

VIEWPOINT

'Frozen' offers glimpse of autism in girls

BY HELEN TAGER-FLUSBERG

15 SEPTEMBER 2015

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I've probably seen the movie "Frozen" at least a dozen times. Like children enthralled with this variation on the classic tale "The Snow Queen," I never tire of the story, the music or the enchanting characters. Among them all, it is Elsa who seems to capture the imagination of every little girl (and many boys too, even if they aren't so quick to admit this).

At first I couldn't understand why Elsa won the most hearts. After all, her sister, Anna, is the warm, charming, spunky and brave heroine of the story. But then, after seeing the film a few more times, I realized what makes Elsa so special: She is the poster child for girls with autism.

Connecting matters: Helen Tager-Flusberg links autism science to society

Illustration by Ivan Canu

Pinning an autism diagnosis on a Disney heroine may seem audacious, but Elsa displays a lot of traits reminiscent of those that clinicians and researchers have highlighted among girls with autism. As a model, Elsa can provide us with some clues about how autism is expressed in girls.

From the time she is a young girl, Elsa is less socially engaged and communicative than Anna. Although Elsa doesn't speak much, she sings beautifully — like several girls with autism that I have known.

Around the time that she accidentally injures her little sister, Elsa virtually stops communicating and playing altogether. And when her parents die, she doesn't realize how much her younger sister needs her — not considering Anna's thoughts and feelings even though she loves her.

Elsa's social impairments reign at her coronation, where she remains distant from guests and refuses to dance with her many admirers. As her responsibilities as queen and Anna's guardian mount, Elsa **experiences so much anxiety** and sensory overload that she brings on a severe winter in the kingdom of Arendelle with her magical powers. That's when she runs away to create a castle of ice on the distant cliffs.

Elsa's symptoms in the behavioral and sensory domains are also obvious. She has magical powers (akin to savant skills) that are sparked by her touch, which turns everything to ice — a symbolic reference to **epilepsy**, perhaps, as the patterns of ice resemble spikes of electrical activity. She wears gloves to ease her **sensory hypersensitivity**, just as some people with autism wear certain fabrics that are less likely to irritate them.

We also see hints of Elsa's anxiety, so common in autism: her fears about her magical powers, her reluctance to be in the limelight as queen and her desire to "let it go." Toward the end, we also see her anxiety as Anna falls into a deep coma.

Emulating Elsa:

Characterizing autism in girls is important for answering several key questions. For example, why does autism appear to be so much rarer in girls? Do girls have factors that protect them from autism risk? Or are girls better than boys at masking their symptoms — say, by tending to copy certain behaviors as a way of trying to fit in socially? Such tendencies, if they exist, might mean that we are just not as good at spotting symptoms in girls.

Once I realized that Elsa would fulfill anyone's definition of autism, the mystery was why no one else had noticed it. Of course, it is because we don't think of princesses or queens as having autism. When we think about autism, we rarely picture girls or women who are accomplished and beautiful.

Last Halloween, Disney sold millions of Elsa costumes to little girls in this country and around the world. If the costumes sold are any indication, so many more girls wanted to be Elsa than Anna, who, given her loveable character and courage, should have been the more popular princess.

I would love to believe that as they wear Elsa's gown, emulate her actions and sing her songs, these girls are learning to admire and embrace a star with autism. In turn, they will become more compassionate and understanding of differences.

Maybe little girls love Elsa precisely for her distinctive traits. Or maybe it is just the beautiful

dresses she wears.

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