



Playing It ROUGH

They called the game Lion. Or Tiger. Or Cheetah. The nuances between them were clear to the boys but lost on me. All I saw was an inordinate amount of pacing on couches and strategically placed chairs, periodically punctuated by charges, pounces and pummeling of rival cats or unsuspecting prey.

They insisted that it was a game, that it was FUN, that everyone involved wanted to play, and that the victim would soon rise, of course, only to be attacked again.

Not my idea of entertainment.

Then my son went to play at a friend's house. That night as I put him to bed we spoke about his day. "We played the best game at Mendy's house!"* he said. "It's called Moving Truck. You open up the zipper on the blanket, and a few kids go inside. Then the other boy rolls everyone up inside the blanket, and he kicks you off the bed." He laughed at the memory. "Wow! That was fun!"

"Oka-a-ay ... And no one got hurt?"

"No, we were giggling the whole time."

Well. At least the timing was right. With this article in the works, Mendy's mother could expect my call.

"So," I asked her, hoping this would not be the last time my son would be invited to play, "what's your opinion of that game Moving Truck?"

To my surprise, Mendy's mother laughed easily. "It's an old-time favorite here. My oldest son invented it about twelve years ago, when he was this age, and my boys have been playing it ever since."

"So you don't worry about it? That someone will get hurt?"

"The bed's not so high. I'm right here, just in case. It's good fun."

So there it was. The difference between us. Mothers like me who kill the game with one glare, declaring, as I've been known to do smack in the middle of a lively round of Tiger, "People are not toys. Go bring out something you can touch, and sit down and play." And mothers like Mendy's who take it in stride and consider it a healthy part of growing up.

Which way to go?

My friend Mimi* and I had discussed this in the country, so of course, I called her again.

"I remember you said you don't mind if your kids, for example, sit on the couch and kick each other. Remind me again what your reasoning was..."

Mimi hesitated. "So, yeah, I used to think, *What's the big deal? If that's what they want to do, let them. And if one of them gets hurt, what's the worst that can happen? It's not going to be a permanent injury. He'll cry for a few minutes, and they'll move on.*"

"But?"

“THERE ISN'T ONE RIGHT OR WRONG WAY. YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR EYE ON IT. IF SOMEONE'S GETTING HURT, IT'S GETTING OUT OF HAND AND HAS TO STOP.”

“But my sister always told me off, so now I usually use your line that people are not toys, and I send them off to play with something tangible.”

So the line is growing grayer. To let or not to let?

Mrs. Shifra Stern,* mother of three boys, is against. “They’re always coming up with new rough games. When I try to stop them, they ask, ‘What are we doing wrong?’ But every time, someone gets hurt. They fall off the bed or hit their head on a corner of furniture.”

Mrs. Malka Schneider* takes it a step further. “I raised eight sons, *ken ayin hara*, and I was careful to keep my home toned down. Wildness begets wildness. If you’re on top of it, providing activities and changing them as necessary, and you keep the rough play in check, your entire home will be calmer. It’s not just about this game and this minute. It’s about the entire mood in the home.”

Mrs. Leah Bornstein* found that the best solution was to redirect their energy. “They need to let it out.” Whenever possible, unless the weather was absolutely awful, she shipped them outside. In her tiny backyard, she installed the largest trampoline she could find, and that was a great energy absorber, too!

I can hear that. Somehow the games take on a more predictable form, such as Tag or Hide-and-Seek, when they’re outdoors — a reasonable option when the weather’s okay and the hour is decent.

Does it ever end? Mrs. Chava Justman’s* nine boys are all grown, and they STILL get physical when they get together. “There’s all that very hearty back-slapping, elbowing and mock-kicks. Even though today it’s friendly (unlike when they were little, when it was often vicious), I find myself muttering the same lines as when they were young: ‘Stop it! Someone’s going to get hurt.’ Of course, it’s no more effective now than it was then. It’s just part of their male culture. It’s how they show love.”

The more I explore this topic, the more it appears to be one of those (very many) places where a mother’s intuition needs to be on high alert.

As Mrs. Chaya Tauber,* a mother and grandmother to a whole gang of boys who also has some background in behaviorism, says, “There isn’t one right or wrong way. You need to keep your eye on it. If someone’s getting hurt, it’s getting out of hand and has to stop.”

In addition, she advises mothers to look at the big picture. “Roughhousing is part of being a boy, but it’s not for all the time. The question is, can they also sit and play quiet games? Mine can. On the one hand, they play Horsie and Wrestling and Indians. On the other hand, they play

puzzles and chess and monopoly. If a child consistently seeks rough play, the parents need to explore why the child craves this. They should find appropriate help so they can introduce replacement behaviors instead of having to say ‘no’ and ‘don’t’ all the time.”

What would a professional say? For that, I turned to Bashi Gruber, BCBA, clinical supervisor in Brainbuilders in Lakewood.

“Like so many of our parenting dilemmas, it is a matter of style and what you (and your house) can tolerate. If the noise and roughness don’t bother you and your house is boy-proofed to your satisfaction, then by all means let them rough it out. But if every loud noise sends you into a panic regarding your children’s safety and the state of your worldly goods, then you need to make some rules.

“Regardless of which approach you take, some guidelines are universal.

“If a rough interaction evolves into an aggression, particularly if one child is significantly older or

stronger, then standing on the sidelines is not a healthy response. If a child is getting beaten up, he needs to know that his parents will step in and save him.

“Children do have a need to engage in physical activity. This can be done through organized sports, or through regular play in the park or backyard. For the rest of the time, keep enjoyable activities accessible at home.

“Consistency is key. If you have a rule of no ball playing in the house, but sometimes ignore your children as they toss a ball back and forth, they will likely ignore the rule. However, if each time the ball is brought inside you immediately remove it, the message will sink in.”

Plenty to think about, as soon as I get my growling son out of that bear costume ... or not? ■

*Starred names are pseudonyms

Mrs. Paluch is the author of *Boy Oh Boy!*, the engaging guide for mothers of one boy or a dozen. Comments and topic suggestions related to this column can be directed to magazine@hamodia.com.