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MEDIA LITERACY FOR PRESCHOOLERS: ENGAGING WORKSHOPS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Nowadays, preschool children are growing up in a world where media are present at every turn—television, computer games, applications on smart devices, and other digital platforms. Although technology has become an integral part of daily life, young children do not yet have well-developed skills for critical thinking and understanding media content. This can influence their emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Parents play a crucial role in guiding their children's first encounters with media. Their involvement in fostering healthy media habits, setting boundaries, and engaging in discussions about content is essential in helping children develop a critical and balanced approach to media consumption. However, many parents feel unprepared to navigate the digital landscape alongside their children, highlighting the need for accessible education and support in media literacy.

On the other hand, educators, who play a key role in shaping children's habits, often lack the tools and professional guidelines to teach children and parents about responsible media use. One reason for this is the rapid development of technology, which research sometimes struggles to keep up with.

Theoretical Framework

Recent Scientific and Professional Literature on Media Literacy in Late Preschool Education

In their recent article, the Slovenian authors Golob, Makarovič and Rek point out that “digital media have become a regular part of children's everyday lives. Even babies are often confronted with digital media for longer periods of time every day, although paediatricians and psychologists strongly discourage the use of such media by children under two years of age.”¹ In this context, they further expand on the notion that, during the early years of a child's development, parents play a pivotal role in guiding and educating children on the responsible use of digital media, as well as in mitigating the potential harm caused by excessive screen exposure or inappropriate media content.² Moreover, parents profoundly shape a child's understanding and engagement with digital media through direct examples, discussions, and shared experiences. As primary role

¹ Tea GOLOB–Matej MAKAROVIČ–Mateja REK: *Parents' meta-reflexivity benefits media education of children*. Comunicar, 2023/76. 96. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1394971.pdf> [19.02. 2025.]

² William G. CHRIST–Belinha S. DE ABREU (ed.): *Media literacy in a disruptive media environment*. Routledge, New York, 2020. 1–338.; Dafna LEMISH: *Children and media: A global perspective*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015. 1–304.

models, they serve as figures whom children naturally observe and emulate.³ Although the authors stress that “the process of media education is become a challenging and ever-changing task for parents to achieve,”⁴ the role of early childhood educators in preschool education must not be overlooked under any circumstances.

In recent years, numerous significant scientific and professional papers on media literacy in late preschool education have been published. These studies provide additional insights and global perspectives on media literacy for preschool-aged children. For example, in 2021, the Erikson Institute published a comprehensive report on „Media Literacy in Early Childhood.”⁵ This report, developed in partnership with several national associations, provides an updated definition of media literacy in early childhood and explains developmentally appropriate media literacy education for children under age 8. The report is based on the importance of co-viewing and co-engagement with media for infants and toddlers, the role of interactive features in supporting young children's learning from screen media, and the last, but not least, the significance of contingent responses from devices for children under 3 years old.

A 2024 study conducted by a group of Thai scientists investigated digital media consumption patterns and their impact on preschool children's development. The research, which included 97 parent-child pairs, found that most parents use digital media for one to three hours per day. Additionally, there was no significant difference in media usage between children with typical development and those with developmental delays. The findings emphasized the critical role of parental media literacy in supporting children with developmental challenges, highlighting the need for informed and mindful media use within families.⁶

A 2024 report on media literacy education in the United States underscored several key findings. It highlighted the growing recognition of media literacy as a vital life skill and emphasized the need for more extensive training and professional development opportunities for educators. Notably, when asked about their sources of training in media literacy education, 77% of educators identified „self-taught“ as their primary method of learning, indicating a significant gap in formal training programs.⁷

Although the importance of education for the media and the use of ICT⁸ has already been socially recognized, it is only in the years that international organizations have highlighted the importance of media education and the use of

³ Mateja REK–Andrej KOVAČIČ: *Media and Preschool Children: The Role of Parents as Role Models and Educators*. Medijske studije, 2018/18. 27–43.

⁴ Ibid. 96.

⁵ Jenna HERDZINA–Alexis R. LAURICELLA: *Media Literacy in Early Childhood: Report Framework, Child Development Guidelines, and Tips for Implementation*, TEC Center, Chicago, 2020. www.erikson.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TEC-MediaLiteracy-Report.pdf [19/02/2025]

⁶ Kannika PERMPOONPUTTANA–Jongkon DOUNGSRI–Sarun KUNWITTAYA–Thirata KHAMNONG–Nonthasruang KLEEBPUNG: *Digital media consumption patterns and development of preschool children: Developing a manual to enhance media literacy in parents of children facing developmental challenges*. Natural and Life Sciences Communications, 2024/3.

⁷ National Association for Media Literacy Education. Snapshot 2024: The State of Media Literacy Education in the U.S., 21, <https://namle.org/state-of-media-literacy-report-2024/> [19/02/2025]

⁸ Information and Communication Technology

ICT for the development of young children between the ages of 3 and 6 years. The European Union has recognized the responsibilities of governments and international entities in improving the quality of ECE⁹ and enhancing children's outcomes, which includes the development of media literacy at ECE, and the accompaniment of teachers trained to help children deal with their experiences in the media.¹⁰

Croatia is also following this path, significantly contributing to the established guidelines by publishing a handbook on media education in preschools. The handbook, *Media and Preschool Children*, published by the Society for Communication and Media Culture in 2021,¹¹ provides educators with valuable information, recommendations, and a variety of activity suggestions for working with children in preschool settings. It consists of eight sections and includes a total of 19 workshop proposals designed for implementation in kindergartens. To support educators in teaching children how to distinguish between positive and harmful media content and to use media safely and responsibly, the handbook highlights key aspects of educational content for preschoolers, the role of parents in media education, and strategies to help children become active media users who engage with media in a meaningful way. It also provides guidance on what to consider when it comes to cartoons and video games, how to assist children in navigating the virtual world and smart technology, ways to prevent media addiction, and how marketing specifically targets young audiences. The workshop proposals featured in the handbook offer creative ideas for introducing various media literacy topics in an age-appropriate manner. Through play, engaging examples, and, most importantly, open discussions, educators can help children explore media and learn how to use it safely and effectively.

Bridging the Gap: The Need for Media Literacy in Early Childhood

“Raising and educating children is a shared responsibility. The more effort we invest in media education during their early years, the sooner we will cultivate generations of responsible and discerning media users who engage with and evaluate media content critically in the increasingly media-saturated world we all inhabit today.”¹²

By the end of 2023, the Croatian Council for Electronic Media¹³ has announced a Public Call for Co-Financing Projects on the Promotion of Media

⁹ Early Childhood Education

¹⁰ Catarina L. ARAÚJO–Cecília AGUIAR–Lígia MONTEIRO: *Media literacy in early education: European policies and curricular differentiation*. Educational Media International, 2023/3–4. 243.

¹¹ Lana CIBOCI PERŠA–Igor KANIŽAJ–Danijel LABAŠ: *Mediji i djeca predškolske dobi: Priručnik za odgojitelje u dječjim vrtićima*. Društvo za komunikacijsku i medijsku kulturu, Zagreb, 2021. https://djecamedija.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/prirucnik_za_odgojitelje_u_djecim_vrticima_e-izdanje5-2.pdf [19/02/2025]

¹² Ibid. 4.

¹³ The Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) is an independent regulatory body that promotes public interest and media pluralism, justifies public trust through professional and transparent activities, encourages media literacy, creates conditions for the production of quality Croatian audiovisual content and ensures equal conditions for media development and media freedom. <https://www.aem.hr/en/> [10/11/2024]

Literacy for 2024. This annually published call for proposals aims to support projects that enhance media literacy, recognizing its growing importance in today's digital landscape. By providing financial assistance, the Council seeks to encourage innovative educational programs, research, and activities that help individuals – especially young audiences – develop critical thinking skills and a responsible approach to media consumption. This call represents a continued commitment to fostering media literacy as a key component of informed and engaged citizenship.

In this context, the project *Little Media Explorers* was designed to address these challenges with the aim to improve media literacy among preschool children. It was submitted to the competition, which resulted by the approval of the project documentation. Consequently, the funding in the amount of 1,250 euros was granted.¹⁴

Little Media Explorers Project: Educating Young Children About Media

The primary objective of the project was to enhance critical thinking skills in preschoolers regarding media content. It encouraged not only discussion and creativity, but also parental and teacher involvement to create a comprehensive media literacy environment. Children, parents, and educators participated in a shared exploration of media through workshops, creative activities, and hands-on experiences.

It was carried out in collaboration with the Osijek Kindergarten,¹⁵ specifically two local kindergartens, *Nevičica* and *Vedri Dani* (Picture 1). The implementation of the project took place during Media Literacy Month (April 2024) across five groups. The project involved around 100 preschool children, a relatively equal distribution of girls and boys, from five older and mixed-age kindergarten groups. A substantial and equally important contribution to the project was provided by HRT Radio Osijek and its staff, whose support played a key role in its successful execution. In addition to the children, educators and parents actively participated.

*Workshop for Children **Super Spy Detectives***

The workshop *Super Spy Detectives* consisted of interactive sessions designed for five preschool groups, incorporating diverse activities that stimulate engagement. Children participated in discussions, play-based learning (guessing game), and creative expression (drawing), all aimed at fostering an understanding of media exposure and its influences. Playful learning strategies were integrated into each

¹⁴ The Faculty of Education served as the project holder, with Darija Kuharić, PhD, assistant professor, as the project coordinator.

¹⁵ The kindergartens of the City of Osijek have been part of the Center for Preschool Education since 1974. The network of kindergartens has expanded over the years and today it consists of 26 kindergartens and nurseries. Nearly 2,900 children attend the kindergartens and nurseries of the Osijek Kindergarten. <https://vrticiosijek.hr/> [10/11/2024]

step, allowing children to gain insights while having fun. In this way, preschoolers were engaged in critical analyses of advertise-ments and media content.



Posters announcing the workshops in both kindergartens (Picture 1.)

Step 1. The first part of the workshop began with a warm-up discussion about the media the children are familiar with and use, as well as the advertise-ments that appear during their media consumption.

Step 2. The young participants were engaged in an interactive presen-tation designed in Canva (Picture 2), during which they identified and analyzed the advertisements presented through video clips.¹⁶



Preschoolers from Nevičica kindergarten during the workshop (Picture 2.)

¹⁶ The selection of advertisements was not random but was carefully designed to integrate this segment into the preschool education curriculum. Advertisements were for food products that contain high amounts of sugar, which led to a discussion about the harmful effects of sugar and the importance of maintaining good dental hygiene.

Step 3. In this step, children created their own advertisements using several techniques (drawing, collage, stickers). Their works demonstrated an impressive level of creativity and understanding of advertisements (Picture 3).



Advertisements created by the preschoolers (Picture 3.)

Step 4. Experiential learning through visits like HRT Radio Osijek enriched preschoolers' understanding of media content. The 'Super Spy Detectives' visited HRT Radio Osijek in May, where they were provided with a behind-the-scenes look at media production. This visit served as a practical example of how media is created and disseminated, enhancing their comprehension of advertisements and media messages. Engaging directly with media professionals helped preschoolers contextualize information they learn in workshops (Picture 4). Real-world experiences solidify learning.



Preschoolers visiting HRT Radio Osijek (Picture 4.)

Step 5. The influence on the children's comprehension was validated through a subsequent creative assignment. The preschoolers documented their visit and experiences through exceptionally inventive works (Picture 5).

Step 6. During a small ceremony at their kindergarten, the children were awarded certificates of participation in the project (Picture 6), earning them the title of „young media researchers and detectives.“

Step 7. A selection of the collected drawings has been chosen, which, along with the children's comments and an additional project commentary, will make up the picture book *Little Media Researchers*.



Impressions on visiting HRT Radio Osijek (Picture 5.)



Example of the certificate of participation for the preschool children (Picture 6.)

Workshop for parents and educators

Involving parents in media literacy initiatives is crucial for fostering a comprehensive understanding of media among preschoolers. The parent workshop *Partnership in Media Literacy: Supporting Children in the Digital Society* (Picture 7) was designed to provide insights into media literacy concepts and practical strategies for engaging with children's media consumption. It was the session's tendency to try to encourage discussion surrounding appropriate media content.



Example of the certificate of participation for the preschool children (Picture 7.)

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that the workshop was attended by educators and staff from the respective kindergartens, whose observations and experiences enriched the discussion and provided valuable insights from their professional perspective. It was them who made a significant contribution to the entire project through their presence and active participation. The educators closely observed the children throughout the workshops, providing support in comprehending the advertising materials. Furthermore, they participated in a visit to HRT Radio Osijek to enhance their understanding of the functioning of modern media.

Key Insights and Conclusions of the Project

The project generated a range of questions and provided important insights. First of all, children exhibit considerable curiosity and receptiveness to media-related learning, yet they necessitate expert direction and adult support. Further, creative tasks, such as drawing and hands-on experiences, proved to be highly effective in simplifying complex subjects for younger audiences. Eventually, the collaboration with institutions, including the Osijek Kindergarten and HRT Radio Osijek, was instrumental in the successful implementation of the project.

The implementation of the *Little Media Researchers* project proceeded smoothly thanks to the professionalism and warmth of all those involved. The children's smiles, their curiosity, and excitement are the best confirmation of the success of this project.

The project has inspired us to continue seeking creative ways to educate children about the media and promote responsible and critical use of technology. The *Little Media Researchers* are not just a project but a reminder of how important it is to invest in the education of the youngest for a better tomorrow.

A Look into the Future

The results of the *Little Media Researchers* project inspired us to continue the project. During its implementation, we recognized the artistic talent of a seven-year-old boy, Dorijan, whose drawings reflected a deeper understanding of media messages. This discovery led to a collaborative effort between the author, Dorijan, and his parents, with significant support from the educators. The author wrote the story, and the young artist created 20 illustrations for the picture book *Zlorekov tajni plan (Adbad's Secret Plan)*.¹⁷ This picture book combines entertaining and educational content tailored to children's perception, making it an ideal tool for fostering critical thinking about the media.

¹⁷ *Zlorek* is a name created by combining the short forms of Croatian words „zločest“ (bad) and „reklame“ (advertisements). In English, the translation would be *Adbad's Secret Plan*. *Adbad* is a playful combination of the words „ad“ (short for advertisement) and „bad.“ In both languages, the name captures the essence of the character, highlighting its connection to problematic or mischievous advertisements in a fun and memorable way, making it suitable for a children's book. The name strikes a balance between creativity and clarity, appealing to young readers while still conveying its intended meaning.

As a result, we have chosen to apply for the Croatian Agency for Electronic Media's competition once more this year, with the goal of publishing and using the picture book to promote media literacy among lower elementary school students in the Osijek area and beyond.

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Absztrakt

MÉDIAMŰVELTSÉG AZ ÓVODÁSKORÚ GYERMEKEK SZÁMÁRA: VONZÓ WORKSHOPOK A SZÜLŐK BEVONÁSÁVAL

Ez az írás az óvodáskorú gyermekek médiaműveltségének oktatásával kapcsolatos legújabb kutatások és kezdeményezések áttekintését mutatja be a Horvátországban megvalósított Little Media Explorers projektre összpontosítva. A tanulmány kiemeli a médiaműveltség növekvő jelentőségét a kisgyermekkorú nevelésben hangsúlyozva a szülők, a pedagógusok és az intézmények szerepét a kisgyermekek kritikai gondolkodási készségeinek előmozdításában. Az Eszéki Óvodával és a HRT Radio Osijekkel együttműködésben megvalósított projekt keretében a gyermekek, a szülők és a pedagógusok számára szervezett műhelyfoglalkozások célja a médiatartalmak és a reklámok jobb megértése volt. A legfontosabb eredmények azt mutatják, hogy az óvodások jelentős kíváncsiságot és fogékonyságot mutatnak a médiával kapcsolatos tanulás iránt, de szakértői útmutatásra van szükségük. A kreatív feladatok és a gyakorlati tapasztalatok hatékonynak bizonyultak az összetett médiakoncepciók egyszerűsítésében a fiatal közönség számára. A projekt sikere vezetett az *Adbad titkos terve (Adbad's Secret Plan)* című képekönnyv kidolgozásához, amelynek célja a médiaműveltség előmozdítása az általános iskola alsó tagozatosai körében. Ez a kutatás hozzájárul a kisgyermekkorú mediaképzés egyre bővülő szakirodalmához, és gyakorlati megfigyelésekkel szolgál a médiaműveltségi programok óvodai környezetben történő megvalósításához.