

BEYOND THE BENCH

Beyond the bench: A conversation with Kristin Sohl

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Kristin Sohl learned young how to access community resources designed to help families through lean times: She had her first child at 19 years old.

“I was a premed student with no income,” she says. “My husband had just finished college, was starting work on his master’s degree and was working full-time as a pharmacy technician. We had a total family income of about \$19,000, and we needed help.”

Today she is a pediatrician who shares the knowledge she gained then with other families — primarily those with autistic children, who make up most of her practice.

Most pediatricians lack training in recognizing and treating autism, says Sohl, professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of Missouri in Columbia. To address that gap, in 2015 she founded **ECHO Autism**, a virtual learning network that connects physicians and other primary-care providers with autism specialists around the world. She is also a principal investigator for the **Autism Care Network**, a group of 20 centers across North America that provide healthcare to autistic people, collect and share data, and conduct research.

Sohl recently told *Spectrum* why pediatricians need to be well versed in autism, why a ‘sponsor’ is

better than a 'mentor,' and how Pokémon Go helps her refresh.

Spectrum: How did you decide to become a pediatrician?

Kristin Sohl: When I was 7, I broke my arm and had to spend the night in a hospital. My roommate there had been in a car accident and had extensive burns over her whole body. Watching her resilience and joy, despite the hurt, really moved me. Since then, I've never veered from my passion to be a physician. Fast forward a decade or so, and I earned a scholarship to medical school while I was a senior in high school. I decided to be a pediatrician because I love how much kids teach us through their innocence.

S: What did you learn about autism in medical school?

KS: Honestly, I didn't learn about autism in medical school. That's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about engaging physicians and clinicians in learning more, so we can reduce the stigma associated with developmental disabilities and autism. Most pediatricians don't know what autism looks like across its broad spectrum. When one of them says, "Nah, I don't think that's autism," that child's outcome will be totally impacted.

S: What does a typical day look like for you?

KS: My day starts with getting up at 6 a.m. and getting to it. I am usually out of the house at 7:10 to take my daughter Isabella to school, and then I go to Panera for some quiet time and iced tea. I go into my first meetings or clinic around 8:30. No day is the same. Some days I'm planning new programs for Missouri and working on budgets, whereas other days I'm launching international partnerships and recruiting families for studies. Or I'm strategizing our next training session to engage more people in the ECHO Autism movement or plotting how to improve population health for children in Missouri. A ton of my free time is spent brainstorming with colleagues and thinking about how we can do something to make a difference in gaps that we see every day.

S: Do you have a mentor?

KS: I have a couple of sponsors, as I think of them. **Sanjeev Arora**, a hepatologist at the University of New Mexico, founded **Project ECHO** to bring effective treatment for hepatitis C to patients in sparsely settled areas in New Mexico. Now there are ECHOs for pain, HIV, COVID-19, cancer. We were the first to apply it to autism.

He and **Susan Hyman** are the two who have cleared paths for me and been my cheerleaders and guides through many experiences. Susan is a developmental behavioral pediatrician at the University of Rochester in New York, the founding chair of the Autism Subcommittee of the

American Academy of Pediatrics, the godmother of autism in the pediatric space.

The way I see it, a mentor might give you some advice here and there, but a sponsor will say “This would be good for you,” and they connect you. They see what you want to accomplish, and they help you make it happen.

S: What is your family like?

KS: My husband David and I have two kids: Alexander, who’s 23, and Isabella, 13. They’re my favorite people. David grounds me, Alexander is the kindest soul I know, and Isabella pushes me to be my fierce self and stay authentic every day.

And I love cats. I have three — Diego, Percy and Roni. They watch TV with me. Roni is technically my grandcat, but I claimed him when my son moved back home during the pandemic.

S: When and where are you most productive?

KS: I’m most productive in a busy airport or a crowded cafe. I love to be in the middle of a lot of action, with headphones on and no one really knowing who I am.

S: What do you listen to while you work?

KS: Music for sure — I love contemporary Christian rock, Billie Eilish and ’80s music. Podcasts are also great. I usually listen to “Dare to Lead” with Brené Brown, or another leadership podcast, on my way to work.

S: Are you a reader?

KS: Yes! I love to read really good psychological thrillers, but right now I’m reading two nonfiction books: Harvard Business Review’s “**Time Management**” and Patrick Lencioni’s “**The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive.**”

S: What do you do to relax?

KS: I love to binge-watch true crime and psychological thrillers on TV, such as “**You**,” for example, and play games such as Spades and Settlers of Catan. I also play **Pokémon Go** (a mobile virtual game) with my best friend, who’s also a pediatrician. I roped my husband into it, too. I love it. It keeps me busy while I’m walking and getting exercise. My brain is ordinarily so nonstop “on” that if I just take a random walk, very soon I will go home, because I can’t stop thinking of things I need to do. Pokémon Go allows me to just totally enjoy the world around me.

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