A scroll with a floral border and the title 'Christmas Through the Eyes of Santa'. The scroll is unrolled, showing a light beige, textured surface. The title is written in a red, serif font. The scroll is decorated with a floral border in the top right and bottom left corners, featuring red berries, green leaves, and small yellow flowers. The scroll is set against a white background with a soft shadow.

Christmas Through the Eyes of Santa

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1. Why Through the Eyes of Santa?



I love telling stories, especially about Santa visits. Whenever I share a Santa story, people smile and often tell me, “You should write a book.” My response is always, yes, someday I will write the book, “Christmas Through the Eyes of Santa.” I think now it is time. Not time to just write a book, but time to share some of the many stories I have collected from over 30

years of wearing the big red suit. It is time to write the book and help you, the reader, embrace both the simplicity and complexity of Santa. As I captured my thoughts and stories and gathered the photos and children's wish lists spanning 30 years, I laughed and I cried, remembering not only the children and our visits, but the inherent and awesome responsibility of being Santa.

Looking a bit like Santa and encouraging that likeness with a full white beard, long moustache with the ends twirled up, and often wearing a red shirt and with my glasses perched on the end of my nose, I have been truly blessed. No matter what time of year, wherever I go, or whatever clothes I am wearing, children look at me with recognition and smiling delight. Not just children either. Adults often look at me the same way. They look at me with big smiles and a twinkle in their own eyes! Even in a place full of strangers, most people call me Santa. Faces light up and laughter ensues when I respond with a big smile plus a heartfelt and booming Ho! Ho! Ho!

How did I go from just an ordinary person to becoming Santa for so many? How did I make my hair and beard white at Christmas? When did my laughter change to always a robust Ho! Ho! Ho! every time I laugh? Some of my stories will help

explain. I have lived with the Santa image outside and inside for the past thirty years and can think of no better life.

Why this book, "Christmas Through the Eyes of Santa"? There are countless books, stories, and movies about Santa. This book is different. It is not a repeat of what we have already read or been told. This book is not a story about Santa. It started as just a collection of stories from my experiences over the years as Santa. Collectively they are more than just stories. They are a tale needing to be told. As you read, I invite you to remember times when you were young and still, "believing." I invite you to read these stories as if you are seeing them through your own eyes.

I encourage you to keep an open mind and remember your own young and formative years and your life today. Did Christmas and a visit with Santa at those young ages affect your life today? How have your youthful experiences with Santa affected you? Have your experiences influenced your children, your grandchildren? Later, I will share a wonderful story about shoes that helps exemplify the lasting impact we have on others.

Wherever possible, I will try to translate the stories into insights that I hope will bring you pause. Think about your own experiences. Not just from when you were young or guiding your children through the line to see Santa, but maybe gained from experiencing the wonderment and love of bringing Santa into their lives all year long. Then imagine how your Santa experiences and lessons you learned affect your personal and work life today.

Imagine you are Santa sharing these stories.

2. Who is Santa?



Who is the most recognized individual on earth?

A young boy was very excited about seeing Santa. We were having such a fun visit. After hearing his Christmas list, I asked if he would like to try on Santa's hat. His eyes grew wide as he thoughtfully and quickly answered, "Yes!" Then I gently

placed on his head my red hat trimmed in white fur. I

do not think I had ever seen a such a big smile that seemed to radiate from his face and whole body. He looked around and exclaimed, "Look at me. I am wearing the most famous hat in the world!" How close was he in his claim that Santa's hat is the most famous in the world? That young man's statement was full of truth and wisdom. Is Santa's hat the most recognized hat in the world, and if so, is Santa the most recognized person in the world?

Thomas Nast, in 1863, created an illustration of Santa complete with a brimless hat trimmed in fur. That style hat was known as a pileus hat. Usually, it was a brimless hat made from felt, popular in ancient Eturia, Greece, Pannonia, and other nearby areas.

When did the red color start? The legends vary, but the original St. Nicholas of Myrna was reported to wear a red robe. In the 1860's the U. S. Confection company used an illustration from Thomas Nast to advertise Santa Claus Sugar Plum candy. The Coca Cola company also used the color red in their depictions of Santa in their 1930s advertising campaigns. There are also some thoughts of Santa's red representing the blood of Christ and white as His purity. This is similar to the stories about the modern candy canes that began in the 17th century as straight white candy sticks and developed later into the now common candy cane.

A man named Nicholas was born circa 280, towards the end of the Roman Empire, in Patara, Lycia, an area that is part of present-day Turkey. He lost both of his parents as a young man and reportedly used his inheritance to help the poor and sick. A devout Christian, he later served as bishop in Myra, a city that is now called Demre. There are no pictures of Nicholas.

Many stories have been found about his giving money to poor families. One popular story is about him giving money to a family so their daughters would have an inheritance and be able to marry. Other stories mention leaving goodies or coins in children's shoes (*the stockings were hung by the chimney with care...*). Nicholas did not write a book. Nor did he live at the North Pole wearing a big red suit or ride in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer.

Did Nicholas become a Saint? The process of canonization (formal church recognition as a saint) did not begin until about 933AD. Before then, unofficially recognizing persons who were exceptional in their religious beliefs and practices was common as formal religions were established.

The stories and legend of Nicholas actively helping others, especially children, grew widely within religious, and probably non-religious, groups of people. About 700 years after his death, Nicholas was officially recognized as a saint in the Christian religion.

Where did the name Santa come from? There are over 7,000 languages on earth, and probably over 7,000 different ways to say Santa. Here are just a few: Santa, Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas, Saint Nick, Christkind (German), Kris Kringle or Sinnterklaas (Dutch), Pere Noel (French), Papa Noel (Spanish), Babbo Natale (Italy), Ded Moroz (Russia), Noel Baba (Turkey), Swiety Mikotaj (Poland), Hoteiosho (Japan). They are all the same person, or rather who that person represents.

How did I begin by role as Santa.

In the early 1990s, I was invited by my local church to put on the big red suit and appear as Santa for a Sunday evening family event. I never knew why Pastor Ed asked me but being a bit of a showman since a young age, I had no hesitation accepting the role for one evening. I put on a wig, fake beard, black boots, and a big red Santa suit. At the time, I was Executive Director of the Denver Habitat For Humanity. Wanting to keep the focus on Habitat, not myself, I had shaved off my then 20-year-old full red beard and cut my hair short. On the appointed evening,

after Santa knelt and prayed over the baby Jesus in the manger, I stood up and exclaimed, Ho! Ho! Ho! The congregation responded with a few chuckles that quickly grew to uproarious laughter. Why? I did not understand. Were they laughing at me? Yes, they were even pointing at me. I felt so awkward. The suit and false beard were not the best quality, but that would not cause the intensity of laughter I was hearing. Then, I discovered the cause for laughter. Santa's pants had fallen down! They rested on the tops of the large Santa boots topped with white fur. Fortunately, the big red coat covered down to almost my knees, so there was nothing obscene. But just imagine what the Congregation saw. Santa with a big bright smile, wearing a store-bought, almost comical beard and a big red wrinkled suit, big black boots topped with white fur, and in-between the suit and boots, what looked like two skinny chicken-like legs with knobby knees! That is why they were laughing! I was so embarrassed.

After I went home, I shared my catastrophic experience with my wife. I told her that the next time I put on the big red suit as Santa I will wear suspenders clamped firmly to the pants so they will not fall down. She asked, "Oh, are they were planning another event?" I answered, "No, but I think there are going to be many more Santa visits."

3. Santa and Religion



Santa represents a Christian holiday. Christmas is the traditional celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the fundamental core of Christianity. But does Santa go beyond the Christian world?

I once visited a friend in a hospital, wearing my big red suit. Yes, it was lots of fun with the patients and staff. However, as I was leaving several visitors approached me with great emotion and motioned for me to follow them. I did not understand their language, but their intent quickly became evident. They ushered me into a room with a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, and several other family members gathered solemnly around his bed. It was clear that the young man's condition was serious, it was a brain injury recovery unit. I quickly came to realize that they saw me as a religious figure, not as a jolly old elf. They saw Santa with reverence of a religious figure, a priest wearing a white collar. I then understood that they were asking me to pray over the young man. I reverently bowed and clasped my hands as I leaned over him and prayed. It was not an act, I honestly prayed. I do not think they understood my words, but they clearly understood that I was praying. I was awestruck with their faces of relief as I prayed. I never knew his condition or prognosis, but I do know that God was with us that evening and the gift of Santa helped that family in their time of need.

4. Gifts and Promises



Christmas!"

For as long as I can remember, I have heard, "Christmas is now all about commercialism, just selling things," or "What happened to the true meaning of Christmas?" At a glance, it appears to be some truth to statements and questions such as these, so in this chapter we will explore the world of Gifts & Promises. The children I meet will always hear Santa say, "I promise you something very special for

I would not try to guess how many times I have heard from children of all ages, "For Christmas I want..." or "Santa, here is my list!" But I have never once felt on the receiving end of an advertising campaign. Do the children who visit with Santa just repeat what they heard? Yes, we are all motivated by what we see and hear, including from formal advertising campaigns. We are directly influenced by our learned behavior and our innate sense of right and wrong. We are also consciously influenced by what others possess and what they tell us they have or want, or even what they tell us we want. "Don't you want a new doll for Christmas?"

These direct and subtle influences are not just at Christmas. "Eat your vegetables if you want desert," "Just take three more bites and you can go play." Most children have heard these phrases. Are these similar to the messages we hear as adults? "Work hard to get what you want," or "Buy three and get one free."

The Bible states that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7) and that Jesus taught it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35)

I have never promised a specific gift for a child. What would happen if a specific gift for Christmas morning were already known and expected? I fear that would spoil their Christmas. It would not be a gift but instead just a reward for a specific

action. Christmas gifts are more than a reward for just eating all your dinner. Christmas gifts are in a category all their own. They are a holistic approach to positive behavior, a year long invitation for children to dream the results of appropriate behavior.

Being on, "The Nice List."

5. Nice & Naughty Lists

*"He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake!"*



I love the giggles from children, and especially from the grown-ups, when I remark, "I was checking my list today, I checked it twice..." This is a reference to the song, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," written in 1934 by Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie. "He's making a list, He's checking it twice, He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice." Do those words suggest a possible second-chance, or redemption from bad behavior?

The song tells children that Santa Claus is always watching. The children are learning that the world will judge them by their actions, not their desires.

Yes, the lists do exist, maybe not printed out at the North Pole, but certainly they are present in all our lives as we are judged by others and ourselves.

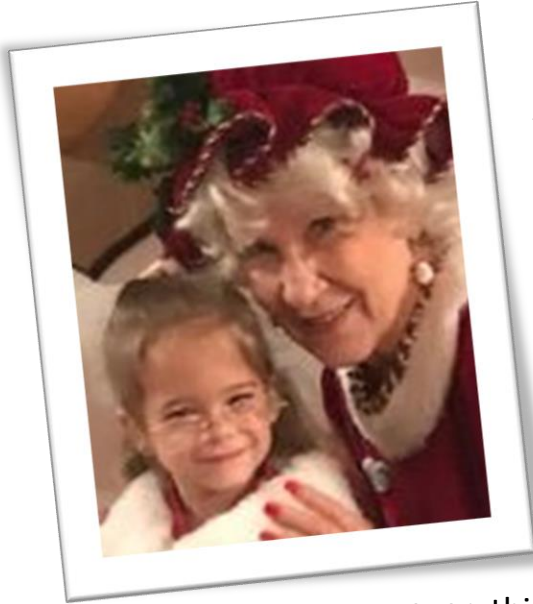
According to Dutch customs, children were supposed to leave hay and a carrot out for Santa's reindeer and were informed that if they were not good all year long, they would be left a bundle of sticks instead of sweets as punishment for bad behavior.

During our visits, if the Naughty & Nice list topic does not come up, we bring it up. Santa and Mrs. Claus will ask the children what they should do to stay on the Nice List. It is amazing to hear their positive answers. "Be nice, "Do not argue with my sisters and brothers, "Share with others, "Finish my homework, "Eat all my vegetables, "Mind my manners, Listen to my parents." It is so good to hear those affirmations of positive behavior. We always reinforce their answers. When our visit is virtual visit, we add their words onto the screen later, so they will always have their own words from their childhood.

“Santa, If I am not good this year, will I get coal?”

Our neighbor Leah told me about her sister when they were young. Their mother told the girl that she had been bad, was on the Naughty List, and would only receive coal for Christmas. The sister asked if she could at least stand in the driveway and talk to Santa. A cute memory, but sad too. I comfort children and tell them that Santa wants to help every child be on the Nice List. Santa will help every child understand good behavior and redemption is always the goal, not coal. I explain that every child is a good child and will receive a very special present that they will love. I like to always, “Accentuate the positive,” as the song goes.

6. Mrs. Claus



After several of my first Santa visits, one of the local children's schools invited Santa to visit and told me that Mrs. Claus would be there. She was great! When I came home, I asked my wife if she had a red dress, a white wig, and desire to be Mrs. Claus. With a twinkle in her eyes, she immediately said yes! She is so attentive and has great ideas. If my moustache needs a little tweak, or a child's dress needs smoothing she will simply make those adjustments. If there is someone about to take a photo, she will politely ask them to wait until

everything is perfect. I love it when she asks the children to gather in front of us, sit on the floor and listen to stories and sing songs. The children love her!

One great compliment and testament to Mrs. Claus came one year during a private home visit. I noticed a group of parents standing off to the side watching us. I heard one of them remark, "I think this is the real Santa and Mrs. Claus. Look at their clothes, they are real hand-made clothes, not just costumes. Everyone in their group smiled and quickly nodded in agreement. I smiled with delight as I watched them all looking with their child-like wide eyes. They looked just like a group of young children believing with all their hearts.



7. Preparing for a Visit



When I started to wear the big red suit, my beard was distinctly red. My hair was light brown/reddish. Not the right look for Santa. So I started looking for hair dye to make my red beard white. Apparently, I was the only one who wanted to do so, because I could find no products to make red hair white. I called and left a message with MGM Studios, thinking they would know. I received a call back from a gentleman who was the head of makeup for MGM, wow! He explained to me that bleaching red hair would probably just make it yellow. He recommended a theatrical hair colorant that would work. I would spend hours before each visit carefully combing in the special product, almost like white paint. As it dried later it would start to flake off, looking a bit like dandruff. It kept Mrs. Claus busy gently brushing the powder off my red suit and off children's Christmas outfits.

When it comes time to leave the children and end our visit, Mrs. Claus will usually make the announcement, with a comment or two about needing to back to the North Pole to make more toys. Santa will then ask if the children would like to watch us as we fly away in the sleigh. "Yes!" they all scream with delight and anticipation. Even the parents pay attention with puzzled looks on their faces. Santa will then lead the children to a window or rear porch to watch, explaining to them that the sleigh will go very fast, and they must watch with their eyes and their hearts to see us. I tell them we will be waving, and Rudolph's nose will be glowing red. I ask that when the first sees us, shout out so everyone else will see. As the visits continue year after year, we ask if they saw us flying away on the sleigh. The answer is always the same, "Yes Santa! We saw you waving and the sleigh and the reindeer and Rudolph's shiny red nose!" One year a family had a drone with a red light that appeared flying from the roof off into the distance. I think some of the parents believed. I can also just imagine those parents controlling the drone and the childlike looks on their faces and fun in their hearts.

8. The Reindeer



From my childhood, I would always leave carrots out for the reindeer. Knowing from experience that most children know this tradition. I probably learned from my parents (my Santa) that sometimes Rudolph does not eat the whole carrot. He just nibbles on the edges. So, when you look Christmas morning, if you see a carrot that has been nibbled on, you will know that Rudolph was here at your home! As I grew out of my “believer” years, I thought my parents simply nibbled on the carrot, but lately I am starting to think it really was Rudolph.

Are the reindeer boys or girls?

I remember a group of about 20 children sitting in front of us with rapt attention. One of the youngest children, probably three or four years old, asked me if the reindeer were boys or girls. What a great question. Knowing I had to answer quickly and with authority, my mind was racing. What information is common knowledge about reindeer? I knew that male reindeer usually shed their antlers before Christmas, but young children probably do not know that fact. How could I be appropriate in my answer and be, “politically” correct about gender? I knew that it was common to talk about Rudolph as, “he”. So I answered the question with, “I know Rudolf is a boy, but I do not know about the others? I never asked them, It does not make a difference to me!” I also told them that the reindeer are all about the same height as you children. How do the reindeer fly? I will talk more about the answer later in this book.

9. Parades, Firetrucks, Helicopters, & Snowcats



Everyone love a parade, especially when Santa is the star attraction! From small to large parades the excitement is always the same. Watching through the eyes of Santa as the children and adults look up with wonder in their eyes as Santa waves to each one, is an experience beyond words.

It is truly magical to ride on top of a firetruck with lights flashing and to wave gracefully and loudly exclaim to the crowds Ho! Ho! Ho! Because there is usually a spotlight on Santa and Mrs. Claus, we are usually blinded by the light but must continue to look as if we can see everyone. Eye contact is so important. I suppose this same is true of actors and musicians on stage, with bright stage lights in their eyes.

We learned from our first ride on a firetruck that climbing on and off is much easier said than done, especially when hundreds of children and parents are watching and taking pictures. There are no platforms on the top for standing and waving, just ladders and other firefighting tools. The firefighters are always so polite as they move equipment around so we can stand and wave and assist us onto the top. Climbing off a firetruck is even more difficult. Maybe it is easy for the professionals who ride them every day, but not for us. Once again, the professionals are always so polite and helpful to Mrs. Claus first. Santa will usually climb down to the rear bumper (they are huge and way off the ground), then turn

to the crowd and with great and robust fanfare, jump off to the ground to the delight of everyone watching! We have been on many firetrucks, from antique to modern engineering marvels to a vintage red Ford pickup truck. Usually, the driver will allow several children to ride in the cab and experience the unique excitement of riding, “with Santa and Mrs. Claus”. One year, we were invited into a firehouse that still had a fire pole. Mrs. Claus and I both took turns sliding down the firepole, what a thrill!

Helicopters have no reindeer, and they are not as fast as the sleigh, but they are still lots of fun. When I climbed aboard, I asked about the wind from the rotors after we landed. I was told that while on the ground the pilot could tilt the rotor blades and there would be only a slight breeze, and he was right! As we prepared to take off, it was fun to listen as the pilot talked on his radio asking permission to take off with a very special passenger on board – Santa! The tower asked, “repeat that please.” The pilot confirmed that indeed Santa was on board. The tower immediately granted access. What fun we all had. We took off, flew up into the air, flew to the other side of the helicopter factory, then landed in front of all the employees and their families and friends. I departed the helicopter with only a slight breeze in the air and had a wonderful visit with everyone.

Santa still plays in the snow, but a few years ago he stopped jumping off extreme mountain cliffs on his white snowboard and wearing red hard-shell racing boots. What colors would you expect!

For several years, we had the opportunity to ride in a snowcat at a major ski resort. Snowcats are the machines that go up and down incredibly steep, snow-covered hills, grooming the snow for the next day’s guests. The snowcats rode in were enormous outside, with five-foot wide treads and a tiny cabin on top. The driver’s young child always rode with us, what a delight for all of us. It is amazing how steep a hill those machines can go up and down. Going up we were pressed flat against our backs. Then, going down, our feet were planted on the dashboard and we looked almost straight down through the windshield! Thanks to our very capable driver, and his son, we made it safely up and down, and climbed over the treads to the joyous waiting crowds.

Whatever the conveyance, when we arrive, Santa always holds his arms out and in a booming voice that reaches the far edges of the assembled crowd, he asks, “Who has a hug for Santa!” The first time I asked this in a large crowd I was a bit nervous as hundreds of children gathered around me as close as they could. As I

felt pushed in all directions, I quickly learned to just trust the children and sway with the crowd. Another great lesson for all of us, young and old.

10. Cookies & Milk



“What is your favorite kind of cookie, Santa?”

“You know, my favorite cookies are the ones you left out for me! The cookies you left out last year were great! Did you set those out for me?” Then I ask what their favorite cookies are. This is part of encouraging children to make choices.

A few years ago, I started telling children how much I loved their cookies, and that I gobbled them right up. But when I returned to the North Pole, I could only tell Mrs. Claus, how wonderful the cookies were at your home. Then I exclaim to the children, “I have an idea! How about next year when you set out the cookies for me, make an extra little plate with cookies for Mrs. Claus. Write her a note, telling her how much you love her. I will make sure to take those cookies back to the North Pole so she can enjoy them too! “Do you think that is a good idea?” I believe this helps to teach and reinforce the importance of creating ways to share with others even when we have no direct contact with them. The older children usually have the same idea before I make a suggestion. When that happens, I compliment them on how clever they are they have always been so thoughtful and caring of others.

I do not know where this idea came from, but I now hear from the children that they did in fact set out some cookies for Mrs. Claus. I hope this becomes one of the Christmas traditions in your home.

11. Talking With Your Children About Santa



At about age nine, after Christmas, my daughter, Jasmine, told me her friends told her there was no Santa. I do not remember any profound, soul-searching discussion, just that she knew. The following year, on Christmas eve, my daughter watched me write the note from Santa to be left after taking the cookies. Her eyes welled up with tears as she asked, that was *you* who wrote those notes? Did *you* leave the Christmas presents every

year? I just spoiled Christmas for my daughter. We talked and I reminded her that the year before she told me that she found out there was no Santa. Again, with tears flowing, she told me she did not believe her friends but wanted me to think she was a big girl. I knew then that I was officially the world's worst parent. Somehow, I regained my parental strength. I explained to her that yes, Santa does not fly through the sky and bring you presents, yes, it was me every year. I told her that for me Santa was my parents and when she grows up she will become the Real Santa. I explained that there are millions of Santas. The, her tears stopped. Her face lit up.

I was a single parent for my daughter from ages 3-10.

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12. Questions Children Ask Santa



I wish I had a record of every question I have ever been asked. Below, I will share some of the more common, plus a few that amazed me with their inquisitiveness and the logic that only a young person can comprehend.

How does the sleigh fly? Does Rudolph really have a red nose?

How do you go down the chimney? What if we do not have a chimney? We will be at Grandma's house, how will you find us? How do you watch us all year long? Does Rudolph really have a Red Nose? Most of these questions require an answer that is not possible with adult logic and reasoning, but they are real questions that often only a young mind can ask.

How do the reindeer fly. My answer to this question is similar to answers to many of the other questions that grown up logic and science cannot answer. I usually answer by saying, "That is a great question! I do not know how the reindeer fly. That is part of the magic of Christmas. We just need to believe. Believe with our hearts and our minds."

How do you watch us all year long?

One year, mid-summer and I was in a local store, dressed in non-red clothes. A young child walked up to me and with an all-knowing voice, looked into my eyes and said, "Now I know how you watch us all year Santa, you just put on regular clothes." I love the simple logic of children. No adult would ever look at me in regular clothes and make that statement as simply a matter of fact. And now

often, when seeing children and I am not wearing my red suit, I just repeat what that one child shared with me. Children look at the person, not what they are wearing. This lesson helps us to understand why many children are afraid of Santa, they just do not recognize the person, but when the children visit the same Santa year after year, they look past the suit and look directly at Santa. Once, at a gas station in my community, a little girl in the car next to mine looked out the window and said, "I know you." Then the mother looked at me, and with the same childlike recognition said, "Yes, we visit with you every year at the Holiday Walk in Evergreen." Yes, I exclaimed, you have come to visit me every year! It is such a joy to see the happiness on faces I meet.

Elf on a shelf.

The first Elf on the Shelf was in 2005. Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell self-published the book "The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition." Along with the book was a special box with a small Elf inside. Many children now have their own version of Elf on the Shelf in their homes. He comes at the start of Christmas time and quietly watches the children and reports their Nice or Naughty behavior back to Santa. The children cannot touch the Elf. If they do, the elf will disappear, there will be less presents, or lots of other terrifying results, like coal, but more about that later. I do not believe in making any child afraid. The Elf is an opportunity for the parents to reinforce positive consequences of a child's behavior. I encourage the children to love their Elf, do not be afraid, tell the Elf about your good behavior and they will tell Santa how good you are, so you can be on the Nice List!

Do children ever argue and fight with each other?

This is from what my parents taught me about arguing or fighting. They told us when we were arguing or fighting to stop, look at each other right in the eyes, tell them you are sorry you are fighting, say I love you, give each other a big hug, and go back to playing! When I told my Dad (my Santa) what I was teaching children, he told me that when I and my sisters would argue, he gave us that same advice. I did not remember my parents saying that to us, but obviously their words affected me in a profound way. Interesting how I learned it from my parents, my Santa and Mrs. Claus, and have now shared it with thousands of other families.

Here is a story that demonstrates how powerful that simple lesson can be. After we arrived to visit with three families gathered for our visit, it was painfully obvious that one of the married couples were unhappy with each other. It seemed that maybe they were there together only because of their children. After Santa led the children through this lesson, Mrs. Claus, in her infinite wisdom, said

aloud, "It also works for grownups." The children all encouraged their parents to join them by starting with a big hug. The one couple barely touched as they lightly embraced. Then the couple faintly said, "I'm sorry I am fighting." Then slowly, as they said to each other, "I love you," their embrace warmed into a hug as they stood looking into each other's eyes. Sometimes we need to work a little harder to speak out with our voices and hearts to embrace true Christmas magic of love.

13. Social Impact of Santa



When children are young, they are well protected by their parents and family. Always within reach, children are encouraged to stay close to the parents, and often told, do not talk to

strangers. Then suddenly, it is the Christmas season. For perhaps the first time in their lives, their parents tell them to go to those two strangers, sit with them, talk with them, love them and tell them what you want for Christmas. Very different from, "Do not talk to strangers" as parents all too often instill in their child's mind.

A visit with Santa may be one of the most important moments and lessons in a child's social development. We are very careful to observe the children before they visit with us. If a child appears to be shy or even afraid, and who wouldn't be - Santa looks larger than life, with a big white beard, a big hat, and big fur trim on their clothes! Santa is careful to not make eye contact. Instead, as their parents hold their child, Mrs. Claus will walk over and gently talk to them, with her amazing gift of calming their fears. Usually, the child will allow Mrs. Claus to hold them as she walks a few steps and turns to face the parents. Not looking at Santa. If the child is relaxed enough, Santa will walk up behind the child and step forward just enough for the perfect photo, without tears or fear, then he steps back out of sight. Most often though, when the child senses no fear, Santa may simply cuddle the child into his arms and everyone relaxes in that happy moment and their child's first visit with Santa is captured in their hearts and by the camera.

This next story talks about how a person's economic status affects their excitement at Christmas time. I was in a local big box store when I saw a local parent with several shopping carts loaded with toys. I knew the gentleman from our annual visits with his wife and two young daughter's in their home. We knew from our visits they were generous in decorating their home every year. I asked if

the toys were all for their two young daughters. He explained to me that no, he was one of many local residents who donated gifts, bicycles, computers, food, and money to be given to the families during an annual event hosted by a local charity organization for less-economically endowed families. At the event that year, as children were busy with crafts and visiting with us for photos and candy canes, one young man sat with us. When I asked if they had decorated their home, he explained that they lived in their pickup truck. No camper. He told me he slept in the back of the truck and could look up and see the stars. Holding back my tears, he was as enthusiastic about Christmas as any child I could imagine. Their economic status did not deter his heart and love. The next afternoon, during a visit hosted by an upscale business, one of the parents, a dad, sat down on Santa's lap. He was laughing as his family and friends watched. When I asked what he wanted for Christmas, with the same excitement and joy on his face as the boy the day before, he asked if his new Bentley auto could arrive before Christmas day. Thinking he was just joking, I asked if could have his old Bentley. He answered, again with a giggling, child-like voice, he told me, "No I already sold that one!" What was the lesson I learned? That no matter a person's economic wealth, their age, or apparent "position" in life, the joy of Christmas does not judge nor discriminate.



One year, as I was standing in a long checkout line a grocery store, without my big red suit. A young boy with his mother stood behind me, and the young man was clearly not in a good mood. I lowered my glasses to the end of my nose and turned to him exclaiming Ho! Ho! Ho! He said nothing and held tightly to his mother, still

looking at me. His mother explained that he was tired and ready for his nap. Then I suggested that if we could take a nap together then maybe he would be ready to play. As he listened, I simply laid down on the floor and he laughed and joined me. We talked for a few seconds, then I exclaimed, "It's morning time!" With delight, laughter, and joy on both of our faces we jumped up! Everyone in line laughed and applauded the young man. Always take time to talk to a child, literally at their level.

A few years ago we were contacted by an administrator of the local high school. She shared with us that the graduating seniors were asked to create a photo collage of their lives. Our community is somewhat remote and relatively stable, located about 30 minutes away from a major city. For most children their

surrounds are somewhat consistent. Same house, same community, same parents, same siblings. But their friends change with each new school year and emotions and logic are swirling about their heads without much stability. When the school displayed the photo collages in the hallways, they realized that 75% included one or more photos of the senior with the same, never-changing Santa and Mrs. Claus who were obviously an important and stable part of their lives.

14. In closing, until
next Christmas!

