



special articles

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What if Santa died?

Childhood myths and development

Disenchantment with Santa Claus is a rite of passage that usually signals the adoption of an adult-defined reality. The ethics of the custom, which has been described as misleading, have recently been debated and there are suggestions that it is less well maintained than in previous years. This short article explores some of the socio-cognitive benefits of promoting the Santa Claus tale and its associated customs. Sociological theories suggest benefits in family bonding and pro-social behaviour, including sharing. Cognitive theories describe enhanced fantastical thinking, expansion of the internal object world and purposeful play. Children may draw parallels between Santa Claus and God, although there is no current evidence that finding out he does not exist impairs their subsequent capacity for religious faith. Whether or not the fable is a threat to the child's trust is to be decided by each parent. On balance, the tale of Santa Claus is a powerful tool that may serve to nurture social and cognitive development, particularly in a technological society where children mature earlier.

Historically, fairy tales have been a recognised facet of western life. In modern culture, the hallmark of mature reasoning is to distinguish fantasy from reality. Belief in Santa Claus is usually limited to early childhood, and families may collude to preserve this quasi-sacred fantasy. Disenchantment with Santa is considered a developmental milestone and the adoption of an adult-defined reality. Some parents and humanist philosophers condemn the custom as lying and promoting materialism to children. As ageless as Santa Claus is the debate of whether or not to promote his existence. So what is the contemporary parent to conclude? While these traditions may be less well preserved today, their consideration offers some insight into children's cognitive development and their active participation in culture.

Parents provide children with their first experience of living in a community unit that subsequently influences their ability to sustain healthy relationships (Nolte, 1998). Contemporary sociologists adopting the functionalist view describe Christmas as celebrating and affirming family bonds and sociability. We communicate the value of family by allocating time to be together – to play a game, to eat a special meal and enjoy conversations. The decorated home and tree are powerful symbols that reinforce family and social norms. Parents expect to give

more gifts to their children than they receive, and this imbalance is central to the ritual and introduces effective social control. Children's beliefs serve as a vicarious source of adult enjoyment and offer children a powerful role within the process. Another parental task is to provide positive role models within family life. At Christmas, Santa is presented as a role model worthy of adulation. To some, he is a consistently loving adult; others are amazed by his magic. Older children may consider him a playful companion or an old friend (Barrington, 1997). Encouraging children to believe in a benevolent Santa may foster traits of kindness and cooperation. Becoming unselfish depends partly on the gradual development of cognitive recognition of the needs of others, and children begin to comprehend sharing through similar experiences within the family unit. Many children grasp the symbolic lessons regarding charitable giving and consideration of others from the Santa rituals. Festive customs encourage sharing of gifts, time and affection. This may be reflected in their wishes for gifts or better situations for family and friends, or even globally. Many letters to Santa include a wish for someone else, including the poor or the sick. Children also ask for the relief of painful personal feelings such as grief, loneliness or rejection.

In addition to pro-social behaviour learned, at least in part, through modelling, the customs surrounding Santa Claus influence cognitive processes. According to Piaget, most toddlers are in the sensori-motor or early pre-operational stage of development, which is characterised by ego-centrism, incipient classification operations and a need for action-orientated activity. Piaget views this action-centred stage as vital for later conceptual development, since action forms the basis of thought (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Symbolic play is a necessity of this stage, when the child distinguishes fantasy and reality by restructuring and changing their situational reality. Play is purposeful and even simple games act as a forerunner of adult problem-solving ability and creativity (Malim & Birch, 1998). Children send millions of letters and drawings to the North Pole, testifying to their perceived sense of influence in the gift process. Writing encourages children to frame their thoughts. Some schools incorporate 'writing to Santa' as a pertinent class exercise. Stimulating these fantasies



helps focus attention and concentration, and may enhance ideals and creative thinking. Particularly for 3–5 year olds, imagination represents a mode of cognitive function that allows expansion of the internal object world and motivation towards increasingly complex relationships with others. Imaginal experience covers the lifespan, from Winnicott's 'transitional object' to talking to oneself. Piaget noted that the incidence of pretend play rises and then falls again between the ages of 1–6 years and, at about age 3, children engage in more sociable play involving make-believe scenarios with peers or adults. Children's excitement towards Christmas might arise from their ability to suspend belief and thus permit magical and fantastical thought. Children imagine Santa's home in the North Pole as a winter wonderland, full of talking snowmen, elves and flying reindeer. For some, Santa is a vivid companion. He epitomises nurturing and generosity, and this fantasy can help children feel loved and comforted. Some gestures may be small, such as leaving milk and biscuits for Santa or a carrot for Rudolph, whereas others are greater. Not all may be realistic. The modern parent must balance between teaching about reality without reducing the power of inspirational fantasy (Cox, 1991; Polakow, 1992). A child's suspended belief in Santa Claus amounts to an act of faith and it is unsurprising that children draw parallels between God and Santa. To young followers, Santa is immortal and omnipotent, capable of supernatural acts and an enforcer of moral behaviour. Gordon Allport, in his study *The Individual and His Religion*, observes that children may equate Santa with God. From a child's perspective, Santa is a spiritual reality who encourages their moral development ('He knows if you've been bad or good!'), and is a transcendent being concerned with their moral welfare to whom sacrificial offerings can be made and even prayers spoken. It is unsurprising, then, that many children on hearing the truth begin to believe God is a myth too. While children do eventually relinquish their literal belief in Santa, their capacity for faith in a higher, transcendent power is not lost just because Santa proves to be mortal. Children who no longer believed in Santa generally found out by themselves around age 7 and reported largely positive reactions on learning the truth. Parents described predominantly sad reactions to their child's discovery (Mayes & Cohen, 1992).

For some, Christmas symbols are displayed too early and too often. The wreaths, lights, decorated trees and presents all advertise the spirit of Christmas, though some voice concern that Santa's bounty reinforces materialism and greed. Adults may recite the mantra that 'Christmas is too commercialised', and shops rush the season by promoting gifts as early as September. One consumer expert, Russell Belk, criticises Santa as '[encouraging] the views that the world is full of good things and that if one simply deserves it, material wishes will come true'. It is obvious that material goods are little substitute for parental attention and that it is risky to attempt to purchase desirable behaviour from children. Many parents do make efforts to counter advertisers' promises that product possession brings happiness and friendship. Teaching children how to distinguish want

from need helps them to become wiser consumers and more balanced individuals (Meyer, 1997).

While most agree that honesty is usually the best policy, the reality is that we all may be, to some degree, less than completely honest in our day-to-day lives. This is a personal matter. Most of us tell children tales we consider to be harmless, like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. Some parents believe that even this storytelling is dishonest in a dichotomous world of truth and untruth. Some psychoanalysts believe that Santa is a harmful lie that threatens a child's trust and that confiscating Santa once a child believes in him is like stealing his transitional object. In deciding for themselves, each parent must take 'The White Lie Test', i.e. will they thank you for caring or feel betrayed if they discover you lied?

Fairy tales are a natural digression for children. As professionals, we may stand accused of over-analysing childhood. This century has seen the birth, death and rebirth of both Freud and Piaget, along with the rise of behaviourism and various neo-breeds. Piaget's observational work with children in natural settings has greatly contributed to our insights regarding the different social space that children occupy. The extent to which society nurtures its young may reflect its own vigour. The effect of modern technology on the social milieu has seen, in part at least, the relegation of fairy tales from family life. Legendary figures, including Santa Claus, provide a sense of magic useful in offsetting the powerful effects of a technological society where children mature intellectually earlier (Clark, 1995). The sense that society is safe and fun can be promoted by introducing children imaginatively to the life of make-believe characters like Santa (Prentice, 1978). It is difficult to imagine a childhood without fictional characters since our own imaginations were nurtured by them and, at times, they seemed more real than some of the adults around us. It is for these reasons that parents should be aware of the benefits for their own and future generations of children of cherishing the magic of Santa. He is a symbol of hope and belief in him teaches children the values of role models, family bonding and sharing, as well as promoting cognitive benefits. If families allow Santa and all his finery to fade into obscurity, we may deny future generations of a fantasy that may be valuable to their cognitive and social development.

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