

# Discussion Guide

Know  
How

knowhowmovie.com



A MUSICAL WRITTEN AND ACTED BY YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE.  
THEIR LIVES. THEIR STORIES. THEIR VOICES.



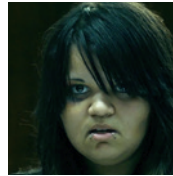
Journeys in Film™  
EDUCATING FOR GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING  
In Partnership with USC Rossier School of Education

# About the Film

*Know How* captures the reality of life in foster care from the point of view of those living in it. Written and acted by youth living in foster care, it's a hybrid of documentary and fiction. Five young people in the New York City foster care system share their experiences through a combination of story and song.

Note: *Know How* portrays stories of the serious and sometimes harmful issues that foster care youth may experience; there are depictions of gun violence, abuse, drug use, and self-harm in the film. It is possible that some scenes will elicit a strong emotional response in youth and adults. We ask that you prepare yourself and your audiences for this possibility according to your best practices. And, while *Know How* is unrated, we advise organizers that audience members should be 13 years of age or older to watch the film.

The film follows these five young people as they confront loss, heartbreak, and disappointment and find ways to persevere.



Megan  
(Clarabelle Pagan)

Megan's story opens with a knock at the door, as child welfare workers and police arrive to remove her and her sister, Kayla, from their home because of reports of abuse.



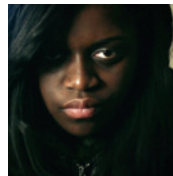
Austin  
(Gilbert Howard)

Austin and his brother James are living on the streets, using increasingly desperate and dangerous ways to support themselves.



Marie  
(Eboney Simpson)

With her grandmother hospitalized, Marie finds support in her connections to her boyfriend, Trey, and her best friend, Addie.



Addie  
(Niquana Clark)

Addie has been living with an aunt since her mother died, and despite her potential has not taken school seriously, making graduation uncertain.



Eva  
(Gabrielle Garcia)

Eva has college dreams of Georgetown University within reach, until the crisis of foster care placement calls them into question.



## About Foster Care

The foster care system was designed to provide for children whose families are unable to care for them. In 2013 there were over 400,000 children in foster care in the United States. Most children enter the foster care system because there has been a decision that it is unsafe for the child to continue living at home. The process that leads to this decision usually starts because someone has reason to believe that a child has been abused (physically, sexually, or emotionally) or neglected (i.e., his/her basic needs have not been met). Anyone can report suspicions or allegations of abuse or neglect, but people who work in certain professions, such as counselors and teachers, are required by law to make these kinds of reports.

An allegation of abuse or neglect begins an investigation by child protective services workers. Child protective services workers will determine whether the allegations are true, and if so, recommend to the court if it is safe for the child to live in the home with the parent. When it is not safe, the court may order that the child be placed into foster care.

Foster care is meant to be temporary—until the parent takes the steps to be ready to take the child home again safely, a relative is able to offer a permanent home, or the child is adopted. Unfortunately, children often linger in this temporary situation; the average time children stay in foster care in the United States is nearly two years.



The arrangement many people think of when they hear the term “foster care” is a foster home. In this arrangement, a foster parent or parents have been certified to take children into their home to live with their family. In many instances, the state will certify a child’s relatives to take the child into their home; this is called kinship foster care. The foster parent, whether a relative or a non-relative, receives a stipend to provide for the child.

Although there is general agreement that a family home setting, particularly with a relative, is best for most children, that arrangement is not always possible. In many situations foster parents are unwilling to care for adolescents, particularly if they have or had emotional or behavioral issues, even if they are developmentally appropriate. Consequently, some young people are placed in what is called congregate care. Congregate care includes group homes, where a number of them live together, supervised by staff, or, if young people have mental or behavioral health needs, a residential treatment center so they can receive specialized therapy or other services. About two-thirds of the children in congregate care are teenagers.

## Questions for Discussion

### How Foster Care Placement Begins

Before watching this film, did you know what foster care is?

Did you have ideas about why children are placed into foster care? Were these ideas confirmed or contradicted by the film? How?

What were the reasons that Megan and Kayla were placed into foster care?

- When the police and social workers came to remove Megan and Kayla, whom did their mother blame for the fact that this was happening? Why?
- A social worker later explained that it was Megan’s teacher who made the report about the abuse after hearing about it from Megan “because it was her job to do that.” Did Megan seem surprised to learn that it was her teacher who had reported the abuse? Do you think that adults in certain roles—such as teachers and counselors—should be required to report any suspicion of abuse?



What were the reasons that Eva and Desi were placed into foster care?

- Some estimates indicate that parental substance use is a factor in about 70 percent of reported cases of child maltreatment. Do you think that Eva’s father’s substance use made the home unsafe for Eva and Desi? Why, or why not?
- When the social worker interviewed Eva and Desi, did it seem like she had made up her mind that their home was unsafe? Or were the questions she was asking necessary to assess their safety? How did Eva and Desi react to the questions? Can you think of other questions the social worker could have asked?
- The social worker and supervisor looked into all corners of the apartment in their investigation, including the cabinets, refrigerator, and drawers. How do we as a society value child safety vs. individual privacy?
- What was Eva’s initial reaction to being placed in foster care? Did her feelings change over the course of the film?

What was the reason that Addie was placed in foster care?

- What do you think Addie means when she says she “became a case when [her] mom died?” How do you think it feels to be referred to as a “case”?
- Some families find ways to handle crises like the death of a parent without involving the child welfare system. What might Addie’s family have done to prevent placement? What reasons other than those above cause young people to be placed in foster care? Do any of these reasons seem more necessary or valid than others? Why, or why not?



## Initial Placement and Planning

Children are placed in foster care to protect them from unsafe situations, and the safety of the child is always supposed to be a top priority in the child welfare system. Does placing children in foster care protect young people from unsafe situations? Does foster care itself ever create other kinds of problems? Are such problems ever worse than the ones foster care is designed to protect children from?

Foster care decision-making should include the opinion of the young person whose life is most affected, particularly when the young person is an adolescent and old enough to participate in the process.

- Did the film show decision-making that included the young people's opinions? Were they asked for their opinion? Was their opinion respected?
- Did the film show occasions when the decision-making did not include the young people's opinion? What was the process? How did the young people react?
- How could young people have more of a voice in the decision-making process?
- What age, if any, do you think is too young to go to court?



Kinship foster care is usually sought as a preferred placement option for young people in care. Why do you think that might be?

- Does the example of Addie's aunt raise questions about whether this is always the best option?
- Do you think Addie would have chosen to live with her aunt if she had had a choice? Why, or why not?
- Do you think Addie would be better off in a foster home with a non-relative? Why, or why not?

Who were the adults in the film offering help to these young people? Were their efforts well received? If not, was there anything they could have done differently?

Is it the nature of the situation that the young people are wary of adults who say they want to help? If so, why do you think that is true? Could both be true—that the adults are not that effective at offering help and that the young people are reluctant to accept help? What might be done so that adults are more effective at offering support? What might be done so that young people are less reluctant to accept help?



Although there are laws that require foster care systems to try to keep siblings together, that doesn't always happen. What reasons did the staff give for separating Megan and Kayla? What other reasons could lead to sibling separation?

Marie finds support and stability in her relationship with Trey, but in the crisis of her grandmother's death, she pushes him away. Why did she respond this way?

### **Loyalty and Connection**

Do you think that loyalty may be particularly valuable to young people whose lives have been affected by the foster care system? To whom do the young people in the film show loyalty?

Sibling relationships can assume a critical importance in families where the parents or caregivers are not providing safety and support. Why might this be true? How do you see the importance of the sibling relationship in the interactions between Megan and Kayla, Eva and Desi, and Austin and James?

### **Diagnosis and Medication**

Even though the total number of young people on psychiatric medication has gone up in the past decades, the number of young people in foster care on medication has gone up even more dramatically.

Why might young people in foster care have a greater need for psychiatric medication?

What other factors might influence why they might be given more medication than young people in other living situations?

### Pathways to Stability and Success

In the early part of the film, Addie notes that “when you’re down, it’s hard to look up.” How might the instability of foster care make it difficult for young people to dream about their futures?

Education can often be the pathway toward a more stable life, particularly for those who are able to achieve a college degree. However, as the film notes, only about half the young people in foster care get their high school diploma, and far fewer get a college degree. What factors might make it difficult for young people in foster care to succeed educationally, even though they are capable of doing so?

Addie is portrayed as having missed many days of school, but still having the potential to graduate. Returning to class requires her to try to catch up and to ask classmates for help. What about this situation might be particularly difficult for someone like Addie? What strengths do you see in Addie that finally allow her to meet her goal of graduating?

Austin has reservations about getting money by robbing people and selling drugs, even though he eventually does both of those things. How might his relationship with James and his assessment of his own prospects influence his decisions? What allows him to step back from that path in the end? How might the outcome of a juvenile delinquency or criminal case be affected by a youth being in foster care?



At one point Marie tells Trey that she just wants to get on a bus to anywhere, and in fact when she can’t stay at Addie’s, she rides the train all night before she goes back to the group home. Why does she decide that sticking it out in the group home is the best chance she has for success? What do you think would have happened if she had not gone back?



## Learn More:

### ABOUT THE FILM:

[www.KnowHowmovie.com](http://www.KnowHowmovie.com)

Synopsis, reviews, opportunities to take action, and more.



### ABOUT FOSTER CARE:

**CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO** Policy research that benefits children, families, and their communities.

<http://www.chapinhall.org/research/areas/Child-Welfare-and-Foster-Care-Systems>

**ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION** Ensuring that children who have been abused or neglected grow up in families and get the help they need to heal, build lasting family relationships, and reach their full potential.

<http://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/>

### ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES—CHILDREN'S BUREAU—ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE STATISTICS

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>

### CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA—PRACTICE EXCELLENCE CENTER

<http://www.cwla.org/our-work/practice-excellence-center/placement-permanency/>

### NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR PERMANENCY AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/>

Discussion guide written by Krista Larson.