

## Will the *Real* Santa Please Stand Up?

By Rachell N. Anderson

*(Author's note: I'm aware that many readers do not celebrate Christian Christmas complete with Santa (Saint) Claus (Nicholas). Even if you don't, you probably can't avoid being affected by Christmas and Santa because of the extreme commercialism of the season. I hope the ideas and interventions I suggest below can be useful in your particular religious tradition.)*

Although Christmas is an enjoyable time for sharing love and presents, it can also be a difficult time for parents and children. The season is highly charged with emotions. Laughter and joy alternate quickly with tears and fears, and these mixed emotions surface as mixed messages.

### Sending Mixed Messages

Children can get mixed messages from parents who have expressed happiness about the coming of Christmas, who spend many hours in preparation, but scream at the child when something goes wrong. Children are often hurt by these mixed messages, unsure of what is going on. Some parents mix messages intentionally; others who do it without thinking may have no idea of their effect on their children.

Santa, a vital part of Christmas, is a common source of mixed messages. Ostensibly, Santa Claus is a "good" figure, a fat little man with a red suit and a jolly disposition. He makes us all — especially children — feel good. When Christmas eve turns into Christmas day, Santa has disappeared, unseen, leaving gift recipients awed by his ability to individualize gifts and deliver them on time. Santa is therefore hardworking, capable and generous. He gives with no strings attached.

*Almost* no strings, that is. Viewed in another way: Santa resembles the neglecting, absentee, overindulgent parent — one who is able to give everything except constant involvement. A parent of this type tends to produce children who are demanding, hostile, resentful and easily bored. These children accept gifts but have not learned to give. They may be trying to fulfill a deep longing by demanding more and more things but become easily bored because things don't satisfy the hunger to belong and to count. These painful feelings can only be healed in the presence of a warm, loving and involved person.

Children may get other mixed messages from Santa. Parents who use threats to control children, who pit siblings against each other in hot competition to motivate, and bribe children to gain cooperation, often suggest that Santa "knows when you are good or bad." These messages suggest that Santa is able to control, belittle, moralize and act as the grand inquisitor, invading children's privacy.

### The Other Side of Santa

On the other hand, we *need* Santa to help us to justify our need to give as well as receive. If that is the purpose of Santa, we must tell our children by our words and our deeds. We must unmix the messages. We may be able to do that by examining several different perspectives:

1. Parents who lie to their children run the risk of losing their trust.
2. Santa is a part of the magic of giving.
3. Christmas is Jesus' birthday and the festivities must be kept in perspective.
4. Children should not be told that the Santa is responsible for the presents under the tree. Parents who work hard to provide a bit of joy for their children should get the credit.
5. Children should be told the truth — any child can soon figure out the impossibility of a single humanoid plunging down untold millions of chimneys in only a few hours.

## **Keeping the Magic without Telling a Lie**

Commercial Santas are plentiful during the Christmas season, complete with treats for any child bold enough to sit on their knees. They will speak children's Christmas wishes loud enough for investigating parents to hear. It is possible for parents to take their children to these stores for a visit with Santa while maintaining honesty. These visits hold a sense of magic for children who can take advantage of the look, feel and smell of real people acting in Santa's stead with little need to internalize fear. Parents may then tell their children the story of St. Nicholas and let them make their own interpretations.

## **Finding a Different Approach to Christmas**

There are other things parents can do to involve their children in both the giving and receiving of the holiday:

- Help children make a Christmas list of the things to be bought.
- Limit the amount and cost based on what they can afford to spend.
- Help children to make appropriate choices of toys and clothing based on age and need.
- Help children make alternative choices in case certain presents can't be found. Use store catalogs to help children make these alternative choices.
- When it is time to shop, take along lists made by each family member and buy from them. This teaches children a variety of skills including how to value others. (There is no real need for the element of surprise — it is more fun to get what you want.)
- Parents can bake a cake and sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus to bring home the message of the holiday's origins. This way, children are taught the significance of the holiday.

Throughout the process of celebrating in this manner, a great deal of cooperation and togetherness is taking place. When Christmas is handled in this manner, the lines of communication between parents and children are not clogged by mixed emotional messages. An open honest approach produces maximum communication with a minimum of hassle during the season. Here, family members can feel good about themselves and are encouraged to reach out to others. Maybe this will allow the spirit of Santa to last all year.

You have just read an article based on Adlerian Psychology. NASAP, the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, was founded in 1952 by a small group of Adlerians under the leadership of Rudolf Dreikurs. Their purpose was to promote growth and understanding of Adlerian Psychology, the work of Alfred Adler, and effective approaches to living based on his philosophy. In the early 1900's, Adler began addressing such crucial issues as equality, democracy, parenting, education, the influence of birth order, life style, and the holism of individuals. Today Adlerian concepts are being used creatively in education, community programs, business and the arts, as well as in counseling, therapy and clinical practice. NASAP membership includes educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, parents, business people, community organizations and other interested people. If you are interested in knowing more about NASAP, Adlerian Psychology or Adlerians practicing in your area, please call or write us, we'd love to hear from you:

**NASAP**  
North American Society of Adlerian Psychology  
65 East Wacker Place, #1710  
Chicago, IL 60601-7298  
(312)629-8801  
FAX (312)629-8859  
email: [nasap@msn.com](mailto:nasap@msn.com)

**Permission is granted to copy this article, as long as all the information on both sides of the page is included; no part of this handout may be used for commercial purposes.**