

Edmonton Head Start Summary and Current State

Purpose

The Edmonton Head Start Project is a collaboration between ABC Head Start Society, e4c and Oliver Centre. It began in 1994 with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada's Community Action Program for Children (CAPC). Head Start is a comprehensive preschool program for vulnerable families that nurtures children's growth and development, at the same time offering parents a range of family support services.

Head Start programs and activities are designed on the understanding that the early years are the most critical time in a child's development, with initial experience at home and school laying the foundation for a child's future educational and life success. Head Start provides a positive introduction to school experiences and serves as a bridge linking children and families to community resources. The goal is to prepare children for a successful educational experience, in partnership with their families and communities.

Currently, Edmonton Head Start provides both full and half-day Head Start programming at nine locations across Edmonton, four to five days a week. Each year, Edmonton Head Start serves over 600 children and their families from over fifty cultural/ethnic groups.

Context

Research evidence has established that experiences in early childhood significantly shape children's future development in cognitive, social, emotional, physical and mental domains (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron & Shonkoff, 2006). This evidence is further reinforced by the 2018 CAPC Impact Report which found that the nature of support provided to parents/caregivers who experience various levels of vulnerability has considerable impact on outcomes. Children from low-income families have been found to enter formal schooling with deficits in their vocabulary, cognitions, literacy skills and more difficulties in their social-emotional skills and self-regulation compared to their more advantaged peers (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Reardon & Galindo, 2009). This observation is not unique to Canada but in the US, Thompson (2018) found that "early markers of success already appeared worse for poor children by the time they enter kindergarten (p. 1101). Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that is multi-faceted and focused on addressing the complex and multi-dimensional needs of vulnerable children and families.

Head Start programming focuses on a holistic approach to child development and is designed to provide a wide variety of services and support to children and families, particularly those facing different levels of vulnerability. These services are tailored to the needs of program participants and include preschool education, physical health care, mental health care, and working with families to facilitate parental involvement in their child's development. It is premised on an outcomes-based framework towards child development by offering early childhood intervention programs focused on four key areas; (1) Early Learning Programming, (2) Family support and involvement, (3) Family and community connections, (4) Multidisciplinary and community partnerships. Unfortunately, all too often accessibility to such programs and services remains a challenge to most vulnerable children and families who require these early interventions to succeed.

The Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) was launched in 1993 with the aim to promote the health and social development of vulnerable children and families. To achieve this goal, CAPC identified three key objectives which include to ensure; (1) children aged 2.5 to 5 from vulnerable families are mentally and physically healthy and ready for school, (2) parents and caregivers from vulnerable families are supported with nurturing their children, building resiliency, enhancing family functioning and social connection, (3) strengthened communities, evidence-based practice and partnership across health, education, social services and community stakeholders to meet the needs of vulnerable families. Edmonton Head Start Project began in 1994 and builds upon these CAPC objectives to provide critical early child development intervention and supports to vulnerable children and families in Edmonton.

Scope of Edmonton Head Start Programs and Services

Early Learning Program: A full and half-day preschool for children aged 2.5 to 5 years. The preschool program is designed to help students learn and grow through play. Each child is set up with a personal learning plan and provided with extra services.

Family support: Edmonton Head Start Project provides weekly parent meetings and works with parents to encourage partnership and involvement in their child's learning. Through the family support services, Head Start connects families to other community resources. Parents are invited to attend regular education and support groups, have access to in-home support and are also given the opportunity to volunteer and be part of advisory committees. Due to the impact of the pandemic, many of these services have now moved to online delivery and are offered virtually.

Strategic Outcome Areas

The outcome framework guides the development of standards and evaluation measures that are used to track program objectives and how Head Start services are making the appropriate impact, as a result of our services, initiatives and resources. The desired outcomes of the Edmonton Head Start Project are:

Outcome 1. Children develop social, intellectual, physical and emotional skills.

This includes the delivery of comprehensive and integrated services such as appropriate assessment, consultation and therapy services in order to be prepared for a successful entry into kindergarten. Children's developments are assessed with a focus on speech and language, cognitive and readiness skills, gross and fine motor skills and social-emotional skills. Through individualized learning plans, children are being supported to achieve their learning/development goals by a multi-disciplinary team of teachers, educational assistants, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, home educators, social workers, as well as Alberta Health Services (AHS) community health nurses and CASA mental health therapists.

Outcome 2. Promotion of social, emotional, and physical well-being of families involved.

As highlighted by the 2018 CAPC Report, the nature of support provided to parents and caregivers has significant impact on a child's health and general wellbeing. Through home visitation and parent groups, family support workers partner with parents to strengthen their ability to parent effectively and to encourage their child's development. At-risk families receive the required support they need and are connected to community resources. These supports create a safe and nurturing environment where parents are able to adopt positive parenting strategies, feel less socially isolated, improve parent-child bonds, and establish proactive social support networks.

Outcome 3. Enhanced staff knowledge to strengthen community capacity and promote evidence-based practice.

Edmonton Head Start Project works to create stronger child development communities by building new partnerships and strengthening existing ones. Over the years, we have strengthened commitment to evidence-based practice by adopting proven frameworks and undertaking renewed standards of practice for the professional development of our team. An example is the widespread application and utilization of evidence-based resiliency theory across all aspects of service delivery.

Fig 1. Overview of Edmonton Head Start Interagency Interventions and Initiatives

Initiatives	Program focus areas	Targets/Expected Outcomes	Performance Measures
Early Childhood Program offered for children facing risk factors as defined by CAPC by three agency partners (ABC Head Start Society, e4c and Oliver Centre)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programs are designed to enhance children's development in a learning through play environment, as well as nutrition and physical activity programming. - A comprehensive health care component which focuses on the physical and mental wellness of children. - Head Start classrooms offer multicultural and inclusive curriculum for all children. 	This program is targeted at outcome 1 which seeks to develop children's social, intellectual, physical and emotional skills.	<p>An Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) is completed for each child to demonstrate an increase in social, intellectual, physical and emotional skills.</p> <p>The Early Years Evaluation-Direct Assessment is used in select programs to evaluate pre- and post-measures related to developmental domains in early childhood.</p>
Parent group and home visitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family support workers and home educators work together with parents to develop individualized learning plans focused on topic areas such as child development and resiliency, parent child attachment, family literacy activities, and transitioning to kindergarten, among others. 	<p>This program is targeted at outcome 2 which is focused on promoting the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of families by helping parents/caregivers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish connection and social support networks. - Develop and apply positive parenting strategies. - Identify their own strengths and family goals, and develop a plan to achieve these goals. 	<p>Families actively meet, or demonstrate progression towards meeting, their self-identified goals as determined through the individual service plans completed for each family.</p> <p>A parent survey is completed at the end of each program year that further measures program impact from the parent-participant perspective.</p>

Some Current Issues and Challenges to the Edmonton Head Start Project.

Although Edmonton Head Start Project has recorded significant successes and achieved positive results in terms of child development, family support and helping vulnerable families to navigate complex challenges, there are challenges that persist. These challenges relate to the changing social, political, and economic environment which impact the delivery of programs and services. These issues include but are not limited to:

- A volatile funding landscape which affects the delivery, or even cancellation, of certain Head Start programs and services. Because funding for Head Start programs comes from a variety of sources including federal, provincial and municipal government, the ability to fund and deliver these critical early childhood intervention programs has been dependent on the extent to which funding from these sources are available.
- A core issue in Head Start programming is a critical shortage of suitable program space to support increased intake and enhance capacity for the provision of programs that meet the diverse needs of

participants. Over the years, Edmonton Head Start has worked with key community partners to expand spaces and increase preschool opportunities for children and at-risk families. However, the increase in vulnerable and at-risk families coupled with rising demand for Head Start programs in Edmonton without corresponding expansion in program spaces has reduced programming capacity. Without significant investment in programming spaces, responding to current challenges in Head Start programs in Edmonton will be unlikely.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges from the closure of schools, childcare centres, and several other non-essential services. With the announcement of Alberta Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) in March 2020 prohibiting the attendance of school and places where early childhood services were provided, Edmonton Head Start shifted most of its programs to remote delivery to continue supporting early childhood development. This has led to new demands – hardware and software technology – for staff as well as program participants who are required to adapt to these new circumstances.

Notwithstanding these challenges, Edmonton Head Start has shown resilience, and strong capacity to respond to, work with, and remain accountable to our community by applying appropriate innovation and leveraging partnerships to surmount these challenges.

- ABC Head Start developed new partnerships with the Winnifred Stewart Association, Northwest Senior Association, South Terrace Continuing Care, and the Northwest Hub Coalition to develop a more robust Head Start for children in need of intensive services, and to build proactive social connections and expand services to underserved communities.
- e4c has initiated a new parent support and education group for families whose child is suspected or confirmed as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or other neurodevelopmental disorders. This initiative emerged from a recognition that most families with children waiting for or having a diagnosis of ASD feel alone and isolated. The purpose of this support group is to connect families to a community of experts, and create a safe space for families to share knowledge and experiences.
- Oliver Centre has worked closely with Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health (CASA) to develop better ways of working together. Through this partnership, subject matter experts have worked with Oliver Centre staff on how to address children's behaviors and also provide parents with mental health challenges additional supports.

Further Recommendations for Continuous Improvement in Edmonton Head Start Project

Since its inception, the Edmonton Head Start Project has evolved its programs and services to respond to existing and emerging needs of the community it serves. Our studies have revealed that program participants are largely satisfied with the scope of programs and services delivered and most parents/caregivers have positive perceptions about the impact of the program on the successes of their children. Some parents have indicated that participation in the program by their children has engendered smooth transition to kindergarten because Head Start helped their children to learn routines, develop academic and social skills and learn to socialize with others. Support workers have also observed that, while these programs have enhanced positive parenting and strengthened parent-child relationships, children with developmental delays have also received appropriate interventions and supports through connection to community resources. As we continue to respond to the needs of our growing community, we hope to further:

- Leverage, grow, and enhance existing partnerships within and outside of the community to improve program capacity to respond to current and emerging needs of program participants.
- Explore opportunities to expand and add new program spaces that will expand program delivery in underserved communities.
- Explore strategies, frameworks and activities that can support evidence-based practice, ensure staff incorporate best practice approaches to program delivery, and evaluate programming continuously to ensure efficiencies and intended social impact.

References

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