

My Letter to Santas Everywhere

Dear Santa:

Several years ago, a major news network asked me go on-air to advise a well-known Santa on answering difficult questions that children might ask. As a practicing psychologist, I was thrilled to accept this foray into national media. Judging by the worried children I have been talking with recently, this year's Santas are going to need some new strategies. Given all that has happened in the nation and around the world, those carefully dressed children standing in line waiting for their photo op with Santa *REALLY* need special attention this year!

At the studio, I found I would appear on a split screen with Santa, who was being filmed remotely to join in this discussion. I'd heard the timeworn advice never to appear on stage with a child or an animal, but nothing had prepared me for Santa. Not just any Santa -- the famous one: the one in the big NYC parade ending at Herald Square. The one with a naturally curly long white beard, authentic twinkling blue eyes, and years of experience as the closest you can get to the real thing.

He was adorable and charming and had a lot more experience in front of the camera than any psychological "expert." But even this quintessential Santa had had some bad experiences, for example, the occasional chewing gum stuck in his beard, damp bottoms, crying children pushed onto his lap, and some greedy and lengthy lists. But, he admitted, some of their questions left him speechless and worried.

This month, Santa is back at department stores and malls and I am back at my office helping children and grownups struggling through this season of cheer with lives less perfect than their holiday photos. But I want to remind Santa of his powers to reassure young children that they and their feelings are valued. And that Santa really listens.

How should Santa answer difficult questions that children ask? I publish a lot and do a fair amount of public speaking, so, when invited to go on-air, I set to work preparing talking points for the interview. But as a Jewish psychologist, who had passed up the mall lines for Santa to light a menorah for eight days, what did I know about Santa? Only the basics learned at school and holiday parties. Then, miraculously, I realized I knew a lot about children in a way that Santa might not. Not an expert on Santa but actually very experienced working with children, I understood that granting material wishes is easy work compared to addressing the difficult questions children might ask a department store Santa.

Back then, children I knew were waiting to ask if Santa "could make their mommy or daddy get well," or "find a job." Could Santa "bring daddy or mommy back from Iraq?" Could Santa "stop mommy and daddy from fighting or getting divorced?" "Keep Grandma from dying?" Today, children ask the same

kinds of questions but might also ask Santa difficult questions about troubling things that they saw in the paper or heard on the news. The wishes I am hearing in my office are about young lives with desperate hopes and worries. And yes, children still ask for a toy, or even several.

Young children often experience a stage called *magical thinking* and some really believe that if only they are good enough, Santa could grant their desperate wishes. Back then, I decided to speak to Santa on air about this hopefulness and the crucial need to acknowledge these wishes and the children's feelings. With a long line of tired kids and their camera-schlepping parents, Santa has to work fast but still needs to take the time to listen and respond thoughtfully.

Feelings are at the center of my practice. Santa first needs to acknowledge children's feelings. I advise saying something like, "*That is such a special wish*" and "*I hope that wish comes true.*" Say "*You are such a thoughtful child to wish for others as well as yourself.*" In other words, let children know it is a very important wish, and you hope that things work out. But be realistic. Let them know Santa cannot deliver on these things come Christmas morning, but will remember them and hope their wish comes true.

Only then, when their feelings are validated and their wishes for life – not things – are acknowledged, can Santa shift gears back to the script and ask if there is a special something they would like to see under the Christmas tree. If the something is expensive, Santa might ask if there is also something small they want, trying for a realistic gift, neither over budget nor out of stock.

Most important, please don't say "*Ho Ho Ho and Merry Christmas!*" without really listening to each child, and for a brief moment allowing your magical power as a symbol of childhood hope to reassure them that they have been heard. Remind them of the healthy carrots and tasty cookies the reindeer will need as a way of reminding them of the need to always think of others.

Back then, my charming, sparkling co-star admitted it is not always easy work. Mostly it is a fun and jolly job, but sometimes it can be heartbreaking. I am sure that Santas everywhere have the same experience. I wonder if sometimes the department store and mall Santas take this work and the feelings that it engenders home with them. I certainly hope so – that still happens to me sometimes after all these years in practice, and the feelings are always a sign that I am really listening. The warm feeling of doing something important in the life of a child is probably what helps to keep the store and mall Santas coming back year after year.

Wishing Santas everywhere a Merry Christmas!

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