



Elves on Shelves, Santa Cams, and Consistent Expectations

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For many teachers and school staff the holidays feels like riding a sleigh, headed down a bumpy hill. Think National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation when Chevy Chase, known as Clark, hops onto a metal disc sled. Not only does he head down the hill, but through a forest, in one side of a full-blown shed and out the other. Laugh as you may, but this joyous holiday season can consist of behaviors disguised as those, wrapped up in a neat bow but ready to scratch and claw their way out of the box.

About 4 years ago, I changed my strategy and started treating the holiday season like the first week of school. At administrative meetings my assistant principal and I begin asking questions:

- What routines and procedures have become a little relaxed since the first few weeks of school?
- What are the most difficult times of the day?
- How are you doing with your praise to correction ratios?
- What specifically have you put in your lesson plans to increase engagement?
- Have you consistently been enforcing and following the school-wide rules, expectations and schedule?

While this may seem redundant and silly, especially if you have a veteran staff, it is very purposeful in nature. The holidays can be stressful for adults as we think about all we "have to get done" in the upcoming weeks: shopping, cooking, cleaning, cookie baking, holiday concerts, the list goes on and on. While we are consumed with our stressors, we can sometimes forget how stressful the time is for our scholars. Many are thinking about the two weeks off from school where they may not receive food on a consistent basis or where the heat has been shut off or if there's a loving adult to provide as much praise and positive attention as you give them on a daily basis. Without knowing it we tend to add to that stress with change in routines, adding in all of those fun holiday activities, and relaxing more than we should as we all "survive" December in solidarity.

Recently our administrative PLC met, another principal asked if we had Elf on the Shelf or Santa Cams present in our rooms. My initial response was, "come again?!" Followed up with a quick, "No!" When I inquired what the purpose of them was, she went on to explain that teachers had begun using them as a strategy to improve behavior but it had turned into a distraction to learning. Even creating more behavior issues in some cases. Teachers had fallen into the trap of repeatedly stating, "Oh, Santa is watching!" or "Looks like our Elf

will be reporting that to Santa!" All I could envision was a poor primary teacher having to say that at least 60 times a day as a corrective strategy. Is that effective? Probably not.

I began to think a little bit about why this new craze hadn't started in our school and thanking my lucky stars that Santa had not installed any of his cams or that we have not been paid a visit by one of his elves! I was also grateful when one of our rock star staff members said, "we don't believe in the gimmicky stuff to change or maintain behavior!" Ahhh, they get it! This is why we start conversations about consistency with routines and procedures, about how to make our environments safe and predictable, providing explicit and frequent feedback, and about maintaining high expectations, so that when the stressors hit we're all equipped to keep ourselves centered and the center of our universe consistent for our scholars who are facing many unknowns this season. From our happy school to yours, Happy Holidays!