

# HISTORY

**A** boriginal Head Start (AHS), funded by Health Canada, is an early intervention program for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families living in urban centres and large northern communities. The primary goal of the initiative is to demonstrate that locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies can provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for life long learning, and opportunities to develop fully as successful young people.

Aboriginal Head Start projects typically provide half-day preschool experiences that prepare young Aboriginal children for their school years by meeting their spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical needs. Projects are locally designed and controlled, and administered by non-profit Aboriginal organizations. AHS directly involves parents and the community in the management and operation of projects. Parents are supported in their role as the child's first and most influential teacher, and the wisdom of elders is embraced. Typical AHS projects operate four days per week with 30 - 40 children aged 3-5 years old participating in morning and afternoon sessions in a structured preschool environment.



AHS was announced in 1995 as a four year pilot phase (1995-96 to 1998-99), and since 1999 has had ongoing funding of \$22.5 million annually. Since its inception, the program has grown to include 112 AHS projects, operating in eight provinces and all three northern territories. Approximately 3,500 children are enrolled in AHS sites each year. Generating enthusiasm and passionate commitment among community participants, AHS has provided Aboriginal communities and organizations with opportunities to collaborate, has focussed community energies on working together for the lives of children, and has improved the lives of thousands of Aboriginal children and families. In 1998, a major expansion of AHS to First Nations communities on reserve began.



AHS was designed to be flexible and diverse enough to meet the wide range of needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures living in markedly different circumstances and geographical locations. Each project reflects the uniqueness of the local culture and language, while focussing on the same six program components. They are: culture and language, parental involvement, education, health promotion, nutrition and social support. In 1999, there were 30 Aboriginal languages being used in the presence of AHS participants across the country in locations as diverse as Toronto and Vancouver to Taloyoak, Nunavut and Thicket Portage, Manitoba. Operating at nearly full capacity, the AHS program reached about 12% of the Aboriginal 3 and 4 year olds living off reserve in 1999.



A tremendous amount of time is donated by volunteers in the community, and partnerships with existing services and agencies are vital to the success of projects. Health Canada regional offices work directly with projects to ensure program quality. The national office in Ottawa provides national coordination, leadership, training, evaluation and resources to the program. A National

Aboriginal Head Start Committee provides guidance and expertise to Health Canada, and ensures project-level input on planning, implementation and evaluation issues.



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<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/acy/ahs.htm>