



B.C. First Nations Head Start One Hundred Percent Parental Involvement

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SKIDEGATE IS A SMALL, ISOLATED COMMUNITY of over 600 people on beautiful Haida Gwaii in the Queen Charlotte Islands in northwestern B.C.

Something that makes Skidegate's Head Start very special is the strong social network and support it provides for parents—this Head Start is a 100% parental involvement program. All programming is parent-and-child. Open four days a week from 9:30-2:00, many faithful moms and their children participate everyday; others come whenever they can.

On a typical day, some parents might phone needing a ride; they are picked up. As families arrive, Elder Herb Jones greets them in Haida. The morning starts in a relaxed way, with parents and staff sharing coffee and chatting or getting some breakfast, while children enjoy free play. Later in the morning, everyone joins in a group Circle Time for singing, reading, storytelling, etc. Parents work with Herb to plan and prepare the daily lunch, and on Mondays one of the moms bakes home-made bread. Activities throughout the week include a literacy and parenting skills program, a weekly prenatal program for pregnant women or women with babies under the age of one or who are breastfeeding (run as a partnership between Head Start and the Health Centre), and a preventative dental care partnership with UBC.

Many of the parents, who would ordinarily be at home alone with their children, now have the opportunity to learn their native language with their children, gain confidence with parenting abilities through workshops (on topics like behaviour and discipline, mental health and first aid) learn new skills such as sewing a quilt or planting a vegetable garden, and improve their knowledge of preparing nutritious meals. And they socialize with other parents, many of whom they might not normally form friendships with because of social standing or other differences. This helps build personal networks of support.

Skidegate parents are extremely pleased with their program. They work together with Head Start staff, asking questions and offering suggestions which guide decisions about programming. Knowing that their children are playing and learning in a safe, nurturing environment where they will have a nutritious meal, the parents too are able to nurture themselves and grow as adults.

"We didn't know what to expect, but right from the beginning, parents and their children kept coming back day after day."