

The Edmonton Head Start Project

Children and Parents
Coming Out Ahead

The Edmonton Head Start Project

The Edmonton Head Start Project is a collaboration between ABC Head Start, E4C and Oliver Centre.

Each program provides half-day Head Start programming at 16 locations in Edmonton, including Francophone Head Start. Annually, Edmonton Head Start serves over 520 children and their families

who represent over twenty cultural and language groups.

These three Project agencies also work together within a larger Interagency Head Start Network which includes Early Head Start, Aboriginal Head Start and Full-day Head Start.

What Is Head Start?

A Complete Early Learning Package | Network of Support for Families

Head Start is more than a pre-school service: it's a complete package, offering low-income families the best available early education for their children. It's a comprehensive program for children ages three-and-a-half to five, that nurtures their growth and development in a learning-through-play environment. These early years are the most critical time in a child's development: initial experiences at home and school lay the foundation for a child's future success.

Head Start provides a positive introduction to school experiences. Moreover, it serves as a bridge linking children and families to community resources, such as speech and language services, occupational therapy services, health screenings and mental health consultations.

Head Start supports parents. They have the opportunity to attend regular education and parent groups. They have access to in-home support and are invited to be involved in all aspects of the program, including volunteer opportunities and advisory committees. Most importantly, Head Start provides parents and families with a caring community.

Determining Head Start's Success

Parents & Staff Reflect from Past 6 Years

How do we know Head Start works?

The Edmonton Head Start Project wanted to assess how successfully its programs are meeting intermediate and long-term goals: that young children are receiving the supports they need for future success at elementary school; that parents are supported both in their parenting and in their wider connections with the community.

In 2010, we carried out a systematic appraisal with staff and parents — those who have children in Head Start, together with those whose children have gone on to elementary school. In 4 community dialogues we asked parents and staff to discuss 7 different impacts that the program has on their children, on them as parents, and on their families' connections with the wider community.

Those impacts are that Head Start:

- Teaches me how to help my child develop and learn.
- Enables my child to be ready for kindergarten.
- Helps to connect my child with professional services (e.g. health team, speech & language) to strengthen his or her development.
- Helps me with my parenting.
- Helps me to solve problems and plan for the future.
- Helps me to make new friends and connections in the community.
- Help me to connect with other community services (e.g., food bank) and health care (doctors, health clinics).

Parents and staff were asked to rate each impact and corresponding activities (such as parent-teacher conferences, home visits, self-help skills) using a five-point scale ranging from 'very significant impact' to 'no impact at all'.

**PARENTS'
VOICES**

Head Start gives my child confidence. She feels she has a voice, and that she gets the help she needs.

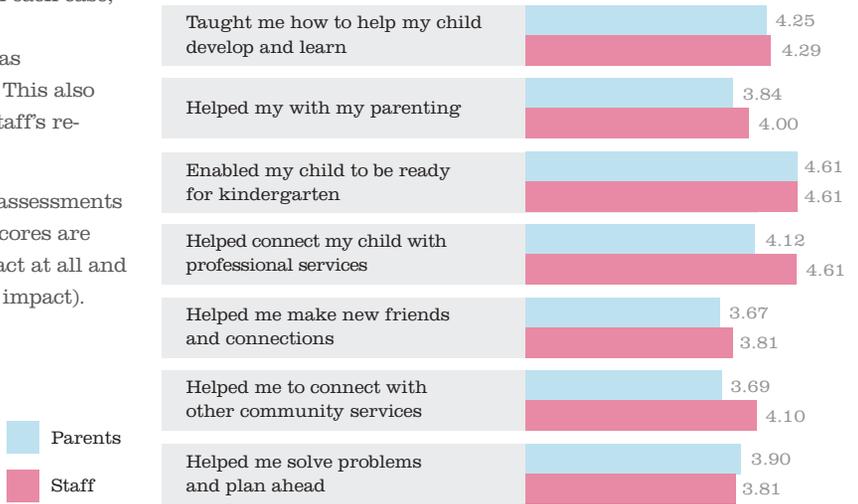
What We Found

All three Head Start agencies can be said to be doing an excellent job in meeting intermediate-term outcomes. In each case, high percentages of participants rated the impacts as significant or very significant. This also holds true when parents and staff's responses are viewed separately.

As Figure 1 shows the overall assessments of both parents and staff (the scores are weighted; 1 represents no impact at all and 5 represents a very significant impact).

FIGURE 1

Total Weighted Scores Divided by # of Respondents





Emerging Trends

1. **The number of multicultural families requiring resources, programs and supports is increasing.** More children have ESL and special needs. Language, culture and other barriers will increase, so that staff with diverse backgrounds and translators may be required. The children's cultural diversity must be reflected more in the program, by honoring cultural celebrations, for example.

2. **With greater numbers of immigrant and refugee families having children in Head Start, staff will have to spend more time helping parents adjust to Canadian life.** Help in understanding the legal requirements of care for children, or safety issues, for instance.

3. **More families may need help dealing with issues** such as drugs, violence, abuse, alienation, poverty and the associated stress. The number of working poor families is growing.

4. **The structure of the family is changing.** There are more single parent families and more blended families. The definition of "family" may have to be extended and children taught that other configurations are fine.

5. **Increasingly Head Start parents work**

or are in school, so they have less time with their families, fewer opportunities to connect with Head Start and are **less likely to be able to attend daytime activities** in the program. Programs may have to consider holding parent groups outside business hours, or make other arrangements to get parents involved.

6. It is becoming **more difficult to access programs** because requirements are changing. More low-income families will be above the cut off guidelines and will not qualify for assistance, but will still require support.

7. **Costs are increasing**, but program budgets are not, and provincially funded services are being reduced. Program planning and priority setting will become more difficult.

8. As technology use increases, **children will need better computer skills** and more access to computers and other electronic devices such as Smart Boards in the classroom. Costs and other factors make it difficult for parents to keep up with technology and school expectations (relating to their ability to help children at home).

9. The **focus on physical activities and health** will have to increase.

PARENTS' VOICES

Head Start is really my family. The staff recognize that I know my child best, but they are there to support me. I have two special needs children and there are lots of challenges. Really, Head Start provides support to all my family members.

The Children

Realizing Potential
Positive Learning Experiences
Readiness for School

A significant majority of both parents and staff felt that Head Start brings the child considerable benefits — and involves the parents as part of the education team.

Most parents said that they learnt how to enhance their child's development after spending time in the classroom, both through the formal parent groups and through more informal visits.

Parents recognise that the social and communications skills their child learns in an environment focusing on positive reinforcement are invaluable. Also important in preparing for kindergarten are the activities the children engage in: reading books and learning songs.

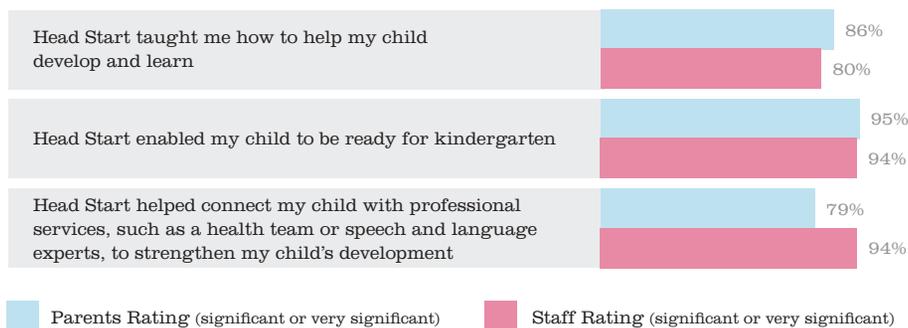
Many children attending Head Start need

additional professional support, like occupational therapists and speech and language pathologists. A majority of both parents and staff indicated that access to early childhood education specialists is important.

Moving Forward > Parents are eager to become even more involved in, and receive more information about, their child's learning; and they'd like to do that in different ways — either through phone calls, a website, or a buddy system. They relish the opportunities to watch the teacher interacting with their child, and would like to have a greater understanding of the strategies used. That desire for education extends to professional services: they'd like to know more about the range of services out there, eligibility, and the details of what each service involves. The same goes for kindergarten — the choices can be overwhelming, so many would like advice on which program might be suitable for their child. And they would like the Head Start team to stay with them in a supportive role as they make that transition to elementary school.

FIGURE 2

Impact on Children





I felt that my own communications skills improved as I learned more about how to talk and play with my daughter.

The Parents

Family Support Parenting Resources

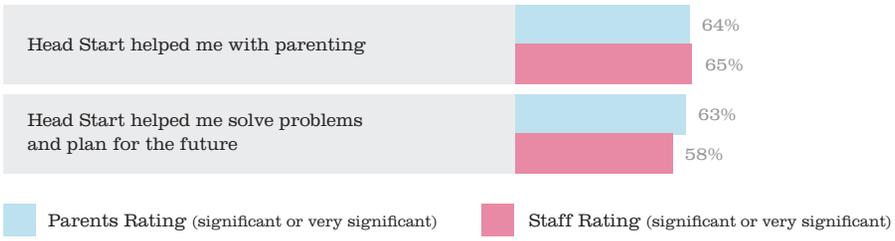
Head Start provides support to parents in a variety of different ways. Parents have the opportunity to learn skills from staff as they observe them in action in the classroom. They can also attend formal information sessions, tackling specific subjects that affect the whole family. The majority of parents and staff view the support offered to parents as significant.

The relationships that develop between staff and parents are a key to the success of Head Start: the two work as a team to support not just the child, but also the family. Not surprisingly then, over 60% of both parents and staff viewed the contacts between parents and staff as essential in helping with parenting. While the relationship starts in the classroom, it's expanded with home visits, where staff can help deal with wider family issues contributing to the success of the child, and assist parents in setting family goals.

Moving Forward > Parents want to build on the success of the parent groups: they'd like the timing to be more flexible — in the evenings or weekends to accommodate those who work; they want to offer suggestions of parenting issues and have experts come to the group with answers; and they'd like broader topics addressing their own education, such as financial planning and nutrition, to be discussed — particularly for those who are new to Canada. There was the suggestion that each Head Start site could host a parent library, offering parenting literature as well as resources helping new immigrants to settle their lives more quickly.

Parents are also looking for a more individualized approach: home visits that are flexible depending on the family's need; ensuring that all children have an individualized plan to set goals; ways to accommodate parents who want to volunteer bringing younger children with them. Above all, parents want their own cultural uniqueness to be recognised throughout the Head Start program — and they want the opportunity to learn more about others cultures too.

FIGURE 3
Impact on Parents



PARENTS' VOICES

The parent group is the highlight of my week: I really like the information I receive. What we learned about nutrition was especially helpful. And then we get together for social events and celebrations too. I get to develop friendships, as well as my child.

Community Connections

Supportive Networks Caring Communities

Parents of small children can often become quite isolated at home — even more so if they are new to Canada. A majority of parents see Head Start as a relief from that isolation.

Getting to know other parents through the parent groups was the most important activity here. Sharing experiences while on field trips, attending social and cultural events in the classroom came lower down the list. An important parent network is developing: parents give each other advice and tips on how to access the City's fee reduction program, where to get in touch with the Multi-Cultural Health Brokers, and generally how to navigate the system.

In rating all of the activities around Head Start's impact on connecting parents to community services, there was some difference between parents' assessment and staff's. More staff than parents thought connections were being made to the Food Bank, doctors and dentists.

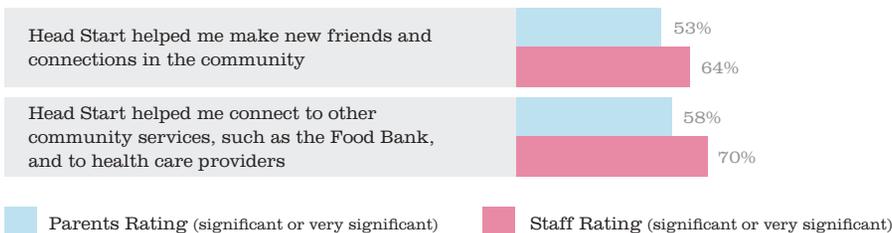
Moving Forward > Parents are looking to expand the network that already exists: they'd like to get together more often, meet up with parents from the other Head Start sites and with parents of children in other classes. A variety of suggestions were put forward to make that happen: newsletters, a Facebook group, a mentoring program.

They would also appreciate the opportunity for increased connections to community services — particularly those that meet the culturally diverse and practical needs of busy parents struggling to make ends meet and adjusting to life in Edmonton.



FIGURE 4

Impacts on the Community





Moving Ahead

1. **Multicultural Needs** Parents want to see multiculturalism reflected more in both program activities and in staff knowledge or representation. In addition, they themselves need help in connecting to other programs, such as ESL, and employment counselling or preparation.

Head Start has an important role to play as a community hub, linking families or providing information in a variety of formats. For example, a parent group session could be dedicated to writing a resume or facilitating the set up of a community kitchen. Head Start programs may have to enhance their partnerships with each other or with other agencies to fulfill these emerging needs.

2. **Transition to School** Parents are concerned about the transition from Head Start to kindergarten and elementary school. Will the personal interest, understanding and attention Head Start has shown children be carried over into kindergarten?

Parents told us they need more information about schools — direct contact with new teachers to feel reassured that this level of caring will continue. Given the recent closure of inner city schools in Edmonton, the need for information may be about to increase.

3. **Flexibility in Scheduling** As families take on more responsibility, they find it increasingly difficult to attend groups during the day or to find childcare on the days that Head Start is not offered. Over time, the programs may have to review and adjust their schedules to accommodate families' changing circumstances.

4. **Communication and Connections** Parents want to be connected to their community and to each other and this should be encouraged.

Alumni parents have a role to play here: they're often more settled and more experienced with the school system than their novice Head Start counterparts. Head Start programs could channel the interest and enthusiasm demonstrated in these community dialogues by setting up a buddy system, mentorship or a hot line: alumni parents may be able to give newer parents guidance and advice relating to Canadian life and the transition to kindergarten.

The community dialogues have surfaced many opportunities to create goodwill and further understanding.

PARENTS'
VOICES

I'm happy
that my
child gets
to learn

about Canadian
culture. But I'd also
like to go into her
classroom and tell
stories or sing in our
own language. I'd
like to teach others
about our heritage
and culture.