



APRIL 2017

# Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities: Further Strengthening Indigenous Community Resilience

## *Key Messages:*

- ▶ A study completed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), analyzed program stories provided by Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program sites across Canada.
- ▶ The study found that AHSUNC sites strengthen Indigenous community resilience through their emphasis on healthy child development in the context of a child's social system, focussing not only on the child but on their family and the larger community.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

The AHSUNC program conducts a bi-annual performance measurement data collection process with sites in all provinces. As part of this process, sites are asked to provide stories describing their impacts on the children, families and communities they serve.

Each story—some of which are quoted in this brief—provides a glimpse into the day-to-day efforts the program makes to further strengthen children, families, staff and communities.

## WHAT IS AHSUNC?

- ▶ The Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program is an early childhood development intervention funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).
- ▶ This program focuses on providing culturally-appropriate early childhood development programs for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children (3–5 year olds) and their families living off-reserve, in urban and northern communities across Canada.
- ▶ AHSUNC sites are locally managed and designed to address the unique needs of each community.
- ▶ They deliver half and full day sessions for preschoolers and programming for families that focus on: Indigenous culture and languages, education, health promotion, nutrition, social support and parental and family involvement.
- ▶ More than 4,800 children and their families participate in the program every year, at one of the 134 program sites across Canada.



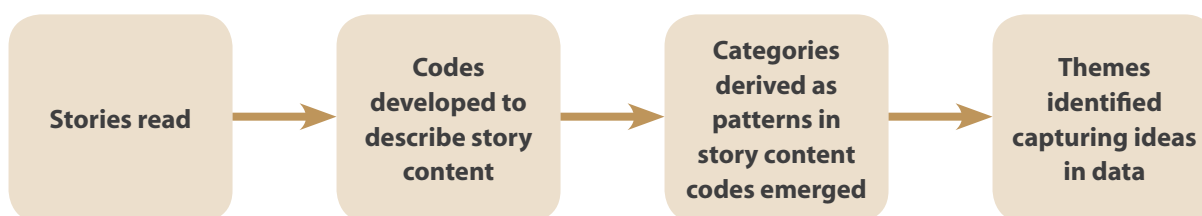
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# How was this study completed?

- ▶ To obtain information on program delivery, the PHAC's Children's Program Performance Measurement Tool (CPPMT) was deployed in 2013–14 to collect data including stories from AHSUNC program sites across Canada.\* These stories—told mainly by site coordinators, parents and caregivers—were analyzed using thematic analysis.
- ▶ Based upon codes developed from reading stories as well as knowledge of healthy child development intervention theory, ten categories and two themes were derived.



<b>What did we learn?</b> (Patterns found across the stories)	<b>What did sites share?</b> (Excerpts from stories submitted by sites)
<b>1. AHSUNC sites strengthen families and their children</b>	<i>"(...) [A child] started the program at age 3. She was experiencing a lot of problems in her home life. Her little brother was one and a half years old. She did not talk, play, did not follow any instructions, did not react to her name, did not recognize herself, did not have any language concepts, did not know her colours, did not know how to use equipment appropriately. The staff worked closely with her parents and all the partners, both formally and sometimes informally. The violent husband was referred to a therapist, the mother received respite care and agreed to the voluntary placement of her children as needed. Last week, (...) [the child] received her AHSUNC attendance diploma. She will begin kindergarten in September and has reached a developmental level that will allow her to integrate into the school environment fairly readily."</i>
<b>2. AHSUNC sites promote Indigenous languages and culture through various activities at the program and community-level (e.g., art/crafts, fishing and hunting, music and dance, traditional ceremonies)</b>	<i>[Excerpt] "During this six week program sixteen of our parents were taught the history of Métis bead work and moccasin making. At first parents were very reluctant but as the classes progressed so did their confidence. Our classes ended up with 16 pairs of beautiful, traditional handmade moccasins. These sessions gave our parents opportunities to share their experiences as parents, to learn more about the history of our culture and to have time with an Elder."</i>

\* AHSUNC sites from the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut did not complete the CPPMT, nor did another eight sites from across the country. Not all sites that completed a CPPMT submitted stories. A total of 136 stories submitted were analyzed in this study.

<b>What did we learn?</b> <i>(Patterns found across the stories)</i>	<b>What did sites share?</b> <i>(Excerpts from stories submitted by sites)</i>
<b>3. AHSUNC sites strengthen social support and social network</b>	<p><i>"In the fall, we had a single father who started the program for the second year. He had two school aged children and one in the AHS program. At this time he was struggling financially and emotionally. He was ready to give up his children to CFS [Child and Family Services] because he felt he could not support them. He had tried to get assistance and was denied. He discussed his options because his hydro was going to get cut off and he was behind on rent. He was only on EI benefits which were being garnished by Maintenance Enforcement even though he had the children. He had quit his job to look after his three children. He felt there was no option for him but to give up his children. We told him there was resources for him and not to give up. We helped with an appeal to Income Assistance and he won. He could not thank us enough. He said he could finally provide for his children like he was supposed to. His rent and hydro was paid as part of the appeal. We also helped him to get a lawyer from legal aide to help get the child support and custody court order varied. He was unable to get legal aide before this because he had owed them money which he could not afford to pay. The father has participated in training in the program and is happy because he said we had provided good training for a single parent because he was unaware of most of the information. He learned about fire safety in the home and his food handling certificate which he said as a single father he needed to know that stuff. His child attending the program is one of the children who requires more attention. We provided resources for the father to help with getting his son assessed. He is currently working on getting the proper supports he needs for his son. His son has made a huge improvement while attending our program. He said he has come a long way as a father since he started the program. He said his family is living more of a positive lifestyle and that they are on the right track now. He always thanks us for giving them help that he needed. We are glad that our program was able to assist this family."</i></p>
<b>4. AHSUNC sites provide a sense of community</b>	<p><i>"This story is about creating a community via workshops, walking club and outings. Participants often vocalise (and share via evaluation) that these activities allow them to meet other families of the daycare, socialise with them, receive and offer support, break isolation, feel more connected with other families and to the daycare. All while learning a new skill/tool (parenting, aboriginal arts and crafts, etc.)."</i></p>
<b>5. AHSUNC has an integrated community approach</b>	<p><i>"Our project took a leadership role in developing a community event – Friendship Play Day. We developed partnerships to assist in implementing the Play Day and we sought after funding to help offset the costs. The goal was to provide a fun afternoon for families that enabled them to connect to community resources that otherwise they would not have known about. It allowed them to see agencies in a different atmosphere thus assisting to form a more trusting relationship between the two. Another goal was to give parents a chance to play with their children."</i></p>
<b>6. AHSUNC sites promote participation of parent, staff and traditional knowledgeable people in the planning, development and operation of AHSUNC programming as well as the community service system</b>	<p><i>"Two staff and one parent received training to present (...) [a home visitation instruction program] curriculum for families in (...) [the community] with children 3 and under who do not participate in any programming. Out of the 3 people who took the training, 1 coordinator and 1 parent do home visits every week to 5 families teaching the parent activities they can do with their children daily. When they have completed 30 weeks they have a graduation. The Parent Program Coordinator is the Coordinator for this program and children who are on our waiting list are involved."</i></p>

<b>What did we learn?</b> (Patterns found across the stories)	<b>What did sites share?</b> (Excerpts from stories submitted by sites)
<b>7. AHSUNC sites customize programming to meet local needs</b>	<p><i>"We offered a few new workshops to our program this year. We implemented Little Métis sing with Me this spring. We had 8 families who participated and 5 of those families faithfully attended every session. We have a large population of Métis people in (...) [the local area] so it was wonderful to bring that Métis culture and heritage back to these families"</i></p> <p><i>"Our Inuit children in the south miss out on many activities that would be seen as being normal in the North. One such activity is the prepping of seal skin and removing fat, etc to prepare it to be stretched then tanned. This fall one of our cultural teachers shared that experience with the students. That day the smell of seal filled the room and the children sat mesmerized and attentive to what she was doing and saying. That day those children all got to experience something that was customary in the North and something some of the parents may never have seen for those raised in the south. This is an experience they would have never had had in any other facility in (...) [the local area]. This impact wasn't only on the children but also on the teacher who was so proud to be able to teach her students something as a demonstration and not only as sharing about the activity. It came to life our connection to the land and the respect we give to the animal as we take care of getting the skin ready."</i></p>
<b>8. AHSUNC sites promote knowledge development and exchange</b>	<p><i>"Home visitation Project In 2011 we received funding to compile and develop a Home Visitors Guidebook and Parent Workbook. One that is specifically for AHS programs nationally with the six components. The guidebook will assist home visitors gain rapport with families as well as tools in supporting them. This project is complete with original artwork, many consultants who helped write the material including input from a Dietician, Motivational Speaker, Early Childhood Professionals, Elders and a French translator. The books as well as a CD-Rom has been distributed and all projects across Canada will receive their very own copy."</i></p>
<b>9. AHSUNC sites contribute to key agency priorities</b>	<p><i>"This is a story about a little boy that came to our program for a couple of years. Every month we do fire drills and we taught the children what to do in case of fire, and one night about a year later of doing drills, this family had a close [call] with fire, the house fill with smoke and parents were kind of panicking, the boy known what to do and said to his parents "just get down on floor and crawl out the door" and he even didn't panic. I think that's amazing story because this boy learned what AHS staff taught him to do and he remembered. He was four at that time . I can proudly say Aboriginal Head start does have a big impacts on our children and families, and we can see now that most of our former AHS children's are graduating grade twelve and going into universities."</i></p> <p><i>[Excerpt] "In the fall of each new school year program we network with the local audiologist to set up hearing appointments for all the registered Head Start children. This past year the audiologist detected two extremely bad ear infections and two children with a potential loss of hearing which would definitely affect their speech."</i></p>

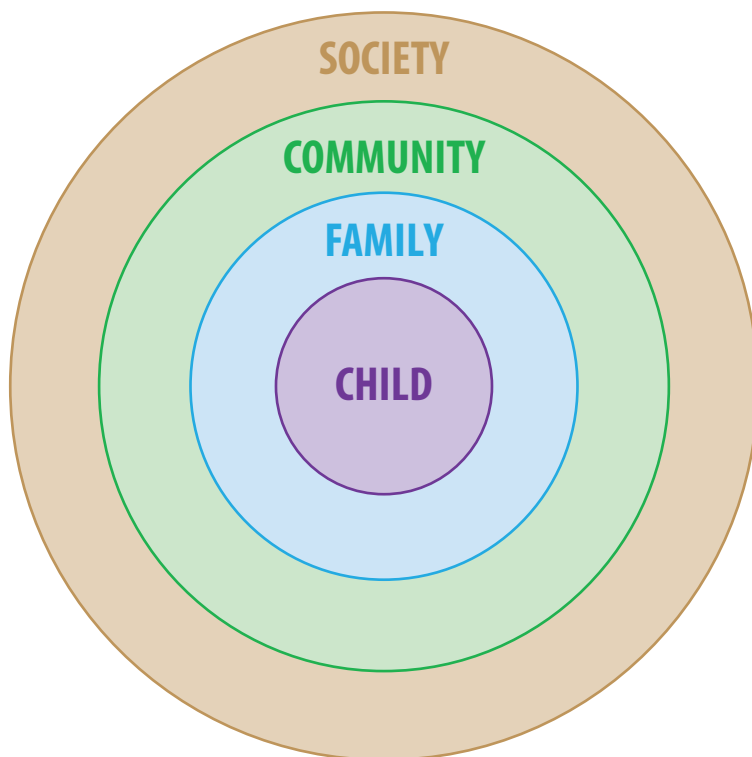
<b>What did we learn?</b> (Patterns found across the stories)	<b>What did sites share?</b> (Excerpts from stories submitted by sites)
<b>10. AHSUNC sites face diverse challenges</b>	<p><i>[Excerpt] “When I started this job, we had roughly 2 children who might have needed to be seen by a Speech/Language Pathologist. Today, almost a quarter of the children who come in to our program must be seen by Speech/Language Pathologist before they can even think about registering for Kindergarten.”</i></p> <p><i>[Excerpt] “I would say that transportation is key in the success of attendance. We pick up our children and drop them off at the end of the day. The driver and Educator (who rides) has opportunity to communicate with the parent while the parent secures the child in the car seat. Many of our families do not have vehicles and it really is a privilege to provide transportation.”</i></p> <p><i>[Excerpt]“ (...) [Our local area] has no grocery store, or any other store. Our closest place to purchase food is in (...), a 2–3 hour ride by train, or 1 hour ride on the winter road which is officially open for 2–3 months of the year. Enough food is purchased in bulk for a month. So, we offer the children, who are registered and attending our program a healthy lunch and snack daily.”</i></p>

*From these stories, two main themes emerged about the impact the AHSUNC program has beyond the children that participate in the program. Families and the larger community also benefit from the AHSUNC program which in turn helps to strengthen the resilience of the community.*

# Theme 1:

AHSUNC sites promote healthy child development in the context of a child's social system, focusing not only on the child but their family and the larger community.

Stories collected convey program processes that sites undertake and outcomes sites achieve within the different components of a child's social system,<sup>1</sup> as seen in the diagram below:



**\*Address key PHAC priorities**

**\*Strengthen social capital**

**\*Promote Indigenous culture and languages**

**\*Customize programming to meet local needs and address challenges**

**\*Strengthen participation in community service system planning as it relates to Indigenous child health**

**\*Strengthen social network**

**\*Strengthen Indigenous community resilience**

**\*Promote knowledge development and exchange**

**\*Provide an integrated community service approach and improve service navigation**

**\*Strengthen parental engagement**

**\*Further strengthen parents' ability to respond effectively to the needs of their children and family**

**\*Strengthen parent Indigenous cultural and language knowledge and skills**

**\*Strengthen social support**

**\*Strengthen positive child health and social development**

**\*Strengthen child Indigenous cultural and language knowledge and skills**



## Theme 2:

### AHSUNC sites strengthen Indigenous community resilience.

An in-depth literature review<sup>2</sup> on community resilience identified key aspects specific to Indigenous communities and suggested measuring its presence through outcomes that contribute to community resilience.

Stories collected convey that the AHSUNC program promotes and maintains community resilience focus on:

- ▶ Strengthening social capital, social networks and social support
- ▶ Providing a sense of community
- ▶ Promoting/revitalising Indigenous languages, culture and spirituality
- ▶ Supporting families and parents to ensure healthy child development and family connectedness
- ▶ Enhancing local leadership and customising services based on community needs
- ▶ Strengthening integrated programming

AHSUNC sites therefore assist children, families and the broader community in effectively responding to adversity and challenges, fostering community resilience and setting the path for improved health and wellbeing.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to AHSUNC site coordinators and parents/caregivers who shared their stories.

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- <sup>2</sup> Kirmeyer, L. J., Sehdev, M., and Isaac, C. (2009). Community resilience: Models, metaphors and measures. *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 5 (1), 62.