

# Parents' Attitudes about Spending Free Time and Reading Habits of their Children

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, a child's free time is more often structured after he has completed his duties in kindergarten and school. This structuring is most often organized by the parents themselves, taking into account their own children's preferences and possible shortcomings in compulsory education. Thus, children most often go to sports activities, attend music schools and foreign language schools. On the other hand, parents less often include their children in programs for the development of language abilities in their mother tongue and in the development of reading competences, even though the understanding of the content of many subjects depends on them. This is precisely why the aim of this work is to examine the attitudes of parents regarding the implementation of their children's free time and the reading habits of their family and children. One hundred and twenty parents of primary school-aged children participated in the research, filling out an online questionnaire, and the data were then processed in the SPSS program for statistics. It has been shown that more educated parents structure their children's free time more often and enroll them in foreign language schools and sports programs more often. It was also shown that the choice of leisure activities will depend more on the offer of the environment in which the child grows up than on the preferences of the child himself. It has also been shown that parents do not encourage their children to read books, except for mandatory readings, and that parents who read more will take more care of their children's reading skills.

**Keywords:** *Free Time, Parents' Attitudes, Reading Habits, Reading Competence, Language Competence*

## Introduction

Today, less and less is said about the free time of children and young people, and more and more is said about the structuring of that free time and its organization. On average, children of primary school age spend from five hours in the younger grades of primary school to seven hours in the upper grades of primary school. In the first two grades of elementary school, it is organized daycare, after finishing the lessons children stay at school and continue to do their homework and

have a structured time until their parents come to pick them up, and they stay at school for almost a full eight hours. Although we are talking about children who are seven or eight years old, and despite the fact that they spend eight hours at school, their afternoon time is also structured and very often the remaining part of the day is spent in different activities, and less often in free play, which at that age might be still the most appropriate. When we talk about free time, we usually talk about the time in which it is necessary to satisfy different needs: the need for play, and the need for entertainment, but also the need for learning new knowledge and skills, and in that time it is necessary to build important relationships, to strengthen them and to explore and satisfy different interests and preferences (Rosić, 2005). Very often, free time for children of elementary school age serves as a space for acquiring new knowledge or "filling in the gaps" in the knowledge that the child possesses, so children, especially in the upper grades of elementary school, are exposed to numerous instructions in their free time that try to "cover" all possible deficiencies in understanding school material. The author Pažur (2020) noticed that free time is already structured in children of kindergarten age, who concluded that children of preschool and younger school age most often attend foreign language schools, play sports and attend music school in their free time. Examining the attitudes of teachers, the authors Pažur and Aladrović Slovaček (2022) noticed that teachers have a positive attitude towards structuring their students' free time, but they also noticed that teachers also notice better success in children who have additional activities outside of their school duties. The authors Pejić-Papak and Vidulin (2016) noticed that insufficiently well-designed free time can also have negative factors on the child's development, and they emphasize the importance of the parental role in this whole process. Namely, the teachers at school follow the child and evaluate his success, while the parent is the one who, in addition to school, should follow the child's interests and should be guided by them when making decisions in filling his free time. In addition to parents, the media plays an important role in the selection process, to which children of primary school age are exposed today. Any promotion of sports content through the media can help raise awareness among children and young people and change from an inactive lifestyle, which is most often present, to a very active lifestyle, and by actively playing sports, the time spent in front of screens is reduced and the development of screen adaptation is prevented (Roje Đapić et al., 2020). However, there are many factors that ultimately influence the choice of activities during leisure time. First of all, the choice will depend on the social position of the parents, on their education, habits and abilities, and financial possibilities. More educated parents will more often offer a more diverse range of free activities to their child, as will parents with better financial opportunities. On the other hand, the choice will also depend on the social environment, cultural heritage and the offer and availability of certain contents (Ilašin, 2001). For example, if a child lives in a smaller place, it is necessary to invest a lot more effort and financial resources in order to engage in some additional activities and thus fill his time. For example, if a child goes to a music school, you need to drive him, wait, fit into his schedule with your work schedule, and the like. Equally, there are some other difficulties related to spending free time, such as an insufficient number of experts in smaller communities, but also a reduced choice of activities, poorer material conditions and too few people interested in a certain activity, which in that case

cannot take place without a specific group of children or adults. On the other hand, children are exposed to the influence of the media, and thus to the consumer mentality, and demands and expectations are often placed before them that are not in line with their interests, and are often not even appropriate for their age. This is often why priority is given to structured spending of free time and a greater amount of activities compared to free play, time for free conversation and nurturing the warmth of interpersonal relationships. Thus, free time and filling it with different activities becomes a space for "escape from reality" and increasingly a space of pressure and frustration, both for the parent and the child (Čunović, 2016). This is precisely why this paper aims to examine the attitudes of parents towards spending free time of elementary school-aged children, the motivation in spending that time and the limitations they see from their perspective, bearing in mind the environment in which the child grows up and his specific interests. Today, just as little time is devoted to satisfying the research and creative potential of children of primary school age, and it has turned out to be important to take care of this segment as well, because those activities that stimulate a child's creativity or use of creative potential greatly pave the way for him to choose such a profession in the future and create the foundations for some new research ventures. Positive feedback and a child's success in an activity increase his self-esteem, create a more positive image of himself and increase his motivation, not only in that area, but in all areas of his activity.

As already mentioned, in addition to the school and teachers, parents also play an important role in this process. Those who are more engaged in the process of organizing their child's free time will also have greater control over their activities. In addition to the mentioned environment, the choice will probably be influenced by the experience the parents have and the way they were raised. This key role in building and raising children has not changed over the centuries, only the circumstances in which this role is realized have changed. Today, the process of education and upbringing has changed in terms of the organization of free time, and that is why it is important to research this area from different aspects in order to create a clearer picture of free time and its organization from the perspective of all stakeholders in the educational process. And finally, it will be clear that free time has fulfilled its function when it becomes a space where children and young people feel satisfied and fulfilled, and in this process their overall creativity, spontaneity and naturalness come to the fore (Fulgosi, 1997, p. 29).

### **About reading and reading habits**

One of the ways to fill free time is reading. Although elementary school students usually do not perceive reading as relaxation, but as an obligation, the question arises of how to motivate students to read and how to bring reading closer to students as a possible quality way of filling their free time. Research conducted with standardized tests - PISA (2015) and PIRLS (2011) showed that Croatian students are above average in strategic reading competence, but that they have very low motivation for reading. It has also been shown that many factors influence student results. First of all, girls achieve significantly better results in reading competence than boys, and students who are more IT competent, as well as those whose parents read and own a family library. Equally, better results on the reading competence test are achieved by students who have been included in

the kindergarten program for at least three years, and students who were read more during their childhood, as well as those whose parents are more educated and aware of the importance of reading. As it was emphasized earlier, as well as in deciding on the structure of free time, parents have an important role in motivating their children towards reading, as well as in working on reading skills. Research (Aladrović Slovaček et al., 2019) showed that students visit the library on average once a month and that they mostly borrow books that are on their reading list. Very few respondents show a wider interest in reading than what they are forced to do. Since reading competence is essential for mastering different contents, such as history, geography or other theoretical issues, it is very important to develop and guide it. In addition to classroom teachers and Croatian (native) language teachers, parents also play a key role in this process, as they need to encourage their children to go to the library. habits to be a role model for children. A parent who reads is an exemplary example of a child who is just picking up a book to discover the world in which he lives. Therefore, it is important that reading is also given enough space in the creation of free time, because many benefits are truly related to the development of reading skills, that is, to the quality of the content read.

### **Research methodology**

#### *Description of the method of implementation, instrument and research sample*

During the 2021/2022 school year, an online survey of parents of elementary school-aged children in the continental area of the Republic of Croatia (Slavonia, Požega-Slavonska County) was conducted with the aim of determining their opinions and satisfaction with school and the possibilities of implementing their child's free time and their views on the advantages and disadvantages of structuring the free time of elementary school-aged children. Parents filled out the questionnaire during the last week of classes, and their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire itself consisted of 20 open-ended and closed-ended questions, and five questions that collected the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (parents). Five out of twenty questions make up theses with which respondents expressed their agreement on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant I do not agree at all, and 5 meant I completely agree). Respondents were offered answers in ten questions, and in five questions they had to answer with one word or sentence to justify their thinking.

158 parents participated in the survey. 51.7% of parents have a university degree, 17.1% of parents have a higher education, while 27.6% of parents have a secondary education. The questionnaire was mostly filled out by mothers, 89.5% of them. 44.5% of parents who filled out the questionnaire have two children, 30% have three children, 14.5% have four or more children, while 11% of parents have one child. 87.7% of respondents live in families where they live with their spouse and children, while 12.3% of respondents live in an extended family with grandparents.

Table 1. Describing of sample

Education of Parents	Family Structures	Environment
51,7% university degree	44,5 % has 2 children	87,7% live alone
17,1% higher education	30 % has 3 children	12,3% live with grandfathers and grandmothers
27,6% secondary education	14,5% has 4 and more children	
3,6% others	11% has one child	

### *Aim and problems of researching*

The main goal of this research is to examine the attitudes of parents regarding the implementation of their children's free time. The following research problems arise from the basic objective:

1. To examine how children spend their free time after school.
2. To examine which activities children choose to spend their free time.
3. To examine parents' satisfaction with the use of their child's free time.
4. To examine the reading habits of parents and the connection between reading habits and the habits of their children.

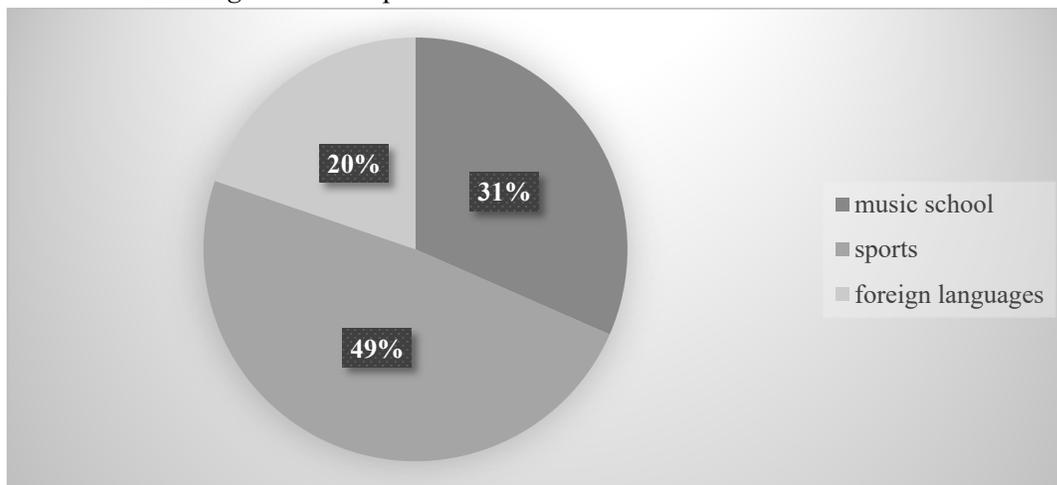
### *Results of researching*

The first goal of the research was to examine how children spend their free time after school. The results of the conducted research show that parents spend one to two hours talking with their children after school (50%), and a large proportion of parents say that they talk to their children for more than two hours a day (46.6%). These answers point to the orientation of parents towards children and the need for conversation, when compared with the results given by the same respondents in assessing the time their children spend in front of screens, 36.2% one to two hours, 36.2% two to three hours, 6.9% more than three hours and 20.7% less than one hour, show inconsistency because the amount of daily time after school is very limited and amounts to 5-6 effective hours if the child has no homework and no additional activity. This shows that parents gave more desirable than real answers when it came to talk to their children, because research (Aladrović Slovaček, 2019) shows that parents actively talk with their children for up to 30 minutes a day, and of course more and longer on weekends. It is also interesting to look at the answers to the question: how often do you play board games with your children? 67.2% of respondents sometimes play board games with their children, while on weekends they say that children spend most of their time outside, even 50% of parents say that their children spend more than four hours a day in the fresh air on weekends. The most common form of spending free time together on weekends is in nature, in the fresh air, walking or hanging out with friends, family and relatives. A few parents use the time during the weekend for sports activities together with their children and for going on trips outside their place of residence.

Another goal of the research is to ask parents what activities their children do in their free time. The results of the conducted research show that 41.4% of parents send their children to music school, 25.9% of parents send their children to learn foreign languages, and 63.8% of parents send their children to some additional sport after school, that is, during their free time. 37.9% of parents

say that in addition to sports, music and foreign language school, their children also engage in some other activities in their free time, such as folklore, mountain climbing, scouting, dancing, programming, mental arithmetic or some other sport.

Figure 1. How parents describe free time of their children

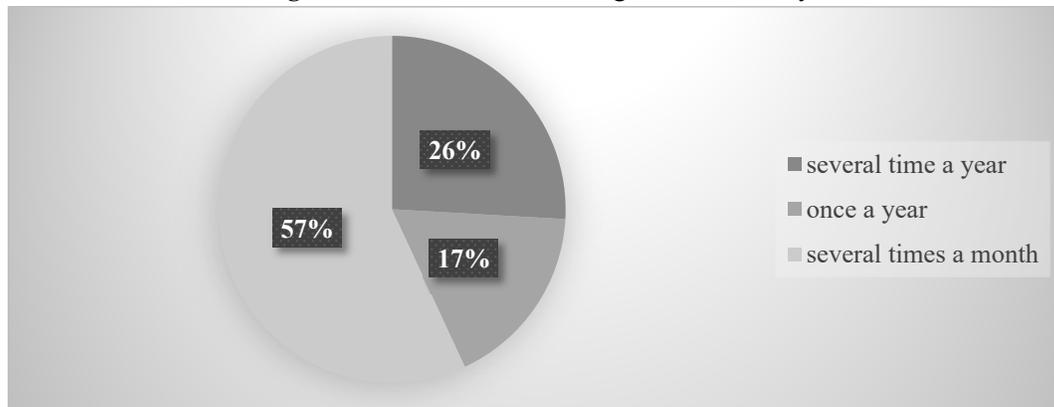


The third aim of the research was to examine parents' satisfaction with their child's leisure time. 65% of parents are completely satisfied or satisfied with their child's free time. Most of the surveyed parents send their children to two free activities during the working week, some parents encourage their children to more than two activities, while some children have only one activity or none at all. Most often, children practice some sport in their free time and go to music school, to dance or to a foreign language. Some children combine music school with a foreign language, while some children go to dance and combine it with another activity. The surveyed parents believe that leisure activities help children to structure their free time, to satisfy their interests and their creativity, and to feel fulfilled. However, they believe that children do not have enough choice of leisure activities, and that leisure activities should be organized after school and during day care in the younger grades of elementary school. Parents notice that children lack practical knowledge, and a few believe that it is necessary to organize extracurricular activities related to the content of the subject, which twenty years ago was called Home Economics and where cooking, sewing, knitting and other practical activities important for running a household were taught. Parents also believe that it is necessary to give children more choices in activities related to the STEAM field, considering the tendency of today's education system and the needs of the labor market. Nevertheless, almost 30% of parents believe that in their free time, children should be provided with more free outdoor play and more sports that will help them develop motor skills and thereby prevent diseases of the spine and circulatory system that occur today precisely because of the large amount of time that is spent sitting and in front of the screen.

The fourth goal of the research was to investigate the reading habits of parents and their attitudes about the reading habits of their own children. Parents believe that the largest number of their children visit the library several times a month - 56.9%, while on the other hand, 25.9% of

parents believe that their children go to the library several times a year. 17.2% of the surveyed parents believe that their children go to the library only once a year. About 70% of the surveyed parents read books, which is actually a very interesting result. Most often, they read novels, historical or romance, then religious reading, classics, books on education and professional literature for work. Considering the interesting results, the research should be repeated at some point, because no differences in answers regarding education were found ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Figure 2. How often children go to the library



## Discussion

Although 158 parents participated in this research, it can be said that the research still has certain limitations, since it was conducted on the territory of one of the twenty counties of the Republic of Croatia, but also that only slightly more than a hundred parents participated in it, and the fact that almost 90 % of questionnaires completed by mothers. Nevertheless, the results are expected on the one hand, and on the other hand show that parents know very well what is expected of them and what their role should be in the context of spending free time. Namely, although the parents as respondents in this research show that they talk actively with their children for about two hours a day on average, this information is in contradiction with the data that these same children, with whom they talk, spend an average of 2 to 3 hours a day in front of screens. Most of these children also have some additional free activities that they do after they finish school, that is, in their free time. This shows how parents understand their role and their meaning in the process of structuring their children's free time, but it also shows that very often this is not enough, but the whole process is influenced by a number of different factors: parental free time, perception of parental free time, parental engagement in the child's life and social life and other factors. The above results confirm previous research (Roje Đapić et al., 2020) on screen adaptation and its connection with the child's social-emotional development.

As expected, the research results confirm the thesis put forward in the research by the authors Pažur and Aladrović Slovaček (2022), who showed that the largest number of parents structure their children's free time by enrolling them in sports activities, then in music and dance schools or activities, and in foreign languages. Also, as the aforementioned research shows a tendency towards the inclusion of children in the STEAM field, this research also confirms this, that is, it

confirms the thesis that an increasing number of parents express the desire for the need to enroll their children in activities related to mathematics, programming and similar activities that are very popular today. appreciated and profitable. There is another conclusion related to the organization of free time as a basis for learning content that is important for the future and creating a work, business and friendly environment (Pejić-Papak & Vidulin, 2016). Equally interesting is the result related to reading as a language skill and its role in the organization of free time. It seems that parents recognize the importance of reading, but ignore the importance of motivation for reading and the role of free time in this process.

Although most of the children of the surveyed parents have one, two or more activities, parents think about additional content that would improve certain areas of their children's knowledge. Although parents on the one hand express the need for the school as an educational institution to provide various contents outside of classes that would help students acquire practical knowledge, parents on the other hand understand the role of modern man, respect his needs and see free time as a space for stronger activation in sports activities as key to maintaining a healthy society, growth and development of young people, which is undoubtedly true.

## Conclusion

Spending free time should primarily be coordinated with the child's cognitive development, and spending free time should enable the child to acquire additional competencies in areas of his personal interest or the development of creative potential to which contemporary educology attaches great importance. The importance of the parent's role in the whole process is extremely important, because what the children will develop more and what less will depend on the parent, his experience and preferences. It is necessary to look at the child as a whole person and the importance of developing all areas at the same time. A lack of hearing does not have to be a reason for not going to music school, nor should excess weight be an obstacle to enrolling in dance or sports. It is the free time that allows the child to make up for what he did not succeed in the compulsory school hours, to test his talent or to try his hand in an area that he considers his area of interest. The parent remains a key factor in this process, and therefore parents should be made aware of their role in the process of structuring free time at parenting meetings and additional education aimed at perfecting parenting. The school can play an intermediary role in this process, taking into account the abilities and creative potential of each child and the attitude of the parents, which can often be completely opposite to what is expected of them, and can be exaggerated in a falsely positive, as well as in a negative direction. Nevertheless, the balance between school duties and ways of spending free time enables the complete development of the child and all his potential equally.

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