



PRESENTATION OF THE MODEL OF PARTICIPATORY WORK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE A STEP FORWARD PROGRAMME

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A STEP FORWARD Programme

- 2021 – 2024
- A series of activities aimed to improve assessment and care for children and youth (children and youth with behavioural problems – starting position)
- **One of the key activities and principles is empowering participation of children and youth in alternative care**
- The intention of the A STEP FORWARD programme is to develop activities and offer a model of child participation in alternative care in Croatia

Starting point

- Child participation is relatively well defined by laws and national strategic documents; however, the process of implementation of the participative approach is relatively slow.
- **Positions and roles of children and adults** – children are moving from passive service recipients into (more) active participants, which simultaneously changes the position and role of adults as well: from exclusive holders of responsibility and power to respecting partners and mentors.
- These changes **also imply the need of children and adults alike to improve their knowledge** of participative rights, implementation of participatory work and ways of encouraging participation.

Previous good practices of child participation in alternative care

- At the beginning of the 2000, within the **Forum for Quality Foster Care** operated the **Youth Forum**, which included foster children and biological children of foster families. Children and youth participated actively in the work of national conferences on foster care.
- Within the activities of **UNICEF Office in Croatia** acted the **Advisory Board for Children's Participation**, which included children from alternative care as well. The Advisory Board developed guidelines for encouraging children's participation (Borić/Mataga Tintor/Osmak Franjić, 2021; Borić/Mataga Tintor, 2020). Young members of the Advisory Board participated actively in the creation of these guidelines.
- Furthermore, **FICE Croatia** is actively promoting the participation of children in care through various projects and activities involving the youth.

Participative activities within the A STEP FORWARD programme

1. Consultations with children and the youth in the analysis of the situation and needs of institutions
2. Inclusion of the youth in the Advisory Board of the A STEP FORWARD programme
3. Educational activities for children and experts on the topic of child participation in care
4. Participation in the CARE international conference
5. Participation in the UPSHIFT programme

Consultations with children and youth in the analysis of the situation and needs of institutions

- Children and the youth are aware of advantages and disadvantages of the care system. They speak most positively about positive relations with experts.
- A group of the most interested actors that needs to be included with due respect in all activities related to the development of the care system.
- Willingness of children and the youth to participate in consultations suggests that they trust experts and the system, and that they believe in the possibility of positive changes.
- Personal contact and sharing of personal stories empowered even us, the experts, to be more persistent in encouraging child participation in the care system.



Inclusion of the youth in the Advisory Board of the A STEP FORWARD programme

- 32 adults and 12 young persons from 6 different institutions
- An introductory meeting is held with the youth and mentors prior to every meeting
- Meetings held in different locations: the Ministry, the Faculty, the UNICEF Office
- Young people believe it is important that more of them attend, so that their voice and suggestions could carry more weight.
- The opportunity to spend time with their peers with similar experiences represents added value for the youth.

Educational activities for children and experts on the topic of child participation in care

- Regional meetings and workshops with children, the youth and their mentors in different regions of Croatia, where the youth and mentors learn about children's rights, participatory rights and participation opportunities in different environments.
- The total of 33 experts and 44 children and youth participated in the educational programme.

Key messages of children and the youth addressed to adults:

They should listen to children more.

They should share more information with youth.

They should include children more, listen to their opinions, talk to them, allow them to participate.

Children and youth want to be taken more seriously, and promises should be kept.

Children and youth should be taken more seriously.



Participation in the SKRB international conference

SKRB2023 – 44 children and youth participated

The conference ended with a joint event for adults, children and the youth, with a panel discussion in which representatives of ministries, the Office of the Ombudswoman for Children, and representatives of organisations that provide services for children and the youth participated.



- Suggestions included the importance of learning about an institution and getting to know it before coming into its care, the provision of timely information about the duration of care, a more considerate way of informing the media of children and the youth accommodated in institutions and of those institutions, improved furnishing of apartments, and increased participation level (especially that they be consulted and asked for their opinion, and that they may participate actively in decisions related to the life in an institution and to their individual treatment/care).
- The youth from alternative care also commented that they feel stigmatised, especially because they are being referred to as children with behavioural problems, and that they wished this term would not be used. They would rather be referred to only as children and the youth, without additional stigmatising descriptors.

Participation in the UPSHIFT programme



- The UPSHIFT workshop for the youth from alternative care took place in March of 2024.
- The total of 9 teams from different institutions participated – 36 young people aged 12–19 and 14 mentors.
- The youth suggested the following project topics: healthy nutrition, regular exercise, how to earn additional pocket money, landscaping of the institution's yard, creating a compost site, preventive education on substance abuse, personal hygiene and hygiene of joint common areas of living, life skills for an independent life, raising awareness and educating peers and teachers about the life of the youth in the care system.



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- Development of child participation in the care system is a **cyclical process that requires continuous investment**, especially since key individuals (interest groups) are growing up and becoming adults, leaving the care system, and are sometimes expressing the same scepticism towards younger generations as adults had expressed towards them.
- An important aspect is the question of **meaningfulness**, whereby it takes a lot of effort and work for the formal and declarative inclusion of children to reach the stage when child participation becomes meaningful for all actors in the system – children and adults.
- Participation (generally) does not simply occur, it has to be created and developed.
- **Goal – establishment of the Advisory Board of children and youth in the care system**
- **From invisibility to visibility, from powerlessness to power, from ornament to influence😊**

Thank you all for participating😊

and for being...

a part of the **Systems that Understand and Care #skrb**

