

Muddling Through

A review of the film



The Kids Are All Right

(2010)

Lisa Cholodenko (Director)



Reviewed by
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I am writing this review soon after the theatrical release of *The Kids Are All Right*. There is no way of knowing at this point how successful *Kids* will be in finding an audience. Unfortunately, many people who would enjoy it immensely if they saw it may never go to “that film about lesbian mothers.” The irony is that what makes *Kids* so special is precisely that it is not amenable to such facile summarization. At its core, the film is too universal for one to easily and accurately pin it down by saying it is about this or that particular topic. Perhaps that is why a woman in her 80s whom I know who would normally have responded with shock and disapproval to a film with a theme that on the surface appears so far from her own much more conventional experience was unequivocally enthusiastic about the movie.

There are many standard genres into which a film can be classified—comedy, action, adventure, drama, science fiction. *Kids* is notable in that it is not adequately captured by any of these designations. Neither is it entirely subsumed even by hybrid terms such as *comic*

drama, although that categorization probably fits as well as any in conveying the general tenor of the film.

Similarly, the essence of *Kids* is not readily found in elements of its plot or its ostensible subject matter. It can be construed as a film about lesbian mothers (Sullivan, 2004), the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2006), the emotional complexity that arises from contact with long-lost birth parents (Lifton, 2009), the dynamics of infidelity (Peluso, 2007), the challenges of maintaining a long-term marriage (Golant, 1999), or the fluidity of women's sexuality (Diamond, 2009). On one level it is about all these things and more. Ultimately, however, the crux of *Kids* is, I believe, immeasurably broader than its multifaceted subject matter would suggest.

If my reading is correct, the intent of this work is more to provide perspective on the human condition than to tell a story, although this objective is accomplished through depiction of the characters' struggles with daily living as the plot unfolds. It is the summer before Joni (Mia Wasikowska) will be starting college, and the various members of her immediate family are experiencing a vague unease as they do their best to cope with her looming departure. Her "two moms," Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore), are understandably slightly rattled simply by the prospect of the older of their two children leaving the household. Her younger brother, Laser (Josh Hutcherson), is concerned for a markedly different reason; because Joni is 18, she has the authority to find out the identity of the donor whose sperm inseminated each of their respective moms.

When Laser first approaches her requesting that she locate their father before going off to school, she seems notably lacking in enthusiasm at the prospect. Who needs a dad when they have two loving parents already? Nevertheless, in response to his urging she ultimately agrees to her brother's request. Somehow it does not seem at all surprising that once they meet him Joni is initially much more enamored than is Laser with their father, Paul (Mark Ruffalo), who exudes the veneer of cool that is emblematic of an adult man permanently lodged in late adolescence.

As a consequence of Paul's entrance into the family system, all of the principles—Nic, Jules, Joni, Laser, as well as Paul himself—are faced with negotiating a major developmental transition that requires reexamining their respective identities and reworking their relationships with each other (Nichols, Pace-Nichols, Becvar, & Napier, 2000). By the end of the film, each of them, as well as the quality of their interactions with each other, has been transformed—and yet, in important ways, there is an enduring continuity in the emotional connection between Nic, Jules, Joni, and Laser.

How, then, to convey the elements beyond the plot that I found so impressive about this film? Both when arriving at and leaving the theater I overheard people engaged in lively discussion and debate about the protagonists in *Kids*. It is a testament to the power of the film that it aroused such an intense level of engagement and reaction. What I found disturbing, however, after seeing *Kids* was how judgmental the conversations I was overhearing were. They seemed driven primarily by a desire to brand one or another of the

characters as being at fault for the suffering of the others—to identify, in other words, who were the “good guys” and who the “bad guys.” To me, this preoccupation seemed to entirely miss the perspective invoked by the film.

Kids impressed me as the rare film that comes close to faithfully depicting real life’s intricacies, subtleties, and vagaries. In doing so, it holds up a mirror in which we can view ourselves and those around us with greater clarity, precision, and, above all, compassion. What struck me throughout viewing the film was the poignancy I felt for each of the main characters as they struggled to balance their own needs with those of the people closest to them. They appeared to be trying as hard as they could within the limitations of their individual vantage points to achieve this equilibrium while simultaneously traversing the imperatives of life-span developmental pulls and presses.

My sense was that the filmmakers, rather than portraying some protagonists as heroes and others as villains, were attempting to depict the characters with a mixture of empathy and objectivity. It was as if they were trying to say, “See how difficult life is and how fragile we are, even those of us who hold a relatively privileged place in society’s pecking order? We could all benefit from being more sympathetic to ourselves and those around us.”

The film’s title certainly conveys some irony: despite their youth and the anxious concern exhibited by their parents, the “kids”—Joni and Laser—manage to be more resilient and skillful in coping with transition than are their adult counterparts. At least they seem less hurtful to those around them. And yet, we can foresee that as they progress into and through the trials of adulthood, the “kids” will be subject to the same types of vulnerabilities, foibles, and missteps that plague their three parents. If a subtitle were to be appended to *The Kids Are All Right*, a suitable one might be: *The Rest of Us Are Just Trying Our Best to Muddle Through*.

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