

Autism Treatment Beyond the Wonderful World of Disney

By: E. C. Thorpe (May 2014)

*Editor's Note: This is a response to the article "[Reaching My Autistic Son Through Disney](#)," by Ron Suskind, which appeared in the 3/9/14 *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. The author, who writes under a pseudonym, is a 23-year-old graduate student who was diagnosed with mild autism at the age of three.*

I share a lot with Owen Suskind. Like Owen, I was born mildly autistic. Like Owen, I was prone to watch Disney cartoons obsessively. My earliest speech was also largely Disney-inspired echolalia, or so my parents tell me.

Unlike Owen's parents, mine did not indulge my longing to watch the same cartoons over and over again. Despite my fervent protests, they would turn the television off. I'm glad they did.

Owen and I are both from the first generation of children to grow up during the extraordinary "Disney Renaissance" which began in 1989 with "The Little Mermaid." The beautiful artwork, stories, and songs stirred the imaginations and emotions of children and adults alike.

The world of Disney had a special importance for kids like Owen and me. Disney characters were often the only "friends" we had, and provided welcome relief from the lonely and anxious life that typically characterizes a childhood on the autism spectrum. I know I speak for many others when I say we are forever indebted to Disney for providing us with their companionship.

Our generation of children was also the first to grow up with the ability to endlessly "rewind" favorite videos. People on the autism spectrum are drawn to perseverative thoughts and activities - a compulsion that in the pre-video age might have been satisfied by an obsessive interest in trains, dinosaurs, or astronomy. These kinds of fixations are familiar to me; indeed, I'm still something of an authority on the sinking of the Titanic. But the satisfaction derived from immersion in such interests can't compete with the multilayered, immersive world of videos.

I'm glad Owen is living a satisfying life, and that his family is comforted by his progress. I am always happy to see an autism family figure out how to meet the many challenges that accompany life on the autism spectrum. But I worry that other families of similarly impaired children may be misled into missing out on approaches likely to yield far greater degrees of independence.

Owen's father believes that following his son into the magical world of Disney created a bridge between Owen's inner fantasy world and the outer world of real life and friendships. Unfortunately, this bridge only spans one-way. This "Disney model" restricts one's world to those who have not only memorized the script, but who are prepared to play their designated cartoon roles.

Real life doesn't follow a script. Scripts can't equip one to deal with life's discrepancies, bumps, and mishaps. A song about love lost can be the most exquisite of its kind, but it pales in comparison to the mess of on-the-ground heartache.

Owen can function, but in a limited world. He is cut off from all who don't know Disney, and they from him, which is a great loss to both. Like an ornate music box, Disney's world is beautiful and bejeweled, but closed.

This is not to say there's no value in using Disney scripts, and other classic children's stories, to help a child emerge from a closed world into the real one. Mr. Suskind's impersonation of Iago doubtless helped Owen to understand Iago's perspective. Zazu's reeducation plan seems like a good idea. But this is a week's lesson plan, not a life plan.

Growing up, I was told that I must prepare for the world, since it wouldn't prepare for me. Following diagnosis at the age of three, I received the usual routine therapies (speech, play, occupational, and generic special education), and some less routine (auditory integration training and megavitamins). But like the Suskinds, my parents weren't satisfied with my progress and kept looking for additional help.

At about the time I turned six, they jettisoned all other therapies and focused on intensive behavioral intervention (often referred to as applied behavior analysis or "ABA"). During the next couple of years, I received 20 to 30 hours per week of therapy. In second grade, I still had a full-time aide. By third grade, I no longer required any support services.

Still, I remained a somewhat "quirky" kid, who didn't develop a "normal" array of friendships until college. I expect that my graduate school friends would be somewhat incredulous to learn of my history. It's not something I share with many people, partly because there seems to be so much passionate, erroneous, magical thinking about autism.

I still have vivid memories of my ABA treatment which, for all its commitment to shaping behavior by "positive reinforcement," can be difficult for the child on the receiving end. Many of the drills seemed challenging, tiresome, and dull, often leaving both teacher and student feeling exasperated.

A child like me will doubt the purpose of the regime, and wonder what it is all for. Yet the answer to this question will reveal itself as they mature: all that time, all those tasks, and all that trouble is to prepare one not for *a* world, but *the* world. Surely there is no greater reward.

Owen says towards the end of his father's piece that "You have to live in the world." Though I appreciate the sentiment, I can't help but have doubts about his ability to do so. I share my differing experience in the hope that some parents may be inspired to help their children become part of a "whole new world" beyond anything Princess Jasmine could imagine.

Copyright 2014: This article is the property of Connecticut Families for Effective Autism Treatment, Inc. (CT FEAT) and its author, and is copyright protected. The article may be reprinted provided it is with proper attribution and in its entirety. For more information, contact: ctfeat2@ctfeat.org.