One subject sure to start a fight with any group of skeptics is the subject of Santa Claus. The most diehard skeptic gets all soft and mushy when it comes to the subject of St. Nick, flying reindeer and slave labor elves.

People that will demand the expulsion of anyone at a skeptic conference that even hints at being an agnostic ("agnostics are just atheists that are to afraid to stand up for what they really don't believe!"), will explain in detail why they tell their children Santa Claus is real.

I don't always buy their arguments. "The rest of the family tells their children Santa is real, while I'm willing to stand up for my atheism and skeptic beliefs, I don't want my young child to have to fight with her cousins about Santa. It's not fair for a 3 year old to have to take this on."

People that gave their grandmothers strokes when they came out as atheists, will say "It would really kill grandmother, I mean not just cause her to lose all ability to move her left side, I mean KILL grandmother if she thought the kids did not believe in Santa. I can't do that to her."

There is the peer pressure argument. "Our child will not fit in at school if she doesn't believe in Santa. The other children will shun her." I like to point out that the Jewish children manage to survive. Children of other religions that do not celebrate Christmas, and I am sure are not told Santa is real, manage to have friends and not be scarred for life. As a former preschool teacher I can assure you Jewish children, as well as Buddhist and Sikhs do not sit down their children, read the "Night Before Christmas" and explain "Except the reindeer don't land here, and you don't get presents. It isn't that you are bad children, we're just not Christians."

Skeptic parents that teach Santa at least don't pull the stunts that other non-skeptic parents do. Anyone that has been shopping at this pre holiday insanity time has probably seen a parent do the "Santa threat". In my day it was "If you aren't good Santa won't bring you presents, you'll just get coal." Today, it's not serious holiday shopping if I don't see at least one parent pull out their cell phone and threaten to call Santa to tell him how horrible the children are behaving. I've seen parents dial Santa and carry on conversations with him about how little Max doesn't deserve the complete Lego Harry Potter set as he's screaming in the middle of Target. It works, but I wonder how these parents keep their children under control the rest of the year.

My own choice for my children was based on how the school where I used to teach dealt with the holiday season. Santa is just one of many mid-winter myths. Children love to hear how different cultures celebrate Christmas and other holidays. Santa has different names and different looks all around the world. He has different helpers, and some cultures don't have Santa at all. My children learned "There are many traditions and myths, let me tell you about other Santa myths and winter celebrations from around the world". Our family loved to incorporate other holiday traditions. We even once included wreaths with candles worn on the heads of my girls, as a nod to Swedish tradition. Despite my worries, both girls managed not to catch their hair on fire, or burn down the house. Christmas was a wonderful cultural and history lesson for my girls.

Santa wasn't "real" he was a "myth" like the Easter Bunny or Ronald McDonald. We also, like all families, made up our own Christmas traditions. We put out carrots for the reindeer, the next morning the carrots were not there. The children knew they had become a holiday snack for hungry wildlife in our yard. It was just fun to "remember" how hard working the reindeer were. When dad suggested Santa might like a beer, the children just giggled and joined in the fun. Every year Santa has a beer waiting for him, it's our tradition. If Santa were real, he would want to stop at our house, reindeer snacks and a Sam Adams!

I also taught the children why there are so many holidays at this time of year. Long ago, there would not be enough food for all the animals on the farm to make it through the winter. Rather than letting the animals slowly starve, the extras were eaten. If you are having a feast, you might as well have a celebration of some sort. Later, when agriculture improved and farmers were able to raise enough crops to feed all their animals through the winter, a mid winter holiday celebration became just a fun way to liven things up.

I in no way advocate that skeptics and atheists should not teach their children about Santa Claus. Parenting is a very personal matter. I myself was not shocked when told that Santa was not "real", though I had a very hard time believing it as my older brother had informed me had had stayed up late one Christmas Eve and seen Santa. I actually went around for a few years feeling the adult that had broken the news to me about Santa was misinformed.

My now adult brother swears he really did see Santa, though we now understand he probably fell asleep while waiting and had a very realistic dream. This is why eyewitness testimony is never enough! If just seeing Bigfoot makes Bigfoot real, then Santa certainly should be real based on my brother's evidence.

My only problem with skeptics and atheists that teach their children Santa is real, is their lack of honesty about why they are doing it. Very few admit, "I tell my children Santa is real, as it's a lot of fun for me. I like Santa!" If telling your child Santa is real, and comes with presents on a sleigh pulled by reindeer and eats cookies and milk (or beer) gives you and your child a lot of happiness, you don't need to defend your choice. Part of parenting is about having fun with your child and also reliving happy childhood memories. I enjoyed Christmas much more after I had children than before. I get much greater joy watching my children open their stockings or unwrap that perfect gift they have been wanting, than in opening a gift for myself.

My children enjoyed the myths of Santa, and enjoyed the thought that around the world so many other children would also be waiting for St. Nick, or Pere Noel, or Grandfather Frost, or even the Christmas Brownie. It was a way for them to feel connected to other children on that special eve and morning.

So "To believe or not believe, that is the question!" It's up to each parent, because this is a family choice, not a political or ethical or religious choice. The holidays are about having fun, and I hope also making up new traditions and myths to be remembered and passed down in the family. Trust me, the Santa gets a beer is one our family still practices. (Sometimes even Mrs. Santa enjoys a beer)

When it comes to Santa, it's really just the business of you and your family. Because the reason for the season is family. (No matter what religious people say)

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