

Aboriginal Head Start

by Paula Dunning



Since 1995, in urban and northern communities across Canada, Aboriginal Canadians have established 100 Aboriginal Head Start programs for children age 2½ to 5. These programs are designed to provide Aboriginal children with the best of both worlds: a head start in preparing for elementary school, and a head start in building pride in and understanding of their native culture. The concept of balance, which is key to the native world view, is the controlling concept of AHS, as well.¹

Although the programs vary from community to community, depending on the particular Aboriginal culture and the needs of the families involved, all use a holistic approach which focuses on the spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth of young children. And all include six features which have become the cornerstone of AHS: Education, Culture and Language, Parent Involvement, Social Services Support, Health Promotion, and Nutrition. These interlocking features work together to form a unified experience for children within their own cultural context, and to give them an opportunity to integrate contemporary and traditional lifestyles from an early age.

The program focuses on young children in a pre-school and childcare setting, and in many ways it is indistinguishable from any good preschool program. Qualified early childhood educators provide activities to help children develop confidence in socializing with others, a sense of self-worth and competence, age-appropriate skills for prob-

lem-solving, and the learning competencies necessary for success in elementary school. Because parents may choose to keep their children in AHS through kindergarten age, programs meet provincial kindergarten curriculum standards.

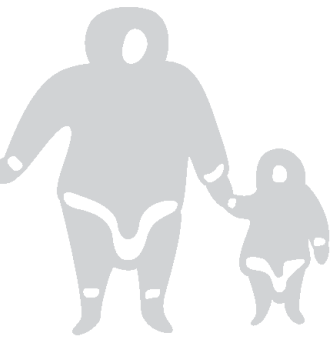
But they go farther by incorporating a significant cultural element and a formal connection with the Aboriginal community, as stated in the AHS mandate to:

- foster the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of each child
- foster a desire in the child for life-long learning
- support parents and guardians as the prime teachers and care givers of their children, making sure parents/care givers play a key role in the planning, development, operations and evaluation of the program
- recognize and support extended families in teaching and caring for children
- make sure the local Aboriginal community is involved in the planning, development, operation and evaluation of the program
- make sure that the initiative works with and is supported by other community programs and services
- ensure the human and financial resources are used in the best way possible to produce positive outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal children, parents, families, and communities.

Family and community involvement is more than an empty commitment. Program organizers are quick to point out that parent and community partici-

pation is integral to the success of AHS, and that support for parents and families is one of the features of every Head Start project. Margaret Wabegijig, Director of the Waabinong Head Start Family Resource Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, says parents work in the classroom, the kitchen, as bus monitors, as curriculum planners, and as custodians. But whatever their activity, they are especially valuable in helping to provide the connection between Native language and culture and the educational curriculum - as are the elders, whose special role is recognized in the Centre's Visiting Elders Program. In Aboriginal culture, the grandparents provide guidance and traditional conditioning to the children and the grandchildren, and so it is at the Head Start Centre where visiting elders are an integral part of the children's day.

Participating in their children's early education can be especially important to Aboriginal parents, whose own experiences with the traditional school system were often negative. For many, AHS represents their first positive experience with a school environment, and a first chance to be part of decision-making for their own children's futures. For many, as well, it opens a door to a cultural heritage which has been all but lost to many young Aboriginal adults. At the Waabinong Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, for example, both children and parents are beginning to learn the Ojibwe language together. A goal, says Margaret Wabegijig, is to gradually edu-



“Let us put our minds together and see what lives we can make for our children.”

-Sitting Bull

cate enough native speakers to include a full language program at the Centre.

In the meantime, children in that centre and in others across the country are learning lessons that older generations of native and non-native Canadians would be wise to learn as well: that native children do not have to choose between ‘their’ culture and mainstream culture; that the two can complement each other; and that it is possible to have the best of both worlds

AHS is a federally-funded program for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children living in urban centres and large northern communities. It began in 1995 as a pilot project, and is funded by Health Canada at a rate of \$22.5 million per year. AHS projects are under way in eight provinces and all three northern territories, with between 3,000 and 4,000 children enrolled each year. Health Canada regional offices work directly with projects, as well as with the Aboriginal Head Start Working Group and the National Aboriginal Head Start Committee.

1 Aboriginal Head Start Initiative (Health Canada), videotape.

2 National Aboriginal Head Start Initiatives.

Paula Dunning is a freelance writer and editor, and editor of *Education Canada*.

MISSION STATEMENT

First Nations, Metis and Inuit recognize children as their nation’s most valuable resource. Thus, the Aboriginal Head Start Initiative will provide comprehensive experiences for First Nations, Metis and Inuit children 0-6 years and their families with primary emphasis on pre-schoolers 3-5 years of age. The program will be based on caring, creativity, and pride following from the knowledge of their traditional community beliefs, within a holistic and safe environment.

The overall primary goal of this initiative is to demonstrate that locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies can provide Aboriginal pre-school children in urban and northern settings with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning and opportunities to develop fully and successfully as young people.²

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