

C H I L E D A

# CHRONICLES



## Welcome to the Second Issue of the Chileda Chronicles!

Dear Chileda Community,

I am excited to welcome you to the second issue of the Chileda Chronicles Newsletter. It is always heartening to highlight the dedicated work of our staff and community. In this issue, we provide updates on various programming and service offerings, celebrate the contributions of our dedicated staff, discuss some of our collaborative efforts, capture our continuous learnings, and much more. Each article reflects our commitment to excellence and our unwavering dedication to making a positive impact on those we serve.

I invite you to dive deep into this issue to gain a deeper understanding of all that we do and strive to do. We are proud of the collaborative spirit that drives us forward and the shared vision that unites us all.

Thank you for being a part of the Chileda family. We look forward to continuing to share our journey and impact with you.

Sincerely,

**Derek Cortez, PhD**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

NEW

## Six Months of Insight: Chileda's Blog Continues to Grow

As we continue through the spring season, we're excited to celebrate nearly six months of insightful and inspiring content on the Chileda Blog! Since launching, the blog has become a valuable resource for families, caregivers, and professionals supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and cognitive and behavioral challenges.

What makes our blog even more special is the wide range of voices across the organization who contribute their expert advice. The diverse range of perspectives allows us to offer well-rounded, practical tips and uplifting success stories to help guide those working alongside individuals with unique needs.

If you haven't had the chance to visit the site yet, please click the link below to explore the latest posts.

[View Our Blog Posts Here](#)

Submitted by Kate Lopas, MA, BCBA, LBA,  
Director of Behavior Services

## World Autism Acceptance Day at Chileda

On April 2, 2025, Chileda joined the global celebration of World Autism Awareness & Acceptance Day. In our latest blog post, we explored the importance of shifting from awareness to acceptance, showcasing ways individuals and communities can create a more inclusive world for individuals with autism. You can read the full article here: [World Autism Awareness & Acceptance Day 2025](#).

To mark the occasion, staff and students at both our La Crosse and Menasha campuses participated by wearing blue, a symbol of support for autism acceptance. It was an uplifting day of connection, reflection, and celebration, reminding us all of the incredible strengths of those with autism and the power of inclusivity.

At Chileda, we are proud to continue fostering an environment where everyone's unique abilities are recognized and valued.



Submitted by: Melissa Vanoskey, MS,  
BCBA, LBA, Director of Shine Community  
Services

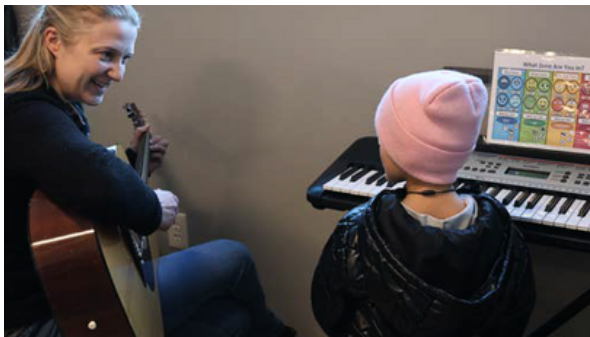
## Building Skills & Connections This Summer at Chileda Shine



Chileda Shine is gearing up for another exciting season of summer programming, and we can't wait to get started!

Our summer services are designed to help youth build meaningful skills while connecting with peers in small, supportive groups. Students are paired with one or two peers who share similar goals and interests, creating opportunities for friendship, collaboration, and growth.

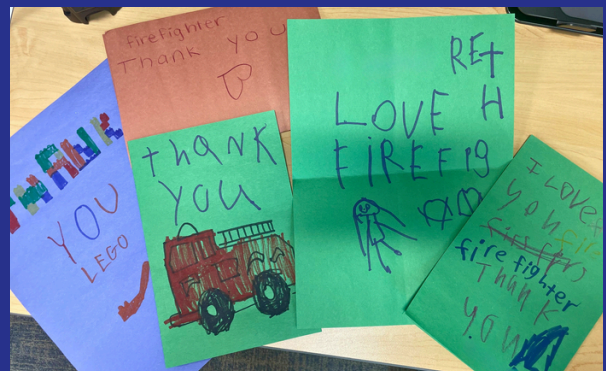
Each session focuses on enhancing communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and daily living skills. Activities include engaging lessons, hands-on practice, and community outings to local parks, stores, and other fun spots, offering real-world experiences that build confidence and independence.



## Chileda Shine Clients Visit the Onalaska Fire Department

On March 30th, Shine clients took a fun and educational trip to the Onalaska Fire Department. They toured the station, sat in fire trucks, and learned about fire safety, from calling 911 to not being afraid of firefighters in gear.

Some students even shared dreams of becoming firefighters one day. Afterwards, our students delivered handmade thank-you cards to show their appreciation for the firefighters' time and kindness.



## BUBBL'R Donates to Chileda Shine

BUBBL'R generously donated 624 cans of BUBBL'R Antioxidant Sparkling Water to Chileda Shine. This thoughtful contribution helps keep our team refreshed and energized as we continue supporting the individuals and families we serve. Thank you BUBBL'R for your generosity!

Submitted by: Rob Becker, Principal, Chileda Learning Center- Menasha, WI

## Springing into Summer at Chileda Menasha

As we welcome spring, the Chileda Learning Center–Menasha team is already looking ahead to an enriching and busy summer for our students.

This summer, we are excited to be offering an Extended School Year (ESY) program along with Summer Skills Sessions. ESY runs from June 9th through July 28th. Summer Skills Sessions are offered from July 28th through August 22nd. These sessions focus on social skills, community integration, functional communication, activities of daily living (ADLs), and emotional regulation. Clients will be paired based on their level of need and placed in groups with others of similar skill levels.

The Summer Skills Sessions are funded through the Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) program in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and our local county agencies.

This program runs through August 22, giving our team time to prepare for another fantastic school year in 2025–26. We're excited to offer these extended learning opportunities and continue supporting our students' growth throughout the summer months.



**NEW  
UPDATE**

Submitted by: Makenna Myers, Adult Family Home Lead Caregiver

## Spring at Chileda's Adult Family Home

Spring has arrived, and the energy at Chileda's Adult Family Home is blooming. As the days warm up, we are embracing the season with enthusiasm—focusing on both the personal growth of our clients and creating opportunities for exciting experiences. Our clients continue to build their independence and life skills through daily tasks like doing dishes, laundry, and cleaning up after meals. Engaging in these activities helps foster a sense of accomplishment and enhances confidence in their ability to manage daily tasks with support. In addition to their growth, clients enjoy a variety of outdoor adventures. From hikes to visits to the park and enjoying ice cream by the river, they create lasting memories while surrounded by the beauty of nature.

This spring, our residents have also hand-crafted flowerpots, filling them with flowers they chose themselves, celebrating both creativity and nature. We look forward to warmer days and to seeing our clients continue to thrive.



Submitted by: Jason Colvin, Recreation Manager

## Camp Chileda — A Summer of Fun, Growth, and Connection!



Camp Chileda is an exciting new summer program designed for current day school and residential students, as well as the dedicated staff at Chileda in La Crosse, WI.

Our goal is to create opportunities for fun, friendship, and positive growth in a supportive camp style environment. We aim to provide students with a summer filled with academic enrichment, adventure, creativity, and connection. Through themed weeks, friendly competitions, special outings, and evening programs, students will have the chance to try new activities, practice teamwork, build confidence, and most importantly, HAVE FUN!



But Camp Chileda is not just for students. It's also for staff!

Camp Chileda Team members will play a crucial role in bringing the camp experience to life by engaging in programs, participating in camp wide challenges, and creating memorable moments alongside their students. It's a chance to step outside the usual routine, tap into creativity, and help craft a summer filled with joy and positive impact.

Camp Chileda is about more than just activities; it's about building relationships, celebrating successes (both big and small), and fostering a sense of belonging for everyone. This summer, we're focusing on fun with purpose, ensuring every student leaves camp with lasting memories, new skills, and stronger connections.

Adventure awaits! Let's make this summer unforgettable at Camp Chileda!



Submitted by: Derek Cortez, PhD, Chief Executive Officer

## Autism in Focus

As the days grow warmer and summer approaches, swim season is officially upon us! There's no doubt that swimming is one of the great joys of childhood. It's a time for laughter, play, and learning new skills that can last a lifetime.



Swimming is not only fun—it's healthy, and contributes to better gross and locomotor skills, balance, and sleeping habits among children.

But with all the fun comes a very important responsibility: safety. Drowning is one of the leading causes of accidental injury-related deaths among children, and many of these tragedies occur in familiar places or during routine play near water.

Children and adolescents diagnosed with autism are **3x** more likely to drown than those who are neurotypical. Drowning remains the leading cause of death through 14 years of age for those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (National Autism Association, n.d). Individuals with autism are more prone to wandering and eloping, may lack awareness of the dangers of water, and often have limited swimming instruction.

Here are a few simple, life-saving reminders to help keep swimming both safe and enjoyable, as recommended by the National Autism Association:

- Always supervise children around water, even if they know how to swim.
- Enroll your child in swim lessons—knowing how to swim is one of the best protections.
- Teach children to never swim alone and to stay within designated swim areas.
- Use life jackets when boating or in open water, especially for younger or inexperienced swimmers.
- Ensure pools have proper barriers, covers, and alarms if you have one at home.
- Learn CPR—it can make all the difference in an emergency.

One challenge for families is the lack of skilled swim instructors who are adequately trained to work with individuals with autism. Consider asking your local public swimming pools if they have staff trained to work with individuals with autism. If not, advocate that they provide training opportunities for their staff.



Submitted by: Derek Cortez, PhD, Chief Executive Officer

## Autism in Focus Cont.

Two other suggestions include *Swim Angelfish* and *The Autism Society's Safety on the Spectrum Water and Wandering Program*.



*Swim Angelfish* is a company that educates families and children with autism and various other challenges by employing a series of adaptive techniques on how to swim. They provide online teaching modules that can be accessed at [swimangelfish.com](http://swimangelfish.com).

*The Autism Society's Safety on the Spectrum Water and Wandering Program* is a program that "works to not only prevent wandering-related tragedies, but to increase water safety skills among individuals with autism and their families.

With the right precautions in place, your children can enjoy all the benefits of swimming while staying protected.

Wishing you a safe and splash-filled summer!

## Key Drowning Statistics

**Drowning** is a leading cause of injury-related death among the general pediatric population, especially those younger than 4.

### 160x

The risk of drowning is 160 times that of the general pediatric population, according to a 2017 study from [Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health](#).

### 70%

According to a 2017 study from the National Autism Association, drowning accounts for more than 70% of wandering-related fatalities.

Submitted by: Jessica Schuler, MS, BCBA,  
LBA, Director of Staff Development

## Collaboration with the La Crosse Police Department



Over the years, Chileda has been in close and consistent contact with the La Crosse Police Department as we work together to serve the community, specifically those with Autism or other cognitive challenges.

Last year, our relationship with them grew as we opened our STEP program and relied on their assistance more frequently. This has deepened our relationship and led to the police department contacting us about conducting a workshop about communicating with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

This past January, we shared our knowledge and experience by answering questions related to communicating with individuals with ASD. The Chileda team provided an overview of ASD and profound autism, reviewed common behaviors that they may see or hear in individuals with ASD, and provided some strategies on how to respond and redirect behaviors to increase safety and communication between the officers and individuals with autism.

Both Chileda and the La Crosse Police Department are grateful for the mutual support and look forward to continued collaboration.



*Pictured from left to right: Kate Lopas, Director of Behavior Services; Jessica Schuler, Director of Staff Development; Brooke Edmondson, Advanced Behavior Specialist; and Melissa Vanoskey, Director of Shine Community Services.*

## Making a Difference in Our Students' Smiles

We extend our sincere appreciation to Scenic Bluffs Community Health Center for their outstanding care of our students at the La Crosse Campus. In just one day, 18 students received full dental exams.





## Employee Spotlight



**Lydia Stiehl**  
Health and  
Wellness  
Manager

My career has been dedicated to supporting individuals of all backgrounds and all abilities. With a degree in Criminal Justice, my focus was on reducing recidivism, driven by the belief in everyone's potential for positive change. This led me to volunteer as a GED instructor at Wabasha County Jail, empowering incarcerated individuals with educational opportunities and promoting a shift in stigmatization. The next step of my journey led me to the field of human services, where I've held roles ranging from Direct Support Professional, In-Home Program Coordinator, to Mental Health Program Director.

Prior to joining Chileda full-time, I served as a Guardian/Conservator Case Manager at Catholic Charities, advocating for the well-being of individuals under court-appointed guardianship. Notably, many of my clients were former Chileda graduates, who consistently expressed gratitude for their positive experiences while at Chileda.

Today, I'm thrilled to be part of the Chileda team. Whether it is completing routine tasks or working to find a solution for a focused project, I am always willing and excited to help. The passion and dedication here at Chileda is truly inspiring. The Chileda-vibe is something that is better left experienced than described. The work done here, really matters!

Outside of work, I enjoy spending time with my family. My husband and I are always busy renovating the home we built in 2020, and we cherish every moment with our two pugs, Barkley and Bohdi.



## We'd Love to Hear From You!

Your thoughts and suggestions are important to us! Please take a moment to share your feedback on this edition of the newsletter. What did you find helpful? Is there something you'd like to see in future issues?

<https://forms.office.com/r/7vv36H44uZ>

Or feel free to reach out directly at [marketing@chileda.org](mailto:marketing@chileda.org)

Thank you for helping us make this newsletter better for you and your family!

### Chileda Institute

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