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Santa's got a plastic shield, but holidays are under way in a pandemic at ICON Park

Little Noah Aharon wasn't sure what to think of the bearded, festive gentleman on the other side of the plastic barrier. His face was full of apprehension until, distracted by a toy, he beamed.

It was photo gold for his mom as Noah, 2, met The Man himself, Santa Claus, for the first time. The holidays aren't canceled during the pandemic but they are undergoing safety changes at International Drive's ICON Park where The Wheel is located.

"We feel like children shouldn't be punished more than they already have been by this pandemic," said ICON Park CEO Chris Jaskiewicz during a recent media preview. "We wanted to find a way to provide them a Santa experience in a safe way."

At the Santa Workshop Experience, which runs through Dec. 24, children and families can get photos with Santa. The event requires advance reservations, temperature checks and families enter their own door to get into the staged wintery scene in the main lobby of The Wheel.

Santa sits on the other side of the plexiglass shield to talk to the children. The shield almost seems to disappear in photos, making it seem like the Noah and the North Pole leader are actually touching.

For the performer, who declined to give his name other than Kris Kringle, he misses the real interaction when he used to lean in closely and listen to the children. Now, all interaction is behind the barrier or from under his face shield.

"It's very awkward," said the man who has been playing Santa since 1981 and has a real beard. "But there's no way around it. It's the best we can do with the virus." Tina Aharon, Noah's mom, said it was one of the first times she had ventured out at a public event during the pandemic. She felt safe at the event, she said.

"I'm just so excited," Aharon said as she planned to blow up one of the photos and share the moment with family and friends after she had worried there might be no chance for her son to meet Santa. "I definitely didn't think we were going to do that this year."



Guests must make a reservation to meet Santa, which is \$20. They can take their own photos at no additional cost or purchase a photo package and the reservation fee will be deducted from the final purchase. Reservations can be made at <http://www.iconparkorlando.com/santa>.

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