

Friends with Kids: To whom does this apply?

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Written and directed by Jennifer Westfeldt

Friends with Kids follows the lives of six middle class New Yorkers over the course of a number of years. Two married couples, Alex and Leslie (Chris O'Dowd and Maya Rudolph) and Ben and Missy (Jon Hamm and Kristen Wiig), lead somewhat conventional existences: marrying, residing together and eventually having children.

Longtime friends Julie (the film's writer-director, Jennifer Westfeldt) and Jason (Adam Scott), however, attempt something different. Viewing with dismay the apparently harmful impact that having children has had on their friends' relationships, they decide to have a baby while continuing to live—and love—apart.

At first, after the birth of their son, Julie and Jason seem to be doing far better than their friends, to the dismay of the latter, with this “clean and simple” arrangement. They keep their separate apartments and effectively and efficiently share custody of the child, while each continues to search for the perfect mate.

Needless to say, difficulties arise. First, Jason's strong infatuation for a young dancer, Mary Jane (Megan Fox), disturbs Julie, somewhat to her surprise. For her part, she encounters Kurt (Edward Burns), a divorced construction contractor, and seems taken by him. The strains and pressures of the various entanglements begin to exert themselves.

Meanwhile, Ben (Hamm) and Missy (Wiig), who were physically inseparable in the first years of their romance and marriage, are inexorably drifting apart. Partly as a consequence of his growing unhappiness, a drunken Ben blasts Julie and Jason's experiment as shortsighted and irresponsible during a holiday weekend in Vermont, prompting Jason to declare publicly his affection for and trust in Julie. This later

misleads Julie into telling Jason she loves him, whereupon he painfully explains he is not interested in her *in that way* ... How will it all turn out?

There are pleasing elements here. Westfeldt, who co-wrote and had a leading role in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001) and has appeared widely in television and film and on the stage, demonstrates in her first feature film the ability to tell a story competently and even gracefully. As a performer, she is an appealing personality, with a face and physique that register real emotions. Overall, the six central actors are intelligent and congenial. There are a number of humorous situations involving Westfeldt and Scott in particular.

Above all, however, one gets the sense from *Friends with Kids* of a milieu that is terribly, terribly easy on itself. And the results are correspondingly meager.

Jason learns to be less self-centered and put others first; Jennifer finally figures out that she, Jason and their child are her one and only family; the viewer is meant to conclude from various strands of the comedy-drama that strong sexual attraction alone is not enough to sustain a relationship through the shoals of married life and child-rearing.

Strikingly, money is hardly mentioned in *Friends with Kids*. Financial pressure is not an issue for these people. Julie advises a Wall Street figure as to how and where he can give away some of his riches. Jason works in “advertising,” and apparently does very well for himself. Other than that, no details are provided about the central characters' working lives, or their lives in general outside this immediate circle.

Unless one treats this as a work of science fiction, set in a future utopian community where individuals, relieved of economic burdens, have begun to work out new and more ideal living arrangements, it seems unclear how much of the comedy and drama in Westfeldt's film will be meaningful to a vast proportion of humanity.

The work devotes itself to a tiny sliver of the population. It would be worth looking into, and I am open to suggestions on this score, how much a household in the US would have to be earning at present to be *almost entirely insulated* from economic worry.

Friends with Kids does not appear to be contemptuous of those less fortunate than its lead characters, it has no obvious air of social malevolence or elitism—it is simply oblivious. This speaks to the current attitudes of a layer of well-heeled film and television personalities, who remain in a deep and still apparently untroubled social slumber.

The movie was shot in New York City in late 2010 and early 2011, some eight or ten months before the outbreak of social protest in the Occupy Wall Street movement. One would like to think that such a development might have registered itself in some way with Westfeldt and her cast. Perhaps not.

The difficulty is, the success of art, even film comedy, depends on the creators and viewers feeling something compelling about a work's principal concerns. The situation at the center of things is not a secondary matter, a scaffolding on which various amusing elements are arranged.

For Westfeldt and company to generate a great deal of interest and concern about the characters in *Friends with Kids*, and their small, fairly predictable dilemmas, seems an almost superhuman task in the midst of so many difficulties and larger tragedies.

A movie can fail for any number of reasons, but one of the most obvious and disquieting is a lack of urgency. There is no built-in reason why a film about the upper-middle class should not be urgent, unless those making it are not especially self-critical and searching in their approach. There is no shortage of drama anywhere, but one has to be oriented toward it.

How seriously can one take *Friends with Kids*, for example, when the next theater in the small cineplex is showing *A Separation* from Iran? There is domestic drama in Asghar Farhadi's film too, but invested with great sensitivity, concreteness and an eye to the social whole.

Or one again runs across Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), with Doris Day and James Stewart, a work of almost unparalleled social and moral tension. Or *A Cold Wind in August*

(Alexander Singer, 1961), with a remarkable performance from Lola Albright as a "fallen woman" caught in an impossible situation. Or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's incisive *Pioneers in Ingolstadt* (1971), based on the 1926 play by Marieluise Fleisser, about a group of soldiers in a small German town and their unhappy encounters with various young women. Or even *Personal Affair* (1953), an intense little British film directed by Anthony Pelissier about an adolescent girl who falls hopelessly for her teacher, with Glynis Johns, Leo Genn and Gene Tierney.

There is no substitute for important things to communicate. Good looks, attractive locations and a handful of brittle, clever lines have never been enough.



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