

WHAT SHOULD WE TELL OUR CHILDREN ABOUT SANTA?

As our children grew up one of the most asked questions were, who is Santa Claus? Santa is such a popular figure in our culture that we cannot ignore him, or the questions about him.

For my wife and I it was important not to lie to our children when they were little, because it would break trust when they grew up and cause confusion. Our concern was, if we tell them that Santa was real, knew our behaviour and give gifts according to how we behave, only to one day when they are older tell them that Santa was fake, and not a real person, we could really confuse them. So, here's what we decided we would tell our children about Santa:

One, there was a real historical person named Saint Nicholas, and his life story was combined with numerous myths from a variety of cultures to create Santa Claus. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, he was born in the third century, Nicholas' life started in a small village in what is now Turkey. His devout Christian parents were wealthy, but tragically died when he was a boy. Nicholas used his inheritance to help the poor, especially children, including hanging socks for them filled with presents and treats. On one occasion, he helped three poor Christian sisters who were unable to pay their wedding dowry. Facing a life of prostitution, Nicholas purchased their freedom.

Nicholas was a godly Christian leader appointed as the Bishop of Myra, a port city that the apostle Paul had previously visited (Acts 27:5–6). The vital Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) that defended the deity of Jesus Christ had Nicholas in attendance defending Jesus as God. After dying on December 6, 343, Nicholas was canonized as a saint and gifts were given each year on the anniversary of his death in tribute to his generous life.

Two, Dutch news explains that the story of St. Nicholas combined with other folklore elements became Sinterklaas, a gift-giving figure who travels from Spain to bring gifts during the first week of December. Dutch colonialists began coming to America in the 1600s, bringing traditions that were slowly added to other Christmas traditions. Somewhere along the way in America, Sinterklaas became Santa Claus.

A similar process gave us the name Kris Kringle, often called Santa's real name or alter ego. Vivian Bricker explains in an iBelieve.com article how Kris Kringle comes from the word Chrstkindl, German for "Christ child." Over time, the pronunciation changed to Kris Kringle. Martin Luther and other Protestant Reformers seeking to bring the gospel back into Christmas celebrations suggested the idea that the Christ child brings children gifts at Christmas, which eventually developed into its own tradition.

Other elements crept in over time. Library of Congress writer Stephen Winick reports that illustrator Thomas Nast provided the definitive Santa Claus image of a man wearing a red fur coat in the 1800s. According to Smithsonian Magazine, Nast's 1866 picture of Santa in Harper's Weekly also popularized the idea he lived at the north pole.

Not far from the North Pole, there was a Siberian myth that a holy man who could fly would come down people's chimneys to leave them hallucinogenic mushrooms that Reindeer also liked to eat. This may explain the myth of flying reindeer, and Santa travelling from the North Pole (near Siberia) to come down the chimney to leave gifts. These stories were brought to America by Dutch immigrants, and by the 1900's, stores began having Santa Claus present for holiday shopping, and children began sending him letters to the North Pole.

In summary, we tried to help our children know the difference between the real and godly Saint Nicholas, and the other pretend stories that people made up, dressing up like Santa Claus for fun.