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### **Early provision and services for pre-school children in Croatian public libraries**

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In Croatia library initiatives to offer as many activities as possible in relation to children's reading have been an issue for more than thirty years. Special status which was given to the children's departments in public libraries, as early as the 60s, has influenced numerous changes concerning library users and particularly children. Until then children accompanied by their parents were visiting libraries with the intention of borrowing books, mostly school required reading. Children's libraries were mostly empty because children used to prefer other activities (e.g. watching TV programmes) which for them used to be a more convenient way of spending their free time. It was quite obvious that children were supposed to be offered something more attractive that will be a reason to spare some of their free time in a library and it was obvious that for keeping the children's habit of borrowing books and visiting libraries, these habits has to be supported from the earliest possible age. During the 60s no more children come to the library only to borrow books but to engage in various programmes and activities, directly or indirectly related to books and reading. It was especially the case in the 70s when public libraries started to work with pre-school children.

The appearance of pre-school children (in Croatia that means children from 0 to 6, including babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers) as users in public libraries has reflected the understanding of the community that the pre-school age is important for the total development of a child. At that early age the child learns most about himself/herself and the world that surrounds him/her. The child learns how to behave socially and how to communicate, establishes his/her system of values, learns about the world and himself/herself in it and starts getting into the habit of using a library and a book that can later develop into a constant need for a library and a book. For that reason, children's libraries in Croatia have changed the established methods and contents of work. They have adapted them to the youngest population that cannot read, so that pre-schoolers will find something for themselves in the library. As play and toys are

characteristics of pre-school age and toy is the most appropriate thing to approach a child because of its irreplaceable position in childhood, playing activities, toys and games, have gradually become the method of work and the first media of communication between a child and a library. Everything started in 1976 when the Medvescak Public Library in Zagreb ran a toy lending service (called IGROTEKA) and organised playing activities for pre-schoolers and their parents (called IGRAONICA).<sup>1</sup>

Those programmes were run with four main aims:

- 1) to bring the library closer to the interests of pre-readers and their parents, and to strengthen reading and reading habits in the family and out of it;
- 2) to offer the possibilities of participating in organised out-of-family educational activities (playing, socialisation and early child development stimulation);
- 3) to increase the quality of life in the local community;
- 4) to answer on the right of each potential and actual user, no matter what age, an appropriate library service.

The Medvescak Public Library covers a district of Zagreb with some 50,000 inhabitants, but it is open for the whole population of Zagreb without reference to the district they come from. The Library functions in two locations (one in the city centre with departments for adults and for children, and the other as the branch - a small children's library located in Northern part of the city). It registers some 15,000 members annually. One third of them are children, and some 800 are pre-school children. Until 1993 pre-schoolers could become members when reaching three years of age. But in autumn 1993 a program called "playing activities for babies and parents" was started for children up to three and their parents. Consequently, there is no age limit for registration.

On registration, children receive the rights to borrow toys and picture-books and participate in the programmes they want to and whenever they wish. On the occasion of each visit they can borrow three picture-books and one toy for use outside the Library for three weeks, as well as parents who can borrow one book from the special book collection for parents, no matter if they are the members of the department for adults. Daily opening hours are 8.00 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. Registration of children and circulation of toys and books are run by librarians and during the playing activities children are supervised by pre-school teachers who are the members of regular staff.

At fixed times of the day (2 – 4 on each location) playing activities in IGRAONICA are organised and it lasts two or three hours. In addition to playing with toys some other activities like story-telling, drawing, painting, modelling, singing, puppet-shows, drama plays, some computer games and the like are organised. All possible media are used in work with children, like picture-books, children's magazines, cartoons, toys, games, puppets, audio and video cassettes and CD-ROMs. That is why the whole space for pre-schoolers could be seen as pre-school multimedia corner.

Children of different ages play together and parents can leave them under the supervision of a pre-school teacher if they wish. They are also invited to join the activities if they want to (about one fourth of parents do). Some parents just sit nearby and watch how their child behaves in play and communication with others. Some of them look at the toys and picture-books that children are to borrow, go to department for adults to choose something for themselves, or sit there and exchange experiences with other parents. Others read something of their own choice or popular literature on child development and education. For that purpose, parents are offered a range of educational materials in a "parent's corner" (newsletters, books, journals, written materials and leaflets, bulletins with annotations and picture catalogues of toys ready for lending). From time to time parents can join organised discussions and talks under the guidance of experts.

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<sup>1</sup> IGROTEKA in its meaning is borrowing of toys ("IGRO" means TOY and "TEKA" defines the place where something is landed) while IGRAONICA defines the place for certain activities – the place for play ("IGRA" means PLAY, and "ONICA" indicates the place for some specific activity).

Analysis of research data collected in Zagreb (1999) on parents of pre-school children attending five kindergartens from various parts of Zagreb, which are the users of children's library, show that 54 % of parents consider library activities to be very important in fostering the interest of pre-schoolers for books and reading at home.

Daily visits to playing activities (IGRAONICA) for pre-schoolers is from 80 to 100 children and more that 150 come to the library during the day just to borrow picture-books or toys.

Toys in toy lending services are processed according to common library rules. As the management and data processing of the library is computerised, toys are assigned numerical codes. They are catalogued by the international standard ISBD(NBM) and put in a database in the UNIMARC format. Toys are classified in ten groups (toys developing motor skills, those developing receptivity, educational toys, constructive, technical, imitative, sensoric, work-habit, show-expressing and team-toys). There is also defined the approximate age of child they are intended for. Children borrow some 7,000 toys annually.

Since the Medvescak Public Library has started with programmes for pre-school children the number of library members has multiplied several times. Analysing all the benefits brought about by the introduction of programmes for pre-schoolers in public libraries, could be described as follows:

- the library benefits from an increase in membership, both children and adults, and in an increase of interest for other library programs and services (sometimes parents come to the library for the first time when receiving the invitation to bring the child);
- the benefits for a child are that such programmes stimulates his/her full development, and especially through developing the habits of reading and using the library;
- parents profit from a library programme for pre-schoolers as in their increased interest in other library services for adults; in getting support and advice on how to strengthen family reading; in the opportunity to educate themselves in the parental role and get support in raising the child;
- the benefits for a community as a whole are in better quality of life of families and in filling the gaps in some other public services that miss at local level.

The idea of using toy as the media and play as the method of work in the public library has been transmitted to the majority of public libraries in Croatia. Today, there is no children's library in Croatia without at least a small facility for pre-schoolers, nor without at least some activities for this age group. But, there is still only a few toy-lending services in Croatian public libraries as they are very demanding for staff and financial investment. The spreading of idea of services for pre-school children in public libraries has been markedly supported by the *Standards for Public Libraries in the Republic of Croatia*. The Standards appreciate the pre-schoolers as library users and prescribe the space, equipment, staff and library materials needed to meet the needs of the youngest population in public libraries. But in practice, the activities for and with the pre-school children depends very often upon the enthusiasm of the staff who are aware that their investment in the youngest will be abundantly returned by the developed culture of reading and library usage.