

**A**s night falls on December 24, countless parents will tiptoe down hallways, nibble on biscuits and carrots, swig milk or even whisky. They will fall into bed bleary-eyed, only to be woken a few hours later by their excited children. All in the name of Santa.

Not Trevar Chilver, however. He doesn't need to make a list and check it twice, because his three young children have always known that the jolly bloke in the red suit doesn't exist. "We have pictures of Santa around," says Chilver, a Canberra teacher. "But I'm very careful to tell my kids the story of St Nicholas, not the story of Santa."

Chilver says he and his wife felt uncomfortable about lying to their children and so they decided Santa and his reindeer could bypass their house. Refusing to perpetuate the Santa myth has presented some awkward moments, such as when he heard his eldest daughter telling her seven-year-old classmates that Santa wasn't real. But he is pragmatic, saying, "We live in a multicultural society; plenty of other kids don't have 'the Santa hope'."

Lea Pettett, a PR manager from the Gold Coast, never told her three daughters about Santa because she "didn't like the feelings that come after finding out he's not real".

Pettett's youngest daughter is 18 and even now Pettett says she underestimated how difficult it would be to be honest in a world that constantly tells children Santa is real. "If we went to a shopping centre, there was Santa," she says. "The girls' kindergarten had milk and cookies left out for Santa, and in the manhole they even put Santa's boots."

Pettett, a practising Christian, says her daughters were always intrigued that other parents would purposely deceive their children. "It really struck us that we were made out to be bad parents because we weren't allowing our children to delve into a world of make-believe," she says.

Omega Howell, a marketing manager from Melbourne, agrees the pleasure that children get from Santa doesn't compensate for parents lying to them. "The usual argument is someone saying they've lied to their kids for the last 12 years because they didn't want to deprive them and ruin Christmas," she says. "But I think lying to your kids ruins Christmas more than that."

Howell says her family still has all the fun of Santa; her daughters give and receive presents, tell lots of Santa stories and even write him letters. "It's just that everyone is in on the story," she says. "You don't have that undercurrent of deceit."

Child psychologist and mother of four Sally-Anne McCormack, from Melbourne, says she circumvented the Santa dilemma by giving "politicians' responses" to her children's questions. "They would ask me

if I believed in Santa and if he was real, and I would say that I believe in the spirit of Christmas and that I love talking about Santa," she says. "It's not a lie. I never actually lied, I just avoided the truth."

The benefits of believing in Santa, according to McCormack, outweigh any potential disadvantage. "I don't think there is any harm in letting your children believe and in fact, I think there are some advantages in children being allowed to have the fantasy."

For McCormack, Santa represents goodwill, giving and positivity, and is a way of encouraging children's imagination. "Unless there is some stress or anxiety for the child about the idea of Santa," she says, "I don't think there is any reason for the majority of parents to shatter their children's fantasy world. Santa is one of the few good things we believe in."

For Trish Hone, from Melbourne, Christmas without Santa just isn't as special. "Last Christmas wasn't the same because my daughter was old enough to know Santa wasn't real, and it was just so sad," she says.

She believes maintaining the Santa story was worth it. "Christmas has a special,

magical wonder about it, and as a parent it's a joy seeing your child's face light up when they see Santa," she says. "They grow up so quickly – why can't we just let them be children for as long as we can and give them the gift of Santa?" She adds that when she broke the news of Santa's non-existence, her daughter was "devastated".

Last year, when my sister-in-law mentioned she was considering never letting her then eight-month-old son believe in Santa, I was horrified. I jumped ahead a few years and imagined my poor deprived little nephew never looking up at the night sky hoping to spot Santa and his reindeer.

Over the past year, however, I've been thinking about what my sister-in-law said. Why not let our children have the idea of Santa through all the stories, but without the deception. And how will we reconcile telling them the importance of being truthful when we knowingly fib to them year after year?

It's not something that I've resolved yet, and as night falls on Christmas Eve, I suspect I will still be putting out the carrots, nibbling on biscuits and waiting with anticipation for the look on my son's face when he wakes up. ●

# THE SANTA Clause

This Christmas, some parents are giving the guy in the red suit the flick, writes **Lindy Alexander**.

