

Child Development Expert Says The Magic Of Santa Claus Is No Lie

December 7 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- Should parents let their children believe in Santa Claus?

Absolutely, according to Charles Smith, a Kansas State University expert in child development. While Santa may not be a flesh-and-blood person, the cultural truth of St. Nicholas is key to a child's developing [imagination](#), Smith said.

"Santa Claus is a shared cultural image of benevolence and kindness and you don't want to undermine that," he said.

"With Santa Claus, you are trying to enrich the child's life by sharing something that you both enjoy," he said. "Santa Claus embodies the whole idea of the Christmas season as the time of caring, togetherness and magic."

Smith said that a child's belief in the story of Santa Claus enables the child to develop a sense of wonder about the jolly character and use their imagination. Using their imagination to consider the possibilities is key to problem solving and other mental tasks down the line, he said.

"Santa Claus is a loving, merry person who cares about kids so much that he wants to bring toys to kids throughout the whole world," Smith said. "If you take Santa Claus out of the picture, you diminish that child's sense that they are special."

"We know that Santa is not real, but the truth of Santa is the shared cultural commitment to kids, to bring happiness into children's lives," he said.

Some parents may think teaching their [children](#) to believe in Kris Kringle is setting them up for big disappointment when they find out he doesn't exist.

Smith said that children who discover Santa isn't real rarely blame their parents. In fact, the most common response is to keep the story going so they not only continue to get presents, but because they recognize the joy their parents get from the experience, he said.

However, Smith said that some parents could take the Santa notion too far. He once had an adult student who reported being very angry with his father for what the student said amounted to lies about Santa. Turns out, this particular student's father used to take him for a drive looking for Santa on Christmas Eve. The father would stop and point to a starry sky. The preschooler would then begin to search, hoping to get a glimpse of Santa. What the young man recalled was his father laughing when his hunt was unsuccessful.

"Instead of a shared, joyful moment, the student felt betrayed," Smith said.

That's why Smith advises against forcing children to sit on Santa's lap at the store or insist they write him a letter. This sort of persistence will only result in negative feelings, he said.

Above all, parents should respect their child's imagination and let them take the lead, Smith said. Most children will ask pointed questions about the mythical man in red who flies around the globe delivering toys to all the world's children in a single night. Smith said it is important not to

overexplain.

"Be honest when children initiate a question," Smith said. "If a child asks if Santa is real, you might say that Santa is a wonderful idea about someone who wants to bring [happiness](#) to children."

Smith also said that using Santa Claus as a disciplinary measure or threat sends mixed messages.

"If Santa Claus was real, he would not refuse to come to your child's house if she didn't eat all of her green beans," Smith said. "Telling a child that Santa would do that undermines a shared enjoyment of Santa Claus.

"Santa Claus is a shared magic that brings families together. When you respect and are responsive to the child's imagination, you build happy memories to last a lifetime, Smith said. "That's why that sense of joyfulness that surrounds Santa Claus is so important. It's a cold, hard world for a child who can't have that kind of pleasure."

Provided by Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Child Development Expert Says The Magic Of Santa Claus Is No Lie (2009, December 7) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

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