

# Santa Claus

They'd be business-like, ordering the toys of their choice, usually being very specific about brand names. Atari video systems were the hit of the day. At least half of the 6-and-up group wanted either an Atari video game system (no other brand mentioned; sorry, Intellivision) or more cartridges for the system they already had.

Some of the others were more emotional; one little girl reached up and kissed me, saying, "I love you, Santa."

One child like that can wipe out the memory of several screamers or of the baby who spit up.

That age group, though, was the most difficult. They're the most skeptical, the most alert to any slip-ups in the Santa image. What do you tell a 7-year-old who asks if you're really Santa? What do you reply when asked how many elves you have, and what their names are?

I don't know what other Santas do. I evaded and tried to change the subject. I know how well that tactic went over when I was that age, and that's why I feel I played the part badly.

But the best parts of the job were the high-school and college students. For those of you reading this article who came out last Saturday afternoon and had your picture taken with me, thanks; you brightened up a tense day.

Some of the young adults were couples, out for souvenirs of romance; more were young

women who found the experience so cute that they couldn't stop giggling. (To tell the truth, I had trouble maintaining my composure.)

But the most interesting groups were the two groups of young men — one from Davis-Gary Hall and the other of unknown origin — who, I suppose, came to immortalize their friendship or, perhaps, to call someone's bluff.

Santa's Helpers, a corps of amazingly patient young women who arranged the photos, would insist that every adult who had a picture taken with Santa sit on the arms of his chair and put an arm around him.

For the women, this presented no problem; for the guys with their girlfriends, it seemed inconsequential. But for the young men on their own, it seemed acutely embarrassing; they'd laugh nervously and look around to see who was watching.

I know it was uncomfortable for them and, a little, for me. But they broke the torrent of emotion that gets unleashed around a character like Santa Claus. They provided some badly needed comic relief.

The relief wasn't just for me, it was also for the Helpers. Trying to coax one frightened child after another into a semblance of happiness is frustrating, but their patience and good humor wasn't forced or fake: it was genuine. But even Santa's

Helpers can use a little laughter. I know they appreciated it.

Being a mall Santa is tiring and it can leave the part-time Santa feeling inadequate. The most bruising part of the experience is knowing that you're part of a lie which every one of the children you meet will find out about some day.

I'm not sure that that transient gleam in a little girl's eye is worth the price: lying to a child, who can't possibly know any better, has always seemed very wrong. It may be harmless — it may be fun for the whole family and worth the inevitable moment of disillusionment.

But it's something worth thinking about.

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