



Canada

Parents and children together – the development of the Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme

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Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a national early intervention programme funded by Health Canada, for First Nations, Inuit and Métis preschool children and their families. Approximately 3,500 children participate annually in 98 aboriginal Head Start centres located across Canada. The Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme started in 1996. It is modelled after the Head Start Programme in the United States¹ that is designed to give preschool children and their parents an opportunity for educational and spiritual development. The programme operates in a centre in the heart of the City of Winnipeg. Recent statistics identify this part of the city as the poorest urban constituency in Canada.² It is a neighbourhood of extreme need for children and families, and high risk too: health, safety, housing, employment, education, personal relationships – all need attention. Single parents and/or grandparents often head families.

But beyond the graffiti-painted fences, inside an old brick building, there is a large room, painted with lively earth colours: the playroom for the children. The four directions, represented with four colours, invite people to understand Ojibway and Cree cultures. On one wall is the kitchen niche, open to the playroom so cooks can be part of the children's programme. One wall has windows with a view to a small playground and park. Another wall has windows that look into the offices of staff. Parent participation is a key to the success of the programme, which honours and supports traditional cultural and spiritual values.

Canada, playing happily in a safe environment
Photo: the Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme

Most of the participants of the programme are aboriginal, mainly Ojibway or Cree. Like other Canadian aboriginals, the participants have endured a history of oppression. Over 200 years of colonisation by a powerful Euro-Canadian government has had a deleterious effect on generations of aboriginals.^{3,4,5} One particular policy that had an effect on education and parenting was the forced removal of aboriginal children to residential schools under the British North American Indian Act of 1876 that stipulated isolation, education and assimilation.^{6,7}

Residential schools began in the mid 19th century and continued through the 1960s.⁸ In these schools, many aboriginal children suffered physical and emotional abuses and a disregard for their cultural identities. Children were not allowed to speak their native languages and besides the brief summer holidays, they were not allowed to contact their families and communities.⁹ Participants in our programme remember their

educational experiences as being humiliating and painful, affecting not only their own lives but also those of their children and grandchildren.

We were beaten. Probably for no reason. Well, we were children so what reason could there have been? They hated us.

I don't remember anything about that school. I don't believe they taught us anything.

And they continue to feel the effects on their ability to parent, and to accept their cultural identity and pass it to their children.

My first language was Ojibway. I always struggled in school. At home that's all we spoke when we were younger. This one teacher said I would never amount to anything because of my language.

I've always been self-conscious and when I had my kids, I told them I wasn't going to teach them our

language because of the fact that I had struggled ... like there was so much taken away from us we didn't even want to be who we were. Well, it was the teachers; it wasn't the kids. [The agency that] used to run the schools always labelled us the dumb ones.¹⁰

By the time the Canadian government ended this policy, many aboriginal people had become separated from their traditional parenting and childcare values and practices.^{11,12} They had not experienced positive parenting nor had they been permitted to observe their parents or other family members engaging in healthy parenting.¹³

These former policies have a direct impact on the current generation of parents in the Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme. In addition, these parents have been subjected to poverty, oppression, and attacks on their culture and language. Many have been addicted to alcohol and drugs; and the local Child and Family

Services Department removed many children from their families of origin, sending them to foster families outside their own cultures. For mothers, losing children is intensely painful:

I felt like I wanted to give up everything. I started thinking stupid, and I was mad. Then, I started to want to find out about my identity. Well, I think for me it's too late, so I want to concentrate on the kids, making sure they know.

A symbiotic response

Against this background, we felt that the only possible approach was to acknowledge such realities and respond to them by working alongside parents and caregivers. Rather than simply being needs based, we wanted to ensure that the centre, and the nature and content of the programme, developed as the parents and children themselves developed. As a broad aim, we were committed to fostering the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of young, aboriginal

children living in the community. And, as a basic strategy, we recognised and supported extended families. At the same time, we were also committed to real partnership, a partnership between staff and parents, and to the policy of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal health and education. To achieve this, we have focused on sustaining healthy personal growth and development in parents, and on helping parents to generate success for themselves.

Twenty seven families are enrolled at the Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme. Forty children attend the early childhood education programme, starting at age three and remaining until they enter grade one public school, usually at six. The programme focuses on the whole family. Parents are told at registration that their collaboration, including volunteer time, is expected. When we began in 1996, staff had difficulty in getting parents to volunteer for six hours per week, but by 1999, 27 parents were volunteering for an average of almost 10 hours per week.

In terms of content of the programme, children learn about their culture, traditions and language, while parents learn parenting skills. There is also a focus on smoothing children's entry into formal primary school. Pride in aboriginal culture and language is emphasised. To counteract the effects of residential schools, the programme helps parents to accept their cultural identity and pass it on to their children.

The programme for children offers ample opportunity for parents/ caregivers to participate and thereby develop personally. It includes arts and crafts, theatre and storytelling, free play, socialisation and relaxation. Children learn Ojibway and Cree culture, traditions and language. They learn to respect the environment and to cooperate with others. They also participate in music and dance: singing and drumming are Ojibway and Cree cultural activities and the children enjoy these. By participating alongside their children, parents learn themselves and also support the learning of their children:

The greatest effect Head Start has had on my life is that the programme has brought me closer to my children. I have always loved my children, but things keep getting better. In the past, I listened to what my children had to say; now I hear them.

Before I became involved with the Head Start Programme I had little interaction with my children. Since I started getting involved in the programme I spend tons of time with my children, copying activities I learned from staff at the programme. I have more confidence when I interact with my children and confidence to try new things. I believe my ability to understand and communicate with my children has improved.

Being involved with Head Start gave my daughter a positive start before she started school. Her kindergarten teacher told me that my daughter was ahead of most children with letter and number recognition and saying words. I'm very proud of her.

At the same time, a variety of educational and support activities and services have enabled the Oshki-majahitowiin staff to facilitate the healthy development of parents,¹⁴ and to help them generate success. For example, each week a sharing circle is held in which parents and grandparents interact with a certified play therapist to work through personal issues and childcare concerns:

Several years ago my children were removed from my care by the Child and Family Services. This experience was a wake up call for me. I took the opportunity to better myself in order to better care for my children. I see the Head Start Programme as a big part of my plan to heal from my past and to give my children a stable environment.

The children have been returned to this woman's care, and she recently received an award for exceptional volunteer assistance in the programme. Other women view her as an inspiration, a role model and a support in their own paths to healing (see next page).

A mother's story

One role that has developed for parents is creating traditional arts and crafts and they meet three times a week to learn and share their skills:

The most satisfying experience for me happened at a session where some women were discussing things that the children needed. One woman suggested that the children needed moccasins. I spoke up and told the other women that I knew how to make moccasins. Later, I was given the opportunity to do a workshop making moccasins.

Parents have also found roles in the programme's community kitchen, cooking meals for children and assisting in meal planning and budgeting. They also cook collectively for their families. Working in the kitchen allows them to form a network with others and has direct personal benefits:

I am no longer depressed because I'm always busy.

Another significant area of parent participation is fundraising. In 1997/98 parents raised over CAN\$2,000 by selling crafts, requesting donations, selling old

I am thirty six years old and I am a single parent raising five children. I was born in a small town, west of the city of Winnipeg. I was raised on a Indian Reserve by my auntie on my dad's side. When I was seven I went to live with my mom. In my childhood I was beaten up, everybody was an alcoholic and I was sexually abused. I left home when I was seventeen. My five children have four different dads. My relationship with each one of the men involved violence and alcohol abuse. I used alcohol and drugs just so I could cope. My children were taken away from me by the child protection [agency] because of my drinking and drugs. They were returned to me but then taken away again because of the same reason. The second time they were taken away was a real eye opener. This became the starting point of an ongoing healing process. My children were returned to me and have been in my care ever since.

I began the Head Start Programme about two years ago after hearing about the programme from a friend. I believed the programme would help me and my children learn and get improved social skills. I believe the programme helped me in many ways.

The workshops helped me learn a lot about parenting and how to have a better relationship with my kids. I feel comfortable now getting crazy and silly with the kids. Before I started to come to the programme I shut the door on my own kids. Now I realised I could be a good parent.

What did I contribute to the programme? I help with the crafts programme. The others tell me I am a role model and a support because look where I started and where I am today. If I could do it so can everybody! One woman was having some problems in her personal life and she walked over to my place for support.

I better understand my own life and my difficulties and I share my experiences and help other women.

Last September, because of all my participation with the programme, I was chosen to attend the National Head Start Conference in Saskatoon. It was my first trip!

I now raise my kids in an alcohol free environment. I would also like to work with women, especially survivors of sexual abuse.



goods, conducting raffles and sales of baked products. All of the money was put towards holiday dinners and celebrations such as the children's graduation ceremony.

Perhaps the most striking demonstration of reaching our objectives is that parents now have roles on boards and committees. Here, parents assume the responsibility and control of the programme's curriculum, philosophy and objectives. Board and committee membership means that parents liaise with other members of the community, community leaders and professionals in health, education and social services. Board and committee members discuss education possibilities for themselves and their children, the transition between home, Head Start and school, and community development and employment options. One woman still can't believe how far she had come in her influence in her community:

I never thought I'd ever see myself here, doing these things, being on a board of directors. I never even knew

what it was. I thought 'What do those guys do? Sit on a board?' Now I know I have a voice and people listen. I can say my opinion about so many things. And I listen to what other people say and think. I never just make a decision. I always listen to what everyone is saying and then we discuss these things as a board together. And it's really incredible. I still can't believe it, where I was three years ago and where I am now!

Conclusions

Looking at the benefits of parental participation, we feel the programme has an impact on families and on individuals. Parents feel they have more control, can make a better life for their children, and can make a difference based on what they choose to do. The impact also appears in the statistics. High residential mobility is characteristic for Winnipeg's inner city – some public schools report a 100 percent or greater turnover rate over three years.¹⁵ Yet several parents have told us that they have postponed moving in order that their children could continue to participate in the

Oshki-majahitowiin Head Start Programme. Nineteen families have been with the programme since it opened in 1996. (Of the families who have left the programme, four had children who graduated and all the others moved to new locations.)

The centre essentially belongs to the parents and children. It is alert to their needs while drawing on their cultures, traditions, ideas and skills, and mobilising and building on their individual resources. Successes are shared, and participants are committed to learning about themselves, their children, their language and cultural identity. Staff notice the parents' sense of loyalty and commitment, the development of a social network based on the centre, the ways in which participants are able to reach into the community, and the feelings of mutual respect.

Parents believe in their own power and in the effect they have on their children's development and progress. Rather than giving up or blaming others for their failures they have taken back control:

A lot has been done to my people. A lot of bad things have happened to my family. And I want these things to stop. I have an influence on my children. Sometimes I'm dying to have a drink, so much I even dream about it at night ... but I can't because I know the damage it will do. I know what happened to my older children and I know what happened to me because my mother drank. She hurt me and I hurt them. I feel now that I have control in my life and I want to keep it there. I feel like I can make a better life for my children. I can make that difference based on what I choose to do. ○

References

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A grandmother's story

I am 52 years old and I am raising triplet grandchildren, three boys. They have been with me for one year and a half. I was raised in a tiny community North of the city of Winnipeg. Cree is my first language. I am one of three [siblings] raised by our parents. When I was two years old I went into a coma which lasted for three days. To this day people from my community believe that I had died and came back.

I left home when I was 16 and moved to Winnipeg. I started to get involved in a relationship with a man. I stayed with him for over thirty years until he died last year. We had four children together. None of them were ever involved with the criminal or child protection systems.

I always had a big part in my grandchildren's lives but a year and a half ago their birth mother asked me to raise them full time. Although it's been ten years since I raised my last child I agreed right away.

I heard about the Head Start Programme from [another community resource]. At first I enrolled just one grandchild; I wasn't sure what to expect from the programme. As soon as I realised how nice and friendly everybody at the programme was, I enrolled the other boys and started participating a lot myself.

The Head Start Programme is a second home to me. The people are friendly and very easy to talk with. I learned a lot by participating in workshops about children and how they develop and learn and I learned about my grandsons. Being a traditional Indian woman, the cultural and language part of the programme is also very important to me. One time, after my partner died the staff brought over a basket full of food for the boys and me with all kinds of food, especially traditional food.

My contributions to the programme? I don't know (laughs nervously). I can

share my experiences with the others and I am a good listener and I really understand a lot of what the younger moms are going through. I feel like this is my community, so I understand.

I am very worried now because the birth mother is causing a lot of problems for us. She has started to interfere with the stability of the boys. I was hoping I could continue to raise them in a loving and safe environment. So this is a problem but Head Start staff and everyone here has been very helpful in every way. They really care and anytime I need them they are there.

Also, about two months ago I was hired to be the cook at Head Start. I work five days a week from 9 am to 12 mid-day preparing breakfast and lunch for the children. Before this job I had to live off the pension. First thing I did after getting my first pay check I took the boys to McDonald's for supper!