



Trigger-Happy Birthday

Is an expensive, well-organized shootout any way for my 12-year-old to celebrate?

By Kiku Adatto

Some months ago, my 12-year-old son received a brightly colored invitation to a friend's birthday party, which was being held someplace called Boston Paintball. A few days later, I received a more somber missive: "This is a Release of Liability — read before signing."

A couple of clauses stood out. No. 1: "The risk of injury from the activity and weaponry involved in paintball is significant, including the potential for permanent disability and death." No. 4: "I, for myself and on behalf of my heirs, assigns, personal representatives and next of kin, *hereby release . . . the American Paintball League (A.P.L.), Boston Paintball . . . with respect to any and all injury, disability, death. . .*"

Welcome to today's birthday party. And by the way, if your kid is killed at the party, it's not our fault. Call me an old-fashioned mother, but I just couldn't sign. Apparently all the other parents did, however; my son's friends told him that everyone had a great time.

I decided to visit Boston Paintball to check it out. Located in an old converted warehouse, the place was teeming with white suburban boys. Over at one end, I found another birthday party, for a kid named Max and 10 or so friends.

With their parents' help, the kids were putting on safety gear — chest protectors, neck guards and "Star Wars"-style masks. "It's fun," said Max's mom encouragingly, "like a video game." Then a referee held up a paintball gun (which looked like a real semiautomatic) and shot off a few rounds. The boys quickly lined up to get their weapons.

Next came the safety orientation. "First rule: don't lift off the masks on the field. We shoot balls at 100 miles an hour. Lift a mask, you'll lose an eye. Second rule: on the field, no shooting point-blank. No taking hostages. No using dead guys as shields. No hitting with fists or with gun butts." Max's dad snapped a few photos and handed out the ammunition.

The referee gave the signal, and the game began.

But nothing happened. The boys huddled behind the bunkers. Eventually some of them poked their heads out; sporadic shots were fired. A few brave souls ventured into the open.

I was watching with the other parents from behind a window in the viewing area. Suddenly a paintball bullet hit the window with a dull thud. I started back. My adrenaline was

pumping, but my mind said, "Trust the plexiglass." More bullets splattered the window. It sounded like real gunfire. "Hey, it looks like one of the kids is shooting at us," joked one of the mothers. We all laughed. And moved back from the window.

There was a release of tension after the first game. Max appeared in the lobby flushed and jubilant. "It was awesome," he said. "I hit someone." Max's parents laid out pizza. Spirits were high. "I killed a person," a boy said as he downed a Coke.

While they ate, I visited the gift shop. Along the back wall were racks of paintball guns — all looking like assault weapons — from the Sniper II at \$249.99 to the Express Pro Autococker at \$749.99. Even without these souvenirs, paintball is pricey: \$29 for kids (\$39 for adults), with numerous extra fees. A birthday party for 10 boys with pizza can run \$450.

Back at Max's party, one boy was pressing a cold Coke can against a welt. I asked Max's mom about the cost. "Max has contributed a hundred bucks of his birthday money to help pay for the party," she said fondly. Suddenly she spotted a welt on another boy's chin. "Oh, my God. How did that happen?" She turned back to me. "He's a little warrior," she said.

When paintball was invented 19 years ago in New Hampshire, it was played by adults who focused less on simulated violence than on self-reliant survival. Today, it is reportedly a billion-dollar business in North America alone, with outdoor theme parks featuring mock Vietcong villages and bases named the Rambo Hotel. It's a business that proudly markets itself as an all-purpose sport: the Boston Paintball Web site said it was great for "stress relief, confidence, company outings, morale boosting" and, of course, "birthdays."

Some of the mothers in attendance that day said that paintball is no different from the war games their brothers played a generation ago. I disagree. True, when I was a kid, my friends and I spun violent fantasies, some (like cowboys and Indians) as troubling as the new high-tech games. But there were differences. We didn't pay for admission. The guns weren't lethal. We used our imaginations. And our parents didn't open the paper several times a year to read about kids firing guns in school.

As I was pulling out of the paintball parking lot, the attendant, a guy in his 40's, asked if I had played. I said no. "I don't think it's good, kids and paintball," he said. "They don't realize that they can hurt somebody with those guns."

Well, I'm with the parking-lot attendant. And as for the contract, I still couldn't sign. ■

Kiku Adatto, a fellow at the Harvard Children's Initiative, is writing a book on the changing culture of childhood.