



## How to Answer a Child When She Asks, "Is Santa Real?"

Written by Rebecca Powell

I have a bone to pick with Santa Claus. The guy has some nerve pushing his way into a holiday that is supposed to be about the birth of Christ. How did this jolly old elf become indelibly linked with such a holy celebration? It is hard to be too angry with an old man who delights in giving, but what is the deal with his rewards and punishment system? After all, I have seen plenty of "naughty" children doing quite well for themselves on Christmas Day while some "nice" children barely get anything. Since I was a little girl, I have had questions about this mysterious man, and this year, I plan on finding some answers.

### Fact or Fiction?

The legend of Santa Claus is largely attributed to Saint Nicholas, a kindhearted Christian bishop who lived in the fourth century. Legend credits him with many miracles as well as the personal characteristic of selfless generosity. "It appears there was a Nicholas of Myrna, although at one time even Rome questioned his existence," says John Hoh, author of *Santa Claus: Is He for Your Child?* (Xlibris Corporation, 2001). "The only historical reference to a Nicholas of Myrna was at the Council of Nicea."

Hoh explains that many of the legends about St. Nicholas do not agree. As he was researching for his book, his intent was to delve into a study of the original Nicholas to show the giving nature and evangelical spirit of the historical man. "Unfortunately," he concedes, "where Scripture is consistent with details, Nicholas's legends are not."

Many Christian parents struggle with Santa Claus. How do you answer your child when she asks, "Is Santa Claus real?" Richard Patterson, Jr, author of *Parenting: Loving Our Children with God's Love* (Intervarsity Press, 2006) and at [www.confidentparenting.com](http://www.confidentparenting.com), says "By the time our son was 5, he noticed that there were Santas on every corner, and he began asking questions. 'Which one is the real Santa, Daddy?' That's when it's helpful to ask questions right back." Peterson recommends asking gentle questions that prod a young child's ability to reason. He suggests open-ended questions, such as, "What do you think? A real person cannot be in two different places at the same time, can he?" This allows you to acknowledge Santa as make-believe and redirect the conversation toward the real celebration - Christ.

### Naughty or Nice

No matter how desperately you try to have a Christ-centered Christmas, it is tempting to use Santa for some parenting back-up during the stressful days of hustle and bustle. My

friend Renee's eyes twinkled merrily as she watched her 4-year-old scamper off to play. "This has been the best Christmas ever," she said happily. "I struggle with Harrison all year long, but at Christmastime he turns into a perfect little angel." Renee and her husband, Bob, had encouraged an elaborate Santa fantasy for their young son, even going to far as to make reindeer hoof prints around their backyard. When I asked them what they were going to do when Harrison found out the truth, Bob just shrugged. "All I know is this is working," he said. "When we remind him that Santa won't bring him any presents if he acts up, he does exactly what we tell him to."

Patterson believes this type of parenting is unwise at best. "It's a shortcut that avoids the better (and most difficult) approach of motivating children to do the right thing because it's the right thing," he explains. "That's a parent's goal. Children are to obey because it's the right thing, because it pleases God and pleases Mom and Dad. That should be the motivation."

John Hoh agrees and reminds parents that Santa is only a temporary fix for discipline problems. "It's only effective for one month – maybe two if you use the threat that Santa will return in January to retrieve the gifts." Eventually, everyone finds out the truth about Santa Claus. A child who has been hoodwinked into good behavior will have no reason to comply with his parents when the jig is up. "Trust is broken," acknowledges Hoh. "In fact even before the truth comes out, a child can be disillusioned." Focusing on a child's outward behavior without tending to the motives of his heart will not solve discipline issues.

### **A Works-Oriented Myth**

It seems odd that Santa, a legalistic, works-oriented, earn-your-keep type of guy, is able to steal the spotlight from a Savior who offers full and free forgiveness to all sinners, not just the boys and girls. "Our children are really trying to be good," says Hoh. "And if they feel they are failing, they either become guilt-ridden or they act up even more."

Why waste your breath explaining Santa's philosophy when you could be sowing seeds of grace in your child's heart? Remember the true meaning of Christmas: "*For God so loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). The core of the Christmas message is that you received what you could never earn and what you did not deserve. "*For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift*" (Ephesians 2:8). It is the best gift of Christmas.

### **Emphasize Christ**

Whatever age your child is, the best approach for the Christmas season is to emphasize the birth of the Savior. Patterson offers the following tips for keeping the focus on Christ. "Ignore Santa and major in Jesus," he advises. He advises parents to deal with the Santa factor only when necessary and then as little as possible. Instead celebrate

Jesus together in as many ways as possible through church, traditions, devotions, giving, and mission projects.

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