

2024-2025
School Year

Annual Report



Cheerful Helpers Child and Family Study Center

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A Message From Our Leaders

2024-2025 was another year where community was our primary focus. Our Friday and Saturday social skills groups thrived. There were so many fun things that kids did as they learned to be prosocial. They made robots and created their own board game, they hosted their families for meals at CHPS, and learned how to negotiate to make plans that worked for each of them. In the school we had a large group of new students, and they integrated beautifully into our school and community.

In January, our Los Angeles community suffered through fires, and our school and larger Cheerful Helpers family were impacted. While we began to recover and rebuild, we also learned a lot about talking about big worries and resilience. We certainly were asked to do some very hard things.

We are, as always, so grateful for our board and our generous donors for allowing us to keep programming alive and growing. Our alumni groups continue to serve families and our BEIG is a place for new families to start learning together. In 2025-26 we will be able to provide dyadic parent/ child play therapy for all of our school kids. We are also expanding this modality to the community.

We have so much to share with all of you in the year ahead!

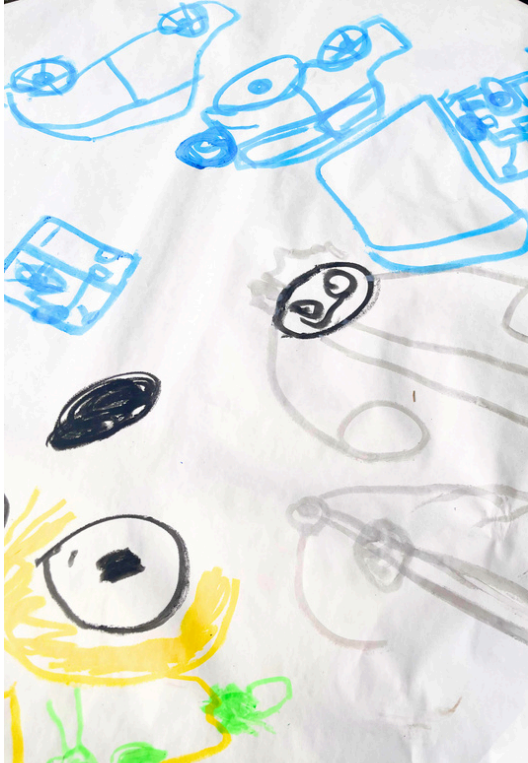


Janet Upjohn, Executive Director



Jaclyn Zeccola, Clinical Director

Who We Serve

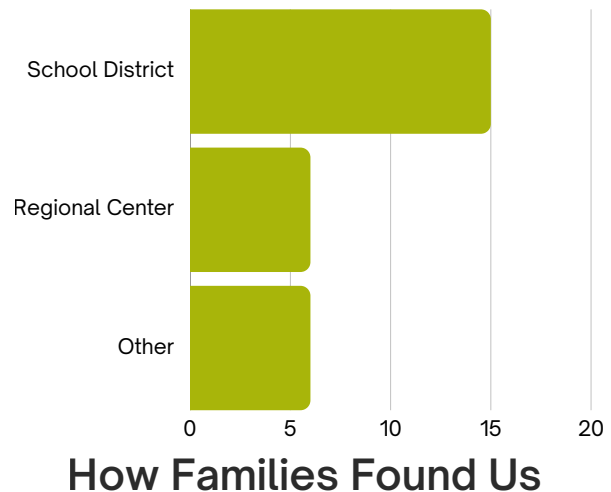
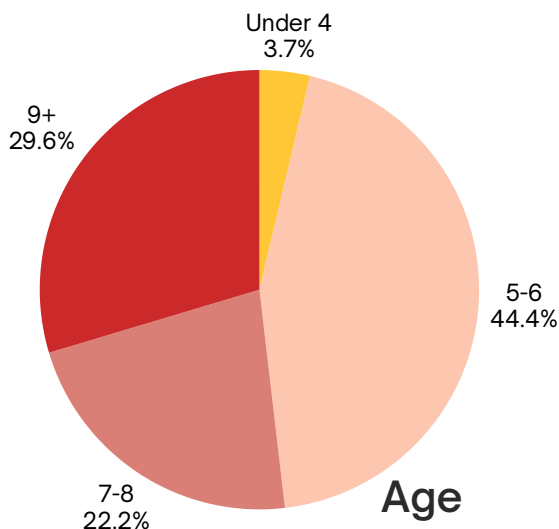


In the 2024-2025 Academic Year

Cheerful Helpers served 40 families, representing over 120 individuals. We are honored to have provided support to so many people.

When a family is interested in services at Cheerful Helpers, our clinical team will reach out to the family for an over-the-phone contact. After the phone contact, we invite the family in for an in-person screening to meet the child. In the 2024-2025 academic year, Cheerful Helpers made more than **60 over-the-phone contacts**. That's over 1,200 minutes of conversation!

Of the families who joined our services, our average age served was **6.9 years old!** Compared to previous years, this academic year, many more families found us through online web searches and word-of-mouth from friends and neighbors.



Our Model



Therapeutic Schooling

Cheerful Helpers is a fully accredited non-public school serving children ages 3-10. Attending schools five mornings a week, students learn in a nurturing, therapeutic environment guided by our special education teachers and clinical team. The class curriculum follows the Common Core State Standards of education. This year, Cheerful Helpers had 15 students enrolled across two classrooms.

BEIG

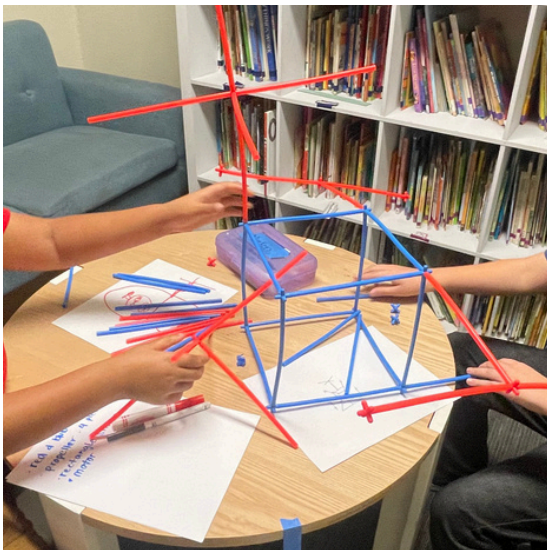
The Brief Evaluation and Intervention Group (BEIG) is often the first point of connection for families seeking support. BEIG, a 16-week program, serves children aged 3-5 and is designed as a collaborative “parent-and me” group. Initially created as a twice a week group, Cheerful Helpers offers a once a week group that meets on Saturdays. Though our traditional BEIG program and our Saturday BEIG program, the goal is provide families with tools for success in and out of the classroom.

Social Skills

Our Socialization Training Group, commonly known as “Social Skills”, supports children in developing foundational interpersonal ability. Through participation in Social Skills, children gain a basic prosocial toolbox filled with competencies such as sharing ideas and listening to others. These tools allow children to feel successful on the playground, in the classroom, and at home with family. In addition to our school-based Social Skills that meets twice a week, we have two community groups offering students the opportunity to attend Social Skills while remaining enrolled in their own school program.

Play Therapy

Cheerful Helpers' play therapy services support both our therapeutic school students and children from the larger community. In a safe and warm environment, created by a clinician, children are invited to explore their experiences through symbolic play. Play Therapy allows children to work through challenging aspects of their lives using toys and other play items to communicate feelings and ideas that are otherwise difficult to express directly to others. Through their play and reflection, along with guidance from a therapist, children in play therapy can begin to heal from traumatic or distressing experiences, expand their self-expression, and develop coping skills.



Our Impact



At Cheerful Helpers, we believe families play an essential role in every child's journey. Each hour of service is purposefully designed to foster growth, joy, and love of learning. By working alongside our families, we provide holistic support to parents while meeting each child where they are, embracing their individuality, strengths, and interests through supportive, relationship-based care.

We offer a wide mix of programs—including group sessions, one-on-one services, and playful classroom activities so every student can enjoy a rich and welcoming therapeutic experience

In the 2024-2025 School Year, Cheerful Helpers provided over:

165

Hours of Play Therapy Services

250

Hours of Speech Therapy Services

335

Hours of Occupational Therapy Services

1,175

Hours of Social Skills Services

4,150

Hours of 1:1 Classroom Services

What It's Worth

Maddox's Story

Of all the things I value in my life, it's hard to say how much Cheerful Helpers is "worth" to me. It's a difficult question that often comes up around this time of year. How much should we donate to the causes we care about? And for that matter, how much should we be spending on other things in our life? Nice meals? Bad meals? Overpriced theme parks? Clothes? Okay clothes is easy—I spend as little as possible on clothes. But it's a consideration for other people.

The question gets harder around Cheerful Helpers, a place at the center of my family's identity. And although we do come up with a dollar amount when it's time to donate each year, I still wonder if it comes close to truly representing how much we value it.

Our son, Maddox, graduated from Cheerful Helpers in 2023 and despite the fact that we had gone all-in on the C.H. approach to his disability, gotten him as many services as he needed and generally felt like he was ready for a new school, the hardest time we ever had with him was the tumultuous months after he graduated.

We had found a LAUSD school with a class specifically for children on the spectrum. We had toured it and met the staff and worked all summer (Cheerful Helpers style) to prepare Maddox and his new team for the coming school year. Yet, within the first week it was already a mess. LAUSD failed us in all the ways one might suspect and even found some innovative ways to screw things up as well. After just two weeks we were in crisis, and the situation at school was not safe.

We were heartbroken and demoralized. He had learned so much during his three years at Cheerful Helpers, and our family had made so much progress. Life at home was nothing like the chaotic, unsafe mess that it was before we started in the BEIG program and then transitioned to the C.H. school. And yet, here we were, watching Maddox crumble in the new environment in a terrifying way he had never fallen apart before. Despite our best efforts, we pulled Maddox from the unsafe school environment after five weeks and started his homeschooling.

That was when everyone at Cheerful Helpers stepped in to help get Maddox back on track. Jaclyn had already been following Maddox's progress at the new school and asked us to call her every night with updates. We immediately started family play therapy, had one-on-one sessions with Richard and enrolled in Saturday social skills. We were the first family to sign up for that session, so there were actually no other kids in the group with Maddox. It's funny to think of a social skills class with only one child. But in truth, those days Maddox was so dysregulated, conversations with caring adults about the idea of other kids was about all he could handle.

Slowly he managed to reconstitute himself, and this was actually when all his (and our) skills learned at Cheerful Helpers truly came into practice. Nothing had worked to save us from a disastrous valley, but these skills were instrumental in allowing us all to climb out, and at a wonderful pace. Just a few months later, he was able to start attending Frostig West, where he thrives today.

Of all the supports he had during the rebuilding of his self-confidence none were as essential as his own ability to look honestly at what had happened, and why. "The real thing" as we all know it to be called. The tools Maddox learned at Cheerful Helpers may have gone dormant under the pressure of this chaotic new school experience, but they were not lost. Once he remembered who he really was—a kid who could do hard things—he was ready.

Just this past summer he aged out of that social skills program he had been with for years, which means we took our last drive out to Jefferson and said a big goodbye to everyone's favorite alley. I do my best to be a part of the alumni support group each month on zoom, and Richard and Sam want to make a plan for Maddox to visit social skills again as a mentor to the younger kids.

How do we begin to assign a value to all of this? How can any of the parents who were equally touched by Cheerful Helpers? .

With love
Andrew, Gigi, and Maddox



2024- 2025 Highlights

Saturday Social Skills

The first service in our Saturday Programming marked it's one year anniversary in September of 2024. We began the year with 2 returning students and 2 new students, all ready to practice their friendship skills!

1

Welcome Maria!

At the start of the school year, we introduced a new member to our team - Special Education Teacher, Maria Lainez. Under long-time Cheerful Helper, Erin Angle, Maria became integrated into the Pre-K and Kindergarten classroom as a co-teacher. Having years of experience in a school setting, Maria brought with her valuable knowledge to support our students.

2





3

The Cheerful Helpers Courier

The Cheerful Helpers Courier celebrated two years of publication in October of 2024! Since its first email blast, the Courier has reached hundreds of our community members' inboxes for over 30 months!

4

Friday Social Skills

In December of 2024, the pilot community program, Friday Social Skills, reached its two year anniversary! Over the course of two years, a grand total of 15 kids have been served through our Friday Social Skills. That's 15 new families that we reached that we would not have been able to during our traditional weekday programming.

5

Graduation

Marking the end of our 67th school year, we held our graduation in July, saying a big goodbye to 4 students – our biggest graduation class in recent years! We shared immensely proud feelings with all of our graduates and non-graduates alike. Many double-dip feelings were watching our four birds take flight.

Meet Maria

by Arleen Firoozan

Interviewer: Let's go back to the start of this school year. What was it like stepping into a co-teacher role at Cheerful Helpers and learning alongside a lead teacher who later transitioned out?

Maria: When I started here, it was a completely different school environment than what I was used to. I had experience in general education and special education, but this place was much more hands-on and more involved with the students. It wasn't just academics, there is a big emotional component too.



When I started, I became really close with the lead teacher, Erin. We connected very quickly. We were always trying different things together, figuring out what worked and what didn't. She would teach me the way she did things, but she would also ask me, "What would you do in this situation?" We were constantly learning from each other. It was a lot of fun. She really brought me into the classroom and guided me through everything, and that was huge for me. There were some things I had to navigate on my own, like parent-teacher conferences. I had done those before, but they were very different here. And this role wasn't just about the kids! I was also responsible for guiding interns, which was completely new for me. Erin gave me a really strong foundation, not just with the students, but with the staff and the overall structure of the classroom.

We knew from the beginning that Erin was going to be leaving. She moved out of state, so it wasn't a surprise. But when my solo role started, the class itself was also brand new. Almost all the students were new, and all the parents were new too. The parents were physically in the classroom at first, so there were times when there were anywhere from eight to eleven adults in the room watching everything! That was scary.



But I think starting that way actually helped me. If I had started with kids who were already here, I wouldn't have experienced what it's like to build relationships with brand new families and to be seen by so many adults at once. It forced me to step into the role right away.

Interviewer: So how did it feel when you officially stepped into the solo teacher role? What shifted for you?

Maria: If you look at my resume, I've taught middle school, third grade, fifth grade, fourth grade, and second grade - but I have never taught kindergarten, first grade, or Pre-K. I had never worked with the younger ones like this.

I came from classrooms with 26 kids, where it's very structured and very academic. Coming into Cheerful Helpers was completely different. We still keep structure, which I like, but it's not about making 26 kids sit down and finish an assignment. That's not the ideology here. After Erin left, I was still doing things the way she had taught me, but I realized it wasn't always working for me. So, I started changing things little by little. I would go to Jaclyn and say, "Hey, I want to try this," or "I want to do it this way," and the response was always, "Yeah, try it."

That was really different from my past experiences. In other schools, I was always scared of administrators coming in and watching me. Here, I was excited for them to come in and see what I was doing. For example, I taught the kids multiplication, but we call it "repeated addition." I taught it in a way that nobody here had learned before. I was so excited for Jaclyn and Janet to come in and see it. In my old schools, I would've been terrified. That's when I realized I was finding my rhythm - when I felt comfortable trying new things and doing them my way.

Interviewer: I love that you were encouraged to grow, just like the children are. What was it like experiencing your first graduation as their teacher?

Maria: It was really emotional. It was super emotional. Some of the kids who graduated were in another classroom, so I didn't work with them every single day, but I still built relationships with them. I played with them, talked with them, and got to know them. Hearing everyone share stories about where those kids started and where they ended up - it was a lot.

Maria: There's a picture over there of one of the kids in a green shirt. That's him on his first day, and that's him on his last day. Seeing that kind of growth was incredible.

As teachers, you see this every year - you watch kids grow, you watch them go from little and chubby to suddenly tall! But it never gets easier. It makes me think about this next year, too, because I can already feel that some of my kids are ready to move on.

Interviewer: Oh man, several of your students are graduating next year! How do you navigate the big goodbyes and bittersweet transitions?

Maria: With last year's class, I didn't have as much time with them as I will with this year's class. This upcoming year is going to be harder - I already know I'm going to cry.

I'm actually going through it twice, because I have another class at a different school I used to teach at, that's graduating too. There are about 60 kids total that I've worked with who are graduating, and 26 of them were mine. They're moving on to middle school, and they're all splitting up. It's a lot.

But those are my kids. You get attached. You always do.

Interviewer: Looking back, what were your biggest takeaways from last year - about your students and about yourself as an educator?

Maria: Flexibility, for sure. Erin taught me how to be patient and how to slow down, because this age group is different. She taught me how to try something, see that it doesn't work, and not take it personally - just try again.

I learned that this is a learning experience for everyone. I'm always asking questions. I'm always open to feedback. I'm always asking, "Can I try this?" or "Do you have ideas for me?" And here, there's space for that.

I've learned so much at Cheerful Helpers - not just about teaching, but about myself too. Being in a place where I'm encouraged to ask questions, try things out, and keep learning has meant a lot to me. Wherever I go next, that's something I'll always carry with me.



What We've Accomplished



It is our mission to provide consistent and meaningful learning experiences for all our students. We set out to continue to invest in the development of our teachers and staff who are at the core of our relationship-based model. We aimed for stability within all of our programs. This academic year, with support from our larger community, we were able to achieve progress on all of our goals.



We introduced “Recreation Play” to our school scheduling. Held during the school day, Recreation Play provided an opportunity for structured play time between students working towards similar goals. Facilitated by one senior staff member and one intern, Recreation Play created a learning environment for both students and trainees alike.

In addition to this new opening for trainees, we have also introduced an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning in the form of Staff Presentations! During our All-Staff Meetings, Cheerful Helpers adults had the chance to volunteer and lead a short presentation on any clinical topic of their choosing. Through these presentations, we explored best practices for a variety of clients and collaboratively thought about how to apply them at Cheerful Helpers.

This academic year, we hit the ground running with our fundraising efforts with a “Back-to-School” event. Throughout the year, our community continued to support us through donations. As a result, Cheerful Helpers was able to provide scholarships for many of our programs. Through these subsidies, we were able to provide stability for many families with the help of our community’s generosity.

Where We're Heading



Having our second half of the school year interrupted by the wildfires, we were reminded to lean on one another. The hardship highlighted how important it is to pour into our community far and wide. As we move forward to a new school year, we are committed to not only building new partnerships but also nurturing our current relationships, deepening our impact.



In the wake of a tumultuous time, we are setting out to partner with agencies and community partners with a similar goal: to support children and their families for lifelong success. We look forward to being able to equip our resources to connect with other agencies and offer a Cheerful Helper's hand where we can.

As is our goal every year, heading towards a new school year, Cheerful Helpers remains committed to ensuring that the quality of our services continues to improve. We are focused on the support that every child receives, and we aim to not only continue to remain accessible, but truly responsive to our student's unique needs and individual potential.

Looking toward the next school year, we are guided by our mission. We are inspired by the resilience shown by our community during the year and at all times. We move forward with hope that we continue to grow, embracing change.



Our Donors

We are deeply thankful for the generosity and continued support of the Cheerful Helpers community during the 2024–2025 school year. Through grant funding and individual contributions, we were fortunate to receive support from:

Stockel Family Foundation
Rose Chorna Endowment Charitable Fund
Evelyn and Norman Feintech Family Foundation
Huff Family Foundation
Michael Levin
Charlotte Huges and Christopher Combs

Together, our community raised **\$84,342** during the 2024–2025 fiscal year, reflecting a **nearly 10% increase** from 2023–2024. This growth strengthens our ability to broaden services and ensure that more students have access to the support they need.



Our Board



We are grateful for the continued support of our
Cheerful Helpers Board of Directors:

Jackie Sloan, **President**
Eric Stockel, **Vice President**
Susanna Lovell, **Secretary**
Peter Foster, **Treasurer**

Steve Barlam, Member; Sarah Bloom, Member; Carrie
Cannon, Member; Kate Colleary, Member; Ben Decter,
Member; Dana Ostroff, Member; Ellen Pearlman,
Member; Ellen Reinstein, Member; Arlene Schneir,
Member; Victoria Sonu Song, Member; Sandy Throop,
Member

2024- 2025 Staff & Interns

2024- 2025 Staff

Janet Upjohn, LCSW, Executive Director
Jaclyn Zeccola, PhD., Clinical Director
Reyna Alvarez, Administrative Coordinator
Erin Angle, MA, Special Education Teacher
Floresita Arcari, LMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Denise Duval, LMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Emily Glickman, LMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Monica Halchishick, SLP, Speech Therapist
Maria Lainez, M.Ed, Special Education Teacher
Michael Lyons, Occupational Therapist
Ani Oganessian, Occupational Therapist
Rebeca Quinto, MA, Special Education Teacher
Richard Vieville, LMFT, Clinical Supervisor
Sam Zarate, ACSW, Program Coordinator

2024- 2025 Interns

Nina Antonijevic, MFT, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Hannah Barukh, MSW, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Taryn Cantorez, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Jason Cho, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Allyson Fraizer, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Ben Hietala, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Andrew Megerdechian, MFT, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Alex Moradians, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Bre'Aujanæ Moore, MSW, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Rony Norcia, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Tatiana Padovan, AMFT, Child and Family Therapist
Meryl Phillips, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Ali Pinkerton, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Luis Rodriguez, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Pratichi Sadavrati, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Ashley Song, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Forrest Suh, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist Trainee
Anka Tanibata, MFT, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Jocelyn Valdez, MFT, Child and Family Therapist Trainee
Andrew Walsh, MFT, Child and Family Therapist Trainee

2024-2025 Clinical and Educational Consultant

Quint Paige, LMFT, RPT-S

Get Involved



Donate

In financially supporting Cheerful Helpers, you are providing hope to families and their young children. Here is the donation link featured on our website: <https://www.cheerfulhelpers.org/how-to-help/>

Become a Partner

For more than 65 years, Cheerful Helpers has been dedicated to building lasting relationships—not only with families, but also with organizations, corporations, and fellow nonprofits—to enrich the lives of our Cheerful Helpers community. Throughout the year, these partnerships play a vital role in helping us create meaningful experiences for our students, families, and the broader community. We are proud to partner with:

- Hype Silverlake
- Pica + Sullivan Architects
- Stoller Barakat Design
- Stewart Design and Antiques

Join Our Team

Cheerful Helpers offers a Clinical Intern Program for graduate and postgraduate students interested in early childhood who want to build hands-on clinical skills in a school setting. Associates registered with the BBS may earn supervised hours toward licensure (such as LCSW or LMFT), and local colleges and universities may offer academic credit for participation in the program. Interns are accepted year-round. To apply, please email your resume to: jaclyn.zeccola@cheerfulhelpers.org.

Hear what our AMFT Trainee, Ashley has to say:

Over the past year at Cheerful Helpers, I have witnessed meaningful growth in children through consistency and care. The students work hard even when tasks feel challenging and frustration shows up. Through these moments, they demonstrate resilience and hope. I feel deeply grateful to be in an environment that allows us to meet children with understanding and encouragement. My hope is to help them grow into the best versions of themselves."

Hear what our MFT Trainee, Meryl has to say:

"I was nervous when I started at CH because there was so much to learn - everything from understanding and participating in narration to knowing where to find the Duplo Dinos at any given time. I gave narration a try and took on a play therapy client which made it snap to find the Duplo Dinos. I participated in everything from the school day (including leading a cooking center), social skills, summer camp and family camp, and play therapy. I got so much out of the program in my first year because of what I put into it. Jaclyn, Janet, Reyna, Sam and everyone on the CH team has been super friendly and helpful in my journey to best help the students. This year, I'm learning new things like dyadic play and am enjoying helping our new clinicians with advice and moral support when I can. It is truly a gift getting to work with children in early social development at the beginning of my career."

