

THE MOVIE REVIEW

The New Normal

The Kids Are All Right's portrait of gay parenting is fearless enough to be hugely entertaining.

By [David Edelstein](#) Published Jul 5, 2010 [Share This](#)

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(Photo: Suzanne Tenner/Courtesy of Focus Features)

Annette Bening has a genius for a kind of “existential” acting—for illuminating the chink (or moat, or abyss) between a person’s front and the quivering creature underneath, desperately trying to hold the mask in place. As Nic, the more patriarchal half of a same-sex married couple in Lisa Cholodenko’s high-strung comedy *The Kids Are All Right*, she wears a short, blunt haircut; drops her voice (she purges the tinkle); and presents to her teenage children, a boy and a girl, a façade of stability, of someone who values structure above all. Nic’s political agenda is unspoken but implicit: that two mothers (the other is Jules, played by Julianne Moore) can create a home that’s every bit as traditional as one with a mother and father. Nic is admirable, inspiring, but also a bit of a pill (and a compulsive drinker). Like the best comic protagonists, she takes herself very, very seriously and tries so hard to do the right thing—which all but guarantees that her orderly world will become unmoored and collapse in a shower of travestied ideals.

It happens like this: As her inward, angry son, Laser (Josh Hutcherson), skateboards on the edge of delinquency, her daughter, Joni (Mia Wasikowska), decides to track down a true father figure for the boy—in this case, their anonymous sperm donor. (Both Joni and her half-brother have the same biological dad, although each mother carried a child.) Enter Paul (Mark Ruffalo), a shambling, freewheeling bachelor restaurateur. When he shows up for dinner on his motorcycle, Nic regards this interloper with distaste bordering on horror. (Bening’s frozen deadpan barely conceals a hundred different impressions—all bad.) But the flightier, femme-ier Jules is intrigued.

Cholodenko, who wrote the screenplay with Stuart Blumberg, has a female partner and a child, and in this political climate, with gay marriage and parenting under fire, you wouldn’t expect she’d even flirt with the notion that two moms aren’t enough. But she’s a true comic dramatist. She tests what is, presumably, her ideal, her design for living; she bombards it with every weapon in her arsenal. Then she surveys the wreckage, ostensibly in the hope it can be reassembled into something more in balance. And why not? Boys do, in this culture, look to fathers to help form their identities. Introspective modern kids do attempt to discern which parts of their personalities are nature and which nurture. As in her *High Art* and (to a lesser extent) *Laurel Canyon*, Cholodenko’s world is too complex, too discombobulated, to let the characters she loves—all of whom practice an “alternative lifestyle”—get away with thinking their revolutionary bubbles are necessarily impregnable.

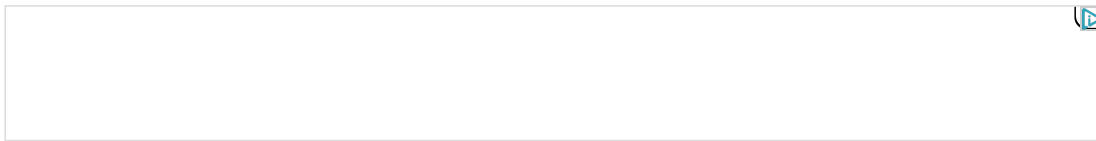
Cholodenko and Blumberg reportedly wrote many drafts of *The Kids Are All Right*, and the scenes are beautifully shaped. Moore’s dithery lyricism carries echoes of Diane Keaton, but as a duettist she’s in a class of her own. She takes on the rhythms of her co-stars—implying that marriage to someone as strong-willed as Nic would have kept Jules soft and suggestible. When alone with Paul, for whom she’s designing a backyard garden, she turns giddy and girlish and self-deprecating. It’s easy to see why she’s charmed. Working in mainstream films, Ruffalo has been in danger of losing that incisive flakiness that

made him so magnetic in Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count on Me*. Well, it's back, baby. What's so winning is how hard Paul, who is naturally abstracted, tries to make contact: first, with supreme awkwardness, with his biological kids; and then with the woman who gives him a glimpse of how good domesticity—how making gardens grow—might feel.

The kid actors are more than all right—less showy but sharp. Wasikowska has the gift of watchfulness. Her Joni (named, yes, for the singer) is about to leave for college and needs to fit together the pieces of her puzzle life. She also needs to leave her half-brother in a better place. Hutcherson at first seems too closed off, but that's part of his strategy. More and more, he lets you in: not all the way, but enough to let you glimpse, in embryo, the person who's fighting to emerge.

The title, like Nicole Holofcener's *Please Give*, is one that trails you out of the theater and gives you something to brood on. (It has nothing to do with the Who—who spelled *all right* wrong anyway.) I think Cholodenko wants you to see that, despite the gaps and uncertainties in the pioneer family life of Nic and Jules, Joni and Laser have enough of a foundation, enough love, to grope their way to all-rightness. That this idea might be viewed as radical or degenerate is part of the larger tragicomedy of American life. But the self-satire of *The Kids Are All Right* is so knowing, so rich, so hilarious, so damn healthy that it blows all thoughts of degeneracy out of your head.

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