

# COOPERATION OF PARENTS AND PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS IN PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL

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## Abstract

In order for the transition from preschool to elementary school to pass with as little stress as possible, it is very important to prepare both the child and the parents. In the new, school environment, the phase of new experiences and challenges for the child begins. The child needs to adjust to the new rules of behavior, sit in one place and follow certain activities for a long period of time until their end. Furthermore, their ability to learn and perform tasks is constantly assessed. Also, it is the first test of a child's social, emotional, intellectual, and other abilities. In order for a child to be able to meet the new requirements, they need to be mentally and emotionally mature enough to start school. On the way to prepare for school, the cooperation of parents and preschool institutions is necessary, and their common goal is for the child to become independent, self-aware, self-confident, and accepted in the new environment. Cooperation between parents and preschool teachers is based on two-way communication, joint decision-making, and encouragement of the child's development and learning. Two-way communication in this relationship is very important because both parties possess information that is important to share with each other in order to achieve the set goals in relation to the child, parents, and preschool teacher. Quality cooperation has three important characteristics: equality, activeness, and responsibility of both the parents and the preschool teacher. Equality means that the goals and obligations related to the upbringing of the child are shared, activeness means that the development of the child is encouraged and responsibility implies that both parties have their duties and rights. It is also important to emphasize that cooperation is based on mutual trust and respect. What is the importance of cooperation between parents and educational institutions? This type of cooperation results in the parent's better understanding of the work in the kindergarten, and later in the school, increases in their parenting competencies and in that way correctly providing help and support to the child, thus increasing the quality of the child's care. The child also benefits from cooperation. They achieve better success in kindergarten and school, increase their self-confidence, successfully overcome difficulties, believe that their parent can help them, and value education as a part of their life. With the cooperation of all participants, the quality and successful transition of the child from preschool to elementary school is achieved.

The main goal of this paper will be to present the characteristics of the child's development and readiness for elementary school, to describe quality cooperation and forms of work with parents, and to determine their well-being. In particular, the roles of all factors of cooperation will be considered.

Keywords: child, cooperation, parents, preparation for school, preschool institution.

## 1 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL AGE

Childhood is a period of rapid and complex development that affects a person's later development and their understanding of subsequent and more complex behaviours. Knowing about a child's motor, cognitive and socioemotional development is very important for knowing how to approach a child. When we are well-informed about the child's development, we are able to make changes in the child's life and resolve the problems that children and parents face. The most important goal therefore is to create optimal conditions for the child's development.

Child development is a dynamic process that takes place within a certain social context, which is in turn influenced by hereditary and environmental factors, as well as by the development of neurological structures (brain, nerves etc.). In Starc et al. [1], the authors emphasise the importance of a holistic approach to the study of child development, setting out the following principles:

- development begins before birth;
- development has several interrelated facets. This includes physical, cognitive, emotional and social development, all of which are interrelated and progress simultaneously. Therefore, any development intervention approach affects all areas of development;

- development occurs in predictable increments, while learning takes place in recognisable sequences, which further allow for individual variability with regard to the child's rate of development and their learning style;
- development and learning occur as a result of the child's interaction with people and the objects surrounding them;
- the child is an active carrier of their own development.

The following are the basic characteristics of the physical, intellectual and socioemotional development of a preschool-age child. Physical maturity is an indicator of a preschool-age child's good development and health and is considered a prerequisite for proper mental and social development. In order for a child to withstand the physical and mental strain that awaits them when they start school life, their physical development needs to be at a satisfactory level. Their level of physical maturity is assessed based on certain parameters, such as the height and weight of the child. The average height of a six-year-old boy is about 120 cm, while the average height of a six-year-old girl is 117 cm. The average weight is the same for boys and girls, about 20 kg. The motor skill development of a preschool-age child occurs through learning and exercise, which includes balance training, strength, speed and mobility [2]. In addition to height, weight and adjusting to a new sleep rhythm, a child's physical maturity or readiness includes bladder and bowel control. Most children establish this control between the ages of three and five at the latest. The physical development of a preschool-age child includes the development of motor skills that take place in stages, manifesting in posture improvement, movement development and object manipulation. According to Starc et al. [1], seven distinct basic motor skills in preschool-age children may be distinguished: balance, coordination, strength, speed, flexibility, precision and endurance. Balance involves maintaining a coordinated body position, static and dynamic balance being the two distinguished types. Coordination, moreover, encompasses the dexterity and ability to move the whole body skilfully, as well as hand movements, learning speed, performing certain movements and performing complex motor reactions. Strength is developed through exercise and involves muscles which move the body. Speed is the ability allowing for the fast and precise execution of simple tasks. Flexibility is manifested in the performance of certain large-amplitude movements. Precision means performing precisely defined and directed movements and mostly depends on the emotional state of the individual. The last skill is endurance, which primarily depends on motivation, and implies performing a certain action over a longer period and with varied intensity [1]. In order for a child to adapt to school life and do schoolwork successfully, it is important for the child to have developed senses, primarily sight and hearing in order to get to know the world around them [3]. Health and proper physical development contribute to the child's self-confidence, to their position among peers and their positive self-image. Furthermore, the prerequisite for this is that the child adapts to school life as easily, quickly and successfully as possible and that they overcome the struggles they may encounter. Precisely because of these situations that make up the child's daily life, physical maturity for school requires, among other things, that the child have no difficulty when standing, moving independently, sitting, feeding independently etc. The motor skills of a preschool child need to be developed enough that they walk independently, run, dress themselves and have uniform muscle mobility. These skills are considered to be the main prerequisite for the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Before first-year enrolment, a school doctor examination is mandatory. The doctor assesses the child's physical maturity needed to start the first year of primary school.

The level of intellectual development of a child is extremely important in order for them to be able to respond to school demands, which are primarily of an intellectual nature. Furthermore, this intellectual development refers to speaking and communication skills that are considered the basis for human interaction and the process of learning and teaching [3]. Intellectual development evolves the fastest in preschool age, as is confirmed by numerous studies, which is why during kindergarten special attention is paid to quality intellectual exercises. A preschool child is an explorer who observes the world and its ways, they marvel at what is unknown to them, they are curious, they ask a series of questions and they get to know and perceive their own environment through their senses [4]. The preschool period is important for the intellectual development of the child, when the goal is to expand children's knowledge of the environment in which they find themselves and to motivate them to seek new knowledge. Cognitive development refers to mental processes that help a child understand the world around them and adapt to it. The main processes that form the basis of cognitive development are the gradual development of internal representations, the use of symbols for persons and objects and the gradual development of thought operations such as comparison, analysis, synthesis, reversibility, abstraction and generalisation [1]. Intellectual maturity is the result of long-term development, encouragement and exploitation employment of the child's mental abilities and potential for acquiring knowledge, skills,

habits, as well as their openness to new experiences. By actively engaging with the environment, spending time in nature, moving in space, using different materials, having producing varied and various effects on the environment and on objects, the child becomes aware of the changes they deliver in their environment, they perceive relationships between objects and compare them based on similarities or differences. The intellectual maturity of a preschool child is manifested in adequate speech development, the development of perception, thought and memory, which are closely related to the ability of holding attention [5]. During the period of preparing the child for school life, the child independently expresses their own opinions, attitudes and desires. In preschool, the child speaks fluently and correctly, they can put phonemes together into a word, they can recognise the initial phoneme of a word and they are able to hear a given word as a whole and distinguish it from another. A child knows about 3000 words at this age, but in one day they are able to use only about a hundred words [3]. Markulin and Simić [6] use the term “intellectual-cognitive maturity”, which implies developed and realistic thought, the ability to reason, solve problems, distinguish, understand analogy, have a grasp on spatial and temporal orientation, understand quantitative relations, having the ability to concentrate and pay attention for 20 minutes or longer, as well as to participate in school work and learning. The preschool child can notice and name basic colours, and they can also distinguish transitional tones. Also, by the time they start school, the child starts conceptualising spatial relationships using the words left, right, forward, backward, up, down etc. Before going to school, children will have formed an idea of space, so they are able to draw simple situations in space that are well known to them. It has been shown that children who are insecure when perceiving space and spatial orientation often experience more serious difficulties when learning to read and write [4]. A child between the ages of five and six is intent on learning and exploring the environment around them, thus making progress in regulating their own attention. Their attention span is longer and it is harder to distract them; they focus on the aspects of the tasks before them, while also neglecting irrelevant details. The child systematically scrutinises the possibilities of a given activity they are engaged in. They are able to single out objects by one or sometimes two properties, they understand natural phenomena and social relations, they form categories consisting of several objects, connect symbols, objects or phenomena that are similar to each other and they have an increased interest in letters, texts and books. Also, they begin to compare sizes, distinguish and name shapes like squares, cubes, triangles; they single out objects that do not belong to a group according to shape. They distinguish between today and tomorrow, are interested in the clock and the calendar, they can name seasons and days of the week, but they do not know which day precedes and which follows; they also are able to identify the time of day, observe objects in motion and speed. In addition to this, children at this age show interest in numbers, understand the finiteness of life, but not that death is an integral part of life; their memory improves, which contributes to reasoning and their problem-solving skills. Their intentional memory also improves, they plan how to solve a problem based on different experiences and ideas, they begin to recognise the mechanism behind devices and machines, ask numerous questions and ask about the meaning of words they do not understand. The child develops metamemory, i.e. they realise that they remember familiar things more easily than what is unknown to them, but at the same time they overestimate their own capabilities. Furthermore, there is an increase in accuracy and range of memory, the child remembers what they find interesting, they use all forms of strategy for meaningful and intentional problem solving, they have newly-formed ideas, they discover the laws and principles of work, and they imagine specific hypothetical situations [1]. The development of a preschooler’s memory depends on their preferences, ability to think logically and their activities. The ability to think logically develops before the child begins school, in line with the development of major thought about general or abstract concepts [3].

The preschool child gradually develops on the socio-emotional level and builds a relationship with themselves and the people around them. Over time, the child begins to notice and understand the emotions of people who are part of their environment. Before going to school, the child needs to be emotionally stable in order to accept the situation before them, as well as the conditions that await them, all in order to more easily acquire new knowledge and establish social relationships with their peers and the teacher. Preschool children show their own feelings, adapting them depending on the situation, and they also express anxiety and fight for their position in society. Emotional stability is frequently singled out as an important prerequisite for a child’s successful adaptation to the school system, precisely because they become subject to evaluation, positive and negative criticism that needs to be accepted in the right way. In preschool, children are in a positive mood with positive thinking, they are tolerant and ready to face the challenges of learning new things, these primarily being success and failure, from which each child needs to take away valuable lessons for their own selves [3]. When a child gains emotional stability and control and is tolerant of frustration, they are then considered emotionally mature enough for school. Precisely because of this, the child will be persistent in learning even when the class material is not interesting to them, and they will be able to refrain from sudden expressions of emotion

[4]. The emotional maturity of a preschool child is manifested in stability and self-control. An emotionally mature child maintains their own emotions, they are persistent and direct their own attention to what is interesting and useful to them [5]. If a child is emotionally immature, they are more likely to become unmotivated, unable to control their own behaviour, and adhere to school discipline. This kind of behaviour results in poor social acceptance by peers, avoidance, teasing, lack of self-confidence and the motivation to learn. The emotional maturity of a preschool child is closely related to social maturity. It is generally implied that the child has friends with whom they spend time talking and playing every day and that they are accepted as an equal participant in their community. In preschool age, the child has adopted basic norms of behaviour, independently achieving their own goals, they are willing to cooperate and align their own desires and interests with the interests of their group [4].

The school clearly defines the rules of conduct that the child should follow and adhere to. When starting school, the child comes into contact with a large number of previously unknown people, they interact, make friends and fight for their own position among peers, which are often the main criteria for success and acceptance. In addition to the above, the social maturity of the child is manifested in the conscientious fulfilment of obligations, in adhering to the rules, in the interaction and mutual cooperation with teachers and peers. The child displays independence in everyday situations, they understand the feelings of the people around them and can identify with them. A socioemotionally mature child is well accepted by peers, is social and positive, adapts more easily to school and new responsibilities, is aware of their own abilities, has high self-confidence and is satisfied [7]. Children between the ages of five and six typically express emotions in a socially acceptable way. At that age, they mostly express anger because their plans and ideas are not being accepted, because their ego is hurt or because they are denied validation or their initiatives are dismissed. Expressing direct aggression is rare, whereas ridicule, swearing, bragging and mocking are common. The development of the concept of the self takes place through self-knowledge, self-evaluation and self-regulation. Around the age of five, the child knows that they cannot change their sex and adopts socially accepted gender behaviour. The child is still focused on physical characteristics but acquires knowledge about their own abilities and is able to discern basic emotions [1]. When it comes to self-esteem, a child between the ages of five and six can admit their own failure in front of others, is very sensitive to criticism and develops methods for failure avoidance, telling defensive lies in order to protect themselves from potential failure. Research shows that socioemotional maturity is necessary for the child's success in school, adjustment and positive self-development [8]. In addition, socioemotional development in children is associated with academic success, the successful realisation of social relationships with peers [9], is correlated with a more successful career and better mental health [10], as well as with greater social acceptance [11].

## **2 THE CHILD'S PREPARATION AND READINESS FOR SCHOOL**

A child's preparation for school begins long before they start school. Everything a child learns and adopts from birth will play a big role in this new impactful change in their life. The child should be taught independence from the start, they should be encouraged to overcome new challenges and it is crucial to be patient with them. Going to school is an important milestone for a child in itself, marked on the one hand by excitement and anticipation, and on the other, by possible stress and uncertainty. Since they find themselves in a new environment, are faced with new tasks and roles and meet new people, it is very important to enable the child to perform this transition as easily as possible. Preschool educators, parents and teachers, as well as other expert staff all play a key role in this adjustment. Whereas during preschool the child is in a less formal environment that is more play-oriented, school is much more structured. In order to successfully participate in classes, the child needs to be concentrated on class content and class exercises, they need to understand the content, follow the teacher's instructions, sit in one place for up to 45 minutes, accept that the classes change and that the breaks are short, behave appropriately in their peer group and adhere to other school rules.

Preparing a child for school refers not only to the period before coming to school, but also to the first months of schooling during which the child learns to adapt to school requirements. This is not a static point of readiness; rather, a long process of the child's adjustment to school [12]. A child's successful adaptation to school includes academic and cognitive skills as well as emotional and social adjustment [13]. Academic and cognitive adaptation is reflected in academic success, i.e., in mastering academic skills (writing, reading and arithmetic) and developing cognitive skills (memory, attention, verbal abilities, etc.). When a child displays positive emotions with regard to school, it is a sign of emotional adjustment. Social adjustment refers to good peer relationships, a good relationship with the teacher, acceptance of school norms, and appropriate participation and behaviour in the classroom. Dockett and Perry [14] state that parents and educators generally agree that the most important component of the transition to

school is social adjustment; however, they point out different aspects of this adjustment. While educators look at social adjustment through functioning well in a larger group, or through following teacher instructions and exhibiting independent behaviour (when called for), parents find it more important that the child successfully adapts to teachers in their new environment and has no problems separating from their parents. It is also very important for the child to work with their peers to make them feel accepted in the classroom and find their place in the group. Social adjustment largely affects emotional adjustment and easier social acceptance in school. Some schools abroad have so-called “buddy programs”, where slightly older students are paired with children who have started first grade [14]. They help them adjust to the new environment, spend class breaks with them and serve as an example of how to fit into the school environment.

School readiness and school maturity are very often used synonymously; however, they actually refer to slightly different concepts. As stated by Čudina-Obradović [15], the term “school maturity” is more a reflection of the child’s biological development (maturational aspect), while school readiness puts emphasis on adapting to school requirements, meeting the teacher’s criteria, learning advancement and the child’s ability to show it. While a child’s school maturity cannot be influenced, school readiness can be increased by preparing the child, i.e., exposing the child to similar experiences and encouraging them to practice their skills, express emotions etc. [12]. Nowadays, the somewhat outdated traditional concept of school readiness has come under criticism, since traditionally the emphasis is placed on the child’s individual abilities and characteristics. On the other hand, a new approach has been developed that deals with contextual factors in school and within the family, as well as the correlation of both. Researchers favouring this approach look at the processes of transition and early adjustment to school life through the prism of the readiness of the child, the readiness of their parents and the readiness of the school itself [16]. Čudina-Obradović [15] also follows this approach, analysing the new definition of readiness for school life, which includes the context of family, of the preschool institution, of teachers, of the school and of the wider community. The readiness of the parents manifests itself through active upbringing and the creation of the best possible atmosphere to foster the child’s curiosity and learning process. The readiness of preschool institutions refers to the higher number of programmes encouraging active learning, thought processes and the child’s initiative, the lower ratio of educators to children, continuous staff training, successful coordination with schools and good cooperation with parents. In order to welcome the child in the best possible way, the readiness of the teachers is also very important; their insight into the basic mastering of pre-maths and pre-reading skills by new students, the organisation of additional tutoring for children who are less well prepared, active collaboration and cooperation with parents, the organisation of a special format for working with children belonging to risk groups and daily monitoring of any changes. The school itself also contributes to the overall readiness of the child by recruiting children for first-year enrolment one year in advance, as well as through short programmes of indirect teaching, the organisation of educational meetings and workshops for the parents of soon-to-be students, the implementation of appropriate conditions for additional work with children belonging to risk groups, cooperation with preschool institutions etc. Its readiness is often reflected in the inclusion and integration framework it offers. The community, as a wider ecosystem, can also indirectly support the child’s readiness for school life through cooperation with the school and through offering various additional programmes as well as through funding and organising the continuous education of teachers and parents. Such an ecological approach, derived from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, focuses on the interaction of the different systems present in a child’s life in the process of shaping their readiness for school life [17].

The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) published, in 2013, the results of a study titled *What does “School-Ready” Really Mean?*, in which 519 respondents — both parents and educators — participated. The study showed that most respondents from both groups believed that, in order to be ready for school life, a child must have strong social skills, must be able to handle their emotions, be able to take care of themselves as well as be curious and have the desire to learn. It is interesting that, among all the respondents, only one-third of educators and one-fourth of parents believed that a child must learn basic skills, such as reading and writing, prior to starting school. Furthermore, 58% of educators and 40% of parents believed that the role of play in preparing children for school life was important and that it should be given greater emphasis, which is supported by various other studies [19], [20]. Additionally, almost half of all the respondents thought that the main obstacles in preparing children for school were the lack of communication with the parents and the school, as well as a lack of cooperation overall [18]. Whitebread and Bingham reiterate that all children, of any age, are willing to learn; the only question is what about. This is why they define readiness for school life as the “fixed standard of physical, intellectual and social development that enables children to meet the demands of school life and assimilate the curriculum that usually entails specific cognitive and linguistic

abilities” [21]. In addition to physical, intellectual and social readiness, it is necessary for the child to be medically, emotionally and motivationally ready to attend school. While some children are accepting of their school obligations, get their books ready and are able to sit still during a lesson, other children are still too playful and find it more difficult.

The usual criteria used to assess the readiness of children to attend school are chronological age as well as psychophysical maturity. Children who reach the age of six by 1 April of any given year are required to start attending school and undergo an assessment process to determine if they are sufficiently mature. If it is determined that a child does not meet the criteria of psychophysical maturity, first-year enrolment is delayed for one academic year. In the event that the same difficulties are also present in the following year, the child is assigned to an appropriate programme for covering the curriculum. In exceptional circumstances, early enrolment can be granted, as well as a temporary exemption from mandatory enrolment. Looking at the data on pre-enrolment and enrolment in primary schools of Zadar County<sup>1</sup> shows that, in the academic year 2018/19, 1788 children took part in pre-enrolment and 1638 of them enrolled, then in the academic year 2019/20, it was recorded that 1772 children took part in pre-enrolment, 1655 of whom enrolled and, in the academic year 2020/21, out of 1698 children taking part in pre-enrolment, 1625 enrolled. The differences between pre-enrolment participations and actual enrolments are due to decisions by the State Administration Office of Zadar County on the delay or temporary exemption from mandatory first-year enrolment reached in the cases of some of the children. The assessment of psychophysical maturity often entails determining what general information the child has regarding themselves, as well as their phonological awareness, visual memory, temporal and spatial awareness, vocal synthesis and analysis skills, reading and speaking, knowledge of numbers and colours, capacity to associate quantities with numbers, graphomotor skills, knowledge of everyday facts and concepts, problem-solving capacity, visual discrimination and oculomotor coordination. Their motivation, concentration, personality and willingness to cooperate are also assessed.

## 2.1 The Role of Parents

The parents are undoubtedly the ones who know their child the best. Therefore, in order to help the child as much as possible within an institutional programme, this knowledge should be utilised. The parents are the child’s first socialisers, and their assumptions, perception, expectations, hopes and fears affect the child’s preparation for school life [22]. Their approach to school is reflected in the emotions that the child experiences after transitioning from kindergarten to school life. In a child’s preparation for school, parental participation in the kindergarten’s transition framework is important (e.g., arranged visits to the school with the child, a short time spent with the child in the classroom, being involved with the child’s obligations, supporting the child etc.), as well as developing a rapport with the primary school teacher [16]. In 2004, Taylor et al. [16] pointed out two groups of studies in their analysis of the literature on the influence of parents on the readiness of children for school life: research on “what parents do” and research on “who parents are”. Research on “who parents are” mostly looks at family characteristics such as socioeconomic status, parents’ personality traits, their level of education, personal attitudes to school etc. Since parents are a model for their children’s behaviour, a child will more often than not take on their parents’ unconscious attitudes, as opposed to what their parents are actively telling them. If a parent tells the child that learning in class is really interesting but invests little effort into staying informed and helping the child with their schoolwork, the child may slowly lose interest for learning. Congruence between who parents are and what they do is essential for setting a clear example. Active parental participation in the child’s school obligations and monitoring their progress is an encouraging factor in the child’s preparation for and adjustment to school life. What stands out in particular is the way parents and children spend their leisure time. A parent can incorporate teaching their child about everyday activities and concepts into play during leisure time. This includes identifying and naming colours and shapes, categorising different animals depending on their characteristics, distinguishing and grouping objects of similar shapes, learning about quantities, determining the position of objects in physical space and describing living beings, objects etc. [23]. Organising group activities for all family members, spending leisure time together, mutual trust, good communication and emotional warmth as well as respecting individual freedom within agreed-upon boundaries enables creating a healthy and encouraging family environment [24].

The role of parents is also observable in examples of negative influence on the child’s school development. Risk groups in terms of negative influence include families where parents (especially mothers) have lower levels of education, single-parent families and families of lower socioeconomic

<sup>1</sup> The data was obtained from the State Administration Office of Zadar County.

status [17]. An insufficiently motivating family atmosphere is a risk factor for poor school development and readiness for school life. Ljubetić [26] believes that it is the duty of the parents, in the context of preparing the child for starting school, to establish a continuous appropriate atmosphere at home in which learning is valued and encouraged and in which positive attitudes on education are nurtured. Ljubetić also highlights the “socialisation skills learned from parents at home” on which the adjustment of students to school and their academic success depends. This includes rule-setting and monitoring, the expectations placed on children regarding academic achievements, communication relating to school and parenting styles. It can be concluded that starting school is as important for children as it is for their parents, who view this transition as a test of their parenting abilities. Parents are thus often riddled with questions about how well the child will manage, whether they will adequately meet all the demands school life has, what kind of academic results they will have and whether they will become a self-dependent individual who will contribute to society.

## **2.2 The Role of Preschool Institutions**

Children attending kindergarten or short preschool programmes achieve readiness for school life more easily [17]. Research shows that children who spend time in kindergarten before attending the first year of primary school are better socialised, more emotionally mature, are able to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and have learned a set of other skills to serve as a foundation for those they are to learn in primary school, as well as that they are, at the end of the day, more ready for the transition from preschool to primary school than children who did not go to kindergarten [27]. According to Čudina-Obradović [15], preschool programmes incite the child's thought processes, direct attention to specific tasks and help develop an understanding of basic notions of quantity, relationships between concepts, the meaning and structure of speech and transferring speech to writing (graphomotor skills). The stimulative kindergarten environment is of greater significance for children coming from largely deprived backgrounds than for children who have access to the same stimulative conditions at home [12]. Research shows that education in kindergartens has a positive influence on academic success and the development of maturity, particularly in children of lower economic status. This is precisely why, in kindergartens, emphasis is placed on the child's independence while performing tasks, as well as on creative and imaginative play [28]. A kindergarten, as a teaching environment, views children as intelligent, competent and sensible individuals who acquire knowledge through working with others and who are able to independently organise their own activities as well as successfully interact with their peers. Because of this perception of children, a kindergarten structures a many-faceted and encouraging environment in which children take action, are independently creative, participate in self-organised activities, skilfully communicate and are happy to share their own opinions [29]. The process of preparing a child for school life, as well as life in general, commences with their enrolment in kindergarten and with participating in all the activities offered so the child could further their overall psychophysical, emotional and social development.

Since 2015/2016, it has been mandatory in Croatia for children who are required to start attending school to go through a preschool programme during the year preceding their first-year enrolment. The significance of preschool programmes for the transition to school lies in gradually preparing children for more active participation and schoolwork, helping form habits and teaching children how to function in a group. It has been found that children attending kindergarten is correlated to higher levels of their motivation towards achievement, more active participation in schoolwork, better motor and graphomotor skills, the desire to stand out and higher social and emotional maturity [12]. In a kindergarten, as a teaching environment, learning should be considered a lifelong process that extends far beyond the boundaries of a specific stage of life or the corresponding stage of formal education. Because of this, the role of an education institution should be preparing students to master the process of learning and to fuel their desire to learn [29]. Preschool institutions that have an established practice of good cooperation with parents and schools also have a higher number of transitional activities, i.e., activities for getting gradually familiarised with school life. Examples of such activities include teachers visiting kindergartens (more practicable in smaller towns) as well as visits by schoolchildren in order to give accounts of affirmative experiences [30]. In any case, building a bridge between a preschool institution and primary school is of great significance for the child, effecting a smoother transition from their previous education environment to a new one.

## **3 COOPERATION OF PARENTS AND PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS**

The cooperation of parents and preschool institutions is based on their shared focus on the child, i.e., on the fact that all involved in the growth and development of the child are responsible for ensuring and

providing the conditions in which these can occur in a healthy manner. Even though parents are primarily the ones responsible for their child, there is also an equivalent degree of responsibility of society/the state to create conditions enabling good parenting. It is thus the goal of institutions educating the child to find ways in which they will be able to meet the needs of parents and children, precisely through cooperation [31]. The period during which the child is preparing to start attending school is a very good opportunity to create partnerships between their family and education experts. Pierce and Bruns [32] highlight three elements important for preparing a child for school life: (a) a continuous coordination of the programmes and syllabi, as well as expectations, between kindergarten programmes and primary school programmes, (b) a positive relationship between the child and their family, school personnel, administrators and community personnel as well as (c) a continuous partnership between the family, kindergarten, school and community.

Some previous research shows that parental involvement in the work of education institutions contributes to a better readiness of the child for school life, as well as to the better development of their socio-emotional skills and reading and maths skills [33], [34], [35]. Preschool institutions and schools should thus continue finding ways to encourage parental involvement and to provide opportunities for educating families. Families are important in the exchange of information on family rituals needed to promote children doing well at school. Families can provide information on a child's learning style and their behaviour outside the kindergarten or school environment, on the unique family dynamics that could influence learning, as well as important information on a child's abilities and needs. Planning and organising meetings including educators, teachers and parents is very important; however, this type of practice that focuses on the needs of individual families is not being implemented often enough [26]. A study conducted by Nenadić-Bilan and Zloковиć [37] shows an insufficient degree of certain types of partnerships, which is why educators are not able to become fully familiarised with the context of the child's family and understand the child's needs and interests. Additionally, if educators do not cooperate with parents, they cannot understand their needs and potential difficulties in coping with their role as parents. However, in that very study, despite the insufficient degree of partnership achieved, the parents expressed a high level of satisfaction regarding their cooperation with educators. Preschool institutions and parents have a common goal: a healthy, self-confident, competent, well-raised and educated child. However, in order to achieve that goal, their cooperation has to be even more intensive. Ljubetić [25] points out the following reasons for the insufficient cooperation of parents and preschool institutions: inadequate awareness of the need for real cooperation, insufficient knowledge on the role and duties of educators (and others) in establishing, building, maintaining and deepening the relation between kindergarten and family, inadequate knowledge of parents about their role in the child's life and the rights stemming from that, insufficient competence of education professionals and the lack of necessary communication skills that are a prerequisite for building partnerships. Parents should be equal participants in the education of their children and the main allies of educators in creating the life in the kindergarten environment overall. Good communication enables both parents and educators to have mutual understanding and acceptance and enables the establishment of partnerships. One of the criteria for determining the quality of the education at a preschool institution is precisely the possibility of active parental participation in all aspects, including the preparation of children for attending primary school. By establishing good cooperation with parents, continuity in education is also achieved, and the child is enabled to grow in an environment that has a positive effect on the development of all their abilities and tends to their specificities. The child then feels safe, happy, accepted and content.

The partnership between parents and education institutions is influenced by many factors, but what is required here is to point out those that contribute to a good and successful partnership. In this sense, Ljubetić [26] highlights four fundamental factors: *the child in focus*, *constructiveness*, *clarity and concreteness* and *continuity*. Focusing on the child decreases the fear parents might feel of being judged and evaluated by experts. In this way, parents are enabled to learn and understand the way the child develops and exchange observations about the child, as well as the successes and difficulties of the child, with educators. The parents then feel accepted, valued and equal. Constructiveness refers to constructive communication and reciprocal exchange of information focusing on improving the child's development. This factor incites good discussions between parents and educators as well as between parents and children. Clarity and concreteness manifest the most during giving clear instructions and concrete strategies to parents for improving the child's learning process and their prosocial behaviour. In this manner, the potential obstacles relating to the differences between the education by educators and education by parents are made smaller. Continuity emphasises the continuous communication and exchange of information that maintain the involvement in the child's development and learning process. It is worth pointing out that, in this context, what is expected of the experts is proactivity and encouragement of communication during the entire pedagogical year and also during the entire



education cycle. The same author also points out that communication that focuses on the child increases parental responsibility and indicates the quality of the relationship between the child and their family.

While writing about the cooperation between parents and preschool institutions, Čudina-Obradović [15] highlights in particular that it is necessary to warn and educate parents to prepare the child for school life from early childhood. In addition, it is necessary for preschool institutions to include as many children as possible in programmes encouraging active learning and initiative because that is the best way to incite thought processes. Preschool institutions should have a lower ratio of educators to children and encourage continuous staff training. Together with schools, preschool institutions should establish common criteria for evaluating readiness for school and encourage cooperation with parents and first-year teachers. On the other hand, the community should provide material and organisational support to kindergartens and schools as well as create conditions for the mandatory inclusion of all children in day-long or short-term preschool programmes. The community should also make the verification and validation of preschool programmes possible, organise continuous educator training in workshops and courses, organise psychological and pedagogical education for pregnant women, future parents and parents of preschool children as well as, finally, organise the monitoring, visiting and advising of families at risk. In this manner, the cooperation between parents and preschool institutions is comprehensive and sound, and the child is in focus.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The preparation for and transition of a child from kindergarten to primary school is a stressful period for both the child and their parents, so it should be given particular time and attention. At this time, the everyday life of the child and their parents up to that point changes to include various obligations and demands that require adjustment. In this regard, it is important to be familiar with the characteristics of the child's development so they could be supported in every aspect. A child must be sufficiently ready and mature to attend school, physically, intellectually and socioeconomically. Primary school differs entirely from kindergarten and requires the child to behave differently and adjust to new conditions. Additionally, it is important that the child meet the prescribed height and weight requirements, be able to independently move and carry out certain tasks, be intellectually mature in order to follow the academic programme, be in control of their emotions, be tolerant to frustration and able to interact and cooperate with their peers. Parents and educators play the main role in recognising and resolving potential problems, encouraging the development of the child's abilities and creating a positive atmosphere of cooperation. The relationship between parents and educators is essential to this process. Both need to be open, tolerant, active, engaged and, above all, equal. However, it needs pointing out that the cooperation between parents and preschool institutions is still not satisfactory. Nowadays, parents are often too busy, and some are uninterested or unaware of how important cooperation with preschool institutions is. On the other hand, educators are expected to make great efforts, be well-trained, continuously further their training and follow the latest findings on child education in order to encourage cooperation with parents. Future research should examine what it is that affects the preparation of children for starting school and what the needs of parents as well as educators are within that process. This would facilitate the transition from one institution to the other and decrease the stress to both children and parents.

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