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**Croatian Reading Program for Prisoners and their Children**

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# Introduction

The Croatian Reading Association (CroRA) is a non-governmental, non-profit and voluntary association whose mission is encouraging, research and promoting reading and literacy with the goals of awareness raising about the importance and impact of reading and literacy, promoting and developing optimum level of literacy and reading skills of every individual, providing an opening for experiences and ideas exchange forum as well as facilitating lifelong education and professional development. The organization of the first national campaign “Read to me!” is a very important project the CroRA members are involved in with the aim of promoting early reading aloud, encouraging parents and other adults to read out loud to children. The association initiated these projects aimed at promotion of reading and using literature for therapeutic and educational purposes (Barath, Matul, Sabljak, 1994).

Modern technologies allow the children to enjoy listening to their parent’s voice reading a book out loud to them, even when their parent is not nearby. Listening to the audio recording while reading a book (or picture book) helps the children develop listening skills, imagination, increase their concentration and enrich their vocabulary. It is just as important in helping the parent and child bond during reading and listening, despite the difficulties they are facing. In *the Croatian Prison Reading Program* children share a beautiful story through the audio book they have received from their parent and are given the opportunity to have their imprisoned parent with them, while the parents have the opportunity of giving their children a piece of themselves.

**Croatian national context of parents in prison**

In Croatia during 2015 the parents of 12.734 children were in prison (RODA, 2016). These children are invisible to community and vulnerable, they are direct or indirect victims of their parent’s crimes. For most children imprisonment of a parent is a traumatic experience. Although children have the right to visit their parents over 60 times per year (weekends and holidays) children on average make only 4 visits per year. Some children visit their parents more often, while others do not see their parent for years. Maintaining the parent-child relationship while the parent is in prison is necessary for the child to grow up balanced and helps the child in overcoming developmental crises (Brkić, 2013). Croatian Reading Association as a partner in the *project Croatian Reading Program for Prisoners and their Children* with the association RODA (*Parents in Action*) conducted in 2015 and 2016 the Prison Reading Program financially supported by the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth. Although similar programs exist in the world the Croatian one has its own special features: the Program has been implemented in all penal institutions in Croatia, including mothers and fathers prisoners who read to their children, from 0 to 18 years of age; the Program has financial support from Croatian ministries and has been continuously evaluated; the books are selected by librarians, members of the CroRA; prison staff have been educated for the implementation of the program and it is free of charge for the prisoners themselves.

CroRa has been involved in this project in the domain of its expertise – promoting the importance of reading both among grownups and children, and especially reading out loud to younger children. Croatian Reading Association members have developed workshops, prepared implementation manual and composed a book list for children and the young, while imprisoned fathers were free to choose a story for their children (Berak, Čunović, Sabljak, 2016, 26). The program is organized in such a way that fathers in prison get picture books and/or books appropriate for older children, among which they choose a book they find appropriate for their child. They read the text aloud as if they were reading it to their child directly, and the prison employees assist them in recording the audio. With the assistance of RODA and CroRA, the audio recording is then sent to the child going through proper channels. In the course of one-day workshops, the prison staff and prisoners were trained to participate in the project activities and learn about the benefits of reading aloud for achieving a closer relationship between parents and children, as well as for the development of their emotional intelligence and reading skills. During the lectures and workshops, around one hundred fathers from three penitentiaries were then also introduced to the importance of reading aloud to children in order to establish a closer relationship with their children, as well as to contribute to the development of their children’s emotional intelligence and reading skills.

During the whole implementation of the program all of the planned activities are being monitored, and there are evaluation questionnaires for every target group so that the project team can gain better insight into their satisfaction in implementation and participation. Anonymous evaluation of the Reading Program implemented in 2015 and 2016 was made according to the results of questionnaires answered by parents/prisoners, prison staff and the prisoners’ families. In the evaluation fathers/prisoners point out positive emotional changes, improvement in the communication between them and the child, and overall mutual benefits. They were mostly satisfied with the books chosen, but some of them expressed a wish for a wider selection. They were very pleased with the staff’s involvement and spoke highly of their engagement and professionalism. 94% of the prisoners gave the highest grade possible to the program and expressed the wish to go on participating in it.



Figure 1.

The likelihood the parent / prisoner will continue participating in the Reading Program activities

Prison staff's evaluation made it clear that they support the program and mentioned challenges they faced which were all technical. Prisoners’ family members also spoke highly of the program, pointing out the program strengthens the emotional bond with the father and helps preserve that bond.

From the beginning of the program to this day, all those responsible for it have slowly been working on its sustainability on several different levels: instruction program participation manual was written so that the program can be independently implemented in correctional facilities; inmates themselves have in a great percentage expressed their willingness to continue their participation in the program even if they would have to provide the money for the book and postage costs. For the last three years, providers of the program, have been transmitting to the public very positive messages about the program, trying to get positive support, attitude and even affection from the public, professionals and particularly decisionmakers so that they would get more actively involved as well as give their further support to the program. As a result, owing to financial and institutional support given by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Croatia, implementation of the Reading Program for Prisoners and their Children continues for the next three years.

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