

Snakes & Ladders

A publication of English Teachers in Japan (ETJ)

ISSN 1883 0080 Issue 3 Winter 2008-2009



A Santa-less Christmas

by Sharon Abe

At the beginning of December another children's teacher, thinking to get some advice, asked me what I do about getting someone to play the part of Santa at my Christmas party. I looked at her with surprise, because I've never had a Santa in the 15 years I've been holding children's parties. At first it was because of logistics: time was short and the room (my living room!) was small. But now it's because of, well, logistics. If you are a small, independent school with only yourself as teacher, finding someone to play Santa can be a nightmare. I am not against having Santa visit during his very busy schedule, but for me and my parties, it is too much of a headache, and I feel it is not necessary. Certainly, none of my students has ever asked why Santa wasn't coming.

One thing to consider about having Santa visit is the time it takes. Would he just walk in, wave and say hello and depart for the North Pole? Would he sit down, have his picture taken with each individual child? Even by groups this takes time. And what if he puts a child on his knee and asks the child if he or she has been good that year? I'm afraid that would take up half of the party time. If having Santa is the main focus of your party, then I really hope you have a great time with him!

However, if you always have Santa but you are starting to feel stressed for time and organization and decide that maybe not having Santa would be

better for you, you shouldn't worry about disappointing the children. If they believe that Santa will visit them on Christmas Eve as usual, then they only need reminding of how busy he is and that this time he won't be able to make the special trip to your party. You might have a letter written by him to your school or each class explaining his regret at not being able to make it but with the hopes that the children will have a very good time at the party. The children will really appreciate it.

Instead of having Santa as guest, as sole owner/operator/teacher I plan a full schedule for the three hours the students are with me: games, crafts, lunch, and present exchanges between students. Instead of holding separate parties for different ages, I hold one party on a Sunday for all my students, kindergarten through jr. high school. Many students cannot come due to a conflict with other events, but more than half of my students do come every year. Last year I had only 35 children attend, but I often have 45 or more. Only my husband helps out with the smallest children, but otherwise I do all of the work before, during, and after the party, including decorating the room. Organizing everything has never been difficult for me; the Internet is a great place to find easy games and crafts for all ages, and discount shops offer a wide variety of supplies for crafts. I use a local bread store that not only makes up sandwich party trays, it delivers free of charge, too! Recycling previously-used games or altering the playing pieces or goal can also save a lot of time. You don't need to think up new games every year; ask your students which games they liked, and use them again!



In the weeks before the party, I hand out the invitations, but even before this, older students start telling the younger ones about the parties they'd been to and which crafts and games we did then, and excitedly ask me if we were going to play this or that. I print up the information

on plain paper using various Christmassy fonts and colors, and then paste (well, double-sided tape) them into Christmas cards I buy off-season at a discount. Or, when I have collected enough Christmas cards over the years from friends back home, I recycle and reuse those, with my invitation covering the old greetings. At the bottom of the invitation is the registration form to be returned with the fee for the party. Only my students are allowed to attend, unlike my other annual events to which friends and family members are invited, too. This is because I prepare a special gift for each of my students, including the ones who cannot attend.

The week before the party I hand out confirmation notices to the attendees, along with a gift sticker they will put on the present they prepare that is to be given. I draw names for the attendees, and they prepare a gift of about ¥500 for that person, who is of the same sex and generally of the same age. I write the students' names and the names of the receivers on the gift stickers first, just in case I need to read it myself (amazing how I can't read some handwritten Japanese!). At the party the attendees will place the gift under the tree so we can admire all the presents and take photographs in front of the decorations.

In class I explain the craft we would be doing at the party. This is to prepare the students for what supplies they would have to bring, such as colored pencils, stickers, glue, or photographs, and also to get them thinking about how they would decorate the item if necessary. Every year I think the craft would take a maximum of 30 minutes, but it usually ends up running overtime. Last year's craft ran almost on time, so I didn't have to cut out any other planned activities. I always prepare all of the parts of the craft and hand them out to the students as a set instead of as individual pieces. This takes more time to prepare, but keeps the time at the party to a minimum. If the craft needs time to dry after using glue (I never allow paint--the horror of it!), I will schedule it first, but otherwise I like to do the craft last, to get the kids calmed down and ready for lunch. Last year, the students made a Peace Bird mobile, which I found on the Internet but changed a bit to suit my students. It included the paper birds and wings, previously printed, cut out, hole-punched and wing-slotted by me; plus the two lengths of embroidery thread that I had measured and cut. The students really enjoyed decorating and making their own mobiles.



I assign the attendees to groups of friends or classmates, so when there is a relay or other team-effort game they work together and also eat lunch together, but otherwise they are free to sit or stand where they like. I use a mix of games so all ages can do well. Last year there was Hot Potato, Janken (the winner gets all the loser's Christmas cards), a spelling game using letter tiles (the words are on signs all over the room), a relay, a beanbag-toss game, and some card games using Christmas-themed cards I made myself. Since there are no points awarded for placing first in a game, it is rather a carefree environment, and the children all enjoy themselves with no disappointments.

After packing up all the supplies and crafts, the students wash their hands while I prepare the lunch. The sandwich trays are delivered in large yellow boxes, so there is enough space for me to add boxes of juice, napkins, paper plates, and my own homemade dessert for each person of the group. This organization is vital, since everyone is clamoring for food at the same time, so I do this before the party. I also give bowls of potato chips to the groups. When everyone is done, they clean up their own areas, return the sandwich boxes and bowls, and separate their own trash neatly into the trash bags. Never a problem there!



Then it's time for the gift exchange. The students retrieve the gifts they brought and get together in the groups of 3 or 4 that I assign and announce at the party. So, A would give to B, B to C, and C to A. They don't know who the third person is until then, so they look forward to it. When all the students are assembled in their trios or quartets, they exchange gifts with a, "This is for you." "Thank you." "You're welcome," and then tear into their gifts. Although out of necessity some students give to or receive from a friend or classmate, they get to know other students by exchanging with others from different classes. At the next week, I often hear, "Oh, I got a present from Yuka-chan! She's really nice!" so I know it's all worthwhile.



At the very end I hand out my gift to the students. If the gift happens to come in different colors, I arrange it so siblings get the different colors--no arguing about whose is whose! I usually make something by hand, such as a Christmas or Zodiac mascot, but when time is short I will buy something inexpensive. I also give a winter-themed store-bought snack. (For the students who can't attend, I give them their gift at the next class.)

So, with all this activity, you can see that a visit from Santa is not missed. The kids have fun and get to know other students while playing and working together. Getting everything set up and running is hard work, but without the added hassle of finding Santa, once it's done I, too, have time and energy to enjoy the party with my students.

Sharon Abe is owner/operator of ABCDEnglish, and can be reached at sharon-a@m3.cty-net.ne.jp