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New program is helping kids with autism gain their independence

By Scott Behrens
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Chileda has been helping children on the autism spectrum for decades, but now, for the first time ever, they're helping parents, businesses and schools make their homes and establishments more autism-friendly.

Karrie Zielke, the director of the Chileda Development and Learning Center, said, "We really haven't done anything like this before. It's going to provide training to parents, school districts, other agencies in the area, businesses of what autism is and how they can support parents and those affected by autism."

Chileda has dozens of students from around the country who live and learn skills on their campus in La Crosse.

"The kids that come to Chileda are primarily on the autism spectrum, whether it's lower functioning or higher functioning autism with very significant behavior problems," Zielke said.

They help those students manage their behavior problems and learn new skills, but many times, when they go back home, there's a problem.

"When they transition home, sometimes they regress," Zielke said.

One of the biggest challenges is most environments aren't well suited for people with autism.

"Noises may be a little bit distracting and overwhelming for them. Lights could be distracting and overwhelming for them," Zielke said.

The new program will train parents and community members on how to be more accommodating.

"Education on sensory and what you can do to make your business or make your home more inviting to a person with autism. Helping the school district really look at the behavior of the child and come up with a behavior plan," Zielke said.

If their program is successful, Terri Gowey, the chief operating officer at Chileda, said more students will be able to stay living at home, which is extremely important.

"It'd be great if kids could stay in their homes and schools. Children do best when they're with their families and with their peers and that social network," Gowey said.

Zielke said a few small changes could have a big impact on kids with autism.

“Parents that have children with autism just want to be included in the community; they want their child to be included into the community as well,” Zielke said.

Chileda’s new development and learning center will be built in the Image World building off Mormon Coulee Road.

They hope construction will be finished by the end of summer.

The current Chileda headquarters is just blocks away on Victory Street and will remain open.

If you would like to learn more or get involved in the program, you can email the director at Karriez@chileda.org

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8



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