Parenting Discussions on G and PG Movies

Walt Disney Pictures - The Jungle Book 2016

Adapted from Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book

Spoilers Galore

PG and 9 ½

“ Once upon a time ” …

Rudyard Kipling wrote a story titled, The Jungle Book which became a Disney movie in 1967 and has now been remade into an action packed adventure, that is NOT FOR CHILDREN. Many of you already know I am not a fan of Disney movies with their usual, early in the movie, killing off of at least one parent. This story is no different with both Mowgli’s father and wolf-father being killed. One you knew and anticipated but it included the abandoned and piercingly frightened eyes of a young Mowgli (Neel Sethi). These eyes show up at my practice in the anxiety-ridden beings of young children whose fears that a parent will die don’t go away because 100 minutes later there is a happy ending though I am not convinced that was the ‘right’ ending. (Why didn’t any people come for Mowgli? Where are all his relatives? Why are humans so bad? And one of my frequent queries about parenting today: How is it that the child is in charge of making important life decisions?) But, and I do this often, I digress… so, the other murdered father is Mowgli’s adopted wolf-father, Aleka (Giancarlo Esposito). His murder was sudden, unexpected and cruel with no time to process as vultures picked at his bones and the perils continued. Later Mowgli’s black-panther guardian, Bagheera (Ben Kingsley) fights off that same murdering Bengal tiger, Shere Khan (Idris Elba) allowing Mowgli to run to safety. The scene ends with Bagheera also lying there, seemingly another unceremonious death but he returns later.

After Aleka’s death, the unsupervised cubs are being told a metaphorically creepy story by the known murderer of their father. While first and foremost, this is a parenting issue - it was a literal touch and go there when Shere Khan blocked and then released the runt of the litter. I held my breath, but in all fairness it seemed like the children around me missed the threat. The children in the theatre at both my viewings reacted (screams, cries, hiding, jumps) time and again to the intense and frightening scenes, there were: epic battles with larger than life claws slashing, teeth biting, animals being thrown and tossed with implied deaths though no blood; many chase scenes of Mowgli running for his life; sensor round growls and roars exacerbated by the scary darkness of the movie theatre and jump scares; there was a draught, mud slide and a forest fire. Mowgli’s body was scantily dressed and had an ever-changing array of cuts, scrapes, at one time bee stings, but as a mother let me say-his hair always looked nice. He was nearly trampled by buffalo, coiled within and almost eaten by a too long, too thick anaconda, kidnaped by the Bander logs (monkey people), escaped collapsing ruins while being chased by the freakily ginormous orangutan (inspired by the Gigantopithecus extinct ape from prehistoric India) and chased through the interiors of a burning tree by the same Bengal tiger intent on killing him like his fathers. All this fear, anxiety and unhappiness does not meet the essential goal of providing our children with a safe, secure, loving not to mention good world. However, when this essential goal is met in the early years then the developmental ‘nine year old crisis’ (see EBIPS) when children lose their sense of oneness and feel separate and lonely - goes easier. Thereafter the child can distinguish between real and fiction and is actually ready for themes of suspense, conflict and danger.

So, what did I like? I liked the cinematography though I don’t understand the “live action” tag as it was so heavily computer generated it wigged me out. Clearly I have a sense of humor because the second showing I aggravated this experience further with the 3-D version. The movie is visually stunning with its beauty and detail of the jungle and the animals. I like the message, given in the excerpt, from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, The Law of the Jungle: “for the strength of the pack is the wolf and the strength of the wolf is the pack.” It would make for some good conversation with 9 and up youth to talk about individual strengths and talents and bringing them to the family, classroom, team and/or village, despite our differences. I was moved when Raksha, (Lupita Nyong’o) Mowgli’s adopted wolf mother said so beautifully, “Never forget this – you are mine – mine to me. No matter where you go, or what they may call you, you will always be my son.” I enjoyed the choice of the two musical renditions: the delightfully playful ‘Bare Necessities’ sung by Mowgli and the sloth-bear Baloo; and the other catchy tune ‘I Wanna Be Like You’ though sung by the frightfully, freakily giant orangutan to the kidnapped Mowgli, while animals fought and were um…tossed around, there was lots of this ‘odd’ shall we say, tossing. As for the credits, stick around, they are worth the movie in and of themselves with the delightful adult discovery of the all-star list of voices that perhaps you did not know or recognize. Bill Murray was so distinct I had trouble seeing the bear Baloo, not a kid complaint though, and maybe that is just me because I am so familiar with and love Bill. Meanwhile, through the credits, a computer generated Jungle book opens to different pages and animal scenes to music. First, the extended version of the Mafioso sounding Christopher Walken as King Louie, menacingly singing ‘I Wanna be Like You’ followed by the sultry sounding Scarlett Johansson as Kaa, hypnotizing us with ‘Trust In Me.‘ This definitely provides us with a wealth of important conversations to have with our youth about manipulation, luring and disconcerting messages such as “shut your eyes you can trust in me, you can sleep safe and sound.” What is with that? Oh yes, Shere Khan threatened our sleep too. Also I think we parents could have some interesting conversations about the authoritative and laissez-faire parenting styles of Bagheera and Baloo respectively.

As caretakers we are mistaken to trust in Hollywood to decide what is developmentally appropriate for our children. All this parent talk about “Oh they will be exposed to it soon enough”; “they might as well get used to it”; “they are mature for their age, they’ll be fine”…is creating a generation of anxious children and its psychological opposite – numb, desensitized and depressed children. Furthermore, when I interviewed children who had attended the movie they did not understand “Why was Baloo mean to Mowgli? I would suggest if it does not come up - do not explain it. It is too sophisticated and manipulative and we already have enough of that in our children. Really at a young age the appropriate response to children’s deeper inquiries should be, “Hmmm, I wonder” and keep them in their dreamy world but given that you have allowed them to see this movie, chances are you are treating and probably believing them to be at an older developmental stage. Do not be fooled, I am reminded of a family who sought treatment after their 7 year old ‘couldn’t stop thinking about’ the heart-wrenching Inside Out scene when Bing Bong the imaginary pink-elephant friend sacrifices himself. The five-year-old moviegoers were not upset, because they did not yet understand, but seven year olds with their developed understanding were in tears. Pixar admitted the segment was actually meant to be even longer and that it has set a new standard. That is concerning because as I keep saying children are not developmentally prepared for such.

Interestingly, I could not tell in the movie if man or beast initiated the fight when Shere Khan entered the same cave that young Mowgli and his father were in. As parents we understand that Mowgli’s father defended himself and his son by using fire that burned and scarred Shere Khan’s face. Whether Shere Khan actually aggressed on Mowgli’s father or not, either way, Shere Khan needs therapy. He is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress and has generalized his outrage to all humans. Furthermore, he has gone on to verbally threaten all the animals saying he will kill anyone who gets in the way of him killing Mowgli. Yet as irrational as he sounds, he is willing to wait until after the truce due to the drought. Do I see an opportunity for help here? Of course I do. I would recommend Individual Therapy and I also think Shere Khan would benefit from some social inclusion services. Whereby, rather than excluding and expelling him we could work on building community, manners as a form of self control, skill development such as empathy training and emotional intelligence skills such as anger management. We could be open, firm and non-judgmental, to create a telling culture where he, we and all can speak freely and we can all feel safe.

Ultimately, I am for play and age appropriate telling of fairy tales allowing the child’s fantasy and pictorial imagination to take flight. There is great wisdom and morality in fairy tales that allow children to take in concepts that will support their thinking after the birth of the intellect with puberty. I like fairy tales best read by candlelight with a mood of reverence that supports a good night’s sleep and whereby every story begins with the reliable “Once upon a time” and ends with

… “ And they lived happily ever after. ”