



B.C. First Nations Head Start Beating the Winter Blues... Does your Head Start have low attendance and participation in winter?

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SINCE OPENING IN 1999, WE HAVE NOTICED A PATTERN IN OUR ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT EACH YEAR. Typically, we are full from April – October, but from November to March we are wondering if our families have hibernated for the winter.

Winter weather and unsafe travelling conditions are reason enough for families to stay home, and the higher incidence of illness in the winter months often keeps both children and staff away. In some areas of the province, winter is the season for cultural cleansing, gatherings and activities, and these activities are sometimes not conducive to the typical Head Start schedule.

Because much of our funding is based on service needs and attendance records, we have developed some creative strategies for altering our service and also seeking out hibernating families.

- Although illnesses are hard to avoid, adopting a wellness policy that identifies symptoms and when children and staff can return after illness helps to keep germs away.
- Disinfect, disinfect, disinfect! Often these seasonal illnesses are contagious, so do all you can to keep a healthy play environment. By cleaning toys, surfaces, telephones, and door knobs you are creating a clean, germ-free play space.
- Plan evening and lunch-time family dinners to draw families back into routine (food always brings a crowd!). Ask parents to help with the cooking; this gets more family involvement in the event.
- Incorporate seasonal cultural activities into programming.

Winter brings with it darkness and cold that sometimes keeps people at home and indoors. Spice up your program by straying from the ordinary. This adds surprise and anticipation to the children's experience. They get excited wondering what will happen next and looking forward to the unknown. Try some of these ideas:

- “Pyjama Day”. Everyone—staff, parents and children—comes to Head Start wearing pyjamas! The silliness puts a smile on everyone’s face and surprises drop-in visitors.
- Other variations include: “Backwards Day”, “Colour Day”, “Bring a Friend Day”, “Bring a Grandparent Day”, “Wintertime Beach Party”, etc. Use your imagination!
- Go on field trips to common places where you will see parents and other family members, and bring a snack to share with the people you see.
- Bake treats and take them to Elders.
- Host a winter carnival and get everyone involved.
- Keep regular contact with families either by telephone or by home visits. It helps to touch base and keep families aware of Head Start events. Sometimes these gentle reminders are all it takes to bring families back on board; they make families feel wanted and appreciated.

Joan Gignac
Child Care Manager, Nutsuma’at Lelum Child Care Centre (Chemainus)