Today, more and more grandparents are raising their children's children. Research why this trend is happening and its effects on the grandparents, parents and children. What might it mean today and for the future? Can the root causes of this trend be changed?
- The power of addiction is very graphically portrayed in this video. Research the physical and emotional roots of addiction and its effects. Think about why, in light of the trauma of addiction, some people are drawn to drugs.
- We make decisions all the time. Consider this family and their strengths and problems in light of your own. What decisions do you face, and how do you want to respond.

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