



B.C. First Nations Head Start **A Community-Based Collaborative Outreach Model**

(BCFNHS *Growing Together* newsletter, ISSUE 7, Spring 2004, p.4-6)

HEAD START PROGRAMS ON RESERVE HAVE PRIMARILY FOCUSED ON PROVIDING SERVICES IN A CENTRE-BASED SETTING. However, many of the highest need or at-risk families on reserve may not be involved in these programs. Outreach provides services to more families, bringing Head Start right to the home.

One challenge to delivery of outreach is costs (bands not having enough funds or staff available and qualified to design and implement their own outreach program). Sometimes outreach attempts fail when they try to use community members to implement the program who are not distanced enough from the families they are serving or have not yet completed their own healing. Other programs run into difficulty if they rely too heavily on one professional to be accepted by many families.

In the tiny, isolated community of Portage (population 140), almost two hours from the nearest large centre (Fort St. James), the Yekooche First Nation Head Start is building an outreach model to meet the present needs of the children who are 0 – 6 in Yekooche. Although this is just the first year of the new program, it shows much promise as a cost-effective outreach model that could be adapted by other reserves.

Yekooche's Head Start program serves 13 families. Based in the elementary school, last year the program focused on offering centre-based day programs for children, with some parenting classes and a new toy lending library. This year, Head Start is working together with others in the community to also use existing services so they can also connect with other families in their own homes.

They have formed a Head Start Outreach Team which is made up of several people who share responsibility for weekly and monthly home visits to families. The present team members include:

- The community youth development worker
- A primary school teacher
- An ECE
- The Head Start coordinator (who is also the child therapist)

Each person brings his/her own special skills and perspective to the group. Team members pool their resources and share ideas with each other, always with the focus on building positive connections with families. Families know that the team members work together and that individual home visitors share their experiences with the team so they can benefit from the full range of expertise and ideas in the group.

The Outreach Team received a one-week training delivered in the community by Head Start Coordinator Natasha McDonald (a child therapist who has a psychology degree focused on play therapy and child development). A boxful of training materials was developed by Natasha from her own resources, and included materials on communication skills, child development knowledge, how to work with families, how to make learning fun, step-by-step building, and developmental assessments.

Each home visitor has a box of developmental toys and a box of resources and forms, and sees from two to four families. Team members have been able to limit the hours spent in outreach to up to five hours a week.

At the beginning of the school year, families were invited by home visitors to bring their children to school for developmental assessments (infant and toddler assessments were done in the home). Natasha and the Outreach Team worked with the families to create individualized developmental plans (in five areas of development) by having parents choose goals from a general list outlined from skills missed on the Portage Checklist.

Subsequent home visits or visits at the school might include chatting about life, hands-on demos of a target skill for parents to work on with their child, helping parents set family goals, or talking about community services parents might wish to access.

Every two weeks, team members meet for an informal sharing and support session in the evening. Over coffee and tea, they talk about each family and share successes and challenges. Team members give each other ideas, encouragement, and lots of support, and are able to change which families they support when necessary for various reasons.

"Parents have been very supportive of outreach since the program started three months ago and have been patient as we worked out the bugs," Natasha says. "One parent said, 'I love our visits and look forward to them.'" Another parent reported that they are glad to understand where their child was at developmentally and to know what types of fun games they could be encouraging."

Because the community is isolated and does not have ready access to specialists, Outreach staff are currently trying to arrange for a group trip with parents and children to see a pediatrician and a speech pathologist in Prince George. The pediatrician will do specialized assessments and where there may be delays needing attention, could provide documentation that would support requests for additional funding. Staff are also working on the possibility of having a speech pathologist come to the community for two days of consecutive appointments.

Challenges still being faced include connecting with some families, creating schedules that work for families and home visitors and making the assessments and materials more cultural.

“Kids Bins”

With additional funds that were available, Head Start Outreach developed bins with \$300 worth of developmental toys and materials—one for each family in the outreach program. Families are asked for 30 hours of volunteer time helping Head Start in exchange for the box. At present, parents are starting to work their hours and we are going to hook a giant medicine wheel circle time rug with the families.

“We started this program because I knew that many of the children in the program were showing global delays in their development. Since starting kindergarten with delays this great is correlated with not graduating high school, we wanted to empower families to support their own children to reach their maximum developmental potential. This is a critical age for every child’s growth. I believe in supporting families to raise their children and I felt that our Head Start program needed to start focusing more on parents. They are the ones who will be with their children for life.

–Natasha McDonald
Coordinator, Yekooche Head Start

“We hope that our model will reach the entire community, meet the needs of families who have young children, develop a strong sense of team among professionals, parents and Elders, and, most importantly, support the idea that learning is fun.”

Tessa Fraser
Home Visitor and Youth Worker, Portage

Assessment Tools

Two resources for outreach assessments are:

Portage Checklist

A developmentally sequenced checklist administered through a program of home visits. Can be used alone without training.

Ages and Stages

A series of simple questionnaires designed to be completed by or together with parents to screen infants and young children for developmental milestones during the 0 – 5 years.

Both these tools are available on loan from the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society. There is no fee for borrowing, but you must become a member to have borrowing privileges (\$10 - \$20/year for yearly membership).

More information and suggestions on assessments in the BC-ACCS *Handbook of Best Practices in Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs* (2003), p. 105 –113.