

INTRODUCTION

This issue appears shortly after Christmas, but I write this introduction a little before. Having a young daughter, I find myself wondering about the Santa fib we parents usually tell our children at this time of year. It really is a *fib*, isn't it? But should we be lying to children? Here are some arguments for and against.

Six arguments for lying to children:

1. Educational fibbing. My eldest daughter and I often tell each other lies. I say, 'Did you know that there are fairies living under our garden shed?' To which she responds, but Daddy, why can't we see them?' To which I answer, 'They only come out at night.' To which she says 'But then how do you know they are there?' and so on. The more we play this sort of game, the better she gets at figuring out when she's being lied to.

Lying games are good way of showing children that, armed with nothing more than their own power of reason, they can often figure out what's true for themselves.

Educational fibbing games can help children develop some intellectual and emotional maturity. They won't be afraid to think or ask a question. It gives them a course in self-defence that will come in very handy when they are confronted by the corporate, religious and other psychological manipulators and snake-oil salespeople later on in life.

If we want our children to grow into good truth-detectors, these are the sorts of skills we need then to acquire.

2. It makes them happy.
3. Gives them an appreciation of what it's like to be a true believer. Even after the bubble of belief has burst, the memory of what it was like to inhabit it – to *really believe* – lingers on. The adult who never knew that is perhaps missing out.
4. And we can vicariously enjoy their pleasure. Having children around who believe in Santa transforms Christmas – we can half inhabit their kitsch fantasy world for a few days.
5. Useful for controlling behaviour. 'He's making a list, he's checking it twice, he's going to find out who's naughty and nice'. Santa is watching what you are doing even when Mummy and Daddy are not.
6. 'Protecting' them from potentially upsetting or damaging truths.

Three arguments against lying to children:

1. They will learn not to trust you. Crying wolf – won't believe you when it really matters.
2. We are teaching them that lying is acceptable.
3. We can instil false beliefs that may hurt them later in life.

And, incidentally, some of the lies we tell we don't ourselves properly register as lies:

- 'You can be anything you want to be!' (Rubbish, of course.)
- 'Looks don't matter!' (Perhaps they shouldn't, but they do.)

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