

# Establishing a Research Agenda for American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Programs

*prepared for:*



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## Chapter I Background

Since it began in 1965, Head Start has been the cornerstone of the nation's services for low-income children and their families. Its basic principles have been models for other programs designed to improve the circumstances and opportunities that vulnerable populations face. Today, Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide comprehensive child development services for children between birth and age 5, pregnant women, and their families. Head Start has the overall goal of helping children from low-income families become ready to attend and succeed at school. Administered by the Head Start Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF),<sup>1</sup> funds are provided through grants to local public agencies, private organizations, Indian tribes, and school systems. These organizations, in turn, operate Head Start programs. They provide services in the areas of education and early childhood development; medical, dental, and mental health; nutrition; and parent involvement. An underlying premise of Head Start services is that they should be appropriate for the child's and family's developmental, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage and experience.

Children are eligible to enroll in Head Start if their families meet certain income guidelines. In fiscal year 2002, Head Start served over 900,000 children in nearly 19,000 centers at a cost per child of approximately \$7,000. In addition to direct program services, the Head Start Bureau sponsors training and technical assistance activities; supports research, demonstration, and evaluation projects; and monitors programs for compliance and quality. In fiscal year 2002, total Head Start program costs came to about \$6.5 billion (Head Start Program Fact Sheet, 2003).

### RESEARCH ON HEAD START

A substantial research enterprise has been attached to Head Start and other early childhood programs, providing information of significant value. Perhaps the most important finding, based on a comprehensive review of 36 studies, is that early childhood care and education:

*... can produce large effects on IQ during the early childhood years and sizable persistent effects on achievement, grade retention, special education, high school graduation, and socialization . . . These effects are large enough and persistent enough to make a meaningful difference in the lives of children*

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<sup>1</sup>ACYF is an agency of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).



















































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activities should take place in tribal ceremonial settings, in the home, or in school. Determining the appropriate place is particularly important in tribal communities where language and traditions are strongly associated with spiritual practices open only to tribal members. Another challenge is the declining number of people who are fluent in the native language. In some places, the native language is essentially lost because so few people can speak it. A third challenge is the decrease in tribal members who follow traditional practices. They cite a variety of reasons for the decline. For example, the wide availability of food products means fewer families must engage in subsistence activities to have nourishment; access to television and electronics means family members may be distracted by them; and the encroachment of the dominant society means traditional ways of life may be displaced. Whatever the cause, they said preserving the culture through traditional activities can be very challenging.

## **HEALTH OUTCOMES**

Listening session participants identified as goals several aspects of children's health that fall into two general categories: (1) good physical and dental health and (2) access to health care resources.

### **Physical and Dental Health**

Good physical and dental health for AI-AN children is a high-priority goal for many listening session participants. In fact, parents, Head Start staff, or tribal leaders in each of the 18 programs visited mentioned positive health outcomes as a goal for their children (Exhibit A-7). Participants from ten tribal communities identified good physical health as a key goal, and participants from nine communities mentioned the goal of good dental health. As critical first steps to attaining good health, participants discussed the importance of good nutrition for their children, keeping them drug- and alcohol-free, and promoting their physical activity and athletic skills.

### **Access to Health Care Resources**

Access to high-quality medical and dental facilities is a critical goal for many tribal parents, staff, and leaders (Exhibit A-7). Listening session participants from virtually all sites mentioned the importance of access to high-quality health care resources for their children. In some tribal communities with geographically isolated populations, the issue of health care access for children had particular relevance for









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## **Educational Opportunities**

Participants identified many areas in which Head Start has promoted the educational development of children in tribal communities. In most programs, participants noted the contribution of Head Start in teaching native language skills and in maintaining native cultural practices and traditions (Exhibit A-11). Referring to powwows held in cooperation with her Head Start program, one parent stated that the “cultural component is terrific. The kids love it and it gets the parents involved. The boys and girls dress up in costumes and learn dances. It’s a real community event.”

Parents, Head Start staff, and tribal leaders in most programs stressed the role that Head Start has in teaching children essential social skills (for example, resolving conflicts and showing respect) and in building children’s basic academic skills, such as reading, counting, and writing. Staff in particular noted that Head Start helps children develop academic skills necessary for later success in K-12 education. Participants in five communities discussed the importance of Head Start in teaching children basic life skills, such as practicing personal hygiene and following directions. At six sites, participants noted the success of Head Start in working with public schools to prepare children for the transition to K-12 education.

## **Health Outcomes**

Parents, Head Start staff, and community leaders in about half of the programs cited as important the availability of Head Start’s medical screenings and health care services for young children (Exhibit A-12). Participants from at least half of the participating tribal communities identified the provision of nutritious meals to children as another important contribution of the Head Start program. One staff member noted, “Head Start is sometimes the only source for meeting the nutritional needs of children.”

## **Family Well-Being**

The encouragement of greater parent involvement in children’s educational development stands out as a key contribution of Head Start identified by participants in almost all programs, particularly by staff and parents (Exhibit A-13). Parents and staff also noted that Head Start helps meet the human service needs of families in tribal communities. For example, it provides referrals to employment, health care, and housing services. In six communities, participants described the ways









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## Chapter IV Research Topics and Methods

The primary purpose of this project is to identify candidate research topics regarding American Indian-Alaska Native young children. The previous chapter discussed outcomes that American Indian-Alaska Native participants identified as important for their children, as well as their perceptions of Head Start's role in achieving those outcomes. They followed these topics with ideas about the types of Head Start-related research that would be useful. In this chapter, we present their suggestions and recommendations for conducting research that will lead to improvements in Head Start programs for American Indian and Alaska Native children.<sup>12</sup>

### RECOMMENDED RESEARCH TOPICS

Listening session participants in all sites expressed interest in a wide variety of research topics. Most recommendations for research fell into one of several categories: tribal identity and culture; educational outcomes of AI-AN children; Head Start operations; screening, assessment, and outcomes measurement; child health and development; staff and professional development; parent involvement; and environmental factors that affect educational and life outcomes for AI-AN children.

#### Tribal Identity and Culture

Tribal identity and culture was consistently raised as a primary issue in response to the question, "What do you want for your children?" In this area, listening session participants offered many suggestions for research, which fell into two categories: studies on the use of and instruction in the native language and studies on tribal identity. Their recommendations are summarized below.

#### *Native Language*

Almost every Head Start program we visited used the native language to some extent. The range of such instruction was broad. At one end of the spectrum, some centers had language immersion programs; at the other end, some had a few pictures of foods, plants, or animals labeled with native words.

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<sup>12</sup>As before, all sites and participants are anonymous. The absence of a recommended research topic does not mean it was of no interest to the particular set of listening session participants; instead, it means that the topic was not raised in discussion.

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Parents, staff, or tribal leaders at all but six sites identified a priority need for research on the role of Head Start in maintaining or advancing native language skills development (Exhibit A-18). Many emphasized the urgency of teaching the native language so as to ensure its survival, especially because of the diminished number of native speakers; this decline, often dramatic, can be attributed to the effects of boarding schools for Indians that frequently banned use of the native language, lack of native language use at home among the parent generation of today's Head Start-age children, intermarriage between individuals from different tribes or language backgrounds, and the effects of acculturation such as popular music and television. In six programs staff and tribal leaders expressed interest in research on barriers to effective native language instruction.

A few individuals noted they see apparently competing demands for native language and English language instruction. Although the vast majority of listening session participants strongly support native language instruction, some – mostly parents – were concerned that their children may not be getting the “head start” they need in terms of English language skills. Others believe that having children learn two languages is beneficial to the child, and they would be interested in more systematic information on the subject. Parents in two very large programs recommended research on differences in educational outcomes for bilingual children vs. English-only children; staff in one program and tribal leaders in another program also suggested research in this area.

Multiple native languages and Spanish were in several Head Start programs. In two such programs, parents recommended research to determine effective ways to promote native language instruction in a multi-language environment.

### ***Cultural and Tribal Identity***

Helping children develop and maintain pride in their cultural and tribal identity is a primary aspiration voiced in every listening session we conducted. Participants, especially parents and staff, across all but five of the 18 programs recommended research on the ways that Head Start does and could foster tribal identity, pride, and knowledge of the culture (Exhibit A-19). Some recommended research on challenges Head Start and the tribal community face in balancing the maintenance of native identity with preparing children for school and jobs that may be pursued in non-Indian institutions and settings.











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Staff from about half of the programs visited would like research into effective ways to change perceptions in their communities – especially among tribal leaders – that view Head Start as a daycare or “babysitting” service, rather than a vital education and early childhood development program. They hope that this would lead tribal leaders and elders to give the program greater support and to get more involved with its services (for example, by having elders share their knowledge of native languages and culture).

We also heard about the need for research regarding effective communication with parents. Parents are particularly interested in learning about (1) their children’s progress in the program and (2) ways to bring nonparticipating parents into Head Start activities. Staff are particularly interested in finding ways to get Head Start parents to read or hear information provided about the program.

### **Screening, Assessment, and Outcomes Measurement**

Head Start requires that all children be screened for health and developmental status within 45 days of their entry into the program. A newer set of requirements calls for assessing children’s progress through Head Start at least three times during the program year and for measuring their achievement of certain outcomes. The topics of assessment and outcomes measurement were particularly salient throughout all of Head Start during the time we were conducting this project and were frequently discussed during listening sessions. In general, participants expressed concerns about the appropriateness of available measures for assessing American Indian-Alaska Native populations.

*Discussion about the validity and cultural appropriateness of instruments used to screen and assess AI-AN Head Start children evoked strong opinions among some listening session participants.*

### **Validity of Measurement**

Discussion about the validity and cultural appropriateness of instruments used to screen and assess AI-AN Head Start children evoked strong opinions among some listening session participants. Several spoke of the need to ensure that tools used with their children would produce valid results, but expressed doubt that current methods and instruments do so. They want to make sure that measures of AI-AN children are beneficial to those children, do not inaccurately diagnose or label children, and correctly identify the strengths and needs of children. Parents, staff, and tribal leaders in a variety of sites recommended research to determine which diagnostic tests and administrative procedures are culturally appropriate for their children (Exhibit A-24).









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learning opportunities). Participants spoke about additional difficulties they face in encouraging professional development for teaching staff. Many have personal and family obligations that limit the amount of time available for attending classes; some are disinclined to enroll in postsecondary education; some fear that insufficient basic skills in English and math will affect their ability to do well in school; and many commented that the pay differential between those with and without degrees is so small that attaining a degree is not worth the effort.

We saw a remarkable degree of variability in the efforts programs and tribes make to enable Head Start teachers to pursue postsecondary education. Some fully subsidize the effort, paying tuition and providing release time for teachers to attend class and study. One program brings professors to the Head Start center, but staff still find it challenging to attend classes and complete homework assignments. In one program, staff must pay their own tuition, fees, and transportation costs – but even these burdens are not enough to stop a handful of young women, including a cook and a bus driver, who are determined to earn their associate’s degree.

Listening session participants are keenly interested in research on ways to give teachers more access to professional development opportunities (Exhibit A-30). They also recommended studies on the following topics:

- the effects of geographic isolation on Head Start staff development;
- the degree of Head Start staff proficiency in the native language;
- the relevance and appropriateness of certification and educational requirements to the educational, cultural, and social needs of AI-AN children;
- disciplinary practices of Head Start teachers; and
- adequacy of Head Start staff supervision of children in their care.

## **Parent Involvement**

Listening session participants in many programs expressed interest in research on strategies to increase parents’ involvement in their children’s social, emotional, and academic development. Several groups of parents, Head Start staff, and tribal leaders recommended studies on the effects of parent involvement on their children’s educational outcomes, along with a greater understanding of the reasons that underlie minimal parent involvement (Exhibit A-31).



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- the extent to which tribal leaders are involved in Head Start policies, programs, and decision making;
  - the effects of welfare reform on Head Start families; and
  - consequences of the boarding school experience for Head Start families.

### **Family Structure and Dynamics**

Participants spoke often of the hardships Head Start children encounter in their homes and indicated that research on these factors and their effects is a high priority (Exhibit A-33). Staff and community leaders – but not parents – from seven sites talked about the need for studies on the growth of young women having children and the increase in single-parent families. Staff in seven communities, leaders in two sites, and parents in one program recommended research to understand the causes of adult substance and alcohol abuse and their effects on children. Additional areas for research that were mentioned included the following:

- the effects of domestic violence and child maltreatment on young children;
- consequences for children whose parents work and are not always available to supervise them; and
- effective substance abuse prevention and treatment strategies.

## **CONDUCTING RESEARCH AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE HEAD START PROGRAMS**

During listening sessions with tribal leaders, elders, Head Start staff, parents, and community representatives, we asked for recommendations about ways to conduct research. Two sites have Institutional Review Boards (IRB), charged with ensuring the protection of human subjects in any research endeavor. Staff in these programs commented that their IRBs may review the intent and content of proposed research to make sure that it is consistent with the tribe's priorities and culture. A manager responsible for cultural matters at another site performs a similar function.

Some sites were invited to participate in this study because of their proximity to or relationship with a tribal college or university. With rare exception, linkages between Head Start programs and these postsecondary institutions consist primarily of Head Start staff taking

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classes toward earning certificates or degrees. Currently, there is very little research activity connecting tribal colleges or universities with these sites.

Of the programs we visited, relatively few had any direct or recent experience with research. We talked with listening session participants about research studies from the past 10 years they had been involved with or heard about. Participants in ten places could not recall participating in or sponsoring any studies, except for the community needs assessment that Head Start requires. In other communities, participants listed the following studies and said that most were very small:

- health and nutrition studies, such as those examining the frequency of Alzheimer’s disease, the relationship between diet and the onset of childhood obesity and risk for diabetes, general studies on diabetes, baby bottle tooth decay, cancer, effects of traditional medicine on native women’s health, and myopia among young children;
- one study about a science curriculum;
- assessing children’s development through research on children enrolled in Early Head Start, a study that tested Head Start children’s recognition and knowledge of local plants and animals, and two studies on school readiness and transition to kindergarten;
- a study on seat belt use;
- one project on domestic violence;
- research on adolescents, including an evaluation of a program on abstinence and pregnancy prevention and a survey on juvenile well-being;
- two studies on language and culture conducted in a single community, one involving elders that examined language prevalence and prospects for the language’s revival and maintenance, and the other on cultural preservation;
- one study about the impact of supplemental readiness training for children and parents before entering Head Start; and
- a study on the effects of historical trauma.

In the sections below, we summarize the listening session participants’ suggestions and commentary, with recommendations aggregated to the community level. The chapter concludes with observations about conducting research in tribal communities.



























































