

The Kids Are All Right

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue



The Kids Are All Right has been on a roll since its premiere at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival. It is directed (and co-written) by Lisa Cholodenko (*High Art*, *Laurel Canyon*), a filmmaker who favors stories about characters who initiate change. Sometimes this change is intentional, other times inadvertent, but by the end the status quo is reshaped.

Here the status quo is a 21st-century family living a comfy life in California. There are two moms: Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore), who have each had a child via the same anonymous sperm donor. Their 18-year-old daughter Joni (Mia Wasikowska) is about to leave home for college, while their 15-year-old son Laser (Josh Hutcherson) struggles with issues of sexual identity caused in part by the all-female environment he has grown up in. To help him fill in some of the blanks, he persuades his older sister to contact the man whose sperm allowed this particular family to form. She's hesitant, but once her own curiosity gets the better of her, she makes the call.

The donor is Paul (Mark Ruffalo), the laid-back owner of a small organic restaurant. He donated sperm, he says only half-jokingly, because it seemed like more fun than

giving blood. At first he seems reticent to revisit that time of his life, but soon his own curiosity overwhelms him and he agrees to meet the siblings.

Nic and Jules know nothing about this clandestine meeting, which gives the film some time to reveal their own problems. Nic is a doctor who drinks too much wine and tends to be a tad controlling. Jules is a free spirit who changes careers with alarming regularity. Though they still seem to love and desire each other, Joni's impending departure from the womb has caused some familial consternation.

A large part of the film's success lies in the quality of the key performances. Though it would be easy to milk the stereotypic aspects, Bening, Moore and Ruffalo do so much to flesh out their characters that we are willing to accept them no matter what reservations we may have about the plot's twists and turns, which can be a bit jarring.

Though much has been made of the fact that the parents are lesbians, once the film finds its footing this factor seems less and less important. More important are the dynamics of the relationship, revolving around issues of trust, disappointment, responsibility and the fear of growing older. These concerns grow exponentially once Nic and Jules discover that Joni and Laser have been meeting with Paul. The film moves from being a possible romantic comedy into a serious examination of the role that family plays for a young woman about to step into adulthood.

The most intriguing character proves to be Paul, who is presented initially as a dramatic catalyst but rapidly becomes the movie's moral barometer. As we watch him struggle with his role in the extended family drama, we witness someone being challenged to change who he is. Sometimes people change for their own sakes, sometimes for others. The ability to do the right thing proves elusive for Paul. By the third act of the film, this aging man with the sweet smile and easy laugh has morphed into something of a tragic character.

Paul's inability to embrace the possibilities that life has presented him gives weight to the conclusion, in which Joni embarks on a new life. Does her new knowledge of who she is and where she comes from matter in the long run? Or is it just another item to throw into her backpack before catching a final peek at her moms and brother and setting off on her journey?