



B.C. First Nations Head Start PACs and Involving Parents

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Why is Parent Involvement Important?

Head Start works to support whole family growth and development by involving parents as much as possible in all levels of activities. As parents gain confidence, get new ideas, acquire skills, make friends, and dialogue about their child's development, they are empowered both to bring forth their own gifts and to gain a deeper understanding of their children.

Why Have a PAC?

Head Start projects are encouraged to include parents in a meaningful way in the planning, development, operation and evaluation of the program. Ideally, each project would have an empowered parent body—a "parent advisory council"—providing leadership and direction, working together with staff to provide the maximum benefit for the children.

Acknowledging Realities

It is not always easy or even practical to form a PAC—the relationship between a PAC and staff can be complex and time-consuming, and community history and resources, parent and staff resources, and varying expectations and limitations all have a part to play.

Parent limitations

As we all know, parents with small children are extremely busy! In many communities, parents are working or attending school full-time, and may not have the time or personal resources to become involved in additional meetings. Some parents, especially if they are very young and lacking experience themselves, may not feel they have anything to contribute.

Training needs

Organizing and facilitating group meetings are learned skills, and not things that come easily or naturally to everyone. Staff may not be experienced in running meetings, guiding group decision-making, etc., and staff and parents alike may be uncertain about PAC roles and responsibilities. Workload and budget. With a new project, the workload can be overwhelming. Even for staff at established sites, there are only so many hours in a day and days in a week. Staff must judge their own capacity for starting and supporting a PAC.

Community realities

Each community has its own reality to work within. In small, tight-knit communities, family

conflicts may pose challenges. Some communities may be struggling with crises and have limited resources if community workers and families are already stretched thin with other responsibilities.

Many sites find that their “Open Door” policy has been really important in setting a welcoming atmosphere for parents. Making it as convenient as possible for parents to communicate with staff and to take part in activities increases the likelihood parents will participate.

To make it easy for parents to attend, many sites hold meetings during a meal time, and provide food and childcare. One coordinator finds parents appreciate the short daily newsletter that she puts out. It is a simple, photocopied one-pager, which she prepares toward the end of the afternoon and quickly copies before pick-up time. Another site has a sign-in routine for parents and children, with a dry erase board posted right beside the sign-in book, where staff post daily notices. This same site uses Circle time as a check-in time for parents—parents are encouraged to stay through circle time and staff take time to acknowledge parents, pass along information, or get feedback.

Building Trust

Working in a tiny island community, one Head Start coordinator found that as a new person on the block, she had to gain the trust of families and provide opportunities for them to get to know her outside of work: “It takes time to build trust.”

Although her community has a healthy PAC which has been in place for several years, on-going challenges include a high number of working parents who do not have time to become involved, (and who may be away during the day on the mainland) or whose primary need is for a safe place for their child, while they are very busy with their own schooling.

The PAC meetings are held once a month during lunch hour, with lunch provided. Many of the Head Start parents are in an adjacent adult education program, so this arrangement makes attendance convenient for them. PAC meetings are open to anyone who is interested, and include the community education coordinator, grandparents and elders. The group has a clear mandate as a place for communication—for parents to raise concerns, ask questions, etc., and for joint program planning (seasons, themes, etc).

Asked what has worked for her, the coordinator says “One-on-one. You can’t just put a poster up. You have to do it the First Nation way. Go and personally invite them. Tell them: I need you; you’ve got something worthwhile to offer.”

Adapting to Community Circumstances

One small northern Head Start site formed a PAC when its program began, but the group was not representative of all the families and became dominated by just a few individuals. With lack of experience and possibly misunderstood goals for the group, meetings turned largely into complaint sessions—demoralizing for staff and not useful in terms of constructive feedback.

Community members were already dealing with many serious issues (including significant substance abuse problems), and the handful of healthy families who might have volunteered to sit on a PAC were already overextended.

So rather than worrying about having a formal parent body, staff instead focused on creating a welcoming “Open Door” policy and building relationships and connecting with parents and families one-on-one, within the framework of the program and its normal hours.

Some parents join their children at lunch. They are also encouraged to come in as paid “subs”, which is educational for them, giving them a chance to learn about the principles of child development and the rationales behind program delivery, as well as contributing to trust and familiarity between staff and parents.

Staff continually ask parents for input, informally through check-ins with parents when they are dropping off or picking up children, or through parent questionnaires (the coordinator might ask “Can I have ten minutes?” and assure confidentiality, then go through the questionnaire together with the parent on-site).

Resource: *Parents in Aboriginal Head Start: Building Community*. A 77-page booklet with a detailed chapter on PACs which includes decision-making, structure, roles and responsibilities, meetings, conflict resolution and other group facilitation skills. Available for loan from BCFNHS