

Santa, the Easter Bunny & the Tooth Fairy

Some parents, who other people think are party-poopers, want to tell children there's no such thing as the Easter Bunny, Santa and the Tooth Fairy. They want to tell the kids that Santa is a commercial construct to perpetuate capitalism, that the Tooth Fairy is just a way of giving everything a monetary value, and that the Easter Bunny has nothing to do with the Christian traditions of the Easter weekend.

Further, they think it's wrong to 'lie' to kids. Here's some stuff to ask them to consider: kids adore make-believe. Whether or not you participate, their own play and thought processes always involve imagination and making up stories. It's wrong and unfair to characterise this as 'lying'. I mean, do you open a book to read a bedtime story and preface it with 'Now remember, Benjamin Bunny isn't real, he's just a few watercolour strokes on the page and the whole story is a cheating lie'? Santa, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy are FUN for kids. Staging the scene (chewed carrots the reindeer had a go at, bunny paw-prints in icing sugar) is fun for parents. It's a win-win.

Kids gradually work out in their own time what's made up and what's real. One day they'll work out that Dorothy the Dinosaur isn't actually of the brachiosaurus family, and that when they throw Barbie across the room she's not really 'flying'. Most kids don't ask whether Santa is real or not until they're closer to 7, 8 or even 10. Sure, they hear the rumours at school, but they want to keep believing. One way to let them down gently is to say, 'Well, *I* believe in Santa, and I'm sure he'll come again this year if you want him to.' It's good to let them work it out for themselves, too, and ask them what they think. While some kids feel sad if the news is imposed on them by an older or more smartarse kid before they're ready, I've never heard of any bitter accusations of 'You lied to me about Santa' or any tantrums about it.

Older kids are often really good about 'keeping the secret' so as not to 'spoil things' for younger siblings or other kids. And I have heard about some nasty stoushes among parents when one of them has insisted on telling their own child or a bunch of kids that Santa isn't real. This is something, like religion and smacking, you can't impose on somebody else's child.

I know quite a few grown-ups, now parents themselves, who grew up without Santa because they had hippy, curmudgeonly parents who explained early and often that Santa was a 'lie'. To a person, each one who didn't have Santa when they grew up has chosen to do the Santa thing with their own kids. One mum actually paled

and clutched my arm when I asked her about it. 'Please,' she begged me. 'Please, give your kids Santa.'

Keeping Santa alive hint: Always give your kid a present that's clearly from the parents, or when they get to about 5 or 6 they'll ask why you never give them a Christmas present after they've just rifflled through a pillowcase of assorted booty from Santa.

SANTA PHOTOS ARE NOT COMPULSORY

Please respect the understandable caution or shrieky freak-out of a toddler or preschooler in a department store confronted with what to them is a gigantic stranger in a bright red suit with the sort of bizarre whiskers that haven't been in fashion since 1897, a too-loud, too-deep, scary voice saying 'Ho ho ho' and sometimes a clangy bell. I wouldn't want to sit on the guy's knee either, so don't insist. Kids have their own, inbuilt 'stranger-danger' radar and, let's face it, Santa's stranger than most.



more info on being scared of Santa

Scared of Santa: Scenes of Terror in Toyland by Denise Joyce and Nancy Watkins

A whole book of pictures of terrified tots forced to sit on Santa's knee, collected by the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper editors over the last few decades. Reactions include screaming like a banshee, back-arching, making a bold aerial bid for freedom and, of course, the old favourite, weeing.