



# For Parents of young children

## Children and the Santa Myth

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Every year a few parents seem to worry about the question: "Should we allow children to believe in Santa Claus?" To summarize my reaction to this question, I could quip: "Yes, Virginia's mother, there is a Santa Claus!" Most families don't worry about the problem—in fact, they don't even consider it to be a problem. Their youngest children believe in Santa. The older ones don't but did at one time, and the transition from belief to disbelief is in most cases, quite painless.

But some parents (or others) still wonder: "Should we allow children to believe in Santa Claus?" Their concern usually focuses around one or more of three matters:

1. Does hearing and believing the incredible things he is told about Santa Claus' abilities and accomplishments destroy a child's ability to think clearly in terms of cause and effect?
2. What will happen when the children find out that there is no Santa?
3. Does the Santa Claus myth conflict with the true Christmas story?

Let's look at these questions in a little detail.

### SANTA PLAYS DIFFERENT ROLES IN DIFFERENT FAMILIES

Santa Claus is not one character with one role to play; his act is different in every family and so is his personality.

In some families, the children are taken to talk to Santa at the department store by parents who behave as if they really believe that this is the old codger himself. And on Christmas Day a bearded, stuffed relative takes the part and is accepted quite literally, on the say-so of the grownups. I think that this literal interpretation of Santa Claus is the one most fraught with possibilities of disillusionment—the result of seeing 14 different Santas downtown (short, tall, skinny, and some too young) or recognizing Uncle Harry under the phony beard.

In other families, Santa Claus is never anything more than a vague symbol of the season to whom the parents refer with a twinkle in the eye, and whom the young children see only in advertisements and books. This is probably the approach to Santa Claus that would be subscribed by most child development specialists. Dr. Spock, for example, has said, "I think children should hear about Santa Claus and have the fun of believing in him."<sup>1</sup> His non-literal version of Santa is illustrated by his caution: "I'd omit the visit to the department-store Santa Claus. This noisy, intrusive fellow usually frightens the wits out of very young children."

Some parents use Santa Claus as a disciplinary weapon from October on, giving him a stern, withholding character. He takes the parents' word as final and seems more interested in faults than in good intentions. This disciplinary use of Santa Claus probably would not receive very wide support among child-care authorities. Use of threats of intervention by any external force—be it a policeman, bogey-man,

wild animal, or Santa Claus—is not a wise means of controlling child behavior. In this regard Dorothy Barclay has said: "... few psychologists are concerned any longer about how this aspect of Christmas is handled—provided Santa is a loving, not a punishing, figure, (better no Santa Claus than Santa the avenger). . ."<sup>2</sup>

### WILL CHILDREN BE DISILLUSIONED WHEN THEY FIND OUT "THE TRUTH"?

To those parents who are in a quandary over wanting their child to have the fun of believing in Santa Claus and yet not wanting to deceive him, I would say (and I am joined by Drs. Spock, Gesell, and Blatz, among others) that there is no need to worry or get too serious. At three, four, and five years, the boundaries between fact and fancy are always blurred and shifting anyway. A child's whole world at that age is more imaginative than real—bears, cowboys, fairy princesses. Children love to pretend that they are some person or animal, and to play the part without self-consciousness. They know they really are that pretend-like being, yet at the moment they are!

Young children believe what they want to believe. Millions of people have believed, and then not believed, and still have been left with a warm spot in their hearts for the whole idea.

Perhaps one of the main reasons why most children are not disturbed by the discovery that Santa Claus is not "real" is that this discovery does not come about all at once. Many children deny some aspects of the Santa Claus myth, such as that he comes down the chimney, while staunchly believing that Santa Claus does exist. Most children do not believe it the first time that somebody tells them that Santa is not real. They are not ready so they probably do not even hear the news. Later, when they do "hear" it, it means that they are nearly ready to accept. If a child is unhappy, tearful, and denies the truth, that only means that he is almost ready to accept. Vigorous, tearful denial of some enlightenment usually means that a child is on the verge of being ready to understand and believe the new thing.

For example, most six-year-olds are very firm in their belief about Santa Claus—insistent and emotional. They often will deny fiercely any hint that he is not real. This fierce denial, however, may just precede the beginning of skepticism. When they finally do hear and repeat that there is no Santa Claus, most of them believe only as much as they are ready to believe. This is a comforting thing to know about children—they have great powers of self-protection and can believe two contradictory theories at the same time.

When children are read a story, they eagerly swallow it whole, and yet, in another compartment of their minds, they realize, at least dimly, that it's only a tale. I think they should have the fun of believing in Santa Claus much like they believe in "Big Bird", "Frosty the Snowman", or "The Cat in the Hat." Even the most sincere parent probably doesn't interrupt a story every five minutes to say, "Remember, this is not true—it's just a story."

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Benjamin Spock, "Should Your Child Believe in Santa Claus?", *Ladies Home Journal*, December, 1959, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy Barclay, *Understanding the City Child*, p. 119.

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What to tell your child will depend on what he wants to know when he asks, "Is there REALLY a Santa Claus?" Does he want to know their whole story, or does he just want you to clear up some small detail? Before you answer, find out what he means. You could ask, "What do you think, Marc?" His answer will tell you what he wants to know—before you plunge into an unwanted discourse on the myth and spirit of Santa Claus. Marc's reply could well be, "I think he's just a nice, rich old man who likes to give gifts to everyone." A simple response, like "Well, those presents certainly make everyone happy, don't they?" may answer the question for the moment.

The parent who is not trying to mislead naturally tells about Santa Claus in a storytelling tone of voice, with a pleasant, day-dreamy expression, which tips the child off that these are not humdrum facts he is listening to. If, at age four, five, or six, a child gets around to asking, "Is Santa Claus really real, or just make-believe?" he is probably ready to be told that Santa is make-believe. You can harm your child and your relationship with him by trying to preserve the myth when he is ready to abandon it. The parent doesn't have to lie or spoil the fun. He only has to say, "Well, I suppose he isn't really real, but I like to pretend he is anyway." And remind him of the pleasure the whole family has in pretending.

This is the time to tell him what Christmas and Santa really mean to you. You need to replace the make-believe with a meaningful and significant real. Your answer might go something like this:

Santa Claus is both real and make-believe. There really is a Santa Claus, but not the kind you have always thought about—the one in a bright red suit who travels in a flying sleigh. That is the make-believe part. Santa is a spirit, or feeling, of love and giving, of wanting to do things for those you love to make them happy. Mothers and Fathers are all Santas, and now that you are old enough to know what being "Santa Claus" really means, you, too, can be a Santa—for the rest of the family.

When the child finds out that what he has been allowed to believe really isn't so, will this undermine his faith in other things that they tell him? This will depend on the spirit in which it is told.

The in-between years of "maybe there is, maybe there isn't a Santa" are probably as deliciously exciting as the earlier years of literal acceptance. "I know it's you and Daddy who give us all the presents," the child coaxes. "Then how come we don't give you as much on your birthday?" Mother replies noncommittally. Until finally the child says, "I know there isn't a Santa! I haven't really believed in two years." "Of course, there's a Santa!" Mother insists with a twinkle in her eyes (Mothers never admit it!) and a finger to her lips. "Don't let the younger children think you don't believe!" It's usually as simple as that. Far from feeling let down, the child now is in the trusted and important position of sharing secrets with Mother and Dad—of helping to surprise the younger members of the family. He may feel a glow of emancipation, he may feel superior to the youngsters who still believe, and may in turn help the disillusionment of others. One boy (who had certainly enjoyed his Christmases) described his first "knowing" Christmas as "my most wonderful Christmas ever." When his mother asked why, he replied, "Because we were all Santa Clauses—even me!"

#### BUT SHOULDN'T CHILDREN BE TOLD THE TRUTH?

The truth? Surely, let us defend it forever. But let us be sure we know what the whole truth is. Dr. William E. Blatz, director of Toronto's Institute of Child Study, once replied to the assertion that the "Santa lie" destroys a child's ability to think clearly in terms of cause and effect, "How absurd! What and where are the established facts which the anti-Santa faction insists upon? Is Santa less an established fact than an economic theory, a chemical formula, a stock-market prediction, or the price of cheese?"

And we might remember that Jesus, whose birthday is why we have Christmas at all, was seldom a literalist. He, the Master teacher,



spoke in parables. He used imagery in the idiom of his day. Should we do less?

#### DOES THE SANTA CLAUS MYTH CONFLICT WITH THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY?

It need not and should not. Consider several reasons for this:

1. The sentiment symbolized by our conception of Santa Claus is one of love and giving, which is also a characteristic associated with Christ. Under age three, a child is unable to grasp much of either Santa Claus or the story of Christ's birth. But after age three, it's easy to interweave the story of the nativity and of Santa Claus. Christmas is Christ's birthday. The Wise Men came on the first Christmas bringing gifts. So we continue to give gifts on Christmas to show our love for the Christ child and his blessed birthday. But, because we are honoring Christ as the Divine Child, it is children we remember most especially on Christmas.

2. Parents who want to emphasize religious aspects of Christmas can stress that Santa, just as everything else we have, comes from God, the giver of all gifts.

3. Santa Claus is the anglicized version of Saint Nicholas, a real Christian saint of the third century and a legendary character in his own right.

Children in most European and Asian countries receive presents from old Saint Nick on his feast day, December 6. The United States is one of the few countries where he comes on Christmas. The switch came in the early days of our country because Christmas became an anti-climax after Santa Claus had been there a few weeks earlier. Many of our Christmas traditions are traceable to Saint Nicholas—carol singing, Christmas trees.

Authorities have this to say about the Santa myth.

Dorothy Barclay (Understanding the City Child, p. 120) "For the most part, children anywhere between five and eight seem able to move easily from a belief in Santa as a reality to the idea of Santa as a symbol of loving giving."

Dr. Arnold Gesell (Child Behavior, p. 326): "Usually a child can assimilate, adore, and in time deny the concept of Santa Claus without suffering any scars of disillusionment."

Dr. William E. Blatz (Your Child Today, p. 15): "I have never known a child who was harmed by believing in Santa Claus. I have known some adults who would have been improved if they only had believed in him, or at least what he stands for."

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