



LIONSGATE

Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire
Discussion & Resource Guide | www.weareallprecious.com

About this Guide

This guide is designed to encourage meaningful discussion about the key issues raised in the film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*. Included are key facts about America's inner cities, informed questions to lead discussion, references and resources. The personal and shared experience of watching and discussing the film in a group can bring about change. Precious is a fictional character whose experiences are inspired by real-life situations based on harsh facts. This guide is intended to inform the viewer about how you can work with your community to bring about change.

We are all Precious.

If you are participating as a facilitator, it is especially important to allow for some personal, emotional space after the film ends. Given the intensity of the film as well as the realistic and honest portrait of its main characters, it may also help to set some ground rules before starting the discussion, or have the group set its own. Here are a few examples:

- Be open and be honest.
- Be respectful toward others who may hold differing beliefs.
- Ensure that any revelations made during the group discussion will be considered confidential.
- Listen actively and refrain from interrupting other participants.
- Remind the group to let one another finish their thoughts, but be considerate of time.
- Make sure each participant knows that his or her feedback is valuable.
- No spectators.
- Speak in terms of your own beliefs, experiences, or feelings, rather than blaming or criticizing others.
- Try to learn something new from the group experience.

About the Film

Director Lee Daniels's *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* is one of the most celebrated films of the year – and one of the few to address vitally important social issues across a wide variety of audiences. It is a vibrant, honest, and resoundingly hopeful film about the human capacity to grow and overcome even the most seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

A powerful drama of hope against all odds, *Precious* touches on the compelling, real-life issues of urban educational failure, generational poverty, and abuse and neglect. It tells the story of 16-year-old Claireece Precious Jones, growing up on the unforgiving streets of 1987 Harlem – brutalized by her parents, underserved by her failing school, and pregnant for the second time by her father. All but abandoned by the people and systems that are supposed to protect and nurture her, Precious finds a lifeline when she enrolls in an alternative school, where she learns to read, write, and trust her own voice. As Precious discovers her own potential and worth, she is able to break the chains of her circumstances, and pursue her vision of a better future, for herself and for her children.

Precious features a powerhouse cast that includes Mo’Nique, Paula Patton, Mariah Carey, Sherri Shepherd, Lenny Kravitz, and acclaimed newcomer Gabourey “Gabby” Sidibe in the title role.

Precious can be used as a canvas to explore brutal, but urgent issues facing our society. Through the story and extraordinary character of Precious, we witness hope in the face of hopelessness, courage in the most frightening of circumstances, and a sense of purpose when one is taught to be worthless. *Precious* is a window into the harsh realities we face in our communities and we can’t let our fears keep us from committing to make a difference. It is our responsibility to move forward on collective mission to affect positive change for each and every one touched by the film.

Discussion Questions

- Precious* is a very powerful film depicting intense situations – including graphic language, images, and situations.
 - What feelings and/or reactions did you have while viewing it?
 - What scenes and images in the film stand out for you?
 - For the images that stand out the most, why do they stand out? How do they relate to your life?
 - How did the film affect you?
 - In *Push*, Precious says she feels invisible. This theme emerges again and again throughout the book. What does Precious mean when she says that she’s “invisible”?
 - Who thinks that Precious is invisible? Why?
 - What forces, both internal and external lead her to feel that way?
 - The word “push” also appears in different contexts in the film, and of course it is the title of the book that *Precious* is based on. Why do you think Sapphire titled the book *Push*?
 - What are some of the different ways the word “push” is used in *Precious*?
- Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking 1952 novel *Invisible Man* also wrestles with an African-American main character who feels “invisible” to society at large. This is a result of years of poverty, oppression, and discrimination.
 - Do you feel that Precious feels this way as a result of abuse or as a result of society?
 - What contributes the most to this feeling –her obesity, marginalization, all of the above?
- Hope. *Precious* is ultimately a story of hope. Precious has a core of hope, though she does feel hopeless at times. She goes to the GED program as an “alternative” to her current situation and puts her faith in her teacher, etc. even in the face of difficult circumstances.
 - What other elements of hope are found throughout the film?
 - What does Precious still have hope for?
 - How does her optimism change her daily life?
 - How did writing help her to heal?
- Precious’ reading teacher, Blue Rain, takes a serious and consistent interest in her well-being and success. Think of a teacher who made a difference in your life.

- a. What key characteristics made this teacher so pivotal? Dedication, determination? How did this change or influence your choices later in life?
 - b. What are the implications and key takeaways for underserved and under-resourced school systems? School leaders? Administrators? Systems?
 - c. What does this story tell us about the ability or preparedness of ordinary schools to deal with students' learning difficulties?
 - d. Did they just simply choose not to address them in Precious' case?
5. The social safety net (e.g. welfare, social worker, and counselor) that is supposed to help Precious doesn't give her all the support she needs. Even though she moves into a group home, she remains disconnected.
 - a. What support does Precious need?
 - b. How can she reclaim her personal power and dignity in a household where she is regularly stripped of it?
 - c. What programs or support did Precious need to ensure that she could excel?
6. Recent studies show that approximately 70 percent of African-American children are born to unmarried parents. These statistics suggest that low education rates, high delinquency (crime), and lower earnings are connected with broken and/or single-parent homes.
 - a. Based on this film, do you think a two-parent family is the best unit for raising children? Should it be promoted?
 - b. Precious will carry the scars of her parents' abuse for the rest of her life. Will she be able to find the trust to break this cycle and create a loving and safe environment for her own family?
7. According to research, children of teen parents are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, 10 times more likely to live in poverty, and two to three times more likely to run away from home than children of older mothers (Healthy Teen Network 2008). A large percentage of girls born to teenage mothers repeat the cycle themselves. The cycle of abuse is also unforgiving and abused children are at a high likelihood of becoming abusers themselves. Precious is abused by both of her parents, and is also a young mother herself.
 - a. What is the likelihood that Precious' children will continue in this unforgiving cycle of abuse? Neglect? Poverty?
 - b. What does their future hold?
8. Precious' story depicts Harlem in the late 1980s, an American inner city blighted by generational poverty, unemployment and welfare, ossified social systems, the crack epidemic, and the emergence of HIV/AIDS, a mysterious new disease.

- a. Given the significant gaps in earnings, opportunity, and achievement between the rich and the poor, black and white, what is the moral obligation and responsibility of America's haves to its have-nots?
 - b. Is the social safety net working?
 - c. Do we still see systematic oppression in society today?
9. According to research, 35 percent of children with reading disabilities drop out of school, and 25 percent (one in four) adults in the U.S. lack basic literacy skills (Get Ready to Read n.d.). Also, approximately 6 million students don't complete high school per year, and large urban school districts graduate less than 50 percent of their students. The rates are even worse for black and Hispanic students. When we meet Precious, she has been kicked out of school, is illiterate, disconnected, socially isolated, and frustrated. How do the low expectations, poor education, and systematic negligence all contribute to her place in life?
- a. If she were able to read, how would her life prospects differ?
 - b. What else could the schools have offered her to ensure that she wasn't illiterate in the 9th grade?
 - c. Would her life really be different if she could read? How so?
 - d. Courage: Precious is a survivor. She has the courage to work toward her GED after being forced out of public school.
 - e. What does this tell us about Precious' hope for herself?
 - f. How does this compare to the expectations others have of her?
10. Social workers, administrators, and others have often been portrayed as adversarial. Their intent can be misrepresented especially as they delve deeper into the causes that have led to systematic abuse, illiteracy and/or obesity, as in the case of Precious. Precious not only needs financial support from social services, but more importantly, she needs to be recognized as more than a statistic. She knows she is more than the sum of her parts and the hurt of her past. Breaking through these stereotypes for her gives her the strength to move forward.
- a. What strengths do Precious have that make her a real, living, breathing person to you?
 - b. If the adults in support and power positions expected more of Precious, how do you think she would have responded? How would she have been different?
 - c. What are some of Precious' greatest strengths?
 - d. She is clearly strong, innovative, and she perseveres. Is resilience Precious' greatest asset?

11. Prejudice is defined as: a preconceived belief, opinion or judgment especially toward a group of people characterized by their race, social class, gender, and ethnicity.
- Who are groups that experience prejudice? How so? Is Precious prejudiced?
 - Precious characterizes several groups as inferior, including Hispanics and gays. How is her reaction to these groups colored by her own feelings of inferiority?
 - Is her feeling conscious or sub-conscious? Both?
 - How does her perception of other minorities change throughout the course of the film?
12. Colorism: In American society, light skin has historically been considered the pinnacle of beauty. Precious seems to continually reflect this preference by wishing for a “light-skinned” boyfriend, showing affection toward her light-skinned nurse, etc.
- What does Precious’ longing for lighter skin say about the culture she lives in? What does lighter skin represent to her? Historically?
 - How does she think that her life would be different if she had fair skin?
 - How has her attitude about her own appearance, specifically her skin color, changed by the end of the film?
13. Prevention: Page 10 of this guide contains helpful resources for those who witness or endure abuse and don’t know where to turn. Precious showed outward signs of abuse at an early age, such as wetting herself, becoming disengaged, and anger. If you or someone you know has seen abuse or suspects abuse, report it. You have the power to make a difference.
- How would Precious’ life have been different if someone had intervened?**
 - Who would have been the key contacts? What were the early warning signs, if any?

Fast Facts: Get in the Know

Education and Literacy

- According to the [Education Trust](#), by the end of high school, African-American students have math and reading skills that are virtually the same as those of 8th grade white students (The Education Trust 2003).
- According to an April 2009 report by McKinsey & Co., school performance as early as 4th grade can predict high school and college graduation (McKinsey & Co. 2009).
- In addition, the achievement gap between white and black students costs the United States up to \$700 billion per year in lost earnings – equivalent to a permanent national recession. (McKinsey & co. 2009)
- Also, children who do not learn to read constitute 17 percent of the population and over 50 percent of the special education population.
- Thirty-five percent of children with reading disabilities drop out of school, twice the rate of their classmates
- Twenty-five percent of adults in the United States lack the basic literacy skills required for a typical job.
- Fifty percent of juvenile delinquents manifest some kind of learning disability, primarily in the area of reading (Get Ready to Read n.d.).

Child Abuse and Neglect

- According to the [National Children’s Alliance](#), in 2007, an estimated 794,000 children were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect. Neglect was the most common form of child maltreatment, but victims also suffered from physical abuse, sexual abuse and psychological maltreatment.
- And an estimated **1,760 children died**.
- Approximately 900,000 children are victims of abuse and neglect every year.
- Research shows that children who were abused are nearly one-quarter more likely to be arrested for violent crimes later in life.
- Poor mothers who had been abused or neglected as children were 13 times more likely to abuse or neglect their children than mothers who were not abused.
- For children in sixth through tenth grade, nearly one in six - 3.2 million kids - are victims of bullying each year. An additional 3.7 million kids bully other children ([Fight Crime: Invest in Kids](#)).

Sexual Abuse

- It is estimated that every two minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted (US Department of Justice 2006).
- One out of every six American women have been the victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime;

- Approximately 18 million women have been victims of attempted or completed rape.
- Sexual assault is one of the most under-reported crimes, with an estimated 60% unreported (U.S. Department of Justice 2005).
- **Seven percent of girls in grades 5-8** and 12 percent of girls in grades 9-12 said they had been sexually abused (The Commonwealth Fund 1999).
- Ninety-three percent of juvenile sexual assault victims know their attacker; 34 percent of attackers were family members; 59 percent were acquaintances (Snyder 2000).
- Victims of sexual assault are (World Health Organization 2002):
 - **3 times** more likely to suffer from depression.
 - **6 times** more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.
 - **13 times** more likely to abuse alcohol.
 - **26 times** more likely to abuse drugs.
 - **4 times** more likely to contemplate suicide.
- In the 2003-2004 school year, 13% of all public schools experienced one or more serious violent crimes such as rape or sexual assault (National Center for Education and Justice Statistics 2006)
- **Sixty percent of rapes/sexual assaults** are not reported to the police, according to a statistical average of the past five years²
- Those rapists, of course, never spend a day in prison. Factoring in unreported rapes, only about six percent of rapists ever serve a day in jail (RAINN (Rape Abuse & Incest National Network).

Teenage Pregnancy

- Studies have found that between 11 and 20 percent of pregnancies in **teenagers** are direct results of rape, while about 60 percent of teenage mothers had unwanted sexual experiences preceding their pregnancy.
- Before age 15, a majority of first-intercourse experiences among females are reported to be non-voluntary.
- The Guttmacher Institute found that 60 percent of girls who had sex before age 15 were coerced by males who on average were six years their senior (Wikipedia n.d.).
- One in five teenage fathers admitted to forcing girls to have sex with them (Cullinan 2003).
- Approximately one in four sexually active teens contracts an STD every year (Kaiser Family Foundation 2005)
- An estimated half of all new HIV infections occur in people under age 25. Most young people are infected through sex.

- According to the Centers for Disease Control, at least one out of four teen girls in the U.S. has a sexually transmitted disease (STD) ([Planned Parenthood n.d.](#)).
- Children born to unmarried, high school drop-out teen mothers are 10 times more likely to live in poverty than those born to married women over the age of 20. (Healthy Teen Network 2009)

Resources: Where to call to get help or report abuse

If you suspect a child is in immediate danger contact law enforcement as soon as possible.

To get help in the U.S., call:

1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) – [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#)

To get help for child sexual abuse, call:

1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368) – [Stop It Now](#)

1-800-656-HOPE [Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#)

National Sexual Assault Online Hotline (<http://apps.rainn.org/ohl-bridge/>)

Other Organizations of Interest

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (www.rainn.org)

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual assault organization and was named one of "America's 100 Best Charities" by *Worth* magazine. If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual violence, it's not your fault. You are not alone. Help is available 24/7 through the National Sexual Assault Hotlines at 1-800.656.HOPE, and online at rainn.org.

Planned Parenthood (www.plannedparenthood.org) – [Teen Talk](#)

Planned Parenthood delivers vital reproductive health care, sex education, and information to millions of women, men, and young people worldwide. Their website includes resources on safer sex, birth control, and resources to ask health providers key questions in their "Teen Talk" Section. Planned Parenthood has 94 independent

local affiliates that operate more than **850 health centers** throughout the United States, providing high-quality services to women, men, and teens.

Advocates for Youth (www.advocatesforyouth.org)

Advocates for Youth champions efforts that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. The organization believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health. Advocates focuses its work on young people ages 14-25 in the U.S. and around the globe.

Prevent Child Abuse America (www.preventchildabuse.org)

The mission of **Prevent Child Abuse America** is to "*prevent the abuse and neglect of our nation's children*" and includes all forms of abuse whether physical, sexual, educational, or emotional.

Stop it Now! (www.stopitnow.org)

Stop It Now!® believes that adults, not children, are responsible for preventing the sexual abuse of children. We also believe that children need accurate, age-appropriate information about child sexual abuse.

National Institute for Adult Literacy (www.nifl.gov)

The National Institute for Literacy, a federal agency, provides leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults.

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (www.safeyouth.org)

The mission of the NYVPRC is to provide key local government and community leaders with dynamic resources to help support their efforts to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate effective youth violence prevention efforts.

Children's Defense Fund (www.childrensdefense.org)

CDF is the foremost national proponent of policies and programs that provide children with the resources they need to succeed. The Children's Defense fund supports policies that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to health care, quality education, and a moral and spiritual foundation.

KIDS COUNT Data Book (www.kidscount.org)

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the Novel Push by
Sapphire

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* profiles the well-being of America's children on a state-by-state basis and ranks states on 10 measures of well-being, such as the percent of children in poverty, dropout rates, and infant mortality. The *Data Book* uses timely and reliable information to track the progress and improve the lives of vulnerable children.

Opportunities to Volunteer: Be the Change

The Corporation for National and Community Service (www.serve.gov)

What can you do? It takes a village to raise a child and, in America there are villages in need every day. Identify your very own service project at the federal website, www.serve.gov with plenty of resources for service-minded citizens. Answer the call today. [Serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov) is your online resource for not only finding volunteer opportunities in your community, but also creating your own. Use [Serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov) to help you do your part. America's foundation will be built one community at a time – and it starts with you.

Volunteer Match (www.volunteermatch.org)

Whatever your interest or passion, VolunteerMatch can help you find an organization that needs your time, talent, and skills. VolunteerMatch strengthens communities by making it easier for good people and good causes to connect. The organization offers a variety of online services to support a community of nonprofit, volunteer, and business leaders committed to civic engagement.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (www.casa.org)

Precious spends several harrowing nights in a shelter until she finds a group home where she can safely raise her children. CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children, to make sure they don't get lost in the overburdened legal and social service system or languish in an inappropriate group or foster home. They stay with each case until it is closed, and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home.

Become a Mentor (www.mentoring.org)

Mentoring – the presence of caring adults offering support, advice, friendship, reinforcement and constructive examples – has proved to be a powerful tool for helping young people fulfill their potential. This website contains resources for mentors, mentoring opportunities by zip code, and additional resources for adults who want to make a difference in the lives of children.

Big Brothers. Big Sisters of America (www.bbbs.org)

The largest and oldest mentoring organization in the United States, Big Brothers Big Sisters mentors children, ages 6 through 18, in communities across the country – including yours. National research has shown that positive relationships between youth

and their Big Brothers and Big Sisters mentors have a direct and measurable impact on children's lives. BBBS is always looking for their next mentors – it could be you.

Getting Back on Your Feet: Moving Forward

Job Corps (www.jobcorps.gov)

Job Corps is a no-cost education and vocational training program administered by the *U.S. Department of Labor* that helps young people ages 16 through 24 improve the quality of their lives through vocational and academic training. Funded by Congress, Job Corps has been training young adults for meaningful careers since 1964. Job Corps is committed to offering all students a safe, drug-free environment where they can take advantage of the resources provided.

For Further Reading

PUSH by Sapphire

The book that inspired the movie, *Push* is a harrowing, gritty tale of one young woman's self-determination and fight against impossible odds.

INVISIBLE MAN by Ralph Ellison

An award-winning classic and bestseller for its time, *Invisible Man* established Ralph Ellison as one of the key writers of the 20th century. The nameless narrator describes growing up in a black community in the South, attending a Negro college from which he is expelled, moving to New York and becoming the chief spokesman for the Harlem branch of "the Brotherhood." *Invisible Man* also explores the themes of blackness and invisibility in a harrowing tale of one man's uniquely American experience.

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS by Maya Angelou

The 1969 memoir by renowned poet Maya Angelou tells the story of her early years. An autobiography that is also literature, this book recounts Angelou's coming of age while dealing with racism and poverty in the Deep South.

BREATH, EYES, MEMORY by Edwidge Danticat

Another coming-of-age story begins in Haiti and is told through the eyes of Sophie, a young girl coming to the United States. According to Barnes and Noble, "*Danticat tells a story that evokes the wonder, terror, and heartache of her native Haiti--and the enduring strength of Haiti's women--with a vibrant imagery and narrative grace that bear witness to her people's suffering and courage.*"

GO ASK ALICE by Anonymous

Controversial when first published, *Go Ask Alice* tells the story of a teenage girl confronting the demons of drug abuse. It presents an honest look at the real-life threats and consequences of drug use in the 1960s and 1970s – told through the eyes of an anonymous young woman.

AMAZING GRACE by Jonathan Kozol

Kozol's work describes the plight of children in New York's South Bronx in 1993, focusing on Mott Haven, a poor, mostly black and Hispanic neighborhood. He tells of the affects of drugs, AIDS, incarceration, and crime, all risk factors that hurt children. He interviews community leaders and enters the homes and lives of Mott Haven's residents and again shames a nation by revealing the plight of one of our poorest and least-served communities.

THE COLOR PURPLE by Alice Walker

A poignant story of friendship set in the Deep South during the early twentieth century; *The Color Purple* is a story of two sisters, their friendships, lives, loves, and struggles. Told using the vivid voice of Celie, we see the triumph of the human spirit in this amazing tale.

THE COLDEST WINTER EVER by Sister Souljah

A tale of one young woman's struggles growing up in the mid-1990s, *The Coldest Winter Ever* tells the story of 17-year old Winter Santiago, the daughter of a big-time drug dealer who comes of age amongst wealth and learns hard lessons in the age of hip hop.



About the Author of *Push*, Sapphire

Born Ramona Lofton, August 4, 1950, in Fort Ord, California, Sapphire spent her first 12 years on army bases in California and Texas. As a teenager she lived in South Philadelphia and Los Angeles. She graduated from City College in New York and received an MFA from Brooklyn College. From 1983 to 1993 she lived in Harlem, where she taught reading and writing to teenagers and adults. . In a 1996 interview with Mark Marvel, Sapphire said "it was while conducting literacy classes there (in Harlem) that the idea for ... *Push* was born."

Sapphire is a performance poet and the author of a collection of poetry and prose, *American Dreams*. She is also the author of three other books, *Meditations on the Rainbow* (1987), early poetry, *American Dreams* (1994), prose and poetry, and *Black Wings & Blind Angels* (1999), poetry. Sapphire's poetry has also been included in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives: A Lesbian Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *War after War*. She lives in New York City.

Link to a video of Sapphire reading from *Push* (<http://vimeo.com/2166168>)

About the Book

Described by reviewers as relentless, remorseless, and inspirational, this "horrific, hope-filled story" stays with readers long after they have closed the book. The story of Precious Jones, 16 years old and pregnant by her father with her second child, meets a determined teacher who takes her on a journey of transformation and redemption.

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