

When Baby Met Santa

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For many parents, visiting Santa with a very young child is a dream come true, especially for first time parents. They simply can't wait to capture the perfect moment and send it out live on Facebook or give prints to grandparents and friends. Kids wear special clothing, hear all about it, and sense their parent's anticipation. It's a rite of passage, for babies, for toddlers, for older children, and mostly for the parents. But how do very young children feel about the special visit, and how should parents prepare?

The first thing you should know is that children of different ages and developmental stages will react differently to a visit with any stranger, let alone one dressed in unfamiliar clothing with a loud voice set amidst a very busy stimulating scene. Every child is different, and although you might have the most amazing memories of meeting with Santa as a child, your infant or toddler will have their own point of view on the subject—even if they are only two months old. Children are individuals, and there's no way to predict ahead of time whether they will enjoy the experience, be neutral, upset or scared. Be open to any and all of these responses and try not to set your hopes too high. If you don't get a picture this year, there's always next year.



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In order to have the best experience possible, here is what I would suggest as an infant and toddler educator and mother of three boys.

Know Your Child: If they display upset feelings when they visit loud and busy places like a museum then realize that Santa's Village might elicit a similar response. If there's something that soothes them in this type of environment, bring it along to help. If you need to nurse while a partner holds your place in line, do it. If your toddler needs to use the potty, don't ask them to wait.

Expect to Wait on Line: Usually there's a long line, so be prepared with diapers, snacks, books, and hopefully another adult to help you. If there's an elf at the start of the line, ask how long the wait might be so you can pace yourself and decide whether your child can handle it.

Understand Stranger Danger: Children around 8 months usually have a hard time accepting strangers, let alone being held by one in a red suit! This is a developmentally appropriate response so try not to see it as a flaw in your child. In fact, it's a sign that they are starting to know their own special people and have a sense of family. If your child shows signs of fear and can't be comforted, wait until next year and try again.

Be Mindful of the Message: If all is going well you can simply share your excitement with the child, tell them you are getting closer, soon you will get to see Santa. Acknowledge a distressed child by saying, "I see you aren't feeling ready to see Santa this year. There's a lot of time to visit Santa when you're older. I want you to have fun so let's do it another time." Stay away from language like: "Don't be afraid, don't be silly, you won't get any toys if you don't visit Santa." If you force your child to visit Santa when she's upset you send the message that their feelings and opinions don't matter. Santa's Village isn't the place to teach a child of any age, let alone an infant or toddler, to face life's fears

Keep Embarrassment in Check: As you respect your baby's feelings and advocate through responsive parenting, don't be embarrassed. Defend your choice to leave Santa Land to anyone who is critical, including grandparents or others who expect to receive a photo in the first or second year. Explain that you care primarily about the baby's experience, and that while relatives might be disappointed there's no picture this year, there will be many opportunities to get a smiling, happy picture in the future.

Above all, put the child first, before your memories, before grandma's expectations, before the pressure to be successful at this no matter what. Observe your child, gauge his enjoyment, and support her with love and respect in the true spirit of the season. Go home, sing some Christmas songs, and bake some cookies for grandma and grandpa.

Renee Bock grew up Jewish in New York City, where she became obsessed with Santa Claus, routinely called him on the phone, and created her own Christmas village at home each year to her parents' chagrin. Thanks to her Aunt Esther who pretended not to notice all those phone calls to the North Pole.

Renee is also a dedicated early childhood educator, who is currently the Chief Academic Officer at [Explore+Discover](#), a social learning center in Manhattan that is committed to setting the standard for infant and toddler care and education. Renee has more than a decade of experience in the field and holds a Master's in Early Childhood Education from Bank Street College in New York. She has three sons, Ariel (16), Raffi (14), and Shaya (13). She can be reached at rbock@explorediscover.net.