

### The presents were there - but no dead Santa

*Christopher Boyle on children's experiences of Christmas magic and myth.  
Warning: contains festive spoilers...*

The Covid Christmas of 2020 brings so much uncertainty and misery, there is an argument it has never been a greater time to indulge in the escapism of Santa. Christmas is a time of magic, where children believe in implausible things, adults (and older children) wish they *could* believe in the incredible, and presents are exchanged around the world, bringing joy, evoking various iterations of the Santa myth.

As I discussed in a 2016 *Lancet Psychiatry* article with Kathy McKay, many adults wish they still believed in Santa and who can blame them, especially in 2020. For many, so much effort goes into cultivating the Santa stories. This is a yearlong extravaganza, including the shaping of children's behaviour (if they want good presents) as well as the magic leading up to Christmas Day. Of course, adults are supported by most organisations who generously advertise Christmas from October every year.

Keeping the magic and myth of Christmas going is no mean feat. As children become older the Santa story becomes much harder to perpetrate and wily tactics are needed. In school, children are learning about science and the limits contained therein. They naturally become harder to fool so then the story must become more about 'a leap of faith', not too dissimilar to that of religious belief. However, some children realise that if they let on that they know the truth about Santa then it might reduce the quality of the experience for them and/or their siblings.

Here, I consider some of the findings from my ongoing international *Santa Survey* (<http://www.thesantasurvey.com>). The survey currently has over 4,200 participants from across the world. I'll focus on the responses to the question *How did you work out the truth about Santa?* – understanding what people remember from that life changing moment may inform current adults (who inhabit the dual role of former children) of what to watch out for and possibly to learn some tactics to keep the myth going that wee bit longer.

### Common mistakes

It would seem that many children are more alert, attentive and vigilant than most parents would give them credit for. The following are a list of common mistakes I spotted, mistakes which still linger or haunt the memories of adults, often decades later. It would seem that parents, when manufacturing the evidence of Santa's visit, must take care not to leave clues or hints, because their offspring are frequently more eagle-eyed than Hercule Poirot at the scene of a murder.

Children seem to be quite aware of where the gifts are bought, with one person recalling that they thought seeing 'made in Taiwan' on a gift was so that you would not boast about it. Those parents who scratch a Kris Kringle autograph on even the smallest of gift tags must watch out for the piercing observational skills of their offspring – 'Santa's handwriting was the same as my Mum's' (Age 10 when they found out the truth about Santa, England). Any attempt at dressing up as Santa will be caught out if the actor under the beard doesn't truly get on board with his jolly persona: 'The Santa in the mall couldn't be real because he was grumpy' (Age 8, USA).

Parents can be caught out even at the early stages of the logistical operation – 'From an upstairs window I saw my parents bringing in Santa toys from the car' (Age 10, Ireland). And they must be careful in case they burst their own carefully constructed Santa myth in the days following the main event: 'Heard a parent mentioning returning a Christmas gift to the shop....not the North Pole' (Age 10, England).

Perhaps alcohol and Christmas really don't mix, with sobriety perhaps leading to defter gift delivery: 'Dad was tipsy when setting out the presents and disturbed my sleep, so I heard him drop them' (Age 11, England), and indeed, parents must remember not to get too carried away when munching on mince pies and carrots for Rudolph. 'I caught my parents drinking and eating what we had put out for Santa and the reindeer' (Age 10, England). Amorous parents should take note that children will often try to 'spy' on Santa when he is in the house: 'I saw my mother kissing Father Christmas under his beard'.

### Inquiring minds

From early childhood children's brains are often rapidly developing the ability to reason and problem solve (Wendelken, 2017). Many will begin to look for evidence, instead of believing in blind faith. These questions and the resultant pondering of the very foundations of the Santa myth can set some children up on the slow intrapersonal journey of tacit disbelief,

setting the scene for the transition of the child into the 'non-believer' category when they are finally confronted with the truth. They cannot argue the case for Santa, when they have already been slowly questioning his existence in their own minds for some time.

In the USA a child struggled with the equity issue as 'there was no explanation for why Santa was supplying gifts from Target to some and wealthier friends received nicer gifts'. The entry and exit of Santa, who is essentially a stranger, is a highly practical challenge, which parents need to give some thought to in order to perpetrate the myth. Children are often fixated on how Santa enters a property via a chimney, window or door: 'I knew it was impossible for such a fat man to fit down the chimney' (Age 7, USA). 'Grandpa's house had a fireplace. It was turned on and when I woke up, the presents were there but no dead Santa' (Age 3, Germany). 'I was pretty sure my parents wouldn't let a stranger in the house' (Age 5, USA). 'I had doubts about it being ok for a man to sneak into my bedroom' (Age 7, England).

One adult details his thought processes leading up to the moment of revelation: 'I once asked my dad how he would get into our house as we had an old council house gas fire. In the films I'd seen everyone had an open log fire. When I questioned my Dad, he told me Father Christmas has a special key to open the door. For some reason my little brain thought this was a ridiculous idea. It was then I realised that Father Christmas must be a fictional character, like Disney characters are, and that Father Christmas wasn't going to break into my house when I was asleep!'

Geography could be a factor for the questioning child too: 'Reindeer, snow, red suit, flying, all on a hot Aussie night!?' (Age 3, Australia). 'Nobody could tell me why children in "poor countries" didn't get Father Christmas to bring them food so there wouldn't be starvation anymore' (Age 8, England).

Parents should be ready for the time when children are on the precipice of their revelation; they will often try to put their theory to the test: 'It seemed strange that I got things I wanted without telling my mother and just writing a letter to Father Christmas. I tested it out one year and sent a secret letter. When nothing on that list arrived, my fears were confirmed' (Age 7, USA). Parents should learn not to recycle items from around the house, because it can detract from the magic somewhat: 'I counted the number of tangerines in the fruit bowl on Christmas Eve and worked out that Santa either didn't really bring presents or he was stealing one to put in each of our stockings' (Age 9, Scotland).

### **Compounding lies**

Parents should think carefully, ahead of time, about what they will do should their children confront them about Santa. It is often the case that a child with an inquiring mind will question elements of the myth, or even hear that Santa doesn't exist from friends at school. Parents should have a strategy for the moment they are questioned. Will they try to sustain the lie? Or will they dismiss concerns and say that Santa does exist?

A direct approach, explaining to a child that they are correct, and that Santa does not exist, could prevent shame and embarrassment for a child when they do finally discover the truth (Boyle & McKay, 2016). After all, as Woolley and Ghossainy (2013) found, children expect adults to tell the truth: 'A boy at school told me. I said he was lying and punched him, making his nose bleed. When my Mum was summoned to the school, I justified the punch by saying it was wrong to lie. I was 7 at the time and believed in Santa for another 3 years' (Age 10, Scotland). However, when a child of a younger age confronts parents it can put them in an invidious position: 'My sister told me that Santa was made up, but I wouldn't believe her. I ran to my parents to get them to tell her he was real' (Age 4, England).

Parents need to be mindful of the potential trauma that could be sustained when they choose to perpetrate a lie: 'When I was first told the truth, from a schoolmate, I was shocked and didn't want to believe him, I remember I asked my mother about it and she lied. At first, I was a little relieved, but it wasn't long until the facts and logic came after me and I realised it couldn't be possible. Then I went through the stages of grief for a while until I accepted the truth and faced my mother again, who this time said "Ok, it is true, but don't tell your siblings and we'll keep giving you presents".'

### **One more season**

As a psychologist, it would not usually be ethical to support the telling of lies. However, using the findings above, I would hope that parents could successfully navigate questions about Santa this year and so maintain the collective myth that is Santa Claus for one more season. The challenges we have faced in these last 12 months will surely live with many children over their lifetimes. With all the magic and hope that he brings, Father Christmas might be a vital tonic for the Grinch that was 2020. What worse horror than to bookend an already troubled year with the disclosure that Santa is not real?

Editor: So Chris, tell us what exactly happened when you found out about Santa?

Well Jon, I actually remember it really vividly. I was around nine years old and in school assembly when an older boy overheard my friends and I discussing Santa. He turned round and without malice said “it is your parents”. I couldn’t believe it and asked my parents later that day. My Dad shushed me as if I should be quiet because the TV was on (this was normal). Later that evening my mum took me into the kitchen on my own and told me the truth. She was crying – I can still remember quite clearly the tears rolling down her cheeks. I was told that I had to keep it a secret from my younger brother. It was in that small kitchen in the southern edges of Glasgow that I was inducted into the Order of the Collective Santa Myth. Christmas never really seemed as good again!

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*The Santa Survey is available at <http://www.thesantasurvey.com>*

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