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A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education
Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043

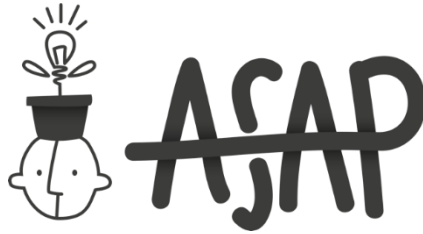


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A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education

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Desk Research Country Report: Croatia



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Short Description	This report presents the results of desk research conducted in Croatia within the ASAP project. It explores the complex relationship between pre-adolescents and digital/social media, with particular attention to cyberbullying, online risks and digital wellbeing. In addition to analysing statistical data and national research findings, the report highlights good practice initiatives, legislative frameworks, and strategies aimed at enhancing digital literacy and fostering safer, more responsible media use among young people in Croatia.

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Executive Summary

The Croatian Desk Research Report, developed within the scope of the ERASMUS+ project ASAP – A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education, aims to provide a concise and comprehensive overview of the intersection between pre-adolescents, digital media, and the Croatian context. Below, the key findings are summarised and clustered around the following topics:

1) Statistical data

The Republic of Croatia has 3,871,833 inhabitants, of which 1,865,129 are men (48.17%), and 2,006,704 are women (51.83%) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). 86% of households in Croatia have access to the Internet. Data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022c) show that "individuals most often use the Internet to send messages (93%), to collect information about products and services (93%), to read daily news and magazines (87%), to use an e-mail (83%), watch videos (79%), telephony and video calls (77%) and to participate in social networks (73%)".

The share of the population between the ages of 0 and 14 is 14.27% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). According to the Population Census, it is estimated that in Croatia, there are 40,644 children aged eleven, 39,767 children aged twelve, and 39,589 children aged thirteen (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b, 3). Regarding social media, Croatian children between 9 and 11 spend 119 minutes daily, while children between 12 and 14 spend 162 minutes daily (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 23). Almost every third child between the ages of 9 and 11 and almost half of the children ages 12 and 14 use a smartphone several times daily or all the time to access the Internet (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 21). Furthermore, almost every third child between 9 and 11 (32%) visits social networking sites daily (Smahel et al., 2020).

2) National research on social media and preadolescents

Access to the Internet has 86% of households in Croatia. Regarding social media, Croatian children between the ages of 9 and 11 spend 119 minutes daily online, while children between 12 and 14 spend 162 minutes online (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 23). Almost every third child between the ages of 9 and 11 and almost half of the children ages 12 and 14 use a smartphone several times daily or all the time to access the Internet (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 21). The usage of social networks increases with the child's age - 35.0% of children aged 9 to 11, 68.1% of children aged 12 to 14, and 76.8% of children aged 15 to 17 have their profile on a social network or online video game site they were using at the time of the study. As for the age of 12 to 14, YouTube is used by 52.4% of them, Facebook 50.6%, Instagram 44.9%, Whatsapp 26.8%, Snapchat 21.1%, Viber 19.8%, Google 18.7%, and Messenger 17.8% (Ciboci et al., 2020). Most children accept a friend request only if they know that person. Thus, 63.9% of children aged 12 to 14 accept a request only if they know that person, 37.8% of them only accept a request if they have mutual friends, 25.7% only accept a request if they know that person very well, 9.2% accept a request only if their parents/guardians approve it. In comparison, 6.8% usually accept all requests. In addition to communicating with unknown people on the Internet, research has shown that so far, 14% of children have met in person with a person they met on the Internet, while such activities increase with age (aged 15 to 17 - 26.8%; aged 12 to 14 - 12.0% and aged 9 to 11 - 3.0%).

Results show that 79% of Croatian children aged 12 to 14 feel safe online and have a positive attitude about communicating with people online or seeking online support or information. Negative experiences online, such as being exposed to online sexual content, aggressive content, and other types of unwanted content; inappropriate contacts; online harassment and bullying; hacking; sharing personal information; damage to reputation; and also viruses, spam, pop-ups, and online advertisements were reported by 10% of them, and 66% stated that they know how to react to online behaviours of others which they do not like (Smahel et al., 2020). Results also showed that 5% of them were exposed to victimization in the past year (on or offline), and 2% of them suffered aggression in the past year (on or offline) (Smahel et al., 2020). Older children (6.4% of children aged 12 to 14 and 11.8% of children aged 15 to 17) are more exposed to electronic violence than younger children (4% aged 9 to 11). The most frequent forms of violence include receiving hurtful or inappropriate messages (61%), followed by being excluded or left out of a group or activity (33%), and publishing and transmitting hurtful messages where others can see them (Ciboci et al., 2020). Personal data misuse is experienced in 2% of Croatian children (9-11 years old), and 7% of them got a virus or spyware on a device (e.g., phone, tablet, computer) (Smahel et al., 2020).

3) Good practice examples

In Croatia, informal media education is highly developed. Civil society associations that have been working for many years on media and digital literacy of media users of all ages, including preadolescents, play a vital role in this. The report provides an overview of some of the best examples of good practice in this area, such as the activities of the Association for Communication and Media Culture and the Safer Internet Centre, as well as educational materials available at the portal Medijskapismenost.hr.

4) Legislation and regulation

Croatia has no special law regulating social media use, misuse, and abuse. However, different aspects of the use of the Internet and social media to protect users are found in different laws, such as the **Criminal Code** (Official Gazette 125/11, 144/12, 56/15, 61/15, 101/17, 118/18, 126/19, 84/21), which provides severe penalties for child pornography and introducing children to pornography, criminal offenses against reputation and honour, disclosure of information from child's private life, hate speech. At the level of educational institutions, the **Ordinance on the criteria for imposing pedagogical measures** (Official Gazette 94/15, 03/17) on primary and secondary school students should be mentioned.

Introduction

Today's children, including those in Croatia, grow up with the Internet and new technologies from an early age, and they are called digital natives for a reason. The fact that they spend most of their free time with different media, dominated by the Internet (which they most often access via smartphone), sufficiently emphasizes the importance of researching children's digital habits from the earliest days. In Croatia, more and more research is being conducted on this topic. In the continuation of this report, the results of some of the most relevant research on the exposure of preadolescents to new technologies and their positive, but also harmful, online experiences are presented.

At the same time, the report provides an overview of examples of good practices in Croatia that show different forms of support, both for children and for teachers, in terms of providing advisory assistance and numerous free educational materials that teachers can use in their work with preadolescents and thus encourage children to have quality discussions about different segments of the Internet. Among the mentioned materials, a positive example is the entire school curriculum with all educational materials, which was created in 2014, and fully dedicated to developing digital competencies in children to protect them on the Internet. All the listed examples can serve as examples of good practice within the ASAP project while creating various educational materials suitable for preadolescents. At the same time, when creating them, it is essential to consider the research results that show how children spend their time on the Internet, especially on social media sites.

1. Statistical data

According to the Population Census conducted in 2021, the Republic of Croatia has 3,871,833 inhabitants, of which 1,865,129 are men (48.17%), and 2,006,704 are women (51.83%) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). The share of the population between the ages of 0 and 14 is 14.27% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a).

86% of households in Croatia have access to the Internet. "The youngest population still leads the way in using computers, and the number of users decreases proportionally to their age. A similar trend was observed in the structure according to work status in which pupils and students, as the youngest group, most often use computers", but also the Internet (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022c, 1). Data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022c) show that "individuals most often use the Internet to send messages (93%), to collect information about products and services (93%), to read daily news and magazines (87%), to use an e-mail (83%), watch videos (79%), telephony and video calls (77%) and to participate in social networks (73%)".

According to the Population Census, it is estimated that in Croatia, there are 40,644 children aged eleven, 39,767 children aged twelve, and 39,589 children aged thirteen (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b, 3). Regarding social media, Croatian children between 9 and 11 spend 119 minutes daily, while children between 12 and 14 spend 162 minutes daily (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 23). Almost every third child between the ages of 9 and 11 and almost half of the children ages 12 and 14 use a smartphone several times daily or all the time to access the Internet (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 21). Furthermore, almost every third child between 9 and 11 (32%) visits social networking sites daily (Smahel et al., 2020). The same research (EU Kids Online Croatia) showed that 42% of children aged 9 to 11 use YouTube, 16% of them Facebook, 13% Instagram, and 32% Viber. In comparison, 19% of preadolescents use WhatsApp (Ciboci, Ćosić Pregrad, Kanižaj, Potočnik, & Vinković, 2020).

If only children aged ten are taken into account, research shows that 95.5% of them own a mobile phone and that 97.1% have access to the Internet at home (Ajduković, Rajhvajn Bulat, Sušac, & Vejmelka, 2020). 49% of children aged 10 use social networks daily (on a computer, tablet, or mobile phone), while 12.2% do so five or six times a week and 11.8% three or four times a week. Only 9.4% of children of that age admitted that they never use social networks (Ajduković et al., 2020). No differences were observed in the frequency of using social networks between boys and girls.

The following section will provide more detailed data on the relationship between preadolescents and social media.

2. National research on social media and preadolescents

In Croatia, the relationship between new media and media users, especially children, is often the subject of scientific research. Although numerous studies on various aspects of this relationship have been published in the last five years, the continuation of this report will detail the data obtained from the implementation of the two most significant national studies among children – research conducted as part of the project "Changes in the organization of the upbringing and education process caused by Covid-19 pandemic: effects on educational experiences, well-being and aspirations of students in the Republic of Croatia (EWACHange)" (Jokić, Ristić Dedić, Šimon, 2022) in 2022 and research on children's digital habits and safety on the Internet (Ciboci et al., 2020) conducted as part of the EU Kids Online international network in 2017.

- *Boris Jokić, Zrinka Ristić Dedić and Jana Šimon (2022) ¹- Changes in the organization of the upbringing and education process caused by the Covid-19 pandemic: effects on educational experiences, well-being and aspirations of students in the Republic of Croatia (EWACHange)*

The report "In search of a balance between the school playground and TikTok: perspectives of children and young people on the use of digital technologies", authored by Boris Jokić, Zrinka Ristić Dedić, and Jana Šimon, was published in 2022 and deals with rarely presented perspectives of children on usage patterns and the impact of digital technologies on their lives, society, and economy. Particular emphasis in this research was placed on analysing the connection between the frequency of use of digital devices and the well-being of children. The research was conducted in 2022, and 17,472 students (fifth (11 years) and seventh (13 years) grades of primary schools and third (17 years) grade of secondary schools) and 3,634 teachers from 165 schools in the Republic of Croatia participated in it, which makes it one of the most extensive research in this part of Europe. Among the students who participated in the research, 3,728 (10.87%) were students in the 5th grade of primary school (between 10 and 11 years old), and below are some of the most important research results for that age group.

In front of the screen, 44.0% of 5th-grade students spend more or significantly more time compared to the period before the pandemic, with no differences between groups (school performance, sex/gender). 45.8% of 5th-grade students use digital devices more than 2 hours a day, 23.7% more than 3 hours, and 11.1% more than 4 hours. The results show that using digital devices is becoming a dominant activity in the lives of children and that it is more common among older students. Hence, 47.9% of 7th graders use digital devices for over three hours. Girls use digital devices more, but there are no differences in the usage of digital devices concerning students' school performance.

A comparison of socializing with friends in-person and online showed that 5.7% of 5th graders do not spend time with friends in-person at all, 10.8% spend up to 1 hour a day, 17.9% from 1 to 2 hours a day, 22.4% from 2 to 3 hours, 19.6% from 3 to 4 hours, and 23.6% more than four hours a day. As for socializing with friends online, the results show the following: 23.6% do not socialize with friends

¹ A detailed report is available at https://www.admin.idi.hr/uploads/Upotrazizamjeromizmediuskolskogigralistai_Tik_Tok_a_FINAL_IDIZ_8fb5eb975f.pdf.

online at all, 36.5% spend up to 1 hour a day, 16.3% from 1 to 2 hours a day, 9.8% from 2 to 3 hours, 4.9% from 3 to 4 hours, and 6.2% more than four hours a day.

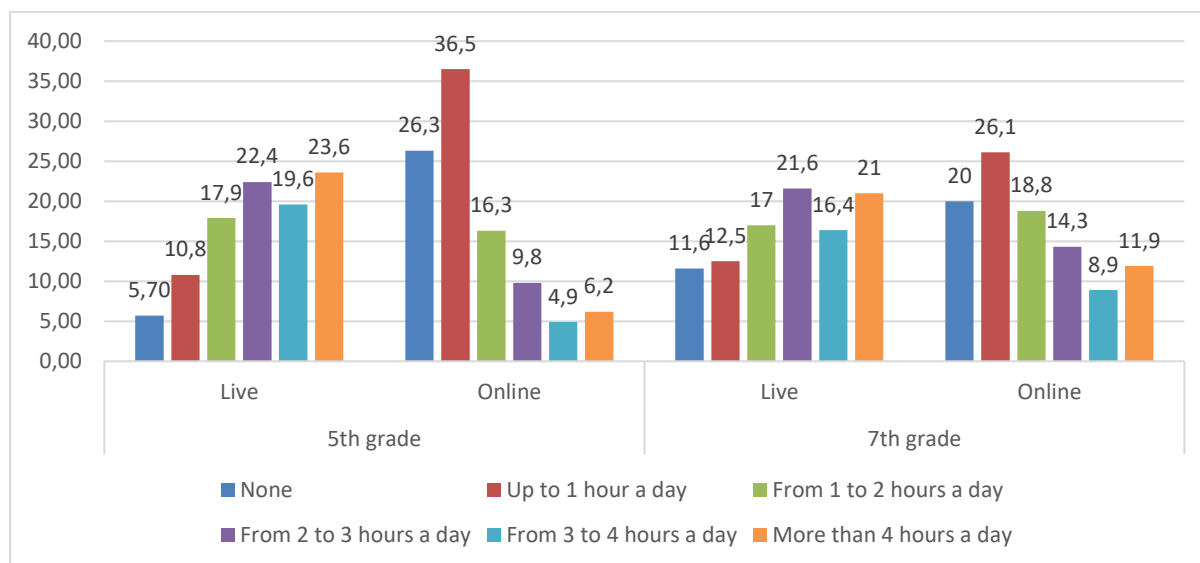


Figure 1. Socializing with friends live and online

Regarding the connection between well-being and the use of digital media, the results of the 5th-grade students showed that it is small to moderate; that is, they self-assess that more frequent use of digital devices leads to lower levels of well-being, that more frequent use of digital devices leads to lower levels of self-satisfaction (minor to moderate association), that more frequent use of digital devices is associated with a higher level of depression (moderate association), that more frequent use of digital devices is associated with a higher level of anxiety (moderate association) and that more frequent use of digital devices is associated with a higher level of loneliness (minor to moderate association). Based on the results, the researchers summarized that the more frequent use of digital devices is statistically significantly associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness and lower levels of well-being and self-satisfaction. "Moderate use of digital devices" (up to two hours per day) is associated with more positive psychological states on all measures. Students assess the impact of personal use of digital technologies on all aspects of their lives as slightly positive. That particularly applies to the assessment of the impact on the quality of relationships with family members and friends.

- Lana Ciboci, Ivana Čosić Pregrad, Igor Kanižaj, Dunja Potočnik, Dejan Vinković (2020) - National survey on children's safety on the Internet (EU Kids Online)

The essential research in Croatia related to children's Internet habits and safety on the Internet was created as part of a large international research consortium EU Kids Online. The research was conducted in November 2017 on a representative sample of children aged 9 to 17. One thousand seventeen children and their parents participated in the research.² This report presents results that refer exclusively to children aged 12 to 14.

² Teams within the EU Kids Online network collaborated between autumn 2017 and summer 2019 to conduct a global survey of 25,101 children in 19 European countries. For all reports, findings, and the technical report of this survey, as well as full

According to the report (Smahel et al., 2020), 48% of Croatian children aged 12 to 14 use a smartphone several times a day or have access to the Internet all the time. The estimated average time online (in minutes) each day among this population is 162 minutes, whereby 55% of them watch video clips daily, 66% visit social network sites daily, 40% play online games daily, 37% use the Internet for schoolwork (Smahel et al., 2020).

The usage of social networks increases with the child's age - 35.0% of children aged 9 to 11, 68.1% of children aged 12 to 14, and 76.8% of children aged 15 to 17 have their profile on a social network or online video game site they were using at the time of the study. As for the age of 12 to 14, YouTube is used by 52.4% of them, Facebook 50.6%, Instagram 44.9%, Whatsapp 26.8%, Snapchat 21.1%, Viber 19.8%, Google 18.7%, and Messenger 17.8% (Ciboci et al., 2020). Most children accept a friend request only if they know that person. Thus, 63.9% of children aged 12 to 14 accept a request only if they know that person, 37.8% of them only accept a request if they have mutual friends, 25.7% only accept a request if they know that person very well, 9.2% accept a request only if their parents/guardians approve it. In comparison, 6.8% usually accept all requests. In addition to communicating with unknown people on the Internet, research has shown that so far, 14% of children have met in person with a person they met on the Internet, while such activities increase with age (aged 15 to 17 - 26.8%; aged 12 to 14 - 12.0% and aged 9 to 11 - 3.0%).

Results show that 79% of Croatian children aged 12 to 14 feel safe online and have a positive attitude about communicating with people online or seeking online support or information. Therefore, 50% of children think other people are kind and helpful online (Smahel et al., 2020). Results showed that 30% of children aged 12 to 14 had contact with a previously unknown person on the Internet, and 8% met a previously unknown person from the Internet face to face. 61% of children aged 12 to 14 stated: "I find it easier to be myself online than when I am with people face-to-face", and 51%: "I talk about different things online than I do when speaking to people face-to-face."

Negative experiences online, such as being exposed to online sexual content, aggressive content, and other types of unwanted content; inappropriate contacts; online harassment and bullying; hacking; sharing personal information; damage to reputation; and also viruses, spam, pop-ups, and online advertisements were reported by 10% of them, and 66% stated that they know how to react to online behaviours of others which they do not like (Smahel et al., 2020). Results also showed that 5% of them were exposed to victimization in the past year (on or offline), and 2% of them suffered aggression in the past year (on or offline) (Smahel et al., 2020). Older children (6.4% of children aged 12 to 14 and 11.8% of children aged 15 to 17) are more exposed to electronic violence than younger children (4% aged 9 to 11). The most frequent forms of violence include receiving hurtful or inappropriate messages (61%), followed by being excluded or left out of a group or activity (33%), and publishing and transmitting hurtful messages where others can see them (Ciboci et al., 2020). Personal data misuse is experienced in 2% of Croatian children (9-11 years old), and 7% of them got a virus or spyware on a device (e.g., phone, tablet, computer) (Smahel et al., 2020).

Children aged 12 to 14 reported being asked questions about sexual content (3.1%). While 4.9% of them were exposed to sexual messages, more of them, 27.6%, were exposed to sexual photos. 11.8%

details of national partners, please visit www.eukidsonline.net, but here we present results for children aged 9 to 11 in Croatia (Smahel et al., 2020).

of children aged 12 to 14 intended to see photos of naked people and private parts of the body. 20.9% of children aged 12 to 14 have seen sexual photographs related to violence without their intention to do so. Boys saw sexual photos almost twice as often as girls (Ciboci et al., 2020).

According to the results, 97% of Croatian children aged 12 to 14 stated that parents, friends, or teachers suggested ways of using the Internet safely at least sometimes, 13% of them have parental restrictions on social networking sites, but 36% of them often or very often help parents when they found something difficult online. Finally, 33% of Croatian children (12-14) ignored what parents say about how to use the Internet at least sometimes (Smahel et al., 2020). Regarding parental attitudes towards children aged 12 to 14, 54.4% said they talk to their children about what they are doing on the Internet. In contrast, 43% encourage the child to explore and learn new things on the Internet, and 20.1% stay somewhere near the child while using the Internet (Ciboci et al., 2020).

If we examine the degree of media literacy of children measured on the basis of knowledge or acquisition of specific knowledge and skills, 78.4% of children between 12 and 14 years say they know how to remove people from their contact list, 76.2% know how to change privacy settings, 82.5% know when they can and when they cannot share information on the Internet, 83.4% know what information they may and may not share on the Internet, 80.3% know how to save a photo they found on the Internet, 80.8% know how to install an application on a mobile device, 76.9% say that it is easy for them to choose key words when searching online, 65.2% know how to monitor their expenses using a mobile application, 60.5% claim that it is easy for them to check whether the information they found on the Internet is accurate, 58.5% that they can easily make a decision whether trust the information they found on the Internet, 61.0% that they know how to buy a mobile application, 60.9% that they know how to upload a video or music that they have created to the Internet, 55.5% that they know how to edit or make essential changes in online content they created, and 38.8% know how to create a website (Ciboci et al., 2020).

3. Good practice examples

In Croatia, informal media education is highly developed. Civil society associations that have been working for many years on media and digital literacy of media users of all ages, including preadolescents, play a vital role in this. The associations achieve extremely high-quality cooperation with schools and hold education for children, their parents, and teachers.

3.1. Association for Communication and Media Culture

[Association for Communication and Media Culture](#) (DKMK) is Croatia's largest civil society association dedicated to the media education of children and adults. One of the most common topics of lectures and activities is new media and social networks and their impact on children of different ages. In dealing with this topic, the association is oriented both from the scientific and practical sides. DKMK coordinates the Croatian EU Kids Online team and regularly writes and publishes scientific papers in that area. As part of the various projects, numerous educational materials were also created with examples of workshops on various topics – from privacy protection, password theft, influencers, and hate speech to various forms of cyberbullying. The workshops are primarily intended for parents and teachers working with children. All workshops are adapted to the age of children in primary and secondary school and include various forms of cyberbullying – from happy slapping, cyber threats and stalking, catfishing, and phishing to sextortion, grooming, and sexting. All the mentioned materials are available for free in digital form.³ And below are some of the valuable materials:

- Ciboci, Lana; Labaš, Danijel (2021). *Influenceri i njihova uloga u životima djece i mladih. Radni priručnik za nastavnike i roditelje učenika osnovnih i srednjih škola*. Zagreb: Agencija za elektroničke medije, Unicef. (English translation - Influencers and their role in the lives of children and young people. Workbook for teachers and parents of primary and secondary school students)
- Ciboci, Lana; Kanižaj, Igor; Labaš, Danijel (2020). *Razgovarajmo o životu s druge strane ekrana. Priručnik za roditelje i skrbnike učenika osnovnih i srednjih škola*. Zagreb: Agencija za elektroničke medije, Unicef. (English translation - Let's talk about life on the other side of the screen. Handbook for parents and guardians of primary and secondary school students)
- Ciboci, Lana; Kanižaj, Igor; Labaš, Danijel (2019). *Poštivanje sebe i drugih u virtualnom svijetu. Nastavni materijali za osnovne škole za učenike od 5. do 8. razreda*. Zagreb: Agencija za elektroničke medije, Unicef. (English translation - Respecting yourself and others in the virtual world. Teaching materials for primary schools for students from 5th to 8th grade)
- Ciboci, Lana; Kanižaj, Igor; Labaš, Danijel (2019). *Ljudsko dostojanstvo, vrijeđanje, sramoćenje i govor mržnje. Nastavni materijali za srednje škole za učenike od 1. do 4. razreda*. Zagreb: Agencija za elektroničke medije, Unicef. (English translation - Human dignity, insulting,

³ All materials are available at <https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/obrazovni-materijali-za-preuzimanje/> and <https://djecamedija.org/knjige-i-prirucnici/>.

shaming and hate speech. Teaching materials for secondary schools for students from 1st to 4th grade)

- Ciboci, Lana; Kanižaj, Igor; Labaš, Danijel; Osmančević, Leali (2018). *Obitelj i izazovi novih medija: Priručnik s radnim listićima za roditelje, nastavnike i stručne suradnike – treće dopunjeno izdanje*. Zagreb: Društvo za komunikacijsku i medijsku kulturu. (English translation - The family and the challenges of new media: A handbook with worksheets for parents, teachers and professional associates - third updated edition)
- Ciboci, Lana; Kanižaj, Igor; Labaš, Danijel (2018). *Sigurnost djece na internetu i elektroničko nasilje*. Nastavni materijali za osnovne škole za učenike od 5. do 8. razreda. Zagreb: Agencija za elektroničke medije, Unicef. (English translation - Children's safety on the Internet and cyberbullying. Teaching materials for primary schools for students from 5th to 8th grade.)

3.2. Brave Online Shelter (Utočište Hrabrih Online - UHO)

[UHO – Utočište Hrabrih Online](#) (Brave Online Shelter) is an online platform jointly created by the Association for Communication and Media Culture, Vienna Insurance Group, and Hrabri Telefon. In the beginning, the platform's primary goal was, through some of the strongest Croatian influencers, to encourage children to report cyberbullying and seek advice on what to do if they or their friends are victims of such violence. During the four months of the active campaign, more than 900 messages were received. The platform is still active, and new inquiries from children arrive every week. Psychologists and communication specialists now answer their inquiries. Children between 12 and 14 asked for much advice and showed preadolescents' difficulties regarding social media. The project above showed how great things could be achieved through the cooperation of influencers and experts, and in this way, not only make children aware of the potential dangers of new media but also encourage them to seek help in case they find themselves in a situation where they do not know what to do.

3.3. Portal medijskapismenost.hr

Among the examples of good practice is the portal [medijskapismenost.hr](#) (English translation – medialiteracy.hr), jointly launched by UNICEF and the Agency for Electronic Media, should be mentioned. The portal provides numerous educational materials for teaching media literacy in kindergartens and schools, examples of good practice, recommendations for parents and guardians, information on the impact of different types of media and media content and social networks on children and young people, safety on the Internet, the problem of misinformation.

3.4. Red Button

[Red Button](#) is an application created by the Croatian police intended for reporting illegal Internet content related to various forms of exploitation or abuse of children. It is intended primarily for child victims but also for all other persons who have information about child abuse or sexual abuse content on the Internet.

3.5. The school curriculum on the safe use of the Internet: Petzanet

[Petzanet](#), the school curriculum on the safe use of the Internet, was created as part of the project 'Safety of Children on the Internet.' It was created by teachers from five elementary schools in Croatia. E-textbooks, manuals for teachers and parents, quizzes, animated stories, computer games, and videos are accessible on the project's website. The entire curriculum is intended for working with children aged 7 to 14.

3.6. Brave Phone memory game

Hrabri Telefon ("Brave phone"), with the support of the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth, and Social Policy developed an [online memory game](#) that helps children learn about the safe use of the Internet. The game explains in a fun way the main rules of online behaviour, emphasizing Internet safety. Hrabri Telefon is a non-governmental and non-profit organization that was founded to provide direct help and support to abused and neglected children and their families, as well as work on the prevention of abuse and neglect as well as unacceptable behaviour of children and youth.

3.7. The Centre for a Safer Internet

The [Centre for a Safer Internet](#) is the National Centre for Internet Safety. The Centre members are experts in informatics, computer programming, criminology, computer forensics, law, pedagogy, and psychology. The Centre focused its work on creating and developing preventive programs and projects.

4. Legislation and regulation

Croatia has no special law regulating social media use, misuse, and abuse. However, different aspects of the use of the Internet and social media to protect users are found in different laws, such as the **Criminal Code** (Official Gazette 125/11, 144/12, 56/15, 61/15, 101/17, 118/18, 126/19, 84/21), which provides severe penalties for child pornography and introducing children to pornography, criminal offenses against reputation and honour, disclosure of information from child's private life, hate speech.

At the level of educational institutions, the **Ordinance on the criteria for imposing pedagogical measures** (Official Gazette 94/15, 03/17) on primary and secondary school students should be mentioned. Among other things, severe and particularly severe unacceptable forms of behaviour are considered to be causing and inciting violent behaviour (e.g. transmitting incorrect information that is a reason for violent behaviour, chanting before or during violent behaviour, recording an event that includes violent behaviour and similar behaviours); encouraging group hate speech; publication of material by electronic or other means, resulting in damage to the reputation, honour, and dignity of another person; violent behaviour that resulted in severe emotional or physical consequences for another person. Reprimand measures, moving to another school (in elementary school), and expulsion from secondary school are foreseen for the mentioned violations.

5. Other aspects of media and digital education within the Croatian school system

When we talk about media/digital education within the formal education system, especially for preadolescents, it should be pointed out that children learn about media primarily as part of Croatian language classes in Croatia. For instance, when it comes to new media, students are expected to recognize and use age-appropriate educational digital media in the first grade (at the age of seven), in the second grade (at the age of eight) to recognize and use age-appropriate educational and interactive digital media, in the third grade to recognize different sources of information: digital textbooks, texts in entertaining and educational magazines and books for children and on educational websites; while in the fourth-grade, student is asked to differentiate between television, radio, and the Internet, to access social networks and to search online portals for children.

However, when it comes to the attitude toward new technologies and social media, the most crucial role is played by Informatics, a free elective activity from the first to the fourth grade. At the same time, it is a compulsory subject in the fifth and sixth grades. Students learn about information and digital technology, computational thinking and programming, digital literacy, and e-society as part of this subject. For example, preadolescents aged 12 to 14 are expected to, among other things, find and evaluate information in the digital environment and react appropriately to any danger/inconvenience in the digital environment.

It should also be mentioned the cross-curricular topic “use of information and communication technology”, within which students obtain essential knowledge about how to protect devices and files as well as their own and other people's personal data, distinguish which content should not be shared, recognize unacceptable actions in the digital environment, react to unacceptable and offensive behaviour in the digital environment in a responsible manner and report it, in a problematic situation seek help from adults; use passwords responsibly, decide not to participate in activities that promote hate speech and discrimination, and with help and advice, decide on shaping his digital identity; help peers in protection from unwanted content, develop awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of communication with famous people who are not physically in his environment, know the rules of polite behaviour in the digital environment, apply the rules of behaviour from the real world in the virtual environment; know who to turn to for help with unwanted content or contacts.

Unfortunately, there is still no regular practice evaluating the achieved learning outcomes regarding children's media competencies. So far, two publicly published studies of the media competence of students in primary and secondary schools have been conducted, which showed that students lack the skills to create media content and critically evaluate it (Ciboci, 2018; AEM, 2021).

6. Conclusions

In Croatia, most children between the ages of 12 and 14 have access to the Internet and actively use various social media apps/sites. Since research shows that exposure to various unpleasant experiences on the Internet (from violence to inappropriate content) increases with age and, this age group is ideal for education, especially those of a preventive nature and those that encourages the development of critical thinking. Although such contents are present within the formal education system, various forms of informal education play a decisive role in this area – from training programs for the children themselves, as well as their teachers and parents, to numerous free digital educational materials that can be very useful for this project and which are mentioned in this report.

Accordingly, it is recommended to include the following as part of the ASAP project:

1. Through the research part of the project, it should be analysed how preadolescents, their teachers, and parents see the use of social media by children of that age and whether the advantages and benefits of new technologies outweigh all the opposing sides and dangers?
2. In creating educational materials, one should consider the importance of raising critical digital literacy among preadolescents who, in their earliest days, encounter unpleasant experiences on the Internet that they often do not know how to deal with. At the same time, they often do not receive adequate support from adults, parents, and teachers.
3. In Croatia, numerous high-quality educational materials are publicly available. They can be a good starting point in creating materials for this project, emphasizing their application and adaptation to preadolescents.

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DESK RESEARCH

This report is part of the Erasmus+ project ASAP – *A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education*.

It presents key findings from desk research conducted in Croatia with students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. The study explores the challenges of digital life in early adolescence and the educational needs of all involved.

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