

**Family Engagement in Aboriginal Head Start Programs in  
British Columbia: A Summary Report for the Public Health  
Agency of Canada on the Findings from a Community-based  
Qualitative Study**

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**2017**

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### **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the support and involvement of the parents, Elders, program coordinators and family workers who took time out of their busy schedules to share their insights and experiences. We are extremely grateful for their participation. We are also extremely appreciative of the Public Health Agency of Canada for funding and supporting this research and for drawing attention to the importance of family engagement in AHSUNC programs in BC.

### **Family Engagement in Early Childhood and Head Start Programs**

There is a growing body of international research broadly focused on family engagement<sup>1</sup> in early childhood programs which shows that children and families receive maximum benefits from programs when parents are actively engaged (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; Hayakawa, Englund, Warner-Richter, & Reynolds, 2013; Henrich, 2013). Moreover, that increasing parental engagement in early childhood education programs improves children's future school attendance, behavior, and academic achievements (Day, 2013; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Hayakawa et al., 2013; Jeyes, 2012). Children also do better in school when home, school, and community have collaborative, complementary and supportive roles to support children's early learning and development (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006).

According to a recent review of this broader literature, family engagement “occurs when there is an ongoing, reciprocal, strengths-based partnership between families and their children's early childhood education programs” (Halgunseth et al., 2009, p. 3). Family engagement has also been described as not something a family member ‘does’ or ‘doesn't do’ but involves situations co-created with staff and programs, in which both family's and staff capacities must be considered (Azar, Miller, & Stevenson, 2013). In this broader literature, there is also evidence that parents' educational history and experiences can play a role in their level of engagement in preschool programs (Azar et al., 2013; Harris & Goodall, 2007).

Evidence indicates that parents with low self-efficacy<sup>2</sup> may feel that their behavior has little effect on their child's education and that they do not have the skills necessary to improve their child's educational experience” (Azar et al., 2013, p. 222). Some research indicates that parents who have not graduated from high school and young parents with

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<sup>1</sup> Use of the term ‘family engagement’ aims to reflect the inclusion of extended family members and parents, and to convey a broad conception of their participation with programs and the wider community.

<sup>2</sup> Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to succeed in certain situations or to complete a particular task and can influence how they approach a particular goal, task or challenge (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy>).

cognitive challenges tend to have low self-efficacy and are less likely to be involved in their children's early education (Azar et al., 2013).

In the context of programs designed and delivered specifically for Indigenous families and children in Canada, community governance and family engagement are foundational to their success (British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2011; Gerlach, Browne, & Greenwood, in press-a; Smylie et al., 2015). 'Parental involvement' is a central and distinguishing intent of Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC). Starting in 1995, AHSUNC is a federally funded community-based early childhood program for children aged 3-5 years with Indigenous ancestry and living in off-reserve urban and northern communities. There are currently 12 AHSUNC programs funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) in British Columbia (BC) serving approximately 500 children and their families annually. While the Aboriginal Head Start program was inspired by and based on the Head Start model used in the United States (US), the program was developed through national consultation with Indigenous groups from across Canada. Six key components form the operating principles of the program: Aboriginal culture and language; education and school readiness; health promotion; nutrition; social support; and parental involvement. National level performance measurement studies have been undertaken on various aspects of AHSUNC programs (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012a, 2012b). Currently, there is a lack of community-based research with AHSUNC programs on parental involvement or family engagement.

### **An Overview of the Research Design**

The purpose of this community-based, qualitative research was to generate insights and knowledge from the perspectives of Indigenous parents<sup>3</sup>, Elders, and program coordinators and family workers<sup>4</sup> in AHSUNC in different regions of BC on:

- 1) The nature of parents' engagement in programs and how this was influenced by various factors.
- 2) How programs currently engage with families and parents, including parents who are reluctant to get involved.
- 3) The influence of program and community contexts on program engagement.
- 4) Strategies for enhancing program engagement.

Consistent with community-based, participatory research involving Indigenous peoples (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014; Smith, 2012), the design, intended outcomes, and knowledge translation (KT) activities for this study were developed and undertaken in

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<sup>3</sup> In this report, 'parents' is used for brevity and is inclusive of all primary caregivers. 'Family' primarily refers to families led by birth parents, grandparents, and extended family members. The perspectives and experiences of foster parents was not a focus of this study.

<sup>4</sup> Currently, five AHSUNC programs in BC have family workers; also called family support workers, family involvement workers, or family networkers.

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close partnership with a community research partner (CRP) - the Executive Director of the Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia (AHSABC), who consulted with members of her Executive Board at key phases of the research. Provincial and federal representatives from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) identified the need for this research and were consulted extensively on its foci and scope, which were delineated in part by the funding and time frame available. Recruitment of research participants was facilitated by the CRP who emailed an informational flyer about the study to all AHSUNC program coordinators, family workers, Elders, and Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) in BC; asking them to contact the community-based researcher, Alison directly if they were interested in learning more and/or participating.

In depth, semi-structured individual and small group interviews, based on an interview guide developed for this study, were the primary methods of data collection. Following participants' informed and signed consent, Alison conducted interviews in-person or by phone from May to November 2016. A limited amount of socio-demographic data was also collected with parents and program staff. Alison also visited six programs in one urban and four rural regions of the province during data collection and attended a provincial gathering hosted by the AHSABC in May 2016. Fieldnotes were also kept throughout the study and analyzed as data. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. Using a codebook developed for this study, initial coding was undertaken using HyperRESEARCH<sup>®</sup> software. Repeated readings of the data at a textual level lead to the identification of analytical themes and subsequent subthemes that were relevant to the purpose of this research.

### **Research Participants (N = 26)**

Purposeful sampling resulted in 26 research participants from five distinct regions of BC:

- Parents (n= 10)
- Elders (n = 6)
- AHSUNC program coordinators/family workers (n = 10)

Collectively, participants represented 11 different AHSUNC programs located in all five distinct health regions of BC. Parent participants were made up of seven mothers, two fathers<sup>5</sup>, and one uncle, with nine parents self-identifying as having Indigenous ancestry. Parents ages ranged from 34 to 46 years and families had between two to six children. Parents had varied educational backgrounds and six were working full or part-time outside of the home. On average, parents had been involved with their Aboriginal Head Start program for six years. Program coordinators/family workers were all female, ranged in age from 26 to 55 years old, and two self-identified as not having Indigenous ancestry. The majority of coordinators or family workers had post-secondary education and an average of 12 years experience with AHSUNC and an average of 17 years experience in the early childhood field.

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<sup>5</sup> Programs reported that most of the fathers in their programs were in 'couples' and there were very few single fathers.

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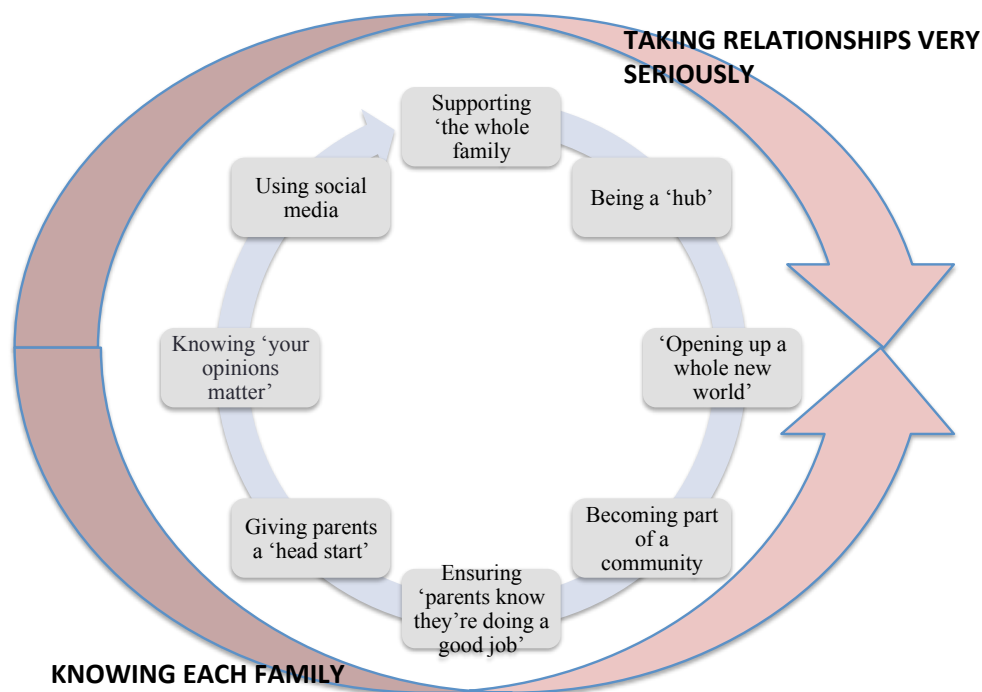
The recruitment strategy led to a sample of parents who were all engaged in their respective AHSUNC programs and felt comfortable being interviewed about their experiences and perspectives. This sample also represents a slighter older demographic than many of the parents in AHSUNC programs in BC. Thus, there were some population subgroups that were not included whose opinions might have added additional richness to the data, especially parents who were less engaged in their AHSUNC programs, teenage and young parents, and single fathers. Analysis of the data was undertaken by one researcher, which may limit the generalizability and reliability of the findings. However, credibility of the findings was enhanced by discussing a preliminary framing of the findings with the CRP, the Executive Board of the AHSABC and a provincial representative of the PHAC, who affirmed that the findings resonated with their experiences and perspectives. It is anticipated the findings of this 'BC study' will have relevancy for AHSUNC programs in other parts of Canada as well as for other Indigenous early childhood programs who are questioning how to strengthen their engagement with families.

### **Findings - A Relational Approach to Family Engagement**

This study identified that AHSUNC program staff had an implicit relational approach to engaging with families. Relational approaches are consistent with Indigenous knowledge systems and approaches to health and wellbeing (Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015). Emerging research has also identified the importance of relational approaches to fostering health equity for Indigenous children in Canada (Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2016), and engagement of parents in 'low income communities' in the education system in the US (Warren, Hong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009). 'Relational' approaches are often interpreted as meaning a primary emphasis on building positive relationships (Warren et al., 2009). However, in using the term relational in the context of the findings in this research, I am drawing on the work of Thayer-Bacon (2003) who contends that 'knowing' is viewed "as something that is socially constructed by embedded, embodied people who are in relation with each other" (p. 10). Thus, as will be discussed in this study, staff-family interpersonal relationships were viewed as significant and inseparable from staff coming to know each family's circumstances. This 'knowing' formed the basis for family engagement. Drawing on relationality in framing the findings also provokes a broader and complex analysis of family engagement by taking into account how historical and socio-economic factors impacted families' lives and their engagement with AHSUNC programs.

Analysis of the data identified two overarching and interlinked themes: taking 'relationships very seriously' and 'knowing each family'. These themes are separated here for clarity but, as will be discussed, are viewed as being inseparable. Data analysis also identified eight inter-related sub-themes, which are summarized in Figure 1 and discussed later. Consistent with interpretive approaches to data analysis, key literature is discussed in relation to the findings.

**Figure 1: A Relational Approach to Family Engagement**



**Taking ‘relationships very seriously’: Making time to connect**

An overarching theme identified in the findings was the importance of staff making time to connect with each family and consciously build trusting relationships over time in which parents felt safe. Participants described how building relationships started with the registration process. Although this process varied between programs – a consistent feature was meeting a parent(s) in person and making the paperwork as easy and positive an experience as possible: *We have coffee and we have coloring for their kids and we say ‘oh bring your kids with you let them see the classroom’. And it’s just very easy and... we start building that relationship actually right at registration (PC23)<sup>6</sup>*. A flexible gradual entry process was also helpful in staff finding out, *“how children relate to teachers [and] how parents relate to teachers”*. (PC19)

Previous research by Gerlach et al (2016), shows that engaging with Indigenous families in early childhood programs takes place in the context of relationships that often extend typical professional boundaries. Similarly, in this study, a family worker reflected: *The kind of relationship we have with our parents - it’s very personal; we take it very*

<sup>6</sup> Each individual participant was given an alphanumeric code: PC = Program coordinator; FW = Family support worker; M = mother; F = father; U = uncle; E = Elder, and Gp = group interview.

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*seriously* (FW24). The ‘very personal’ nature of relationships is evident in the following excerpt in which a mother describes how she related to her coordinator and family worker: *They were a huge support because I could go there and as a woman, as a friend, and as a parent go [with] all my problems, say everything* (M.Gp2). Program staff described how relationships with parents needed to ‘slowly build up’ over time and could not be ‘forced’. Consistent daily contact either on the bus or during drop-off/pick up was considered to be particularly effective for becoming a familiar face and trusted person.

Program staff also explained how they tailored their communication in response to parents’ preferences that took into account such factors as parents’ social anxiety, literacy level, and preferred mode (text, phone etc.). However, there was also evidence of staff’s uncertainty about how to stay connected with some parents, including those who were working: *I think some sort of communication between home and the preschool and I’m not sure exactly how that looks like but that parents have a way to communicate with us if they’re at work all day.... [Parents] want to know what’s going on and you want to get some communication from the teachers back to home... even if it’s little notes... not something that’s time consuming... it’s just one easy way to somehow bridge it, keep it open* (PC16).

Participants were in agreement that texting was an effective way of staying connected with parents, many of whom did not have home phones or talk minutes on their cell phones. Some coordinators and family workers were also using group texting to circulate general information and reminders about upcoming events. Monthly newsletters and calendars were also used to stay connected with families and remind them about how to ‘get involved’: *[We have] a calendar that goes out to every month with the parent’s name on it and the day that they see their name on it they’re more than welcome to come to the program to share anything about their culture and language or they could just even come in and read to the children and maybe brush teeth or... maybe help out in the kitchen wherever. And we get a really good turn out that way with the parent involvement. And if they can’t make that day I mention to them that it’s an open door policy that they could come to the center at any given time* (PC14).

According to the broader literature, positive parent-teacher communication, that is respectful of family members’ preferences and in which parents feel listened to and valued, is a key component in increasing family engagement and supportive connections between preschool programs and home (Bokony, Whiteside-Mansell, & Swindle, 2013; Forry, Moodie, Rothenberg, & Simkin, 2011). In building on this literature, the findings in this study emphasize the relational context of engaging and communicating with families and the inseparability between fostering interpersonal program-family relationships and the following overarching theme of ‘knowing each family’.

### **Knowing Each Family**

Analysis of the data highlights that it is through program staff becoming a ‘familiar and trusted face’ that they gradually came to ‘know each family’. Understanding the context



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of families' daily lives was an essential starting point for tailoring expectations and strategies for family engagement. As one program coordinator noted: *We try to find out about a parent's situation.... Are you working? Are you going to school? Is there daycare? Are you divorced? So that we can kind of get a feel of what is happening in your life that might be a barrier for why you might not be coming here* (PC20). Similarly, an uncle cautioned: *Know that each family - we all have our difficulties and things that we're working through so just being supported about that and cautious* (U18).

It is important to recognize that not all families attending AHSUNC programs experience the 'difficulties' described in the following section. However, Elders, parents, and program staff consistently expressed their concerns for the daily 'struggles' that many of the families' who accessed their programs experienced. As a program coordinator described: *I'm dealing with such high needy families.... They're just struggling... like really hurting families* (PC14). Also: *We're dealing with a lot of very low income families, dealing with a lot of drug and alcohol issues, family violence, kids that aren't getting to bed at night... parents are not getting up in the morning. And so we're dealing with some pretty big family issues. And I'd say for probably seventy-five percent of our families* (PC16). Analysis of the data identified how many of the families accessing the programs in this study experienced intersecting and structurally-rooted social challenges.

**'Historically-rooted barriers'** - It is increasingly recognized that engaging with Indigenous families in early childhood programs must be informed by the ongoing, multifaceted and intergenerational effects of the residential school and child welfare systems on families' lives (Benzies, Tough, Edwards, Mychasiuk, & Donnelly, 2011; Gerlach et al., 2016; Health Council of Canada, 2011). Similarly, in this study, program staff understood how historical 'barriers' influenced families' lives and program engagement: *I mean the barriers [to family engagement] obviously are historical.... Families are not sure [about] simple life skills. Some of our parents don't know how to cook, some of our parents find it really hard to be in relationships with their partners, even with their own children, so domestic violence can be an issue. . I feel like a lot of parents come in here and they just don't even love themselves they don't even value themselves* (PC20).

**'Very Financially Strapped'** - Participants reported that many of the children in their programs were living in single parent families led by women, many of whom were often in their early-mid 20's: *A lot of single moms with big families ... no vehicle and very financially strapped.... Some of them have maybe two other kids at home, little ones.... A lot of them are quite isolated for staying at home with their children* (PC14). Across all the programs, food insecurity, or more specifically 'hungry children' was reported as a recurring cause of stress for many families: *Children are just hungry... you just wonder how well it's going if everybody went to bed hungry* (PC20). In northern BC, food insecurity was compounded by the higher cost of 'food and bills'. However, being 'in survival mode' was also a recurring stressor for families in southern urban and rural programs. Secure housing was reported as another recurring stressor for families. As the following excerpt highlights, family engagement had to take into account the

multifaceted and everyday stress experienced by families living on very low incomes: *Would I like to see parent's involvement of course I would. Is it feasible in one of the most expensive cities in Canada? Probably not for a lot of people* (PC19).

**‘Struggling with Mental Health Issues’** - Perhaps not surprisingly, research shows that parents who have a history of depression have fewer interactions with their preschool teachers (LaForett & Mendez, 2010; Pittenger et al., 2015). Similarly in this study, a recurring theme was the influence of parents’ mental health on their capacity to engage with programs: *One of the biggest ones right now is mental health... whether it's depression or bipolar or medication or past addictions - it just seems like more and more people are struggling with mental health issues* (PC20). Participants stressed the importance of supporting parents in their ‘healing’: *[If parents] don't have their health or mental health... then they've still got all this healing to do themselves before they can contribute* (M11). Participants also frequently talked how their programs provided parents with some time to take care of themselves.

**Being mandated ‘to get your kids into Head Start’** - Consistent with emerging Canadian research (Gerlach et al., in press-a; Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, & Elliot, in press-b; Hare & Anderson, 2010; Health Council of Canada, 2011), the findings of this study indicate that families’ concerns about coming under greater scrutiny and/or having their children removed from their care by child welfare authorities were significant ‘barriers’ to being more involved in AHSUNC programs and/or asking staff for help: *We have had family services involved with some of our families and being a small town that information gets out and it's like ‘don't take your kids to [program name] because they'll take your kids away* (PC16). Family engagement was also challenging when families were mandated to ‘get your kids in Head Start’: *MCFD<sup>7</sup> is actually the one that said ‘you need to get your kids into Head Start’. So right away that barrier was there.... She had to get them in here because it was mandated and she didn't trust us* (FW24). This finding raises the question about the potential need to examine how many parents and/or children in foster care are being mandated/referred to AHSUNC programs, and whether programs are becoming ‘ad hoc extensions’ of the child welfare system; resulting in fewer opportunities for families that are not involved with this system (Gerlach et al., in press-b).

**Having ‘so many barriers’** - Findings demonstrate that family engagement strategies needed to take into account and be responsive to families who experienced multiple ‘struggles’: *Some families have so many barriers that it's amazing that they even get their child here. When you talk to them it's not just one or two things, sometimes it's astonishing some families have like twelve, thirteen things happening at once for them and it seems to keep happening. So especially for those families, it's like, okay, we have to be realistic here. The piece that's important is that the child is just getting here and ... we're engaging with that parent by just keeping connected by phone or texting* (PC20)..

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<sup>7</sup> MCFD refers to the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development who administers and funds the child welfare system in BC.

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This program coordinator goes onto express her concern that expectations for family engagement was ‘sometimes trading in one stress for another’: *I’ve just recognized that people are very, very busy and it’s not that I don’t want them to engage with their child but I feel like you’re trading in sometimes one stress for another or maybe the family is just not even there yet.... So we do really press the importance like your children need you involved... but some messages – ‘just don’t be late’ and ‘show up as much as you can’ maybe that’s the most? It depends where these parents are at (P20).*

Consistent with research undertaken with Early Head Start programs in the US (Hubel, Schreier, Wilcox, Flood, & Hansen, 2017; LaForett & Mendez, 2010; Pittenger et al., 2015), the findings in the theme of ‘knowing each family’ highlight that family engagement needs to take into account and be responsive to the realities of families’ lives, particularly when they are struggling with multiple and significant stressors on a daily basis. These findings provide a contextual foregrounding for the following subthemes that are centred on relational approaches to family engagement.

### **Relational Approaches & Strategies to Family Engagement**

Participants from different regions of BC reported that family engagement in their programs often varied from year to year and tended to decrease as the school year progressed and/or with poor weather conditions. Analyses of the data lead to the identification of eight inter-related relational approaches and strategies related to family engagement, which are discussed in detail in the following section.

#### ***Supporting ‘the whole family’: Accessing basic determinants of family wellbeing***

The findings show that providing help that directly addressed parent’ concerns and priorities frequently extended the scope of practice beyond children’s early development and school readiness. This broader scope was particularly evident in the data generated from the perspectives of family workers: *I see myself as a resource person so if families need anything - if they have issues with housing, food ... attending different appointments with them. For example, I went to an intake appointment for counseling [and the mother had] high anxiety and just wanted a familiar face to go with her.... I’m here because of the whole family. My role isn’t to work with your child it’s to work with the whole unit (FW22).* How this form of support was communicated to families varied between programs. As another family worker commented: *Some parents in the past don’t feel comfortable coming and talking to the staff or asking the staff questions.... They would feel more comfortable coming to ask me.... [AG: Do you then say at the open house’ we are here for your whole family - for you as well as for your child’?] I don’t think we did that. It’s almost like it’s a known thing.... It’s not something that we come out and say it just organically happens. Maybe that’s a good idea though just to not assume that - put it out there (FW24).*

AHSUNC programs are often described as an early intervention program designed to enhance child development and school readiness for Indigenous children (Hare &

Anderson, 2010). However, this study shows that the scope of AHSUNC programs extends to ‘supporting the whole family’. This broader scope often translated into helping parents to access basic determinants of health for their families that included: food and housing security; accessing healthcare, child welfare, and educational systems, and returning to school or employment. This finding is particularly significant, given the evidence that engaging ‘hard to reach’ families who experience social marginalization is enhanced when program staffs’ initial interactions are respectful of and focused on understanding and responding to parents’ self-identified concerns, priorities, and needs with tailored practical help rather than a sole focus on their children’s early learning and development (Fox et al., 2015; Gerlach et al., in press-a; Lynam et al., 2010). It is unclear from this study how this form of support and approach to engagement is shared and discussed with parents. Also, as highlighted by Hubel et al (2017) in relation to Early Head Start programs in the US, broadening the scope of early childhood practices in order to engage with families and the multifaceted daily struggles that many experience raises concerns about the education and training of early childhood educated workers.

### *Being ‘a hub’: Increasing families’ access to diverse programs & services*

Participants frequently used the word ‘hub’ to describe their programs. When programs were physically located in larger Indigenous community agencies or hubs, families had easier access to/transition between AHSUNC programs and a diverse range of programs, services, and resources (for example: employment, housing, extra food, counseling, daycare, early intervention therapy, and healthcare) that they may not otherwise have known about or accessed: *We’re like a one stop shop... we have different programs. We have an Elder program, a youth program, parenting, counseling, daycare.... We can give [parents] referrals for the drug and alcohol counselor and they’re really great with our parents.... If one of our parents really needs to speak with someone and even though they have a wait list they’ll make room for our parents* (FW24). Importantly, there was also evidence to suggest that when families were familiar with, and felt welcome and safe in a hub-type agency they also felt more comfortable engaging with an AHSUNC program located in the same agency. As one program leader noted: *“Those connections allow you to make a different sort of in with some of the families that really need some support.... So we have some different opportunities that way”* (PC16). However, there was also evidence that when a program was co-located in a host organization that included a child welfare agency, or when programs were in buildings that were originally used as part of the residential school or contemporary educational systems, family engagement was more challenging. Engagement, particularly for working parents, also appeared to be constrained when programs were in hubs that were closed in the evenings or weekends.

The findings suggest that programs that were not physically co-located within a larger community agency also acted as a hub for families through program coordinators and/or family workers’ knowledge about, relationships with, and involvement in their community. Significantly, participants described how being well connected within their wider community helped to engage with ‘reluctant’ families: *I have a few families that kind of are standoffish.... I don’t push, I just remind them that I’m always there. And I participate in a community kitchen program that a lot of those families participate in, so I*

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*make sure to attend.... And sometimes, if I see them around I just make a point of saying 'hey, how's it going?' Just checking in (FW25). We've got the largest enrollment we ever had ... and I'm pretty sure a lot of that had to do with some of the connections we've made in different ways [in the community].... We've got at least four or five families that were not intending to go to preschool who have changed their minds and are now attending and we're as close to being full as we ever have (PC16).*

These particular findings are consistent with the conclusions of a recent Commission of Inquiry in Manitoba by Hughes (2013) that calls for programs for Indigenous families and children to be located in places where families are 'already gathering and feel safe'. They are also aligned with recommendations made by the Canadian 'Best Start Resource Centre' (2011) for connecting with 'hard to reach' families by program staff being 'community workers' who have extensive knowledge of, and partnerships with relevant family services and agencies.

### ***'Opening up a whole new world': Re/connecting with culture and language***

An Elder at the AHSABC gathering told the audience: *"I never thought of culture – just lived it"*. However, according to Stout (2012), many Indigenous families, particularly those now living away from their home communities and in urban areas have become 'dislocated/disconnected' from their culture as a result of colonization. Participants in this study frequently stated that having *"the culture... right throughout the whole day"* (E.Gp1) was appealing for many families. As one mother reflected: *My childhood didn't really have any cultural aspect to it. But I knew I wanted my children to have that in their life (M.Gp1)*. A coordinator adds her perspective: *[Parents] talked about doing a round dance... smudging and the drum. They said they were never exposed to that, and how it's opened up a whole new world for the parents... and that missing piece of culture in their home life. And a lot of them have never been exposed to it (PC14).*

Across all the programs that participated in this study, family engagement was consistently strong when programs hosted various ceremonies. As the following excerpt highlights, some program leaders recognized how participating in ceremonies was engaging and healing for parents: *The most response and the most engagement is we have four or five ceremonies a year.... I think as soon as you say the word ceremony [parents] know this is important and even a foster parent will know this is important.... [Parents] see it as a place of healing, they feel like the school is helping them become a better parent. They're being connected to their culture which they're really hungry for and it honestly doesn't even matter like we have people that are actively in their addictions and the foster parent will say you're going to get a chance to do regalia come to the drum ceremony and parents find a way to get cleaned up just so that they can even attend this (PC20).*

However, programs also reported mixed experiences of engaging parents in projects such as regalia making or learning a particular language, which may indicate that parental expectations need to be realistic given the realities of some families' lives. As one family worker reflected in a discussion about low parent participation in a language class: *"just*

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*getting through the day, just getting their child to school sometimes is all [parents] can do” (FW24). Also, given that participants frequently reported a high incidence of social anxiety and depression experienced by many of the mothers in their programs – participating in larger gatherings may be too daunting and require a more individualized approach.*

The beneficial outcomes for children, families, and communities of having greater father engagement in Indigenous early childhood programs are being increasingly recognized and advocated (Ball, 2009; Ball & Roberge, 2007). In this study there was some evidence to suggest that activities connected to the land and relationships with Elders were an important draw for fathers: *I actually think we would get more dads out if we were doing some cooking outside or open campfire; things that would be more like dads. We don't have a lot of dads involved so just trying to explore other avenues for more father involvement (PC20). When one father was asked what he liked most about being involved with his Head Start program, he replied: The interaction with the Elders. I've got definitely relationship with certain ones of the Elders that come (F21).*

It is increasingly recognized that promoting the health and wellbeing of Indigenous families requires that community-based programs ‘protect and promote’ “Indigenous ways of knowing and being; and the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge and kinship systems” (Smylie et al., 2015, p. 130). The findings in this study highlight that the involvement of Elders, and the anchoring of programs in Indigenous knowledges and practices are also central to fostering engagement for many parents and families. This approach was also closely connected with fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.

### ***Becoming part of a community: Creating a sense of belonging and inclusion***

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in urban and northern communities that have transient populations as families relocate for employment, education or for other reasons, being an ‘Aboriginal’ program that welcomed as one Elder said, “*First Nations people from all different walks of life*” was a draw for many families in creating a sense of belonging in a community. As this father explained: *Having an Aboriginal program brings all our people together. Moving into a big city from my village was so different right? [The program] brings our children together and shows we can all be together again ... there's so many different nations that we know now because of this program that we may not have known of if we lived back home so I think it's great to have an Aboriginal program for them; learning that there are other people and other nations out there that we can associate with (F17).*

Participants consistently emphasized that family engagement was successful when their programs’ hosted various social events for the whole family that included: monthly brunches, open houses and dinners at the beginning of the year, and various celebrations throughout the year, including: Halloween, Christmas, mothers, fathers, grandparents day, Aboriginal day, valentine’s day and end of the AHSUNC year. These events, as one family worked stated: “*solidifies that community feel*” (FW22), and were successful at bringing families together. As two mothers reflected: *We're definitely struggling with*

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*parent involvement... One day a month to celebrate I don't think anyone would argue with that.... I think that family day thing would work - I'm just totally assuming that sometimes when you're a young parent and you're being around different age groups, around a grandma, foster parent or an older parent it might be intimidating because they're really active already.... So if you did a fun thing, all the parents, the young parents they can learn together and have fun (M.Gp2). There was a family brunch where parents were invited to stay and have breakfast with everyone and Elders would be invited too. And so it was a little bit more of a formal invitation to stay and so you'd see other parents that weren't always there or weren't able to come during the year (M13).*

Analysis of the data also highlighted that having a welcoming parent-friendly social space in a program helped to convey to parents that they were valued members of a Head Start community. Parents talked about the importance of having coffee at drop-off and an inviting space 'to hang out' and chat with each other and/or program staff: *And the first thing is there's coffee on... which is very welcoming as soon as you walk in the door.... A lot of parents will congregate... for coffee and talk about certain things that are happening in the community ... that's another little support group that we have in the morning with the parents and then go on our daily routine after that (U18).*

These findings highlight that engaging with families requires that parents and family members feel valued and a sense of belonging in AHSUNC programs. This finding is consistent with research by Kaomea (2012) with Native Hawaiian parents, that describes how preschool communities can become a 'surrogate family network' for parents who are struggling with 'familial dislocation'; providing the support traditionally received through extended family networks. This finding also relates well to the broader literature on engaging with families who experience marginalization and social isolation (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011; Hubel et al., 2017), and demonstrates the importance of staff being responsive to parents' social circumstances and creating ongoing opportunities for informal parent-parent interactions, and fun social gatherings.

### ***Ensuring 'parents know they're doing a good job': Enhancing self-efficacy***

Participants recognized that some parents felt uncertain about their ability to contribute to their Head Start program: *I think maybe there's that feeling that... you take our kids and give them the program and we'll be here to take them home at the end of the day. And I don't know that they feel that there's really a need, maybe just that sense that they do have something to contribute (PC16).* Making sure that 'parent knew they were doing a good job' was described as an important strategy in enhancing parents' self-esteem: *I have witnessed a lot of parents getting their kids back, keeping them home, knowing the safety, knowing the wellness, knowing how to support their children in a different way, doing parenting skills.... And then I see those parents really bloom... They start doing volunteer work, they start learning, they go back to school.... A lot of them are just getting their spirit back, their self-esteem (E.Gp1).* This finding is consistent with a strong theme from the AHSABC gathering in 2016, which celebrated the achievements of several mothers whose agency and self-growth had been transformed as a result of their involvement and leadership roles in their AHSUNC programs.

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Ensuring that parents knew they were important to their children's health and wellbeing and were capable of contributing to their AHSUNC program was linked with parents 'becoming involved': *You can see [parents] gaining self-esteem, see them gain confidence when they do become involved* (PC16). This approach is also captured in the following excerpt: *I sent home notices little things every now and then just saying 'this is what I've noticed about your child'. And it's all, of course, very positive and upbeat and . . . I've had one mother say you know what I'm so excited I can hardly wait to get my daughter's because my son's is in a frame.... So I think it helps build their self esteem- like I am a good parent, I'm doing a good job, they really like my child, my child is thriving at school. I think that's what they get is they get empowered and that is fundamental* (FW24).

This finding suggests that staff-parent relationships and interactions that focused on parental strengths and capabilities contributed towards enhancing parents' sense of self-efficacy and program engagement. These findings are aligned with recognized 'best practice' in Indigenous early childhood programs (British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2011), and may be particularly relevant for parents who have had involvement with the child welfare system, which tends to focus on 'parental shortcomings and misconduct' (Hughes, 2013). This approach is also evident in the following theme of giving parents 'a head start'.

### *Giving parents a 'head start': Enhancing self-efficacy in the school system*

A core principle of involving parents in AHSUNC programs is that parents are their children's 'primary teachers' (Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998). The findings of this research draw attention to how AHSUNC programs, as described by one coordinator, gave "parents a head start" (PC20), by supporting parents to believe in their own abilities and agency to be their children's 'primary teachers' and to influence their developmental trajectories. Program coordinators recognized that parents' relationships with staff and their involvement in their AHSUNC programs provided opportunities to "break down those communication barriers" (PC20) so that parents were 'not scared' to talk to teachers: *[AG: Why do you think family involvement is important?] It's the beginning of being involved with their child's education and their whole experience through school.... And I think if you don't start early where it's a more comfortable environment it may never happen.... I understand [the school system] can be very intimidating. But this [AHSUNC program] gives [parents] a chance to see what that looks like and how it feels and the importance of it. (PC15) [Parents are] not scared to come and talk to teachers because I mean that's the big thing we want to build on.... [Parents] should be able to communicate with their teacher any time .... not 'they're the teacher and they're kind of scary' (PC16).*

Program coordinators also described how their programs helped parents to become more comfortable discussing their children's progress with staff in preparation for school entry: *One thing that we did last year... parents made interview times and they came, talked*



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*with the teachers [about] how their child is doing. That was the first time we ever did that. I think we had 22 parents who came... and again we just had the coffee on, come on in and it was just a chat, it was very informal.. it was all positive (PC23).*

These findings are important to consider in light of existing research which shows that parents who do not have an adequate foundation in interacting with their preschool teachers are less likely to be involved in their children's kindergarten and elementary schooling (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Findings suggest that AHSUNC programs have an important role to play in supporting parents' sense of efficacy and belief in their abilities to be involved in and advocate for their children's learning in the education system. However, pertinent to this study, is evidence from Early Head Start programs in the US that shows parental engagement in programs improves when staff support 'parental self-efficacy'; that is, parents feel that they can contribute in a meaningful way towards their children's learning and education (Hubel et al., 2017). This finding is closely linked with the following theme.

### ***Knowing 'your opinions matter': Parents as partners in program governance***

Participants reported that their Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) provided an opportunity to "let parents voices be heard" (PC 14), and for programs to engage with parents' opinions, interests, and skills in their programs; including parental involvement in reviewing and revising existing policy documents, and planning for particular special events and fundraising initiatives. As one mother stated: *PAC is supposed to not be run by the coordinator or the staff - it's really the PAC running the PAC.... Our opinion matters, and that's huge too knowing that no matter how much or little you have to say your opinion counts and they want to hear from you.... Every group is different and different parents at different times have different skills that they can offer (M.Gp1).*

Coordinators described how PACs helped to inform how their programs could be tailored as far as possible to build on parents' ideas, strengths, and priorities: *I'm excited with this PAC meeting with it being our first because I really want to let them know that they have that power to decide on things.... They can make this the best program they want to (PC14).* Similarly, a program coordinator noted that: *"We try to do things that are going to fit the needs of the families. We find that out through the PAC meetings" (PC20).* There was a concern, however, about the influence of host organizations on program autonomy and governance. As one coordinator described: *Parents wanted to make drums one year and... it was voted down by the admin [because] ... they were expensive but it would have been the parents who would have fund raised for it right? So last year some parents said 'why do we bother when our voice doesn't matter?... It's very frustrating (PC23).* Having leadership in the host organization that understood, respected, and was excited about having an engaged PAC made a difference for staff and parents.

In the context of Early Head Start programs in the US, Henrich (2013) claims that power and control needs to be shifted from organizational and program leadership to parents in order to authentically engage with parents as partners in program governance. This

approach is also supported by the work of Smylie and colleagues (2015) in Canada, who assert that ‘Indigenous community investment and governance’ is central to the success of community-based health promotion programs for Indigenous mothers and children. Also, in the broader literature, the Canadian ‘Best Start Resource Centre’ (2011) states that “parents need to trust that they will be respected and heard, in order to consider increasing their engagement in services” (p. 5). In this study, closely related to program governance were interconnected subthemes related to fundraising and volunteering, these are discussed in the following section.

### *‘You guys will have to fund raise’*

A surprising finding from the mothers in this study was that many of them described how their PACs were primarily focused on raising funds for their programs: *I think that has something to do with like the lack of support of funding from lots of resources or funders... because when you go to a PAC meeting that’s probably 80% of what we talk about (M.Gp2)*. In some programs, the need to raise additional funds for programs was in part driven by parents’ expectations on what they wanted to see or have happen in their programs. In the following excerpt a program coordinator in northern BC describes how fundraising was also in response to their local economy, and the relationship between fundraising and parental involvement: *For our program the price of food is so expensive. To get that bus running monthly it’s \$5,000 just on gas.... So we ask the parents to fundraise because [they] get a meal here... so that brings the parents... That money comes out of the PAC as well for any kind of stuff they want to get involved with.... I said if you want it, our budget is only limited, you guys will have to fundraise (PC14)*.

The impact on parental engagement in PAC when its primary focus was on fundraising was also raised as a concern by some of the mothers: *There’s valuable information that these parents, especially if they’re young parents, they’re not gaining socially in this PAC forum because we’re fund raising and stressing about lack of resources (M10)*. Not all programs share this focus on fundraising in their PACs. However, this study does raise concerns about how the current funding of AHSUNC programs is placing expectations on parents to fundraise and how this expectation can deter some parents from getting involved in their PACs.

### *‘The same people there every time’*

Participants reported that information about upcoming PAC meetings was shared with parents in-person, and/or via newsletters, texts and emails. Many of the participants talked about fluctuating attendance in their PACs, and the challenges of getting parents involved. Participants described how the first PAC of the school year was often well attended but that attendance tended to drop off. A strong and recurring theme was that PAC and fundraising drives were run by *“a really good bunch of parents that are usually the same ones all the time” (PC14)*. As one mother reflected: *I look back and there were a few events that were so well attended... but then you’d go to the PAC meetings and there would be the same three people there every time.... You lose a lot of people; nobody wants to go to the PAC meeting (M.Gp2)*.

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Social dynamics amongst parents, a primary focus on fundraising, parents' busy schedules, and the timing of PACs were identified as some of the key challenges to increasing parental involvement. Where host organizations were 'locked up tight at night' – PAC meetings were scheduled during the preschool hours. However, many of the participants said that meetings were scheduled in the early evening. In the following excerpt a father who works described his family's challenge with attending: *With me working the evenings...[my wife] can't just pick [our children all up and come.... They do have child minding here but it's her getting the children here and then getting them back home.... That's our concern anyway, our challenge* (F17).

Participants described incentives to increase parental involvement in their PACs that included providing transportation, dinner, 'door prizes', childcare, and inviting grandparents. A recurring message from participants was that PAC meetings needed to include time for parents to socialize. As one mother stated: *I think building relationships within the PAC for parents is a great idea.... The social side of it has to be better.... I just think it goes all back to building relationships like maybe in the beginning of the school year have some social activities before we get into the business time* (M.Gp2). This perspective was shared by family workers and program coordinators: *We also have dinner before the meeting and like parents and the kids eat separately which I find that's a good time for parents to interact... and then the parents end up talking, they end up opening up and have some great laughs....It's no fun doing things serious - it scares them away.... Some people... said 'you know what you're right, it was fun, why didn't I come sooner?' (FW25). We get a lot of parents coming to the PAC meetings. We always offer dinner and we make sure that it's usually very good home cooked... and so people come for the food - if they don't have to make dinner it's a bonus. The staff all stay and they look after the children* (PC20). However, several coordinators also reported that incentives did not always work: *This past year I had five [parents at PAC] and I was like what is happening?... We have childcare, we have food and we have these free passes that you each get.... Why aren't you coming?*(PC14).

Some of the mothers with experience on PACs also offered the following suggestions to increase parental involvement: *[It] could be great to have like a like a year-end report – 'hey these are some examples, now what would you like for your own child this year? What can you see as your goal and your journey with your child this year?' You know give them ideas because you can't make people feel obligated to be a part of it. You have to empower them enough where they want to be a part of it.* (M.Gp2). A mother from a different region of BC adds: *At the very first PAC meeting a woman come in that was a former PAC member and she just spoke about that experience and I think she was the treasurer when she was involved. And she's gone onto participate in so many other sort of PAC's and groups and... to see her successes and sort of accomplishments coming out of that experience was really I think sort of motivating for a lot of the parents there and made it a lot easier to take that risk or take that step out and participate at a more involved kind of level so having her talk was, was a big bonus* (M13). This particular

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subtheme highlights some of the opportunities and challenges faced by programs in having ‘a good solid PAC’ to guide and inform AHSUNC programs.

### *Volunteering ‘in a different way’*

Participants’ perspectives on expectations for parents’ volunteering in their programs varied between 10-12 hours/year and that volunteer opportunities were communicated in various ways; in-person, during registration and/or orientation, at PAC meetings, and in a monthly newsletter. The following family worker describes her approach, which included tracking families’ volunteer hours and emphasizing their contribution to the AHSUNC community: *We’re keeping track this year.... I try to say that this program is run on being community, having that family feel, we all need to contribute.... And we can’t do all this on our own we have to have that help* (FW20).

Participants’ expressed mixed feelings about having explicit expectations on parents to volunteer, including when parents were working: *Family participation was mandatory and... there are parents that are working and they just can’t do that. But I think now that we’ve evolved, I’m thinking it would be nice to put it back in a different way - whether its taking home some materials and doing some cutting at home and returning it with your child.... I just think there’s ways that even if you are working and a busy mom that there’s ways to still participate.... Ultimately we want our parents out there being successful in the real world* (PC16). Some participants described how they accommodated working parents by offering the option of sending activities home, for example preparing artwork at home for a class activity: *Each family is required to do 12 hours of volunteer for the whole year and so, we’re doing registration like we’ll go over our paper work and I’ll mention it then. And then I’ll give them a list of ideas of what they can do and then some of them there is at home stuff they can do which qualifies for those twelve hours* (FW22). The theme and subthemes encompassed in ‘your opinions matter’ need to be considered in relation to the social contexts of families’ lives as discussed earlier, and raise questions about the explicit expectations for, and purpose, foci, and practicalities of engaging parents in PACs and in fundraising and volunteer activities.

### **Using social media: The up/downside of Facebook®**

Many of the participants expressed an interest in learning about and/or using social media to support greater parental engagement, and social connections and relationships between families. Several programs had started to explore the use of a specialized platform for early childhood programs (<https://www.himama.com>). However, on the whole Facebook was the predominant platform currently being used and these findings are discussed in the following section.

Participants reported how they were using a private Facebook page to enhance communication with and/or between parents. On the whole, having an ‘electronic connection’ to a program was perceived as a benefit for sharing information with parents

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including parents who for whatever reason were reluctant to ‘come in’. As one mother said: *A lot of our people don’t have home phone numbers but everybody has Facebook.... We’ve got way more on our Facebook this year because we started seeing that people were actually becoming more engaged.... So the more of us parents who started hash tags and posting on our Facebook and then it was funny because we’d have a conversation of like 12 parents and then other parents were like I’m going to add my friend who’s also a parent. Then the list of people evolved and the conversation grew and it kept growing and growing (M.Gp1).*

Having a Facebook page also helped parents to connect with and support each another: *I’ve had parents who have been on there like ‘oh, my son has outgrown his clothes, I have two bags of size four clothing anyone interested?’ So there’s that engagement that the parents are having with one another on the page (FW22).* A program coordinator adds: *It’s just for the parents in our program so any questions they have.... And everyone that’s on that page can see what we’re chatting about if they wanted to engage in the conversation. And that seems to be working; they seem to utilize that quite a bit.... I’ll see that they’re chatting back and forth, oh a Halloween party is coming up, what are we going to bring.... The parents are talking to each other on that page (PC14).*

These findings highlight how Facebook contributed to creating a sense of belonging and inclusion in an online AHSUNC community, which may provide some parents with a first step towards becoming engaged in other ways with their programs. As discussed earlier, given that program coordinators and family workers frequently expressed concerns about a high incidence of social isolation and/or social anxiety experienced by parents in their programs, having a social networking site connected to a specific program appears to have considerable benefits. However, participants also expressed concerns that parents used Facebook ‘for too much drama’ or negative messaging. There were also privacy concerns about children being photographed without parents/guardians’ knowledge or permission, particularly if child welfare authorities were involved. Perhaps to address these concerns, some programs are keeping their Facebook page private, read only, and used for sharing information, including: requests for specific volunteer activities; field trips; reminders of upcoming events; an outline of what supports are available; wider community family events, and reminders of upcoming PAC meetings. Other programs have a Facebook page only for fundraising purposes.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this qualitative community-based study provides evidence on the nature of family engagement in AHSUNC programs in BC. Framing the findings in this research as ‘relational’ moves beyond decontextualized and individualized understandings of family engagement; highlighting the complexity of engaging families in AHSUNC programs, and how this process is influenced by multifaceted personal, social and structural factors and contexts. Framing family engagement as a relational process recognizes the broad scope of programs beyond a sole focus on children’s early health, development, and

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school readiness to include the wellbeing of ‘the family as a whole’. From this perspective, family engagement and family wellbeing are inextricably linked. Framing family engagement as relational also foregrounds the dynamic intersection between ‘taking relationships very seriously, and ‘knowing each family’. In other words, it is only through relationships that develop over time and place that AHSUNC program staff comes to know each family so that they can tailor their expectations and strategies to enhance engagement respectfully and effectively.

Finally, the findings of this study are remarkably well aligned with the ‘Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework’ developed in the US (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011) which identified seven optimal outcomes of ‘engaged parents’ that are grounded in positive and strengths-based relationships with families: (1) family wellbeing, (2) positive parent-child relationships, (3) families as lifelong educators, (4) families as learners, (5) family engagement in transitions, (6) family connections to peers and community, and (7) families as advocates and leaders.

### Key Insights

The knowledge and insights generated by this research have relevancy for Aboriginal Head Start and other Indigenous early childhood programs in Canada that are questioning how to engage with families. The key insights are summarized as follows:

- ❖ **Family engagement as a ‘relational’ process** emphasizes that it is through program-family interactions and relationships over time and in different contexts that AHSUNC program staff come to learn from families about their particular social circumstances and histories, preferences, strengths, and priorities, and understand how to adapt their engagement expectations and strategies accordingly.
- ❖ Flexible family engagement expectations and strategies need to **be informed by and tailored for each particular family** - there is no one size fits all approach; each family may respond and engage differently depending on their circumstances, resources, and priorities at any particular time.
- ❖ Engaging with families requires a **nuanced & socially responsive approach** - For some families, AHSUNC programs provide a much-needed respite. Family engagement may be less focused on contributing to PAC or fundraising activities and more on supporting families’ access to basic determinants of health.
- ❖ Despite being called a ‘preschool program’, AHSUNC programs have a broad scope that extends beyond a sole focus on children’s early health, development, and school readiness to **supporting family wellbeing**, which can further enhance family engagement. From this perspective, supporting family wellbeing and program engagement are interdependent foci of AHSUNC programs.
- ❖ Family engagement is enhanced when AHSUNC **programs and staff have strong relationships with multiple intersectoral services and programs** in their communities and region and/or are co-located in multiservice organizational hubs.

- ❖ **Elders and the anchoring of programs in Indigenous knowledges and practices** are a draw for parents who want to strengthen their personal connection with their Indigenous identities and ancestries.
- ❖ Programs and program spaces need to foster opportunities for **informal parent-parent interactions, and larger social gatherings**. Engaging with families requires that parents' feel that they are valued and belong, just as much as their children, in AHSUNC programs.
- ❖ Family engagement that is grounded in positive and strengths-based staff-parent relationships and interactions have the potential to **nurture parents' self-esteem and self-efficacy in influencing their children's education** and navigating the educational system.
- ❖ Enhancing family engagement requires that **PACs are not solely focused on fund raising and provide opportunities for parents to socialize**.
- ❖ **Social media** can create a sense of belonging and inclusion in an AHSUNC online community and may be a stepping-stone towards greater in-person engagement.

## Recommendations

The recommendations arising from this research have been discussed with the CRP and members of the Executive Board of the AHSABC and will be explored through further dialogue and knowledge translation activities with AHSUNC programs in BC. It is anticipated that many of the recommendations will resonate with, and have relevancy for Aboriginal Head Start programs in other regions of Canada. They are summarized as follows:

### (1) Understanding the benefits of family engagement

- a. It is important that management, program staff, and Elders have a shared understanding that family engagement in AHSUNC programs is intimately tied to the potential of programs to support the health and wellbeing of the family as a whole and fostering parents' beliefs in their abilities (self-efficacy) to influence their children's development, early learning, and future academic success.

### (2) Training and professional development

- a. The social challenges and complexities of many of the families in AHSUNC programs, requires that program staff receive the necessary training, skills, and resources to support maternal and family wellbeing. This may include training in harm reduction and trauma-informed approaches.

### (3) Recognizing and supporting family wellbeing

- a. Given the social context and complexities of many of the families who access AHSUNC programs, the findings of this study support the need for programs to have funding for family workers who can focus on engaging with and being responsive to individual family's circumstances, needs and priorities. Stable and competitive

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funding will help to ensure that family workers stay with programs over a long period of time and are able to develop strong intersectoral relationships within their respective communities and regions.

- b. Program coordinators and/or family workers need to have strong working relationships and networks with a wide range of intersectoral services, programs, and resources, including local mental health support services.
- c. Programs may want to consider having a more formalized and documented individual family support plan as a way of emphasizing the kinds of supports available and identifying each families' existing strengths and resources, preferences, priorities, and needs.
- d. Given the multifaceted nature of the stressors that many families experience, programs may further benefit from offering more self-care activities for parents; including strategies for managing stress, including yoga, meditation, relaxation and other approaches.
- e. For all AHSUNC programs to consider having a strategic plan on how to engage with more fathers and male caregivers. Flexible scheduling, cultural and land-based activities, and male Elders as role models are key considerations that were echoed by the male caregivers in this study. The booklet by Ball and Roberge (2007) is an excellent resource with a checklist and suggestions for working towards greater father engagement.
- f. PHAC and AHSUNC programs need to consider how educational and training opportunities can support a broad scope of practice beyond what is typically experienced in a preschool environment.

### **(4) Funding**

- a. Re/connecting families with culture and language as a key Indigenous determinant of health (Greenwood et al., 2015), and as illustrated in this study, as a key approach to family engagement needs to be recognized in how AHSUNC programs are funded to the extent that parents are not expected to fund raise for this critical component.

### **(5) Enhancing communication strategies**

- a. Program staff need to convey to parents clear and explicit messaging in a variety of formats (verbal, written, online) and at various times (registration, orientation, and throughout the year) about how their AHSUNC program can meet the needs of the whole family, and the benefits of family engagement to children's future developmental trajectory and academic success. There is also evidence that direct and open discussions with parents about the benefits and barriers to participating in their child's program can help increase parents' motivation for program engagement (Hubel et al., 2017).
- b. The effectiveness of texting to stay connected with 'hard-to-reach' parents' suggests that all programs need to invest in a designated cell phone and text messaging computer software, which can be used to schedule text messages in advance and send messages to a group of parents. The frequency and timing of text messages can be individualized to fit within existing programs and parent preferences.



**(6) An AHSUNC community & support network**

- a. For AHSUNC programs to explore whether, and how, their parents are using Twitter or other social network sites, and their potential use as an engagement strategy.
- b. For the PHAC to collaborate with AHSUNC programs on the development of policy and practice guidelines about the use of social media involving families.
- c. For programs to consider developing or enhancing a welcoming social space that is clearly designated for parents to gather, ‘hang out’ and have a cup of coffee, and an AHSUNC community bulletin board for parents to post on and share information. For example, passing on baby clothes, finding sports equipment, advertising special community resources or events and so forth.
- d. For programs to provide regular opportunities for families to come together and socialize.

**(7) Rethinking PAC**

- a. For all AHSUNC programs to have quality improvement processes in place so that *all* parents, including those who do not attend PAC meetings, are encouraged and able to provide feedback on their programs. Also, PHAC could provide programs with training and a basic template for a simple online survey, and completed surveys could be entered into a draw as an incentive. Feedback may also target particular groups, for example, teenage or young parents, and male caregivers.
- b. Programs could place added emphasis on communicating with parents how they are making adjustments to their programs based on parental input; showing parents their input is being heard, considered, and used to make improvements.
- c. Programs could consider having/enhancing peer support or mentorship/shadowing for new PAC members.
- d. PAC meetings need to have adequate time for parents to socialize before ‘getting down to business’ and have realistic expectations for fundraising given the recommendations in this study on programs having adequate funding for cultural and language activities and avoiding having fundraising as the sole function of PACs.
- e. Programs could consider developing a volunteer pamphlet provided and reviewed with families at orientation. This pamphlet could include a range of examples of volunteer ideas and opportunities and quotes from parents about how they have benefited from volunteering in their AHSUNC programs.

**(8) Comprehensive efforts for school entry**

- a. Programs and their PACs could explore and create increased opportunities and strategies that are focused on emphasizing and enhancing parents’ understanding of the connections between their engagement in AHSUNC programs - their self-efficacy in being their children’s ‘first teachers’; influencing their children’s development and school readiness and being ‘family school ready’ - with their children’s long-term success in the educational system. The ultimate goal being that parents have increased self-efficacy and involvement in their children’s education.

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- b. Clearly communicating this to parents, and also supporting parental involvement through potential 1:1 and/or workshops that prepare parents to be empowered in their child's education is suggested. For example, assertiveness training; regular meetings with AHSUNC staff to review their children's progress; co-creation with staff of a summary of their child's strengths, abilities and 'what works' for their transition into kindergarten.

### **Future research**

It is recommended that further research with AHSUNC programs across Canada is needed to:

- a. Understand the particular perspectives and priorities of young/teenage parents and of fathers in relation to how AHSUNC programs can support their wellbeing and enhance their engagement.
- b. Capture and measure longitudinal outcomes of family engagement on maternal and family wellbeing, and children's wellbeing and academic outcomes.
- c. Identify the educational and training needs for entry-level early childhood educators that reflect the scope of practice in Indigenous ECD programs, including AHSUNC programs.

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