

Santa Doesn't Care if You're Naughty or Nice

Oliver St. John, USA TODAY

Santa's making a list and checking it twice, but he's likely to give kids the same presents whether they're naughty or nice.

Nearly 80% of parents say their kids will get the same number of toys for Christmas, even if they get on Santa's "naughty" list, according to a Walmart national holiday survey of parents and kids to be released Tuesday.

At risk: the most effective and traditional leverage that parents have had over their kids at holiday time for decades. Behave well, or pay in lost presents. Ever since the song Santa Claus is Comin' to Town was recorded in 1934, it's acted as an unofficial warning to kids. And it still does: 62% of kids still think they'll get more toys if they stay on Kris Kringle's "nice" list, the survey notes.

Psychologists say Santa is much more real to children than their parents think. Mary Lamia, a developmental psychologist in Kentfield, Calif., says it's the parents who deserve a stockingfull of coal for threatening their kids with Santa-surveillance claims.

"The assertion by parents that 'Santa is watching to see if you are good' is a tool for manipulating kids to behave," says Lamia. "Parents should just give in and admit that Santa will love them no matter what."

Where does this leave Walmart, which commissioned the survey? Laura Phillips, senior vice president of toys, would not comment on Santa's lenience to bad behavior.

"Ultimately," says Phillips, "the parents' goal is to create the most magical holiday for their kids possible."

But kids could be a lot naughtier than parents think.

Nearly 25% of kids peeked in the closet to find hidden presents, the survey says.

Toy industry gurus say, no matter what mischief kids drum up, few parents dole out punishment under the lights of the Christmas tree or Hanukkah candles.

"When it comes to Christmas, you're just not going to disappoint," says Jonathan Samet, co-publisher of The Toy Insider. "We all become softies when it comes to the holidays."

Amber Plante, 32, tells her sons, Calvin, 6, and Phoenix, 4, that Santa won't bring presents to little boys who don't listen to their mothers. But, she admits, Santa would never follow through on the threat.

"I'd rather my boys have fuzzy memories of happy times ripping open their presents, not of being harshly taught a lesson that, frankly, could be taught any other day of the year," says Plante, an operations manager from Chester, N.H..

Kids are willing to do almost anything to get the toys they want. Most kids said they'd work harder in school or clean their rooms daily.

But kids drew the line in the vegetable garden. Only 23% said they'd be willing to eat spinach.