



Social Incites™: Santa, Easter Bunny, and Others...

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I once received the following email from a teacher:

"The mother of a student with ASD asked us today about how to handle her son's anger at having been lied to by his parents about the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa. He is a 5th grade student and has been told by a friend that all three are really his parents. He has been quite angry and has called his parents liars and said he is not sure he will be able to trust them again. He has a younger sister who is still a 'believer.' We realize that loss is playing a significant role here – this must come up for many, many kids with ASD. Do you have any suggestions for how to help this family handle the transition?"

I'm guessing that many of you can relate to this dilemma! I know that this issue comes up even in families that don't have a loved one diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)! I used to be a first grade teacher, and I remember the kids in my classroom getting into heated arguments about whether there really IS or ISN'T a Santa or a Tooth Fairy. Movie producers have some fun with this issue by creating movies such as "The Santa Clause" and "The Polar Express," which inspire our fascination with the subject.

But while many kids grow up with a family tradition which promotes one of these beliefs, only to go through a period of revelation followed by ready acceptance, we know that for individuals with ASD, the loss and apparent deception can cause significant issues. The frustration and anger exhibited by this particular student is understandable!

So what are we to do? I would be as honest as possible with this student. Explain that these are "traditions" that are passed on from adults to children, from generation to generation. Often, when children grow up and become adults, they decide to pass the tradition along to their children by telling and acting out the stories of those traditions. Now that he knows that it is simply a tradition rather than reality, he can help to pass the tradition on to his younger sister. There may be ways for him to be involved in that! (When I was a child, I helped put cookies on the mantle for Santa, knowing that my dad and our dog would enjoy a midnight snack, but still enjoying the "game"--especially for the benefit of my little sister). The student might be able to do some research on those traditions, or help his parents or teacher write a report to describe a particular tradition and how and why it's celebrated. Like a detective, he may want to help look for "clues" that show that it's simply a tradition rather than reality (i.e. each mall has a Santa—one person can't be at each mall at the same time!)

Depending on how seriously he is taking this, his parents might also owe him an apology, explaining that they had not viewed it as deception, but as the passing on of a tradition, but that they can see how it would feel that way to him. It's important to validate his feelings, too!

The teacher is correct that this is also a loss-related issue. Be sensitive to the various expressions of "grief" that the student might exhibit as he comes to terms with this, including anger and denial.

Best wishes, and thank you for the work you are doing to promote effective social interactions and personal and interpersonal growth! If you have your own suggestions for dealing with this issue, please send them to me!

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