

Franchise Mentor: Becoming a Brain Balance Franchisee Was a Personal Decision for Mother of Four (Part 1)

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This post is the first of two parts. To read Part 2, please check back on Wednesday.

For most investors, making money is the motivating factor for becoming a franchise partner with a company. Kristel Thomas's reasons were much more altruistic. After seeing her son with learning disabilities show vast improvement following enrollment in a [Brain Balance Achievement Center](#), Thomas wanted to do more to help him as well as other children like him and their families.

"It's like being given a gift that you really want to share with the world. That's how personal and how powerful it was," Thomas said of her decision to become a Brain Balance franchisee in 2010.

A mother of four boys, Thomas, 40, was introduced to Brain Balance through the book "[Disconnected Kids](#)," written by the company's co-founder Dr. Robert Melillo. Her son, Louie, had been diagnosed with challenges such as developmental delay and language delay. Educated at Miami University of Ohio, Thomas put her career on hold to care for her child's special needs. Living in Canton, Ohio, she went so far as to separate her family for three summer months to enroll her son in a Brain Balance center in Atlanta because none existed in Ohio. Her husband stayed in Ohio with two of their sons, while she took the other two to Georgia.

At the end of just three months, Louie was making great strides with the program, but Thomas wanted to return home and reunite her family. She and her husband Greg began discussing opening a Brain Balance Achievement Center in Canton.

A Growing Franchise

Today Thomas operates one of more than 50 Brain Balance centers nationwide and the chain, launched in 2006, is growing with 13 new centers expected to open in 2013. The centers have helped thousands of children between the ages of 4 and 17 reach their academic, social, and behavioral potential through a non-medical, brain-based program.

The individualized and customized program utilizes sensory-motor, cognitive exercises, and nutritional guidance to address the root cause of most neurobehavioral issues. The centers work with all kinds of learning disabilities, including ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's, Asperger's, and autism spectrum disorders.

Being a Brain Balance franchisee takes a certain type of person, Thomas said. The owner/operator has to have a sincere desire to work with children and to help families.

"It's not like running a [Baskin Robbins](#)," she said. "You're working with families, many of whom are in crisis, and



Kristel Thomas, Brain Balance Franchisee



you're taking them from that place to a place of healing. You're not just clocking in and clocking out."

"I think what makes a successful Brain Balance franchise owner, you have to have a passion for working with children with learning disabilities. We're not only working with the child but we are working with the family. It is intensive and it's emotional so you have to know that about yourself."

Operator Receives Intensive Training

Thomas said Brain Balance's intensive training program prepares the center operator for that responsibility. Once she had decided to become a franchisee, Thomas spent months learning about the Brain Balance approach to treating children through online modules and tutorials. She was introduced to a three-prong approach beginning with an assessment of an imbalance in the child's brain that is causing behavioral, academic, and social difficulties. The program then uses physical, cognitive, and dietary changes to correct the imbalance.

Following online training, franchisees travel to the Brain Balance headquarters on Long Island, N.Y., where they spend three weeks receiving further hands-on training in classrooms, learning more about neurology, participating in sensory-motor sessions, learning about cognitive approaches, conducting assessment and testing methods, and learning practical information about running the business, such as how to market a center.

"I thought it was as effective as it could have been," Thomas said of her training. "Nothing really prepares you mentally for when you're finally on your own."

Corporate representatives also come to the franchisee's center to help train the hired staff, but training is an ongoing process, Thomas said.

Support is Ongoing

"My center director now has weekly conference calls. There is always training going on. So, it's not really like you go out (to Long Island) and come back and that's the end of that. They are extremely interested in providing the best possible program that can be provided. It's very cutting edge. If I hire a new staff member, there are training videos and conference calls. You're never alone. There's so much support."

Thomas opened her 3,200-square-foot Brain Balance center in March 2011 in a retail center located across from an elementary school. Her husband, a commercial Realtor, helped find an ideal spot, but other franchisees can rely on assistance from the corporate office, she said. Ideally, a center should be in a residential area where it is easily accessible to families with children.

"You don't want to be in a downtown metropolitan urban area," she said.

The space is built to certain specifications that provide necessary learning and conference spaces, she said.

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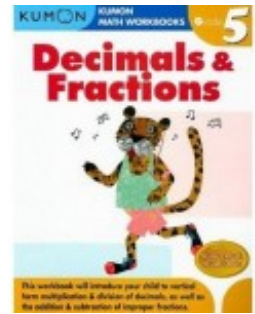
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