

Is tech friend or foe to Santa Claus?

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NEW YORK (AP) — Kids can video chat with Santa, follow him on Twitter or enlist NORAD to track his every move online. And yet in many ways, technology may be making it harder for parents to keep their children believing in the jolly old elf.

At nearly every turn, the Internet threatens to blow the fat man's cover.

Practically any schoolchild can type "Is Santa real?" into Google. And just a few clicks can bring youngsters to websites that sell customized letters from the North Pole or offer advice on how Mom and Dad can fool the kids into believing in old St. Nick.

"I have a love-hate relationship with technology and Santa," said Kristi Kovalak, a mom in St. Louis. "The beauty of Santa is the not knowing. Technology is all about knowing, and knowing this instant. I swear, Google is the nemesis of the North Pole."

She embraces digital life daily but stays far away from cyber-Santa for her two boys, ages 5 and 11.

"We don't do robo-calls. We don't submit lists to Santa online. I don't have tracking apps on my phone," she said. "Too much proof means you then have to explain away when the next crazy thing contradicts it."

Kevin Grout and his wife had a close call recently while watching a Santa Claus parade on TV with their children, ages 6, 4 and 5 months. A commercial came on for a website that creates email greetings from Santa. They switched channels just in time.

"We're definitely in this boat, primarily with our oldest. She's a smart cookie," said Grout, of St. Catharines, Ontario. "It was clear to me a poor strategy to run it during a Santa Claus parade when many kids would be tuned in."

Santa sites can easily be found by any kid with an iPad.

Igco.com, for example, screams: "Discover our acclaimed letter from Santa, phone call from Santa, Santa evidence kits and official good list certificate. Make your children's eyes pop out of their heads this Christmas!" (Parents might have fun explaining away the Santa boot print kit, complete with a plastic template and a shaker full of snow crystals, for \$15.99.)

Over at Santa.com is a menu of prices for letters from Santa. There's a fancy one on a scroll for \$19.99 and a simple postcard for nearly \$3. (Mommy, why does Santa charge?)

Enter the search query "Is Santa real?" and up comes an entry on a psychology site about the dreaded question itself and how parents who are trying to keep the Santa secret live in fear this time of year.

Kyla Kelim of Fairhope, Ala., caught her oldest, a 9-year-old boy, on her iPad playing Santa sleuth a week or so ago.

"We're so close with him this year, not believing," she said. "He was Googling 'Santa,' and I saw him

type the word 'myth' when I grabbed it and said no electronics. I'm constantly having to follow my phone and iPad and stuff around right now. We're trying not to debunk Santa for our 7-year-old."

Not all parents are worried technology will destroy the magic.

Dad Brian Searl in Ormond Beach, Fla., keeps the Santa secret for his 7-year-old daughter through apps that offer Santa video chat and recorded calls from the big guy. "It isn't getting harder. The methods are just different," he said.

And what happens when she's older? He said he might go retro and haul out the movie "Elf" with Will Ferrell, the one "where the sleigh doesn't have enough power because people don't believe."

Other parents, though, are finding that in some ways, it was easier to maintain the Santa myth before high-speed Internet.

When Kimberly Porrazzo's boys, now in their 20s, were little, she and her husband jingled sleigh bells outside their kids' bedroom windows on Christmas Eve, and Dad took to the roof to make scampering hoof sounds.

When one of the boys was still a believer at 12, she broke the news — gently — before some playground skeptic did it for her. The Lake Forest, Calif., mother turned the experience into a little book she self-published, "The Santa Secret: The Truth About Santa Claus."

"Now, with technology, all the various opinions on whether or not he exists are more readily available to children beyond asking their parents," she said. "It's likely they will Google rather than asking their parents. That's why parents need to share the secret on their terms."