

Teaching our kids the holiday spirit by having them take a turn as Santa

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By Amy Paturel

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My family’s first stakeout of the season always happens in early December. My husband, Brandon, and I bundle up our three children in flannel pajamas and holiday-themed beanies. The boys pull on their snow boots (yes, even though we’re in California) and we set off for our heist-in-reverse.

As we approach our first target, Brandon turns off the headlights. I silence the Christmas music. And the boys shush each other before they get out and tiptoe up the driveway, leaving us in charge of the getaway car.

It’s almost like a scene from “Home Alone,” only instead of stealing things, our holiday-clad prowlers bear gifts. The boys fear they’ll get caught in the act. Brandon and I fear they’ll trip over each other on their way back to the van.

Instead of creating an elaborate Santa Claus myth for our kids, Brandon and I decided to flip the fable and make “playing Santa” our Christmas tradition. So each year, just after Thanksgiving, all five of us sit down to plot our course, deciding who will get presents and

when we'll deliver them. Then, on the nights leading up to Christmas, we dash through the streets dropping colorfully wrapped packages at an unsuspecting family's house, then disappear before anyone spots us.

The list of "drop-and-dash" recipients varies each year, but it always includes people who have touched our lives. Our former neighbor, Barbie, is usually our first stop. She once gave our youngest son, Jack, lifesaving CPR. We leave cookies and treats as a small token of appreciation.

Our next stop: An elderly man, named Hollis, who lives around the block. He reminds me of my late father with his bright eyes, fair skin and mischievous grin. He even shares my paternal grandmother's maiden name. I first noticed him just four months after my dad passed away, while I was on a neighborhood walk and he was trimming a tree. I forged a friendship with him and his wife, Letitia (or Auntie Tish, as my kids call her).

The boys repeat this "drop-and-dash" act for their teachers, scout leaders, babysitters and a whole lot of random strangers.

Sometimes we travel by car, sometimes by foot. And sometimes we send gifts to the other side of the world in a shoe box. We take the boys to the dollar store and purchase basic essentials such as shower curtains, washcloths, flip-flops, soap and water bottles, along with some toys, books and crayons, and ship them to far-off places through Samaritan's Purse.

My children love the excitement, the adventure and the anonymity of giving presents to strangers. But mostly, they love the thrill of tiptoeing up driveways, ringing doorbells and running back to the car.

"Go, Daddy! Go!," they yell as soon as they strap themselves back inside.

Lest you think I'm depicting our three sons as angels, I should be clear: There's almost always some bickering about who carries the gift, who holds the card and who gets to ring the bell. Still, when I watch our sons' faces light up with each gift drop, I can feel the spirit of Christmas.

And these nighttime excursions are our way of paying homage to a Christmas legend. We have explained that "Santa Claus" is slang for Saint Nicholas — a real guy who loved children and shared his riches with the less fortunate. They understand he lived in another place and time, and that he protected the sick and suffering. Over time, we hope the boys will remain eager to follow this lead, putting together Christmas packages for friends, family members and those in need.

The day after our drop-and-dash at Hollis's house this year, Jack saw Hollis putting up Christmas lights during our neighborhood stroll. "We should help him," Jack said.

Hollis insisted he didn't need help with the lights — this 86-year-old man isn't letting age hijack his passion and drive. Instead, he invited us inside. Jack gave Letitia a big hug, then immediately noticed the poinsettia we delivered the night before displayed on the coffee table.

“I got your gift,” Hollis said, with a wink and a smile.

Like Hollis, I suspect many folks on our list know who we are, despite the “secret admirer” cards. Those new digital doorbells with cameras frequently out us — and our boys aren't exactly quiet. Plus, at least a few of the families get deliveries each year, so they're well aware of our tradition.

Back at home, Santa hardly receives mention. The boys hear plenty of stories about him at school. They read about him in books and see him on TV shows. One of our 8-year-old twins suspects Santa Claus is an elaborate tale. The other is convinced he is real. My 5-year-old? He's on the fence. But none of them have asked me directly whether Santa Claus exists, and I haven't weighed in.

As my boys grow older, I imagine they'll figure out that only a fictional character could traverse the globe by way of flying reindeer. But they'll know Santa Claus is based on the real-world story of Saint Nicholas, whose spirit of love and kindness lives inside of all of us. And for now, when they step into that role, I hope they feel that's the real magic of Christmas.

Amy Paturel is personal essay writing teacher and journalist in Southern California. She is working on a children's book based on these drop-and-dash adventures. Find her on Twitter [@AmyPaturel](https://twitter.com/AmyPaturel).