

What is 'make-believe'? Let's look at those 2 words, to "make a belief," for a clue to the understanding of early childhood.

From the ages of two to seven, children are making their own beliefs from the world around them. To us, their belief system is magical, to them, it is ordinary. In their world, toast pops out of a toaster ready to eat, dad drives a car through traffic and gets you to the zoo, a caterpillar crawls on a leaf, snow falls out of the sky, you can talk to and see Grandma on the computer, there are fairies in the woods, and yes, Santa and his reindeer are on their way. For children, all of these are 'normal' and part of their everyday world, forming their conception of the world as a whole and containing all of it.

Children don't differentiate between a toaster and the tooth fairy- they don't consider any of it magical, because it is all just part of their experience of this wonderful world. It constructs their 'make-believe' system, because in their world, a toaster and Santa are equally plausible, equally real and totally believable.

A friend of mine, a magician, once confided in me that he disliked doing magic shows for young children. "Why," I asked, taken aback.

"Because they are not surprised to see a rabbit come out of a hat, or a \$20 bill show up in my hand, or a coin come out of someone's ear," he replied. "It just confirms what they accept and know, that they live in a world full of 'magic,' which is their everyday world. I do magic to provoke amazement and they are not amazed. Not my favorite audience!"

When we adults enter into a child's 'make-believe' world, we have to be able to discard our version of reality (and it is our version) and accept their world fully, for their world is full of hope, faith, kindness, courage, and good and bad guys too - all the qualities celebrated in fairy tales around the world. Children need to take in these qualities, to nourish their inner life, as much as they need to eat and breathe. These qualities feed the developing psyche, and with luck and encouragement, these qualities will sustain them for the rest of their lives.

Fairy tales are such an important food for young children, giving them entry into a world of mystery and the unknown. Read fairy tales to your children, and they will reward you by being breathless listeners. Read that same story again and again. They love it, for it brings them deep satisfaction, building and strengthening their belief system.

We won't go into it here, but there is a whole wonderful world of children's literature, starting with fairy tales and going through young adult, that nourish the developing psyche. You can see a short list on the Village School website, with the monthly book reviews by the school staff.

The 'make-believe' world slowly fades from the ages of eight to twelve as children begin to recognize the reality of the material world, the world which we adults view as our reality. But we all hope that the qualities from 'make-believe': goodness, kindness, right action, patience, compassion and more, stay with them, deep inside, for the rest of their lives.

Is it necessary for us adults to interfere with our children's beliefs? Are we lying to them? I do not think we are lying, because that would be insisting that our version of reality is the one and only version. We must remember that their reality is at least as vivid and real to them as ours is to us. Do beneficent beings exist that look after children, such as angels, Santa, and the tooth fairy? All we adults can say is, "I don't know" or "It may be true" or "I am not sure," which children accept. When I say, "It may be true," they often start giving me examples of evidence of those beings: "The tooth fairy came to my house and took my tooth", or "Santa left footprints in the snow." Who am I to disagree with them? Or to try to tear down their belief world?

So if your child tells you, on Christmas morning, that he can tell that Santa came by last night.....enjoy the moment with him, for the time will come, as he moves through childhood, that he may view this as a childish belief. A twelve year old boy came up to me this year, and whispered in my ear, "Rise, I know Santa isn't real, but I won't tell any of the little ones." That was a wonderful adult perception, showing that he understood how much the little ones need to believe. I felt proud of this boy, knowing that just a few years ago, he believed in Santa too. Perhaps he still does, in his own way.

"If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales." Albert Einstein