

# OTTAWA CARLETON HEADSTART ASSOCIATION FOR PRESCHOOLS

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

### Background Information

Incorporated in 1990, the Ottawa-Carleton Headstart Association for Preschools (OCHAP) is an organization representing staff, parents and Board members of Headstart Preschools, licensed under the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Day Nurseries Act of Ontario. OCHAP was established in response to the urgent need for advocacy and networking among Headstart programs dealing with issues of poverty, family stress, public housing, multiculturalism and other factors affecting child development.

OCHAP's stated purpose is: (1) to support and coordinate Headstart Preschool programs and community agencies, (2) to provide a central body to coordinate service, (3) to educate staff, (4) to support parent education programs, (5) to advocate on behalf of member schools, (5) to advocate and inform the community of Headstart programs, and (6) to advocate on behalf of families participating in member schools.

### Purpose of Focus Groups with Parents

With funding from the Ministry of Community and Social Services, OCHAP hired a Community Developer to support its goals. As outlined in the Workplan for the Community Developer, focus groups (with parents of the Headstart programs as participants) were arranged. The focus group questions related to the work of the Community Developer: (1) to help identify gaps and overlaps in services for children and parents using community Headstart childcare programs; (2) to assist individual Headstart childcare programs in developing a close relationship with social, health and educational agencies within their community; (3) to seek out new partnerships in the community that could assist with the support and profile of Headstart childcare programs; and (4) to articulate issues facing families with children in communities and throughout the new City of Ottawa.

### Focus Group Methodology

Each Director of the individual Headstart programs made the arrangements for her program's focus group – setting the date, booking the room, informing and recruiting parents, and securing refreshments. The Community Developer facilitated the focus groups which were conducted in English. Each meeting lasted between 1 to 1½ hours. The focus group questions were asked orally and responses were recorded on flip chart paper for all to see.

At the onset of the focus group meetings, the Community Developer reviewed the agenda and the ground rules. The rules included: respecting each other's opinions, welcoming different points of views, soliciting negative comments as well as positive ones, encouraging people to say exactly what they think (not what others want to hear), and speaking one at a time.

Due to a lack of resources and capacity of the Community Developer, the focus groups were conducted in English only. This limited the participation of some parents who were not able to converse sufficiently in English. Another limitation of the focus groups is that it only captures the opinions of parents who were able and motivated to come; the voices of those who did not participate were not heard. In addition, some participants may have been reluctant to honestly share information regarding their situation and/or services they receive from other providers.

Between June and October 2001, eleven focus groups were held at the following locations:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b># in Attendance</b>	<b># of Children</b>
June 2001	Nanny Goat Hill Nursery School 755 Somerset Street, West	7	7
June 2001	West End Nursery School 1470 Raven Avenue	3	3
June 2001	Children's Aid Society Headstart Nursery School Telsat Court	7	9
July 2001	Pinecrest Queensway Nursery School 2860 Ahearn Avenue	14	16
July 2001	Hawthorne Meadows Nursery School 2244 Russell Road	11	18
August 2001	Queensway Preschool 429 Parkdale Avenue	8	8
September 2001	The National Capital Region YMCA-YWCA Headstart Nursery School 180 Argyle Avenue	4	4
September 2001	Foster Farm Child Care Centre 1065 Ramsey Crescent	4	3
September 2001	Esther by Day Care 1550 Caldwell Avenue	3	4
October 2001	Cornerstone Children's Centre Heatherington Nursery School 2330 Don Reid Driver, Suite 102	3	3
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>64</b>	<b>75</b>

## Focus Group Questions

The focus group questions included:

1. What is the postal code for your current residence? What are the ages of all of your children and specifically of your children in the Headstart program? How long has your child(ren) been with this Headstart program? What is your cultural background?
2. What does Headstart mean? When you applied for a day care subsidy, what was the experience like?
3. How did you hear about this particular Headstart program? What were your reasons for choosing this program? What do you like or dislike about the program? What are your recommendations for improving this program? What do you think about this program, in general? In what ways does this program help or benefit your child(ren) or family?
4. What other services do you or your family use or would like to use? What is needed by families with young children in this new City of Ottawa?

## Focus Group Findings

1. **What is the postal code for your current residence? What are the ages of your children and the children in the Headstart program? How long has your child(ren) been with this Headstart program? What is your cultural background?**

The 64 Headstart parents were present at the focus groups, representing 54 different families and 75 children or 18.75% of the potential 400 Headstart slots. The following table presents some basic demographics of the participating parents. Headstart families reside throughout the City of Ottawa. Approximately two-thirds of the Headstart families identified their cultural background as other than Canadian or French Canadian. Many of these new Canadians are of African descent – with the Somali population highly represented. The next largest cultural grouping were parents of Middle Eastern background. There was equal representation by families of Asian (e.g. Chinese, Vietnamese and Indian) and Caribbean background (e.g. Haitian, Jamaican, etc.)

Variable	Number and Percentage	Variable	Number and Percentage
Families By Area		Families By Background	
West End	5 9.3%	Canadian	16 29.6%
Southwest	12 22.2%	French Canadian	3 5.5%
Central	18 33.3%	Caribbean	4 7.4%
Southeast	9 16.6%	South American	3 5.5%
East End	10 18.5%	Somalian	7 13.0%
		Other African	10 18.5%
		Middle Eastern	7 13.0%
		Asian	4 7.4%
Children By Age		Families by Years at HS	
Under 3 years	13 18.8%	Under 1 year	18 33.3%
3 to 4 years	45 65.2%	1 to 2 years	22 40.7%
Over 4 years	11 16.0%	Over 2 years	14 26.0%

Nearly two-thirds of the children – represented by their parents – are between 3 to 4 years of age. Two-thirds of the families have been using Headstart services for more than 1 year. Fifteen (26.7%) of the families had only one child; eighteen (32.1%) had two children; fifteen (26.7%) had three children; and eight families (14.3%) had more than four children in their household.

## 2. What does Headstart mean? When you went for your day care subsidy, what was the experience like?

For all the parents, the term “Headstart” had positive connotations. The parents recognized that the program is funded by the government, and differs from other day care programs, in that Headstart offers a unique learning environment with structured play, which:

- < makes children ready for school – *e.g. exposes children to English for ESL families; how to write letters and repeat alphabet, numbers and colours; hold writing tools properly; talk and convey ideas clearly; and focuses on physical, mental and speech development*
- < prepares children for independence – *e.g. how to eat and dress by themselves*
- < teaches children responsibility and appropriate behaviours– *e.g. rules, do’s and don’ts, listening skills, paying attention to teachers/authority, picking up toys*
- < encourages positive social skills – *e.g. how to build relationships, interact well with others (children, siblings, and parents), show respect, share, resolve conflict without violence, and appreciate other cultures*
- < teaches children a routine – *e.g. waking up, getting dressed and going to school*

There was a split between the families who had a positive experience, those who thought the experience was neither positive nor negative, and those who had a negative experience when they applied for their day care subsidy.

**The Positive:** The experience was considered positive by families whose workers: (1) referred and provided accurate information about Headstart eligibility requirements, (2) called the Headstart program “right away” to help enroll the family, and (3) responded to calls by Headstart Directors who advocated on their behalf.

**The Negative:** The experience was negative for families for several reasons: (1) the worker provided misinformation on who was eligible, (2) the process to apply for the day care subsidy was intimidating and unwelcoming, and (3) the environment where you apply is inappropriate to bring young children.

Some parents were told that Headstart was only for disabled children, only for families who work full-time or are in school full-time, and for the economically disadvantaged. Some parents did not like going to the welfare office, as they were only applying for the day care subsidy and not for social assistance. Some felt the experience was intimidating and confusing, and involved a lot of waiting and some run-around. The experience was worsened by the fact that they were accompanied by their children, who were exposed to such negativity, e.g. other people in the welfare office who were mad and cussing.

**3. How did you hear about this particular Headstart program? What were your reasons for choosing this program? What do you like or dislike about the program? What are your recommendations for improving this program? What do you think about this program, in general? I what ways does this program help or benefit your child(ren) or family?**

The families learned about the Headstart programs through a variety of ways:

- , by word-of-mouth from friends and other parents.
- , by seeing visible signs on vans, buildings, etc.
- , by reviewing a list of child care programs in the community or the telephone book.
- , through referrals from service providers (e.g. CHEO, CAS, Healthy Beginnings, CHC's, etc.).

The parents chose their Headstart program for multiple reasons:

- , based on the recommendation of their acquaintances and the schools's reputation
- , based on the proximity of the school to the family's residence or place of work
- , because it provided children with an opportunity to be around other children
- , based on the early education components and the school's philosophy
- , because it provided extra help to special needs children and speech and language emphasis
- , because the school offered bus service
- , because of the cleanliness of the facilities
- , because of the food component
- , because of the awesome teachers
- , because it was a designated Headstart facility

The parents generated an extensive list of things they liked about their Headstart program. The following captures it all:

	WHAT DO YOU LIKE?
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i Friendly, patient, helpful, loyal, caring, loving, understanding, nice and professional teachers.</li> <li>i Teachers and Director are available to talk to parents and provide feedback.</li> <li>i Teachers know what child is doing each day.</li> <li>i Teachers respond to the special "likes" and "dislikes" of each child.</li> <li>i Children are taken care of by staff if they are feeling sick or had an accident.</li> <li>i The concept of a Program Assistant and Speech Pathologist</li> <li>i Low teacher to child ratio and small group size</li> <li>i Volunteers</li> </ul>
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i School is clean.</li> <li>i Creative classrooms, gym and play space is good for children to explore</li> <li>i Security system</li> </ul>
Parent-Specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i Friendly parents.</li> <li>i Parents get together after-school.</li> <li>i School fosters sense of community.</li> <li>i Subsidy</li> <li>i Open door policy re: visits</li> </ul>

	WHAT DO YOU LIKE?
Programs for Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i Social activities – where children have friends and are connected and learning about different cultures is encouraged</li> <li>i Fun activities and sports – swimming, gym, exploring water and nature</li> <li>i Children learn English and other skills to prepare them for school.</li> <li>i Children learn independence – how to use their own words.</li> <li>i Good habits are learned – learn to wash up, be clean, pick up toys, etc.</li> <li>i Respect and discipline are taught.</li> <li>i Fun, structured and personalized teaching to fit needs of children</li> <li>i Children are given special attention.</li> <li>i Field trips</li> <li>i Bus and transportation service</li> <li>i Snacks and nutritious meals</li> </ul>

Parents always had a difficult time thinking of “things they didn’t like.” Many of the comments were unique to that particular Headstart program. Overall, areas of concern could be generalized to:

- < **Hours of Operation** – Some parents preferred longer hours, earlier start times, and having or not having a summer break.
- < **Transportation Services** – Some parents wished their school provided a bus or better transportation service.
- < **Playground Facilities** – Some of the outdoor playground facilities could be upgraded.
- < **More Structured and Educational Activities** – Some of the parents valued the emphasis put on early education, and encouraged the inclusion of more structured and educational activities for their children.
- < **More Teachers** – Parents appreciated the small group size, and believe their children can benefit more with a lower teacher to child ratio and/or the use of qualified volunteers..
- < **Day Care Subsidies** – Many parents thought there were not enough subsidized day care slots.

As mentioned previously, these Headstart programs are effective in teaching children a routine, making children ready for school, preparing children for independence, teaching children responsibility, and encouraging positive social skills development. In addition, the program teaches children English, better manners, and values. The program also helps parents and families by:

- < sharing ideas;
- < giving parents some free time;
- < providing parents, especially newcomers, with opportunities to meet other parents;
- < exposing parents to other things in the community.

Overall, the parents had only positive comments about all of the Headstart preschools. All would recommend the program to other parents, and urge them to take advantage of the opportunity for the sake of their children. Their words praised the program’s commitment to respecting individuals, the caring and polite disposition of staff, providing a safe and positive learning environment, and fostering a sense of community.

#### 4. What other services do you or your family use or would like to use? What is needed by families with young children in this new City of Ottawa?

Parents were asked information on what services they “use” or “would like to use.” Parents use a variety of services from a number of service providers in Ottawa including:

- < First Words
- < Nobody’s Perfect
- < Better Beginnings
- < Boys and Girls Clubs
- < Children’s Aid Society
- < Community Health Centres, CHEO, and other medical clinics
- < Local YMCA-YWCA or recreation centre
- < Ontario Works - Employment Resource Centre
- < Local library
- < Local elementary schools
- < Food banks
- < Shelters

With regard to services parents “would like to use,” the following table lists all of their responses. The bolded suggestions were repeatedly presented by parents in the different focus groups.

	WOULD LIKE TO USE
<b>Other Day Care Services</b> (e.g. before or after Headstart school, full-day care, home-day care, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>Alternative day care or drop off programs on weekends and in afternoons</b></li> <li>&lt; Play groups</li> <li>&lt; Information on other child care programs for people going to college/university or in different locations</li> </ul>
<b>Early Childhood Educational Services</b> (e.g. schools, libraries, speech therapy, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; Sunday school</li> <li>&lt; Craft programs</li> <li>&lt; Homework club for French students</li> <li>&lt; Reading and writing program</li> <li>&lt; <b>Music programs</b></li> </ul>
<b>Recreational Programs</b> (e.g. recreation centres, museums, parks, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>Affordable sports and games for young children</b></li> <li>&lt; Affordable sports for adults</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Programs</b> (e.g. cultural interpretation, language school, diversity workshops, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>School for language acquisition (French)</b></li> <li>&lt; <b>Programs to learn about different cultures</b></li> </ul>
<b>Health Services</b> (e.g. community health centres or resource centres, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; Dental services</li> <li>&lt; Eye services</li> <li>&lt; Medical services (after 7:00 p.m.)</li> <li>&lt; Cheaper prescriptions</li> <li>&lt; <b>Health workshops on topics such as CPR, epilepsy, allergies, asthma, emergency care, etc.</b></li> </ul>

	WOULD LIKE TO USE
<b>Employment and Job Search Services</b> (e.g. Ontario Works, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>Computer skills training and typing classes</b></li> <li>&lt; Professional training (eg. for teachers, doctors, hairdressing etc.)</li> <li>&lt; Information on starting your own business</li> <li>&lt; Information on employment opportunities</li> <li>&lt; Driving lessons</li> </ul>
<b>Housing Services</b> (e.g. shelters, tenant rights, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>Affordable housing options</b></li> <li>&lt; Information for first-time homeowners</li> <li>&lt; Shorter waiting period for subsidized housing</li> </ul>
<b>Parenting Programs</b> (e.g. Parent Resource Centres, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; <b>Parenting workshops on how to deal with anger, sibling rivalry, time for self, special needs children, etc.</b></li> <li>&lt; Parenting programs after 5:00 p.m. for people who work.</li> </ul>
<b>Practical Assistance Services</b> (e.g. food banks, clothing banks, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&lt; Community kitchen / food co-op</li> <li>&lt; Food banks which give more than 1 week of food, don't have to show drug card, accessible, more nutritious foods</li> <li>&lt; Information on places to go</li> </ul>

Parents were asked to expand their viewpoint to the needs and concerns other families with young children in the City of Ottawa. Parents talked about issues related to newcomers, single parents, parents in underserved areas, lack of opportunities available to economically-disadvantaged families, community safety issues, inadequate health care system, lack of affordable housing, the need for more quality, subsidized child care programs and programs for children.

## Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned findings and the objectives for the Community Development, the following is a list of recommendations for consideration by OCHAP members.

- i** Establish effective strategies to inform parents about the Headstart programs in their community.
- i** Educate service providers, including staff in Ontario Works offices, about the eligibility requirements and the process to register parents and children in to Headstart – as a means of reducing misinformation given to potential Headstart clients.
- i** Build the public's image, understanding of and support for the "Headstart" concept and programs in Ottawa. Mobilize parents to become powerful advocates.
- i** Continue to strive toward the ideal preschool and strengthen the existing Headstart programs in Ottawa – by establishing standards and goal-oriented curriculum, providing training to staff, involving parents, offering nutritious menus, arranging for transportation to and from school.
- i** Foster partnerships with schools, community agencies, service providers, and others interested in serving families with young children.

In sum, the focus groups meetings provided parents with an opportunity to discuss their interests and concerns. Their feedback, creativity energy, enthusiasm shown during these meetings are a testimony to their commitment to the well-being of their children, families and community. Their expertise, personal experiences and thoughts add credence to our efforts to identify gaps in services to families with young children.