

"Seeing it run down poor Santa's boot is an image that will stay with me for a long time."

— Stacy Seiden, whose son spit up on Santa eight years ago

Ho-ho-ho doesn't have to mean boo-hoo-hoo

Experts share advice on how to get children ready to visit with Santa — and how to get a tear-free photo

By VIKKI ORTIZ HEALY
Tribune reporter

Like countless other parents at this time of year, Stacy and Bill Seiden dressed their baby boy in a Christmas sweater and slacks, endured the long line at the mall, then carefully handed the infant over to Santa for a keepsake photo.

But just as the Northbrook parents backed out of the camera's view, little Henry spit up all over himself and the jolly old elf on the throne.

"It was everywhere, it was horrible," said Stacy Seiden, who recalls the Santa incident from 8 years ago as if it were last Christmas.

"There's that certain smell of spit-up, and seeing it run down poor Santa's boot is an image that will stay with me for a long time," she said.

From here to the North Pole, parents are gearing up for what they hope will be a magical visit for their children with Santa, free of screaming fits, wardrobe malfunctions and other unpredictable events, and just right for that once-a-year photo. And experts and experienced parents say there are steps parents can take to keep the holiday tradition stress-free and enjoyable.

One of the easiest things parents can do is to introduce the idea of Santa Claus weeks — even months — before a trip to the mall.

Marie Johnson, vice president of operations for IPCA, which hires and trains Santa Clauses at malls across the country including York-

town Center in Lombard, said even summertime isn't too early to begin prepping children for a few minutes with the big guy.

Sure, IPCA's Santas — seasonal hires who are often grandparents or college students studying elementary education — are trained to work with shy, hesitant and scared children. Some Santas use high-fives, while others lay their bells on the ground and ask for help in retrieving them, Johnson said.

But those tactics work best when parents have already prepared the child for the moment, said Johnson, who estimates that meltdowns take place about 1 in 10 visitors.

"Let them see the books and hear the stories about Santa. Talk to them so it's not all of a sudden this bigger-than-life person in this big

*Please turn to **Page 7** red suit," Johnson said.*

Judy Noerr, CEO and CMO of the Noerr Programs Corp., another company that places Santas at malls across the U.S., encourages parents to come earlier in the season, rather than later when lines are long and the stress level in the air is higher.

"The less additional noise or stress there is the better, so coming early in the season is really good," Noerr said.

Bringing timid children along with older siblings or friends also helps because it allows the child to see Santa interacting positively with

someone they know, Noerr added.

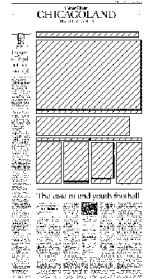
Because children vary widely in personality and temperament, use your judgment to decide how much preparation your child will need, suggested Jonice Webb, a clinical psychologist and author of *"Running on Empty, Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect."*

If you have a child who is more emotional and prone to stranger anxiety, prepare him or her for the encounter with as much detail as possible. Describe Santa, the set where you will visit, and exactly the process of the picture taking, Webb said.

"Let the child know everything that you know," Webb said. "If your child can imagine it, it will be much less scary when it happens."

If your child is too young for conversation, Webb suggests bringing comfort objects to help a child to feel safe: a favorite blanket, bear or other toy. And stay within the child's direct line of sight the entire time, Webb said.

Dan Kotheimer in Oak Forest didn't realize he was prepping his 2-year-old son, J.D., for a great Santa visit a few weeks ago when, on a leisurely trip to Orland Square Mall, he paused for a



few minutes to let the boy watch Santa greet children in line.

When Kotheimer's wife, Tara, returned to the same mall a few days later with J.D., the toddler requested "Santa! Santa! Sit! Sit!" as soon as he saw the display. Although J.D. wasn't wearing the perfect holiday ensemble his mother had in mind for the photograph, Tara Kotheimer knew she needed to take advantage of her son's enthusiasm.

"The kid was rearing to go," Dan Kotheimer said. "He was fine, didn't cry at all."

Of course, as almost everything goes with children, there's no way to

guarantee a parent's plan will work. Noerr said even children who count down the days until their visit with St. Nick — and beam happily while waiting in line at the mall — can end up sobbing when it's his or her turn. And Johnson said parents do buy pictures of their children crying.

"It is their story to tell," Johnson said. "That was their child's personality at that age."

The most important thing to remember, Webb said, is that children don't have the ability to control their emotions like adults do. And offering comfort and support during a not-so-smiley Santa experience

will go a long way in helping the child to face nerve-racking scenarios in the future.

It certainly worked that way for the Seidens, who mopped up Henry's spit-up with a burp cloth as quickly as possible that day eight years ago. Since then, Henry has been back to see Santa every year, and he loves the tradition.

"It only got better from there," said Stacy Seiden with a laugh. "You have to have a sense of humor about the whole experience and just have fun."

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Gina Rasoulis' children Ioanna and Antonis have different reactions to meeting Santa Claus last week at Yorktown Center in Lombard.

Reader tips on Santa trips

We asked readers for anecdotes about their children's trips to Santa or advice on making the visit less traumatic. Here are a couple of responses.

No scary stuff

Want to be sure your child is not scared of seeing Santa Claus? That's easy.

All children have good days and bad days. That's human nature. As parents, you know your child better than anyone else. Don't start a month before the holiday, traumatizing the offspring with scary stories of how "Santa knows when you're bad" and "You won't get any toys for Christmas if you don't be good and do what Mommy and Daddy tell you what to do."

This may foster the behavior you are looking for (even temporarily) but the warning is going to be in the file cabinet that is your child's mind, to spring forward when he or she sits on this stranger's lap and looks up into this unfamiliar face asking what they want for Christmas.

Make it an anticipated, fun visit that kids will look forward to when you go to the store or mall where Santa is. Tell them they can tell Santa anything in the world about Christmas (don't worry, your kids can wing it — the four in our family did just fine). And for God's sake, make the Santa visit early in your shopping trip. Don't haul them over to Santa's throne after a long day of hauling presents around, and they are tired and whiny by that time.

Do this, and your child will never be afraid of seeing Mr. Claus — or cry and fuss. Trust me, as a former child who was raised by

these guidelines, it works.

— *Martha F. Grieashamer, Chicago*

Expectations

This is my story about my daughter, she is now 8.

My daughter, Jaydra, was almost 3 years old and all dressed up in her fancy new outfit and we went downtown to Bloomingdale's mall in Chicago to see Santa.

I had told her she could sit on Santa's lap and ask him for what she wanted for Christmas. All was good.

We waited in line, she got on Santa's knee and asked for what she wanted: "Candy!"

Luckily they took a picture then — which was a great picture. But following this was the meltdown, when Santa was sending her on her way, she ever so sweetly asked "Where's my candy!?"

That was the one small detail I failed to mention to her: You don't get what you ask for on the spot. She was so confused when the candy was not immediately presented to her, her face completely dropped and she started bawling.

I never thought to explain that you go visit Santa and then Christmas comes later and Santa brings your presents, I guess it's hard to remember what happened the last Christmas at that age. Hope this might help other parents.

By the way, I got her some chocolate on the way home and she recovered very quickly.

— *Elissa Hamid Efroymson, Chicago*

'Take me home'

Our daughter was 2½ when we took her to see Santa at the mall for her first

and only visit . She never made it to Santa's lap. She became hysterical when she saw him. "Please take me home," she pleaded.

From then on she would make Christmas Eve miserable for us. Her behavior affected her two siblings also. She would start crying as soon as she woke up and cry off and on all day. Every time she cried the other two would do the same. She didn't want Santa to come into the house even though he would be bringing gifts. It pacified her somewhat that we would tell her, "We'll have Santa leave the gifts on the front porch."

She was 8 before she learned the truth about Santa. From then on Christmas Eve was pleasant.

— Bee Jones, Brownsburg, Ind.

Do you have any advice or anecdotes? We'd like to hear from you too. Email us at healthfamily@tribune.com. Include your name, phone number and hometown. We'll print some of your responses in an upcoming edition. And don't forget to visit our Scared of Santa photo gallery at chicagotribune.com/santa.



9-month-old Leah Adams wasn't feeling her visit with Santa last week.



Dina Simpson, of Plainfield, comforts Eloise, 15 months, during a teary visit with Santa last week at Yorktown Center in Lombard.

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