CHILDREN’S WELL-BEING DURING TRANSITION PERIODS IN CROATIA: THE PROPOSAL OF EMPIRICAL VALIDATION OF ECOLOGICAL-DYNAMIC MODEL

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Abstract

Transition is defined as an intense process of change and movement from one identity to another, determined by the various factors described in the contemporary ecological and dynamic model of transition [1]. Within transition, the various contexts in which and through which the child passes, and their interrelations over time, are crucial for children's well-being. Therefore, this socio-cultural understanding of the transition, shows the significant effects of different intra- and interpersonal factors of children, caregivers and educators on successful adaptation of children, and the relationships between those factors. The first studies have shown that the characteristics of a child have 25% of the variance of overall success in adaptation [2]. Mihić and colleagues have confirmed [3], [4] that secure attachment and warm relationships lead to successful adaptation. In addition to the sensibilities and skills of parents and educators, the key relationships in the child’s environment, social values, teaching strategies and environment are emphasized. It is also important to point out that there are very few scientific researches in this area in Croatia, and most of them analysed practice of organizing kindergarten work during adaptation [5], [6] or measures for testing the quality of adaptation and attachment [7]. In addition, prior studies determined that practices in Croatia are rather different regarding the various kindergartens and primary schools [8]. So, this review article presents contemporary theoretical models and empirical studies in the field of transition periods in children’s lives with the aim of postulating the proposal of empirical validation of the ecological and dynamic model of transition in Croatia and the analysis of significant correlates of transition from family to kindergarten, as well as of transition from kindergarten to primary school. This research will provide clear guidelines for parents, teachers and associates in Croatia about ensuring the highest levels of children's well-being during transition for children. On the representative samples of early aged children (transition from family to kindergarten) and preschool children (transition from kindergarten to primary school), the following variables will be explored: intrapersonal factors of children (temperament, socio-emotional well-being, strength and difficulties, resilience), parents/caregivers (personality, sensitivity, subjective well-being, resilience) and teachers (personality, subjective well-being, resilience); and the interpersonal factors of child-parents-teachers-environment (attachment, adaptation, relationship with parents/educators, teaching strategies, relationship between family-kindergarten-school-local community-environment, social values). The quantitative methodology will be applied with reliable measures that will objectively present the perspective of children, parents, teachers and associates. This analysis will contribute to realization of short-term goals by validating the theoretical model and postulating the practical guidelines for achieving optimal transition in the early and preschool period, as well as to realization of long-term goals by preventing the mental health problems among children in Croatia with the aim of enhancing their lifelong psychological well-being.

Keywords: adaptation, children’s well-being, ecological and dynamic model of transition, environment, family, kindergarten, primary school, teaching strategies, transition.

1 INTRODUCTION

From their youngest days, children pass through a variety of life transitions or turning points. These life transitions differ concerning the intensity of the change and the intensity of the child’s reaction to that change. For most children, the first and indeed the most significant turning point is the transition from the family home to an institution of early and preschool care and education. Therefore, we distinguish those significant and big turning points such as enrolling in the kindergarten, preschool or elementary school and those less significant and small ones such as changing the layout of the furniture in the living room of their home. However, the intensity of the child's reaction is not only related to the size of the change that is happening but also to who or what is involved in that change and the importance which a child attributes to that someone or something. So, there are daily changes and transitions between the family home and, for example, the home where the grandparents and the cousins live, or...
the preschool, the playground, playrooms, children’s club or some children’s activities center. However, there are also those transitions that involve a change in some of the other significant persons in the child’s life, and these transitions are critical since they directly affect the intensity of the child’s perceptible reaction to the new situation. They are all part of the children’s lives and are vital as they provide opportunities and new challenges for personal growth and development. They are also the source of various feelings of anxiety and insecurity for that child and his family members [9]. At that time, their families are an essential support for their children, and all of them are significant others who jointly experience the transition situation with the child, in other words, preschool teachers and associates.

According to the Croatian encyclopedia [10], adjustment means the same as adaptation, which comes from a Latin word (adaptatio) and in psychology, it refers to adjusting or adapting to a new situation or the rearranging of a situation. Contemporary psychological science has clearly shown how important a good and optimal adaptation is to the environment in which an individual lives concerning the level of his psychological well being and the general quality of his life. By doing so, the ability to adapt effectively to a new environment, where five fundamental factors significantly determine efficiency in the general development model: time, intrapersonal factors (behavior, perception, personality), interpersonal factors (child’s relationship with the parent(s), siblings, peers, preschool teachers/school teachers, etc.), higher order factors (family, group, socio-economic context, society, culture), and organic (physiological processes, genes, etc.) [11], represents a very complicated process that can also be the cause and effect of a particular mental state of the child. Taking the general development model into account, for example, it is not the same whether a child at the age of 3 or 5 is going through the process of adaptation to the kindergarten, has an easy or hard temperament, a harmonious and affectionate relationship with his parents/caregivers, is a member of an ethnic minority or not, and whether or not there are some organic specifics. It is, therefore, essential to take into account the whole set of factors that determine the child’s course of the adaptation process and to know how to provide optimal support to the child. The transition period in the child’s life is most significant for that aspect of the child’s development which is connected to his attachment. The development of attachment in children is to the greatest extent, as a close and interrelated connectedness and understanding between the child and the primary caregiver, determined by the characteristics of the child’s vulnerability and the relevant behavior of the primary caregiver. Thus, it is entirely determined by the quality of the relationship between the primary caregiver, i.e., the parent and the child, since it is the first, fundamental relationship in the child’s life. Throughout the transition period and adaptation, which provide a clear picture of the quality of attachment between the child and the caregiver, attachment is being “tested” and reveals the possible need for early intervention, in the case of some form of insecure attachment [3].

Each transition, in a certain way, connects the child to the new environment and to some other significant others, through which the child realizes his potential, grows, and develops. On the one hand, there is an external inevitability of the related environmental factors of development that are most simply presented through the famous Bronfenbrenner model of development [12]. Their connectedness and the quality of these relationships are significantly determined by the social and cultural factors in which children and their families live, as well as the various political and social values that dominate in a given moment. On the other hand, people represent those internal factors that have the most significant effect on the quality of connecting different environments and their fundamental characteristics. This is the environment of the primary family/caregiver and the system of early and preschool care and education of the key environment during one of the first real and significant transition periods and adaptations that have a significant effect on the development of attachment in children starting from the early and preschool age. The way these two micro-environments are linked as well as the underlying organization and structure of these relationships and the quality of their interconnectedness more than significantly influence the course of transition, adaptation, and development of attachment in children. Thirdly, parents/caregivers, preschool teachers, and children have the capacity and power to shape and modify these relationships before, during, and after the transition and adaptation period, regardless of the inevitability mentioned above and determinism with different periods and higher-order factors. Precisely the latter is the basic idea for the presentation and suggestion of empirical verification of the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition [1] in Croatia. This model points to the importance of four significant psychological concepts: attachment-relation-adaptation-transition shown in Figure 1, and their relevance to the overall optimal psychological development of early and preschool-aged children. It is therefore essential to examine their relationship with the methodology later described, which will enable.
scientific and professional implications to be defined to achieve a high level of the child’s wellbeing, as well as a high-quality practice of early and preschool care and education.

Figure 1. ARTA-model: Attachment, Relation, Adaptation, Transition – four significant concepts in children’s lives in the context of an early and preschool care and education

2 DEFINING TRANSITION WITHIN CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL MODELS

For most children, the transition from the family home to an early and preschool institution is the first and most ecological transition into their educational life [12]. Institutions of early and preschool care and education or kindergartens represent the basic form of educational institutions for early and preschool-aged children, which precede the formal system of primary education in a large number of countries, including Croatia. This is an institution where children for the first time make clear impressions and awareness of school as a place where something is learned and about themselves as future students. Thus, apart from Bronfenbrenner’s perspective [12] of this transition from one ecological system into another, there is also a socio-cultural perspective [13], which highlights the cultural familiarity and connection between the family home and the kindergarten or communication between two different cultures. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory [13] explains the design of the child’s individual development and his perception of the world precisely from his historical, cultural, and institutional context. The context of the family home and the context of the kindergarten have quite different characteristics and purposes, so the child is faced with entirely different cultural models. It is no less important to note that the diversity, complexity, and interpenetration of the relationship between the family home and the institution of early and preschool care and education have a significant impact on shaping the child’s unique transition and adaptation experience [14], [15]. Although a large number of current studies tackle transitions and educational practices related to the adaptation to the elementary school and the effects that parents and the school system have on the quality of a child’s adaptation, contemporary research shows that the critical factor is actually the child himself and his characteristics [16]. Namely, the process of adaptation is a very dynamic and active process [17]. Therefore, it is precisely the way the child copes with a new situation and how he adapts to the new preschool that is crucial to building his role as a lifelong learner. Bearing in mind this long-lasting effect of the process of the child’s adaptation to the kindergarten, its importance in the life of the child is evident, as well the consequences that emerge.

A significantly large number of studies describe transition as a change of context, i.e., moving from one institutional framework or phase to another in the educational continuum [18], [19], [20]. The transition is “the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another … to when the child is more fully established as a member of the new setting. It is usually a time of intense and accelerated development demands that are socially regulated” [21, p.3]. Thus, in order to highlight the change of context, the transition is marked as a process of change and movement from one identity to another [22], which is also evident in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological systems theory of development [12], more specifically the ecological model of transition proposed by Pianta and associates [23]. According to this model, three basic principles and their interrelationships over time are crucial for the transition outcome. This model promotes the mutual coordination and
harmonization of the practice and educational policies which facilitate the transition to the kindergarten. According to this model, three basic principles are agreed upon to guide activities during the transition period with the aim of supporting children: 1) connect and support families and preschool during the transition; 2) identify significant correlations of the quality of transition from the child’s previous developmental phase; 3) perform and take action in accordance with the needs of children and families (e.g., make personal contacts, home visits, and the like). Thus, the ecological model describes the direct effects of the context (kindergarten/school, neighborhood, peers, and family) on the child’s adaptation to the kindergarten/school. Unlike this model, the modern transition model, which was further developed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta [1] into the so-called “Ecological and dynamic effects model of transition” describes two aspects of adaptation: a) interaction between two different contexts that change, e.g., communication between the kindergarten and the school; and b) continuity between different contexts that stay stable over time, e.g., if the child always stays in the same neighborhood regardless of the transitions and adaptations he faces. In addition, a number of factors that influence the transition period are important: children’s intrapersonal factors (temperament and other characteristics of children), family (personality and parent sensitivity, parenting style, communication style, etc.) and preschool teachers/primary school teachers (preschool teacher’s/primary school teacher’s personality, competencies, attitudes); and interpersonal factors child-caregiver- kindergarten (attachment style, course and outcome of the adaptation, relationship with the caregiver, relationship with the preschool teacher/school teacher, work mode in the kindergarten/primary school, relationship between the family and the preschool, kindergarten-school-local community relationship, social values). In any case, significant adaptation factors are the same in all models, but the contemporary model highlights interactions that had previously been neglected: it takes into account not only the changes in the time that occur in a child, but changes in the contexts, changes in the family, changes in society, and changes in their interactions. Thus, it is noticeable how great the complexity of the transitional period is in early childhood and preschool age, and therefore the difficulty of predicting successful adaptation as well.

3 TRANSITION FROM HOME TO KINDERGARTEN

In defining adaptation, it is imperative to make a distinction between some similar terms, such as the difference between adjustment and adaptation [16]. Although these terms are often used as synonyms, they are not. Lazarus [24] and Folkman and Lazarus [25] described two concepts of psychological adjustment: adjustment as an achievement and adjustment as a process. Adjustment as an achievement is “adaptation to environmental circumstances and something to be achieved” [26, p.95]. On the other hand, adjustment as a process refers to the characteristic way in which an individual deal with new environmental requirements. Therefore, when studying a child’s transition period, it is possible to observe two aspects: a) What are the outcomes of adaptation in a particular child, i.e., to which degree has the child adapted to the nursery/kindergarten/school? – adaptation outcomes to the kindergarten/school; and/or b) What are the strategies which a child employs for dealing with a particular situation of adaptation, i.e., what is the characteristic way in which a child copes with a new situation in the context of the nursery/kindergarten/school? – adaptation strategies to the kindergarten/school. With regards to the theory within the modern psychological science there is a clear distinction between these concepts, but the way in which they are used in practice is one of the questions that might be answered through the conducted research on the preschool teachers’ attitudes about the adaptation of children in the nursery/kindergarten and their perspectives of the organization of children’s adaptation in an institution for early and preschool care and education.

Any change in the life of a person, and especially of a child, is a kind of challenge that, when overcoming emotions, is often a source of discomfort and stress. One of such changes is the beginning of attending the nursery or kindergarten. Enrollment in the nursery or kindergarten can also be to a greater or lesser extent stressful for both the parents and the preschool teachers. These are instances of the first “real” and serious separation of the child from his parent and of the abandonment of the familiar environment and departure into an unknown environment with unknown people. Adaptation is thereby defined as the time it takes for a child, parent or preschool teacher to adapt to a new situation, where time is a plausible indicator and an indicator of the adaptation success. In other words, adaptation can be defined as the ambition to fit into the environment in ways that enhance survival [27]. In addition, adaptation or adjustment of a child in a nursery or a kindergarten can be defined as the time or period in which a child is adapting to a new situation, i.e., to the nursery or kindergarten [16]. Adaptation can take up to 10 to 15 days and even one or two months, depending on the type of adaptation. The adaptation time is individual and depends on the intrapersonal and
interpersonal characteristics of the child, parent, preschool teacher, kindergarten/school, and their interactions.

“There are three basic types of adaptation: easy, medium, and difficult adaptation” and each of these types of adaptations is explained as following [28, p.366]. EASY adaptation is the simplest form of adaptation and is considered a normal occurrence in new life situations, such as enrolling the child into a nursery or kindergarten. This kind of adaptation takes a relatively short time, usually 10 to 15 days after which the child is delighted to go to the new environment. Adaptation is noticeable in children who are emotionally mature and are well prepared for new situations. MEDIUM adaptation refers to the adaptation that does not happen within 10 to 15 days but is extended to 30 days. The child experiences a feeling of fear and disapproval of the new environment for an extended period. These are most commonly children with a lack of confidence. Failure to accept a new life situation entails certain defensive mechanisms, such as aggression against other children, crying, withdrawal, and so on. These are children who did not have enough interaction with other children before the nursery or kindergarten. Also, they are possessively connected to their parents and are troubled by the thought of separation from the parents [29]. HARD adaptation is the most difficult form of adaptation, which is the least common among children. It is extended for 2-6 months. In the difficult adaptation, certain factors hamper the adaptation process itself and prolong its duration. They may be linked to any of the factors mentioned above, or a few of them, which have been mentioned in the context of the modern ecological and dynamic model, and it is essential to identify them on time and on that basis to provide adequate support to the child and his family. With mental symptoms occurring during hard adaptation, there are also physical symptoms such as vomiting, abdominal pain, food rejection, sleep problems, etc. Psychological symptoms often include aggression, behavioral regression, uncontrolled urination, tearfulness, non-sociability, etc. In such cases of hard adaptation, sometimes there is a need for expert help from psychologists or pedagogues to facilitate the adaptation of the child and to reduce the mental and physical symptoms.

4 SIGNIFICANT FACTORS IN TRANSITION – ECOLOGICAL AND DYNAMIC MODEL OF TRANSITION

Generally, there are three significant factors that directly affect the adjustment of children in the institutions for early and preschool care and education. Namely: the characteristics of institutions for early and preschool care and education; characteristics of parents and their stress reactions; and the characteristics of preschool teachers [6, p.68]. Kindergarten presents the fundamental framework for building optimal child adaptation during early and preschool education. The kindergarten is an institution with which the child meets for the first time and does not know what awaits him there. Since the enrollment into the kindergarten is an entirely new situation in a child’s life, it requires gradual adaptation. Therefore, the most common guideline during this transitional period [9], especially during the first few days, is to bring a child to the kindergarten for several hours in the presence of his parents so that he could get acquainted with the new environment, other children, and the preschool teachers. It is imperative that the kindergarten is spatially and materially organized in such a way as to give the appearance of the family home, warmth, and comfort for the child, which should be continually maintained.

The family structure (number of family members, siblings and their interrelationships), family dynamics (positive, negative), and parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, indifferent) as well as the overall behavior of parents represent the foundation of child development and are responsible for child development [3]. The child’s family is an environment in which the child should feel safe and loved. It is the smallest, but at the same time, the most natural community in man’s life. Parents are role models for their child. As the child grows up, he begins to imitate his parents. What parents do and how they behave becomes normal for the child in different situations, even in transition instances. This is equally true for the child’s transition from a family home to an institution of early and preschool care and education. In addition to all intrapersonal characteristics of parents and families, interpersonal characteristics are also essential, i.e., the way in which the parent has prepared his child for a new life situation and what the parent thinks about it since it will become the child’s opinion [20]. The child’s enrollment into the kindergarten is often the child’s first “real” separation from his parents, which brings about some more family changes, such as the mother returning to work, which is stressful both for the child and his mother. Parental stress can also be unconsciously transmitted to the child. If a parent is unsure of his child’s attending the kindergarten, the same insecurity will be felt by the child. Likewise, if a parent has a positive attitude towards the kindergarten and the preschool teacher, the child will also find it much easier to accept the new situation.
In the context of institutional childhood, the preschool teacher is, along with the parents, the most important factor in the child’s development and thus during the child’s adaptation to the kindergarten as well [3]. During the child’s adaptation to the kindergarten, the preschool teacher should provide support both to the child and the parents. It is necessary that the preschool teacher observes the child and his behavior during the adaptation and that in accordance with the perceived behavior of the child, he or she creates activities that will facilitate the child’s first days at the kindergarten [4]. With the goal of adequate child development, the relationship between the preschool teacher and the parent should also be a close partnership. The precondition for such a relationship is the frequent, open, and direct communication between the preschool teacher and the parent. The teacher should talk to the parents before their child leaves the kindergarten. It is common practice for parents to complete a survey through which expert associates and preschool teacher attempt to get a general impression of the child, his habits, emotional state and needs, all with the aim of better shaping the child’s daily activities in the kindergarten and to achieve a relationship with the child that is as close as possible.

As it has already been emphasized in the contemporary Ecological & dynamic model of transition [1], cultural differences are also one of the important factors influencing the child’s adaptation. Different cultural values and norms have a strong impact on adaptation and the methods used for supporting children and families during transition. The values conditioned by the socio-cultural context in which the child lives manifest themselves primarily within the family and then outside the parents’ home, in this case, in the institution of early and preschool care and education. Why is the culture important for the success of children’s adaptation? Because it defines the dominant patterns of care or instructions on how to behave towards the child. The modern family lifestyle, modern parenting, and culture in our country are characterized by a strong orientation towards the child and (overly) protective behavior of parents towards their children, with simultaneously high standards for the parents, especially mothers. For example, 50 years ago, it was common for children to walk alone from their home to school and from school back home. They were encouraged to develop in this way their independence and parents were proud of such behavior of their children. Today, children are mostly driven by their parents’ cars, and if they do not have that opportunity, children and parents feel ashamed because they have not met the contemporary needs and expectations of the society in which they live, regardless of the fact that their child does not develop social skills and does not move enough.

During the transition and adaptation, it is essential to provide adequate support and encouragement for the child with the aim of fostering his independence [4], [30]. The range of independence at this age is limited, but it is essential that they are developed to the extent that it is possible and suitable for the developmental stage of the child. If it is known that a significant change will occur in the child’s life, such as the transition from the family home to an institution of early and preschool care and education, it is recommended for parents to occasionally separate from the child in order for the child to adapt to the separation easier. Such periodic separation reduces the shock of “real, big, and serious” separation when starting to attend the nursery or kindergarten because the child will be somewhat prepared and partly used to the separation. Likewise, over time, it is necessary to allow the child to go to bed without sleeping in bed with the parents. Before attending the nursery or kindergarten, it is necessary to occasionally familiarize the child with a broader environment from that which he is acquainted with within the family. This involves contact with others, unknown or less known people and other children. Also, it is useful to visit a kindergarten or a nursery to get the child acquainted with the new environment. It is essential to talk with a child who is about to start attending an institution of early and preschool education about the future situation. When a child starts attending the nursery or kindergarten, it is vital for the parents to have a positive attitude about the new situation because they will directly or indirectly transfer their attitude to their child. Although the practice is different in the organization of adapting children in institutions of early and preschool care and education, as is evident, already this small part of recommendations points to the importance of learning different and new contexts, i.e., to the importance of the realization that the immediate change of context in the life of a child is instantaneous and that it is not a bad thing but rather a challenge and a learning situation, which children gradually realize during their earliest experiences.

5  THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELATIONS AND TRANSITION FROM HOME TO KINDERGARTEN – FOCUS ON PROVIDING MODEL FOR DEVELOPING SECURE ATTACHMENT AS THE STRATEGY FOR QUALITY TRANSITION

According to the Ecological and dynamic model of transition [1], interrelationships of all significant persons in the child’s life and the child’s relationship with others have a significant effect on adaptation outcomes. Although peer relations and relations between the preschool teachers and parents are
significant, this paper focuses on the relation of the child to his parents and preschool teachers due to the importance of safe and secure attachment in the context of the transition. Bearing in mind the importance of the developed type of attachment to the overall socio-emotional well being of children [31], it is clear how a warm, close, and caring relationship between the child and his parents is crucial for an optimal and appropriate adaptation of the child to new situations, as well as to institutions for early and preschool care and education [3], [4], [32]. In addition to the child-parent relationship, if due to the newly established transition situation the image of the primary caregiver, responsible for the development of the relationship and attachment, has been replaced with the figure of the preschool teacher, teacher, expert associate, or coach, then the relationship between the child-preschool teacher has become extremely important. Not only in the short term; the quality of development of attitudes, regardless if this is the figure of the primary caregiver or preschool teacher, is a critical factor.

The habits and attitudes that a child adopts at home will also be transferred to the nursery or kindergarten” [35, p.211]. The more protective factors a family has, the greater the guarantee of a successful adaptation of children during transitional periods. Positive psychology [36] as well as other authors [11], [35], [37], state the following family protective factors: affectionate relationships with caring adults; authoritative parenting (warmth, monitoring, and expectations); positive family atmosphere and family organization; high education of parents and their positive characteristics; and involvement in the child’s education and a good socio-economic status. Parents or caregivers, i.e., families, represent a protective factor during a child’s development. Relationship with the parent or caregiver is the foundation of the development of attachment, which depends on the child’s adaptation to the kindergarten, but also to other persons. At a later age, the child who had a positive relationship with the family can develop other trust-based relationships. Likewise, bad family relationships at the earliest stages create an insecure person who has no confidence in other people.
In the context of the nursery and kindergarten, the preschool teacher plays a critical role in maintaining a high level of children’s well-being [38]. The preschool teacher is an expert who has certain knowledge and skills to carry out certain activities during the child’s educational process. Preschool teachers are experts who directly implement different programs with children. (S)He is a person who, with his behavior, must at all times be a role model and support. In other words, given that the parent represents the primary “figure” of attachment, the preschool teacher represents a secondary or alternative figure of attachment [39]. It is vital for a child to create a positive image of the institution itself when adapting to an institution of early and preschool care and education, and this is primarily manifested through the relationship with the preschool teacher, which should be close and friendly in order for the child to create trust in the preschool teacher and therefore in the nursery or kindergarten. It is important that communication takes place at the child’s level. This refers to talking at the height of the child, looking him in the eyes, and talking in a warm and friendly tone. The preschool teacher should be available to the child and answer his questions so that the child feels that the preschool teacher is a trusted person who will also facilitate the process of adaptation to the nursery or kindergarten.

Stojić, Divljan, and Avramov [28] through an analysis of the transition from the family home to the kindergarten from the perspective of the attachment theory, describe in their work several significant possibilities: a) early prediction of individual differences in child adaptation based on mother-to-child relationship quality; b) providing answers to the question of attachment transfer from the mother to the preschool teacher; c) compensating for the adverse effects of an unsafe relation with the mother through a safe relation with the preschool teacher; d) capacity of an early-aged child to form multiple relations; e) reorganizing the hierarchy of figures and the ways of quality support by preschool teachers and kindergartens as institutions, which are essential for the formation of safe relationships. In other words, from the perspective of the attachment theory to the transition situation, which is a challenge in the development of attachment, it is possible to empower the child and to encourage his overall development. Therefore, attending the nursery provides the opportunity for an expansion of the number of figures to which the child is attached to review the mental model of oneself and others depending on the quality of interaction that will be provided in the new environment [40]. From the perspective of the attachment theory, by attending the nursery, the child has the potential to change the figures for the development of his attachment and the possibility to become connected with the preschool teacher, which is qualitatively different from the pattern he has had with his mother, due to the innate, adaptable mechanism of affective attachment. The preschool teacher potentially becomes a figure to which the child is connected, thus gaining a learned safe base from which to explore, learn, and participate in various activities. Along with the growing need for daily childcare due to the mother’s employment, there is a growing interest in better quality childcare and the development of approaches that meet the child’s potential.

The process of forming an emotional connection with nursery preschool teachers is similar to the process of creating an emotional connection with the mother and the development of attachment. When children come to the nursery, they direct their emotional connection to the preschool teacher and, over time, their new experiences in interactions with the preschool teachers become increasingly structured and organized. The longer children are exposed to continuous interaction with other people over a more extended period of time, the greater the chance to create a strong emotional connection based on the repeated interactions with people who care about them. Howes [41] argues that children with pre-developed emotional disability difficulties are able to reorganize their representations of attachment when they come into contact with those caregivers who are sensitive to their needs or to create independent relationships based on experiences with new caregivers. The pattern created with the primary caregiver is relatively stable because the working models will rather assimilate new information into the existing schemes than change the adopted schemes [42]. However, to be adaptable, the pattern must be plastic. That is why children can develop safe relationships with preschool teachers, despite insecure relationships with their parents [43]. The frequency of children with a developed insecure attachment, who nevertheless develop a secure attachment to kindergarten teachers varies from 31% [44] to 50% [43]. Goossens and Ijzendoorn [43], have found that children with developed secure attachment to the preschool teachers spend more time in the kindergarten, the preschool teachers are younger, and behave more responsively to the child’s needs during the child’s period of free play. Children who use preschool teachers as their safe base for exploring the environment (kindergarten) and new relationships (peer group, relationships with the authority) are more interested and more empathetic to peers and participate in peer activities longer than children who are insecure about their preschool teachers [45].
Also, children with developed secure attachment to their preschool teachers show a significantly greater autonomy and aspiration to success compared to peers with developed insecure attachment [45]. It is interesting to note that children with a developed insecure attachment show the smallest degree of participation in games with the preschool teachers when compared between their mothers and preschool teachers unlike children with a developed secure attachment [44]. Also, if a child has developed an insecure attachment with his mother, regardless of the type of attachment he has developed with respect to the preschool teacher, the child will interact with the preschool teacher the least and will spend the least time at play with him. Based on these findings, it can be seen that a variety of child behaviors can serve as a set of valid indicators in the study of the socio-emotional well being of children in the domain of developmental attachment and relationship with others, which significantly affects the quality of their transition and adaptation process to the nursery/kindergarten. It is, therefore, imperative to fully comprehend all significant transition factors, particularly in Croatia, where similar research does not exist.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This review article presents contemporary theoretical models and empirical studies in the field of transition periods in children’s lives with the aim of postulating the proposal of empirical validation of the ecological-dynamic model in Croatia and the analysis of significant correlates of transition from family to kindergarten, as well as the transition from the kindergarten to elementary school. As it was emphasized before, since there is a significant lack of similar research in Croatia, the contribution of this research proposal is even higher. It will provide clear guidelines for the parents, teachers, and associates in Croatia to ensure the highest levels of children's well being during the children's transition. Besides that, as it has been mentioned, there is a substantial opportunity to develop a safe base between children and preschool teachers, which is especially valuable if a child is experiencing an insecure attachment to his caregivers [46]. Therefore, the main conclusion of this review article would be that, due to the contemporary changes within the context of early and preschool care and education, the contemporary needs of children and their families during transition periods and the lack of similar research in Croatia, it is necessary to propose an empirical research design on significant determinations of transition in Croatia.

Intrapersonal factors of children (temperament, socio-emotional well-being, strength and difficulties, resilience), parents/caregivers (personality, sensitivity, subjective well-being, resilience) and teachers (personality, subjective well-being, resilience); and the interpersonal factors of child-parents-teachers-environment (attachment, adaptation, relationship with parents/preschool teachers, teaching strategies, relationship between family-kindergarten-school-local community-environment, social values) will be explored as significant determinants on a representative samples of early aged children (transition from family to kindergarten) and preschool children (transition from kindergarten to primary school).

The quantitative and qualitative methodology will be applied with reliable measures that will objectively present the perspective of children, parents, teachers, and associates. This analysis will contribute to the realization of short-term goals by validating the theoretical model and postulating the practical guidelines for achieving optimal transition in the early and preschool period, as well as the realization of long-term goals by preventing mental health problems among children in Croatia with the aim of enhancing their lifelong psychological well being. Based on the lifelong learning of early childhood preschool teachers and implemented guidelines in Croatian kindergartens, it will be possible to explore the opportunities to develop a safe base in the context of the children-early childhood preschool teachers' interaction and early school preschool care and education their long-term effects.

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