

### Q1 Synthesis

#### Suggested reading and writing time—55 minutes

It is suggested that you spend 15 minutes reading the question, analyzing and evaluating the sources, and 40 minutes writing your response.

Note: You may begin writing your response before the reading period is over.

The majority of Americans celebrate Christmas either as a secular or religious holiday. Central to the American celebration of the holiday is the legend of Santa Claus, who lives at the North Pole and delivers toys to children around the world on Christmas Eve, flying through the air on a magical sled pulled by flying reindeer. Some argue that Santa is emblematic of a commercial and materialistic emphasis that has replaced the true, religious meaning of the holiday. However, for millions of Americans, belief in the existence of Santa symbolizes the innocence of childhood and the joy of the Christmas season. However, belief in Santa comes with an inevitable moment of discovery that his existence is a fiction, and many parents worry about the psychological impact on children when they discover that Santa is not, in fact, real.

Carefully read the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources to develop your position on the extent to which new parents today should encourage a belief in Santa Claus.

Source A (Woolley)

Source B (Turner and Kamenetz)

Source C (survey)

Source D (Brown)

Source E (Johnson)

Source F (Church)

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
- Select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support your line of reasoning. Indicate clearly the sources used through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Sources may be cited as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the description in parentheses.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

**Source A**

Woolley, Jacqueline. "Believing in Santa Claus could help your kids develop a cure for cancer."  
*The Washington Post*. December 24, 2014.

*Jacqueline Woolley is a professor and chair of the Department of Psychology who studies children's understanding of reality at The University of Texas at Austin.*

Tonight, Santa Claus will consume the minds of many children across the world. Many parents' thoughts also drift there, but for different reasons. Parents of young children wonder whether they should promote the myth of the jolly old man in the red suit, while parents of older children wonder what they're going to say when their child asks for the truth. Underlying both of these questions is a larger one: Is it good for kids to believe in Santa Claus? Research in developmental psychology suggests it is, because of the benefits for cognitive and emotional development.

Believing in impossible beings such as Santa Claus may exercise children's counterfactual reasoning skills. The kind of thinking involved in imagining how nine reindeer could fly through the sky carrying a heavy sleigh may well be the same kind of thinking required for imagining a solution to global warming or a way to cure a disease. This kind of thinking — engaging the border between what is possible and what is impossible — is at the root of all scientific discoveries and inventions, from airplanes to the Internet.

Believing in Santa also exercises children's deductive reasoning abilities and their use of evidence. We discovered in a recent study that older children might be better able than younger children to use, for example, the half-eaten cookies on Christmas morning as evidence of Santa's existence. In our study, we taught children about a novel fantastical being, the Candy Witch, who visits children's houses on Halloween night and replaces their candy with a new toy. Older children, who woke up to find their candy gone and a new toy in its stead, were more likely to assert that the Candy Witch really exists. Their advanced understanding of evidence led them to interpret the simultaneous disappearance of the candy and appearance of the toy as proof of the Candy Witch's existence.

But perhaps the greatest benefit to children's cognitive and emotional development may arise from the discovery that Santa Claus is not, in fact, a real physical being. Many parents envision a sudden point in time at which their child demands the truth, but the discovery process is often more gradual. In fact, there is often a protracted period during which children become increasingly less sure about Santa's existence. Toward the end of this period, children may actually look for evidence to confirm their suspicions.

This is where parents can help. A parent who had disguised her handwriting on the presents from Santa can begin to use her own handwriting. Or she can put a few "from Santa" presents under the tree early for children to discover the night before. Once children begin to doubt, they become very scientific about the whole thing, and in some cases even set up their own experiments. For instance, my daughter left a camera and a note next to the milk and cookies, requesting that Santa take a picture of himself and leave it for her as evidence.

In the end, children are empowered by feeling that they have figured it out by themselves. Upon making the discovery, they become part of the adult world; they are "in on the secret" and can derive even more emotional benefit by being given a role in keeping the myth alive for their younger siblings. Though children get all the presents, they're not the only ones who reap all the benefits of the Santa tradition. Engaging with cultural myths allows adults to vividly recall their own childhood sense of wonder and to create fun opportunities for their loved ones. In the end, the whole family benefits. Children grow emotionally and cognitively, and parents get to spend a bit of their own time imagining the impossible.

### Source B

Cory Turner and Anya Kamenetz. "Is It OK To Lie About Santa And The Tooth Fairy?" Life Kit. National Public Radio (NPR). November 28, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/716698873>

*The following is taken from an episode of a self-improvement podcast on National Public Radio called "Life Kit".*

We try to be pretty honest people. I mean, we're journalists. The facts matter! But when it comes to Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy, or whatever mythical creature it is in your family, we started wondering ... is it bad to lie to your kids to keep the magic alive?

Cory's gotten deep into the Santa ruse: setting out the reindeer snack, calling into the Santa tracker on Christmas Eve. Anya's written notes impersonating the Tooth Fairy — and when that didn't work, she even set up a phone call! The con has gotten really long, and the kids might be on to us. So what should we do?

We know we're not alone in this, so we reached out to Rosemarie Truglio, a childhood development specialist and senior vice president of Education and Research at Sesame Workshop, for advice about how to keep the magic alive — and for how long. Here are four tips for handling that awkward moment when your kids start doubting the world of magic.

#### **1. You aren't lying. You're entering their world of make-believe.**

Characters like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy are actually an important way for grownups to bond with our kids, according to Truglio. "It's during those early years, you know, up to age 7, that their world is filled with magic and imagination. You know, how many of us have had imaginary friends?"

Truglio says that to kids this age, "Everything is real. So even when you think about our characters — Elmo and Abby and Snuffleupagus and Big Bird — those characters are real to children. They live outside of the TV box."

It's actually healthy, she says, to engage with kids in this world of make-believe. "How did you feel when you were a child?" she says. "It is that warm spot in your heart that we remember and we want to convey to our children."

#### **2. When kids start asking questions, listen carefully. They might not be ready for the whole truth.**

Truglio says when your kids ask about these make-believe characters, they may not actually be asking what you think they're asking. Beware of giving them an answer they're not quite ready for. So rather than responding immediately, try asking a question.

Truglio has a perfect, personal example. She and her family are Catholic. And her son Lucas attended a predominantly Jewish school growing up. When he was around 8, one day a bunch of his classmates told him Santa wasn't real. So Lucas came home and asked his mom if Santa was real. She started with a simple question back to him — "Why are you asking?" And then out came the story about his classmates.

"I said, well, Lucas, you know, they're Jewish. And we're Catholic. And so do you think that has something to do with it because they don't celebrate Christmas? He's like, oh, yeah. You're right. That's all he needed at that moment. He wasn't — he didn't want to give up on the magic of Santa."

#### **3. When the jig is up (you'll know!), come clean and be prepared for big feelings.**

When Truglio's son was 10, he simply told her, Santa isn't real, and you and Daddy get the presents. At this point, Truglio says the responsible thing to do is to just tell the truth. (She did.) The conversation was difficult — her son was upset. He knew Santa didn't exist, but he was holding on to the magic.

#### 4. Find new ways to keep the magic alive.

Just because the make-believe is over, doesn't mean the magic has to be. Maybe your older child begins to play Santa Claus alongside you, delivering presents for a younger sibling. For Lucas, it was about surprise.

"Still to this day, he'll say, you know, I know I have to make a list. But can you surprise me? Surprise me with something that's not on the list," Truglio says. "And it's about — that surprise reminds him of that special time, the magic of Christmas morning."

Keeping the magic alive, however you choose to do it, it's not just good for kids. It's good for everybody.

### Holiday Activities

*% who typically did each activity as a child, and % who plan to this year*

	Childhood	Now
 Attend a gathering with extended family or friends on Christmas Eve or Day	91%	86%
 Buy gifts for friends or family	89	86
 Put up a Christmas tree	92	79
 Send Christmas or holiday cards	81	65
 Give homemade gifts, such as baked goods or crafts	66	58
 Attend religious services on Christmas Eve or Day	69	54
 Pretend Santa Claus will visit home on Christmas Eve or Day	72	31
 Go caroling	36	16

Source C: Pew Research Center Survey of Americans

DECEMBER 24, 2013

# It's not just kids who are excited about a visit from Santa

BY MICHAEL LIPKA  
<http://pewrsr.ch/1cl0esb>

Source: Pew Research Center Dec. 3-8, 2013. Q84, Q85, Q86, Q87.

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## Pretending Santa Claus Will Visit on Christmas Eve

	Plan to do this year %	Typically did as a child %
Total	31	72
White	31	78
Black	20	67
Hispanic	45	65
18-29	30	70
30-49	39	75
50-64	27	72
65+	23	72
Parent/guardian	49	72
Of Santa-believer	69	76
No Santa-believers	18	63
Not parent/guardian	22	73
Protestant	28	75
White evangelical	30	77
White mainline	31	81
Black Protestant	17	71
Catholic	40	75
White Catholic	32	81
Hispanic Catholic	53	68
Unaffiliated	30	69
See <i>Christmas</i> as ...		
Religious holiday	33	77
Cultural holiday	33	71
Do not celebrate	11	46

Source: Pew Research Center Dec. 3-8, 2013. Q85c, Q87c.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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**Source D**

Brown, Maressa "PSA: Please Stop Telling Your Children Their Pricey Gifts Came From Santa."  
*Parents*. December 9, 2019. [www.parents.com](http://www.parents.com)

*The following article from the website of a popular parenting magazine discusses a viral Facebook post.*

It's the most wonderful—and stressful—time of the year for parents everywhere who want nothing more than to make the holidays magical and memorable for their children. From Elf on the Shelf to DIY experiences to booking a family getaway, the ways to make a L.O.'s eyes light up are endless. But a social worker named Megan Dunn took to Facebook to ask that parents abstain from an all-too-common Christmas practice: giving Santa Claus credit for the priciest gifts under the tree.

In a post originally shared in 2017, then re-shared by a woman named Lauren Hodgson this year, a social worker named Megan Jackson noted, "I cannot stress this enough. STOP TELLING YOUR SANTA AGE KIDS THAT THEIR IPADS, AND IPHONES, AND 200 DOLLAR TOYS ARE FROM SANTA."

Dunn went on to explain, "Cause some families can't afford that. Little kids wonder why they got socks or a coat or hand me down toys from Santa and other kids got an iPad." The social worker said that she has had parents cry to her that their kid asked if they're not good enough or if Santa doesn't like them as much.

"Breaks my heart for the parents and the kids," she wrote. The bottom-line to her: "Take credit for the gift. Santa didn't buy that iPad; Momma or Daddy did. Leave the less expensive gifts from Santa. Be blessed you can afford what others cannot. Merry Christmas."

On Hodgson's post, commenters applauded the message, sharing related details. One who is also a social worker said, "TRUTH! This is the worst time of year for my families. Domestic abuse goes way up because of stress. Parents getting locked up because they're stealing for their children or doing something illegal to get money. It's heartbreaking! Thank God for people who donate, but they aren't usually donating electronics or pricey items."

Another commenter said she didn't agree with having to sacrifice her child's "imagination for the less fortunate." "I understand, and I have empathy for everyone, but you also have to teach your children not to covet what other people have," she wrote. "It's always going to be someone who has something that another child can't have."

On the original Facebook post, which has earned 102K shares, commenters voiced similarly passionate and differing opinions. One shared, "Everyone is so worried about making sure that their kids believe in Santa as long as possible. I'm all for it. I want my two to believe too! But let's get real, if your kid gets a bunch of toys for Christmas, and that iPad or PlayStation is the only thing that momma or daddy bought them, do you honestly think that it is going to ruin their Christmas because Santa didn't bring that iPad? Do you honestly think that they are just going to be like, 'Santa didn't bring me that, so he must not be real!' If so, this proves that our kids have gotten so wrapped up in material things and not what the true meaning of Christmas is all about."

Another mom proposed a smart solution: "My parents did it that way. They bought the big stuff for Christmas Eve, and Santa brought small stocking stuffers. This was true for many of my friends: Christmas Eve was the big night, Santa the smaller stuff."

No matter how families choose to label their gifts, Jackson's message is one that deserves sharing every year. After all, holiday time is ultimately about much more than lavish gifts. It's about the importance of family, community, and empathy—all themes that are bigger and more important to impart than the origin story of a pricey tech device.

**Source E**

Johnson, David Kyle. "Let's Bench The Elf on the Shelf." *Psychology Today*. December 19, 2012  
[www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/plato-pop/201212/let-s-bench-the-elf-the-shelf](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/plato-pop/201212/let-s-bench-the-elf-the-shelf)

*David Kyle Johnson, Ph.D., is a professor of philosophy at King's College in Pennsylvania. The following essay was published on the blog for the magazine and website Psychology Today.*

Santa has had his fair share of helpers over the years—the Austrian Krampus, the Dutch Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) and the German Knecht Ruprecht, just to name a few. But recently Santa has acquired a new helper—and he's gaining popularity every day: The Elf on the Shelf.

You likely know someone who has one; you may even have one yourself. Most see it as fun and harmless and innocent, but I would like to argue it is not. It's something that should be avoided at all costs.

For those who don't know what The Elf on the Shelf is, it is simply a small elf doll that you can place on a shelf (which you can buy for \$29.95). But the name is not as self-explanatory as it first might seem; there's much more.

He comes with his own website, iPhone apps, and even his own TV Christmas special. But the controversial part is what you tell the kids about The Elf on the Shelf: "The elf is actually alive and moves around when you're not looking. He's watching you and you never know where he will turn up next. And if he sees you doing something wrong he reports directly back to Santa."

As his ad on Amazon says: "Every year at Christmas, Santa sends his elves to watch you. And they go back and tell him who's been bad and who's been good. The Elf on the Shelf is watching you, what you say, and what you do. The Elf on the Shelf is watching you, each and every Christmas."

Kids are not allowed to touch him and you are supposed to move him around every night to a different place in the house so the kids think he's alive. This way, anytime the children misbehave, all you have to do is remind them that The Elf on the Shelf is watching.

Fun right? A little Christmas joy along with an easy way to keep the children behaving for about a month. What could possibly be wrong with this seemingly harmless practice? I say plenty.

I have argued against the Santa Claus lie — the practice of tricking your children into believing that Santa Claus is literally real — elsewhere (in 2009, 2010 and in my book, *The Myths that Stole Christmas*).

My argument is threefold. It's a lie (that does not encourage imagination), it threatens your parental trustworthiness, and it encourages credulity. But The Elf on the Shelf is basically a steroid shot for the Santa Lie—a physical reminder of the Santa lie in your house for a whole month. So it should not be surprising that my objections to the practices surrounding The Elf on the Shelf are similar.

First, it most certainly is a lie. Of course, not all lies are morally wrong. Lies done for noble or monumental purposes are morally excusable, sometimes even morally praiseworthy. But the fun you have tricking your children into believing something false is not a noble cause; don't fool yourself — you're not saving any lives.

Second, your children rely on you to give them accurate information about the way the world is, and you should want them to trust and believe what you say. But finding out that you have been lying to them — and even been playing an elaborate joke on them (for example by moving the elf yourself but telling them it moves on its own) —

has the possibility of significantly eroding their ability to trust you. What else might you be lying about, or tricking them into believing?

Think it's not a big deal? In some stories I have collected, children come to doubt God's existence after learning the truth about Santa; "If mom and dad are lying about Santa, they're probably lying about God too." This is actually fairly good reasoning. Have you ever thought about how many characteristics the two characters share?

Third, it promotes credulity — a gullibility and propensity to believe things that are false. Just like with Santa Claus, to get your children to believe The Elf on the Shelf is alive, you have to encourage them to turn off their critical thinking skills — don't question, don't doubt, just believe.

This is not the kind of thing we want to encourage in our children; in fact, credulity is a major contributing factor to the decline of American civilization.

As Hank Stuever put it in *Tensel: A Search for America's Christmas Present*:

If a child has concluded...that it's impossible for a man in a flying sleigh to make it all the way around the world in one night, delivering elf made replicas of all the stuff you see in Target and Best Buy, then that's a child I would be happy to steer toward a voting booth when she's 18. That's an American in search of facts. If, however, she goes on pretending to believe well into her teens (I encountered more than one such teenager in Frisco) because it makes her parents (and God) feel sweet and happy, then I become worried. That becomes an American willing to spend \$100,000 on her "special day" wedding or who will believe without hard evidence that other countries harbor weapons of mass destruction when they don't.

But I would like to add a fourth objection to all this Christmas lying—an objection to something that can be present in the Santa Claus lie as well, but is the main purpose of The Elf on the Shelf lie: goading your children into behaving with promises of future lavish reward. I'm not denying it is useful for this purpose. As one of my students told me about their older brother and his wife's Elf on the Shelf, "All they have to do is remind the kids that the elf is watching, and the fights and tantrums stop and they are perfectly behaved." I am arguing that, regardless of its effectiveness, the elf should go.

Now, don't get me wrong, mild rewards in response to spontaneous positive behavior can be a good thing. Children develop good character with good habits and we want to encourage the development of those habits by sometimes rewarding good behavior when we see it. But stopping bad behavior with promises of future reward is completely different — and a terrible and harmful practice.

First of all, it's just lazy parenting — the easiest, but worst, way to get your children to behave. Secondly, children need to learn self-control and to do the right thing for its own sake. But a child who behaves because The Elf on the Shelf is watching and will tell Santa — that child is learning the exact opposite: that how they behave should be dictated by the rewards they receive. And this is not unproblematic. What happens when these children grow up and discover that in the real world, it is lying and cheating that earns the most rewards? Now, I'm not saying that The Elf on the Shelf will encourage even more corruption in the business world — but I'm also not not saying that either.

Ironically, I most recently found evidence for my position in an article written by child psychologist Melinda Wenner Moyer (for Slate Magazine) where she argues in favor of the Santa-lie. (She thinks it's okay because it encourages imagination. She's wrong; it doesn't. I've pointed out elsewhere why.) Although she is okay with the Santa-Lie in general, she emphatically points out that lying — and specifically the Santa lie — should not be used as a parental crutch.

“Though lying can be an awfully convenient parenting crutch — Sorry, sweetheart, but the police might arrest you if I let you have more candy so we better not — it’s generally best to keep it to a minimum, both to develop trust between yourself and your child and to lead by example...[but] sometimes, parents use Santa inappropriately, such as when they force their terrified kids to sit on Santa’s lap or when they use him primarily as a disciplinary threat—If you keep throwing pens at your sister, Santa will leave coal in your stocking.”

Obviously, the same point applies to The Elf on the Shelf, and since his primary use is as a disciplinarian threat, Moyer would clearly agree with the critique I have offered here.

I know I have friends and relatives who own and are using The Elf on the Shelf (I've seen your Facebook posts) and they're probably pretty upset with me right now. Please forgive me. I'm not saying you're bad parents.

I'm just trying to encourage you — in fact, everyone — to think a little bit more critically before you fall for the next Christmas fad. And I'm not saying you shouldn't buy The Elf on the Shelf. In fact, go buy 40! They make cute decorations. I'm just saying they should not be used to trick your children.

It's like Santa. It's not that Santa should be eliminated from Christmas, it's just that — like The Elf on the Shelf — he should not be used as prescribed.

**Source F**

Church, Francis Pharcellus. "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." (1897)  
publicdomainreview.org/collection/yes-virginia-there-is-a-santa-claus-1897

*In New York City in 1897, Dr. Philip O'Hanlon was asked a question by his then eight-year-old daughter, Virginia, which many a parent has been asked before: whether Santa Claus really exists. Rather than answer her directly, O'Hanlon suggested she ask the question to one of New York's most prominent newspapers at the time, The Sun, assuring her that "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Virginia wrote the following letter:*

*Dear Editor: I am 8 years old.*

*Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.*

*Papa says, 'If you see it in The Sun it's so.'*

*Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?*

*The response to Virginia's letter by one of the paper's editors, Francis Pharcellus Church, remains the most reprinted editorial ever to run in any newspaper in the English language.*

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VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.