Early Childhood Education and Care in the Republic of Croatia is an integral part of the system of education and child care.

It constitutes the initial level of the education system and, except for pre-primary education programs, it is not compulsory for preschool children. It is divided into three educational cycles, based on the age of children: (1) from 6 months to one year of age, (2) from 1 to 3 years, (3) from 3 years of age to the start of primary education.

**Legal basis**

Early Childhood Education and Care in Croatia is governed by the Act on Preschool Education (Official Gazette No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013) and the accompanying legislation. It includes education and care for preschool children, and is realized through programs of education, healthcare, nutrition and social care for children from the age of 6 months to school age.

Early Childhood Education and Care is provided by kindergartens and other legal entities that have established education programs for children aged from 6 months to primary school age in accordance with the provisions of the Act on Preschool Education (Official Gazette No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013). A kindergarten is a preschool institution (with or without branches) providing organized forms of out-of-family education and care for preschool children.

Early Childhood Education and Care is provided in accordance with the developmental characteristics and needs of children, as well as with the social, cultural, religious and other needs of the family.

Educational activities at kindergartens are performed in Croatian language and Latin script, whereas early childhood education and care for children belonging to national minorities is provided in accordance with the Act and regulations governing the rights of national minorities.

A kindergarten can be established by the authorities of the Republic of Croatia, local and regional units of self-government, religious communities, and other legal and natural persons.

**Focus of educational activities**

The focus of educational activities during the early childhood education and care is on encouraging full and healthy growth and development of children, and the development of all areas of the child’s personality: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, moral and spiritual, in accordance with the child’s
developmental abilities.

The education of preschool children is based on humanistic-developmental concept consisting of the following:

1. the idea of humanism (a child is a value in him/herself);
2. knowledge of the specific characteristics and principles of development of preschool children, and knowledge of human development as a whole;
3. knowledge of the characteristics of the out-of-family education of preschool children.

Principles of early childhood education and care

The principles of early childhood education and care are as follows:

- to meet the child’s basic physical needs is a basic prerequisite for the development as a whole;
- socio-emotional needs are equivalent to physical development, and all areas of development are in interaction;
- to ensure optimal conditions for development: flexible organization;
- a period of adjustment of the child to the kindergarten and re-adjustment (after absence);
- preparing children for school;
- preventing negative impacts on child + active protection;
- spontaneity as a working principle (always allow the child spontaneity);
- constant interaction child-adult;
- individual approach to child;
- to carefully design the space and material environment where the child resides;
- to flexibly organize the educational process, directed towards the child, not for the child;
- to respect the principles of development (age abilities + integrity of development opportunities);
- evaluation of the results of educational activities and conditions.

Education Programs

Regular programs of education, healthcare, nutrition and social care for preschool children are provided in kindergartens. The programs are adapted to child’s developmental needs, as well as to their abilities and competences, including the programs for preschool children with disabilities, gifted children, children belonging to national minorities, pre-primary school programs, early foreign language learning programs and other programs of artistic, cultural, religious or sports contents approved by the ministry responsible for education.

Regular programs are comprehensive developmental programs of care and education for children at the age from 6 months to the school age, which vary in duration and are designed to meet the children’s needs and the needs of their parents.

With regard to duration, the programs of early childhood education and care may be as follows:
• full-day programs, lasting 7 to 10 hours per day;
• half-day programs, lasting 4 to 6 hours per day;
• several-day programs, lasting from 1 to 10 days (excursion programs, summer vacation programs and winter vacation programs);
• programs lasting up to 3 hours.

**Special programs** include the following:

1. programs of early foreign language learning,
2. music programs,
3. art programs,
4. drama and theatre programs,
5. IT programs,
6. sports programs and dance programs,
7. environmental programs and sustainable development education programs,
8. religious programs,
9. health education programs,
10. programs for children with special healthcare needs (children with acute illnesses and needs, children with chronic illnesses, children affected by body weight disorder, endocrine and other disorders),
11. programs of work with parents, safety programs, prevention programs, and compensation and rehabilitation programs.

**Nursery**

Nursery is one of the first children's potential areas. There is an increasing number of small children entrusted by parents to nursery care at the age from 1 to 3 years, i.e. at the time when the intensity of growth and development is very distinct, and the child has already mastered some basic skills important for later life and the activity in the human community. Nurseries are an “extended arm” of mother and father. Children in nurseries have the opportunities and possibilities to find everything they need in order to grow psychologically and physically, and to form themselves in the social and human terms. This means that, in addition to the usual personal care, nurseries assume the obligation to provide the children with the following: incentives for the development of children's potentials; that every child therein is confirmed as a human being in a favorable atmosphere of safety and emotional connection with an adult; to satisfy their need for action, exploring, early methods of research in the company of other children that every individual will find stimulating.

The basis of the process of care and education of children in nurseries is the modification of the educational practices of educators (choice of activities, organization of space and planning). However, education and care of children in nurseries cannot be observed without the education and care of children at home. The cooperation between the family and the institution is required to achieve optimal results. The process of gathering information about the child includes involvement of parents, educators and other experts participating in the educational process, and they all have to cooperate, be flexible and open to the needs of the child. The whole process of care and education takes place in indoor and outdoor nursery areas. This environment should be safe, clean and inviting to children who are at the center of the holistic approach. In such an environment, children are free to move around and explore, practice their abilities and skills; carry out freely their activities, whether they are initiated by children or educators. The holistic approach to care and education of children in nurseries involves connecting of all components. The fact is that a child is the most important in the educational process, that every child is different, but equally valuable. If adults who participate in the educational process respect this fact, the nurseries will be filled with creative children, children who learn quickly and look forward to independent attempts.