

Provision of quality early childcare services (Czech Republic, 10-11 November 2015)

Croatian national framework for care services for children under the age of three in relation to the quality of those services¹

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen a significant increase in research on early childhood development. Different scientific disciplines have reached joint conclusions all of which unanimously advocate the crucial importance of early childhood when it comes to the development of human potential. Moreover, in the meantime good practices have been developed that have offered additional insight on how this knowledge could contribute to the well-being of children and society at large. This positive global trend has also resulted in a historic opportunity to develop human action – by offering considerable enhancement of the efficiency of programmes and policies focusing on small children and families around the world, on the basis of acquired insight and knowledge.

Through harmonised and complementary programmes, services and actions created and implemented by communities, the negative circumstances for children can be changed, the outcomes can be improved, and children's rights can be realised in such a manner that every child is able to accomplish her/his development potential.

Three factors affect the quality of early childhood development within the social environment in which the child is growing up: the social community, the family and experts/scientists.

Enhancing the process of care for the child and encouraging the child's development is impossible in the absence of the interaction between all key factors in the child's development.

Society – determines the legal and material conditions under which the child's development occurs both in the family and beyond. Croatia is a signatory state to the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, No 156, and its Article 5, point b) states that **the state has the duty and obligation to provide care for preschool children.**

Family – has responsibility for the use of the child's personal capabilities and has an impact on the social potential for the child's development.

Experts/scientists – contribute in terms of providing the scientific and expert foundations for education and care for the development of children at early age.

In the Republic of Croatia, the competent body for family and social protection is the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, whereas the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports is competent for education and science.

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After the birth of a child, the mother is entitled to **mandatory and additional maternity leave and parental leave in accordance with the Maternity and Parental Benefits Act**. The duration of mandatory maternity leave is 98 days or 28 days before due date of the birth and 70 days after the birth of the child. Exceptionally (and based on the gynaecologist's medical findings), mandatory maternity leave may start 45 days before the planned birth date, which is determined by the general practitioner. On completion of mandatory maternity leave, the mother is entitled to additional maternity leave **until the child is six months old**, and additional maternity leave **can be transferred by the mother to the father** by a written statement with the father's previous consent.

Healthcare services for the mother and child

The visit of the visiting nurse after giving birth is one of the most common services for parents used by almost all families.

In terms of support to breastfeeding provided by primary health care (paediatricians and family doctors) for parents in rural areas, the provision of health care services and medical experts is significantly lower, which is also the case with parents from Istria, Primorje and Gorski Kotar, Lika and Banovina (compared to parents from Zagreb and Northern Croatia) (Pećnik, 2013).

After completion of maternity leave by the parents (mother or father), care for the child can be provided in the following ways:

1. by taking care of the child at home by the family (grandparents, relatives, neighbours, friends);
2. by taking care of the child by a babysitter (regulated by the Act on Babysitters and falling within the competence of the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth);
3. by implementing educational programmes for children at early age (nursery school programmes) in kindergartens.

Services of early childhood and preschool education

Early childhood and preschool education is regulated by the Preschool Education Act and numerous subordinate regulations as well as the Preschool Children Education Programme and the humanistic concept of development. The National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education, as an expert document, is currently part of a comprehensive curricular reform.

The aim of the comprehensive curricular reform is the establishment of a harmonised and efficient education system through the introduction of comprehensive changes in terms of content and structure. Early childhood and preschool education have been included into the comprehensive curricular reform as part of the education system of the Republic of Croatia since the adoption of the Preschool Education Act in 1997. The Framework for the National Curriculum (FNC) is a key document of the curricular system. It is being prepared in accordance with the guidelines of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014), developing certain conceptual solutions as laid down in the National Curriculum Framework (2011) and taking into account other relevant education policy documents.

The FNC is a key document for the preparation of national curricula for early childhood and preschool education, primary education, grammar school (gymnasium), vocational and art education. In addition, it facilitates the preparation of other curricular documents which will define the subject areas of learning and teaching as well as cross-cutting topics in a coherent manner. This



implies that the preparation of the amendments to the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education is ongoing.

Preschool education and care for children is part of the education system of the Republic of Croatia, and it includes children between six months of age and the school starting age.

As of 1 October 2014, the Preschool Programme has become mandatory for all children in the year before starting primary school. The Preschool Programme includes all children who have turned five and a half years by 1 September 2015 (or who will have turned six years by 31 March 2016), and one year it covered 99.6 % of children in the year before starting primary school, both in regular kindergarten programmes and preschool programmes, and since the year 2014/2015 it has covered 100 % of children. The content, duration and implementation of the preschool programme have been regulated by the Ordinance on the content and duration of the preschool programme (Official Gazette, No 107/2014).

Total number of kindergartens: 795 kindergartens (total number of facilities is 1,762). The Government of the Republic of Croatia is the founder of one kindergarten. There are 342 (43.01 %) private kindergartens, out of which 223 were founded by natural persons, 53 were founded by religious communities and 65 by associations, and there are 453 (56.98 %) city/municipal/county kindergartens.

Total number of children: 159,591 children (64 %). The number of children in private kindergartens is 34,596 (21.68 %), and the number of children in city/municipal/county kindergartens is 124,995 (78.32 %).

Table 1 - The inclusion of children at early age in educational programmes in kindergartens (between the age of 6 months and three years) by counties (2013/2014):

County	number of children	number of groups
Zagrebačka	2,160	116
Krapinsko-zagorska	331	22
Sisačko-moslavačka	684	40
Karlovačka	381	24
Varaždinska	825	58
Koprivničko-križevačka	411	26
Bjelovarsko-bilogorska	439	31
Primorsko-goranska	1,970	132
Ličko-senjska	148	11
Virovitičko-podravska	124	8
Požeško-slavonska	147	13
Brodsko-posavska	357	18
Zadarska	689	49
Osječko-baranjska	772	53
Šibensko-kninska	708	47
Vukovarsko-srijemska	397	30
Splitsko-dalmatinska	2,250	145



Istarska	1,383	93
Dubrovačko-neretvanska	1,064	59
Međimurska	319	28
City of Zagreb	9,768	503
Total	25,327	1,506

Inclusion of preschool children by programme:

126,625 children (79.34 %) are included in regular full-day (8 to 10 hours per day) programmes.

14,708 children (9.21 %) are included in the preschool programme beyond regular kindergarten programmes.

18,258 children (11.44 %) are included in shorter programmes (up to 3 hours per week).

5,972 (5.46 %) children with difficulties, 1,373 (1.5 %) gifted children and 2,570 (2.10 %) children who are members of national minorities are included in preschool education programmes.

Total number of employees: 18,716 employees work in preschool institutions, out of whom there are 11,410 professionals in early childhood and preschool education, 1,009 of other educational staff (professionals), 658 graduate nurses and 5,639 persons who are employed as administrative and technical support staff.

The duties of a professional in early childhood and preschool education for children between the age of six months and the school starting age can be performed by a person who has completed an undergraduate university study programme or a professional study programme of a certain type (lasting three years) or an appropriate study programme upon the completion of which a person has acquired higher professional qualifications in accordance with the previous regulations, as well as persons who have completed a graduate university or specialist study programme of a certain type (lasting 5 years).

The duties of other educational staff (professionals) can be performed by a person who has completed a graduate university study programme or a graduate specialist study programme of a certain type.

The duties of a nurse/health worker in kindergartens can be performed by a person who has completed an undergraduate university study programme or the professional study programme of nursing, that is, the study programme upon the completion of which a person has acquired higher professional qualifications in the field of nursing in accordance with the previous regulations, as well as a person who has completed a graduate university study programme or the specialist study programme of nursing.

Development of the early childhood and preschool education programme

A total of 2,982 newly verified early childhood and preschool education programmes were implemented in 2014. These programmes were adapted to the needs and abilities of children on the basis of the humanistic approaches to the child's development, and the pluralism of the programme was fully accomplished in line with the framework Preschool Children Education Programme.



Foreign language learning in kindergartens at early age

A total of 552 verified programmes for foreign language learning at early age were implemented for preschool children in 2014. At present, more than 70 % of children between 4 and 6 years of age are learning a foreign language as part of the regular kindergarten programme or as a shorter programme beyond the regular programme.

The competence of communicating in a foreign language is one of the eight key competences and the number of children included in learning a foreign language at early age will certainly be growing in the future.

Sports programmes

A total of 568 newly verified sports programmes of rhythmic gymnastics, dancing, folklore, indoor soccer, taekwondo, tennis etc. were implemented in the pedagogical year 2014. In cooperation with the Croatian Olympic Committee and as part of the "Kindergarten Olympic Festival" project, sports competitions regularly take place in kindergartens, and there is an increasing number of sports associations that wish to implement sports programmes in accordance with regulations.

In spite of the fact that every kindergarten is obliged to implement day-to-day sports activities (morning exercise and physical activities – physical education classes) for preschool children, in recent years there has been an increasing number of sports clubs and associations that have decided to implement legally regulated shorter sports programmes such as rhythmic gymnastics, dancing, folklore, indoor soccer, taekwondo, tennis, skiing, skating, swimming etc. The total inclusion of children in special sports programmes is around 86 %.

Education programmes for sustainable development

A total of 352 verified eco-programmes and education programmes for sustainable development for preschool children was implemented in 2014. More than 150 kindergartens were awarded the green flag and the status of "eco kindergarten", and children at early age and preschool children together with their educators (professionals in early childhood and preschool education) participate in these activities.

Programmes of working with parents

A total of 180 verified programmes of work with parents were implemented in 2014. These programmes are devised by kindergartens themselves. In addition, the programmes of "Let's Grow Together" and "Let's Grow Together Plus" were implemented in 2014 in cooperation between the UNICEF and the Education and Teacher Training Agency, and were promoted by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

Programmes for children with health problems

A total of six (6) programmes for preschool children with health problems were set up in hospitals in Zagreb, Sisak, Zadar and Rijeka (allergies, diabetes, celiac disease etc.), in cooperation between kindergartens and hospitals.

Accessibility and use of parent support services

The accessibility of services for strengthening parental competences in the community is rather low. Along with a real lack of these services, inadequate or inefficient information of parents on these services also contributes to their



perceived non-accessibility. One third of parents are not even aware of the existence of different services of this type in the community.

The parent support services most widely used by parents are courses for pregnant women/future parents – every fifth parent took part in these. Parents of lower socio-economic status, parents with a lower level of education and parents from rural areas used this service less frequently, as well as most other parent support services. The second most widely used services were services used by every tenth parent to every hundredth parent. These are the following services: individual counselling with the paediatrician on parenthood issues (10 %), gymnastics for mothers and babies (5 %), other joint programmes for parents and children (provided by kindergartens, religious communities, associations, libraries etc.) (5 %), groups supporting breastfeeding (4 %), individual counselling with the psychologist or pedagogue (4 %), groups for socialising and support (at associations of parents of children with developmental difficulties or at the church) (2 %), the programme of workshops with parents “Let’s Grow Together” (1 %) and another programme of group work with parents (educational workshops or schools for parents, 1 %).

Challenges encountered

Preschool education forms the basis for lifelong learning. Therefore, the responsibility of the Republic of Croatia is greater since preconditions must be met by 2020 for the inclusion of 95 % of children at early age and preschool children in the preschool education system (Europe 2020 Strategy). At present, the level of inclusion of children at early age is lower than the desired level, thus being a challenge for its increase, the inclusion of preschool children in the year before starting primary school is 100 %, notwithstanding the fact that the preschool programme had not been mandatory by the pedagogical year of 2014/2015, when it was first stipulated by the Preschool Education Act and the Ordinance on the content and duration of the preschool programme (Official Gazette, No 107/2014). The level of regulation of the early childhood and preschool education system is of high quality and is characterised by high standards adapted to the child in the existing kindergartens and other legal entities implementing preschool education programmes.

The Education and Teacher Training Agency is competent for the maintaining and increasing the quality of educational work in kindergartens. The Agency participates in monitoring, enhancement and development of education in the area of preschool, primary and secondary education, adult education and the schooling of the children of Croatian nationals living abroad and the children of foreign nationals.

Self-evaluation and external evaluation of kindergartens is implemented in cooperation with the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education.

