

How Santa Claus Knows If You've Been Naughty Or Nice

By [Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D](#)

Have you ever wondered how Santa Claus determines whether to leave you a present or a lump of coal on Christmas Eve? How he knows if you've been naughty or nice? I don't have any hard evidence to back me up, but I'm pretty sure that he must be a first-class lie detector.

And, if so, here is how Santa does it:



He begins with a baseline

The first and most important step in Santa's deception detection is learning your *baseline* behavior under relaxed or generally stress-free conditions so that he can compare it with the expressions, gestures, and other signals that are only apparent when you are under stress.

He watches you while you are chatting informally, noticing how your body looks when you are relaxed. (What is your normal amount of eye contact and blink rate? What kind of gestures

you use most frequently? What posture do you assume when you're comfortable? What is your pace of speech and tone of voice?

Then, after he knows your behavioral baseline, he stays alert for meaningful deviations that signal a stress reaction (and possible deception) as you go through the day.

He sees you when you're faking

There are seven basic emotions that are shared, recognized, and expressed the same way around the world. Discovered and categorized by Paul Ekman and his colleagues at the University of California in San Francisco, the universal emotional expressions are joy, surprise, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and contempt.

When you don't genuinely feel the emotion that you are trying to display, it often shows up in expressions that don't use all the muscles in the face that are typically part of that emotion. For example, if your smile doesn't include the eye muscles, it is not a felt smile. Real smiles crinkle the corners of your eyes and change your entire face. Faked smiles involve the mouth only and are often asymmetrical.

In monitoring your emotional reactions, Santa also looks for simulated emotions, where you try to convince others that you feel a certain way by simulating the facial expression associated with that feeling. He will notice your "terribly sincere furrowed-brow" or your exaggerated display of anger that feels somehow excessive. He knows, too, that any expression you display for more than five to ten seconds is almost certainly being faked.

He knows when you are aligned

When your thoughts and words are in sync (when you believe what you are saying) Santa can see it in your **body language** because your gestures, expressions and postures fall into

natural alignment with your verbal message. But when he spots *incongruence*, where your nonverbal behavior *contradicts* your words – such as a side-to-side headshake while saying “yes” or a slight shoulder shrug (which is a sign of uncertainty) as you say you are “absolutely positive.” Santa knows that often, verbal-nonverbal incongruence is a sign of intentional deceit. At the very least, it shows that there’s an inner conflict of some sort between what you are thinking and what you are saying.

He looks for clusters

Clusters play a key role in Santa’s ability to spot lies. Your nonverbal cues occur in what is called a “gesture cluster” – a group of movements, postures and actions that reinforce a common point. A single gesture can have several meanings or mean nothing at all, but when you couple that single gesture with at least two other reinforcing nonverbal signals, the meaning becomes clearer.

According to research by David DeSterno of Northeastern University (research that he has surely shared with Santa Claus) there is one specific cluster of nonverbal cues that proved statistically to be a highly accurate indicator of deception. The “telltale four” body language signals that are associated with lying are hand touching, face touching, crossing arms, and leaning away.

He judges you as being “good” or “bad” only after considering the following

For the vast majority of us, the act of lying triggers a heightened (and observable) stress response. But here’s what complicates matters:

- Not all people demonstrate the same degree of emotion.
- Not all liars (especially if polished or pathological) display readily detectable signs of stress or guilt.
- Not all lies trigger a stress reaction. (Social lies,

for example, are so much a part of daily life that they hardly ever distress the sender.)

Santa Claus also knows that truthful (“nice”) people like you can exhibit anxiety for a variety of perfectly innocent reasons including the fear of not being believed or discomfort speaking about embarrassing or emotionally arousing topics.

When Santa Claus takes all this into consideration, I’m sure you will be opening lovely gifts on Christmas morning – and that’s no lie!

About the Author: Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. is an international keynote speaker, and the author of “The Truth About Lies in the Workplace.” She can be reached at Carol@CarolKinseyGoman.com or through her website: www.CarolKinseyGoman.com