

LYING ABOUT SANTA

Nicholas passed away on December 6 sometime around the 340s or 350s AD, and the day of his death became an annual feast in which children would put out food for Nicholas and straw for his donkey. It was said that the saint would come down from heaven during the night and replace the offerings with toys and treats—but only for the good boys and girls. There are many different versions of the legend of Saint Nicholas, but all are the inspiration for the jolly, red-suited gift-giver that we now know as Santa Claus.

Many Christian parents are torn as to whether or not they should play the "Santa game" with their children. On one hand, he makes Christmas fun and magical, leaving wonderful holiday memories for years to come. On the other hand, the focus of Christmas should be on Jesus Christ and how much He has already given us. So, is the story of Santa Claus an innocent addition to Christmas festivities, or is he a subject that should be avoided?

Parents need to use their own judgment in deciding whether or not to include Santa during the holidays, but here are some things to consider: Children who believe that the gifts they receive Christmas morning are from a magical man with unending resources are less likely to appreciate what they have been given, and the sacrifices their parents make in providing them. Greed and materialism can overshadow the holiday season, which is meant to be about giving, loving, and worshiping God. Children whose parents are on a tight budget may feel that they have been overlooked by Santa, or even worse, deemed one of the "bad" boys or girls.

An even more troubling aspect of telling our children that Santa comes down the chimney each year to leave their gifts is that it is, obviously, a lie. We live in a society that believes that lying for the "right" reason is acceptable. As long as it doesn't hurt anyone, it is not a problem. This is contrary to what the Bible tells us. "For the Scriptures say, 'If you want to live a happy life and good days, keep your tongue from speaking evil, and keep your lips from telling lies'" ([1 Peter 3:10, NLT](#)). Of course, telling our children that Santa is real is not a malicious deception, but it is, nevertheless, a lie.

Although it is probably not typical, some children honestly feel deceived and betrayed by their parents when they find out that Santa is not real. Children trust their parents to tell them the truth, and it is our responsibility not to break this trust. If we do, they will

not believe more important things we tell them, such as the truth about Christ, whom they also cannot physically see.

Part 2

Because no one has ever seen him, many people think that Santa Claus does not exist. But many, many others think that he does. In the US, for example, [85% of 5 year old children believe that Santa Claus exists](#), and the belief remains quite strong up to the age of 8. In the UK, [92% of children 8 years old](#) or younger believe in Father Christmas – he’s still Santa, by a different name -, at least as reported by their parents (this datum might be a bit inflated by the fact that some children do not want their parents to find out that they – the children – have stopped believing, so they keep their parents’ illusions alive for as long as possible).

But why not lying about Santa, at least for a few years of a child’s life? True, lying in general is wrong and finding out that your parents lied to you can undermine your trust in them. However, most people get over it quite easily and everybody at some point forgives their parents for having lied about Santa. Besides, isn’t one’s memory of one’s childhood time spent waiting for Santa Claus, and sharing hopes and happiness for the presents with one’s family, one of the dearest and most meaningful memories a person can have? Why take all this away from children? Many people grow up and abandon the religious dimension of Christmas, but very few of them also abandon the spirit of Christmas and the desire to pass it on to new generations.

DISCUSSION

Another Christmas, and another blog about the ethics of Christmas-based lying.

Around this time last year, Alberto Giubilini [wrote a post](#) about whether we should allow children to believe in Santa. Alberto was pretty scathing about some of the arguments in favor of Santa-based honesty, but I want to offer some ethical considerations in favor of this unpopular view.

I agree with some of Alberto’s criticisms on this front. While some children might be traumatized by their parents lying to them, most of us get over it – indeed, most of us go on to do the same thing ourselves. Similarly, it’s at least a claim in need of some evidential backing that children from poorer families are psychologically harmed by the fact that they get fewer, cheaper presents than their wealthy peers. Perhaps more

plausible is the worry that children might get teased or bullied if they go on believing after their peers; but that's at best an argument for revealing the truth earlier than one otherwise might, not against lying in the first place. And it's worth noting that *failure* to believe too early might also cause upset, both to one's own child and their unsuspecting peers.

On the other hand, I don't think there's actually much available by way of defense for what we might call 'The Santa Lie'. The most obvious defense is that the rituals and excitement around Santa are, well, exciting. There is clearly a significant amount of good done by the Santa lie, and so it might seem that we'd need a pretty strong argument against it.