RUNNING HEAD: PARENT PROMOTION AND LIVE SANTAS

Ho! Ho! Who?
Parent Promotion of Belief in and Live Encounters with Santa Claus

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Abstract

There is a long enduring lay notion that children must be taught the difference between fiction and reality. Yet, cultural fictional characters such as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are widely promoted as real. With Santa Claus, children are faced with an additional conundrum: multiple live versions of Santa Claus seen at malls, museums and parades. In two studies we investigate how and when children come to understand this live version of a fictional, magical character. In both studies, we find parents are highly promoting of the live Santa as real, regardless of child age. In Study 1, we find the more live Santas children are exposed to, the more they believe a live Santa is the real Santa. In Study 2, we find the more parents promote Santa Claus, the less likely children are to question who live Santa is. Taken together, findings indicate parental promotion of Santa does not change much with age, and that amount of Santa promotion is negatively associated with understanding this live version of a fictional character.

1.1 Introduction

There is a long-standing and enduring lay notion that children live in fantasy worlds, and must eventually grow out of them. Early developmental psychologists such as Piaget (1962) supported this notion. However, recent research shows that children draw a clear line between what is fictional and what is real (Harris 2000; Woolley 1997) and even between different types of fictional worlds (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Weisberg & Bloom, 2009). Children begin to make the fantasy-reality distinction by ages 3 or 4 (Woolley & Cox, 2007), and use a number of sources and cues to do so, including testimony from their parents and peers, their understanding of context, and their knowledge of the real world (Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Vanderborcht & Jaswal, 2009; Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013).

Paradoxically, American children of these same ages show high levels of belief in fictional characters, particularly culturally endorsed characters such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny (Anderson & Prentice, 1994; Clark, 1995; Prentice, Manosevitz, & Hubbs, 1978; Prentice, Schmechel, & Manosevitz, 1979; Rosengren, Kalish, Hickling, & Gelman, 1994). In fact, throughout preschool, children become more credulous about fantasy and fictional characters, believing in more characters when they are 4 and 5 years old than when they are 3 years old (Sharon & Woolley, 2004). This is a puzzle: even though parents (and children) draw a clear line between what is fictional and what is real, children still believe in these characters. How is this possible? One explanation focuses on the role of parental and cultural testimony. Preschool aged children show some lingering confusion regarding causal principles across the fiction-reality border, accepting (Subbotsky, 2004) and using (Phelps & Woolley, 1994) magical explanations for anomalous events and denying the possibility of improbable events (Shtulman & Carey, 2007). Because children's fantasy-reality differentiation is still developing during the preschool years, they may be especially vulnerable to misleading testimony about the reality status of Santa Claus and other fantasy figures. Indeed, parents who explicitly endorse Santa Claus or other fictional characters have children who believe in them (Prentice et al., 1978; Rosengren et al., 1994).

It does not take much evidence for many children to believe in a fictional character—far less than is provided for Santa Claus. In previous work, children were found to believe in a new fictional character, the Candy Witch (who exchanges candy for toys on Halloween), after a few visits from experimenters discussing the Candy Witch, and a single visit from the Witch on Halloween (Woolley, Boerger & Markman, 2004). Santa is presented far more often to children and in many more ways. The additional cultural pressure to believe in fictional characters is also strong at this age. For example, Prentice and Gordon (1987) found that even a number of Jewish children they tested believed in Santa Claus.

In our studies, we focus on live versions of Santa Claus seen around Christmas time. Representations of fictional characters are one critical way in which children may be forced to consider reality status. As noted above, the majority of studies in this domain have addressed the ontological status of fictional characters. However, in a comprehensive study of children's use of the words "really" and "real," Bunce and Harris (2008), found that 2- to 7-year-olds rarely commented on ontological status (e.g., "monsters are not real"); instead they often made statements about the authenticity of representations of fictional characters (e.g., "He's not the real Father Christmas"). Among 4-to 7-year-olds, authenticity uses made up 63% of children's utterances whereas ontology uses comprised only 29%. Thus it is striking that few, if any, studies have addressed the issue of the authenticity of

live representations of fictional characters. Children's understanding of live Santa Claus representations may be central to their thinking and reasoning about what is real and what is not real.

Children do eventually come to understand these characters as fictional. However the question of how this understanding begins is still underexplored. It may be that as children age, parental testimony about Santa changes or decreases, and children's beliefs follow suit (Harris, Pasquini, Duke, Asscher, & Pons, 2006). A second possibility, however, is that testimony stays consistent across age, and instead, as children develop cognitively in other areas, such as in their lay understanding of physics and biology, they begin to understand that key aspects of the Santa myth violate naïve theories and that he must be fictional in the same way fairies and monsters are fictional. Here, the level of parental promotion matters less for children's beliefs than their own understanding of the world (Shtulman & Yoo, 2015).

One potential way to solve this conflict is to take a closer look at parental promotion of fantasy figures. This promotion can include both parental testimony about the reality status of these figures and the experiences parents provide for children. In regards to verbal testimony and semantics, there is evidence to suggest that parents (and siblings) talk to children differently about fictional entities than about real entities (Canfield & Ganea, 2013), and that children can pick up on these varying cues to testimony (Woolley, Ma, & Lopez-Mobilia, 2011). Less research has investigated promotion of fantasy figures through the experiences parents create for their children and the types of behaviors in which parents themselves engage. We do not know if the amount of testimony about and experiences provided for fictional characters such as Santa Claus changes with the age of the child, and whether and how these changes may be related to children's questioning of the Santa Claus myth.

A few studies have addressed understanding of Santa as a case study of broader fictional character understanding, but findings are inconclusive. Previous work has found that the average age of discovery about Santa's fictional status is around 7 years old (Prentice et al., 1978), and that children learn Santa is not real gradually rather than at one moment in time (Anderson & Prentice, 1994). However, live Santa Clauses particularly are a strange phenomenon. Unlike taking children to the theater or to a movie, where it is understood that what they are about to experience is a show, a fictional performance put on for their enjoyment, Santa Claus at the mall is set up for children to engage with. In this way, he is similar to the fictional characters such as Cinderella or Elmo that children see at Disney World or Sesame Place—the difference being that parents and the culture at large experience and discuss such characters as fictional, whereas there is cultural pressure to discuss Santa as real. Children are expected to interact with the Santa at the mall as though he is the same person who will decide if they are naughty or nice and what to bring them on Christmas morning.

A potential source of confusion is the fact that children can be exposed to many different live Santa Clauses over the course of a few months. Children can go to the same mall multiple times (which may involve seeing the same or a new actor playing Santa), or go to multiple malls, museums, and private parties in which Santa may appear. The Santas in these locations are unlikely to be the same person. Added to this, a live Santa appears in the media in everything from jewelry commercials to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. In sum, even children who are not raised to believe in Santa see multiples of the same

magical man over the course of a short period of time, and may have several opportunities to interact with him—a strange phenomenon developmental psychologists know little about. Intuitively, it may seem that seeing these multiple, different versions of one man would cause children to question Santa’s reality status. Alternatively, however, seeing multiple versions of Santa in multiple places may be taken as evidence of Santa’s magical abilities and supernatural status, thus reinforcing belief.

Research offers some insight into how children might respond to multiple Santas. Work by Guthiel et al. (2008) shows that young children recognize that different instantiations of a storybook character (e.g., 2 Winnie the Pooh dolls) are representations of the same individual (Winnie the Pooh), but still have unique identities as a function of their spatio-temporal history. Research by Rhemtulla and Hall (2009) indicates that young children understand that multiple representations of a storybook character share certain properties as a function of their shared character identity, and also that children are selective in which properties they generalize to these representations. These studies together suggest that children have the capacity to see Mall Santas as representations of the real Santa Claus, yet they do not allow us to predict whether they will adopt this view or view them as actually being the real Santa Claus. These findings also allow us to predict that, if children do view the Mall Santas as representations they will attribute certain properties of the real Santa to these representations. However, no studies of this sort have addressed children’s understanding and reaction to live, enacted multiple instantiations of fictional (or even real) human characters, which might present unique challenges to the child. In addition, no previous studies have addressed relations between children’s interactions with these beings and their beliefs about the being’s reality status.

The current studies, therefore, look to parental promotion of Santa Claus, with a particular focus on the live versions of Santa encountered throughout the Christmas season: how parents explain him, and what children think about him. In Study 1, we interviewed children and caregivers visiting a live Santa Claus at a children’s museum and asked whom they thought the man they had just visited actually was. Although there is no previous work on how children’s understanding of Live Santa develops, previous work has found that children’s understanding of acting (Goldstein & Bloom, 2011; Goldstein & Bloom, 2015) develops from believing that actors experience all the characteristics of their characters, particularly when the actors’ portrayal is realistic in nature, to believing that actors may only experience some of the emotions that they are portraying (Goldstein, 2014). Similarly, previous work has found that children’s understanding of fictional characters more generally follows a similar trajectory—a belief that the character is fully real and magical, to an emerging doubt of the supernatural and magical qualities of the character, to final doubt of the existence of the character all together (Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Woolley 1997). Given this previous work, we hypothesized that children go through four levels of understanding about the live Santa Claus with age, and that we would observe these levels in our different-aged participants. At the first level, children would believe that live Santa was the real Santa Claus, the same man who came down their chimney and gave them presents. At the second level, children would think that this was not the real Santa Claus, but was instead someone who worked for Santa and shared other characteristics with Santa—that perhaps this person was magical in his own right. At the third level, children would understand that this person was not magical, but perhaps still worked for the real Santa and could communicate with him. Finally, children would come to believe

that this person was not the real Santa and also was not magical, but rather was an ordinary person who was dressed as Santa.

In Study 2, we surveyed a large number of parents online to determine how much promotion of Santa they engaged in, how their children interacted with and reacted to live Santa Clauses, and the relationship between these variables and religiosity, as Christmas has become both a secular and a religious holiday in the United States. In both studies, we looked at the types and amount of parental promotion, how promotion and reactions to live Santas specifically changed with age, and the relationships among understanding and promotion of live Santa and other parental holiday practices. Our data not only shed light on the nature of children's beliefs about Santa, but also on their understanding of live representations of fictional beings more generally. Critically, our studies also provide insight into the role of parental promotion, experiences, and testimony in the development of children's beliefs.

2.1 Study 1

2.1.1 Methods

2.1.1.1 Participants and procedure. Participants were recruited from a group of children and caregivers visiting a Santa Claus exhibit at a local science museum in a suburban area over the course of one week before Christmas. Children and caregivers came into the exhibit from the general museum. The exhibit, which took place in a large decorated room, consisted of a live Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus actors sitting in chairs, and two large costume characters, Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The Santa and Mrs. Claus were fully dressed, with Santa wearing a beard, white hair, glasses, and pillow belly. After waiting in a short line, children could sit on Santa's lap, take a picture, and then go to a separate area of the exhibit to create and color a paper ornament with Santa's picture. While children were coloring, experimenters approached caregivers to ask if the child and caregiver would like to participate in a short survey. After verbal assent, children were interviewed one on one by an experimenter. Children were asked questions verbally, and experimenters transcribed what the children were saying during the interview, clarifying their transcripts in between interviews with each child. If children refused to answer "yes" or "no", or gave an "I don't know" answer, experimenters repeated the question, asking children to choose. All questions could be answered with a simple yes/no or a single word (e.g., "same" or "different") with the exception of two probes: "Where does this Santa live?" and "Where else have you seen Santa?" Parents were given a clipboard and survey to complete on their own. Experimenters attempted to approach every caregiver of children who appeared older than 3 years old. Caregivers were given a coupon for their next visit to the museum as a thank you for participating.

Child participants who completed at least half of the survey included 4 two-year-olds, 16 three-year-olds, 28 four-year-olds, 13 five-year-olds, 6 six-year-olds, 5 seven-year-olds, 3 eight-year-olds, and 2 ten-year-olds, for a total of 77 children, 29 male and 37 female, with 11 children's sex unreported by their caregiver. Sixty-five parents and caregivers were interviewed (27 had more than one child with them)—63 females and 2 males. No other demographic information was collected from parents or children. All aspects of the study were approved by University IRB and reviewed by the education coordinator of the museum. Exact wording of all questions, and categorization of question type can be found in Appendix 1.

2.1.1.1.1 Parent questionnaire. Caregivers were given a questionnaire with a series of

open-ended questions, and were told to complete as many as they wished. Questions included: 1) two items on “Santa promotion:” what they did to keep the Santa myth alive and what types of Santa promoting activities they did; 2) six items on “live Santa” experiences, including if their children had exposure to multiple live Santas, if anyone in their family had ever dressed as Santa, how many live Santas their child had visited publicly or privately, whether their child had ever asked about live Santa and what they told their children about live Santas; 3) three questions about whether their child had ever asked about multiple versions of Santa, expressed doubt about Santa’s abilities, or asked how Santa was able to complete his supernatural tasks; 4) if their children knew what an actor was and if they had ever been to a play; and 5) two questions about other fantasy characters—Frosty the Snowman, the Gingerbread man.

2.1.1.1.2 Child interview. Children were first asked if they knew whom they had just visited. They were then asked questions to probe whether they believed the Santa they had just visited was the real Santa Claus, including whether this Santa was the one who came down their chimney, brought them presents, and whether there are other Santas or if this was the only one. Children were given two options for each question, for example, “Are there other Santas at other museums, or is this the only one?”

If children answered negatively for any of the questions about whether the live Santa was the real Santa, they were asked a series of “characteristic probes” to investigate whether they believed this live Santa shared characteristics central to the Santa Claus persona. These included “Does this Santa live at the North Pole?” (if they answered no, then they were asked “Where does he live?”), “Does this Santa have a reindeer named Rudolph?”, “Does this Santa have some elves that help him?” and “Does this Santa like to drink milk?” Children were also asked if this Santa could communicate with the real Santa, namely “Does this Santa know the Santa who gives you presents?” and “If you tell this Santa what you would like for Christmas, will he tell other Santas at other places?” Children were then asked about their experiences with multiple Santas, “Have you seen Santa anywhere else?” (If children answered yes, they were asked where and how.) These questions were used to investigate the possibility of a lesser level of belief, that is, if children thought that this was not the real Santa but was somehow related to him. Finally, children were asked if Santa would come to their house this year to determine whether they believed in Santa Claus.

2.1.2 Results

Four research assistants coded (two coded fully and then two others each coded half of the dataset, resulting in 3 complete sets of coded responses) parent answers for both the “keep Santa myth alive” and the “Santa promotion activities” questions. Coding resulted in a count of the total number of activities reported for these two items, and reliability estimates were computed for these counts. Inter-rater agreement for all qualitative questions ranged from 90 to 100% across the two questions. Disagreements were resolved by taking the majority (2/3 coders) code.

2.1.2.1 Santa promotion. Parents were asked two questions about their at-home (as opposed to live) Santa promotion: “What do you do to keep the Santa myth alive?” and “What ‘Santa-promoting’ activities do you do?”. Coders counted the numbers of individual activities parents listed in response to the two “Santa Promotion” questions: (1) how the kept the myth alive, and (2) the types of promotion activities in which they engaged, with 0 as minimum, but no upper limit. We created a “Santa Promotion Activities” variable by

averaging the number of activities done to keep the Santa myth alive and to promote Santa. A linear regression with age in months as the predictor variable and “Santa Promotion Activities” as the dependent variable was not significant, $F(1,47) = 2.4$, $p > .12$. Thus parents do not differ in their promotion of Santa Claus for different aged children. The percentages of parents engaged in various numbers of activities, as they responded to each individual question in the questionnaire, are reported in Table 1, collapsed across age of child.

2.1.2.2 Live Santas. When asked, “Does your child have exposure to multiple Santas?”, 8% of parents reported that this was their first visit to a live Santa Claus, 8% reported this was a second visit, and 84% reported that they visited more than two live Santas this year. Eighteen percent reported that their children had no other exposure to other Santas (that is, the museum Santa was the only live Santa they would visit this year, even if multiple times), while 82% of parents reported they would visit multiple live Santas at multiple locations this year. The percentages of parents who brought their children to see live Santas various numbers of times per year and across their children’s lives are reported in Table 1, again collapsed across age. Only a few parents reported that their child had ever encountered a live Santa Claus at a private event, house party, or that anyone personally familiar to their child had ever dressed up as Santa Claus. We created a “Live Santa Exposure” variable by totaling the number of visits a parent reported their child had to a live Santa per year. A regression with “Live Santa Exposure” as the dependent variable and age in months as the independent variable showed no significant effect of age, $F(1,45) = 0.33$, $p > .56$. Again, this indicates that parental promotion and child experience around Santa Claus through visits to live Santas does not change over time based on the age of the child.

Table 1. Percentage of parents engaged in number of activities for Santa promotion and live Santa Visits collapsed across age.

	1	2	3	4	5+
Keeping the Santa myth alive	5%	41%	24%	26%	2%
“Santa-promoting” activities	6%	22%	34%	28%	8%
Live Santas visited in one year	13%	36%	22%	13%	8%
Lifetime exposures to live Santas	18%	27%	16%	7%	29%

We then created a total “Santa Promotion” variable that summed the number of parents’ activities to promote the Santa myth, how many Santa promoting activities the parents completed, how many live Santas parents took their children to see, and whether children got to interact with a Santa outside of the visit to a museum or mall (i.e. at a private party). A regression with Santa-promotion as the outcome variable and age in months as the predictor variable showed that the amount of Santa promotion did not vary significantly by the age of the child, $F(1,49) = 2.17$, $p > .14$. Again, age of the child does not appear to affect parents’ behavior.

2.1.2.2.1 Testimony about Santa. When asked how they spontaneously talk to their children about the live Santa Claus, 22% ($n=9$) of parents responded they had said nothing about him to their children (Mean age of child= 4yr, 10mo), while 33% ($n=14$) told their children he was real (Mean age of child= 4yr, 1mo), 42% ($n=17$) told their children he

was a helper (Mean age of child= 4yr, 5mo), and 2% (n=1, age 5 years) told their child he was an actor, or someone pretending to be Santa. A one-way ANOVA revealed that parent talk about Santa did not differ by age, $F(3, 37) = 0.43, p = .73$.

When asked whether children had asked about the reality status of live Santa (appendix 1, question 9), a majority of caretakers, 64% (n=22), reported that their child had never asked who the live Santa was, (Mean age of child= 3 years, 9months), while 36% (n= 13) of parents (Mean age of child=5 years, 5 months) reported their children had asked. Explanations in response to these questions included that he was a helper (n=7), that he was an actor (n=2) or an open ended or unspecified answer (n=4). To examine whether age is associated with whether children had asked about the reality status of live Santa, we conducted a logistic regression with age of child (in months) as a predictor variable and whether or not children had asked questions as the outcome variable. Age was negatively associated with asking a question about live Santa, Beta = -.061, SE = .025, $p = .014$, OR = .816, 95% CI = .718, .927. Older children were more likely to ask than younger children.

When asked whether children had asked about Santa's magical abilities (as a character, not specific to the live Santa; appendix 1, question 10), 62% (N = 21) reported their child had asked about Santa's magic, while 38% (N = 38%) reported their child had not. To examine whether age is associated with whether children had asked about the reality status of live Santa, we conducted a logistic regression with age of child (in months) as a predictor variable and whether or not children had ever asked any of the doubt and disbelief questions as the outcome variable. Age was negatively associated with asking a question about live Santa, Beta = -.072, SE = .035, $p = .01$, OR = .931, 95% CI = .870, .996. Older children were again more likely to ask than younger children.

2.1.2.2.2 Child responses. Almost every child interviewed professed a belief in Santa Claus, with 94% reporting that Santa would come to their house this year (one Jewish child whose mother still brought him to visit Santa and two 10-year-olds were the only exceptions). Children's responses to each individual question are reported in Table 2. We created a "live Santa as real" score based on children's professed belief as to whether the live Santa they just visited was the same as the one who comes down their chimney, the same Santa as the one who gave them presents, or the only Santa who appeared at all the various locations over the course of the season ("Is this the same Santa that comes down your chimney or is this a different Santa?"; "Is this is the same Santa that gives you presents or is this a different Santa?"; "Are there other Santas at other museums or other places, or is this the only Santa?") by adding up their responses to the 3 questions. Scores could range from 0 (different/other to all questions) to 3 (same/only to all questions). A linear regression with child's age in months as the independent variable and "Live Santa as Real" score as the dependent variable was not significant, $p > .26$. Regardless of age, children had the same level of belief that the live Santa was the real Santa.

Table 2. Individual question responses to each child question.

Question	Answer Options	N	% "No/ Not real/ Other" Answer	% "Yes/Real/Only" Answers
Will Santa come to your	Yes/No	73	5.5%	94.5%

house at Christmas this year?				
Are there other Santas at other museums or other places, or is this the only Santa?	Other/Only	73	54.8%	45.2%
Is this Santa the same Santa that comes down your chimney or is this a different Santa?	Different/Same	68	66.2%	33.8%
Is this Santa the same Santa that gives you presents?	Yes/No	72	36.1%	63.9%
Does this Santa live at the North Pole?	Yes/No	49	40.8%	59.2%
Does this Santa have some elves that help him?	Yes/No	39	33.3%	66.7%
Does this Santa have a reindeer named Rudolph?	Yes/No	40	30%	70%
Does this Santa like to drink milk?	Yes/No	72	29.2%	70.8%
Does this Santa know the Santa who gives you presents?	Yes/No	39	33.3%	66.6%
Have you seen Santa anywhere else?	Yes/No	76	28.9%	71.1%
If you tell this Santa what you would like for Christmas, will he tell other Santas at other places?	Yes/No	30	36.6%	63.3%

When children answered negatively for any one of the “Live Santa as real” questions, they were then asked follow-up questions about whether this Santa shared characteristics with the real Santa (i.e., Does this Santa have a reindeer named Rudolf?; Does this Santa have some elves that help him?; Does this Santa live at the North pole?; Does this Santa like to drink milk?), and we used these responses to create a “Belief in Shared Characteristics” variable. This score could range from 0 (no shared characteristics) to 4 (all shared characteristics). Children were not asked these questions when they responded “yes” to all three questions that the live Santa was real so as to not induce doubt. We then conducted a regression with age as the predictor variable and “Shared characteristics” as the dependent variable. The regression was significant, with age explaining 7.5% of the variance, ($R^2 = .075$, $\beta = -.27$, $F(1, 73) = 5.82$, $p = .018$). Among children who already did not believe that the live Santa was the real Santa, older children were less likely to believe the live Santa shared characteristics with the real Santa than were younger children.

When children answered that the live Santa was not the real Santa, they were also asked several questions about whether he knew or communicated with the real Santa. Children’s answers to these questions were averaged to create a mean “Live Santa shared

world” score. A linear regression with child’s age in months as the independent variable and “Live Santa shared world” score as the dependent variable was significant, with age explaining 15.4% of the variance, ($R^2 = .154$, $\beta = -.39$ $F(1, 45^1) = 8.18$, $p = .006$). Among children who believed that the live Santa was not the real Santa, older children believe less that he is connected in some way with the real one than did younger children.

We then grouped children according to degree of belief in the live Santa (i.e., if he 1) was Santa, 2) shared characteristics with Santa, 3) communicated with the real Santa, or 4) was simply an actor). The highest level of belief was that this was the only Santa, the same as they saw in other museums, and the real Santa ($N = 31$, 39.2%). Children were classified at the second level if they responded no to the “only and real Santa” question, but “yes” to any of the questions about whether this was the same Santa who came down their chimney, or the same Santa who gave out presents ($N = 30$, 38.8%). The third level of belief included children who answered “no” for whether this Santa came down the chimney or gave presents, but responded “yes” on any question about whether he shared characteristics with the real Santa ($N = 11$, 13.8%). The final level was assigned if a child responded “no” on all of the above, but responded that the Live Santa communicated with the real Santa ($N = 1$, 1.3%). No child in our survey answered no to all questions; this most likely was an effect of where we collected our sample. To look at the relationship between age and belief, we conducted a one way ANOVA, with age as the predictor variable. We found no effect of age, $F(3,68) = 2.207$, $p = .12$.

2.1.2.2.3 Relations between Santa promotion and understanding of live Santa. We then turned our attention to the links between parental promotion of Santa Claus and children’s understanding of the live Santa. First, to determine what factors predicted children’s belief that the live Santa was real, we regressed age, parental promotion score, and number of exposures to live Santa onto the “Live Santa as real” score. The overall model was significant, $F(3,43) = 4.278$, $p = .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .176$, however when looking at each predictor separately, child age and parental promotion were not significant predictors, but number of exposures to live Santas was, $p < .01$, $Beta = .517$. The more live Santas children had been exposed to, the more likely they were to believe that the live Santa was the real Santa. To determine what predicted a belief that the live Santa shared characteristics with the real Santa, we regressed age, parental promotion and child exposure to live Santas on child belief that the live Santa shared characteristics. The model was not significant, $F(1,47) = .55$, $p = .64$.

Finally to determine what predicted whether children believed the live Santa shared information with the real Santa and other live Santas, we regressed age, parental promotion of Santa and amount of exposure children had with live Santas onto children’s belief in live Santas interactions. The model was significant, $F(3, 29) = 3.117$, $p = .043$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$. When looking at each predictor separately, age and parental promotion were not significant predictors ($Betas = -.26$ and $-.22$, respectively), but number of exposures to live Santas was a marginally significant predictor, $p = .061$, $beta = .537$. Regardless of age or parental promotion of Santa, the more exposure children have to live Santas, the more likely they are to believe live Santas can talk to one another and to the real

¹ These questions came at the end of our survey, and therefore many children had chosen not to complete the survey to this point. Therefore, our N for the “Shared world” interaction questions is lower than our N for the “Characteristics” questions.

Santa.

2.1.3 Discussion

Despite potential concerns over the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality, we observed high levels of promotion of the fictional character of Santa Claus among the parents we interviewed, both through activities in their own homes and by bringing their children to see multiple live versions of the character. Importantly, in-home parental promotion of Santa Claus was at the same level regardless of children's age. Using three different measures of how much engagement children had with the fantasy of Santa Claus, we found no significant differences in parental promotion and child experience by age. Thus, regardless of their children's age, parents are spending a lot of time and energy creating a realistic fictional world for their children when it comes to Santa. Further, level of parental promotion of Santa at home was not related to children's belief that the mall Santa was real. This may be because parents were overall promoting Santa at a very high level, or it may be that other factors are more critical determinants of these beliefs.

The factor that did positively affect belief that the real Santa and the mall Santa are one and the same was exposure to multiple Santas. The more exposures to a live Santa children had over the Christmas season, the more likely they were both to believe a live Santa was the real Santa and to believe (if they did not believe the Santa was the real one) that the multiple Santas can communicate with each other and with the real Santa. This is a counterintuitive finding, as one might expect that experience with and evidence of different Santa Clauses would lead to skepticism and doubt. Perhaps seeing Santa in multiple places with multiple backgrounds and slightly different physical characteristics instead reinforces children's beliefs that Santa is magical, all knowing, and all seeing; his appearance in a variety of situations is evidence of his supernatural abilities. Independent of age, amount of first-hand evidence of Santa's existence matters.

Although the overall level of in-home promotion did not change with age, it is possible that the type of testimony children receive does change. We did not measure exactly what the parents were saying when they engaged in the various Santa activities. Very few parents ($n=13$) responded that their child had asked about the multiple versions of Santa; 64% ($N=22$) of surveyed parents reported their child never asked about live Santa, although older children were more likely to ask than younger children. This is a question that should be explored further in future research. Overall, it appears that, if parents have made the decision to promote the Santa Claus myth, children believe in him regardless of the amount of promotion in which parents engage. Thus it may be that other factors, such as children's own understanding and skepticism about magic and supernatural events may be critically important in the eventual transition to disbelief (Shtulman & Yoo, 2015). Other aspects of testimony, such the specific content of the testimony, or more subtle aspects (e.g., facial expressions, phrasing) may also play a role.

As noted, this study was conducted at a museum exhibition with a live Santa Claus and Christmas-themed display. Therefore, it might be unsurprising that we found a high level of Santa promotion from parents and belief in children; a paid visit to a museum to see Santa requires some level of planning and effort, as well as willingness to attend on the part of the children. This last issue may have been at least partly responsible for the lack of an age effect on the "Live Santa is Real" score, as older children who no longer believe may have been reluctant to accompany their parents to this event, and thus were not included in our sample. Therefore, in Study 2, we wanted to achieve three goals: (1) to investigate

what Santa promotion looked like in parents who did not necessarily make the effort to bring their child to a live Santa visit, (2) to explore parental encouragement beyond parents with young children visiting Santa and (3) to investigate additional factors that might affect parental encouragement, such as religion.

Using the open-ended responses from Study 1, we created forced choice responses for Study 2. In Study 1 the majority of children were preschool-aged, which raises the question of what happens with older children, particularly as they begin to question the reality status of Santa (average age of disbelief from previous studies is around 7 years old (Prentice et al., 1979). Hence, we included two groups in our Study 2: Parents with children under the age of 6, who would most likely fully believe in Santa, and parents with children between the ages of 7-12, who may be beginning to question or disbelieve in Santa.

3.1 Study 2

3.1.1 Methods

3.1.1.1 Participants. Participants included 197 adults who completed at least half of a survey, divided into two groups based on self-reported parental status. Participants were classified based on the age of their oldest child. Parents either reported having an oldest child under the age of 6 ("Parents of Younger Children" N=120, 61%), or an oldest child between the ages of 7 and 12 years, ("Parents of Older Children" N = 77, 39%).

3.1.1.2 Procedure. Surveys were posted on Qualtrics and made public. After consent, participants confirmed they had a child under the age of 12 and completed the survey based on their current celebrations, practices and beliefs. Participants were recruited via posting the link to the survey on various parenting forums and list serves, and to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The survey took roughly 15 minutes to complete and can be found in Appendix 2. Parents were entered into a lottery for a gift certificate for their participation.

The items in the survey were based on responses to Study 1, and included a number of additional questions on parents' religious affiliation, whether and how parents celebrated Christmas religiously or secularly. We used these data as predictor variables for our live Santa belief and promotion outcomes below, to investigate the role that religion and secular celebration of Christmas plays in live Santa belief and promotion. In addition, we asked about which activities parents did to promote Santa and which they considered to be the most important, children's exposure to live Santas, why parents brought their children to see a live Santa, and what parents considered to be "important" for a live Santa's appearance.

3.1.1.3 Analysis Plan. Our goal was to investigate Santa promotion in the larger context of religious and secular celebrations of Christmas, with parents who did not necessarily take their children to see a Live Santa exhibition. We also sought to discover what parents regarded as important characteristics of Live Santas, and how they discussed Live Santas with their children.

We begin by exploring the frequencies of religious celebrations, secular celebrations, Santa promotion and live Santa visits around Christmas in the two parent groups, using MANOVA to determine whether parents of older (versus younger) children promote Christmas more religiously, secularly, or as related to Santa and live Santas specifically. We then investigate (also using MANOVA) whether parents self-identifying as religious, regardless of child age, differ in secular celebrations, Santa promotion and live Santa visits from non-religious parents, to test whether religiosity is a predictor of live

Santa exposure and promotion, particularly in comparison to other predictors of promotion. We then look more closely at religiosity, using regression to investigate whether amount of religious celebration of Christmas predicts secular celebration, Santa promotion and live Santa visits.

We then turn our attention to live Santas specifically. Here we assess, with a series of chi-squares, potential parental group differences in the reasons parents take their children to see live Santa, when they first took their children to see a live Santa, and what characteristics parents find important in the live Santas they take their children to visit. Using regression, we also investigate whether parents who promote Santa more also take their children on their first Santa visit earlier than parents who promote him less. Finally, we look at when children question their parents about the live Santa Claus, how often they ask questions and what parents reply. Using logistic regression, we test whether more religious, secular, and Santa promotion predicts children's questioning of live Santas.

3.1.2 Results

The average age of the responders for the parents of younger children was 34 years (SD = 4 years; 97 women, 9 men, 20 no sex information), and 37 years (SD = 5 years; 64 women, 5 men, 8 no sex information) for the parents of older children. For questions in which we asked parents to discuss their children, we asked them to focus on their oldest child specifically. The average age of the oldest child for our parents of younger children was 3 years, 4 months (SD = 1 year, 10 months, with 46% discussing a male child). The average age of the child for the parents of older children was 9 years, 3 months (SD = 1 year, 6 months, with 53% discussing a male child).

3.1.2.1 Christmas celebrations and Santa promotion. Descriptive data on religious and secular celebrations, as well as Santa Promotion, and Live Santa exposure, divided by parent group, can be found in Table 3. The number of religious celebrations each participant endorsed were summed to create a "total amount of religious celebrations" score, and the number of secular non-Santa celebrations each participant endorsed were summed to create a "Total amount of secular non-Santa celebrations" score. The number of Santa promoting activities in which participants engaged, not including live Santa visits was summed to create a "non Live Santa promotion total" score, the number of visits to live Santas was summed, and age of first live Santa visit was reported as a measure of live Santa promotion.

3.1.2.2 Effects of parental group. To determine whether parental group (i.e., oldest child age) was a predictor of number of religious celebrations, secular non-Santa celebrations, amount of Santa promotion, number of live Santa visits, and age of first live Santa visit, we conducted a MANOVA with parental group as the predictor variable. The overall MANOVA was not significant, Wilks' Lambda $F(5, 170) = 0.42$, $p = .83$. Tests of between subject effects showed no individual significant effects, all $ps > .37$. Again, child age did not predict Santa promotion.

Table 3. *Descriptive data for religious and secular celebrations and Santa promotion (percentage of parents reporting engagement in each activity).*

	Parents of Younger Children	Parents of Older Children
Religiously Affiliated	61%	61%

Celebrates Christmas Religiously	49%	58%
Attend Church	43%	52%
Christmas Pageant	11%	21%
Nativity Scene in house	30%	39%
Visit Church Nativity Scene	15%	18%
Talk, Read or Sing about Christmas Religiously	6%	8%
Advent Calendar in the Home	4%	7%
Total Number of Religious Celebrations	1.09 (1.39)	1.44 (1.58)
Celebrates Christmas Secularly	92%	91%
Has a tree	83%	88%
Decorate House	80%	86%
Attend Parties	75%	81%
Give Presents	73%	78%
Other	8%	9%
Total Number of Secular Celebrations	3.85 (1.76)	3.98 (1.55)
<i>Santa Promoting Activities</i>		
Visit Santa	57%	48%
Cookies and Milk	61%	75%
Carrots for Reindeer	34%	47%
Elf on the Shelf	23%	25%
Letters for Santa	35%	65%
Talk about Santa	67%	78%
Warn children about naughty/nice	46%	57%
Santa Books/Movies	64%	72%
Total Number of Santa Promoting Activities	6.61 (3.96)	7.74 (3.34)
Total Number of Live Santa Visits	2.06 (1.20)	2.15 (1.21)
Age of First Santa Visit	2.20 (0.95)	2.36 (1.11)

3.1.2.2.1 Effects of Christmas celebrations and Religiosity. We conducted a MANOVA to determine whether parents identifying as religious ($N = 108$) promoted Santa, had more secular non-Santa celebrations, visited more Santas, or visited Santa earlier than parents not identifying as religious ($N = 68$). There was no significant difference between groups, Wilks Lambda $F(1,174) = 1.16$, $p = .33$. Follow up tests of between subjects effects showed that religious parents ($M = 3.36$) actually engaged in fewer secular non-Santa celebrations than did non-religious parents ($M = 3.73$), $F(1,174) = 4.19$, $p = .04$, but otherwise the two groups did not significantly differ on live Santa visits, age of first live visit, or Santa promotion.

We then conducted a regression with number of religious and non-Santa secular celebrations of Christmas as predictor variables and amount of Santa promotion as a dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 173) = 3.908$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$. Both religious celebrations, $p < .001$, Standard beta = .17, and Secular celebrations, $p < .01$, Standard beta = .46, were significant predictors of Santa promotion, showing that Santa promotion is part of a larger pattern of Christmas celebrations. We then

conducted a regression with amount of religious and non-Santa secular celebration of Christmas as predictor variables and number of Live Santa Visits as the dependent variable. The overall model was not significant, $F(2, 173) = 1.08$, $p > .34$, $R^2 = .01$. We then conducted a third regression with amount of religious and non-Santa secular celebration of Christmas as predictor variables and age of first Live Santa Visit as the dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 207) = 6.582$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .06$. Only Secular non-Santa celebrations was a significant predictor $p = .003$, Standard beta = .206, showing that age of first Santa visit is related to secular, but not religious celebration of Christmas. Overall, it appears that how parents celebrate Christmas, specifically, the number of celebrations in which they engage, is a stronger predictor of Santa promotion than is family religiosity.

3.1.2.4 Live Santa visits. When asked why they take their children to see live Santa, parents had a variety of reasons, but “for the picture” was the most common response for both groups of parents. The variety of reasons that parents took their children to see live Santas at the Mall can be found in Table 4. To check for differences in endorsed responses by group, we conducted a chi-square test on each response. The parents of older children endorsed the idea of a live Santa visit to reinforce Santa belief significantly more than parents of younger children, $X^2(1, N = 197) = 3.719$, $p = .04$, and to enforce good behavior, significantly more than parents of younger children $X^2(1, N = 197) = 4.02$, $p = .044$, and parents of younger children endorsed the idea of engaging in make believe or play through a Santa visit marginally more than parents of older children, $X^2(1, N = 197) = 2.798$, $p = .06$. There were no significant differences between groups regarding endorsement of finding out what the child wanted for Christmas or to take a picture. It may be that as parents perceive their children as becoming skeptical about Santa’s reality, they use visits to live Santas as a means of counteracting that process.

We also asked when parents first took their child to visit Santa. To examine whether parents who promoted Santa more also began promoting him earlier, we conducted a regression with age of first Santa visit as the predictor variable and Santa promotion as the dependent variable. However, we did not find a significant relationship $F(1, 256) = 1.50$, $p = .22$, indicating that age of first visit is not related to total amount of Santa promotion.

Table 4. Reasons for Live Santa visits endorsed, by parental group.

	Parents of younger children	Parents of older children
For the picture	58%	55%
To play/make them happy	42%	30%
To reinforce Santa belief	19%	31%
Find out what child wants for Christmas	15%	20%
Reinforce good behavior	4%	12%

It may be that while children’s age is not related to promotion or experience with live Santa, the types of experiences parents seek out for their children vary by age in more subtle ways. One factor we explored was the level of realism of the portrayal of the live Santa. We asked participants what characteristics they thought were important for a live Santa to possess. Means for each characteristic, judged from 1-5 (Not important, Moderately

Important, Important, Very Important, Extremely Important), can be found in Table 5. Those characteristics that were judged as “Very Important” or higher included a red suit, male and happy. However, almost all characteristics, with the exception of race/ethnicity, were judged as at least “Important” or higher. In line with our predictions, parents of younger children cared less overall about these characteristics than parents of older children. A MANOVA with characteristic as the dependent variable and parent group as the independent variable was significant, *Wilks’ Lambda* $F(1, 12) = 2.396, p = .007$. Follow up tests of between-subject effects showed that parents of older children cared significantly more about glasses, $F(1, 179) = 8.867, p = .003$, and black boots, $F(1, 179) = 8.09, p = .005$, and marginally more about a real beard, $F(1, 179) = 3.49, p = .06$ and a fat belly $F(1, 179) = 2.61, p = .10$. The parents of younger children consistently rated the characteristics as less important than the parents of older children.

This suggests that perhaps children’s experiences with live Santas are changing in subtle ways as they get older—the Santas they are exposed to are conforming more to the ideal myth of Santa. It may be that parents are more attuned to which type of Santa they are exposing their child to, or that parents recognize children are becoming more specific in their expectations for a live Santa, and are choosing to confirm (rather than challenge) those expectations.

Table 5. Importance of various characteristics for live Santas.

Characteristics	Parents of younger children	Parents of older children
Real Beard ⁺	2.81 (1.49)	3.18 (1.45)
White Beard	3.66 (1.33)	3.87 (1.30)
Fat Belly ⁺	2.93 (1.19)	3.36 (1.46)
Glasses*	2.04 (1.21)	2.62 (1.50)
Red Suit	4.07 (1.18)	4.10 (1.23)
Same Race as Participant	1.62 (1.03)	1.78 (1.24)
Caucasian	1.75 (1.13)	2.22 (1.48)
Surrounded by decorations	2.57 (1.24)	2.69 (1.36)
Male	3.81 (1.36)	4.01 (1.32)
White Hair	3.54 (1.32)	3.91 (1.27)
Black boots*	2.84 (1.44)	3.46 (1.35)
Happy	4.36 (1.14)	4.23 (1.12)

*Significant difference by group, $p < .02$

+Marginally significant difference by group, $p \leq .10$

3.1.2.5 Questioning Live Santa. For the parents of younger children, 20% ($N = 22$) reported their child had asked about the live Santa (80%, $N = 85$ reported no), and 62% ($N = 46$) of parents of older children reported their child had asked, (38%, $N = 28$ reported no) $\chi^2(1, N = 181) = 32.27, p < .001$. Parents who responded that they had been asked were told to select as many possible responses as they had told their children. The most common answer for younger and parents of older children was that he was Santa’s helper, with 73% of younger and 52% of parents of older children responding this way. The next most

common response was that he was someone pretending to be Santa, but was connected to the real Santa, with 32% of younger and 24% of parents of older children responding this way. Many parents responded that he was just a man pretending, unconnected to the real Santa (13.6% of younger and 17.4% of parents of older children). Only 4% of parents of younger and 8% of parents of older children tell their children that he is the real Santa. And finally, 9% of parents of younger and 8.6% of parents of older children did not say anything specific.

To examine what factors might be associated with whether or not children asked about multiple and live versions of Santa, we conducted a logistic regression with amount of Santa promotion, religious Christmas celebrations, secular non-Santa celebrations, age of first Santa visit and number of live Santa visits as simultaneous predictor variables and whether or not children had asked questions as the outcome variable. Only level of Santa promotion significantly predicted whether or not children asked about live Santas. Greater promotion was associated with lower odds of asking, Beta = -.204, SE = .065, $p = .002$, OR = .816, 95% CI = .718, .927. Unlike in Study 1, number of visits to Live Santa did not seem to affect children's questioning, but more Santa promotion was associated with lower likelihood of questioning.

3.1.3 Discussion

As in Study 1, we found a very high level of celebration of Santa, and a very high level of Santa promotion and exposure to live Santas. In this much larger sample of parents who were not specifically chosen because they had taken their child to visit a live Santa, the importance of the promotion of this fictional character was still high. Importantly, and somewhat surprisingly, we found no differences in the amount of Santa promotion undertaken by parents of younger compared to older children. In addition, we found similar levels of visits to live Santas, as well as of both religious and secular celebrations of Christmas in both age groups. These findings indicate that parents are not providing different levels of support for Santa Claus to different aged children. However, we also explored parents' motivations for taking their children to visit live Santas and found that many parents, while taking their children to multiple live versions of Santa, were doing so primarily for the picture and not for the explicit purpose of promoting belief. At the same time, parents of 7- to 12-year-olds, compared to parents of younger children, were more likely to take children to see live Santa for the purpose of "reinforcing belief," and promoting good behavior, and were pickier in what they considered the most important characteristics for a live Santa to possess. Thus, even though the amount of Santa promotion remains constant across age in our study, parents' internal motivation for such promotion appears to differ with age, suggesting the existence of more subtle differences in experience as children get older. Given previous findings that between the ages of 7-12 children are beginning to give up Santa belief (Prentice et al., 1978; Prentice et al., 1979), it may be that parents of older children are trying as hard as they can to continue their children's belief, while parents of younger children, because they know that their children believe firmly, care less about what a live Santa should look like.

Santa promotion was found to be a part of a larger pattern for families with high levels of religious and secular celebrations of Christmas, that is, Santa promotion is not isolated from the broader Christmas celebration. Number of religious celebrations was associated with higher levels of Santa promotion and visits to Santa, but was not associated with non-Santa secular celebrations. While he is not intended to be a religious figure, Santa

seems to be connected to the religious foundations of Christmas in a way that other types of secular celebrations are not. One limitation to note is that we did not measure parents' child-centered activities in other areas—such as birthday parties or visits to museums. It may be that the parents who engage in high levels of religious, secular and Santa celebrations simply are more active in their parenting overall, rather than specifically active around the kinds of measured activities. Future research should investigate the uniqueness of Santa and Christmas promoting activities from general activities.

As in Study 1, we found that children did not overwhelmingly ask about the live version of Santa Claus. Questioning of the reality of live Santa occurred less in children whose parents had promoted Santa more through household activities, however it was unconnected to number of religious celebrations, non-Santa secular celebrations, or the number of visits to live Santas. We did find, however, that parents of older children more often reported that their children asked questions about live Santa's reality status than did parents of younger children. A caveat is that because we relied on parental self-report to collect our data, parents' memories may have played a role in these findings. Future research will present parents with opportunities to talk about live Santas in a lab setting.

4.1 General Discussion

In Study 1, we found that the more children visited live Santas, the more they believed he was real, regardless of age. Instead of finding inconsistencies across multiple Santa visits (e.g., different beard, voice, glasses, etc.) to be evidence of his non-reality status, more exposure meant more belief. In Study 2, although we did not ask children about their belief, we have an indirect measure in children's reported questioning behavior. Here we found that asking questions about the reality of Santas was unassociated with number of live Santa visits, but was negatively associated with amount of parental Santa promotion. In both studies, the more promotion of Santa, the less likely children were to ask questions about a live Santa's reality status. According to Harris et al. (2006), because of their reliance on testimony for objects and entities they have never seen with their own eyes, children may require more direct evidence when a being is considered to be equivocal in existence. Thus, a primary explanation for children's waning belief with age is a decrease in the amount and nature of parental testimony. But our data show that this testimony may not vary with age, as our findings revealed no effects of age on any of our promotion measures. Therefore, when children do begin to disbelieve in Santa, it may less as a result of changing parental testimony, and more a result of various cognitive changes and personal experiences.

An important area of future research would be to investigate children who are not given strong parental promotion of Santa Claus but still encounter him at the mall or in other public places—perhaps these children believe at the same rate as children whose parents strongly promote Santa, because they are experiencing directly what others take on testimony. Previous work showing existing Santa belief in Jewish children indicates the strong role that cultural testimony and experience may play (Prentice & Gordon, 1987) independent of parents or direct testimony.

We also found that children's age was not associated with number of live Santa visits in either Study 1 or Study 2. However, parents with children between the ages of 7 and 12 were also more picky about what live Santas looked like, rating multiple characteristics as more important than parents of younger children. In addition, parents of older children were more likely to claim that the reason they took their children to visit live

Santa was to reinforce belief. At the same time, the parents of older children also had children who were reported as more likely to ask questions about Santa's magic or live versions of Santa. Tying all this together, it may be that parents are engaging in subtle attempts to increase belief in their 7-12 year old children (such as ensuring certain physical characteristics of Santa are correct, and visiting explicitly to reinforce belief), perhaps as a result of their children beginning to doubt Santa more (through asking more questions). These data cannot tell us whether parents are stepping up their promotion because of children's questions, or if older children are beginning to increase questioning as a result of their parents' actions. It may be that parents wish for their children to retain belief in childhood magic as long as possible (Clark, 1995), and continue to promote Santa, and to promote him more carefully as their children show doubt.

Children's belief in who exactly the live Santa is seems to follow a progressive pattern. While most of the children in our sample for Study 1 believed in the overall myth of Santa, perhaps their engagement with and eventual disbelief in the representational live version of Santa was a critical first step in developing understanding. If children did not believe that the live Santa was the real Santa who comes down their chimney (which in our sample did not depend on age), they believed he shared characteristics with the real Santa, such as having elves or liking milk, or they believed he could communicate with the real Santa. Both belief in shared characteristics and belief in communication were lower in older as compared to younger children. In most previous work on Santa belief, and character belief generally, the pattern of understanding has been explained as bimodal: either children believe, or they do not (e.g. Prentice et al, 1978; 1979). A few studies have shown more gradual development in disbelief (e.g. Anderson & Prentice, 1994), including increases in critical questions as children begin to better intuitively understand physics and biology (Shtulman & Yoo, 2015).

Our study shows one pathway by which children's beliefs may systematically progress from full belief to disbelief. Components of belief in the Santa concept may change as children get older, even before children themselves begin to doubt the existence of Santa. At first, children may believe that a live representation of Santa inhabits the same magical world as the real Santa, but as they age, they begin to separate the magic and connection of the mall Santa from the magic of the real one. Then, once they no longer believe in the representation as magical or connected to the "real" character, they begin to disbelieve in the magic of the "real" Santa. However, the realistic nature of the representational fictional character in this case may be particularly confusing even to older children; perhaps they need to progress through believing the characters are the same, to thinking they are connected, to believing the representational character is not real, and to finally understanding that Santa himself is not actually real.

There are still many unanswered questions about children's belief in Santa Claus and their understanding of representational live versions of all kinds of fictional characters. In future work, we plan to investigate children's understanding of live versions of known fictional characters, such as Cinderella at Disney World or Elmo at Sesame Place. Unlike Santa, who is promoted as real, Cinderella and Elmo are known to be fictional by most children visiting these characters; it could potentially confuse or frighten children when they see a live human in the real world that had previously been assigned to the world of fiction (as compared to Santa, who is promoted by parents as really existing in the real world). Future research could also provide children, in an experimental setting,

opportunities to judge the reality status of a novel fictional character (such as the “Candy Witch”; Woolley, Boerger & Markman, 2004) who appears in multiple live instantiations.

An additional question is what children think about the live nativity scenes often seen around Christmas time. Only 16.6% of parents in Study 2 took children to see a live Nativity scene. How children understand these live humans portraying biblical characters, and how parents talk to their children about the scenes, is unanswered. Finally, whereas we asked parents how they explained the live Santas to children, we did not question children who no longer believed in Santa directly as to whom they believed the live Santa was previously. Current work in our lab is investigating how children who have recently come to disbelieve in Santa viewed the live versions of Santa in recent years past.

How Santa, particularly live versions of Santa, fits in with the larger picture of understanding fictional characters and narratives is still underexplored. At the same time, Santa holds a special place in American culture and fictional understanding. Santa is promoted in multiple ways, both similarly to other fictional characters in books, movies and television shows, and uniquely as a readily available live experience in the community spaces of children’s lives. These multiple ways of promotion seemingly occur independent of children’s ages.

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Appendix 1. Study 1 Questionnaires

Parent Questionnaire

Santa Promotion Questions

1. What do you do to keep the Santa myth alive?
2. What “Santa-promoting” things do you do? (e.g. put out cookies and milk, write “From Santa” on presents, have an Elf on the Shelf?)

Live Santa Questions

3. What do you tell your children about the mall/museum Santa?
4. Does your child have exposure to multiple Santas?
5. How many times has your child visited Santa before in a museum, mall, or other public event?
6. Has anyone in your family ever dressed up in a Santa suit?
7. How many times has your child been visited by Santa at a private event or your house (that is, your child saw and interacted with Santa).
8. How many Santas will your child visit this year?

Doubt and Disbelief Questions

9. Has your child ever asked about multiple versions of Santa? If yes, how did you explain it?
10. Does your child ever ask how Santa is able to deliver all the presents/ know who is good/ etc? What do you say?
11. Has your child, in any other way, ever expressed any doubt about Santa’s existence? If yes, how did you respond?

Other Questions

12. Do your children know what an actor is?/ Has your child ever been to a play?
13. Are your children/child familiar with Frosty the Snowman (i.e. do you own the movie/ read a book/ sing about him?) How many times have you read/watched
14. Are your children/child familiar with the Gingerbread man? (i.e. do you own the book)? How many times have you read it?

Child Questionnaire

Recognition of Santa

1. Who are you visiting today?

Belief as Real:

1. Are there other Santas at other museums or other places, or is this the only Santa?
2. Is this Santa the same Santa that comes down your chimney or is this a different Santa?
3. Is this Santa the same Santa that gives you presents?

Shared Characteristics (if no to any Belief as Real question):

1. Does this Santa live at the North Pole?
 - a. If NO: Where do you think he lives?
2. Does this Santa have a reindeer named Rudolph?
3. Does this Santa have some elves that help him?
4. Does this Santa know the Santa who gives you presents?
5. Does this Santa like to drink milk?

Uniqueness of Live Santa:

1. Have you seen Santa anywhere else?

If OTHERS 1) Where are there other Santas?

If OTHERS 2) If you tell this Santa what you would like for Christmas, will he tell other Santas at other places?

Belief in Santa:

1. Will Santa come to your house at Christmas this year?

Appendix 2. Study 2 Questions

1. Do you have a religious affiliation?
2. What is your religious affiliation?
3. Do you celebrate Christmas religiously?
4. How do you celebrate Christmas religiously? (please check as many as apply)
 - a. Go to Church (1)
 - b. Participate in Christmas Pageant (2)
 - c. Have a nativity scene in your house (3)
 - d. Visit nativity scenes at churches (4)
 - e. Other (5) _____
5. Do you celebrate Christmas secularly(i.e., non religiously)?
6. How do you celebrate Christmas secularly (i.e., non religiously)?
(check as many as apply)
 - a. Have a tree (1)
 - b. Visit Santa (2)
 - c. Decorate house (3)
 - d. Give presents from Santa (4)
 - e. Attend parties (5)
 - f. Other (6) _____
7. What "Santa- promoting" things do you do? (Please check all that apply).
 - a. None (1)
 - b. Bake/ Put out cookies and milk (2)
 - c. Put out carrots for Santa's Reindeer (3)
 - d. Elf on the shelf (4)
 - e. Write letters to Santa (5)
 - f. Take children to see Santa (6)
 - g. Talk about Santa (7)
 - h. Presents from Santa (8)
 - i. Hang stockings for Santa to fill (9)
 - j. Warn children about being naughty or nice (10)
 - k. Read Santa books (11)
 - l. Sing songs about Santa (12)
 - m. Watch movies about Santa (13)
 - n. Other (14)
8. Does your children have exposure to Live Santas? (For example, at the mall, a museum, a private party, etc)?
9. How many per year on average?
 - a. 1 (1)
 - b. 2 (2)
 - c. 3 (3)
 - d. 4 (4)
 - e. 5+ (5)
10. Has anyone in your family ever dressed up as Santa?
11. What was your oldest child's reaction?

- a. Thought it was a real Santa (1)
 - b. Knew it wasn't the real Santa but enjoyed it anyway (2)
 - c. Knew it wasn't the real Santa and was not interested (3)
 - d. Other (4) _____
- 12. How old was your oldest child, the first time you took him/her to see a Live Santa Claus?
 - a. Never taken my child to see a live Santa Claus (1)
 - b. Less than 1 year old (2)
 - c. 2 (3)
 - d. 3 (4)
 - e. 4 (5)
 - f. 5 (6)
 - g. 6 (7)
 - h. 7 (8)
 - i. 8 (9)
 - j. 9 (10)
 - k. 10 (11)
 - l. 11 (12)
- 13. Have your children ever asked about multiple/ live versions of Santa Claus?
- 14. What do you tell your children about the Live Santa?
 - a. Don't say anything specific (1)
 - b. He is the real Santa (2)
 - c. He is Santas helper (3)
 - d. He is someone pretending to be Santa, but he is connected the the "real Santa" (4)
 - e. He is just a man pretending, unconnected to the real Santa (5)
- 15. Please check the reasons you may take your child to see a Live Santa (please check as many as apply).
 - a. I don't take my child to see Santa Live (1)
 - b. For the picture (2)
 - c. To enforce good behavior (3)
 - d. To find out what my child wants for Christmas (4)
 - e. To make believe/play with them (5)
 - f. To reinforce their belief in Santa Claus (6)
 - g. Other reason: Please explain (7) _____
- 16. How important are the following aspects of a Live Santa's appearance?
 - a. Real beard (1)
 - b. White beard (2)
 - c. Fat belly (3)
 - d. Glasses (4)
 - e. Red Suit (5)
 - f. Same race as you (6)
 - g. Caucasian (7)
 - h. Surrounded by decorations (8)

- i. Male (9)
 - j. White hair (10)
 - k. Black boots (11)
 - l. Happy (12)
- 17. What is your age?
 - 18. What is your sex?
 - 19. What is your highest level of education?
 - 20. What is your profession?
 - 21. What is/ are your race AND/ OR ethnicity?