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Children's understanding of physical possibility constrains their belief in Santa Claus



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ABSTRACT

What role does children's understanding of physical possibility play in their acceptance of adults' testimony about Santa? This question was addressed by comparing children's ability to differentiate events that do and do not violate physical laws to their skepticism toward Santa. Children aged 3–9 ($n = 47$) were asked (a) to generate information-seeking questions for Santa in a letter-writing task, (b) to explain how Santa accomplishes some of the feats he is purported to accomplish, and (c) to assess the possibility of various physically extraordinary events (unrelated to Santa), some possible and some impossible. Children who were better at differentiating possible events from impossible events had also begun to engage with the mythology surrounding Santa at a conceptual level, questioning the feasibility of Santa's extraordinary activities while also positing provisional explanations for those activities in the absence of a known answer. These findings suggest that children's acceptance of testimony about Santa – and possibly other forms of counterintuitive testimony – depends not only on the testimony they receive but also on the child's own understanding of physical possibility.

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1. Introduction

Much of what we know about the world comes from the testimony of others. Few adults have dissected a human body or performed astronomical calculations, yet most still know that the liver is

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in the abdomen and that the Earth orbits the sun. One of the prerequisites of learning from testimony is that we must trust what others tell us, but such trust need not be blind. There are many strategies one could use for discriminating trustworthy informants from untrustworthy ones, and children seem to adopt these strategies prior to formal schooling, preferring informants who are knowledgeable (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008), familiar (Corriveau & Harris, 2009), consistent (Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007), and moral (Doebel & Koenig, 2013).

To date, research on how children learn from testimony has focused on children's evaluation of the source of novel testimony (Mills, 2013), yet their evaluation of the content of that testimony is just as important. Informants who are generally trustworthy may occasionally impart false information, and informants who are generally untrustworthy may occasionally impart true information. Testimony about Santa Claus is a prime example. Children receive this testimony from individuals who, by most measures, are trustworthy (e.g., parents, relatives, mentors), yet that testimony is not only false; it's highly implausible. Santa is purported to engage in activities that violate physical principles known even to infants, at least on an implicit level (Baillargeon, 2004; Spelke, 1990). For instance, Santa violates our expectations about spatiotemporal continuity by visiting all the world's children in a single night; he violates expectations about containment by entering children's houses through their narrow chimneys; and he violates expectations about support by flying through the air on a wooden sleigh. Despite these causal violations, young children believe in Santa more strongly than they believe in any other fantasy character (Sharon & Woolley, 2004), and they typically retain that belief until age 8 or 9 (Blair, McKee, & Jernigan, 1980; Prentice, Manosevitz, & Hubbs, 1978). Why do children so readily trust testimony that contradicts many of their most deeply entrenched causal expectations?

One possibility is that the testimony itself is sufficiently consistent across different informants. Parents, relatives, and mentors all seem to agree that Santa is real, and children may thus privilege the consistency of that testimony over any personal doubts to the contrary. Only when the testimony becomes mixed do children begin to waver in their belief. As Harris, Pasquini, Duke, Asscher, and Pons (2006) state in the following passage, "Admittedly, children's belief in Santa Claus . . . involves a mistake about reality, but the primary source of that mistake is almost certainly the testimony that children hear rather than some autonomous inclination to live in a fantasy world. . . . When older children abandon their belief in a particular special being it is probably not attributable to any change in their fantasy disposition or to a cognitive developmental advance but rather to a shift in the pattern of testimony that they receive." (p. 94). On this view, children's belief in Santa comes and goes with the ebb and flow of testimony about Santa, regardless, perhaps, of the child's conceptual understanding of that testimony.

Support for this view comes from research documenting direct correlations between children's belief in fantasy characters and the cultural support they receive for those beliefs. Children whose parents explicitly endorse the existence of Santa Claus and other event-related fantasy characters (i.e., the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy) are more likely to believe in those characters than children whose parents do not (Prentice et al., 1978; Rosengren, Kalish, Hickling, & Gelman, 1994). Likewise, children whose parents engage in behaviors that presuppose the existence of a fantasy character – e.g., creating evidence that the character visited their house – are more likely to believe in those characters than children whose parents do not (Woolley, Boerger, & Markman, 2004; Boerger, Tullos, & Woolley, 2009). And children whose parents do not endorse the existence of Santa may still believe in Santa if exposed to cultural support for that belief outside the household, as documented among U.S. children raised in Jewish households (Prentice & Gordon, 1987) and in fundamentalist Christian households (Clark, 1998).

While these findings support the claim that belief in Santa is culturally prescribed, they do not necessarily indicate that *disbelief* in Santa is as well. Indeed, the claim that children stop believing in Santa because the testimony they receive about Santa changes with age has at least two problematic implications. First, insofar that testimony about Santa comes from many different informants, it implies that all such informants collectively tailor their testimony to children of different ages, a seemingly implausible feat of coordination. Second, it implies that children never become skeptical of the Santa myth on their own and would continue to believe in Santa indefinitely if never persuaded otherwise. While there are no prospective studies of the factors that induce disbelief in Santa (to our knowledge), retrospective studies suggest that it is skepticism, not testimony, that plays the major

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