

## **“ Early Intervention of Children with Disabilities in Preschool Institutions in Croatia”**

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### **Abstract**

The right of a child to quality care and education should be ensured from the first day of life because the Right to quality education is a basic precondition for improving the quality of a child's life and his capacity to function as a constructive member of society.

During the early years, the child needs support in its development and should receive that support from their parents and community. The environment in which a child lives is a significant factor in the quality and effectiveness of the child's early development and subsequent advancement. Early inclusion embodies the values, policies and practices that support the right of every child and his or her family, regardless of their child's abilities, to participate in a wide range of activities as full members of the family, community and society.

The goal of this paper is to emphasize the importance of early intervention for children of early and preschool age and the importance of early involvement in preschool institutions. The medical model in Croatia is still prevalent in terms of categorizing children with disabilities, and the social community continues to look at them through their impairment, but not through their skills and abilities.

Early inclusion of children with difficulties into preschool programs should be accepted as an integral part of education and as the first and crucial step in the path of an individual's overall development. The social community is responsible for creating a network of preschool programs that ensure, through quality early development, the realization of children's rights.

***Key words:*** *children's rights, early intervention, children with disabilities, preschool programs*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Respect of human rights is the foundation of freedom, equality, social justice, democracy and peace. The child's right to quality care and education should be provided from the first day of life, because their right to quality education is a basic prerequisite for improving the quality of a child's life and their ability to function as a constructive member of society (Mlinarevic, 2005). The Convention on Rights of the Child (hereinafter: CRC) (2001) mandates an obligation to the countries to develop a system of care and education which promotes the development of all children, and which is available to all children. Croatia, which has ratified the Convention, has become one of those advanced countries that have taken on the obligation to ensure and to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. Respect, protection and promotion of human rights is an obligation that arises from the Croatian Constitution, and on its realization depends the safety and welfare of the population and future generations. The child's progress in school and the development of their personality depends on their development in early childhood, when parents are the main educators and are responsible for the upbringing and development of the child (Article 18 CRC). This article obliges the signatory countries to provide support to parents in fulfilling their parental responsibilities.

### **1.1. EARLY INTERVENTION**

Equity for young children means more than being included in the same programs their peers attend, it may also mean access to specialized support, known as early intervention that can greatly influence children's development (Underwood, Valeo & Wood, 2012).

According to Pinjatela and Joković Oreb (2010), early childhood intervention includes a wide range of methods from a child's birth until their school age, with the aim of improving the health and well-being of children, their competencies, minimizing their developmental disabilities, mitigation of existing difficulties, the prevention of functional deterioration, promotion of adaptive parenthood and improvement of their functioning in the family. The Law on Social Welfare (OG [157/13](#), [152/14](#), [99/15](#), [52/16](#), [16/17](#), [130/17](#)) provides the Service of early intervention, which includes stimulating technical assistance to children as well as technical and advisory assistance to their parents, including other family members and foster parents of children, especially for some identified developmental risks or developmental disabilities of the

child. Early intervention should be based on thoughtful and realistic policies and practices, which must also be in accordance with existing resources, be sensitive to individual families, have significant Programs of professional and paraprofessional education and apply existing knowledge into daily practice (Guralnick, Albertini, 2006). It turned out that the program of early intervention is the most effective, if it is applied immediately after determining deviations or detection of disability (Wrightslaw, 2008). Sloper (1998) states the importance of holistic approach, assessment and meeting the families' needs, building relationships between parents and professionals, flexible and individualized approach, focusing on parental interests and recognition of the importance of parental perceptions of the hierarchy of their needs and recognition of parental expertise regarding to the child and family. Characteristics of Early intervention programs that pose challenges of defining and assessing quality include a wide range of services, individualized needs and care of children and families, multiple children and family goals and subjective nature of many of the desired features quality (Sloper, 1998). Numerous studies show that services directed to families have features that contribute to positive outcomes for children and their families (Watson and Gati, 2012). Bailey et al. (1999) state how studies indicate that a higher quality environment for the care of children is linked with a better developmental outcome for the child. Although, a survey that focuses on the quality of the environment for childcare provides a more valuable theoretical framework for conceptualizing the quality of early intervention for the unique needs of children with disabilities and their families, and the different characteristics of early intervention programs limit the extent to which the framework should be generalized. The impact on early childhood development should be accepted as an integral part of basic education, as a first and crucial step on the way to the individual's overall development. The social community is responsible for creating a network of preschool programs to ensure the realization of children's rights through quality early development.

## **1.2. INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL MODEL**

Early care and encouragement of early development in integrity of influence represent a holistic approach to the child, which includes a wide array of services for children from birth to entering primary school. While in the past the primary goal of preschool education was preparing the child for school, preschool programs are now oriented to the development of the child's abilities and all parts of its personality. Early childhood is the period of the most intense physical

and mental development when the child learns more quickly and easily. During those early years, a child needs support in its development and this support should come from their parents and from the community. The environment in which a child lives is a significant factor in the quality and efficiency of their early development and subsequent progression. However, we should not forget that the family is part of society and they share the fate of the community in which they reside. It is expected from the community to react whenever it is threatened, or when the family is unable to provide the conditions for such development. The community is responsible for creating a network of preschool programs to ensure the realization of the rights of the child to the quality of early development. The Theory of Ecological Systems by Urie Bronferbrenner emphasizes the importance of environment for the development and psychosocial adjustment of children. Especially at a young age and largely through life, human development takes place through reciprocal interaction of active, biopsychosocial development of the human organism and its personality, as well as through objects and symbols in its immediate external environment (Bronferbrenner, 1999). According to Bronferbrenner, the child is at the centre of the system, while layers of the environment spread around it in concentric circles, and to a greater or lesser extent influence their development, as well as the dynamic influences of society and culture manifested through politics, economics, expectations, and standards for the education of children (Darragh, 2007).

Like other children, children with disabilities have the same rights to a cheerful and carefree childhood in the company of their peers, and involvement in appropriate programs of early education. In contemporary educational practice, based on a humanistic-developmental theory, the notion of inclusion of children with disabilities is affirmed in the development of a regular system of early care and education. It assumes a higher level of respect for children with disabilities as equal participants in the system, regardless of their allocation to specific requirements and the provision of special assistance to any child whenever it needs it. An inclusive model affects prevention of marginalization and segregation of children with disabilities through high quality of education and socializing with peers. Inclusion in preschool education is a basic requirement of awareness of all participants in the educational process, in terms of the importance of inclusion of children with disabilities into regular preschool groups. The positive effects of inclusion are consciousness of the diversity and the possibility that children with disabilities develop with more incentives, obtaining the right to education and inclusion among

peers in accordance with their specific development opportunities and developing a sense of belonging to the group and the wider social community. Rafferty et Griffin (2005) indicate in their study that the differential levels of support found for children with specific disabilities, and those with severe disabilities, suggest that practitioners must be provided with training strategies to enhance their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and their ability to work effectively with all children.

### **1.3. EARLY CHILD CARE AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN CROATIA**

Croatia is one of the countries in which preschool education is a part of the educational system and includes programs for education, healthcare, nutrition and social welfare. Preschool education in Croatia was accepted as the first level of the educational system and implemented for children from the age of six months to school age. Preschool education is determined by the Preschool Education Act (1997, 2007, 2013) and the National Pedagogical Standard (2008). Preschool age is a particularly important stage in a child's development. The general goal of preschool education is to provide the child with personal development and the development of social skills required for the establishment of good relations with others (Milanovic, Stricevic, Males and Sekulic-Majurec, 2000).

According to the National Pedagogical Standard (2008), children with disabilities are included in the regular program or program of public needs of preschool education. Work programs for children with disabilities are conducted with children between the ages of six months old to school age, including children in: educational groups with regular programs, educational groups with special programs and special institutions. The Law on Preschool Education has established a priority for children with disabilities for enrolment in preschool institutions and co-financing of preschool programs. When enrolling in kindergarten, all children must have a medical document, which also shows the child's psychomotor development. Children with disabilities mostly have a Report and Opinion of the Social Welfare Centre.

During enrolment of children in kindergarten, parents take part in an interview with a special educator and a psychologist where they give the necessary information about the child's abilities and capabilities as well as its current development. Once the documents are collected and interviews with parents are finished, the kindergarten's professional team selects the appropriate educational group and preschool teachers for children with disabilities. The purpose of the

activities of the professional team is to study the reports and opinions for a child with disabilities and to propose and monitor educational and rehabilitation methods. The members of the professional team are: the Director, special educators, speech therapist, psychologist, pedagogue and health consultant. In collaboration with preschool teachers and parents, the professional team provides a specific educational program for work. The coordinator of the professional team for observation of children with disabilities is a special educator. Everyone from the institution should be involved in the inclusion process, which is confirmed by the following study.

The study that Mlinarević and Marušić (2005) conducted in kindergartens "Radost" and "Sjenčica" in Osijek on a sample of 20 educators indicated that educators are facing major challenges when it comes to their personal practice in the context of human rights to education. For obtaining a successful educational effect, it is important that educators develop a partnership with parents. This study led to the conclusion that educators know what the child's rights are and they also aware how these rights should be accomplished in the context of the kindergarten. For the inclusion of any child, we need keep in mind its entire personality which can be neglected if the inclusion is focused only on one aspect of the child (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Children have no political voice, so the adults who care for them are obliged to advocate for their best interests and they need to ensure that their rights, as well as the right to education, are being respected. Quality pedagogical work, besides teaching, child support and ensuring of supportive material environment, also involves the understanding and promotion of human rights of the child, as a precondition for improving children's lives and prosperity of the entire human society (Siranovic, 2012).

Children are insufficiently included in regular education because their development is lacking or it is estimated that they have an "intellectual disability." Relevant laws, regulations and acts which govern inclusive education and special educational needs should prevent such exclusion. Cross et al. (2004) conducted a study that leads to the conclusion that providers and parents who supported the decision to include the child with significant disabilities in community settings all had optimistic, clearly identifiable attitudes toward inclusion. This research study focused on the educational and therapeutic practices that facilitate the successful inclusion of young children with significant disabilities who are served in community childcare or preschool programs. When parents want to involve their child in a preschool institution, institutions and local departments of education are obligated by law to do everything in their power to remove barriers for admission

and participation of children with disabilities. Preschool institutions can collaborate with other institutions and communities in order to improve the educational opportunities and social conditions in their local community.

In Croatia, the perception of the demanding role of the preschool inclusive context is fully unexplored, as well as its assessment of all forms of support that it has in its work, and it is dependent on the policy of the organization at the local level. In a study on 476 of educators in the kindergartens of Primorje-Gorski kotar County, it was found that educators express hesitancy about the willingness to work in inclusive groups with a tendency to a positive attitude towards preschool involvement and assessment of a relatively lower level of competence in working with children with disabilities (Skocic-Mihic, 2011). While teachers of higher grades are more resistant to inclusion (Killoran et al. 2007), early childhood educators have been found to be philosophically more accepting of inclusion. They also state that many preschool settings are not inclusive and often do not welcome children with disabilities and their families. The results of this study demonstrate the dire need to focus on preschool settings and the inclusion of young children with disabilities. According to a study made by DeVore & Russell (2007), co-operative inquiry contributed to better understanding of how early care and education leaders in a rural community implemented professional practices that resulted in more coordinated preschool options for young children with and without disabilities. Co-operative inquiry involved first studying the extent to which inclusive practices were already in place within the community, and then engaging in action planning to expand such practices community-wide. The same is happening in Croatia, because the conditions for full inclusion of children with disabilities in early and preschool institutions still have not been not created, or because of the excessive number of children in groups, the lack of professional staff or readiness for inclusion from the institution.

The first aspect of successful inclusion is the ability of children with disabilities to attain the outcomes or goals stated on their Individual Family Service Plan or Individualized Education Program. Young children with disabilities can make “at least as much developmental progress in inclusive programs as they do in non-inclusive programs” (Cross et al., 2004). Children also must make gains in their individual development and in the acquisition of the knowledge and skills in the general education curriculum. Children with significant disabilities need the opportunity to

interact with typical peers to acquire typical patterns of social interactions. Successful inclusion means that the child's parents must be satisfied with progress being made (Cross et al., 2004).

#### **1.4. BARRIERS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

Booth and Ainscow, (2002) see Inclusive education as a two-way process: 1.) increased participation and learning, 2.) identification and reduction or elimination of barriers to participation and learning. Barriers that hinder or prevent an inclusive process and the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational institutions can be divided into 3 groups.

##### *1. Psychosocial barriers*

People with disabilities sometimes face negative attitudes and prejudices that arise as a result of a lack of information, ignorance and/or social distance. Typically, there is a misconception that children with disabilities are always sick, slow, boring, and that other children do not want to socialize and learn along with them.

Negative attitudes towards children with disabilities are the biggest barriers to children's access to regular education and the benefits from it. Those can be found in all levels: between parents, community members, preschools, schools, government officials and even among the children with disabilities. As a result, children with disabilities and their parents often develop low self-esteem, hide and avoid social interaction, which can lead directly to exclusion from education and social life. The best way to change the present negative attitudes is to increase contact with children and persons with disabilities, with information and education about their rights, needs and possibilities.

##### *2. Physical barriers*

Environmental barriers can prevent or hinder access to buildings and services and can create a sense of inferiority, confusion or even cause injuries. All the buildings in which institutions are located (health, cultural, educational ...) need to be accessible to everyone. This is best achieved using principles of inclusive design, based on respecting the needs that are common to all, and adjusting it or providing design solutions that meet specific requirements, such as for people with disabilities.

##### *3. Institutional barriers*

Institutional barriers illustrate the way in which social institutions contribute to isolation and exclusion from various forms of social life for individuals or groups because of their diversity,



social deprivation, ethnicity or gender. In all societies, there is a need to raise awareness about the fact that children with disabilities have the same rights and needs as other children.

Overcoming psychological, institutional and physical barriers presents an enormous challenge, but it is key to ensure inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

True inclusion will only happen if the right forms of support and resources are in place. Stimulating and appropriate environments can significantly affect the overall progress of the child and encourage development of their social competence. The quality of inclusion of children with disabilities in institutions of preschool education is determined partially by the quality of the context in which the process of inclusion is carried out (Killoran et al., 2007).

In Croatia the medical model is still prevalent, not only in terms of categorization of children with disabilities, but also when deciding on their education and employment in the future. Children with disabilities are still understood through their impairment, rather than through their capabilities, and experts are those who decide on the method of education, type and place of work and finally the way of living of people with disabilities. Although there are positive examples of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream systems of education, there is still a problem related to their full inclusion. Medical, charity, law and special education discourses of disability promote the idea that the problems which children with disabilities face in gaining access to early childhood settings and curriculum are caused by their impairments rather than by a disabling education system. Because of the dominance of these kinds of negative understandings about disability in society, and the fact that many people believe that children with disabilities are 'special' children, who have 'special educational needs' and therefore are in need of a 'special' education, the inclusion and teaching of children with disabilities in mainstream education can elicit significant negativity from teachers, management, other professionals and other parents (Purdue according to Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

## **2. CONCLUSION**

The development of their potential is a right of every child with disabilities. The community is expected to work on enhancing those rights and supporting parents in their parenting role. Inclusion in preschools is equally concerning participation of preschool personnel as to the inclusion of children with disabilities. Creation of inclusion comprises the reduction of all forms of exclusion. It refers to all those temporary or long-term pressures that get in the way

to full participation. These pressures may be the result of difficulties in communication between children and preschool personnel. Inclusion means reflection on beliefs and values that we input in our work and procedures in general, and then connect what we do with the inclusive values. These values mean equality, the importance of participation, the right to quality support in their environment and respect for diversity. Linking our actions with our values might be the most practical step that we can make towards improving our preschool institutions. Creation of an inclusive environment respects and recognizes diversity. This may require fundamental changes in activities and relationships in preschool institutions. This means that, while respecting differences, we avoid making hierarchies based on these differences. Historically speaking, attitudes towards children with disabilities has not always been absolutely welcoming and organized in the form which we are trying to establish today. This relationship has experienced transformations over time that generally followed the overall social progress and significant scientific discoveries. The idea of common education of children with and without disabilities gradually received its legal form. Increasingly more efforts are being made to include as much as possible the number of children with disabilities and integrate them into the educational system. Generally, it can be said that the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular kindergarten programs has multiple benefits, but also disadvantages or aggravating circumstances. The quality of inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool institutions is conditioned by the quality of the context in which the inclusion process is conducted. Stimulating and appropriate environment can significantly affect the child's overall progress and encourage the development of its social competence. However, it is important to consider all the relevant factors so that we understand the situation completely and get a clear picture.

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## SAŽETAK

Pravo djeteta na kvalitetnu skrb i obrazovanje treba osigurati od prvog dana života jer pravo na kvalitetno obrazovanje predstavlja osnovni preduvjet za poboljšanje kvalitete života djeteta i njegovu sposobnost da funkcionira kao konstruktivan član društva.

Tijekom ranih godina, dijete treba podršku u svom razvoju i tu podrška treba dobivati od svojih roditelja i zajednice. Okruženje u kojem dijete živi je značajan čimbenik u kvaliteti i učinkovitosti djetetovog ranog razvoja i kasnijeg napredovanja. Rana inkluzija utjelovljuje vrijednosti, politike i prakse koje podržavaju pravo svakog djeteta i njegove obitelji, bez obzira na djetetove sposobnosti, sudjelovati u širokom rasponu aktivnosti kao punopravnih članova obitelji, zajednice i društva.

Cilj ovog rada je naglasiti važnost rane intervencije za djecu rane i predškolske dobi te važnost rane uključenosti u predškolske ustanove. U Hrvatskoj još uvijek prevladava medicinski model u smislu kategorizacije djece s teškoćama u razvoju, a društvena zajednica i dalje ih promatra kroz njihovo oštećenje, ali ne i kroz njihove sposobnosti.

Rano uključivanje djece s teškoćama u razvoju u predškolske programe trebalo bi biti prihvaćeno kao sastavni dio obrazovanja, kao prvi i presudni korak na putu cjelokupnog razvoja pojedinca. Društvena je zajednica odgovorna za stvaranje mreže predškolskih programa kojima se osigurava ostvarivanje prava djece kroz kvalitetan raniji razvoj.

***Ključne riječi:*** *dječja prava, rana intervencija, djeca s teškoćama u razvoju, predškolski programi*