

2024 AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time - 2 hours

Question 1

The Elf on the Shelf was written in 2004 by Carol Aebersold and her daughter [Chanda Bell](#). Bell suggested they write a book based on their family tradition of an elf sent from Santa who came to watch over children at Christmas time. *The Elf on the Shelf* won the Best Toy Award by [Learning Express](#), a Book of the Year Award from Creative Child Awards, and a National Best Books Award sponsored by [USA Book News](#) in 2008.

Many privacy organizations and researchers criticize the product for teaching children that involuntary, non-consensual surveillance is normal and suggest it conditions kids to just accept the [surveillance state](#).

Read the following sources carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, synthesize material from at least three of the sources and develop your position on whether *Elf on the Shelf* prepares children to live in a surveillance state. Clearly defend, challenge, or qualify the idea, supporting your argument with appropriate evidence.

Source A (*Psychology Today*)

Source B (Blog post)

Source C (*The Heartful Parent*)

Source D (*IAPP*)

Source E (*Reason.com*)

Source F (Political Cartoon)

Source A

Goodwin, Cara. "Will the Elf on the Shelf Improve Your Child's Behavior?" *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 9 Dec. 2021, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/parenting-translator/202112/will-the-elf-on-the-shelf-improve-your-childs-behavior.

Throughout the month of December, many parents use an "Elf on the Shelf" or threats of Santa's nice and naughty list to keep their children's behavior in line. According to these parents, Santa will find out (through an elf in their home that spies on the children or just omnisciently know) whether their children have been "nice" or "naughty" and will only bring presents for the "nice" children. Is this strategy effective in improving children's behavior? Are there any negative impacts from using this strategy to manage behavior?

First, research suggests that the Elf's strategy of offering children rewards in exchange for "good" behavior is likely *not* an effective strategy. [Research](#) finds that tangible rewards (such as presents) that are expected (that is, promised in advance) and are not linked to performance (as is often the case for Christmas presents) are linked with *decreased* intrinsic, or internally driven, motivation. This means that, even if the promise of Christmas presents resulted in improved behavior for the month of December, children will be less likely to continue to choose to behave in this way after the promise of Christmas presents is removed. Put even more simply, your child could become *more* likely to misbehave after Christmas is over if you use this strategy.

There is also some [evidence](#) that tangible rewards may reduce kind behavior (such as sharing or helping others). Children are already naturally very motivated to engage in this kind of behavior and rewarding them for it may ultimately decrease their motivation to do so.

In addition, the Elf on the Shelf often becomes negative in practice, involving threats and shaming children for misbehavior. For example, some Elf on the Shelf kits involve an "Official Naughty Notice" that you can issue to your child when their behavior is less than desirable. This type of threat of negative consequences may also be ineffective at promoting positive behavior in children. For example, [research](#) finds that telling children a story that emphasizes the negative consequences of lying does not seem to be associated with more honesty in children.

[Research](#) also shows that expressing disappointment in children and shaming them as a disciplinary tactic may be associated with increased anxiety and aggression in children. In addition, [research](#) indicates that telling children white lies in order to regulate their behavior is associated with increased anxiety.

So what should you do instead? How can you get your children to behave during the crazy holiday season?

If you would like to reward your child's behavior, use positive attention. Have the Elf on the Shelf point out anything your child does *right* rather than what they did *wrong*. For example, "I noticed that you shared with your brother yesterday," or, "You did a great job getting dressed for school on your own!" There is no reason to link this observation to presents or to label your child in any way. You can also use this strategy yourself (with or without the Elf) to make it even more effective. [Research](#) shows that positive attention increases the frequency of behavior.

Use natural and logical consequences to manage your child's challenging behavior during the holidays. [Research](#) suggests that the most effective parenting strategies for changing behavior involve logical and natural consequences rather than unrelated consequences. In other words, children are more likely to learn not to throw their Christmas cookies if you take away the cookies when they throw them rather than taking away presents 25 days later.

It is also important to mention that there is nothing wrong with having the Elf on the Shelf or Santa as part of your holiday tradition. If you remember to be careful about linking your child's behavior to presents on Christmas morning, you can feel free to create elaborate scenarios with your Elf on the Shelf, visit Santa, and even leave treats for the reindeer. Happy holidays to all!

Source B

Campbell, Jeff. *Can Elf on the Shelf Improve Kids' Behavior?*, 19 June 2023, newmiddleclassdad.com/why-does-elf-on-the-shelf-misbehave/.

Understanding Elf on the Shelf Misbehavior

Elf on the Shelf has become a Christmas staple in many households. It all started as a children's book by Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell. It then grew into a Christmas time phenomenon.

[Elf on the Shelf is for younger kids](#) ages 3-7 (give or take) and each year, often Thanksgiving eve, the elf flies to your house from the North Pole to start that holiday season.

The elf's purpose?

To encourage imagination and creativity in children by engaging in a series of mischievous antics throughout the holiday season. While many parents and children find the elf's antics to be a source of laughter and fun during the Christmas season, it's essential to understand the impact of Elf misbehavior on children's behavior and find ways to manage it effectively.

Is telling children their elf friend is a snitch a good idea? Does using Santa's little helper as a motivational tool actually improve the behavior of younger children?

The Purpose of Elf Antics

Many families enjoy the fun and cheer that Elf on the Shelf brings to their December mornings.

The elf, sent by Santa Claus, performs its elf moves around the house each day, monitoring children's behavior and reporting back to the North Pole. If your kids are bad, the scout elf tells Santa and your kids could end up on the naughty list.

By maintaining a positive, fun atmosphere, you can ensure that the Elf on the Shelf remains a [Christmas tradition](#) for your family during the holiday season.

Encouraging Imagination

The Elf on the Shelf tradition serves to encourage children's imagination, as they wonder about the elf's nightly adventures and the magic it possesses.

However, it's important to be aware of the potential impact this tradition can have on a child's behavior. Elf on the Shelf could lead to discouragement and anxiety, especially for those who struggle with impulse control or making good decisions.

Setting Boundaries with the Elf

Setting boundaries with the Elf on the Shelf is crucial to managing its misbehavior and maintaining a positive holiday atmosphere.

One way to do this is by making the Elf's purpose more positive than punitive, focusing on reporting good behavior instead of bad. Another approach is to ensure that the Elf's magic is preserved by handling it with care and placing it in a cool environment, such as the refrigerator, for 30-45 minutes when necessary.

By establishing clear boundaries and expectations, you can ensure that the Elf on the Shelf remains a cherished and positive tradition in your household. This will not only help manage the Elf's antics but also encourage your child to embrace the spirit of the holiday season and do the right thing well beyond Christmas Eve.

Using the Elf as a Teaching Tool

The Elf on the Shelf can serve as an effective teaching tool to encourage positive behaviors in children. For instance, the Elf can write messages to students or create a ball pit with jelly beans or pom-poms, making learning more engaging and enjoyable.

To get the most out of using the Elf as a teaching tool, it's essential to strike a balance between fun, engaging activities and promoting positive behaviors. By doing so, you can ensure that the Elf on the Shelf remains a beloved and beneficial holiday tradition for both you and your child.

Source C

Keating, Christy. "You Better Watch Out, You Better Not Cry: Positive Discipline and the Elf on the Shelf." *The Heartful Parent*, 17 Mar. 2022, theheartfulparent.com/news/elfontheshelf2020/.

The Christmas season is upon us (gasp!) and [for those who celebrate], with it comes a whole host of family traditions.

And despite the fact that its 2020, this year, like every year, we used the day after Thanksgiving to crank up the Christmas tunes while my girls decorated the gingerbread houses that my mom baked and built from scratch. It's a sweet (literally) way to start the holiday season and has always helped my family feel shiny and bright about the weeks leading up to Christmas.

For some families, holiday traditions include coming up with new and creative ways to "spy" on their children and enforce good behavior by moving the "Elf on the Shelf" around the house. In light of this tradition (which just arrived on the holiday scene en masse in 2005) many November and December Facebook and Instagram posts include pictures of the Elf's new surveillance spot each morning, waiting to be discovered by the children of the house; Pinterest is chockfull of ideas to make even the most artsy parent go nuts with trying to keep up. Indeed, I've heard more than one mom bemoan the need to continually come up with something new so that little Susie is convinced of the Elf's overnight travels to the North Pole, or worry when she forgot to move the Elf, leaving little Timmy to question whether the Elf is really real.

But rather than asking what we can do next with the family Elf, maybe the question we should be asking is actually, **should we be doing anything at all?** This question was posed to me last year when an attendee at my fall positive discipline workshop messaged me to ask: "What does positive discipline think of Elf on the Shelf?"

To be honest, as a non-Elf-on-the-Shelf family, the question had never occurred to me. But when another parent asked me, it got me thinking. And while there are many wonderful ways to use the Elf (and Santa for that matter) to make the season cheerier (I promise I'm not trying to rain on anyone's parade or ruin your holiday fun), the reality is that Elf on the Shelf—at least in the way it was originally conceived—and positive discipline really are at odds with one another. Here's why:

1. **Elf on the Shelf, at its core, is a threat, and likely an empty one at that:** What are we really saying to our children with the Elf? We're basically telling our kids that he is reporting back to Santa on a daily basis about our behavior—bad or good—and that Santa won't bring the gifts they asked for if the Elf reports bad behavior. Do we really want our children thinking that Santa is that fickle, nasty, and unforgiving? That one fight with a sibling, or one defiant comment to Mom or Dad might actually ruin Christmas for them? Notwithstanding the fact that threats definitely don't fall within the realm of positive parenting, we have to then decide whether we are we really ready to follow-through on the Elf's threat and withhold gifts? Absent follow-through, we are making empty threats, leaving children with the message that we don't always mean what we say. Problematic. And lest you argue that it's the Elf and Santa doing it, not you—I'd remind everyone that at

some point every child will realize it's all fantasy and that you are actually the one responsible for withholding (or threatening to withhold) Christmas. And yes, the same thing goes for Santa's naughty and nice list.

2. **Elf on the Shelf is an external motivator:** What has a child learned who behaves simply because the Elf is watching? Has he learned to intrinsically behave for the all reasons we want him to? Has she learned the intricacies of emotional regulation, or simply stuffed her emotions down in order to please the Elf, and ultimately Santa? What kind of problem-solving skills does a child learn when they are behaving only because of the rewards it might bring at Christmas? Using an external motivator like this teaches a child to make their relationships transactional—in other words, to behave or get along only because of what they'll get out of it. This flies squarely in the face of positive discipline's goal of building internal motivation in our children—of teaching them to do right simply because it's the right thing to do.
3. **Elf on the Shelf does not encourage effective problem-solving or build trust:** When we parent heartfully, we often arrive at solutions collaboratively, and strive to settle on solutions that are **reasonable, respectful, related, and helpful to all parties**. Even when the best problem-solving skills are utilized in response to a Christmas-time transgression, solutions that are fundamentally reached in response to a threat of Christmas gifts not coming cannot possibly be reasonable, respectful, related to the transgression and helpful to all parties. The disconnect is simply too great.
4. **Elf on the Shelf is Time-Limited:** Let's assume for the sake of argument, that the threat posed by the Elf (and Santa) is enough to curtail even the most troubling and persistent behavior, and that little Sammy and Sarah manage to control themselves for the entire month of December right up till Christmas morning (undoubtedly a fantasy in and of itself)—what happens on Christmas afternoon? On December 26? Coming up with a way to *control* behavior, rather than encourage and foster it in positive ways, in the days leading up to Christmas leaves parents high and dry come December 26. Absent a healthy foundation, and a good toolbox of positive parenting skills, what are you going to do next? Likely the answer are bigger threats, more punishment, and more extrinsic motivation. Is that the place you want to find yourself stuck in?

Source D

Bracy, Jedidiah. "Elf on the Shelf and Giving the Gift of Surveillance." *IAPP*. 14 December 2014.
<https://iapp.org/news/a/elf-on-the-shelf-and-surveillance-culture/>

So I learned about the Elf-on-the-Shelf phenomenon the other day (can you tell I don't have kids?) after a coworker confessed she went against her parental policy and bought one for her child. While it may be filling up my Facebook news feed with amusingly suggestive poses for Santa's Little Helper (and Barbie), the concept is a bit creepy and alarming in this big data, post-Snowden world.

For the unfamiliar, Elf on the Shelf is based on a children's book and has been all the rage for young children for several Christmases. The \$30 doll is meant to keep tabs on children and report back to Santa on their behavior. Parents are supposed to move the doll to a different spot each day leading up to Christmas, emphasizing the elf's constant vigilance.

But here's the thing with this phenomenon: Many children want to be spied upon. They want to prove they're being good so they get what they want for Christmas. It's this extension and normalizing of surveillance culture that is concerning.

Now, I'm not the first one to write about this. **Alex Steed wrote** an excellent column in the *Bangor Daily News* on why he's not buying one for his daughter and why we should feel uncomfortable extending and normalizing surveillance culture into our homes. He writes, "Having been molded by this age of NSA overreach, Snowden, Wikileaks and Anonymous, what bothers me most is that inviting Elf on the Shelf into the home unnecessarily extends surveillance culture into a place that should be free of it. Santa Claus is a myth that at best represents generosity at its finest. But with the elf, we choose to emphasize his surveillance. That is really weird."

As we've seen before, surveillance is often paved with good intentions. We see it all over the place with corporate wellness programs, car insurance and even aid to the poor. Do you want to take part in a wellness program? You better be ready to share lots of your personal health information. How about a lower car insurance rate? Plug in this car recorder for a month so we can check your driving habits. And humanitarian aid? **Those who receive it often undergo iris scans and the collection of other biometric data.**

You see, if you're not doing anything wrong, you shouldn't have anything to hide from Santa, right? This concept was played out in full in Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*. In his book review last year, **Sam Pfeifle wrote**, "This is a world where everybody-gets-a-trophyism has met narcissism unchecked alongside do-gooderism run rampant, creating hordes of otherwise bright people who have no problem whatsoever—even pine for—allowing their employers to know where they are at all times, every tiny health detail, heck, every little thing at all. Who can only see the benefits of tracking every child's movement with a chip in the ankle. Who fall prey to—nay, come up of their own accord with—slogans like 'secrets are lies,' 'sharing is caring' and, here's the kicker, folks, 'privacy is theft.'"

Plus, the old school Letter to Santa business may be coming to an end. Why tell him what you want, when "a careful evaluation of your search and browsing histories as well as other elements of your online footprint" can tell the elves everything they need to know. For more on this ultimate data-mining Santa Claus, **I recommend you read this letter from him to "Tommy."** (This is a COPPA-compliant letter, of course!)

What I found the most disturbing, however, were the **very nonfictional comments made by Judge Richard Posner** about surveillance in the name of national security. “I think privacy is actually overvalued,” he said. “Much of what passes for the name of privacy is really just trying to conceal the disreputable parts of your conduct ... Privacy is mainly about trying to improve your social and business opportunities by concealing the sorts of bad activities that would cause other people not to want to deal with you.”

So, according to Posner, privacy is selfish and a means to protect your bad deeds? **We've seen this argument before, and we've seen how it has more holes than Swiss cheese.** Just ask U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

As privacy pros continue to remind their organizations why privacy is important, let's remember it also starts in the home. This Christmas season, be good for goodness' sake. But not because the elves are watching.

Source E

Fisher, Anthony. "Elf on the Shelf Isn't Just Creepy, It's Teaching Kids to Accept Surveillance State." *Reason.Com*, 18 Dec. 2014, reason.com/2014/12/18/elf-on-the-shelf-isnt-just-creepy-its-te/.

The stop-motion animation TV special *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* recently celebrated its 50th anniversary with a weeknight airing on CBS. I showed the film to my two young daughters, hoping to enjoy an hour of peace and quiet to myself, but instead found myself consistently peppered with questions about why the reindeer were such petty bullies, why Frosty the Snowman (voiced by Burl Ives) busted out into a song about "Silver and Gold," and why after Rudolph ran away from home, his father forbid his mother to help in the search for her lost child because it was "man's work."

Times have changed, thankfully, but I could at least shrug off this truly unpleasant excuse for entertainment as my flawed but earnest attempt at maintaining some kind of holiday tradition. The thing has aired for 50 straight years, after all.

Apparently longevity is no longer required to earn the title of "Christmas tradition," as evidenced by the Elf on the Shelf. Though it's only been around since 2005, first as a book and then as a toy, the creepy side-eyed gnome has spied and informed on millions of kids to an unaccountable power broker at the North Pole. According to the product description:

The Elf on the Shelf®: A Christmas Tradition includes a special scout elf sent from the North Pole to help Santa Claus manage his naughty and nice lists. When a family adopts a scout elf and gives it a name, the scout elf receives its Christmas magic and can fly to the North Pole each night to tell Santa Claus about all of the day's adventures. Each morning, the scout elf returns to its family and perches in a different place to watch the fun. Children love to wake up and race around the house looking for their scout elf each morning.

None of this is too far removed from the Stasi-meets-stalker lyrics to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town":

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

You better watch out, you better not cry
You better not pout, I'm telling you why

Dr. Laura Elizabeth Pinto, a digital technology professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, thinks Elf on the Shelf poses a critical ethical dilemma. In a paper for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Pinto wonders if the Elf is "preparing a generation of children to accept, not question, increasingly intrusive (albeit whimsically packaged) modes of surveillance."

Sensing that she might come off as a humorless paranoid crank, Pinto clarified her position to the Washington Post:

"I don't think the elf is a conspiracy and I realize we're talking about a toy. It sounds humorous, but we argue that if a kid is okay with this bureaucratic elf spying on them in their home, it normalizes the idea of surveillance and in the future restrictions on our privacy might be more easily accepted." (Emphasis mine).

One could argue that the millions of adults walking around with NSA-trackable and criminal-hackable smartphones in their pockets are far more influential than a seasonal doll in setting the example to the next generation that surveillance is inevitable and Big Brother is not to be feared. Still, Pinto has a point when she writes:

What The Elf on the Shelf represents and normalizes: anecdotal evidence reveals that children perform an identity that is not only for caretakers, but for an external authority (The Elf on the Shelf), similar to the dynamic between citizen and authority in the context of the surveillance state.

Source F

Heller, Joe. "Political Cartoon U.S. Putin Hacking Russia Elf on the Shelf." *Theweek*, The Week, 21 Dec. 2020, theweek.com/cartoons/956414/political-cartoon-putin-hacking-russia-elf-shelf.

