

Believing in Santa Claus

Ottawa *Citizen*, under the headline “The Case against Santa Claus,” 18 December 2009

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Editor’s sub-headline: Extricating ourselves from tangled tales of sleighs and reindeer wouldn’t be necessary if we didn’t lie to our children in the first place

When should a child be told the truth about Santa Claus?

Don Martin wrestled with this question in a recent column in the *Citizen* (“You’ll know when it’s time for the Santa Claus talk,” 15 December). Martin says that even the birds-and-bees chat is easier.

On the one hand, parents want their children to continue to experience the magic and wonder of Christmas. They worry that telling their children that Santa Claus doesn’t exist will ruin their fun. On the other hand, parents don’t want their children to be the last in their classrooms to know. Kids can be cruel, and a child privy to the adults’ secret has a powerful weapon to use against her ignorant, gullible peers.

The problem usually resolves itself. The kids catch on without adults helping them out. (This might also be true about the birds and bees.) That a man and his wife could, let alone would, live at the North Pole is implausible enough. That that man travels the world in one night in a sleigh pulled by reindeer.... And then there’s the problem of the two or more shopping mall Santas.

Some parents try to explain away the apparent impossibilities and the pieces of disconfirming evidence. Most, though, wouldn’t want to keep up the duplicity to the point at which it involves bald-faced lying, either because they themselves are uncomfortable being liars or because they judge that their children deserve the truth. Of course, there’s also the practical reason for wanting the truth to come out, that keeping up the deception is just plain taxing.

We don’t want to lie to our children, for lying involves manipulating the person lied to and to manipulate a person is to treat that person disrespectfully. This is so even when the manipulation is in the person’s own best interest. Lying to protect a friend’s feelings is to treat that friend as less than one’s moral equal, despite the good that might come of it. That we love our children gives us a particularly strong reason not to lie to them, for we are not expressing love when we act with disrespect.

These facts should raise for parents a disturbing question. How did their children come to believe that Santa Claus exists in the first place? Perhaps they believe in Santa Claus because their parents told them a story while pretending that that story involves events that actually occurred and people who actually exist. But that means that their parents have already lied to them. Or perhaps a parent’s children believe not because the

parent out-and-out lied to them, but because he or she merely let the children believe uncritically what was in the air. Less than a lie, then—but from the child’s point of view, still deception. It’s like the time your friends stood by as you spoke and acted on an assumption they knew to be false. Good friends they were.

The problem how to disabuse a child of her belief in Santa arises only because the child was lied to or encouraged in her false belief in the first place. That original deception need never have happened.

But it is for the child’s own happiness and sense of wonder, the parent will respond. Without it, Christmas wouldn’t be the same. A little child in on the secret is like a member of a conjuror’s audience who knows how the trick is done and, so, finds it boring and pointless.

Even if this is true, the loss of magic has to be weighed against the lying and duplicity required to create and sustain the belief, as well as against the lessons the child will eventually learn about dispensing with honesty and candour.

But, of course, it isn’t true that magic must be lost. Stories are no less exciting or moving for being just stories. A tale is not improved by our believing that it recounts actual events involving real people. Parents who relate to their children tales of Santa frankly as make-believe do their children no disservice. Indeed, they do well by them. They help their children to appreciate art without undercutting the distinction between truth and fantasy. They don’t model for their children lying, deception, or other disrespectful treatment. Their example shows that being imaginative and having fun do not require us to shelve our critical attitudes.

When to tell a child the truth about Santa? Right from the start.