



Dr. Gia Koehne Blossom Center for Children

Twenty years later, Dr. Gia Koehne vividly recalls the three, non-verbal boys, ages 2, 3 and 5, diagnosed with autism. They would change her life forever from the moment she met them while working as a behavior therapist in her native Puerto Rico.

By xxx xxx | Photography by David Teran

"I remember one of them, all he would do was sort Fruit Loops by color, and when I would ask him a question, he would scream," said Dr. Koehne, CEO, and founder of Blossom Center for Children. "Another one, any time the TV would be turned off, he would start screaming because he thought 'The Lion King' was coming on.

"Then it dawned on me," Dr. Koehne continued, "with patience and understanding where they were coming from, I knew I had to be their connection with a person who was going to be fun and engage with them. It pushed me to get on the floor and be silly so that their focus could be on me, not the TV or cereal."

Their story has a happy outcome thanks to months of an accelerated, play-based therapy method known as applied behavior analysis (ABA). Today, two of them have college degrees, and the other works for an IT company. "Within a year-and-a-half, they were talking and going to school. It ignited my passion for working with children with autism," she said.

In 2011, Dr. Koehne, who initially wanted to be a pediatrician, took a leap of faith and opened Blossom Center for Children after working with several agencies as a consultant. Its mission is to help children with autism achieve their maximum potential through a unique method of ABA completely focused on play and social engagement.

"I opened Blossom because I wanted a space to provide my unique approach of ABA, which involves a core focus of play and neurodevelopmental aspects of autism," she said. "If we teach through play and focus on creating connections with the kids, not only are the kids happier, but the staff is happier, and the kids learn so much faster. Most of my rooms don't even have a table and chairs since everything is taught while playing on the floor. Anything can be taught through play, and if play is the universal language of children, why try to remove that when teaching?"

"Also, our field is constantly evolving, and I wanted a place to share knowledge and train staff and parents. Finally, I wanted a place where parents felt they were part of our team and had an open door to be part of their child's session. My company is one of the few in San Antonio that is owned by a clinician."

Dr. Koehne said ABA has evolved over the decades and is proving to have a tremendous impact on children with autism. "When ABA started in the '60s, most children were taught skills sitting on a chair, with flashcards, and given rewards like candy," she said. "Although they were learning, the progress was sometimes slow due to tantrums and therapist frustrations. With my expertise

in neurodevelopment and autism, I wanted to move far away from this and create a program in which the kids were happy and learned faster so we could close the gap." Dr. Koehne admits that although working with kids with autism can be challenging, the joy and excitement of seeing a child make progress are satisfying for everyone involved.

"It's those little changes that mean so much," she said. "After telling a mom their child has autism, her world can fall apart. But then, a couple of months later, their child is coming to our clinic, and they're so grateful their child is talking. It's worth every single minute."

Dr. Koehne and her close-knit staff rely on peer support from the Council of Autism Service Providers, that she said helped them navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic. "They were started by a small group of passionate people like me who own practices, yet we don't fit into the medical or speech and occupational therapy field," she said. "We rely on each other a lot, collaborate and share as much info as we can with one another."

However, Dr. Koehne stresses to parents that a diagnosis of autism is not the end of the world, nor should they despair. Research has found that early intervention can have a tremendous impact.

"Some people, who I know have autism, are married and have careers," she said. "The important thing is getting the right intervention as soon as possible, so we can help them be whatever they want to be. Having autism doesn't mean they can't have relationships as they get older. And today, there is so much help."

In addition to her full-time job serving dozens of children with autism each year, Dr. Koehne is also a mom to four daughters: Kamila, 16; Gianna, 14; Alana, 11; and Mia, 5, who was born with Down syndrome.

"Mia has changed our lives in the most fascinating way, but also created challenges for her sisters and to accept that life is a little bit different than we thought," Dr. Koehne said. "But having a child with special needs has helped me resonate even more with parents who we serve," Dr. Koehne said.



For more information:

<https://www.blossomcenterforchildren.com>