

JOSEPH Why do you keep talking to Charlie about Father Christmas when you know he's not real?

DAD Well, it makes him happy. All little children enjoy believing in Father Christmas.

JOSEPH Yes, but isn't it lying? I mean, it'll be really gutting for him when he finds out.

DAD It's not like you suddenly see through it. It creeps up on you gradually. I expect you were disappointed, but you got over it pretty quickly.

JOSEPH That was different. I was OK about it because then I knew a secret Charlie didn't, and it made me feel grown up. But Charlie hasn't got anybody to keep it secret from.

DAD Just don't tell him, or there'll be trouble.

LATER...

JOSEPH Dad, I need to use the computer and Charlie's playing his stupid game.

DAD Charlie, Joseph's got to use the computer for his homework for school, and he's going out in an hour.

CHARLIE But then I'll have to go to bed. I want to play my game.

DAD Well, you can't have everything you want. Now stop moaning or I'll tell Father Christmas you're being selfish, and he won't bring you any presents.

THE NEXT DAY...

CHARLIE I want to use the computer now. Dad said at five o'clock it would be my turn.

JOSEPH Well, you can't have everything you want. I'm in the middle of talking to somebody. Go and do something else, or I'll tell Dad it was you that broke that vase, not the cat. And then he'll tell Father Christmas you've been bad. And then Father Christmas won't bring you any presents.

CHARLIE It isn't fair.

JOSEPH That's just tough luck.

Santa and the Whiteness of Lies

The theme for this dialogue was suggested by Lizzy Lewis of SAPERE. Most of us would maintain that the pretence of Father Christmas is maintained for the benefit of the little ones, but the threat of disfavour from the bearded dispenser of plastic tut is a powerful sanction in some households.

Lying for whose sake?

Can the intention behind a lie change it into something good? Or is it who benefits from a lie that determines its moral status? In the first dialogue, the argument is that the deception is for Charlie's own sake. In the second, it appears to be for Joseph's benefit (although perhaps for Dad's in search of a quick solution). In the third, the lie is obviously self-serving. The untruth is the same in each case, but its purposes and who benefits are different.

To take another scenario, if A asks, "Does my bum look big in this?" and it does, do any of these make it OK for B to answer "No"?

1. B knows "Yes" would upset A, and doesn't want to upset A.
2. B knows "Yes" would upset A; but mainly B doesn't want to wait while A changes.
3. B wants A to go to the party wearing a dress that makes her bum look big so A will be embarrassed.
4. B doesn't think A should worry about her bum looking big, because you shouldn't judge by appearances.

Learning by imitation

Another theme that may be picked up is that of parents setting an example which children follow. Here Joseph appears to pick up some bad habits from his dad, both in terms of holding the power of Father Christmas over his little brother, and of closing down the argument with "Just..."

How much do we pick up our values from our parents? How far or when are we able to choose which ones we keep and which we discard?

Threats versus persuasion

Is threatening someone successfully better than reasoning with them unsuccessfully?

If you are going to threaten someone if they don't agree with you, are you really reasoning with them?