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# How Parents and Communities Care for the Youngest Children in Croatia

## SUMMARY OF THE MAIN RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research on services for the support of parenting the youngest children in the community includes **key questions necessary for promoting responsible parenthood and early development of children**, and provides data and insights necessary for the planning of policies and activities in the field of social support to parenting in the period from pregnancy to the child's pre-school age.

The focus is on **parenting support services**, or organised interventions for parents aimed at promoting the child's welfare and development by focusing actions towards parents' understanding and fulfilment of their parental responsibilities. Those services are aimed at strengthening the knowledge and skills of the parents, as well as promoting the values of responsible parenting, and are implemented by health institutions, kindergartens, family centres, non-governmental organisations, social welfare centres, etc.

Besides parenting support services intended to strengthen parental competences, this research also includes other services and activities for the youngest children in the community: **pre-school education, health services, and various recreational, educational and cultural activities for children, their parents and families in the community**. While parenting support activities strive to influence parental actions and the experience of parenthood directly, other services included in the research are intended to protect the child's health, help in the early education of the child and stimulate the child's physical and mental development, as well as to indirectly support the fulfilment of parental responsibilities. All these services and activities are designed for parenting that respects the child's rights, and ensuring them - is a part of the social responsibility for the welfare of children.

The research integrates different systems that reach to parents of the youngest children (health, pre-school education, social welfare and the civil sector) or through which parents have access to parenting support. With such a **comprehensive approach** to the key issues of parenting in early childhood, the research strived to continuously analyse those issues through the parents' perspective.

The basic **purpose** of this research was to learn about the needs of parents for different forms of support in their care for the youngest children and about the availability of parenting support

services and other services (educational, health) and activities for children in communities throughout Croatia.

The research was carried out on a **quota sample** of 1,271 mothers and 350 fathers of children aged six months, one year, three years and six years (those six-year-olds who were required to start their schooling in the school year 2012/2013). The quotas were **formed according to the data of the Croatian Health Insurance Fund** on the number of children of a certain age and gender born in specific parts of the Republic of Croatia and on their parents' education. The parents were surveyed in the period between March and May 2012.

The parents that participated in the research mostly have secondary education (64 %), are married (89 %) and have one child (44 %) or two children (35 %). The parents live mostly in urban areas (63 %), while the rest live in settlements with less than 2,000 inhabitants. In accordance with the number of children born in the population, the majority of the parents from the sample are from Zagreb and its surrounding area (28 %), and Dalmatia (21 %). 65 % mothers and 82 % parents are employed. 688 (42 %) parents from the total sample receive a child allowance. For the purposes of analysing the position of more socially vulnerable subgroups of parents, groups of parents of the low (9 %), lower middle (35 %), higher middle (40 %) and high socioeconomic status (16 %) were formed. Groups of parents of children with developmental difficulties, neurorisks and chronic diseases were also formed by subsequently adding 94 more parents with some of those characteristics to the basic sample, so that there were 202 participants in total.

The main results and their practical implications are summarised according to the thematic units of the research. They are the results arising out of basic socio-demographic comparisons, while more complex analyses were carried out for an in-depth understanding of the parents' needs and behaviours. The data shown relate to samples of the general population of the parents of six-month-old, one-year-old, three-year-old and six-year-old children, along with the specificities of the two groups to which special attention was paid – parents of the low socioeconomic status and parents of children with developmental difficulties.

## **DEVELOPMENTALLY DESIRABLE AND DEVELOPMENTALLY UNDESIRABLE PARENTAL ACTIONS TOWARDS THE YOUNG CHILD**

The early childhood (0-6 years of age) is an extremely important period in human development, and the interaction between the parent and the child has a key role in it. The research offers an insight into the prevalence of certain developmentally desirable and developmentally undesirable parental behaviours and beliefs, which have been the subjects of measures and activities concerning parenting support so far.

### **»The prevalence and duration of breastfeeding**

The data gathered from parents show that their breastfeeding practice deviates from the international expert recommendations of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of the

child's life. It was shown that around 20 % of children had been breastfed for one or two months, while between 35 % and 40 % of children had been breastfed up to their fourth month.

While keeping the existing activities aimed at promoting the benefits of breastfeeding during pregnancy and in the maternity ward, it is necessary to ensure a more efficient support that would enable the breastfeeding to continue in the months in which it was shown that the percentage of breastfed children is in the sharpest decline (between the second and fourth month of the child's life). This involves improving support by paediatricians and visiting nurses, as well as by the wider community.

The research has shown that the socioeconomic status of the parents is significantly correlated with the probability and duration of breastfeeding. Younger, less educated mothers of a lower socioeconomic status are less likely to breastfeed and they breastfeed for a shorter period of time. Mothers of a lower socioeconomic status are the first to start with complementary food (which, if prematurely introduced, reduces the likelihood of the continuation of breastfeeding). As regards the regional distribution, mothers in Dalmatia are the least likely to breastfeed. As regards the attitudes towards the desirable duration of breastfeeding, there were no differences with regard to the socioeconomic status of the parents.

The proportion of children who were not breastfed at all is higher in children with developmental difficulties and children with neurorisks and chronic diseases compared to other children. Such results point to the need for a specific support that health workers and the community should provide to the parents of children with neurorisks and developmental difficulties, so that their children too could be breastfed according to their mothers' wishes.

### » **Developmentally stimulating interactions of parents with their children**

Positive and responsible parenting to a young child involves different joint activities of parents and their child that contribute to the quality of their interpersonal relationship and improve the development of the child's cognitive, socio-emotional and/or graphic and motor skills. According to the statements of the parents surveyed, most of them engaged in some of the examined forms of developmentally desirable interaction with their child (e.g. browsing/reading picture books, singing/dancing with the child, doing jigsaw puzzles or encouraging independent problem solving) once or more frequently during the seven-day period preceding the research. However, it has been established that there is a small percentage of children (up to 10%) who, during the abovementioned period, did not experience none of the surveyed stimulating and supporting parental behaviours.

Less individual stimulating and supporting parental behaviour was experienced by children whose parents are poorly educated or of a lower socioeconomic status, children living in families with multiple children, rural areas and/or certain regions (Slavonia, Dalmatia).

Although drawing conclusions from this requires caution, since the research included a limited range of parental stimulating behaviours, these results reveal inequalities in the chances of poorer children and children from rural areas to exercise their rights to the family conditions that support the full development of their potential.

The knowledge of parental stimulation of the child's cognitive and socioeconomic development in the first years of life through the manner they spend time with their children, support their curiosity and learning, and encourage development of emotional security, should be made available to all parents, especially to poorly educated parents, parents of a low socioeconomic status and parents living in rural areas. Those parents emphasized television as an appropriate medium for learning about parenting. In order to empower parents for a greater involvement in the child's early learning, besides providing information, it is necessary to provide them with support in development of parental aims and skills through appropriate parental support services.

#### **» Parental violence and attitudes towards corporal punishment**

The results of the research show that a significant proportion of the youngest children in Croatia are deprived of their right to protection against violence within their own homes. According to their own statements, 5 % of the parents of six-month-old children, 15 % of the parents of one-year-old children, 35 % of the parents of three-year-old children and 19 % of parents of six-year-old children spanked, hit the arm or pulled the hair of their child ones or more often in the seven-day period preceding the research. Although the parents of around one third of three-year-old children and one fifth of six-year-old children admitted to the interviewer they had hit or pulled the hair of their child one or more times in the previous week, it can be expected that these results are somewhat understated compared to the actual situation.

Three-year-old children were the most exposed to parental violence. One in three children was hit by a parent or had his hair pulled ones or more often in the seven-day period preceding the research, and 3 % of them experienced it daily.

While there is a correlation between the socioeconomic status of the parents and the frequency of stimulating and encouraging treatment of their child, no correlation could be identified for parental violence. It was equally present among the parents of both a lower and higher socioeconomic status. Certain inequalities in the frequency of parental violence were identified as regards parents' education, number of children and size of the urban/rural areas where they live. More hitting and hair pulling was experienced by one-year-old children whose parents completed only primary education, compared to better-educated parents, and one-year-old children in families with multiple children. Six-year-old children living in families with multiple children and from rural areas experienced the most parental violence.

Most of the parents stated that they were mostly or strongly against corporal punishment of children, but almost a third of the parents did not rule it out. As much as 12 % of mothers and fathers are mostly or strongly in favour of corporal punishment as a proper method of raising children, while 17 % of them are still undecided.

A more positive attitude towards corporal punishment of children was expressed by mothers of three-year-olds, compared to the mothers of children from other age groups represented in the research. A higher tolerance toward corporal punishment was also expressed by mothers of multiple children, mothers of a low and lower middle socioeconomic status, and mothers from rural areas. Salient among the regions are the northern Croatia, where mothers tolerate such methods of upbringing the most, and Istria and Primorje, where mothers have the strongest negative attitude towards corporal punishment.

Most parents consider that the most useful method of reducing the corporal punishment of children is “to help parents with their problems, so that they do not take it out on their children due to disgruntlement or exhaustion/stress”, followed by giving advice to parents on how to raise their children without corporal punishment. One in five parents considers that the best help parents can get to reduce parental violence towards children involves support in reducing the consumption of alcohol, and help with their psychological problems.

Activities aimed at preventing corporal punishment should be directed to acquiring skills for responsible parenting, including non-violent setting of limits, but also at acquiring skills necessary for tackling problems that parents encounter in other areas/roles of their life. Therefore, an expansion of the scope of the efficient (evaluated) parental support programmes is recommended. With access to such universal programmes that contribute to the reduction of corporal punishment, a part of parents should be provided access to additional interventions focused on multiple topics, that act against both the sources of stress and the difficulties present in the wider context of parenthood in order to remove obstacles to positive, non-violent parenting.

## **EXPERIENCE OF PARENTHOOD, OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PAID LABOUR AND PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES, AND OF GENDER DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD WORK**

### **» Parental stress and coping with challenges of parenting**

Care for the child's welfare and optimal development also requires care for the welfare of parents. The research indicates that the personal welfare of parents is correlated with their more frequent developmentally desirable interactions with the child, and less frequent violence towards the child. Parents who experience a greater stress of parenthood engage in stimulating and supportive interaction with their child somewhat more rarely, but yell at the child and hit him/her or pull his/her hair more often.

The research indicated that the parents of six-year-old children are more concerned about the behaviour or development of their child than the parents of children from the younger age groups, that they suffer from highest levels of parental stress, and that they have the weakest feeling of parental competence. Furthermore, among the parents of children aged six there is the relatively highest number of those who admitted that they often struggle with the responsibilities of parenthood (a third). These results place emphasis on the need for the development of services intended for parents in the year before the child's enrolment in primary school, along with the existing services intended for parents after childbirth and in the first years of the child's life (particularly the third).

The increased parental stress is an indicator of an imbalance between the demands of child care and the ability of the parents to respond to them appropriately using their internal resources and the resources from their environment. The results of the research indicate a disadvantaged position of parents of a low socioeconomic status and parents with multiple children because they are the ones who report increased levels of parental stress and poorer physical health. Services adjusted to the needs of such parents should, apart from the strengthening of parental skills, also focus on removing the sources of stress and improving the skills necessary to combat stress.

Parents of children with developmental disabilities also experience significantly more parental stress compared to other parents – they are more concerned about the behaviour and development of their child, they find it more difficult to face the challenges of parenthood (38 % of them stated that they sometimes or often could not deal with the challenges of parenthood, while 17 % of the parents of children without disabilities reported the same). The reasons for this are fatigue and being overwhelmed, as well as a lack of support that would prepare them for facing the challenges of parenting a child with developmental disabilities, which involves a care of the child's health and developmental needs. On the other hand, such parents do not differ from other parents as regards their assessment of their own parental competence (there is no difference in the developmentally stimulating and violent actions either). Parents of children with developmental disabilities invest additional effort in their parenting, with an increased level of stress and poorer physical health, and thus it is necessary to offer them additional services.

## » **Balancing domestic responsibilities with paid work, and gender division of household labour**

Balancing domestic responsibilities with paid work is a source of stress for the majority of employed parents. Thus, a third of employed fathers reported the feeling that their job responsibilities often or always create difficulties fulfilling their parental role, while a quarter of employed mothers reported the same. The necessity of balancing paid work with parenting is more often experienced by parents with multiple children and parents of a low and middle socioeconomic status. These and other results of the research underline the importance of the support provided to parents within their work environments and employments so that the parents may balance between often incompatible requirements arising out of them being parents and participating in the labour market at the same time.

The experience of parenthood and parental behaviour towards their child are a reflection of the parents being overwhelmed with the demands of child care and household chores. The results of the research show that mothers take up a greater proportion of child care obligations and household chores than fathers. The gender differences in the perceived division of household labour are much more visible when it comes to household chores than child care. Thus, 2/3 of the mothers involved in the research perceive themselves as taking up all or most of the activities related to child care/activities with children. As regards household chores, 3/4 of mothers consider they do all or most of them.

The traditional gender division of household labour, in which the chores and child care are mostly women's work, is more pronounced in certain subgroups of parents. Mothers of a lower socioeconomic status and poorer education carry out all or most of the activities related to child care more often. They also perform most of the household labour, as do mothers from rural areas or from the northern Croatia, Slavonia or Dalmatia.

On the level of public policies, a greater emphasis should be placed on aspects of the balance between household labour and paid work related to gender inequality in the division of household chores and child care. It is also necessary to promote a more active involvement of fathers in early child care more efficiently.

## **NEEDS FOR PARENTING SUPPORT**

### » **Informal social support to parents**

The parental behaviour and experience of parenthood are influenced by a multiple environmental and situational factors, and their action may weaken (e.g. poverty) or strengthen (e.g. social support) the parental skills for providing a child with the optimal care.

The research has shown that the group of parents of a low socioeconomic status is a particularly vulnerable group because it is characterised by an accumulation of risk factors and an absence of protection factors. Since they believe the place where they live is unsuitable for raising a family, and that they have not established good relationships with people in the local community,

these parents feel counselling, material and practical support of the informal social network is much less available to them. Parents of a low socioeconomic status, poorly educated parents and parents with three or more children receive significantly less needed help with child care and household chores from their partners, members of the extended family and other persons from the community. These results point to the fact that parents who raise their children in more difficult conditions, with less material and personal resources, receive the least informal social support.

### » Professional help in parenting

Almost all parents would go to their spouse and/or members of the extended family for help with parenting issues. A little more than a half would rather seek the counsel of other parents in such situations. A half of the surveyed parents consider experts (e.g. paediatricians, kindergarten teachers) as the best sources of counselling support in matters of parenthood and child development.

Two thirds of parents felt the need for expert parenting advice, and more than a third feel this need often or sometimes. However, less than a quarter of the surveyed parents have actually sought the counsel of an expert in matters of parenting and child care. At the same time, three times as many parents stated that they would probably or certainly use free, quality and non-stigmatising help from an expert in matters of parenthood and education if it were available to them. These results are in favour of a proactive approach to parents with an offer of different forms of professional parenting support and with invitations to participate in such activities/services.

One obstacle to using the expert help may be the negative attitudes of parents toward seeking professional help in parenting, which are related primarily to the fear of stigmatisation. They were identified in a third of the parents surveyed. The most widespread among those attitudes was the belief that professional support is intended for “problematic families”, while the average parent should solve parenting problems on his/her own. It is important to change certain beliefs regarding the purpose and consequences of professional support in parenting, as well as regarding its beneficiaries. It is also important to better inform parents of the professional support to parenting itself, using the experience of the parents who benefited from such programmes. The results show that those parents who have had some experience in using professional support have a more positive attitude toward it.

The results of the overall research show that there is a series of other reasons that may prevent parents from using professional support in parenting, including the one that such services do not satisfy the needs of parents with their availability, content or approach. It is necessary to invest in the development and implementation of services that will satisfy the parents’ needs, or in the adaptation of the existing services so that they can attract those parents they were unable to reach before. This requires the cooperation between service providers, policy makers and scientists working in the field of parenting support, which will enable all families to have access

to the appropriate forms of (professional) support. Parents should be involved in all service development phases.

As regards parental dilemmas, parents of a low socioeconomic status find the most support among the members of their family, and they are less likely than other parents to turn to other parents or experts. Parents of a low socioeconomic status and parents who live in rural areas (and Slavonia) believed less often than others, that they needed professional advice in matters of parenting, education and the child's development. They also expressed less interest in contacting experts who might offer them free and quality professional help in that area. A low socioeconomic status of parents, poor education and younger age (less than 25 years) are characteristics particularly correlated with a limited access to support in parenting, especially because they are accompanied by more negative attitudes toward seeking professional help in parenting. Therefore it is necessary to invest additional effort in ensuring the rights of each child, including children whose parents have the aforementioned characteristics, so that their parents can receive the appropriate parenting help and support.

On the other hand, parents of children with developmental disabilities express a greater need for the expert help in their parenting, and more positive attitudes toward seeking professional help, they use it more often, and if free and quality professional help in matters of parenting or the child's development were available to them, almost all of them would use it.

#### **» Parenting resources in the period of the child's early development**

The resources listed by parents that would be of most use in their daily care of their children of an early age influence parental behaviour indirectly, by shaping the conditions in which they raise their children, and thus the quality of life of the parents and their family. They are related to material living conditions, balancing household labour with paid work, activities in the community and the wider social environment appropriate for the needs of the children (of an early age) etc.

There are hardly any parents involved in the research who did not stress measures for improving their standard of living, balancing paid work and parenthood, and measures for the enrichment of the social environment so that it would be better suited to children, as the most important forms of help in their parenting. Thus the greatest proportion of parents listed improving their material situation, increasing their income and/or decreasing the cost of child supplies, and better employment opportunities, as the means that would facilitate the fulfilment of their parental responsibilities. These needs and the need for resolving their housing problem are more pronounced in parents of a lower socioeconomic status. Parents of a higher economic status list a better adjustment of job market requirements with parental responsibilities and lower interest rates of housing loans as priorities as regards the material living conditions.

More accessible day care facilities (i.e. more capacities to enrol children, kindergartens closer to home, lower prices) is the requirement related to the need for a better adjustment of the social environment to the needs of parents and the youngest children, that is most frequently

expressed by almost a half of the parents of six-month-old and one-year-old children. The need for improving the quality of the pre-school education services (in the sense of smaller groups of children, better equipment in kindergartens, working hours adjusted to the parents' working hours) was mentioned by around a fifth of the parents. A priority almost equal to the priority of the availability of day care facilities is the need for better adapting public spaces to the youngest children (more well-kept parks and playgrounds equipped for children etc.).

From the results described, it is visible that parents have multiple needs for the resources in the community to be adapted better, by promoting the education of the youngest children and their health protection, and by providing better opportunities for connecting with other parents and children. More available and better-quality pre-school education services are needed along with other educational and recreational activities for children up to six years of age in the community (especially in rural areas), as well as more opportunities for playing outdoors (more well-kept parks and playgrounds). Parents of a low socioeconomic status and poor education would like more quality television programmes for the youngest children. Furthermore, when it comes to fulfilling their parental responsibilities, parents living in cities would benefit from an appropriate venue in the community which they could use as a place of socialisation with other parents and children.

In addition to everything mentioned above, the importance of the information that may directly influence parental behaviour towards children was recognised. Thus, apart from the need to be better informed of their rights and access to assistance (extremely important for parents of a low socioeconomic status), parents express the need for new information on how to support the development of their child, which would empower them in their role as parents. Different groups of parents wish to receive such information via different media.

The priority needs of parents of children with developmental disabilities are focused primarily on the issues related to meeting the developmental needs of their children, limited capacities of the existing services, lack of experts and information, complicated paperwork, labelling and discrimination of children with disabilities, and absence of an early intervention. The most important need is the need for a greater transparency and coordination of services within health, education and social care systems.

## **AVAILABILITY AND USE OF SERVICES FOR THE SUPPORT OF PARENTING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

### **» Health care services for mothers and children**

Although the majority of parents leave the maternity ward satisfied, a significant proportion of the parents of six-month-old and one-year-old children was not satisfied with the attitude of the medical staff towards mothers, while a smaller number of parents listed several other remarks regarding the situation in maternity wards. These results encourage new initiatives with the aim of improving the conditions in maternity wards further.

The visit of a visiting nurse after childbirth is one of the most widely used services for parents, which included almost all families. Parents regard the visit of a visiting nurse as very useful in the part related to questions concerning the physical care of a new-born child. However, there is a need for improving the knowledge and skills of visiting nurses in the area of breastfeeding support and empowering mothers and fathers for parenthood.

Breastfeeding support by the primary health care professionals (paediatricians and general practitioners) is unsatisfactory. The results of the research show that less than two thirds of the parents received the information about breastfeeding from a visiting nurse, and less than a quarter from a paediatrician/the child's physician. Furthermore, there is a significantly smaller proportion of those who found such information very useful. Appropriate activities are required to harmonise the practices used by paediatrician and general practitioners related to breastfeeding support and introducing supplementary food, with the contemporary international recommendations.

Parents in rural areas have a significantly more limited access to health and other experts on the primary health care level, and the same was found for parents living in Istria, Primorje and Gorski kotar, and Lika and Banovina (compared to those living in Zagreb and the northern Croatia). The differences in the perceived availability of health services were also identified with regard to the education and socioeconomic status of the parents, which must be taken into account when planning measures for improving the availability of health and other forms of professional care for mothers and children from the infant to pre-school age.

The data collected from parents of children with developmental disabilities, neuro risks and chronic diseases indicate a need for creating cooperation between maternity wards and service providers for parents and children with developmental deviations/risks or early intervention networks in order to improve the child's development and strengthen the child's family. Similarly, it is necessary to develop a multidisciplinary system for controlling developmental deviations and pay more attention to parents, who notice developmental deviations first, in order to ensure their early detection and a prompt support.

### **» Pre-school education services**

The Croatian pre-school education system is characterised by sharp and persistent regional differences, both in the coverage of children by pre-school programmes and their quality (i.e. the children-teacher ratio, presence of a team of experts), and in the modalities of their (co)financing, which do not enable all children equal access to an affordable and quality early education. Half of the parents consider that they have, in financial terms, poor or mediocre access to pre-school institutions, and that it is one of the main difficulties faced by parents as regards the enrolment of their children in preschool programmes. Therefore, not only should pre-school education programmes be made more affordable in the future, but the equality of the system of its (co)financing, which now varies according to the decisions of individual local communities, should also be improved.

Another cause of concern is the fact that children from families of a lower socioeconomic status are left outside the pre-school education system significantly more often, while, in the end, those children “benefit” the most by being included in such forms of care.

The decision of parents to rely on informal forms of care that are available to them is not always the result of insufficient capacities and financial (un)affordability of pre-school education programmes. In order to make equal chances and rights to be included in publicly funded pre-school education programmes to all children, along with increasing their availability and affordability, it is necessary to influence the attitudes of the public by emphasizing the positive aspects of early upbringing and education (especially as regards the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills) so as to encourage those parents to whom informal forms of care are available to enrol their child in a kindergarten. A stronger commitment of the policy makers to guarantee the right to children to be included in pre-school programmes (at least for the older age group), as well as raising awareness of parents and the wider community of the effects of the (non-)inclusion of children in quality pre-school education programmes for their future chances in life, would contribute to that aim.

Up until the beginning of the research, 16 % of six-year-old children who had to start primary school had neither been included into a kindergarten nor pre-school programme. Pre-school programmes were also more rarely attended by children whose parents were poorly educated, of a low and lower middle socioeconomic status, from rural areas, or with three or more children. The figures for the enrolment of children with developmental disabilities, children with neurorisks and other diseases in kindergartens and pre-school programmes are the same as those for children with normal development. According to the data collected from a surveyed sample of parents, 55 % of children with developmental disabilities are enrolled in a kindergarten, and 17 % of children with developmental disabilities are enrolled in a pre-school programme, which is a proportion that corresponds to the sample of children from the general population. These data indicate equal participation. However, since children with developmental disabilities require additional support apart from physical inclusion in order to participate in all activities as equals and to fulfil their potential, additional activities are required to achieve this.

#### **» Availability and use of parenting support services**

The results indicate a poor availability of services aimed at strengthening parental competences in the community. With the real shortage of such services, insufficient or inefficient information that parents receive about them also contributes to their perceived unavailability. A third of the parents surveyed stated that they did not know whether different services of this kind existed in their community.

When it comes to parenting support services, parents mostly used courses for expecting mothers/future parents – one in five parents has participated in them. This service, as well as most of other parenting support services, was more rarely used by parents of a low socioeconomic status, poor education and from rural areas.

Next ranked on the list of most frequently used services are those used by one in ten parents to one in a hundred parents. They are the following: individual counselling with a paediatrician on issues of parenting (10 %), developmental gymnastics for mothers and babies (5 %), other programmes for joint participation of parents and their children (offered by kindergartens, churches, NGOs, libraries etc.) (5 %), breastfeeding support groups (4 %), individual counselling with a psychologist or a pedagogue (4 %), socialisation and support groups (in associations of parents of children with developmental disabilities or in churches) (2 %), the “Let’s Grow Together” workshop programme for parents (1 %), or some other group work programme for parents (educational workshops or parenting schools) (1 %).

Only a half of parents were satisfied with the quality and diversity of support services for parents of the youngest children in community. Parents of a low socioeconomic status and parents from rural areas were somewhat less satisfied with them.

The following obstacles to access to the necessary parenting support, child education, health care and/or other services for children were identified: the lack of services, unaffordability, and poor access to those services, or a lack of information that would enable parents to access them. Finally, parents clearly state that it is up to the community to continue investing effort in improving the formal parenting support system in order for the services provided to actually contribute to the quality of life of parents and children in the community.

A low socioeconomic status of parents consistently proves to be a “double risk”. On one hand, it is characterised by multiple attributes and circumstances representing a risk factors for positive parenting (e.g. more parental stress, less informal support, more lack of confidence in experts). On the other hand, a low socioeconomic status is also accompanied by a lower perceived availability, accessibility and affordability of parenting support services and other services for parents and children in the community. Therefore, the existing services do not contribute to the improvement of internal parenting resources in parents of a low socioeconomic status by strengthening their abilities to protect their health, stimulate psycho-physical development and prevent difficulties in their child’s infancy. When planning further activities for making parenting support services more accessible to parents, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that, with the focus on strengthening parental competences or the welfare of children, they should also be aimed at improving the welfare of parents, and take into account different ways parents themselves perceive their need for support.

Parents of children with developmental disabilities are more informed about the existence of services for children and parents, and they have used them more. However, they used those services aimed mainly at children with developmental disabilities, and rarely used those intended for empowering the parents themselves. The parents underline the fact that they pay the expenses for such services necessary for their child’s development themselves, that they need to travel to reach them, and that there are long waiting lists everywhere. Parents are aware of the

fact that the early intervention system has not been established yet and that this deprives their children of equal chances for development. There is a poor provision of services for parents of children with developmental disabilities offered by institutions, and most of the parental support programmes are carried out by NGOs.

## PARENTAL NEEDS FOR SUPPORT AND THE AVAILABILITY OF PARENTAL SUPPORT SERVICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REPRESENTATIVES

### » **Service providers' perspective**

Regarding some of the key questions of the survey conducted with parents, the opinions of 26 experts (paediatricians, visiting nurses, kindergarten psychologists and social workers from family centres and social welfare centres) who provide information and support to parents in their parental role were gathered in four cities of different sizes and economic development.

According to the experience of the experts interviewed, parents of the youngest children usually refer to expert support services motivated by a need to reduce uncertainties and to improve parental competences, or by parenting support programmes that respond to the needs of parents. Parents also contact experts to solve problems connected with their child's behaviour, development or health, but also following encouragement or an order by the institutions/experts chartered to care for the welfare of children.

Experts recognise the periods of pregnancy and early childhood as a time when parents are the most interested in learning about parenthood and in becoming involved in universal parental competences strengthening programmes offered by the community.

Most experts recognise parents of children with developmental disabilities and parents in high-conflict divorces as subgroups of parents with specific or additional needs for support in their parental role. Very rarely parents of a low socioeconomic status or other vulnerable groups at risk of social inclusion are also mentioned as such.

In comprehending the characteristics of a cooperative relationship between experts and parents, as well as the experiences of their establishment, certain differences must be mentioned between medical and psychosocial experts, as well as between the institutions in which they work. Experts of all profiles express a need for contemporary knowledge of positive parenting, communication skills and building a partnership with parents. They also mention a lack of knowledge as regards the evaluation of the efficiency of their own work. In the context of the necessity of a further development of their own professional competences of paediatricians in support to parenting, a need was expressed for a better availability of non-medical experts in the area of counselling on matters of parenting and deviations from child's regular development.

Experts who provide services to parents through the health, pre-school education and social welfare systems point out a lack of recognition of the needs of parents of children in the period between birth and primary school enrolment as regards parenting support, as well as a general unavailability of services and experts in the field of child health and development for this age group.

The lack of experts, or a great number of children or families under the care of the existing paediatrician, kindergarten psychologists and experts from social care centres, and lack of efficient services and programmes intended for empowering parents for responsible parenthood were identified as the main obstacles to the access of parents and children to experts. This was not equally expressed in all surveyed locations, but varied depending on the city or the county where the particular expert was coming from.

The unwillingness of parents to seek professional help was also identified as an obstacle to receiving professional parenting support. This is due to the characteristics of parents, such as a lack of proper insight into their child's needs, and the effects of their own parental behaviour, being uninformed about the services and their providers, and a fear of stigmatisation.

A part of service providers strive to develop the means to overcome these and other obstacles in order to ensure that parenting support services are available to all parents, not only to those in a more advantageous position. In this context, it is necessary to underline the value of the so-called progressive universalism, founded on the idea of universal services for all parents as a means of realising their right to parenting support. However, this approach also implies additional activities of making services more accessible or adjusting them for parents who rarely respond to invitations to participate in universal services, in order to ensure that they are actually universally accessible and used. Additional support to vulnerable groups of parents is often a prerequisite to them being able to participate in support programmes intended for all.

The results obtained, together with the findings from other research projects, indicate the importance for experts, communicating with parents of the youngest children, to know that many parents need support in their role as parents, recognise and understand it as an opportunity to support the realisation of the child's developmental potential (as well as to prevent possible issues or difficulties concerning parenting or the child's development in the future). It should also be recognised that this includes care for the personal welfare of parents.

#### **» Public administration representatives' perspective**

The subject of recognition the needs of children aged 0-6 and their parents, and the availability of pre-school education services, health care, social welfare and other services for children, parents and families in the community was also discussed with representatives of the administrative departments and services of the local and regional self-government, responsible for these areas.

With regard to the existing parental support services available to parents in the period between childbirth and the child's enrolment in primary education, the analysed communities may be divided roughly into communities with a poorly developed network of parenting support services and communities with a developed network of parenting support services. These communities differ in their understanding of the role and significance of social support to parenting. Thus, communities with a poorly developed network of services build on the deficit model, where parenting support is seen more as a "help" to parents in adverse circumstances, whereas communities with developed services implement parenting support in the context of the development and quality of life of the community. Parenting services thus become a part of the development of the entire community, while the funds spent on parenting represent an investment in its development, not a cost of helping disadvantaged persons. In other words, it is an approach that, instead of mitigating harmful effects of problems, strives to invest in the development of the human capital and the quality of life of the family and community.

Communities with a more developed network of services pay more attention to assessing the needs of its population, and strive to make informed decisions based on facts and data. In the same way, they make an effort to plan long-term and develop partnerships with other stakeholders in their community, e.g. through a participatory process of defining the public health and social priorities of the community that serve as criteria in the funding of programmes for public needs. The same approach may be recommended to other communities as well. A more coherent national parenting support programme on one hand, and more opportunities for an exchange of experience and examples of good practice between local/regional self-governments on the other hand, would provide impetus for such an approach. In this way, different stakeholders would be better networked, and additional support would be provided for communities to identify their needs and find efficient ways to meet them through cooperation, exchange of experience and possible setting of common guidelines.

Prioritising the area of support to parenting and early child development requires greater investments both in parenting support services and pre-school education services. It implies that these services are not perceived as "social welfare services", but are, through a perspective of the economy and development, understood as a social investment that brings multiple benefits, leads to better developmental outcomes and, finally, improves the quality of life of the entire community.

## **ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

Research by different scientific disciplines shows that investment in early child development programmes is a very cost-effective investment, not only from the individual perspective of promoting the rights and welfare of children, but also from the social perspective. The better the social, economic, psychological and social conditions for the development of children in their early years of life, the greater the likelihood of the "optimization" of the children's development

potential and their productive participation in the society in the future. This is primarily true for equalizing chances in life through the use of early development programmes by the most vulnerable children, who grow up at risk of poverty, those who have parents who possess less personal and community parenting resources, or children who have developmental difficulties themselves, or are at a higher risk of difficulties.

In Croatia there is less investment in programmes and services intended for the welfare of children and families compared to the average figures for investments in parents/children in 27 member states of the European Union. While in the aforementioned EU member states the investments amount to 2.3 % of the GDP on average, in Croatia the figure is 1.6 % of the GDP. However, it is apparent that in recent years the children's service sector in Croatia has been expanding, primarily in the area of pre-school education. Other forms of services for pre-school children are still quite underdeveloped, only the establishment of family centres has indicated a certain positive trend in the area of such services in recent years. Money transfers intended for the welfare of children and parents are substantially lower in Croatia compared to other European countries.

With all the aforementioned social and economic reasons underlining the importance of greater investments in children and families in Croatia from the social perspective, this investment has become imperative due to a serious demographic deficit and the issue of the future sustainability of the pension system. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure a more detailed statistical monitoring and gathering of data related to investments in early child development in the period between birth and enrolment in primary education.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the results of the research show the society, particularly as regards policy makers, experts communicating with parents, and parents themselves, should be sensitised for the right of every child for his/her parents to receive support in fulfilling their parental responsibilities, as well as for possible consequences of the absence of the necessary support to parents of the youngest children.

It is necessary to influence the attitudes of the public to a series of issues in matters of parenting and early child development so that they could understand the important role of parents in their child's development, and the important role of the community in providing support to parents. It is also important to inform the public so that the parents know where and how they may get support in resolving issues of parenthood. This includes the efforts in "normalising" the use of parental support programmes in order to increase the number of parents participating in them as early as possible. At the same time, it is necessary to develop efficient parental support programmes adjusted to the heterogeneous needs of the parents and make them more accessible, including the needs of parents of children with developmental disabilities, and the needs of parents of a low socioeconomic status.

When planning and developing the appropriate activities, a document particularly dedicated to the development of parenting support serving as the basis of the current Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2012-2015 may be used: the Recommendation Rec(2006)19 of the European Council on policy to support positive parenting, which calls for the recognition of the importance of the family and parental role, and for the organisation of public policies and parenting support programmes with the following aims: **(1)** to create the conditions for positive parenting by ensuring that all who raise their children have access to the appropriate resources and that the society is open to accepting the needs of families with children and of parents; **(2)** to remove obstacles to positive parenting, particularly in the area of balancing parenting and paid work; and **(3)** to promote positive parenting by raising awareness and taking all the necessary measures for its realisation.

Finally, the opinions of parents of the youngest children and other participants of this research should serve in further discussions and planning of actions of various stakeholders as regards the realisation of rights and improvement of the welfare of children in different areas – from health and education to social policies and regional development policies. In the context of the development of policies aimed at promoting the rights and interests of children, it is crucial to recognise the main message of the scientific knowledge and data presented in this publication, which states that parents are at the centre of child support policies, and that parenting support benefits not only parents and children, but also the society as a whole.