

Ask the Experts

Our experts discuss speaking to your child about Santa, staying stress-free during the holidays, and dieting habits in children.

When to Talk to Your Kids about Santa

Q I love baking and leaving out cookies for Santa with my son on Christmas Eve. However, I'm wondering when is the right time to tell him the truth about Santa. Will he trust me after?

School Age

A Each year during the Christmas holiday, millions of young children eagerly anticipate the irresistibly exciting time when Santa delivers colorfully wrapped presents to well behaved children. Parents also share in their children's excitement, but wonder when and how to taper their promotion of the famous tale of Santa Claus.

On one hand, telling a child not to believe in Santa seems to go against the magic and innocence that flourishes throughout childhood. For childhood is a time when fantasy plays an important role in a child's healthy cognitive and emotional development. On the other hand, fear rises that teaching children important values, such as not telling lies, will conflict with the cherished traditions of telling the tales of Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. Children do need to know that they can trust that their parents will tell them the truth. But does it really come down to nixing ole St. Nick in favor of promoting the virtues of honesty? Not necessarily.

Each family is different and so is each child. However, the tales of the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus surround the children everywhere. Inevitably, questions or discussion about the truth of Santa's existence are bound to come up. By age eight or nine, most kids figure out that Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny are not real, but

they may begin asking at a younger age. While parents may try to plan the best time to tell the truth, their child's friends or classmates may have already broken the news. Some kids relish in the idea of telling their classmates that the tooth fairy or Santa Claus don't exist, both as a way of defending against their previous dependencies and appearing more grown-up than their peers. In any case, we might feel the real truth about Santa may still be devastating for them to learn. Understanding our child's temperament and personality style can help us determine when is the right time to reveal the truth. For example, we usually know if one child in the family is much more imaginative and sensitive than his or her sibling, and we can safely conclude that he may be more likely to be crushed by the disappointing news that Santa is just a myth. Knowing this and picking up on a child's cues can justify a delay in delivering the news. However, if your child asks directly whether Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy are real, it is best to tell him the truth. You can first ask, "What do you think?" as a way to gauge their maturity and emotional readiness with the topic and as a way to follow their lead of how much they know and how much more they want to know. When the time comes for full disclosure, and the truth is told, what happens next is actually more important.

Upon hearing the truth, a child may respond with great anger and disappointment, and perhaps even prolonged and extensive wailing or crying. Depending on his or her age, the anger and disappointment could be directed at you, for leading him to believe in a story that is not true, or his profound dismay may be a result of wanting

so desperately for the Santa tale to be true. Like many well-meaning and responsive parents, you may start to back off if you see that your child is getting wildly upset in learning the real truth. Some parents actually find themselves shifting the story again, including only partial truths that Santa doesn't exist, mixed with creative fabrications that he died but his spirit is involved in bringing the gifts to children. Either way, whether the rage and disappointment is directed at you or at the reality of Santa's non-existence, it is not too terrible. Children have inborn resiliency and can withstand disappointments. Being accepting of their feelings is crucial for their development. Studies have shown that parents can actually help children build upon their natural resiliency during disappointing or even traumatic events. Reassurance during times of disappointment is also important. For example, reassuring your child that the traditions of gift-giving, the spirit of Christmas and family togetherness will not change can be very helpful. Most importantly, we provide a much larger gift to our children when we accept their feelings in the moment as opposed to trying to talk them out of them. This acceptance of their anger and disappointment at the world, and even at us, shows them how we love them through it all. It also teaches them to accept their feelings and ultimately to accept themselves. In the meantime, enjoy the fun while they are still believing.



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Headache-Free Holiday

Q When the holiday season hits, I can't really enjoy it because I'm usually stressed out. From getting the right gifts, staying on a budget, planning family gatherings, cooking for the family and attending all the different holiday parties, I start to feel less joyous and more overwhelmed. Do you have any tips on how to remain calm and stress-free during the holidays?

Parent

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