

# Raising Awareness of the Importance of Reading to Early Childhood and Preschool Age Children through Lifelong Education of Parents

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## Abstract

*In the modern age, the importance of reading to children from an early age is undoubtedly emphasized. Even though modern technology is present in all spheres of children's education, the fact that reading has a significant role in children's future development and learning, both cognitive and emotional, should not be neglected. Children whom it has been read to since birth are most often given a good foundation for learning and reading successfully later on in life. The parental role is invaluable in early reading to the child because, in addition to developing the child's vocabulary, imagination and faster understanding, the time parent and child spend together is quality time. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the parents' views on the importance of reading to a child from an early age, as well as to determine whether parents aspire to some form of lifelong education in the mentioned field.*

*In the first phase, unstructured interviews were conducted with five parents whose children attend one of the early childhood and preschool institutions in Međimurje County. In the second phase of the survey, a questionnaire was constructed to examine the parents' opinions (N = 78) on the importance of early reading to the child. It has been found that parents most often state lack of free time as a reason for insufficient reading to or with the child. They also mention that so far they haven't participated in any of the professional training forms or workshops dealing with this topic. They believe that due to their busy schedule and work obligations,*

*educational institutions should take on the role of reading to children, as well as stimulating interest in the book. If given the opportunity and leisure, there are some parents who would like to participate in one of the lifelong learning programs.*

**Keywords:** *child and early reading; child's cognitive and emotional development; pre-reading skills; parents and educators.*

## Introduction

In early childhood and preschool education it is often emphasized that rich and stimulating spatial and material environment plays the role of the third educator. It can be said that the development of reading skills also requires a stimulating reading environment. If children have the opportunity to grow up surrounded by picture books, books and other printed media, and have the opportunity to see adults read, it is more likely that they themselves will develop reading habits and skills as well. The National Reading Encouraging Strategy for the period 2017-2022 (later referred to as NRES) states that “more recent research has shown that better reading literacy means a higher probability to continue education until the age of 21, that reading literacy is a predictor of professional career (rather than school grades), that it has a positive impact on the attitude towards studying, that it is related to a tendency for lifelong learning and also to participation in society and political activism. Reading literacy is important not only for an individual but also for the economic growth of the country. Specifically, literacy level affects the quality of work, mobility, employment, later training and broader participation in civil society”(NRES, 2017).

Therefore, is it more than a clear answer to the question whether children should be read to from an early age? From an early age, a child learns about the world around him, hears sounds and voices, and although he does not understand their meaning, he listens to the tone, the way they are pronounced, and starts producing sounds himself. Listening to adults read, and reading along with them, the child learns new words, creates sentences and stories, enriches his vocabulary and develops reading skills. Since reading to a child is essential from the very birth, parents have a significant role in developing reading habits, as well as do educators and library staff. As early as the 1980s, Taylor (1983) pointed out the importance of education of parents, educators, teachers, and all those who work with children, in the field of early literacy, especially reading to children at early childhood and preschool age. Throughout history, the concept of literacy has evolved from the traditional notion that it is sufficient for a person to be able to write his or her name, to the modern understanding of literacy that highlights reading, listening, observing and speaking, and various literacy skills. In the past, it was considered that a child begins to learn to read only when he or she starts school, so school had the primary function in teaching reading and writing. Thanks to research in the field of neuroscience, it is now known that the development of reading skills begins as early as from the birth of a child (Diamond & Hopson, 2006).

In addition to enriching vocabulary and speech, reading to children also enables imagination and cognitive and emotional development. When children and adults are reading together, it creates a special bond and intimacy, strengthens emotional bonds, and creates special emotional moments for the child, as well as for the adult. For educators, the question that arises is how to encourage and support parents, as well as experts in the educational system, in early reading to children. It is important to make parents aware that in addition to reading and flipping through picture books, they also need to talk to their child about what they have read, that they can create a sequel together or invent new stories. Regarding that, Vygotsky (1962) speaks of a zone of subsequent development, where the adults are the ones who determine the existing level of the child's knowledge, and then extend their knowledge with new insights and experiences. According to Čudina-Obradović (2002), the reading comprehension phase begins with the development of speech, when parents speak to the child, name persons, things, actions, expand the content and therefore create a fundamental premise for the future development of reading skills. When parents tell stories to a child, over time the child begins to understand the content of the story and the characters, and enjoys repeating the stories. Therefore, storytelling must become part of the parents' everyday life, and strengthen the bond between them and the child. It is more natural for the parent to tell stories because this will be more understandable to the child; the child will look at the picture book with the parent, and after a while notice that the picture book or book also contains written text. While reading to the child, it is best for the child to sit in the parent's lap, so that he/she too can look at the picture book and follow the course of the word. The parent should occasionally point at the word that is being read.

A picture book should be appropriate for the child's age, starting from simple pictures and simple content with one or two characters, to more complex stories. It is all a process in which children first acquire listening skills, then speaking skills, pre-reading and reading skills, and finally writing skills. According to Apel and Masterson (2004), language and speech development is a complex process in which a child, in the first six years of his life, adopts the basics of communication that will be useful to him for the rest of his life. This is why the active role of parents in interacting with their child is important. Because of all of the above, it is necessary to make parents aware of their role in reading to children through various educational activities. Raising awareness of the parental role can be achieved through specific workshops, counseling sessions, lectures, and also create a connection between the family and institutional reading environment (Farrant & Zubrick, 2012).

Studying the relevant literature in this area, it is clear that most of the research and texts on early reading refer to educators, and only a few to parents. Therefore, Taylor et al. (2016) find that parent-child reading should be viewed holistically; i.e., that parent-child reading activities are influenced by the parent-child psychological state, parenting style, cultural factors and socio-economic circumstances that include education,

employment, income, and even the neighborhood itself. Law et al. (2018) conclude that early reading enables the child to develop vocabulary better, that children who come from deprived families can compensate for certain educational disadvantages through early reading; that is, they can improve their cognitive and speech development. Parents' workshops and counseling can also help parents become more aware of the importance of reading to their child, which can then contribute to better speech development and enrich the child's vocabulary. A child who is exposed to early stimulation of reading and conversation will have highly developed reading and speaking skills by the age of five. The neural connections that have been developed in the early and preschool years are the basis for future upgrading of the child's learning (Stričević & Čunović, 2013). Apart from affecting academic achievement, reading also affects cognitive development, social skills development, emotional development, language development, encourages memory and attention, develops imagination, strengthens confidence as well as the bond between children and adults (NRES, 2017).

Some of the research specifically focused on cognition within early childhood development and on how parental involvement fits into early literacy development. In the field of early literacy, the importance of daily adult-child reading is emphasized, as well as having a hundred or more books in one's home, which is cited as a link to a child's academic readiness and performance in kindergarten (Burton, 2013). However, research has shown that reading as an independent activity will not help children develop pre-literacy skills (Phillips et al., 2008). There is also a need for developing other specific reading skills that will help children successfully develop pre-literacy skills (DeJong & Leseman, 2001; Roberts et al., 2005). Therefore, children need parents who will be role models in their daily reading, all with the aim of successfully completing their initial literacy skills. Some research states that parents should pay special attention to the words on the page as they read with their child. Such a strategy will help children relate stories and illustrations with the ability to recognize, understand, and make sense of particular words or sentences. All of the above can serve as a good explanation for parents of the importance of reading in early childhood, and since parents want to enable their child to develop well and have good achievements in life, such research and insights can serve as motivation for early reading to children.

## **Method**

The aim of the study was to examine the parents' perceptions of the importance of reading to a child in early childhood, both in the family and institutional context. In addition, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into the parents' opportunities and desires for lifelong learning with the aim of raising awareness of the role of reading to children from an early age. Given the research aim, the following research tasks were set:

- 1 Examine and analyze the ownership of a home library in the family, the number of books in it, the frequency of reading books, picture books and daily newspapers,

as well as membership in the library and reading room, and parents' assessment of the child's interest in picture books.

- 2 Examine and analyze the structure of the parents' opinions about the importance of reading in early childhood.
- 3 Examine the parents' self-assessment of the attention they pay to reading in the family and the desire for lifelong learning in that field.

The research included the target population of parents in one kindergarten in order to gain insight into the parents' opinions on a particular issue. Although the results may not be generalized to parents in other kindergartens, they are an indication for conducting research on a larger scale. Given the total number of children in the kindergarten (N = 110), one parent of each child was included in the study to meet the requirement of representativeness of the sample size (Cohen et al., 2007). The decrease in the final number of respondents is a result of the fact that some parents have two or more children in that kindergarten, therefore the total number of parents (families) was 96. According to the number of respondents (N = 78) who agreed to participate in the research, it is evident that 81.3 % of the total number of parents in the kindergarten participated. Given the gender structure, the sample is 33.3 % male (N = 26) and 66.7 % female (N = 52). In terms of qualifications, 76.9 % of the mothers have a primary or secondary education level, 12.8 % have a bachelor's degree, while 10.3 % have a college degree. The situation is slightly different for the fathers. 55.1 % of them have completed secondary education, 11.5 % have a bachelor's degree, while 33.3 % have a university degree. According to the number of children in the family, the most represented are the respondents with two children in the family (48.7 %), then those with one child (37.2 %), followed by 7.7 % of families with three and 6.5 % with more than four children.

For the purpose of this research, a survey method was selected (Milas, 2009). The data collection process lasted from January to February 2019. Prior to the survey itself, in October 2018, an interview was conducted with a smaller number of respondents, which was the method of creating the survey questionnaire. At a parent meeting, the purpose of the research was explained to the parents. They were asked to participate in the research, which was anonymous and it was possible for them to quit at any time. The SPSS statistical program was used for data processing, and descriptive, inferential and multivariate statistics were performed.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Home library, habits and reading interest***

The results of the research show that 74.4 % of the parents (N = 58) state they own a home library, while 25.6 % (N = 20) state they do not. Table 1 shows the number of books in the home library. It is evident that the largest number of respondents have 31 to 60 books (46.6 %) in the home library, while the smallest number of respondents have up to 100 books (10.3 %).

Table 1  
*Number of books in the home library*

Number of books	f	%
Up to 30 books	15	25.9
from 31 to 60 books	27	46.6
from 61 to 100 books	6	10.3
more than 100 books	10	17.2

Respondents mostly stated that they read several books a year (63.4 %), 23.9 % of respondents read three or more books a month, while 12.7 % of respondents state they do not read at all. In the daily press reading assessment, the answers are scattered; therefore, 27.3 % of respondents read daily and 24.7 % once a week. 16.9 % of respondents read daily press two or three times a week, as well as two or three times a month, and 14.3 % of parents point out that they do not read the daily press. In most cases, one child (66.7 %) and a child’s mother (20.5 %) are members of the library and the reading room, while 10.3 % of the respondents state that none of the family members is a member of the library and the reading room.

When assessing the child’s interest in picture books, parents estimate that their child/ children are highly interested in picture books (85.5 %), while a smaller number of parents indicate that the child shows little interest in picture books (14.5 %). Although some parents state that the child shows little interest in picture books, the results regarding owning a picture book show that each child has at least a certain number of picture books at home (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Number of picture books a child owns*

Number of picture books	f	%
Up to 10	6	7.8
Up to 20	24	31.2
Up to 30	24	31.2
Up to 50	15	19.5
More than 50	8	10.4

Considering that children are highly interested in picture books, results show that more money is spent on books and picture books for children in the household, compared to books for parents, which is not surprising ( Table 3).

Table 3  
*Money spent in the last 6 months on books and picture books*

Money spent	0 kunas		Up to 50 kunas		Up to 100 kunas		over 100 kunas		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
For children	6	7.7	13	16.7	28	35.9	31	39.7	78	100.0
For adults	31	44.9	13	18.8	10	14.5	15	21.7	69	100.0

It is well known that reading to children is invaluable because the emotional connection between the child and the parent is even stronger in those moments, and additionally, it has been scientifically proven that children whom it was read to from the earliest age have a strong foundation for successful reading throughout their lives (Schauperl, 2007). The results show that mothers read to their children once or twice a week (42.3 %) and daily (47.4 %), with only a small number of respondents estimating that mothers read once a month (9.0 %) or never (1.3 %). However, the dispersion of responses is evident in the fathers. Specifically, 24 % of the fathers read to children every day, while the number of those who read once or twice a week is slightly higher than that of the mothers (46.7 %). 22.7 % of respondents estimated the mothers read to children once a month, while 6.7 % estimated that the fathers never read to children. The results obtained are a good insight into the situation in the family environment that can help the educators in creating activities that can raise the parents' awareness about the importance of the role of parent-child reading for the child's overall development (Taylor et al., 2016). A bivariate correlation was performed to determine whether there was a correlation between the mother's and father's frequency of reading to the child. The Pearson correlation coefficient showed that there was a statistically significant and positive median correlation ( $r = 0.562$ ,  $p = .000$ ) between the mother and father reading frequency to the child. According to the parents, as one parent in the family reads to the child more often, the other parent will do the same. The mother and father reading frequency to the child has 31.58 % of the common variance. The findings emphasize that many studies suggest that the more time parents spend reading to children, and the more books there are in a family library, the more successful children will be in later social and academic achievement (Law et al., 2018).

### ***The importance of reading in early childhood***

In order to determine the structure of the parents' opinions about the importance of reading in early childhood, factor analysis was performed on the scale of the same name, under the component model. Ultimately, six particles were omitted from the analysis because they were saturated on separate factors and their internal reliability was not satisfactory. Two factors were extracted (Table 4), which were retained as statistically significant by the Guttman-Kaiser factor of factor extraction limitation (greater than 1). As the KMO test was 0.751 and Bartlett's sphericity test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 261.023$ ;  $df = 55$ ,  $N = 78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), the basic prerequisites for proceeding with factor analysis were satisfied. The baseline solution was retained and the resulting factors interpreted 54.1 % of the total variance. The first factor interprets 28.5 %, while the second factor interprets 25.6 % of the total variance.

Retained factors, given the content of a single particle, could best be described as a *positive approach to reading in early childhood* (Factor 1) and a *lack of free time and the role of institutions* (Factor 2). Based on the obtained factors, two scales were created that make up the structure of the parents' opinion on the importance of reading in early

childhood. On the right side of Table 4, arithmetic means and standard deviations for each particle are presented, as well as separately for the two scales. Looking at the range of agreement, it is noted that items in the first rating scale range from *neither agreeing nor disagreeing* to *fully agreeing*. Parents express the highest degree of agreement on the importance of reading together with their child, as this creates a better emotional connection. Role models from stories and picture books and the importance of daily reading to a child show somewhat lower agreement, but such a result can be attributed to individuals' different understanding of the role models and characters from the stories, as well as the (in)ability to read to a child daily due to different circumstances or parental obligations. The second rating scale has estimates ranging from *fully disagree* to *neither agree nor disagree*. Lack of free time is the highest ranking item and the parents' are most indecisive in this statement. The lowest agreement was found in the item that there is no need to read daily to the child because he or she is listening to stories in kindergarten, which certainly reflects the parents' awareness of how important their role is in reading to the child and with the child at home.

Table 4

*Two-factor Solution Scale Component Matrix and Reliability Coefficients/Descriptive Scale Particle Indicators of the Importance of Reading in Early Childhood*

Particles	Factor saturation		Descriptive parameters	
	F1	F2	M	SD
<b>F1 A Positive Approach to Reading in Early Childhood</b>			<b>4.08</b>	<b>.73</b>
In order for a child to love reading, parents should set an example for him/her and show that they love to read.	.60		4.20	1.00
It is very important for a child to develop an interest in picture books.	.65		4.39	.88
Role models from stories and picture books are a good means of forming the moral traits of a child.	.68		3.68	1.06
The best way for a child to gain new experiences is to read to them every day.	.68		3.71	.96
Reading together creates a better emotional connection between the child and his parents.	.68		4.41	.87
<b>F2 A lack of free time and the role of institutions</b>			<b>1.82</b>	<b>.65</b>
There is no need for me to read to my child at home as they listen to the stories in the kindergarden every day.		.54	1.24	.67
These days parents do not have time to read to their child daily.		.58	2.73	1.23
If a child is too fond of reading, they may become alienated from other children.		.63	1.75	.92
It is not necessary to pay much attention to reading to children in preschool; it is more important when they start school.		.66	1.64	0.99
As a parent with obligations, I cannot read to my child and I leave it to the institutions.		.72	1.64	.94
I know reading to children is important, but I just don't have the time to do it.		.65	1.91	1.04
<b>Intrinsic value</b>	<b>3.13</b>	<b>2.82</b>		
<b>Cronbach a</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>0.75</b>		



### ***Lifelong education of parents – desires and opportunities***

In order to examine the parents' desires and opportunities to participate in lifelong learning programs in the field of the importance of reading in early childhood, several issues were explored: their self-assessment of paying attention to reading in the family, the child's age at which the parent should start reading to them, and whether they participated in any programs regarding the mentioned issues. More than half of the respondents (69.2 %) said that more attention could be paid to reading in their family, 26.9 % said that enough attention was paid, while 3.8 % said that insufficient attention was paid to reading in the family. When evaluating participation in various workshops or training, 85.9 % of the parents stated that they did not participate in any lifelong education programs, while 14.1 % stated that they did. If offered the opportunity to participate in various forms of training, 70.5 % of the parents estimated that they would participate, 12.8 % would not participate, while 16.7 % did not provide an answer. 67.9 % of the parents would participate in workshops that encourage child-parent reading, 16.7 % would not participate in such workshops, while 15.4 % did not answer this question. The chi-square test tested the contingency relationship (Table 5) of the gender variable and the variables on preferences and opportunities to participate in one of the lifelong learning programs. Based on Pearson's Chi-square test and Cramer's V correlation coefficient, a statistically significant correlation between the independent variable of gender and *previous participation in different lifelong education programs* was confirmed, as well as the *desire to participate in such programs*, but the results show that this correlation is statistically small (CV = 0.29; CV = 0.25).

Table 5

*Correlation between desire and opportunity to participate in lifelong education programs and gender of the respondents*

Gender of the respondents	Previous participation		Desire to participate	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
	%		%	
Male	0,0	100,0	71,4	28,6
Female	21,2	78,8	90,9	9,1
Correlation	Chi-square test:		$\chi^2 (1, 78) = 6.403$	
			$p < 0.05$	
	Cramer's V coefficient:		CV=0.29	
			$\chi^2 (1, 65) = 4.144$	
			$p < 0.05$	
			CV=0.25	

A review of the percentages shows that the fathers have not participated in any of the early childhood reading lifelong learning programs, while the mothers are more represented in the "yes" group. Regarding the desire to participate in one of such programs, the mothers are more represented in the answers that they would like to participate, while the fathers are more represented in the group that would not want to participate if given the opportunity. Although most respondents indicated that they would like to participate in lifelong learning programs that promote the importance of reading in early childhood, the alarming fact is that individual parents, when given

the opportunity to participate, would not want to attend such programs or activities. It is certain that work needs to be done on the parents' awareness of the importance of reading in early childhood, as research conducted in this area has shown that reading to children in a family setting is positively associated with activating various brain areas that later affect children's speech, reading and expression (Hutton et al., 2015), cognitive skills (Kalb & van Ours, 2014), and also, children later find it easier to cope with the socio-emotional challenges they face during school and life (Duncan et al., 2007; Mistry et al., 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Analyzing the literature exploring parents' thinking about the importance of reading in early childhood, it is noticeable that there is a relatively small amount of research examining this topic from a parent's perspective (Law et al., 2018; NSPC, 2017). Therefore, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of parents' opinions on the importance of reading in early childhood, as well as to gain an insight into how much attention parents pay to reading to their child and participation in one of the lifelong learning programs. The findings indicate that parents are highly aware of the importance of reading to a child from an early age; however, they say that more attention could be paid to adult-child reading. Most parents did not participate in any of the lifelong learning programs in the area, but if given the opportunity, they would participate in activities and workshops. Fathers show less interest in engaging in various forms of lifelong learning than mothers.

Parents need support in early reading to the child, as well as providing specific programs (workshops, counseling, lectures) that will enhance interactions and experiences in the field of early reading to children (Trivette et al., 2010). Therefore, some scientific research and relevant articles on early reading, as well as the experiences of practitioners in the field of working with early childhood and preschool children, can be a good foundation for understanding parents, supporting parents and developing partnerships with parents in the early reading field. Working together with the mutual respect and cooperation of parents and institutions can lead to certain changes in the interests, attitudes and reading habits of parents, which means greater awareness of the importance of reading in early childhood.

Although the sample in this study is not representative of the parent population in the Republic of Croatia, it is indicative of an insight into the assessment of parents' opinions about the importance of reading in early childhood. Also, these results are a good indicator for educators and local authorities, showing what parents think, and setting guidelines how to organize training and activities that would encourage children and adults to read more. It is recommended that future research include a larger number of particles that relate to parents' understanding of the importance of reading in early childhood in relation to children's cognitive, social and emotional development, as well as examining the relationship between parental reading in their own childhood and today's attitude toward reading.

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# Cjeloživotnim obrazovanjem roditelja do osvještavanja važnosti čitanja djeci rane i predškolske dobi

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## Sažetak

*U suvremeno doba nedvojbeno se naglašava važnost čitanja djetetu od najranije dobi njegova života. Iako moderna tehnologija prodire u sve sfere odgoja i obrazovanja djece, ne bi trebalo zanemariti činjenicu koliko snažnu ulogu čitanje ima u budućem, kako kognitivnom tako i emocionalnom razvoju i učenju svakog pojedinoga djeteta. Djeca kojoj se čitalo od rođenja, najčešće imaju dobre temelje za učenje i uspješno čitanje i u kasnijem životu. Roditeljska uloga neprocjenjiva je u ranom čitanju djetetu jer, osim što se rječnik, mašta i razumijevanje djeteta brže razvija, vrijeme koje roditelj i dijete provedu zajedno iznimno je kvalitetno provedeno vrijeme. Stoga je cilj ovoga rada istražiti stavove roditelja o važnosti čitanja djetetu od najranije dobi, kao i utvrditi teže li roditelji nekom od oblika cjeloživotnoga obrazovanja u području navedene problematike. U prvoj fazi provedeni su nestrukturirani intervjui s petero roditelja čija djeca pohađaju jednu od ustanova ranoga i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja u Međimurskoj županiji. U drugoj fazi istraživanja konstruiran je anketni upitnik kojim se ispitalo mišljenje roditelja (N = 78) o važnosti ranoga čitanja djetetu. Utvrđeno je kako roditelji najčešće navode manjak slobodnoga vremena kao uzrok nedovoljnoga čitanja djetetu ili s djetetom. Isto tako, spominju kako dosad nisu sudjelovali na nekom od stručnih edukacija ili radionica koje se bave navedenom tematikom. Smatraju kako zbog prezaposlenosti roditelja, odgojno-obrazovne ustanove trebaju na sebe preuzeti ulogu čitanja djeci, kao i poticanje interesa za knjigu. Ako im se pruži prilika i slobodno vrijeme, pojedini roditelji željeli bi sudjelovati u nekom od programa cjeloživotnoga obrazovanja.*

**Ključne riječi:** *dijete i rano čitanje; kognitivni i emocionalni razvoj djeteta; predčitačke vještine; roditelji i odgajatelji.*