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What's in your Stocking: Evidence around Santa Claus.

Clinical Question: What has research told us about Santa Claus?

Bottom Line: Santa is linked to kindness, although children might not like waiting in line to see him at the mall. Children often stop believing in Santa around age seven and parents are more bothered than children who stop believing. Just because some children stop believing in Santa does not mean he does not exist: Some people don't believe in EBM, yet here we are.

Evidence:

Is Santa linked to kindness?

- ❄ 52 adults shown the same story by the same man dressed as Santa or a Doctor found Santa "kinder": 9.2 versus 8.7 out of 10 ($p=0.05$).¹
- 🔔 No defined minimally important difference in kindness: But every little bit matters.
- ❄ 25 first-graders donated more gum when randomized to discuss Santa versus Easter Bunny or pets (3.6 pieces versus 1.3-1.6).²
- ❄ Unclear if invoking Santa to promote good behaviour yields intended results.³

Are children excited to see Santa in the Mall?

- ❄ Five year study of 150-300 children/year waiting in line to see Santa: 58-82% were indifferent on facial rating scale.⁴⁻⁸
- 🔔 More seemed happy one week before Christmas (30-37% happy) versus four weeks before Christmas (10-16%).^{6,7}
- 🔔 More parents seemed happier (82-93%) than children (6-37%).^{5,7}
- 🔔 Reliability very low: One observer, scale used more for pain.⁴⁻⁸

When do children stop believing?

- ❄ From 1896-1987, four studies found disbelief started mean age 6.4-8.3 years.^{3,9-11}
- ❄ Age is the strongest predictor of belief.^{3,9-11}
- 🔔 Gender and 'fantasy' thinking (example imaginary friends) not predictive.^{3,10,11}

🔔 Parents' belief¹¹ beyond age ten and parental encouragement³ may predict believing longer.

🔔 Transition usually gradual with 54% of children "figuring it out on their own."⁹

Are children upset when they stop believing?

❄️ Children had minimal distress transitioning to disbelief.⁹

🔔 Most emotional ratings were "<10% intensity" and generally positive.

🔔 Parents more negative: 40% sad versus 6% glad.

🔔 Most children feel future children should be encouraged to believe in Santa.¹²

🔔 Only 8% of new disbelieving children felt they would not teach their kids about Santa.⁹

Context:

❄️ Other limitations:

🔔 When lining up to the mall, unclear if the children were seeing the real Santa or someone in a Santa suit.⁴⁻⁸

🔔 Some research performed in summer,⁹ early fall,¹ or around Easter^{2,11} (known as "Bunny Bias").

❄️ While it may seem unbelievable for one being to visit children all over the globe on a single night, it may also seem unbelievable that academics are paid to write this review.

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Disclosure:

This is a bonus Tools for Practice article sent in the holiday spirit only. It is neither peer reviewed nor certified.

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