



Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities

Promising practices from Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities

The 14th Annual Summer Institute on Early Childhood Development:
Addressing Inequity in Canada through Early Childhood Education

June 2, 2017
Toronto, Ontario



Statement of Acknowledgement of Traditional Land

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Presentation Outline

- 1. Context**
- 2. Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)**
Program Overview
- 3. Introduction Video**
- 4. AHSUNC Program Evidence**
 - Overview of Recent Studies Undertaken
 - Synthesis of Findings
- 5. Conclusion**

Context: Indigenous Children Living Off-Reserve



- Indigenous people in Canada (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) primarily live off-reserve (i.e. 75%) and are increasingly urban
 - 56% of Indigenous people living in urban areas.
- Indigenous children are the youngest and fastest growing demographic in Canada.
 - 24% increase in the number of Aboriginal children aged 0-6 living off-reserve in Canada between 2001 and 2011.
- As of 2011, there were approximately 120,000 Aboriginal children under age 6 with 82% concentrated in 5 provinces (Ontario, BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba)
- Indigenous children continue to be at higher risks for poor developmental and health outcomes including:
 - Over-represented in the child welfare system, high levels of moderate and severe food insecurity, twice as likely to experience poverty and are 2 to 3 times more likely to be raised by a young, single parent;
 - Poor oral health, higher rates of obesity and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).
- Longer term impacts include lower high school completion (only half of Indigenous children currently complete high school) as well as other poor health and social outcomes .

“[] ...when children grow up in conditions of suppressed identity, lack of belonging and abuse, it can lead to challenges. Those challenges can include, but not limited to: illness (physical and mental); addictions; social isolation; spiritual disconnection; poverty; school drop out; and teen pregnancy.”

*Monique Gray Smith
Witness at 20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC
In Aboriginal Head Start The Next Generation – Then and Now
Reflections on the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the AHSUNC*

Addressing Gaps for Indigenous Children and Families

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action, challenged all levels of government to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families.
- The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) plays a public health role for all Indigenous Peoples, regardless of legal status, geo-social status, or geographical location (i.e. status-blind). This population-based approach is important, as the off reserve Indigenous population is increasingly mobile and not defined by particular geo-social or geographic realities
- Provinces and territories have a role in Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care in that they fund, license and regulate child care in their jurisdictions.
 - However the impact of colonization and multi-generational trauma is a complex issue that requires a holistic population-based approach that is inclusive of children, families, and community.
- PHAC works collaboratively with provinces and territories to address health and economic disparities for Indigenous communities through federal investments like AHSUNC which address a gap in culturally appropriate early childhood programs for Indigenous children. In addition, the AHSUNC program while geared to children provides multi-generational benefits to participating Indigenous families.

“AHSUNC not only provides the children with a connection to culture and language, but it is also a bridge to the children’s parents and grandparents reconnecting them with their culture and language.”

*Monique Gray Smith
Witness at 20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC
In Aboriginal Head Start The Next Generation – Then and Now
Reflections on the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the AHSUNC*

“A quote we hear often is that AHSUNC gives back what Residential Schools took away... It’s holistic. It’s just welcoming. It’s inviting. In that sense, it increases well-being.”

*AHSUNC staff
2017 AHSUNC Evaluation*

Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)

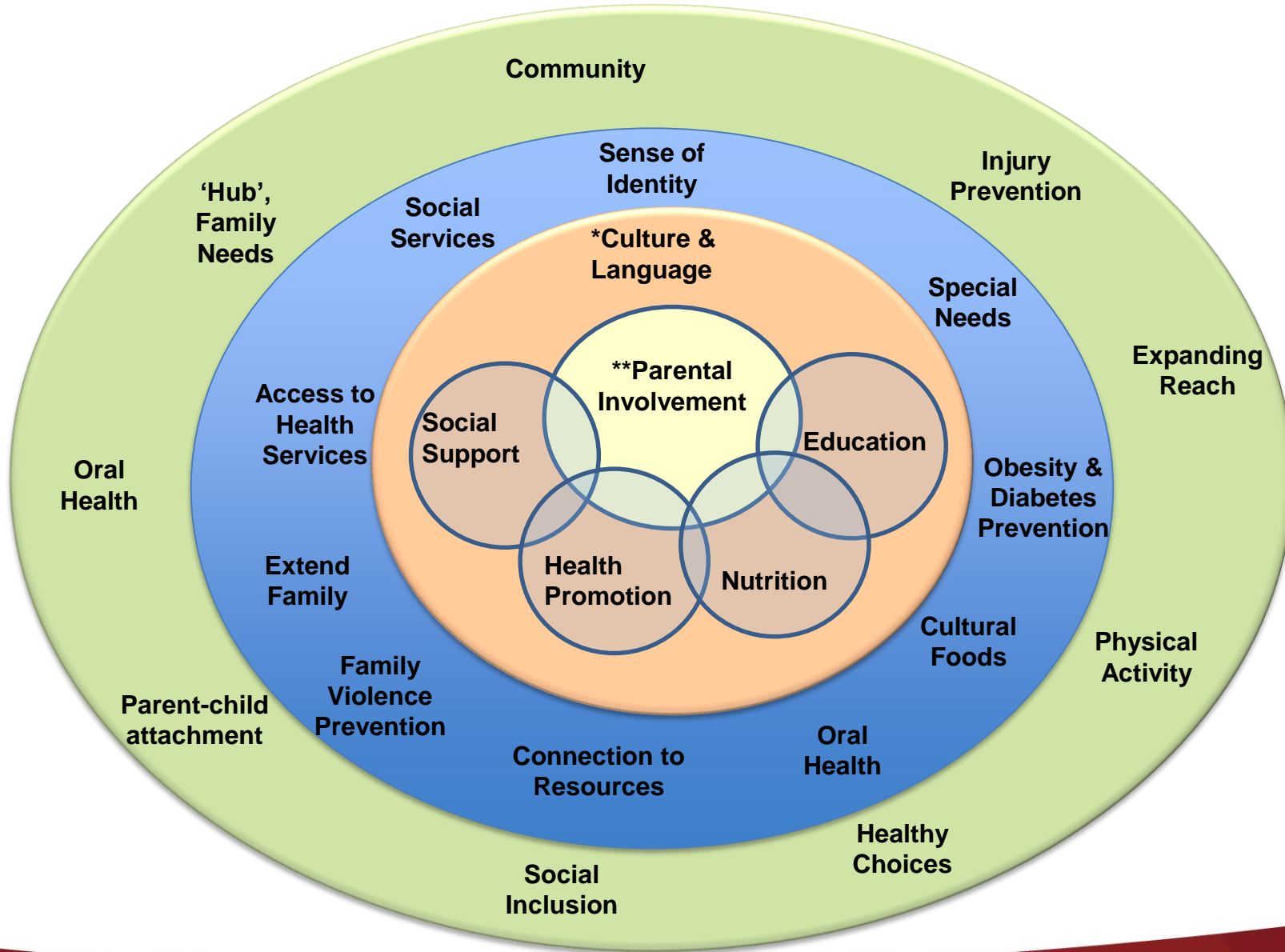
- Introduced in 1995 as an early intervention program for Indigenous children and families living off-reserve and in the North.
- Indigenous community-based organizations are funded to deliver the program to First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families (AHSUNC: \$32.1M/year).
- AHSUNC builds a strong foundation centred on the child while involving parents as the child's first and most influential teacher. The program cultivates positive self-worth, a desire for learning and opportunities to succeed.
- Projects typically provide structured, comprehensive and holistic half-day preschool experiences for Indigenous children focussed on **six program components** to prepare Indigenous children for their school years.
- Currently, 134 sites provide structured, full and half-day programming for 4,600 Métis, Inuit and First Nations children in 117 communities across the country.

In addition to centre-based ECD programming activities, AHSUNC sites offer a range of complementary activities to meet the needs of participants:

- Early Head Start (ages 2-4) (in response to jurisdictions with full-day kindergarten)
- Outreach activities (in communities in need; raising awareness of existing services; fill gaps)
- Home visits
- Activities that include parents and children



AHSUNC Six Program Components – holistic community-based approach well aligned with public health and population health interests



**Culture and language are woven into the design and delivery of the culturally appropriate early child development program*

***Parental involvement supports parents as a child's primary teacher*

Population Served

Participation is based on local demographics and need. Many sites serve children from multiple groups.

- **First Nations:** 88 projects with a majority of First Nations children
 - 55 % (approx. 2,530) self-identify as First Nations.
- **Métis:** 57 projects with a majority of Métis children
 - 19 % (approx. 874) self-identify as Métis
- **Inuit:** 31 projects with a majority of Inuit children
 - 21 % (approx. 966) self-identify as Inuit

“I knew I was Ojibway. I was very proud of being Ojibway because of the teachers at Head Start.”

AHSUNC Youth Graduate

Communities Reached: 117 communities

- 24% of the communities reached are large population centres (100,000 residents or more);
- 19% are medium-sized population centres;
- 47% are small or rural; and
- 20% are isolated or remote.

Indigenous Culture and Languages: Cree, Ojibwe, Inuktitut and Michif are among the most common languages taught in the program. Sites include cultural teaching in their programming through:

- Crafts
- Music and dance
- Storytelling
- Traditional food and dress
- Cultural Ceremonies



“Learnings about my culture and traditions helped me become a traditional drummer and dancer and I’m proud of that.”

AHSUNC Youth Graduate

Delivery Model

- AHSUNC projects are typically administered by local non-profit Indigenous organizations mostly managed by Indigenous professionals and support staff (85% of staff are Indigenous).
- Projects involve parents and guardians, as well as extended family and community members, so that they have meaningful input in the program design, implementation, management, evaluation and ongoing planning. In most projects, parent advisory committees are active in the operation of local sites.
- All AHSUNC sites run free of charge to participants and are typically centre-based preschool programs, offering on average 13.5 hours of programming/week in the form of ½ day programming four days/week, nine months per year, between September and June to children between the ages of 3-5 years. Some sites also provide full day (33%) and/or summer (21%) programs.
- Although each site is unique, all offer additional services such as:
 - parenting programs
 - referrals to health and social services
 - family drop-ins and cultural/ social events
- Many sites have community Elders that are regular contributors to their programming.

“AHS influenced my life, but also my Mother’s life as well...she participated in the PAC [Parental Advisory Committee] and continued when I entered the mainstream education system. This helped her build relationships with my teachers and the community, which helped increase her involvement in my life and even helped her get a job with the program. Without the program, I feel that I wouldn’t be the person I am today. It helped bring me closer to my family and learn important cultural values.”

AHSUNC Youth Graduate

“Right now, as Indigenous people, we are on a healing journey”

AHSUNC Elder

20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC

Program Advisory

- The AHSUNC program has a national advisory body, the **National Aboriginal Head Start Council (NAHSC)**:
 - Comprised of program site representatives from each province or region
 - Works directly with PHAC to provide advice and make recommendations regarding policy and programming related to the AHSUNC program.
- The NAHSC represents diverse perspectives and experiences and acts as the voice for Indigenous children, parents, families and communities involved with the AHSUNC program.
- As such, the NAHSC mines and harvests community level knowledge and experience and provides comprehensive and credible advice to support the strengthening and improvement of the AHSUNC program.
- In addition, each region or province has a regional committee of AHSUNC site representatives, which meet regularly to collaborate on programming, training and sharing community-based knowledge.



Introduction VIDEO

Program Evidence

- Evidence of program delivery and outcomes are gathered through performance measurement studies, research studies and site innovations. Knowledge development and exchange is an integral part of AHSUNC resulting in access to (e.g., training, sharing findings with all program sites) and application of program wisdom gathered through these activities.

Recent studies undertaken

1. School Readiness Short-term Impact Study 2010-11 (aka “School Readiness Study” 2011)

- Pre-post quasi-experimental study
- Children 3-5 years of age assessed by teachers using Brigance Head Start screen (Basic Assessment)
- Assessed in 2 phases (Fall 2010 and Spring 2011) over course of one school year
- Guidelines developed for teachers on adaptations to screen administration to take in account cultural context
- 80% sites participated; 70% participants in program 3-5 participated; 33% had both pre and post assessment to be included in study

2. AHSUNC Exposure and its Impacts on Immediate Child and Family Outcomes (aka “Parent Survey Study” 2015)

- A representative sample of AHSUNC sites were chosen in May 2015 to have parents complete a survey on their participation/exposure in AHSUNC and its impact on child and family outcomes
- 81% sites invited to participate, returned surveys. However, surveys were returned by less than half the participants (42%) contacted by sites. A total of 443 surveys were used in the analysis.
 - » Despite lower parent survey rate of return, results of the study are accurate with a margin of error of four percent (± 4.44)

Recent studies undertaken...

3. AHSUNC 2013-14 Site Stories Study (aka “Site Stories Study” 2016)

- Site stories describing impacts of program on children, families and communities were gathered as part of biannual data collection regarding program delivery in 2013-14
- AHSUNC sites in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut did not complete the data collection tool, nor did another 8 sites across the country (access issues)
- Not all sites that completed a data collection tool submitted qualitative program stories. A total of 136 stories were analyzed in this study.
- Site stories told by site coordinators and parents were analyzed using thematic analysis.

4. Study of Elementary and Intermediate/High school age Health and Education Outcomes of AHSUNC Participants (aka “Aboriginal Peoples Survey Study” 2016)

- Archival data study by Statistics Canada based on most recent Canadian survey of Indigenous peoples living off reserve (2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey)
- Socio-demographic characteristics and data on early child development (ECD) participation of respondents in grades 1 to 12 were analyzed to examine associations between past ECD participation on current parent or self-rated health and education outcomes in both elementary and intermediate/high school
- Most children who attended ECD with an Indigenous focus were expected to have participated in the AHSUNC program as this is the main off-reserve Indigenous ECD program in Canada.

Recent studies undertaken...

5. 20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC in 2015 (aka “20th Anniversary Reflections”)

- Three day celebration, gathering 51 youth graduates (13-25) of the AHSUNC, Elders, parents/family members, program staff from across Canada.
 - » PEI and New Brunswick sites not in operation long enough to have youth graduates 13-25 yrs.
- Invitations to nominate graduate youth across country in 2015. Youth alumnae provided letters of nomination and had to be a healthy role model
- Monique Gray Smith invited to be Witness to celebration and wrote reflection paper about ways program impacted generation of children, families and communities
 - » Captured reflections from facilitated conversation between youth and Elders
- Website: <http://www.ahsabc.com/index.php/ahsunc/20th-anniversary-celebration>
Reference: http://www.ahsabc.com/images/docs/reflections%20paper_linked_web.pdf

6. Community Based Qualitative Study on Family Engagement in AHSUNC sites in British Columbia (BC) (aka “Family Engagement Study” 2017)

- Community based, participatory action qualitative research study with Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC (AHSABC) and Dr. Alison Gerlach of the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, University of Northern BC (UNBC)
- Purposeful sampling (flyer to all BC sites) resulted in 26 participants from five health regions in 11 AHSUNC sites in BC
 - » 10 parents, 6 Elders, 10 program staff
 - » Sample not representative and may not take into account young parents, teen parents, single fathers and parents who are less engaged in program
- Data collection through semi-structured individual or small group interviews conducted by researcher and site observation at 6 sites from May to November 2016. Thematic analysis used.
 - » Credibility of interpretation of findings confirmed through validation throughout analysis and reporting with AHSABC.

What program wisdom is gathered by these studies?

AHSUNC is reaching its target population

AHSUNC program components of culture and language, parental and family involvement, social support, education, health promotion and nutrition are foundational to improved health outcomes.

AHSUNC: Reaching its Target Population

- The study done using the Aboriginal Peoples Survey found that Indigenous early child development (ECD) programs including AHSUNC are being used by Indigenous children living with the highest level of socio-demographic risk.

Significant differences in socio-demographic risk of children and youth who participated in Indigenous-focused ECD (vs. non-Indigenous focussed ECD):

- More likely to live in the north
- More likely to live with single parents (measured for elementary aged only)
- More likely to have parent(s) with low school involvement (significant for elementary aged only)
- More likely to have a mother with a low level of education
- More likely to have a parent and/or grandparent who attended residential school
- More likely to live in a household with lower income
- More likely to live in households with greater number of people
- Less likely to have a chronic health condition

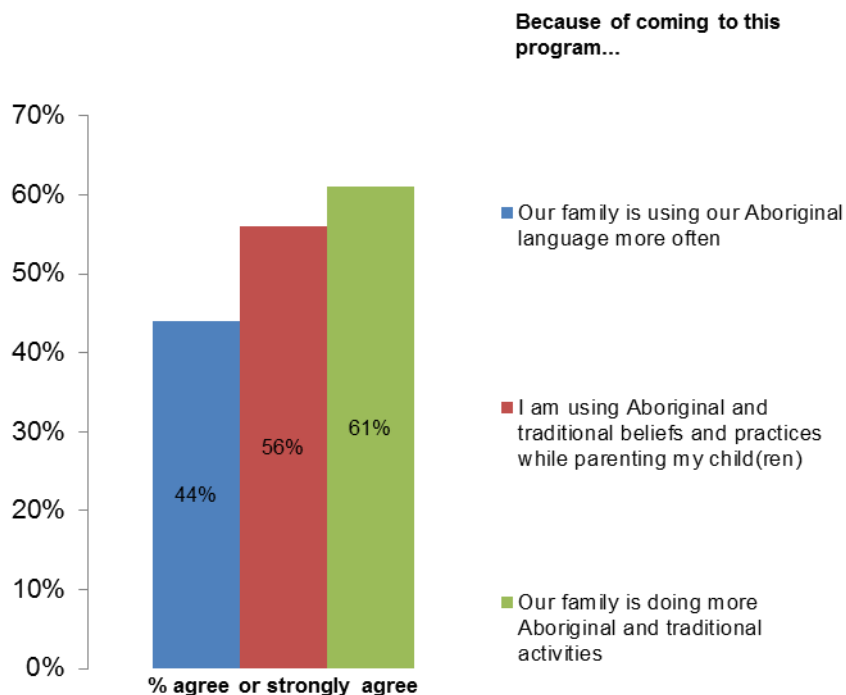
AHSUNC: Reaching its Target Population

- The 'Parent Survey Study' 2015 also found that AHSUNC is reaching children and their families with socio-demographic vulnerability.
 - Of those that responded to socio-demographic questions, 22% parents did not complete high school, 40% single parents, 50% living in low income and cumulative effect of risk.
- The 'Family Engagement Study' 2017 regarding how AHSUNC program sites in BC are engaging families reported that the context of AHSUNC family engagement is complex as its influenced by multifaceted factors (historically rooted barriers: extreme poverty, traumatic events, personal crisis etc.).
 - Consistent expression of concerns by site staff regarding daily multifaceted 'struggles' that many families experience.
- The '20th Anniversary Reflections' 2015 stated that AHSUNC has had an influential role in supporting an estimated 50,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children across Canada and their parents and families.

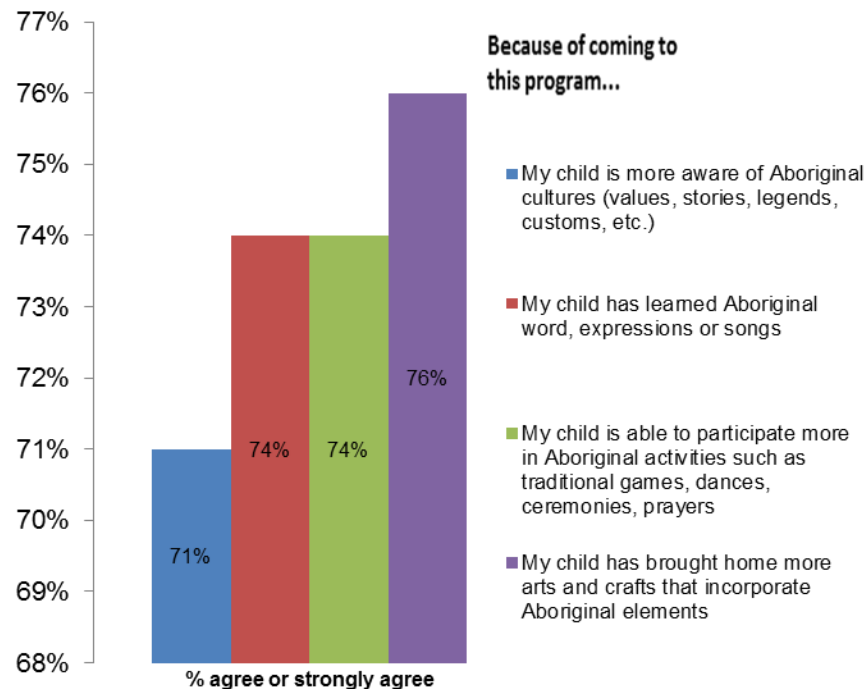
Culture and Language Component

- The 'Parent Survey Study' that considered immediate parent and child outcomes found that the program has a positive impact on the promotion and reinforcement of Indigenous language and culture for children, parents and families.

Program Impact on Aboriginal Culture and Language: Parents and Families



Program Impact on Aboriginal Culture and Language: Children



- The 'Aboriginal Peoples Survey Study' suggested that AHSUNC—which focusses on Indigenous culture and language— helps participating Indigenous children close the gap in health and education outcomes with non-AHSUNC participants that may face a lesser degree of adversity.

Culture and Language Component

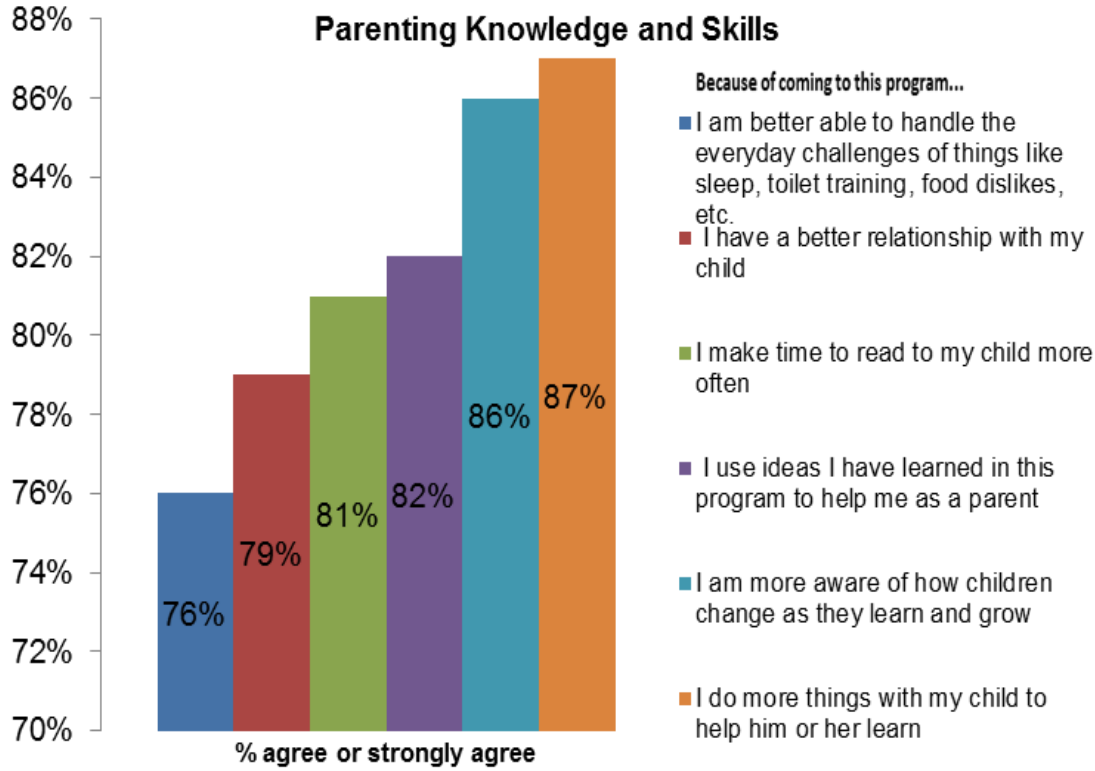
- ‘Site Stories Study’ found that AHSUNC sites promote indigenous culture and language through various activities at the program and community-level (e.g., arts/crafts, fishing and hunting, music and dance, traditional ceremonies, offer connection to land, access to Elders) and that there is an increase in parent and child cultural knowledge and skills.
- The ‘20th Anniversary Reflections’ thematic analysis of youth nominee letters concluded that for:
 - *Culture and Traditions*: alumnae youth think respect for culture is important. Recollections were very positive with strong emphasis on the youth’s remembrance of being connected to their cultures, traditions and languages.
 - *Language*: Youth associate language with culture. They conveyed a strong sense of importance of language.
 - *Physical/Nutrition*: Physical activities and nutrition in the AHSUNC program were pleasing for the youth. Practices were nature and culture-based. There was a strong sense of joy gained from these experiences.
- The reflections from the 20th Anniversary celebration which captured learnings from the conversation between Elders and youth also concluded that culture and language are important for supporting the growth and identity of children in AHSUNC.

“[] ...my time spent at the AHS program helped foster my desire to practice our Dene tradition...As a Dene, I enjoyed my time spent at our community’s traditional remote camp in Willow River. There, we learned to set nets properly pack canoes, boats, went hunting, learned camp safety, first aid and gun safety. We also learned to prepare fish, set up camp, hiked and safely cut and gather wood.”

AHSUNC Youth Graduate

Parental Involvement Component

- In the 'Parent Survey Study', parental attendance in program activities had a strong positive impact on child outcomes, suggesting that the greater involvement of parents in the program enhances child outcomes.
- This same study also found that most parents rated themselves as having improved their parenting knowledge and skills.

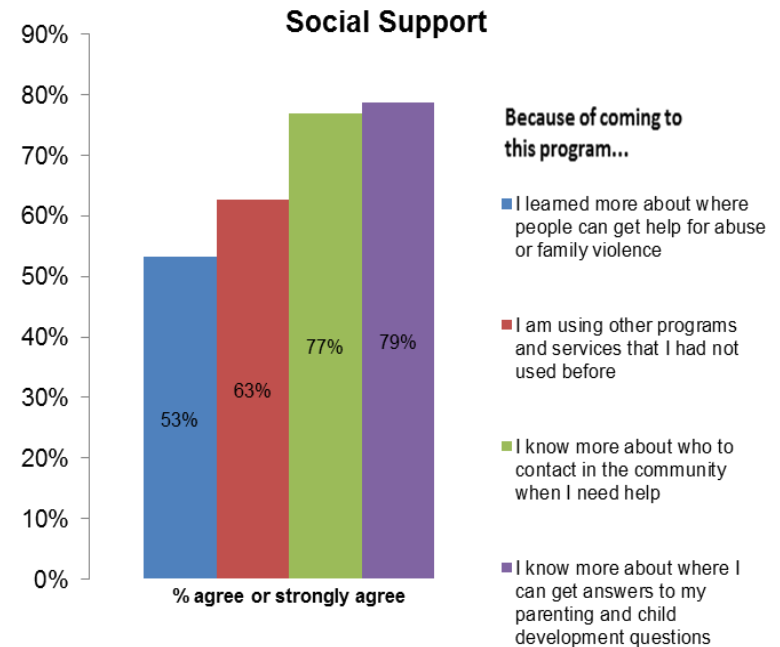
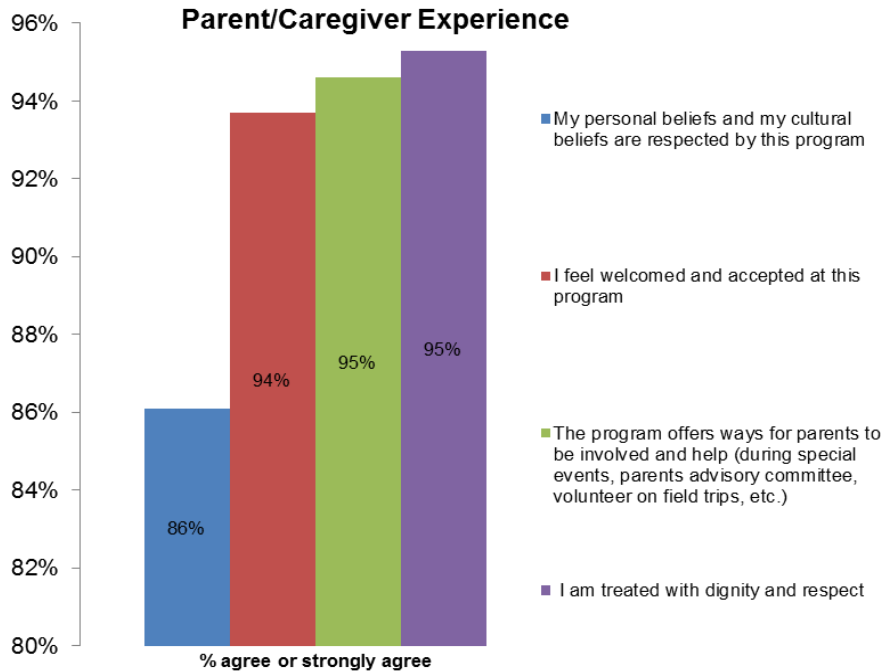


Parental Involvement Component

- The 'Site Stories Study' 2016 identified that:
 - Sites provide program opportunities for family bonding.
 - AHSUNC strengthens positive parenting skills.
 - Parent/family and Elder input was found to be used to identify and close gaps through the customization of the program locally (e.g., taking on knowledge development and exchange projects, building partnership, programming that reflects and relates to local Indigenous groups).
- The 'Family Engagement Study' 2017 regarding AHSUNC sites in BC found that the program staff who participated in this study had **an implicit relational approach to engaging with families** that was characterized by:
 - Staff investing significant amounts of time in developing interpersonal relationships with families enables them to know each family's circumstances.
 - A relational process of 'knowing', enabled staff to tailor their expectations and approaches to engaging with families.
 - The relational approach to parental engagement that supports family wellbeing has the ability to foster parent self-esteem and self-efficacy (i.e., being their child's first teacher) in influencing their children's education and navigating the educational system/becoming 'family school ready'.
- The '20th Anniversary Reflections' 2015 acknowledged the importance of parent/family involvement in healing intergenerational wounds based on the program's foundational impact on children and families as reported by youth years, and even decades later.

Social Support Component

- The 'Parent Survey Study' 2015 noted that AHSUNC was considered by parents to be a supportive and respectful environment.
- Also parents thought they had improved awareness of information and support as a result of the program.



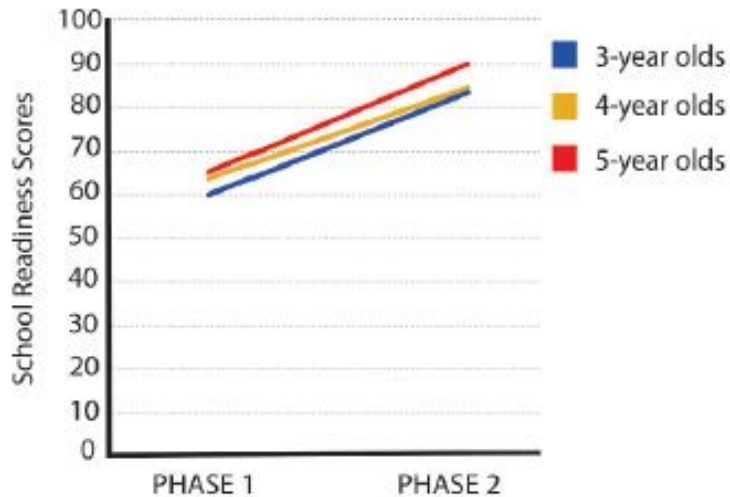
Social Support Component

- 'Site Stories Study' 2015 provided evidence that:
 - Sites strengthen social support and social networks families, encourage parents in the pursuit of training and education and provide employment experiences for parents
 - Elders and Traditional Healers provide social support on site
 - Site staff and traditional knowledgeable peoples are involved in local community service system planning
 - AHSUNC has an integrated community approach and improves access to services in the local community
 - AHSUNC increases the ability of parents to meet some of the basic needs such as provision of food and clothing
- The program was considered a source of support for children (20th Anniversary Reflections).
- The 'Family Engagement Study' 2017 found that the relational approach to parent engagement supports family wellbeing.
 - The AHSUNC program has a broad scope that extends beyond child early health, development and school readiness to supporting family wellbeing.

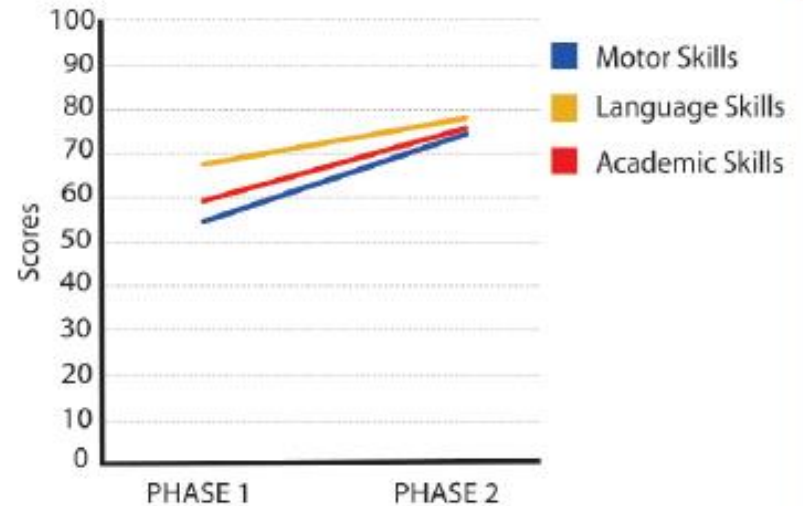
Education Component

Positive Child Short Term/Immediate Impacts (School Readiness Study, 2011):

All age groups improved significantly over the course of the year



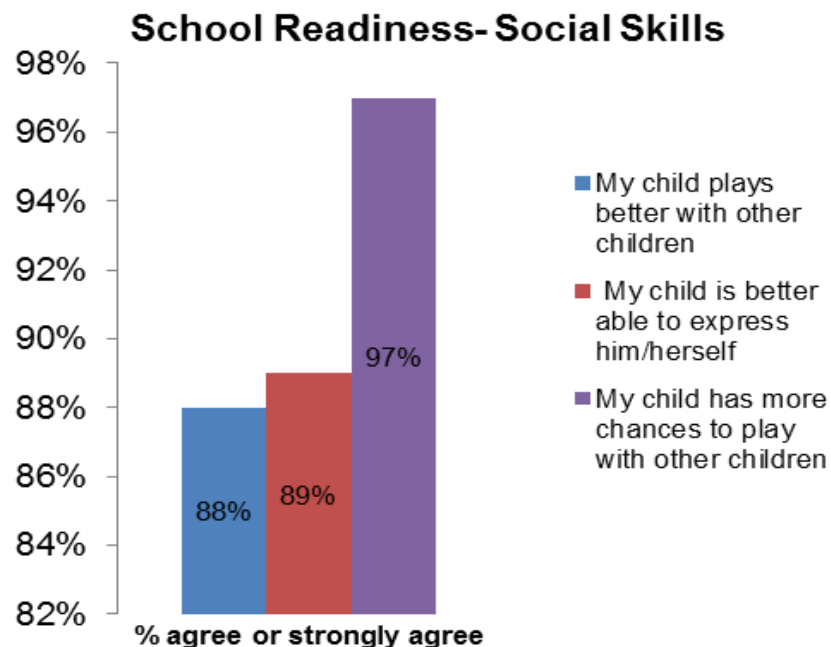
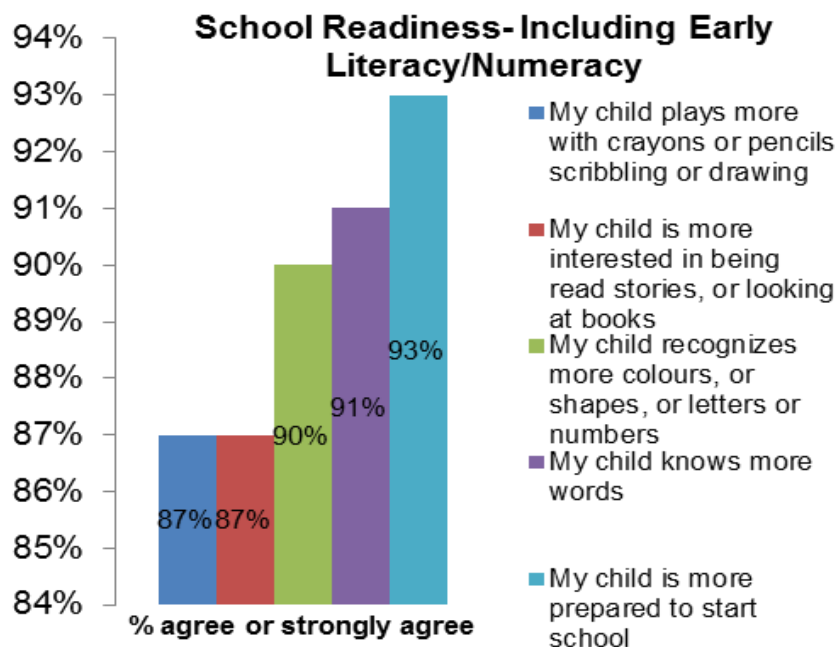
Participants improved significantly in all three skill areas



- Both girls and boys progressed significantly over the course of the year.

Education Component

- Evidence was found for positive child health and social development, school readiness and successful transition to school as well as success in life longer-term (i.e., graduation high school, post-secondary degrees, careers) (Site Stories Study, 2016).
- The 'Parent Survey Study' found AHSUNC program is considered by parents to have helped prepare children for entry into school by increasing academic and social skills.



Education Component

Impacts for elementary and intermediate high school aged AHSUNC participants

- Despite greater socio-demographic disadvantages, Indigenous children and youth who participated in AHSUNC have similar education and health outcomes as their peers in elementary and intermediate/high school (Aboriginal Peoples Survey Study, 2016).

AHSUNC/Indigenous ECD Participation outcomes

Accounting for socio-demographic risk factors, AHSUNC participants were **as likely to:**

- **Receive mostly A's on their last report card**
- **Receive tutoring**
- **Be in excellent or very good health**
- **Not miss school in the past two weeks**
- **Never repeat a grade**
- **Be happy at school**
- **Be in excellent or very good mental health**
- **Not be late for school in the past two weeks**

Elementary school - Grades 1 to 6
and
Intermediate/high school - Grades 7 to 12

Intermediate/high school - Grades 7 to 12

However, AHSUNC participants in elementary school were more likely than non-Indigenous ECD participants to have been late for school in past two weeks.

and

AHSUNC participants in intermediate/high school were more likely than those who had not participated in ECD to have skipped school in the past two weeks.

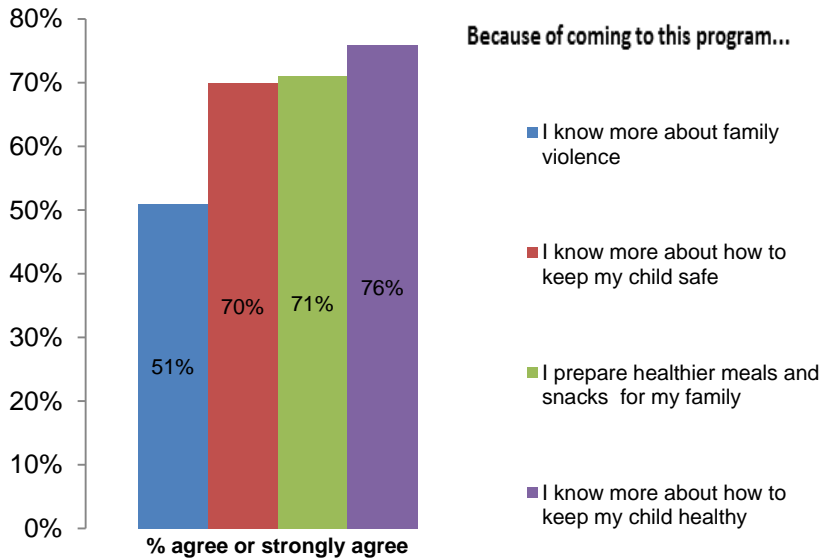
Education Component

- AHSUNC program has given youth a strong foundation in their development from child to teen and into adulthood in a very positive environment and acknowledged how lessons learned in the program continually complements their self-image and self-esteem (20th Anniversary Reflections, 2015) in the following areas:
 - **Education/school readiness:** Youth alumnae affirmed that the program gave them a strong foundation for education and school readiness.
 - **Future schooling:** AHSUNC influenced youths progression from preschool to further their educational aspirations.
 - **Social development:** Youth expressed that they learned to be sociable citizens in a respectful way, based on cultural and social norms.
- AHSUNC's relational approach to parent engagement (which supports family wellbeing) has the ability to influence a child's education and navigation of the school system (i.e., by fostering parent self-esteem and self-efficacy; becoming family school ready) (Family Engagement Study, 2017).

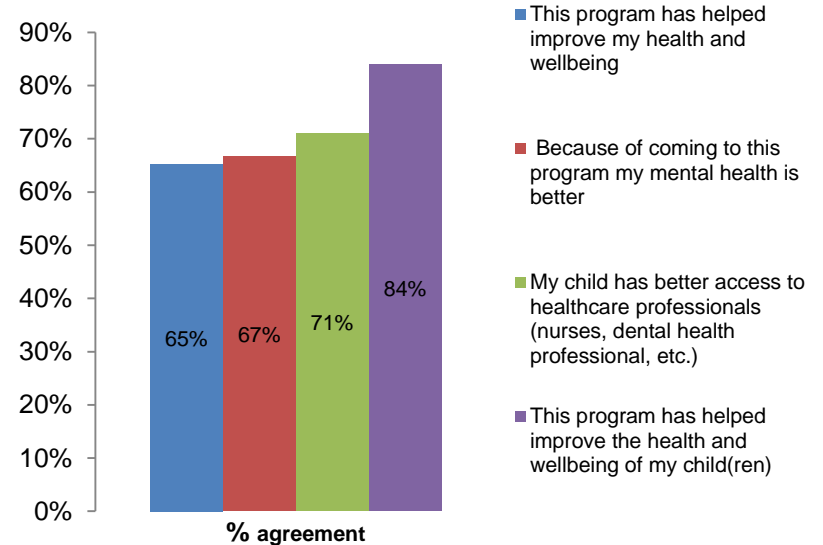
Health Promotion and Nutrition Components

- Sites contribute to healthy nutrition and active lifestyle and well as injury prevention and access to health services. Site stories also described improved parent emotional wellbeing as an outcome of the program (Site Stories Study, 2016).
- AHSUNC is having a strong impact on health and wellbeing of both children and their parents (AHSUNC Parent Survey, 2015).

Health and Wellbeing of Parent and Child



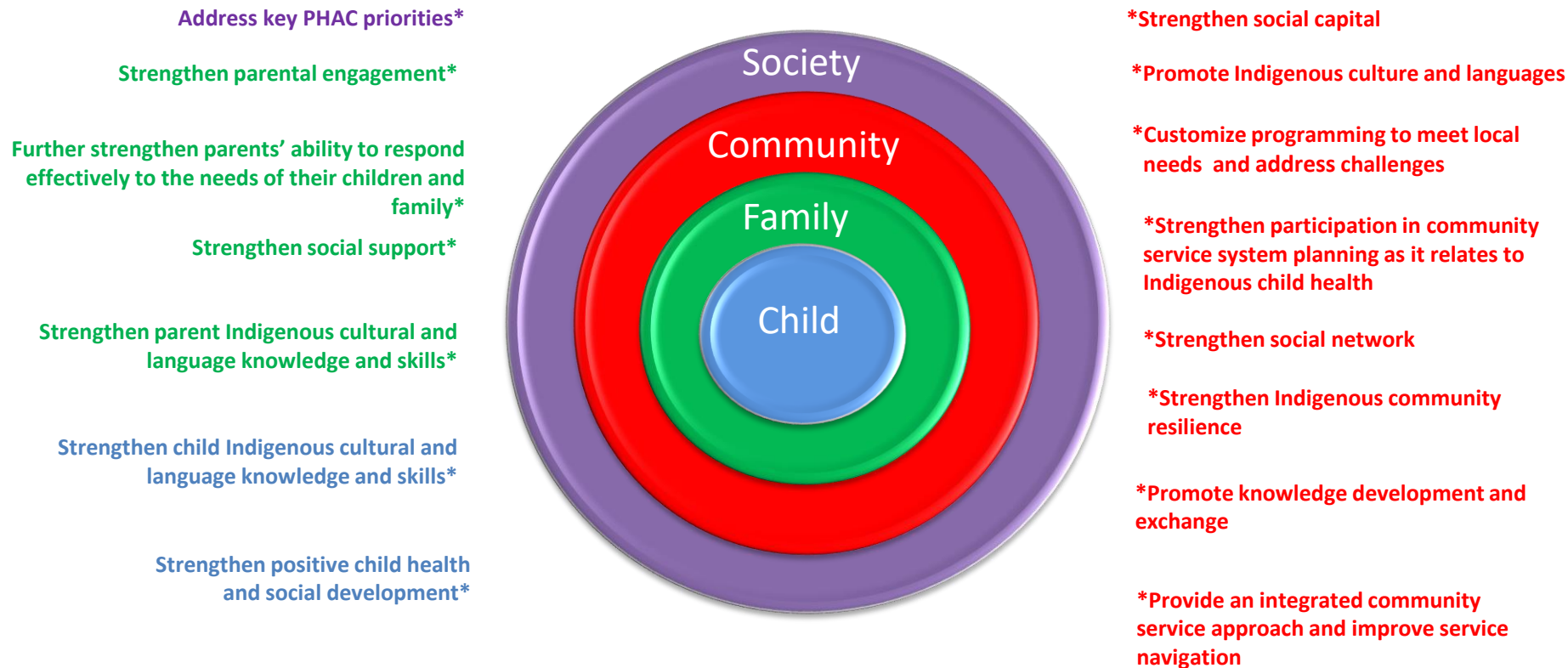
Health and Wellbeing of Parent and Child



- Many alumnae youth are comfortable role models and prefer healthy lifestyles as well as recalled the physical activities and nutrition in the program to be pleasing, noting that practices were nature and culture-based, and that they received a sense of joy from these experiences (20th Anniversary Reflections, 2015).

AHSUNC Program Promotes Healthy Child Development in the Context of a Child's Social System

- Studies provide evidence that the focus of the program is not only on the child but also the family and local community.
- 'Site Stories Study' convey program processes that sites undertake and outcomes sites achieve within the different components of a child's social system, as seen in the diagram below:



AHSUNC Program Promotes Healthy Child Development in the Context of a Child's Social System

- Parent Survey Study 2015 also found evidence of both child and family outcomes.
- The Family Engagement Study found that AHSUNC programs have a broad scope that extends beyond a child's early health, development and school readiness to support family wellbeing.
- The 20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC's analysis of alumnae youth nominee letters and the reflections on the celebration concluded that:
 - Family and community support in the program was reflected on by youth. The participation of parents, family members, Elders and community members as a whole are revered as valuable contributions in the youth's development. Appreciated safe and supportive environment.
 - Stories have importance in teaching and healing all AHSUNC community members.

"The Head Start program impacts my life every day. I feel respected, independent, and supported by everyone."
AHSUNC Youth Graduate now
AHSUNC Staff



20th Anniversary Celebration of AHSUNC

Resilience Outcome

- Evidence that sites assist children, families and the broader community in effectively responding to adversity and challenges, **fostering community resilience** setting the path for improved health and wellbeing was found in the 'Site Stories Study'.

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

- The 20th Anniversary Celebration's reflections acknowledged the importance of building resilience in our future leaders.

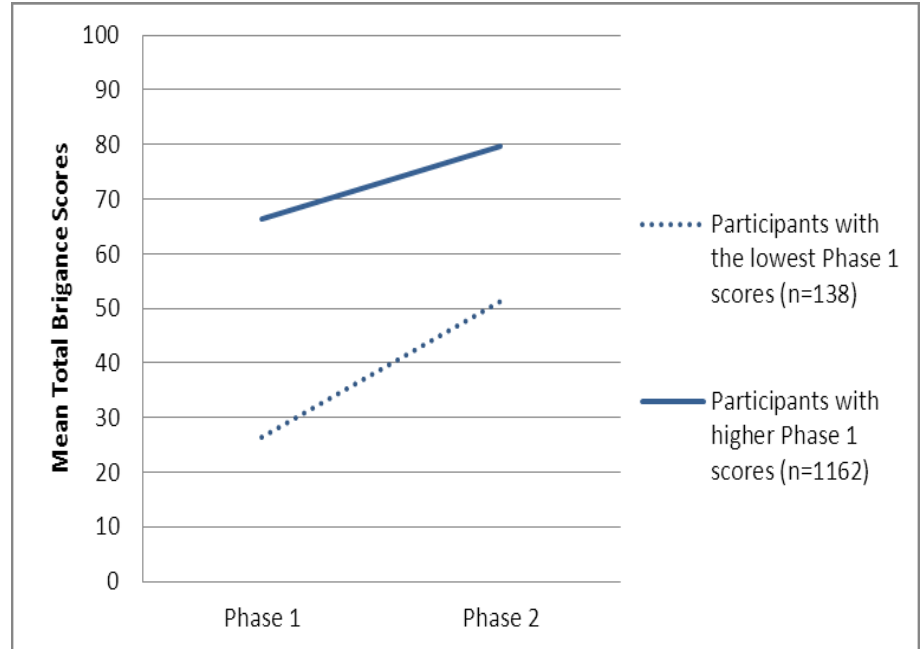
Differential Effectiveness of the Program

Consistent with the literature that the **greatest impacts** are often **found in children most 'at risk' at the outset of the intervention**, the quasi-experimental study of teacher assessed child short-term school readiness skills (over the course of a school year) showed that:

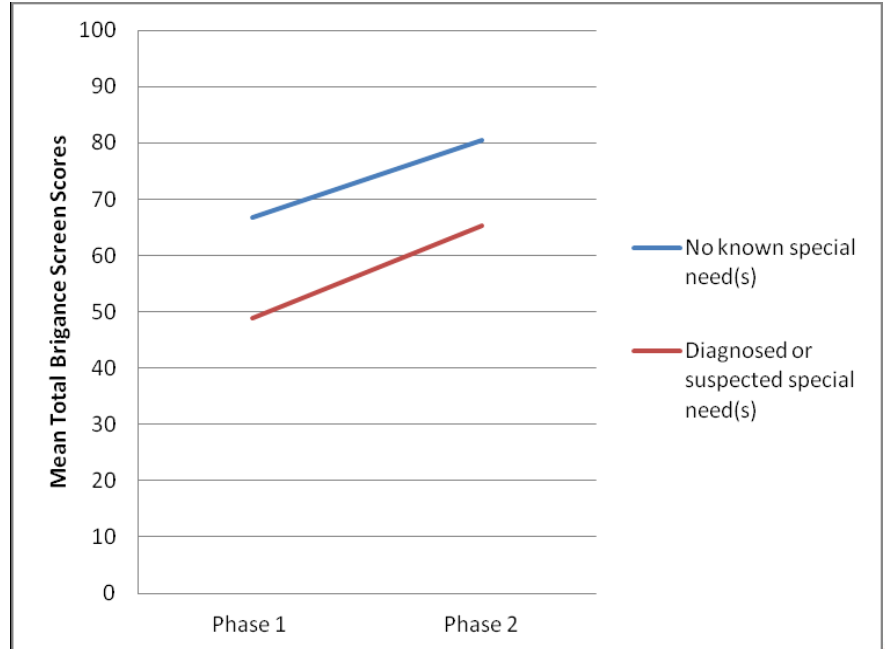
1) Participants with the lowest scores at the beginning of the school year (most 'at-risk') showed greater improvement over the course of the school year.

2) Participants with and without special needs (suspected and diagnosed) all benefited from the program.

Comparing the progress of participants with the lowest scores in Phase 1 to participants with higher Phase 1 scores



Scores by special needs, all ages-combined

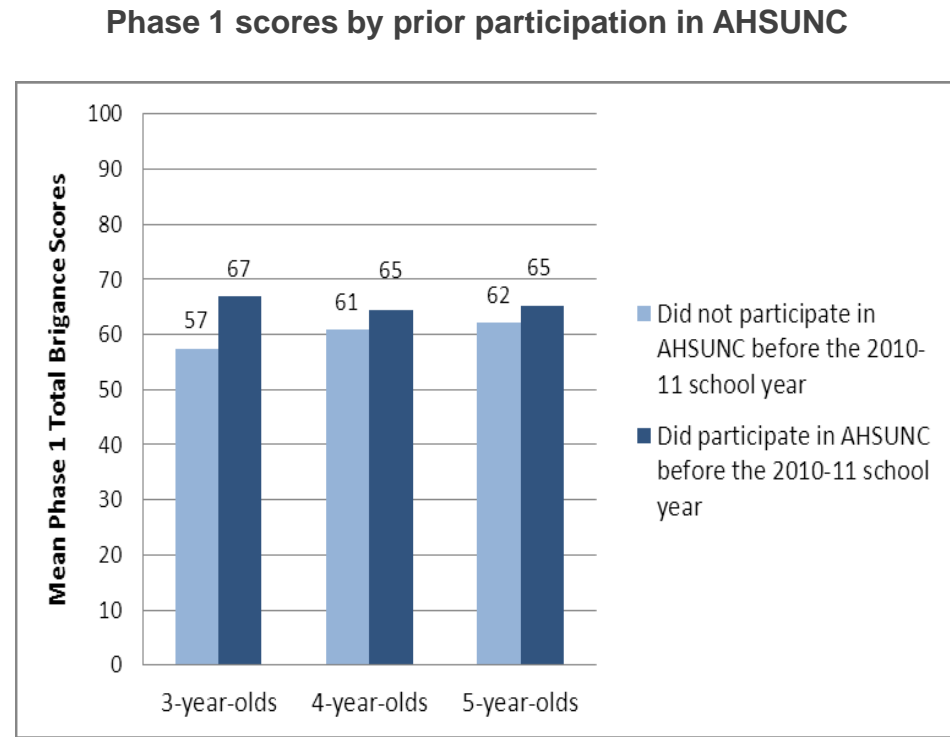
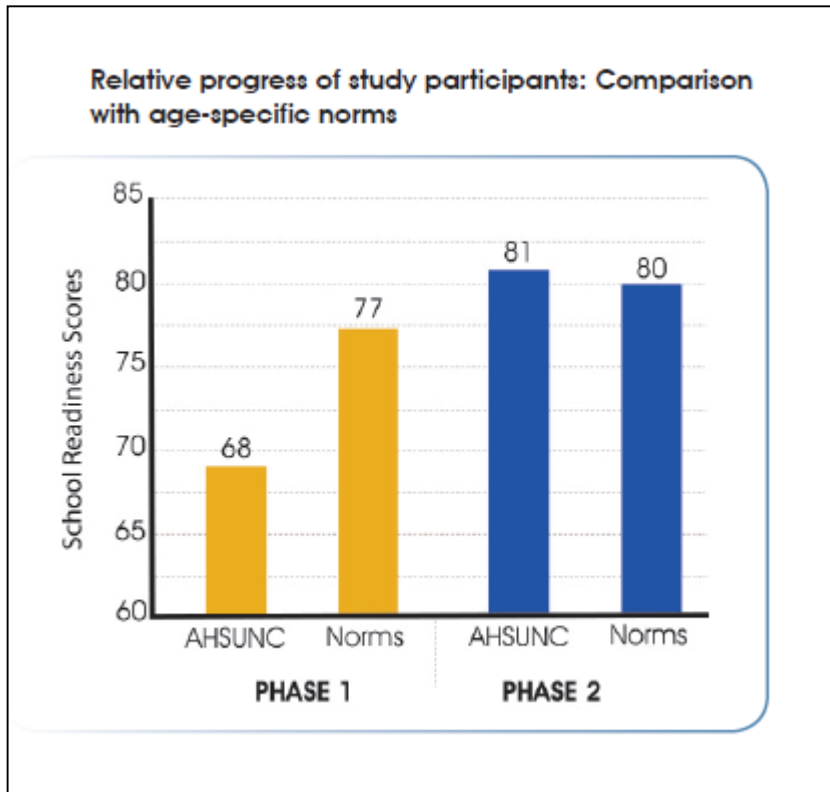


Differential Effectiveness of the Program

- AHSUNC had a strong positive **impact on all children** despite any difference in their level of vulnerability in the Parent Survey study findings:
 - Regardless of family characteristics, **all children benefited equally** from program. The most vulnerable of families reported the same level of support and benefit as those with fewer risk factors.
- A trend toward ‘high-risk effectiveness’ of program for parents was found in the Parent Survey Study:
 - **Parent program outcomes were greater for Indigenous women living in low income**
 - **Being a younger parent and attending more parent program activities** were the factors that most strongly related to **better parent program experience ratings** (program considered a supportive, respectful environment).
 - **Being a younger parent** was most strongly related to **increases** in self-rated parent **support** outcomes.
 - **Being younger and living in low income** were the family characteristics that were most strongly related to **increases** in self-rated **parenting knowledge and skills** outcomes.

Closing In On Attribution

- The program has been proven to have a positive short-term impact on participants' school readiness skills over the course of a school year (School Readiness, 2011).



Closing In On Attribution

- Both child and parent exposure to the program significantly impacted positive child outcomes (Parent Survey Study, 2015).
- Outcomes were found for all of the program components from several studies. This provides evidence in support of program theory of change.
- Qualitative and quantitative studies show the same findings. This triangulation of results, shows the increased validity of findings as a whole across studies.
- Studies also considered the child's behaviour at home and in the program/school setting. Situational specificity is considered through:
 - ECE assessment of school readiness outcomes and staff site stories which considered the perspective of the child in the program/school environment
 - Parent rated outcomes and parent site stories which considered the perspective of the child in the home environment

Promising Practices

- The AHSUNC program as an early childhood intervention is a best practice for Indigenous ECD programming in that it is:
 - culturally appropriate and respects diversity of cultures;
 - reaches family in addition to children and also focuses on the community;
 - applies a strengths based and empowerment approach by including parents in decision making;
 - linking to community: development of partnerships and referral systems, 'hub' model, community events; supporting children with special needs, welcoming environment.
- The AHSUNC program has gained much experience in the implementation of large-scale performance measurement and research studies with AHSUNC sites. Use of mixed methods for data collection (qualitative and quantitative), participatory action research approach and consultative approach used with the NAHSC are in line with best practice for program evaluation of community-based programs for Indigenous families.
- AHSUNC sites promote knowledge development and exchange (e.g., workshops, conferences, summits, training sessions, cultural activities) for families, community and wider AHSUNC program (Site Stories Study, 2016).
- Transportation is integral to good attendance/success (Site Stories Study, 2016 and 2012 AHSUNC Program evaluation).

Promising Practices

- **‘Family Engagement Study’ identified the following as enhancing parent engagement in AHSUNC sites in BC:**
 - **Flexible family engagement expectations and strategies** (not one size fits all)
 - **Nuanced** (some parents are taking a much needed break) **and socially responsive approach** (work to support families’ access to basic determinants of health)
 - **Supporting family wellbeing** (can further enhance family engagement and both are interdependent)
 - **Strong relationships with multiple intersectoral services and programs in communities or co-located in multiservice organizational ‘hub’**
 - **Elders and the anchoring of programs in Indigenous knowledges and practices** (are a draw for parents who want to strengthen their connection with Indigenous identities and ancestries; key determinant of health)
 - **Programs and program spaces provided to foster informal parent to parent interactions** (make parents feel valued and that they belong)
 - **Positive and strengths-based staff-parent relationships and interactions** (foster self-esteem and self-efficacy (i.e., being their child’s first teacher) in influencing their children’s education and navigating the educational system/becoming ‘family school ready’)
 - **Social media when used with discretion** (can create sense of belonging and inclusion; also stepping stone towards greater in-person engagement)
 - **Father engagement through flexibly scheduled, land-based activities and access to Elders who are men** (role model)
 - **Direct and open discussions with parents about the benefits and barriers to participating in their child’s program** (can help increase parent’s motivation for program engagement)

Promising Practices

- Site innovations also provide emerging promising practices
 - **Under One Sky “Take It Outside” Program** in Fredericton, New Brunswick:
 - Pilot project funded by the AHSUNC Strategic fund
 - Blended model of AHSUNC and Forest School approach to preschool teaching and learning in a culturally appropriate manner
 - Focusses on language and has six main advantages to teaching and learning language through the outdoor experience:
 1. Our languages are based in the land. Content is abundant and relevant.
 2. It’s a more natural way to learn, connected to reality.
 3. It reinforces healthy family-style interaction
 4. There is less stress or language anxiety
 5. It is a more effective way to teach Indigenous language
 6. It offers greater opportunities for delivering and creating curriculum
 - Teaching and learning language and culture through the outdoor experiential learning:
 - Strengthens connections to traditions, stories and ceremonies
 - Increases confidence and curiosity in children
 - Allows language to flow organically as most Indigenous languages are closely linked to the land
 - Strengthens parent/family engagement through outdoor activities (e.g., taking the Parental Advisory Committee meetings outside; better turn out from parents)
 - For more information regarding ‘Take It Outside’: Patsy McKinney, Program Coordinator, Under One Sky, email: patr.mck@gmail.com , telephone number: 506-458-9269.

Quality Improvement Opportunities

- After accounting for socio-demographic disadvantages, AHSUNC participants are doing as well as their peers on most health and education outcomes (Aboriginal Peoples Survey Study, 2016). However, further examination of barriers and supports to increase punctuality and school attendance outcomes are important for AHSUNC participants and programming.
- Continue supports for children with special needs given the increases in participating children having suspected or diagnosed special needs:
 - In 2015-16, 25% of the children enrolled in the AHSUNC program have suspected or diagnosed special needs and this has increased from 19% in 2013-14 . Speech difficulties is by far the most common area of special needs, both years assessed.
 - In four provinces (BC, AB, MB and ON), more than 30% of the children enrolled in AHSUNC in 2015-16 have special needs.
 - Sites support children with special needs in a number of ways. Most sites are able to refer these children to health professionals and/or assist families in accessing other services while offering support through program activities where Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) will work with the children or through other means.
 - AHSUNC continues to invest heavily in training to support educators' work with children who have special needs.
- Important to note that the AHSUNC program was found to benefit participating children with diagnosed or suspected special needs by increasing their school readiness skills over the course of one year of programming.

“AHS helped me practice and understand routine. The routines from the program helped with my transition into other educational environments.”

AHSUNC Youth Graduate

AHSUNC Site Challenges Raised in Studies

- Explore opportunities to improve program quality in the following areas:
 - Transportation (although 83% of sites have a vehicle for transporting children)
 - Accessibility of food transport, services and learning resources in remote/isolated locations
 - Staffing challenges and turnover
 - 57% of sites in 2015-16 report staff leaving to pursue other career opportunities and 50% report staff leaving to seek positions at higher wages.
 - Complexity of families' contexts (i.e., reaching most vulnerable Indigenous families)
 - Affects family engagement
 - Training and resources to support family wellbeing (e.g., harm reduction, trauma informed approaches)

Wisdom gathered by these studies concludes that...

- AHSUNC is **reaching its target population**
- AHSUNC is **achieving outcomes for all six program components**
- AHSUNC is **associated with program outcomes in elementary school through to high school and into adulthood**
- AHSUNC **promotes healthy child development in the context of a child's social system**
- AHSUNC **fosters resilience**
- AHSUNC has some differential effectiveness (leaning toward **increased effectiveness for those most at risk**)
- **Findings are attributed to the AHSUNC program**
- **There are promising practices/reflections** gathered through studies
- **There are quality improvement considerations** gathered through studies

***Many thanks to families and staff of local AHSUNC sites
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Reflections? Questions? Comments?

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