

# Fulfillment of the Child's Participation Rights in the Family and the Child's Psychosocial Adjustment: Children's and Parents' Views

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*European families have been undergoing changes in power relations among the family members, including democratization of relations between parents and children. These processes were facilitated by the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified in Croatia in 1991. This study examines perceived fulfillment of the provision, protection and participation rights of the child within contemporary Croatian families. In addition, it explores the links between participation rights fulfillment and children's perception of a democratic climate in their families, as well as some indicators of children's psychosocial adjustment. In 2010, a representative sample of 1074 seventh grade students (thirteen-year-olds) and their parents (983 mothers and 845 fathers) provided the data on measures of the child's rights fulfillment in the family, family governing style, self-esteem, self-control, problem behaviour and resistance efficacy. Participants predominantly report respect of all of the examined rights. However, the provision rights and the protection rights are generally realized more often than the participation rights. Approximately a half of the children reported full respect of their right to freely express their opinions and ideas, and the right to influence decision*

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*making that affects them. In 9-12% of families children never or rarely experience fulfillment of their participation rights. Assessments of the 'governing style' in their families reveal that over a quarter of children see their families as dictatorships, anarchies, or post-revolutionary states. Higher participation rights fulfillment was linked with perceiving own family as a democracy, the child's report of higher self-esteem and fewer behavior problems, more frequently resisting peer pressure to use substances (cigarettes, alcohol), as well as with the parent's report of greater child's self-control. Parents, in comparison to their children, tend to overestimate the level of fulfillment of children's rights to protection of physical integrity, dignity, participation in decision-making and to receiving loving care.*

**Key words:** participation rights of the child, child's participation in decision-making, family democracy, parenting, adolescents, parent - adolescent relations.

## INTRODUCTION

Along with the changes in structure and values, contemporary European families are undergoing changes in power relations among the family members in the direction of reduced authoritarianism and greater equality in participation (Daly, 2005). For example, a recent Swedish study documented large differences in parent - child relations across the last three generations of parents (Trifan, Stattin and Tilton-Weaver, 2014). The trend of democratization of family relationships is supported by public policies that incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) through designating children as individuals with specific rights to serve as active participants in society, whilst viewing parents and states as guarantors of these rights. Moreover, ensuring of children's rights in all contexts of the child's life, including the family, has been supported by the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (Council of Europe, 2012b, 2016) and the National Strategy for Children's Rights in the Republic of Croatia (Ministry of Social

Policy and Youth, 2014). These documents have listed the promotion of child's participation<sup>1</sup> among their strategic goals.

Despite the changes in the relations between parents and children and policies that promote their new roles, scientific and professional literature on parenting, as well as the general public, primarily describe parental responsibility in the context of caring for the physical, emotional and educational needs of children. It is also widely accepted that the role of parents is to protect children from maltreatment. Ensuring fulfillment of the participation rights of the child, as an integral part of parental responsibility, is less salient to parents, practitioners, and researchers alike. Therefore, it is not surprising that international bodies for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC stress the need to explore the fulfillment of the **child's participation rights** in European families (Badran, 1996; as cited in Ochaita and Espinosa, 1997).

One of the rare data-based insights into the fulfillment of child's rights in the family was provided by Hart and colle-

<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe (2012b) defines 'participation' as individuals having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity, and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

agues (2001) who conducted a research with children aged 12-14, in 23 countries worldwide, including 12 in Europe. The results revealed that, out of the examined child's rights, those most often fulfilled in families are provision rights (to have food, clothing and housing; to have health care; to be taken care of and loved; to be taught what is good and what is wrong, etc.) and, somewhat less frequently, protection rights (to receive help when in trouble; to receive protection from bodily harm inflicted by another person). The rights estimated to be the least frequently ensured in families include the rights to make choices that are appropriate for the child's age, to influence decisions related to the child, and to have child's needs and wishes taken into account when planning and undertaking family activities. These results suggest that in families around the world children's provision rights and (to some extent) protection rights are more frequently ensured than their participation rights. This paper focuses on the fulfillment of participation rights, contrasting it to the fulfillment of other rights of the child in contemporary Croatian families.

### Participation rights of the child

The comprehensive range of rights represented in the UNCRC is sometimes conceptually grouped into the '3 Ps': provision, protection, and participation (Mayall, 2000; Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie and Vandevelde, 2010). **Provision rights** refer to the rights of the child to receive the appropriate care for his/her physical, health, educational, emotional and other needs thus ensuring the conditions for survival and optimal development; **protection rights** relate mainly to protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation and cruelty; **participation rights** (i.e. the rights of the

child to be listened to, heard and respected) reflect the view of the child as an active and competent agent in his/her own development. This view of the child is expressed, explicitly or implicitly, in several articles of the UNCRC, primarily in articles that elaborate participation rights. Article 12 in particular requires that the child's opinion, if the child is interested to express it, be heard by adults and taken into account when adults make decisions concerning the child. This article embodies the presumption that adults retain responsibility for the actual decision, while being informed and influenced by the views of the child (Lansdown, 2010).

The right to have the child's opinion heard and taken seriously applies to all actions and decisions that affect the lives of children. There is no age limit for this right, so it applies to the youngest children as well. The child's competence to understand the issues that affect him/her does not develop according to a rigid set of developmental stages. Instead, it depends on the nature of the issues involved, the individual life experience of the child, and the level of support from adults (Lansdown, 2001). Fulfillment of the child's right to seek and receive information and express his/her views freely, as provided by the Article 13 of the UNCRC, implies that adults take responsibility to create opportunities for the child to do so. In other words, Articles 12 and 13 are binding on adults (parents, professionals, politicians) to enable and encourage children to express their perspectives on important issues that they face in different environments (family, school, institutions, the public sphere). The Article 7 of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability has the same purpose, calling on adults to support children with disabilities in expressing their views on an equal basis with other children.

The Article 5 of the UNCRC, which refers to parental guidance that takes into account the **evolving capacities of the child**, is also important for the fulfillment of the child's participation rights. According to this article, parents and/or other persons who have responsibility for the child must consider the child's ability to independently exercise his/her rights. As the child's competence develops, the need for guidance is reduced, and the child's ability to take responsibility for decisions that affect his/her life is increased. However, it should be emphasized that children of the same age differ in their life circumstances and experiences, and hence their competence to take responsibility for exercising their rights varies (Lansdown, 2005). The competence of the child to exercise rights might also vary with regard to the type of right. Thus, children require distinct degrees of protection, participation, and opportunities for autonomous decision-making in different contexts and areas of decision-making (Lansdown, 2005).

The concept of evolving capacities of the child is crucial for achieving a balance between recognizing children as proactive agents who have the right to be heard and respected on one hand, and ensuring their right to be protected in accordance with their age and the level of maturity on the other hand. Consideration for the 'evolving capacities of the child' enables respect for the child's agency and autonomy, without burdening the child with the full responsibility of adults' (Lansdown, 2005). The 'evolving capacities of the child' do not affect respect for the rights of the child stated in the UNCRC since they apply to all children equally, regardless of their abilities. What the 'evolving capacities of the child' do affect is the recognition of where the responsibility for ensuring the child's rights lies, whether it is with the adult or

with the child. Understanding this concept may prevent inappropriate transfer of responsibility for ensuring children's rights from the adult to the child.

Reynaert et al. (2010) indicate that the dominant topic in the literature on the rights of the child is a new view of children as autonomous human beings, not human beings "in the making." There is an emphasis on individuality, autonomy and competence in the child, which implies that the responsibility for exercising one's own rights lies with the children themselves. The authors conclude that academic discussion about the role children play in taking responsibility for exercising their own rights is scarce. They argue for the shift in focus of the scientific literature on the rights of the child, from analysing texts of the UNCRC to examining contexts in which it is applied.

The interdisciplinary relevance of the issue of responsibility for children exercising their participation rights is evident in the idea of 'responsibility for the responsibility of other', proposed by theologian Burggraeve (1997; as cited in Dillen, 2006). He argues that one person is not only responsible for the other person, but also for ensuring the other person's responsibility-taking. In the context of parent-child relationship, this means that a parent, along with a responsibility to provide for the child's basic needs and protection, also has a responsibility to encourage the child to take responsibility for his/her own rights. Supporting the child to develop and express his/her own opinion is a manifestation of taking parental responsibility for the development of child's responsibility.

Developmental psychology also addresses the question of responsibility for the fulfillment of the rights of the child. Ochaita and Espinosa (1997) state that parental responsibility to support the child in the exercise of his/her rights diminishes with

the growth of the child's capacity for independent exercise of these rights. They also suggest division of the UNCRC articles that relate to participation rights into two groups. The first group includes articles that list forms and conditions of participation (the Articles 12, 13, 14, 15, 31, 40), and the second includes articles that focus on the preconditions for participation (the Articles 5, 15, 17, 18). Preconditions to participation include providing guidance in accordance with the child's evolving capacities and ensuring access to appropriate information that help children form their own opinions. This notion of preconditions can be linked to the literature on reciprocal influences between parents and children (e.g., Kuczynsky & Parkin, 2009), and empirical findings about the interdependent contributions of a parent and a child to the democratic functioning of the family system (Stattin, Persson, Burk & Kerr, 2011).

### **The importance of ensuring children's participation rights in families**

The right to be heard and taken seriously is fundamental to human dignity and healthy development of every child and young person (Council of Europe, 2012b). Lansdown (2001) offers a number of reasons why it is desirable to get adults to listen to, hear and take into account the child's perspective. First, involving the child in the decision-making process leads to better decisions because children's opinions and ideas potentially differ from those of adults as they are based on different perceptions and experiences. Therefore, including children's views enables an exchange of specific perceptions and contributions between generations in the family.

Furthermore, listening to children leads to their better understanding of democratic decision-making procedures. Involving children in decision-making processes creates an opportunity to learn about rights and responsibilities, to recognize that individual freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others, and to realize that individual actions affect the rights and freedoms of others. Lansdown (2001) stresses that children can begin to understand and value democracy only by experiencing how important it is to listen to others and have own views respected.

Finally, listening to children ensures not only participation rights, but also facilitates implementation of their other rights, including the right to have optimal conditions for the harmonious and complete development of a child's potential. Hart (1992) emphasizes that fulfillment of children's participation rights creates opportunities for a gradual development of independence and exploration, which is often limited by excessive control aimed at protecting children from risks. Moreover, he sees the development of children's social competence and responsibility, as well as the establishment of quality relationships within the family, as positive side effects of children's participation (Hart, 1992).

### **Developmental outcomes of ensuring children's participation rights<sup>2</sup>**

Both the UNCRC and contemporary developmental psychology argue that in order to achieve child well-being and developmental potential, it is not enough to meet the physical and emotional needs of a child. Instead, it is also important to meet his/her need for autonomy (e.g., Smetana,

<sup>2</sup> In children's rights literature and in this paper, the term **child** is used for a person under 18 years, while in the developmental psychology a person aged 13-18 years would most often be called **adolescent** or **young person**.

Campione-Barr & Daddis, 2004; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010) i.e. to have an active role in the creation of his/her everyday life and development as a human being (Ochaita & Espinosa, 1997). According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the need for autonomy, along with the need for relatedness and the need for competence, is a basic psychological need. As conceptualised by this theory, autonomy is a universal motive for self-determination and protection of 'the self'. Self-determination presumes the motivation to achieve personal control over interactions with the environment, which is considered important for strengthening feelings of competence and personal well-being.

Although it is present at an early age, the need for autonomy is intensified in early adolescence. Its fulfillment becomes a prerequisite for the creation of one's own personal identity (Ochaita & Espinosa, 1997). According to these authors, adolescents who fulfil the need for autonomy and who participate in decision-making processes within their families develop the ability to express their opinions and strengthen their social competence in the home, school, and community.

Smetana and colleagues (2005) found that adolescents typically demand greater personal autonomy than their parents are willing to grant. Through adolescence, the perceived obligation to obey parental rules declines. In parallel, autonomy develops through the efforts of adolescents to create and expand the scope of independent decision-making.

Research about the desired growth of autonomy (Smetana, 2011) suggests that both parents and adolescents expect autonomy in deciding about personal issues (e.g. decisions about which books or magazines to read, how to spend free time, when to do homework) to be achieved earlier

(i.e. in the early or middle adolescence), compared to situations related to social-conventional issues (e.g. proper behavior, keeping promises, sincerity). Autonomy is expected even later (i.e. in late adolescence or young adulthood) when it comes to prudential issues (e.g., when to drink alcohol, smoke or have sex). Research reveals that adolescents and parents mostly agree that parents have legitimate authority in the last two domains, which is not the case for personal issues (Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Moreover, adolescents and parents do not always agree on where the boundary lies in the legitimacy of decision-making, since the same situation can be considered a social-conventional or security issue by parents, and a personal issue by adolescents (Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

There is some empirical evidence supporting the association between children's participation in the family and desirable developmental outcomes, as well as between exclusion from active participation in family decision-making and adverse developmental outcomes. In a longitudinal study conducted with a representative sample of US children aged 11 - 16, Brody and colleagues (1994) found that adolescents' involvement in decision-making processes in families was positively correlated with similarity in various attitudes of adolescents and their parents six years later.

Stattin and colleagues (2011) conducted a longitudinal study of democratic climate in families in a group of 527 Swedish adolescents (aged 13 - 15) followed for two years. As a measure of the democratic functioning of the family, they used the adolescents' perception of their own participation in decision-making processes and their perceived influence in the family, i.e. parents' willingness to listen to and consider the views of adolescents. In a separate

analysis, the adjustment of youth from families characterized by high youth influence on family matters was compared to the adjustment of youth from families less open to youths' influence (Persson et al., 2007). The results showed that adolescents from families open to adolescent influence had the lowest scores on measures of delinquency, alcohol consumption, depression and expectation of failure, and the highest scores on measures of self-esteem.

On the other hand, Fuligni and Eccles (1993), in a one-year follow-up study conducted with thirteen-year olds, found adverse developmental outcomes in young adolescents that were excluded from decision-making processes within families. Those adolescents who reported that they had fewer opportunities to participate in decision-making with their parents, and that the number of these opportunities did not increase during the one year period, were oriented towards their peers to the extent that they neglected parental rules, school obligations, and hobbies.

These findings demonstrate a correlation between children's participation within the context of family relationships and their healthy psychosocial adjustment, at least when it comes to issues from the personal domain. Therefore, they speak in favour of adults ensuring child's participation rights. However, despite the established links between children's lack of participation and some problems in psychosocial adjustment, and regardless of the policies striving to ensure greater implementation of children's rights, there is relatively little empirical evidence on the extent to which children exercise their participation rights in their homes. In Croatia, this topic has been addressed from the perspectives of children aged 11 to 18 (Žižak, Nikolić and Koller-Trbović, 2001a) and their parents (Žižak, Nikolić and Koller-Trbović,

2001b) with results suggesting that the child's participation rights in the family are not as respected as the provision and protection rights. A more recent, although less comprehensive, insight into children's perception of fulfilment of their participation rights in the family is provided by a UNICEF-supported survey of children's attitudes towards all types of children's rights ensured in families, schools and the media (Miharija and Kuridža, 2010).

Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to gain an insight into the level of child's participation rights in contemporary Croatian families. To achieve this aim, we will examine children's and parents' perceptions of the fulfillment of children's rights. In addition, children's assessment of the presence of a democratic climate in their families and its association with the fulfillment of participation rights will be explored. Finally, we will examine the links between the fulfillment of participation rights and some indicators of children's psychosocial adjustment.

## METHOD

The data were collected within a larger study of families with young adolescents (Pećnik & Tokić, 2011), which was financially supported by the former Ministry of Family, Veterans' Affairs, and Intergenerational Solidarity. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Law.

## Participants

The study was conducted with a nationally representative sample of seventh grade students from 50 schools in Croatia and their mothers and fathers. Students were selected via probabilistic cluster sampling, by cumulative size method (Lohr, 2009), with 2.4% of the population of Croatia covered.

The study included 1 074 students, 50.8% boys and 49.2% girls. The average age of students was 13.43 years. The study also included their parents, 983 mothers and 845 fathers. The average age of mothers and fathers was 40.8 and 44.2 years, respectively. Most parents had a high school education (62.6% of mothers and 70.4% of fathers). Only primary education was completed by 19.3% of mothers and 12.2% of fathers. University degrees were held by 16% of mothers and fathers, including 1% with master's and/or doctorate degrees.

### Procedure

The survey was administered in 2010, in cooperation with classmasters of the selected seventh grade classes. At the meeting with parents, researchers or their collaborators explained the general purpose of the research, asked them to complete a questionnaire for parents and to approve their child's participation in the study. Furthermore, they explained to the parents that the participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and the obtained data confidential. For the children's sample, a high response rate of 89.6% was achieved. The response rate of mothers and fathers was 82.1% and 70.5% respectively, which could also be regarded as very good. To be able to pair the data of parents and children, with their anonymity secured, participants were asked to create a password that would be common for both parents and the child. More information on the sampling, the participants and the research procedure can be found in the project monograph (Pećnik & Tokić, 2011).

### Instruments

**The child's rights in the family scale** (Pećnik & Tokić, 2009) measures the fulfillment of the rights presented in the

UNCRC within the family environment. The scale consists of nine questions that encompass *provision* rights (to be loved, to help with learning, to development of children's abilities and talents, to play and leisure), *protection* rights (protecting physical and psychological integrity, and privacy), and *participation* rights of the child (to freedom of expression and participation in decision-making). Questions, (e.g. 'in your family, is the child's right to be protected from bodily harm fulfilled?') are followed by the four-point response scale, where 1 means 'No, never', 2 'Mostly no', 3 'Mostly yes' and 4 'Yes, always'. A higher score on this scale indicates a perception of greater fulfillment of children's rights in the family. Reliability of the scale is  $\alpha = 0.854$  on the sample of children,  $\alpha = 0.833$  on the sample of mothers and  $\alpha = 0.856$  on the sample of fathers.

**Family governing style** measure (Person et al., 2004) seeks to examine the children's perception of the presence of a democratic climate in family by using the metaphor of a family being a state. Children can choose one of four answers to the question 'If you see your family as a state, and your parents as the leaders, what type of state would your family be?' The answers describe a **democracy** ('It is a democracy where people respect each other and people discuss and make decisions together. Sometimes conflicts can arise, but people try to solve them together. Everyone can influence decisions.'), a **dictatorship** ('It is a dictatorship where there are leaders that decide over everyone. Only the leaders can influence the decisions.'), an **anarchy** ('It is an anarchy where everyone does what he or she wants to do. There are no clear rules and there is no leader.') or a **post-revolutionary state** ('It is a country where people have had a revolution. The people who used to make decisions do not

make the decisions now. The old leaders no longer have any power.').

**Self-esteem scale** (Rosenberg, 1965) has 10 items (e.g. 'I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with other children.'). The task of the children is to express their agreement with the statements on a four-point response scale, where 1 means 'strongly disagree' and 4 'strongly agree'. After recoding negatively formulated statements, the overall score is calculated as the average of responses on 10 items. A higher score on this scale indicates higher self-esteem of the child. Reliability of the scale is  $\alpha = 0.741$ .

**Children's self-control scale** (Humphrey, 1982) consists of 5 items (e.g. 'He/she thinks about the possible consequences of his/her actions in advance.'). Based on these statements, parents estimate how often their child behaves in a certain way, on a scale from (1) 'never' to (5) 'always'. A higher score on the scale indicates a higher assessment of child's self-control. Reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0.847$  on the sample of mothers and  $\alpha = 0.850$  on the sample of fathers.

**Problem Behaviour Frequency Scale** (Farrell et al., 2000) was translated, shortened and adapted for the purpose of this study. The adapted form of the scale contains 17 items, i.e. problematic behaviors (e.g. 'You seriously threatened another child, stating that you will hit him/her.'). The items' content varies according to the severity of the offense, and relates to substance abuse, delinquency, physical and non-physical aggression. Children estimate how many times in the past year they behaved in a certain way, on a four-point response scale, where 0 means 'not even once' and 3 means 'more than 10 times'. The overall result is formed as the average of 17 responses. A higher score on the scale indicates more frequent behaviour pro-

blems of the child. Reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0.845$ .

**Resistance efficacy** (Ellickson & Hays, 1990) is measured by two questions on which adolescents estimate how they would react in hypothetical situations in which they are offered cigarettes or alcohol by peers. Response format is somewhat modified compared to the original, in order to include the measure of motivation for (not) refusing the proposals. The possible responses, in the situation with alcohol offer, are: (a) 'I would refuse an alcoholic drink, because I do not want to drink alcohol'; (b) 'I would refuse an alcoholic drink, even though I would love to try it'; (c) 'I don't know'; (d) 'I would take an alcoholic drink, because I would be embarrassed to refuse' and (e) 'I would take an alcoholic drink, if I feel like drinking it'. These responses vary in two dimensions: compliance vs. resistance to peer pressure and autonomous vs. conformist behaviour. Based on these dimensions, it is possible to distinguish four categories of responses: (a) autonomous resistance to peer pressure (due to one's own beliefs), (b) non-autonomous resistance to peer pressure (conforming to adults' requirements/norms), (d) conformist compliance with peer pressure and (e) autonomous congruence with peer pressure.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Differences in children's and parents' perceptions of children's rights fulfillment

In relationship with their child, parents directly promote, respect or violate the rights of the child in the family. Even though children are the most relevant source of information about fulfillment of the child's rights, this paper examines children's and parents' perceptions of child's rights fulfillment, in order to compare them. Table

1 shows children's and parents' estimates about the extent to which the provisions of

the UNCRC are implemented in their families.

**Table 1**  
*Assessment of the fulfillment of the child's rights in own family from children's (N = 1 074) and parents' perspective\* (N = 1 828)*

In your family, is the child's right to fulfilled?	1 – NO, never		2 – Mostly NO		3 - Mostly YES		4 - YES, always	
	C** (%)	P (%)	C (%)	P (%)	C (%)	P (%)	C (%)	P (%)
freely express his/her opinions and ideas and gain others' respect for them?	2.7	0.3	6.4	1.5	36.3	48.4	54.5	49.8
have his/her opinion taken into account when plans and decisions related to him/her are being made?	4.0	0.4	8.1	1.8	43.5	51.6	44.4	46.2
be protected from bodily harm?	3.2	0.2	5.5	0.4	20.9	21.0	70.4	78.4
be protected from others' hurting his/her feelings and dignity?	3.0	0.3	6.3	0.4	28.4	28.6	62.3	70.7
privacy (of his/her personal belongings)?	4.3	0.5	9.1	1.7	32.0	49.8	54.7	48.0
be loved?	1.1	0.2	2.2	0.1	14.3	7.7	82.4	92.0
play and leisure?	1.4	0.2	3.9	0.7	29.5	35.7	65.2	63.4
sufficient help with learning?	3.1	0.6	6.7	2.2	31.3	45.0	58.9	52.2
develop his/her abilities and talents?	2.1	0.4	5.8	0.5	29.4	37.8	62.7	61.3

\* The percentage is calculated as the average percentage of mother's and father's assessment of the fulfillment of a particular right of the child.

\*\*C – Children; P - Parent

As it is evident from the Table 1, both children and parents reported that the examined rights are mostly or always fulfilled in their families. This was expected since these are normative values and behaviours that are considered an integral part of the parental role. Although there are some differences in the perceived fulfillment of certain rights, it can be concluded that the participants predominantly report respect of all of the examined rights – to provision, protection, and participation. However, such result, aside from reflecting a high level of children's rights implementation and/or social awareness about their importance, can also be the product of socially desirable responding. Despite the use of codes instead of names, which was em-

ployed to encourage answering the questionnaire honestly, it is possible that parents and children wanted to portray themselves in a more positive light. On the other hand, Table 1 also indicates that there are children and parents who report non-respect for some or all of the rights of the child in family. Although these are the rights to which *every* child is entitled, some participants reported that some or all of the rights were never or mainly not fulfilled in their families. For example, around 9% of children and 2% of parents considered that in their family the child's right to express his/her opinions is not exercised. Similarly, about 12% of children and 2% of parents reported that the right of the child to participate in decision-making was never or

mainly not exercised in their families. Disrespect of the children's rights is not limited to the participation rights of the child. Namely, about 13% of children and 2% of parents stated that the right to privacy of personal belongings was never or mostly not exercised in their families.

These results are similar to those found by Miharija and Kuridža (2010). They examined a representative sample of about 500 children, aged 8-9. The results revealed that 9% of children claimed that they were very rarely or never asked about their opinion on matters associated with them. In the same study, slightly better results were obtained with a representative sample of about 500 children, aged 16-17. Specifi-

cally, it was found that 3% of them think that their opinion is rarely taken into account and almost no participants claimed their opinion is never taken into account. This study included age groups that are different from the one used in our study, and as such complements the picture of the dynamics of the implementation of the participation rights in families in Croatia.

Table 2 shows the means of the fulfillment of particular rights of the child in family, calculated separately for children's and parents' samples. The means for both groups of participants lie between the values of 3 and 4, assigned to a view that the right is mostly or always fulfilled, respectively.

**Table 2**  
*Descriptive statistics and the results of the t-tests between the estimations of the fulfillment of particular rights of the child in family for children's and parents' \* samples*

The right of the child to:	Sample**	N	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
							-0.08
freedom of expression	C	1056	3.43	0.734	-2.057	0.040	-0.24
	P	787	3.48	0.428			
participation in decision-making	C	1059	3.28	0.777	-5.195	0.000	-0.33
	P	793	3.43	0.444			
protection from physical harm	C	1058	3.59	0.739	-7.518	0.000	-0.34
	P	786	3.78	0.345			
protection of the dignity	C	1057	3.50	0.748	-7.711	0.000	-0.14
	P	782	3.70	0.371			
privacy	C	1057	3.37	0.819	-2.881	0.004	-0.14
	P	784	3.46	0.444			

The right of the child to:	Sample**	N	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
							-0.34
be loved	C	1061	3.78	0.532	-7.715	0.000	-0.09
	P	796	3.92	0.229			
play and leisure	C	1065	3.58	0.638	-1.758	0.079	-0.06
	P	793	3.63	0.406			
help with learning	C	1060	3.46	0.755	-1.295	0.196	-0.12
	P	787	3.50	0.460			
development of abilities and talents	C	1052	3.53	0.701	-2.690	0.007	-0.06
	P	789	3.60	0.419			

\* Average parents' estimates are obtained by averaging mothers' and fathers' estimates.

\*\* C – Children; P - Parent

From the Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that both children and parents reported that the child's rights to be loved and protected from physical and psychological assault are most often realised in their families. This is followed by the right to play and leisure (children's report) and the right to protection of the child's dignity (parents' report). The rights to participate in decision-making, to privacy and to freedom of expression are exercised to a somewhat lesser extent. These results are consistent with the finding of Hart and colleagues (2001), stating that the families around the world more often realise children's provision rights and, to a smaller extent, protection rights, than their participation rights.

The data indicate some differences in children's and parents' perceptions of fulfillment of particular child's rights in their families. For example, about five times more children than parents reported that the right to freedom of expression is not exercised in their families. The ratio is even

greater when it comes to the right to participate in decision-making, where nearly six times more children than parents stated disrespect of that right in their homes. The largest gap in children's and parents' perceptions is evident with regard to the right to be loved, the right to protection of the child's dignity and the right to protection from physical harm. Disrespect of these rights was reported nearly eleven, thirteen and fifteen times more by children than by parents, respectively. Although there is a relatively small proportion of children who reported lack of fulfillment of the rights to be loved ( $N = 35$ ), to be protected from bodily harm ( $N = 92$ ) and harm to own feelings and dignity ( $N = 99$ ), these figures are by no means negligible.

The differences in children's and parents' perceptions of fulfillment of particular rights of the child in family were analyzed using t-tests for independent samples. In spite of negative skew to the data and leptokurtosis of some of the dis-

tributions, the parametric test was chosen due to the fact that the samples are large enough that these deviations do not compromise results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). T-tests (Table 2) indicate that there are statistically significant differences in children's and parents' perceptions of the fulfillment of the rights to be loved, to be protected from physical and psychological harm, to freedom of expression, to participation in decision-making, to development of abilities and talents, and to privacy. All of these differences are in the direction of children reporting lower levels of fulfillment of these rights compared to their parents. On average, children perceived their rights to be loved, to be safe, to participate in family decision-making, to express opinions freely, to develop their abilities, and to have privacy implemented in their families to a lesser extent than their parents did. Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes presented in Table 2 reveal that the biggest differences between children's and parents' perceptions are found with respect to the rights to protection of physical integrity, dignity, participation in decision-making as well as to being loved. However, these differences are modest, between small and medium size (Cohen, 1992). Statistically significant differences between parents' and children's perceptions of the fulfillment of the rights to sufficient help with learning and to play have not been established, although children's average responses are again suggesting somewhat lower rights fulfillment than those given by their parents.

The differences in the perceived fulfillment of children's rights between parents and children may be due to the differences in the expected levels of autonomy or in the sensitivity to violation of these rights, selectivity in memory and/or recall, and/or different interpretations of the me-

aning of individual rights (cf. Smetana et al., 2005). The differences in children's and parents' responses could also result from other factors, such as the deliberate distortion due to social desirability, where it can be expected that children have less reason to hide undesirable responses than parents do. However, it is important to note here that, despite their statistical significance, differences between parents' and children's means with respect to certain rights (e.g., the right to freedom of expression) have effect sizes below the criteria of a small effect (i.e. 0.20, Cohen, 1992).

The research on the implementation of the fulfillment of children's rights in the family is scarce. Consequently, the possibilities for the comparison and interpretation of the current findings are limited. Nonetheless, the result that parents estimate the child's rights to protection of physical integrity and dignity, to receive affection and to participation to be more fulfilled in their families than their children do has significant implications for both research and practice. Future research should further examine systematic differences in the perceptions of parents and children. A practical implication of the finding that parents, in comparison to children, tend to overestimate the level of fulfillment of children's rights is that this can hinder parents' ability to promote or protect children's rights. Because of their economic, physical, and psychological dependence on their parents, children often do not have direct access to fulfillment of their rights; instead, they fulfil them through their parents (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). Since parents have such key role in affirming and nurturing the child's rights (including the right to participation), it is important that they are sensitive to the child's perception of the extent to which his/her rights are respected.

### Perceptions of a democratic climate in the family

The 'governing style' of their parents was reported by 1 024 children. About three quarters (73.1%) of the children selected the answer that describes the democratic system. The next most frequent response was the one referring to the dictatorship (14.8% of children). The answer that describes the post-revolutionary state was chosen by 6.3% of children, while the lowest proportion of children (5.8%) responded that their family resembles an anarchy.

Using the same measure, Persson and colleagues (2004) found a similar percentage reported by Swedish adolescents, aged 15-16, who perceived their families as de-

mocracies (72%). About 12% of them saw their families as dictatorships and 4% of them regarded their families as post-revolutionary states, which is somewhat less than what was reported by Croatian adolescents. On the other hand, a somewhat higher proportion of Swedish adolescents perceived their families as anarchies (12%).

We next analyzed the relationship between realisation of participation rights and children's impressions of the 'family governing style'. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the composite variable of participation rights fulfillment<sup>3</sup> for four groups of children formed according to their impression of the 'family governing style'.

Table 3

*Descriptive statistics for the variable of perceived fulfillment of participation rights for children who perceive different 'family governing styles'*

Perceived 'family governing style':	N	M (participation rights)	SD (participation rights)
democracy	749	3,45	0,561
dictatorship	152	3,01	0,839
post-revolutionary state	64	3,20	0,754
anarchy	59	3,22	0,789

The Table 3 illustrates that children who experience their families as democracies perceive the highest fulfillment of the rights to freedom of expression and participation in decision-making. As expected, the mean of the participation rights fulfillment was the lowest for the children who described their families as dictatorships. However, it should be noted that in the latter group the participation rights were, on the average,

'mostly respected' ( $M=3.01$ ), which suggests that the term 'dictatorship' might be too strong for indicating how most of these families usually function.

We tested the statistical significance of the differences between the mean estimates of the participation rights fulfillment among children that see their families as democracies, dictatorships, post-revolutionary states or anarchies. Due to unequal

<sup>3</sup> The composite variable of the realisation of the participation rights in family represents the average estimate of the realisation of the two participation rights that participants evaluated, ie. the right to freedom of expression and the right to participation in decision-making. The response scale ranges from 1 (never fulfilled) to 4 (always fulfilled).

sizes of the groups, and (in some instances) non-homogeneity of variances, the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was employed. The results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the perception of the participation rights fulfillment. Mann-Whitney tests revealed that children from 'democratic' families felt their participation rights were more protected than did children who saw their families as dictatorships ( $Z = -6.23$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and the post-revolutionary states ( $Z = -2.61$ ;  $p = 0.009$ ). However, the effect si-

zes are between small and medium (0.21) and small (0.09), respectively. Statistically significant differences in the participation rights fulfillment were not identified among other groups.

### **Assurance of participation rights and children's psychosocial adjustment**

Table 4 illustrates the correlations between children's psychosocial adjustment and their perceptions of the fulfillment of their participation rights.

Table 4

*Descriptive statistics for the indicators of the child's psychosocial adjustment and the correlation of these indicators and the child's perception of the participation rights fulfillment in his/her family*

	N	M	SD	$r_{PR^*}$	p
Child's self-esteem	1000	3.17	0.461	0.341	0.000
Child's self-control	763	3.66	0.632	0.253	0.000
Behaviour problems	1016	0.46	0.386	-0.156	0.000

\*  $r_{PR}$  – correlation with the perceived fulfillment of the participation rights

The data in the Table 4 shows that there is a moderate positive correlation between children's perceptions of participation rights fulfillment and self-esteem ( $r = 0.341$ ). These two variables share about 12% of the variance, which is not negligible given the complexity and the multiple determination of the self-esteem construct. The finding that children who report higher participation rights fulfillment also report higher self-esteem corresponds with claims and empirical findings in the literature on the association between participation in family decision-making and self-esteem (Malone & Hartung, 2010; Persson et al., 2007).

Parental reports of children's self-control were significantly correlated with children's perception of the fulfillment of their participation rights ( $r = 0.253$ )<sup>4</sup>. Malone and Hartung (2010) also documented the connection between higher levels of participation rights and greater child's self-control.

Children's reports of behavioural problems were negatively correlated with the realization of their participation rights ( $r = -0.156$ ). Although the correlation is small, it indicates that children who perceive more freedom of expression and more frequent participation in decision-making

<sup>4</sup> We only took into account the data for children whose self-control was assessed by both parents. Bivariate correlation was calculated using the means of the two estimates.

processes tend to be less prone to externalizing problems. The data are consistent with Hart's (1992) predictions that participation in decision-making reduces tendencies for delinquency. They also corroborate the findings of Persson et al. (2007) that adolescents from the families characterized by openness to influence, mutual responsiveness, and democratic functioning have the lower rates of alcohol consumption and delinquency. Having said this, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of drawing causal conclusions from the correlational studies.

Table 5

*Descriptive statistics for the child's participation rights fulfillment in his/her family for children with different reactions to the negative influence of peers*

Reaction to the negative influence of peers:	Situation*	N	M participation rights	SD participation rights
autonomous resistance to peer pressure	C	718	3.41	0.611
	A	526	3.44	0.617
non-autonomous resistance to peer pressure	C	64	3.34	0.635
	A	99	3.23	0.667
conformist compliance with peer pressure	C	30	2.90	0.700
	A	30	3.02	0.623
autonomous congruence with peer pressure	C	95	3.28	0.753
	A	226	3.27	0.748

\* C – Peer-pressure to smoke a cigarette; A Peer-pressure to take alcoholic drink

The data in the Table 5 shows that the children who report the highest fulfillment of their participation rights are most able to resist peer pressure. Conversely, the children who are prone to conformist compliance with peer pressure report the lowest participation rights fulfillment. According to our results, exercising rights to freedom of expression and inclusion in family decision-making processes is connected not only to children's scores on self-esteem, self-control, and behavioral problems measures (Table 4), but also to their ability to

Finally, we examined children's resistance efficacy to peer pressure to perform norm – breaking behaviors (smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol). According to their responses<sup>5</sup> to situations of peer pressure to take a cigarette or alcoholic drink, children were grouped into four groups of differently motivated resistance to or compliance with the negative influence of peers. For each of these four groups of children, Table 5 contains descriptive statistics of participation rights fulfillment and ability to resist negative peer pressure.

resist peer pressure to use substances. This finding is consistent with the established link between democratic functioning in the family and adolescents' alcohol consumption (Persson et al., 2007) and with the finding that parent-child relationship where young adolescents perceived being excluded from decision-making was related to 'extreme peer orientation' (Fuligni and Eccles, 1993). Adolescents from such parent-child relationship oriented toward peers to such an extent that they were willing to forego developmentally posi-

<sup>5</sup> The 'don't know' option was omitted from the analysis.

tive aspects of their lives, including their parents' rules, in order to keep, and be popular with, peers. The authors suggest that adolescents with such peer orientation may feel that only their relationships with friends afford them opportunities to explore and develop their own opinions and preferences; therefore they are prepared to maintain them at almost any cost.

Due to the markedly unequal group sizes, Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for both hypothetical situations and statistically significant differences in the perceived fulfillment of participation rights between the four groups were found (in both cases  $p = 0.000$ ). Subsequent Mann-Whitney tests were used to examine comparisons of two groups that are most relevant to the topic, i.e. autonomous resistance to peer pressure and conformist compliance with peer pressure, and all other groups. Mann-Whitney test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the participation rights fulfillment between the autonomous resistance group and the conformist compliance group in the situation of being offered cigarettes ( $Z = -4.14$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Similar findings were revealed regarding being offered alcohol (for non-autonomous resistance to peer pressure  $Z = -3.27$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ; for conformist compliance with peer pressure  $Z = -3.88$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ; for autonomous congruence with peer pressure  $Z = -2.61$ ;  $p = 0.009$ ). The effect sizes of all these differences are small (from -0.10 to -0.16). In addition, the conformist compliance group differs in the participation rights fulfillment from autonomous congruence group in the situation of cigarette ( $Z = -3.03$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ; medium effect size: -0.27) and alcohol offer ( $Z = -2.47$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ; small effect size: -0.15).

Hence, the statistical analyses corroborate the abovementioned trend. Adolescents who autonomously, on the basis of

own opinion, refuse peer pressure to take substances, also report more frequent realisation of their participation rights in family. On the other hand, adolescents who conform to the peer pressure out of the fear of rejection, in all pairs of the comparisons made here, perceive fewer opportunities to express their opinion and participate in decision-making within their families. The results are in accordance with Hart's (1992) claim that one of the favorable by-products of participation is the development of children's social competence and responsibility. They also corroborate the findings of the study by Ochaita and Espinosa (1997) who found that the respect for the participation rights and the involvement of children in family decision-making strengthens children's competence to participate in different social contexts.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results of this study provide support to earlier claims that ensuring children's rights in families is related to better psychosocial adjustment. Children who perceive more opportunities to participate in decision-making and greater freedom of expression in their families are less prone to various behaviour problems and are less willing to conform to peer pressure to perform a norm-breaking behaviour. Moreover, ensuring greater rights to participation is linked with better self-esteem and self-control.

Although every child is entitled to participation rights, the results of this study with a nationally representative sample of Croatian seventh graders indicate that not all of them exercise their participation rights in the context of their families. In an average family, children's participation rights are fulfilled less often than his/her provision and protection rights. Only 54%

of the children in our sample reported the full realization of the right to freely express their opinions and ideas and to have others hear them. Even fewer children (44%) said that their attitudes regarding the plans and decisions that affect them are always taken into consideration in their families. It is particularly worrying that in 9-12% of families children never or rarely experience fulfillment of their participation rights.

Children's assessments of the 'governing style' in their families provide further insight into the realization of their participation rights. More than a quarter of children see their families as dictatorships, anarchies, or post-revolutionary states. These results suggest that a substantial percentage of the families fail to fulfil their potential to be the first environment in which the child's competence for participation and a sense of social responsibility develop. Parenting that encourages freedom of expression and the inclusion of children in family decision-making provides children with the opportunity to be not only the ones who receive, but also the ones who contribute to family decisions (by presenting their views, providing practical help, taking responsibility through the participation in decision-making, etc.). This opportunity is not given to all children because some parents do not act in accordance with the evolving capacities of the child, as outlined by the Article 5 of the UNCRC.

However, along with recognizing that parents have a greater responsibility for ensuring the fulfillment of children's rights than the children themselves, in explaining possible reasons for the lack of children's participation in family communication and decision-making processes, it is necessary to consider the bidirectional nature of the parent-child influence. Not only have parents' behaviours been found to influence adolescents' disclosure to parents (e.g., To-

kić & Pećnik, 2011), but adolescents' behaviours (i.e. openness to communication) have also been identified as determinants of perceived family democracy (Persson et al., 2004). Moreover, a longitudinal study by Stattin et al. (2011) demonstrated that both parents' and adolescents' behaviours contribute to a democratic climate in the family, with mutual responsiveness suggested as its marker. Hence, the lack of fulfillment of the participation rights in our study could also be partially attributed to child's characteristics (e.g., low self-control).

Although the UNCRC has been ratified in Croatia for two decades at the time of the data collection, its implementation is rather slow. The implementation of participation rights seems particularly slow, in families and schools alike (Miharija & Kuridža, 2010), possibly because listening to children and taking their views seriously is quite a recent addition to the established mode of adult – child interactions. The child's right to be involved and taken seriously in decision making requires (in some contexts even radical) changes in understanding and building adult-child relationships. This may be a particular challenge to adults who believe that children are passive objects of caregivers' socialization influence, as suggested by the study of the Croatian citizens' beliefs about the proper treatment of children (Pećnik et al., 2011). The results of this study revealed that some participants believe that children's unquestioning obedience is desirable, that children should not interfere with adults' conversation, and that it is important to break children's defiance and stubbornness swiftly.

The possibility that some parents did not experience respect for their own participation rights in childhood may explain some of the barriers to parents' listening to their children and respecting their rights to participate. Such parents may benefit

from parenting support<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it is important to invest effort in the fulfillment of children's right by providing parents adequate parenting support (Ochaita & Espinosa, 1997). This primarily refers to the Article 18 of the UNCRC that commits governments to assure appropriate support to parents in fulfilling their parental responsibilities and is further elaborated in the *Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18* (Council of Europe, 2012b)<sup>7</sup>.

A common argument against the participation of children is that parents' listening to children will result in a lack of child's respect for the parents and the disruption of parental authority (Lansdown, 2001). However, by listening to children, along with showing respect to them, parents can help children learn how to respect others. Recognition of the child as a person, and listening to his/her experiences and ideas, is integral to parenting in the best interests of the child (Pećnik, 2007) promoted through the *Recommendation on policy to support positive parenting* (Council of Europe, 2006). Listening to children also serves parents' interest because it helps them build and nurture warm relationships within the family. Thus, parents and other adults who work with children through the educational system need to become aware that experiencing participation, dialogue and autonomy support is as needed for the welfare and development of the child as the satisfaction of their other physical, educational and emotional needs.

<sup>6</sup> Parenting support is 'a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving how parents approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competencies'. (Daly et al., 2015; p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> „In order to maximise the opportunities for all children and young people to participate in all matters affecting them, member States should: - encourage parents and carers through legislation and parent-training programmes to respect the child's or young person's human dignity and her or his rights, feelings and opinions; - create opportunities for intergenerational dialogue in order to encourage mutual respect and cooperation“ (Council of Europe, 2012b; p. 9).

This study is among the first to explore the fulfillment of children's participation rights in Croatian families. Future studies should improve upon our two-item measure regarding the children's participation rights so that these issues can be examined in more depth using psychometrically sound assessment tools. By providing initial evidence on parents' support of children's rights in Croatia, our results may stimulate further research on children's participation in families, as well as identification of barriers to ensuring rights and the ways to overcome such barriers.

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## Sažetak

### **REALIZACIJA PARTICIPATORNIH PRAVA DJECE I PSIHOSOCIJALNA PRILAGODBA DJETETA: STAVOVI DJECE I RODITELJA**

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Europske obitelji proživljavaju promjene u pogledu odnosa moći između članova obitelji, uključujući demokratizaciju odnosa između roditelja i djece. Te je procese olakšala primjena Konvencije o pravima djeteta UN-a (1989.) koju je Hrvatska ratificirala 1991. godine. Ova studija analizira percipiranu realizaciju prava djeteta na skrb, zaštitu i participaciju unutar modernih hrvatskih obitelji. Osim toga, istražuje veze između realizacije participatornih prava i djeće percepcije demokratske klime u njihovim obiteljima, kao i neke pokazatelje psihosocijalne prilagodbe djece. U 2010. godini na reprezentativnom uzorku od 1074 učenika sedmog razreda osnovne škole (trinaestogodišnjaka) i njihovih roditelja (983 majke i 845 očeva) dobiveni su podaci o mjerama realizaciji prava djece u obitelji, upravljačkom stilu u obitelji, samopoštovanju, samokontroli, problematičnom ponašanju i djelotvornosti otpora. Sudionici uglavnom izvješćuju o poštivanju svih analiziranih prava. Ipak, prava na skrb i zaštitu općenito se realiziraju češće od participatornih prava. Oko polovice djece izvješćuje o potpunom poštivanju njihovog prava da slobodno izraze svoja mišljenja i ideje, kao i pravo da utječu na donošenje odluka koje utječu na njih. U 9-12% obitelji djeца nikada ili rijetko doživljavaju ispunjenje svojih participatornih prava. Procjena 'upravljačkog stila' u njihovim obiteljima pokazuje da više od četvrtine djece doživljavaju svoje obitelji kao diktature, anarhije ili post-revolucionarne države. Veća realizacija participatornih prava povezana je s doživljavanjem vlastite obitelji kao demokracije, višim samopoštovanjem djeteta i manje problematičnih ponašanja, češćem odupiranju vršnjačkom pritisku da konzumiraju supstance (cigaretе, alkohol), kao i s roditeljskim opažanjem veće samokontrole djeteta. Roditelji, u usporedbi sa svojom djecom, pokazuju tendenciju precjenjivanja razine ispunjenja dječjih prava na zaštitu fizičkog integriteta, dostojanstva, sudjelovanja u odlučivanju i primanju brižne skrbi.

**Ključne riječi:** participatorna prava djece, djeće sudjelovanje u odlučivanju, obiteljska demokracija, roditeljstvo, adolescenti, odnosi roditelj-adolescent.