

Be Honest In Talking About Santa Claus

In today's contemporary world, how should parents respond when their children ask them that perennial Christmas question: "Is there a Santa Claus?"

Before the youngsters reach the age of popping that question, should parents betelling them that they have to be good if they want Santa to bring them presents?

Fresh opinions on both questions were sought recently in an interview with Dr. Richard N. Roberts, a clinical psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro who has an active private practice in family counseling.

As far as the truth about Santa Claus is concerned, there is certainly no need to panic, said Roberts. In answering the question, he believes that parents need to be forthright and honest in telling their children about Santa.

UNC-G's Department of Psychology. "It can be harmful if you tell a child Santa is watching him, and if he isn't good, there will be no presents under the tree."

Such an external control measure, which Roberts calls an inappropriate use of the jolly old elf, can be harmful in two ways.

"Children will learn eventually that there's nothing to the warning, especially when they wake up on Christmas Day and find full stockings and plenty of presents," said Roberts. "When this happens, the parents' credibility is decreased."

"Children also need to be given a more specific reason for behavior than the possibility of an empty stocking. Children should behave because the parents ask them to do so, not because they think Santa Claus is an authority figure who's keeping tabs on them during the year. If this keeps cropping up, there may be some problems in

child management."

Most children begin asking questions about Santa Claus around the age of three or four years, said Roberts. The serious doubts usually emerge a few years later as children hear skeptical remarks from their playmates.

Many child psychologists feel there's no harm in having children discover that Kris Kringle is really a mythical old man, Roberts pointed out. But there can be some pitfalls associated with revealing Santa's true identity.

"Learning about Santa Claus is kind of a step in the growing up process, sort of a way that kids discover the difference in the way the world is and the way we would like it to be," said Roberts. "There are some problems that may manifest themselves in the short run, however."

"One of the issues is that the child might think his parents

have tricked him and he might be ashamed about it," noted Roberts. "Parents need to let the child know that they understand his feelings and sympathize. The child needs to understand that the Santa Claus legend was not intended as a trick, but as something very nice."

Another problem that can crop up, Roberts said, is that the child's newly found knowledge might create a little skepticism, possibly on such important matters as the existence of God.

"I think it probably does create some skepticism, where a child asks 'If Santa Claus isn't real, are there other things that aren't real, too?'" said Roberts. "But it's up to the parents to help the child distinguish those things that are meaningful and those things that are fantasy."

When young children visit Santa Claus for the first time, Roberts cautions against speeding the youngsters into his lap for that traditional Christmas

photograph.

"Parents should follow their children's cues," said Roberts. "After all, even though most children recognize Santa Claus, he is a stranger, and many of them might be a little frightened."

"A child may want to just get close to Santa or shake his hand or even touch him. Parents should be willing to content themselves with that. Even though most parents want that photo of their child with Santa Claus, there's nothing sadder at Christmas than a crying child whose fuming and tense parents have forced him onto Santa's lap. It adds a little stress to the season that really should not be there."

All in all, the idea of Santa Claus can be very beneficial for children, teaching little ones the ideal of selfless giving and generally helping them participate in the fun and excitement of the Christmas season. And it also helps build family

traditions, which Roberts said are important for children and adults as well.

"Santa Claus can be a rather fun-filled thing for them and it increases the mystery of the holiday season," said Roberts. "There are a lot of nice things that go along with the tradition of Santa Claus—the cookies and milk on the hearth, hanging stockings, leaving carrots for the reindeer, the story 'The Night Before Christmas,' and the idea of a nice, grandfatherly old man who loves them and who gives them presents for no reason at all."

The tradition of leaving the milk and cookies for Santa and the carrots for his reindeer, for instance, teaches children to share. "It gives the child a sense of sharing and of doing something nice for someone," said Roberts. "It's the idea of 'If you do something nice for somebody, they'll do something nice for you.'"

"In breaking the truth to children, I think the best thing for a parent to do is go ahead and ask the child if there are some questions he has about Santa Claus," said Dr. Roberts. "If parents can read their children's feelings pretty well, they'll know when the time is right. I wouldn't blurt it out, though."

"A lot of children have doubts about things but they're afraid to ask their parents. If kids have doubts, but find they can discuss things openly and get the right information, then there's probably some relief all around."

One thing that parents should avoid at the holiday season, Robert said, is using Santa Claus as a threat or reward in order to make children behave. It's a holiday tradition he'd like to see stamped out.

"Frequently parents use Santa Claus in a negative way, as a way of controlling behavior," said Roberts, an assistant professor in

Carols Tell Of Beauty Of Christmas

What could sound sweeter than a chorus of voices singing hymns in perfect harmony? That same chorus of voices singing Christmas carols from a church choir or a snow-covered street corner.

The heavenly strains of carols awaken ears to the simple beauty of the Christmas celebration and, in no time at all, invite all within earshot to join in and sing.

The word, carol, derives from the Greek and Latin words for "chorus." It was used in the middle ages to describe a ring dance or song, which was generally sung among a group of persons, either seated or standing in a circle. At some later time in history, the word became synonymous with Christmas and songs of wonder.

Different from hymns

The Christmas carol—quite different from the traditional church hymn, which was always sung in Latin—originated as the song of the Nativity, sung in the vernacular and understood by all.

While many of the present-day Christmas customs originated with ancient cultures' forms of worship, it was not until the second half of the 19th century that Christmas carols met with general acceptance in both Europe and North America.

When, in 1868, Bishop Philip Brooks was rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, he was asked by his Sunday school pupils to compose a Christmas hymn. It has since become the earliest popular carol composed by an American:

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark sky shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

*For Christ is born of Mary;
And, gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God, the King,
And peace to men on earth.*



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