

Study examines motives behind Santa myth

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Having kids believe there's a jolly man in a red suit who visits on Christmas Eve isn't detrimental, although some parents can feel they're outright lying to their children, according to a new analysis by Serge Larivée.

"When they learn the truth, children accept the rules of the game and even go along with their parents in having younger children believe in Santa," says Larivée, a psycho-education professor at the Université de Montréal. "It becomes a rite of passage in that they know they are no longer babies."

Larivée, along with colleague Carole Sénéchal from the University of Ottawa, examined a study from 1896 involving 1,500 children aged 7 to 13, which was repeated in 1979. More than 46 percent of children in 1896 and 44 percent in 1979 gradually found out on their own that Santa didn't exist.

The studies also analyzed the reaction of the children once they discovered the jolly old elf wasn't real. More than 22 percent in the 1896 study admitted to being disappointed compared with 39 percent in the 1979 study. But only 2 percent and 6 percent, respectively, felt betrayed.

"The constant outcome of the two studies was that children generally discovered through their own observations and experiences that Santa doesn't exist," Larivée noted. "And their parents confirmed their discovery."

"Children ask their parents, for example, how Santa gets in the house if there's no chimney," he says. "And even if the parents say they leave the door unlocked, the child will figure out that Santa can't be everywhere at the same time and that reindeer can't be that fast."

Close to 25 percent of children in the 1896 study learned the truth about Santa from their parents, compared with 40 per cent in 1979. Those who didn't find out from their parents learned the truth from other children.

Larivée says belief in Santa diminishes as children approach the age of reason. "But cognitive maturity and level of thought that would allow a 7-year-old to differentiate between the imaginary and reality are insufficient to let go of the myth," he adds, pointing out that half of children of that age in a 1980 study still believed.

In 1896, 54 percent of parents said they perpetuated the myth of Santa since it made their children happy; compared with 73 percent in 1979 and 80 percent in 2000.

Larivée and Sénéchal now want to explore a deeper question: If children attribute the same supernatural powers to Santa as they do to God, why do they stop believing in Santa, but continue their belief in God?

Source: University of Montreal

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