

## Chapter 5

# DISNEY FILMS

Disney produces films that are loved by people of all ages, and their films tend to be watched and re-watched over the years. Disney films often involve stories that are driven by parental loss or family formation. We start our journey into the movies with a selection of enjoyable Disney films that can help your family start some meaningful conversations.

Some of the films in this section are geared towards kids while others seem most likely to appeal to adults. The discussion questions in this section explore becoming a family, themes of belonging, dealing with loss and sadness, differentiating between Secrecy and Confidentiality, feelings of missing or longing for birth family members, and identity development. Let's get the movies rolling!

### **Angels in the Outfield**

(1994, PG, 102 minutes. Live Action. Starring Danny Glover, Tony Danza, and Christopher Lloyd)

#### The Plot

Roger and JP are two young foster children in the short-term foster home of Maggie. They live near the home of the

last-place Major League Baseball team, the Angels, and they are devout fans. Roger, the older of the two boys, has recently been visited by his father, who is about to relinquish his rights to Roger. Roger asks when they can be a family again, and his father, using gallows humor, says, “When the Angels win the pennant.”

Roger takes him literally, and begins praying for the Angels to do well. His prayers are answered when angels from Heaven start helping out the Angels from California, and along the way he and JP develop a relationship with George, the manager of the Angels. Roger is surprised and distressed when he learns that his father has relinquished him anyway—but his disappointment quickly turns to joy when he learns that he and JP will be adopted by George.

### The Adoption Connection

Roger is in foster care because his mother has died and his father, for whatever reason, cannot care for him. We do not know where JP’s family is, but we do know that he used to live in a car with his mother. Maggie is a caring foster parent, but is adamant that her role in the kids’ life is for only a short season. The kids become special to George, who ultimately decides to take them into his home. The boys are elated and express their joy at becoming a family and having a dad. George’s adoption of the boys fits into a specific category of adoption that is recognized in California as a “Non-Related Extended Family Member” adoption, which is any adoption of a child by an adult who has a pre-existing, nurturing relationship with the child but is not a relative of the child.

## Strong Points

So many adults in this film come to love and care about the kids.

Roger and JP start as foster siblings, but will become actual siblings through adoption. They are able to trust each other, and they share their questions and hopes with each other, including their wishes to be reunified with their families. They are overjoyed when they realize that they will become family to each other.

Maggie appears to be a competent, caring, and comfortable foster parent. She understands her role as a foster parent, and also believes that kids in foster care generally have a good grasp on reality. She believes that every kid in care is “looking for someone to love.”

George acknowledges Roger’s pain, but tells him that he can’t go through life expecting everyone to let him down.

Roger and JP remain optimistic in the face of painful life experiences.

## Challenges

An older foster child in Maggie’s home says some mean and scary things to Roger and JP, but he is ultimately placed somewhere else. Interestingly, JP breaks down in tears when he learns that that child has been moved; permanency is so important and instability can be very devastating for kids who have been in foster care.

George is initially temperamental and violent. The kids appear to have a good influence on him, but children should know that adults are responsible for their own behaviors. Kids need to feel safe around the adults who care for them.

George's initial interest in Roger is because he thinks Roger might help his team win baseball games.

Maggie has the kids sleep in sleeping bags on top of their mattresses rather than under sheets, and we're not told why.

One adult says something insensitive about parents to Roger.

Roger does have to keep secrets about the heavenly angels.

Roger has deep confidence that he will reunify with his father; he gets something else instead and is happy with it, but some viewers might be heartbroken that he doesn't get what he initially wanted. Other viewers will see a parallel to their own story here. Maggie tries to console Roger, saying that his father relinquished him because he wants what's best for Roger. Those words are not likely to soothe Roger's pain, and he admirably voices his feelings.

George tells Roger that although he is not Roger's real father, he can love and care for Roger and JP. By saying this, he honors the loss that Roger is feeling with regard to his dad, but his choice of terms and the way he phrases it might be painful to some young viewers.

## Recommendations

*Angels in the Outfield* seems best geared towards kids of ages 7–12 who have been in foster care and have moved into, or are moving towards, adoption. Its portrayal of a loving but temporary foster home and the creation of a new family could mirror the story of kids who have journeyed through foster care en route to placement with a family friend, teacher, or other caring adult. Roger and JP have real and powerful emotions but also help each other process their situation and remain generally optimistic and hopeful.

Parents would want to be careful that the themes of abandonment (via Roger's father) or angry adults (early scenes of George) are not too emotionally difficult for their young viewers, and should also be careful that their kids do catch on that, by the end of the film, George cares about the boys for their own sake, not for what they might be able to do for his baseball team.

### Questions for Discussion

- At what point did George start seeming likely to be a good dad?
- Would it be OK for Roger to miss his dad at the same time that he is happy to have George as his dad?
- How does Maggie compare to other foster parents that you know?
- What do you think it's like to become brothers with your best friend?

## Annie

(1999, Not rated, 90 minutes. Live Action. Starring Victor Garber and Alicia Morton)

### The Plot

In Disney's 1999 rendition of *Annie*, the famous red-headed optimist lives in a New York City orphanage. As an infant, she was left with a note that promised her parents would come back for her. Now, 11 years later, Annie still waits for her parents. Other girls in the orphanage mock her, and one tells her that Annie is an orphan because she doesn't have parents

and never will. Annie remains optimistic, but also wants to escape from Miss Hannigan, the cruel orphanage director.

Annie's desire to escape is granted, at least temporarily, when billionaire Mr. Warbucks invites her to spend Christmas with him. Warbucks is surprised to find himself caring for Annie and expresses a desire to adopt her. Annie declines, wanting instead to wait for her parents' return. Warbucks agrees to offer a reward for anyone who can prove they are her parents.

Drawn by the reward, Miss Hannigan and her criminal brother attempt to pose as Annie's parents to collect the reward money. They plan to take the money and kill Annie, however, their plans are thwarted. At the same time, Annie learns that her parents died shortly after leaving her at the orphanage. Although she is saddened to learn of their deaths, she quickly cheers up because she is now free to be adopted by Warbucks.

### The Adoption Connection

Annie has spent nearly all of her life in institutionalized care and continues to long for her parents. Only when she learns that they are dead does she allow herself to consider being adopted.

### Strong Points

Annie's optimism gets her through difficult times. She perpetually looks forward to brighter days, and eventually her hopes are realized. Annie's perseverance and resilience mirror the perseverance and resilience of many real-life foster kids.

When Annie first comes to Warbucks' home, she is asked what she wants to do—she initially mistakes this as a request

for her to start doing chores, but she is redirected. Many kids come into foster care from situations that required them to be overly responsible, and it can take time for them to learn that it is OK to just be a kid.

Even though Warbucks wants to adopt Annie, he puts her desire to find her parents ahead of his desire to adopt her.

### Challenges

Miss Hannigan is an unkind, threatening, and abusive orphanage director, and she is even willing to carry out criminal acts against Annie for money.

Some characters tell Annie harsh things about her status as an orphan, which might be painful to kids who have lost parents or who have felt parentless.

Although Warbucks might have a soft spot for orphans since he lost his parents when he was young, his initial motivation for inviting Annie to his home is more a public relations reason than actual care for Annie.

When considering adoption, Annie refers to her “real parents,” and expresses doubt that she’d be able to love anyone else, since she loves them so much. This does not deter Warbucks, though, who continues to be committed to her. When Annie learns that her parents have died, she quickly embraces Warbucks as her father.

### Recommendations

This retelling of *Annie* seems best suited to kids of ages 8–12. Younger kids might be too scared by Miss Hannigan’s cruelty and her plot to harm Annie, and older kids might not be completely captured by a kid-centered musical.

*Annie* could be particularly helpful for kids who had been in foster care for a long time prior to being adopted, or for

kids who initially had mixed feelings about being adopted. Many foster kids will resonate with Annie's conflicting desires to be adopted and to be loyal to her parents.

Although Annie waited to be adopted until she knew that her parents were dead, adoptive parents could skillfully explore what other issues might make it hard for a kid to allow themselves to be OK with being adopted.

Because of Miss Hannigan's cruelty, the rapidity of the adoption, Warbucks' initial mixed motivations for taking in Annie, and Annie's steadfast refusal to be adopted unless her parents are actually dead, this might not be a good choice for kids who are still somewhat uncomfortable with being adopted; it seems better as a tool for reflective discussion after a child has reached a sense of peace about their adoption.

### Questions for Discussion

- Why didn't Annie want to be adopted at first? What are some other reasons that might make kids hesitant to be adopted?
- What made Miss Hannigan such a bad caregiver? Have you ever had any caregivers who were almost as bad as her?
- How happy do you think Annie will be now that she's been adopted by Mr. Warbucks? What will be the best thing about that for her?
- How did Annie keep her hope during her hardest times?
- If you wrote a song about your life, what would it be called? How would it go?