

# Bearded man in red looks scary

I want my daughter to enjoy a visit to Santa, but when I take her to the mall to sit on Santa's lap, she is petrified. She hides behind me and doesn't want to tell Santa what she wants for Christmas. How can I make this fun for her?



PARENTAL  
GUIDANCE  
**BETH  
WHITEHOUSE**

beth.whitehouse@newsday.com

It can be disconcerting to children constantly warned not to talk to strangers to be encouraged to sit on the lap of a man they don't know, even if he is Santa Claus.

"Essentially, the child is reacting to Santa because he looks very strange," says Edward Stevenson, psychologist and clinical director of the South Shore Child Guidance Center, a children's mental health center in Freeport. "A lot of children go through a period of stranger anxiety, and nine times out of 10, that's what it is."

So you shouldn't try too hard to change your daughter's "No, no, no" to "Ho, ho, ho."

You could try to make Santa seem more familiar, starting about a week before the actual visit, Stevenson says. Watch

movies about Santa and take your daughter to the mall solely to watch other children visit Santa without any pressure to visit herself. If an older sibling could offer to go back with your daughter and speak to Santa with her, that might help.

"See if she warms up to the idea," says Peter S. Kanaris, a psychologist with a private practice in Smithtown and the coordinator for public education for the New York State Psychological Association. "But if she doesn't, act as though it's no big deal either way, even if you're disappointed. Do not try to force the child in any way to see Santa. I wouldn't do this whole convincing job."

It's normal that some children find Santa too larger-than-life for comfort, says Deena Abbe, a child psychologist at The Thera-



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py Center for Children in Patchogue. So it's best to respect the child's reaction. This is true for any character who makes your child uncomfortable, be it Santa in the mall or Mickey Mouse or Big Bird at an amusement park. "You see them on TV, and they're that big, and you see them in person, and they're huge," Abbe says.

Remind yourself that talking one-on-one to Santa is a discretionary holiday activity, and don't worry that you and your

daughter are missing out. "As nice as it is, as wonderful as it is to have those pictures, it isn't worth risking creating a problem for the child," Kanaris says. "There will be plenty of other photo ops."

"I can remember, as a child, taking a crying picture with Santa that I still have," says Stevenson, who laughs about it now. But Stevenson and Abbe both agree with Kanaris: There's always next Christmas to try again.

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