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## **SANTA'S 'MAGIC DUST' / Playing role of ol' St. Nick requires dash of psychology; [2 STAR , 3 Edition]**

CAROL E. VAUGHN, *Houston Chronicle* correspondent. **Houston Chronicle**. Houston, Tex.: Dec 20, 2001. pg. 01

### **Abstract (Summary)**

Photos: 1. Alton "Sonny" Horn Jr. of Deer Park tries to calm a nervous 15-month-old [Darlynn Smith] during her visit to Santa. Horn will spend 38 days - more than 400 hours - this holiday season as St. Nick at the Greenspoint Mall. (color); 2. Alton "Sonny" Horn prepares for a session as [Santa Claus]. (b/w, p.4)

### **Full Text** (845 words)

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FIFTEEN-month-old Darlynn Smith likes monkeys, but she doesn't much care for Santa Claus this year.

Bucking and crying as her mother tries to transfer her to the Greenspoint Mall Santa's lap, Darlynn suddenly quiets. Santa has offered a tantalizing, bright-green sucker, quickly drawing her attention to a mechanical elf nearby. Into the chair and - "CLICK!" - the deed is done.

Such psychology, says Santa, is a priceless commodity.

Santa Alton "Sonny" Horn Jr., a Deer Park resident, loves kids, which is necessary for the job. He is certain that some day he will write a book aimed at parents who want the warm-and-fuzzy Santa experience for their child. Horn's rules:

Never carry a child onto the set. Always try to walk them.

Never use the words "afraid" or "scared" or ask the child if he or she wants to see Santa.

Use the affirmative: "Let's go see Santa." Make it a joyful experience.

Horn, normally a towboat operator, will spend 38 days - more than 400 hours - this holiday season as St. Nick.

He will eat, drink and sleep Santa. Like most other Christmases for the past 25 years, Horn will rely on his children to shop and trim the tree. All his energy must be focused on Santa.

Santa Horn has the classic Santa look. His stark-white beard and curly, pearl locks are authentic. Ignore that his natural hair color is chestnut brown. Visible Changes does everything, he jests.

"I have it done a couple of times during the season," he says.

Wife Shirley, a photographer on the Santa set, augments the process as a licensed beautician - when she has the time.

The No. 1 toy this year, as in years past, is Barbie.

Santa would love to have just one toy patent, and that would be Barbie, says Horn. Bikes and Gameboys follow in popularity.

Santa never promises money, houses or shiny red cars. At least not in the real sense. He does give Monopoly money, dollhouses and Hot Wheels.

Another cardinal rule is never to oblige the request for a pet without first asking the parent.

"They often ask if I got the letter, and I tell them that I sent it to Mrs. Claus at the North Pole," he said. "We have three shifts working around the clock to build these toys."

How do the reindeer fly?

Santa Horn has the magic dust at his side, a mixture of oil and glitter. He also sprinkles the dust on homes that don't have fireplaces, which allows him to enter.

Beside Santa are the half-dozen homemade gifts children bring along when they visit. A golf-tee box is decorated with sparkly jewels. Love notes and wish lists will line the perimeter prior to Christmas Eve.

Santa must be particularly careful these days about the touching issue. Three cameras supplied by the mall and his company, Sepia, note his actions on the set. For each photo that goes out, two white gloves must be depicted in the photo.

"It makes me feel very secure," Horn said.

Children love Santa unconditionally. They like a hug, and then there is the irresistible urge to pull Santa's beard to make sure it's real. And they will tell Santa anything.

The most prolific pain, says Horn, is when Santa hears a child's story about being hungry, needing clothes or being neglected.

"You would like to take care of all the children in the world, but you can't," said Horn, explaining that often he does use limited personal or company funds to buy shoes or a coat for a needy child who sits on his lap.

Although Santa is not bilingual, he does know a little conversational Spanish.

Que quieres para Navidad? What would you like for Christmas. Sonrisa is smile.

As a rule of thumb, 15 months to 2 years is the difficult age, says Santa's helper and daughter, Deana Zakes.

Two-year-old Cameron Mayes is the perfect example, clinging to his father Joe like a lifeline when he sees Santa. He wants a motorcycle, but can't make it closer than 10 feet from Santa without exhibiting fear. In his case, a letter will have to do.

Diane Ponce, 3, wants a muneca, a doll for Christmas. She curiously approaches Santa, but decides to move on. Another letter will need to be sent to the North Pole.

But Caesar Eduardo, 4, knows more about Santa's significance. The little boy with wide brown eyes is on a mission to tell Santa about his desire for a Power Ranger and Nintendo 64.

"Me gusta Santa Clause," he blurts out in Spanish, his smile widening.

Caesar has told his mother what millions of other kids are thinking at Christmastime:

"I like Santa Claus."

**[Illustration]**

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