

**SUPPORTING INVOLVED FATHERING OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN CROATIA:
EVALUATION OF THE “GROWING UP TOGETHER FATHERS’ CLUB”**

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Abstract

Contemporary literature on parenting support programmes advocates for greater engagement of fathers (Lundahl et al., 2008) and stronger evidence-base of programmes (Barlow & Cohen, 2018; EurofamNet, 2020). The aim of this study was to estimate the outcomes of a parenting support programme “Growing up Together Fathers’ Club” (Pećnik et al., 2016). In total, 238 fathers (of children aged 1 to 5) who completed the four weekly workshops of the “Fathers’ Club” programme in 25 sites throughout Croatia participated in evaluation. A pre-post intervention comparison of self-reported data, revealed that fathers reported higher self-efficacy, more frequent positive involvement with the child, less frequent shouting and hitting the child, more attempted understanding of a child’s perspective and less angry outbursts in response to child’s misbehaviour upon completion of the programme. Additionally, their beliefs were more tolerant of respecting child’s physical and psychological integrity. Fathers’ educational level did not moderate the results. Fathers also provided qualitative data about programme benefits for themselves and their children as well as suggestions for the improvement of the programme relevant for the future outline of the programme.

Keywords: programme evaluation, parenting support, fathering, father-child interaction, father involvement

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary fathers bring up their children within historically unique social context, shaped by multiple social processes, including those reflecting changes in gender roles and parenting values (Juul, 2012; Pećnik, 2007), and may therefore experience insecurity in their parental roles (Pećnik & Tokić, 2011; Pećnik & Pribela-Hodap, 2013). Today’s notion of a good father differs greatly from the patriarchal one and implies nurturing involvement with children and taking on an equal share of parenting tasks (Holden, 2010; Pahić & Miljević – Riđički, 2014). A predominant conceptualization of the father’s role rests on a model that proposes three components of paternal involvement (Lamb et al., 1985): engagement (the extent to which fathers experience direct contact and actual one-on-one interaction with the child in the context of caretaking, play, or leisure); availability (a father’s presence or accessibility to the child); and responsibility (the extent to which a father arranges for resources to be available to the child, including organizing and planning children’s lives).

A review of studies on longitudinal effects of father involvement on children’s developmental outcomes by Sarkadi et al. (2008) found that availability (father’s cohabitation with mother and child) was linked to less externalizing behavioural problems, while active and regular engagement was linked to a range of positive child outcomes, including lower frequency of behavioural problems in boys and psychological problems in young women, enhanced cognitive development and decrease in delinquency. Allen and Daly’s (2007) review demonstrated links of high father involvement not only with the child’s psycho-social development, but also with the

well-being of the mother. Large proportion of research on fathers focuses on father's role in early childhood and confirms that father's involvement from child's infancy has positive outcomes on social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development (Fatherhood Institute, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Pleck, 2010).

However, growing scientific evidence about the benefits of fathers' involvement in (early) childcare and play is not well reflected in the extent of fathers' involvement in childcare and play activities in contemporary Croatian families. Dobrotić & Pećnik (2013) reveal traditional gender differences in distribution of childcare tasks and responsibilities among parents of young children; in addition to taking on smaller proportion of childcare generally, fathers reported engaging less frequently in educational/structured play activities with their young children (e.g. singing nursery rhymes, reading picture-books) in comparison to mothers. Fathers also reported lower parenting self-efficacy than mothers (Dobrotić & Pećnik, 2013), which could be attributed to less experience in caring for young children in comparison to mothers who spend more time in childcare, and therefore become more competent in parental role. Thus, the presented research findings demonstrate a need for a parenting support intervention that would increase involved fathering and fathers' sense of parental competence and, ultimately, optimize child's developmental outcomes.

Fathers' participation in parenting support programme

Parenting support refers to the activities oriented to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competences (Daly et al., 2015). An increasing body of research confirms effectiveness of parenting support interventions in achieving child-related and parent-related outcomes (e.g. Barlow & Coren, 2018; Lundahl et al. 2008). Global trends in emerging of the evidence-based parenting support

programmes in the last decade as well as the predominant presence of mothers among their users (Daly et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2012) are also present in Croatia (Pećnik, 2019). For example, in the nation-wide universal parenting support programme “Growing up Together”, fathers make up only 9.4% of participants (Keresteš et al., 2017). Among participants of the programme “Growing up Together Plus”, targeted at parents of young children with disabilities, father - mother ratio is slightly better, with fathers making up 14.6% of programme participants (Keresteš et al., 2017).

This low rate of fathers participating in parenting support programmes is consistent with findings that men are less likely to seek professional help, both generally (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) and with respect to parenting-related problems (Pećnik & Raboteg-Šarić, 2005; Pećnik & Tokić, 2011; Pećnik & Pribela-Hodap, 2013). However, the reasons that underline such findings remain uncertain. According to Bayley et al. (2009) barriers to participation of fathers in parenting programmes include their unawareness of the existence and value of such programmes, lack of time due to work demands, perception that these programmes are a better fit for mothers, and concerns that the programmes are aiming to dictate them how to parent their children. Additionally, in comparison with mothers, fathers of young children have also been found to have less positive attitudes towards seeking advice on parenting issues from educational or health professionals (Pećnik & Pribela-Hodap, 2013), which might put them at more risk of missing out professional support that might strengthen them in their parental role.

In an attempt to engage fathers more successfully, Pećnik et al. (2016; 2019) have developed a group-based programme, targeted specifically at fathers, as recommended by McAllister et al. (2012).

“Growing up Together Fathers’ Club”

Parenting support programme “Growing up Together Fathers’ Club” (Pećnik et al., 2016; 2019), was developed with the objective to support paternal involvement with their young children as well as to learn from participants about fathers’ needs and preferred ways to receive support in parenting role.

Theoretical background of the programme

Designing a programme that would increase fathers' involvement with their young children, and developing a theory of change that underpins such programme, were rooted in consideration of determinants of paternal involvement. According to Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting, father's involvement can be attributed to multiple factors that are related to father's individual characteristics (e.g. personal resources), contextual sources of stress and support (e.g. relationship with child's mother), and characteristics of the child (e.g. disability). Consistent with Belsky (1984), a heuristic model of father involvement by Cabrera et al. (2014) presents multiple potential influences on fathers' parenting behaviour, including fathers' personal characteristics and family relationships (e.g. co-parenting). Cabrera et al. (2014) also propose that fathering operates in additive, complementary, and synergistic ways with mothering to influence children's development.

Planalp and Braungart-Rieker (2016) examined father-, mother-, and child-related factors in relation to resident father's caregiving and play with their young children, and found that father role identification was most consistently related to their involvement with their children. Fathers' *beliefs about their role of a father* were therefore selected as one of the core components in the programme “Fathers’ Club”, and addressing them through a number of programme activities, was expected to stimulate subsequent father involvement. Presentation of a father role (Lamb et al.,

1985) within the “Fathers’ Club” highlights availability for emotional connection and responsive engagement with the child, because the research links fathers’ high regard for the nurturing role to their involvement with their preschool children (Rane & McBrid, 2000). In connection with beliefs about father’s role, the programme also addresses the participants’ experience with their own fathers, as an important part of their developmental history (Guzzo, 2011) which (to some extent) determines parenting behaviour (Belsky, 1984; Cabrera et al, 2014), including fathers’ involvement with their children (Guzzo, 2011).

Another core component of the programme “Fathers’ Club” are fathers’ *parenting self-efficacy beliefs*, since sense of competence strongly correlates with higher levels of warmth/involvement and lower levels of over-reactivity (de Haan et al., 2009). This is consistent with Trahan’s (2018) recommendation that ‘interventions bolster fathering confidence as a gateway to involvement’.

Support from a co-parent (or lack of it) is another determinant of parenting (Belsky, 1984; Cabrera et al., 2014). Components of co-parenting (Feinberg, 2003) related to parents’ agreement in childrearing goals and values, along with mutual support (or undermining) in co-parental roles have also been selected as important elements of the new programme aiming to increase father involvement.

Finally, the exchange with other fathers through *groupwork* was recognized as a core programme component intended to stimulate attitudinal and behavioural changes (Jenkinson et al., 2016). By participating in a set of workshops, fathers were expected to gain informational and emotional support which would facilitate self-reflection and learning that would influence their beliefs about father role, parental self-efficacy and interaction with their young child(ren).

Design of the programme

“Fathers’ Club” aims to support fathers in their parental role, influence their understanding of it, feeling about it and carrying it out. Overall goal is to increase participants’ knowledge about fathers’ role in enhancing young child’s development and to facilitate change of fathers’ beliefs (e.g. parental self-efficacy) and behaviours (e.g. more positive engagement with the child, less violence).

The programme is targeting general population of fathers/father figures with children between 1 and 5 years old. It is implemented in a closed-group format, involving 8 to 12 fathers per group. It consists of 4 weekly, 120-minutes long workshops, entitled: „*Father’s role in early childhood*“, „*About fathers and feelings*“, „*About fathers and mothers*“ and „*The Crackerjack Dad*“. Workshops are designed to enable exchange of scientific and experiential information on parenting a young child, stimulate exploring father role (including father’s sensitive interaction in early years and its importance for child's development), father’s interaction with the child (especially through play, empathic communication), and the co-parenting relationship with mother. The workshops are manualized, with structured activities within each workshop, including short presentations, exercises and handouts (Pećnik et al., 2019). They are co-facilitated by two professionals (a child psychologist or a pedagogue and a kindergarten-teacher), licenced as the “Fathers’ Club” programme leaders, after having completed training provided by the programme authors. The programme is implemented predominantly through community preschool-education services (kindergartens/day-care centres). Participation of fathers is voluntary and free of charge.

Aims of the current study

Literature recommends involving fathers in parenting support programmes (Lundahl et al., 2008) and assessing fathers' benefits from participation in such programmes (Barlow & Cohen, 2018). Building an evidence-base of programmes' effectiveness is an essential step in fulfilling quality standards (Asmussen, 2011; EurofamNet, 2020). Thus, the main objective of this study is to evaluate the outcomes of a parenting support programme "Growing up Together Fathers' Club" and determine: (1) whether participating in the programme is followed by changes in fathers' self-reports of parental self-efficacy, responses to child's misbehaviour and involvement in interaction with their young children, (2) whether fathers' educational level moderates the outcomes of the programme; and (3) fathers' perception of the programme's outcomes and suggestions for improvement.

METHOD

Procedure

Evaluation of outcomes of the „Fathers' Club" was conducted using a pre-post intervention comparison of self-reported *quantitative* data, complemented with *qualitative* data at post-intervention. Programme participants were approached twice – the first time before the beginning of the first workshop, and the second time immediately after completing the final one. Group-facilitators on each site provided participants with questionnaires, informing them that participation in evaluation is voluntary, confidential and anonymous, and explaining how to generate a code that would enable joining their pre- with the post-intervention responses. Data collection took about 15 minutes per trial. Evaluation recruited fathers from all 29 groups in 25 sites throughout Croatia where the programme was implemented in the period from late 2015 to

early 2018. Additionally, *qualitative* data was gathered from 14 groups implementing the programme from late 2016 to early 2018, asking participants to provide answers to open-ended questions added to the questionnaire in the second trial.

Sample

In total, $N = 238$ fathers of children between the age of 1 to 5 participated in the study. Participants were 25 to 58-year-old men ($M = 37.06$; $SD = 4.90$) who enrolled the programme „Growing up Together Fathers' Club”. Most of them (44.2%) had only one child, 39.5% had two children and the minority had more (14.9% had three and 1.4% had four children) – in the range from 0 to 13 years of age ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 1.88$). Fathers came from different educational backgrounds – 56.7% had tertiary education (39.6% in universities and 17.1% in polytechnic schools), 35.5% had secondary education and 0.9% had primary education only; for 17 fathers these data were not provided. Most fathers (83.7%) were married/cohabiting, only 0.8% were single fathers, while others left this question unanswered. Some participants ($N = 18$) did not complete the programme, so the total number of the matched pre- and post-intervention questionnaires eligible for statistical analysis was $N = 220$. Among them, $N = 114$ provided answers to the open-ended questions included in the qualitative analysis.

Measures

Parenting self-efficacy scale is a five-item subscale derived from Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Gibaud-Walston & Wandersman, 1978) that was translated and validated by Keresteš et al. (2011). Participants used a 5-point scale (1 – I completely disagree to 5 – I completely agree) to express a level of agreement with the given statement (e.g.: “I believe I have

sufficient knowledge and skills for raising my child”), and the scale was proven to have acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.73$) on the sample of fathers in the present study.

Parental beliefs about young child's integrity were measured by two items derived from the Questionnaire of beliefs about desirable parental practices towards young children (Pećnik et al., 2011). Each item (1. “*It’s sometimes OK to hit a child – so he would learn what he shouldn’t do*” and 2. “*It’s important to brake children’s stubbornness on time – the tree is to be bent while young*”) was answered by a 5-point scale (1 – I completely disagree to 5 – I completely agree), and since the correlation between these two items was significant, the composite measure as a single indicator was used in the present study.

To learn how parents tend to respond when their child does something they really do not like, the *Attempted understanding scale* (Stattin et al., 2011) was used to measure the frequency of the desirable reactions (e.g. “The most important thing to me is to understand why the child did what he or she did.”) and the *Angry outbursts scale* (Stattin et al., 2011) was used to measure the frequency of the undesirable reactions (e.g. “My first reaction is anger and I yell at the child”). Each scale included four items and participants assessed frequency of each parental reaction on the 5-point response scale (1 – never to 5 – always). Both the *Attempted understanding scale* (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.80 - 0.84$) and the *Angry outbursts scale* (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.78 - 0.80$) were proven to have acceptable internal consistency in the present study.

Frequency of recent *positive parent-child interaction* was measured by a stem question (“How often in the last 7 days did you...?”) followed by a five-item scale (e.g. “for 10 minutes or more dedicate all of your attention to playing or talking with your child, for no other reason than fun”), while frequency of recent *negative parent-child interaction* was measured by the same stem question followed by a three-item scale (e.g. “Yelled at your child”). Participants assessed

frequency of each behaviour in the 7 days prior to data collection, using a 5-point scale (1 – not once to 5 – several times a day).

At post-intervention, participants from 14 groups provided responses to three open-ended questions about their experience of benefits from the programme participation for a) *themselves* and b) their young *child*, and c) about their recommendations for the contents and process of the programme itself.

RESULTS

Comparison of parental beliefs and behaviours before and after “Fathers’ Club”

A two-way mixed ANOVA has been conducted in order to investigate the hypothesised intervention effects of participating in the parenting support programme (problem 1), and to test if such effects had been moderated by a paternal level of education (problem 2).

In line with the premise, *parenting self-efficacy* was significantly greater after the intervention ($F(1,206) = 82.63, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.29$), suggesting that participation in the programme activities had empowered fathers’ sense of competence in parental role. Observed effect of intervention was not moderated by parental level of education ($F(2,206) = 0.99, p > 0.05$). Comparison of the participants’ pre- and post- intervention self-efficacy at the item level (Table 1), indicated that participation in the “Fathers’ Club” might have the highest (moderate size) effect on *parental knowledge & skills*, and the smallest one on *parental problem solving*.

Table 1. Results on the Parenting self-efficacy scale (items and total score) before and after the programme ($N = 220$)

	time of measurement	M (SD)	N	t	df	d
1) parental problem solving	before	3.78 (0.78)	220	2.06*	219	0.14
	after	3.89 (0.72)				
2) parental knowledge & skills	before	3.47 (0.81)	219	9.63**	218	0.64
	after	3.95 (0.63)				
3) parental understanding of own child	before	3.33 (0.81)	217	6.54**	216	0.45
	after	3.71 (0.83)				
4) parental abilities & qualities	before	3.92 (0.77)	220	6.12**	219	0.42
	after	4.25 (0.64)				
5) good parent to any child	before	3.40 (0.93)	220	5.24**	219	0.36
	after	3.72 (0.88)				
PARENTING SELF-EFFICACY	before	3.58 (0.58)	220	9.35**	219	0.63
	after	3.90 (0.51)				

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

As expected, *parental beliefs about young child's integrity* significantly differed before and after the programme (Figure 1). Though the participants' initial agreement with statements that indicate a potential threat to child's integrity was not very high, it became even lower upon completion of the programme ($F(1,206) = 16.22$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$), suggesting that fathers heard and internalized the programme's message about respecting child's physical and

psychological integrity. This effect of intervention on parental beliefs was not moderated by parental level of education ($F(2,206) = 0.03, p > 0.05$).

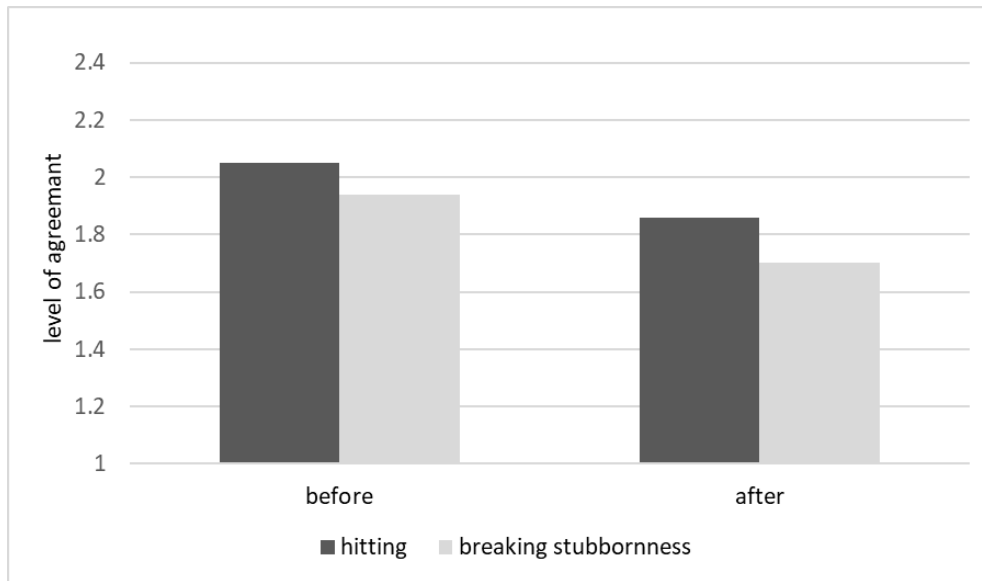


Figure 1. Parental beliefs about young child's integrity before and after the programme ($N = 220$)

Expectedly, paternal usage of desirable, responsive reactions to child's misbehaviours, measured by the *Attempted Understanding Scale*, significantly differed before and after the programme ($F(1,206) = 30.23, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$), and this effect was not influenced by the level of participants' education ($F(2,206) = 0.15, p > 0.05$). On item level, fathers reported improvement in usage of all four types of responsive reactions after the programme (Table 2) while the effect sizes suggest that the "Fathers' Club" programme may have the highest (though small) effect on encouraging fathers to try to *understand the reason* behind the child's problematic behaviour and to *listen to a child* in attempt to understand the child's view of the situation.

Table 2. Results on the Attempted Understanding Scale (items and total score) before and after the programme ($N = 220$)

Fathers' reactions to child's misbehaviour	time of measurement	M (SD)	N	t	df	d
1) understanding reason behind misbehaviour	before	3.90 (0.78)	219	5.64**	218	0.38
	after	4.18 (0.69)				
2) understanding child's feelings and thoughts	before	3.95 (0.83)	220	4.15**	219	0.28
	after	4.15 (0.74)				
3) talking with a child to calm down the conflict	before	4.18 (0.69)	217	1.97*	216	0.13
	after	4.27 (0.57)				
4) listening to a child to understand his/her view	before	3.85 (0.73)	219	5.29**	218	0.36
	after	4.13 (0.68)				
ATTEMPTED UNDERSTANDING	before	3.97 (0.60)	220	6.47**	219	0.44
	after	4.19 (0.55)				

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Additionally, fathers reported a lower usage of undesirable, aggressive reactions to child's misbehaviours, measured by the *Angry Outburst Scale*, upon completion of the programme ($F(1,206) = 6.08, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$). When observed on the item level, this effect appears to be obtained mostly because of the improvement (decrease) in paternal “*anger and yelling at a child*” (Table 3). It should be noted that this type of undesirable behaviour, although displayed as relatively rare before and after the programme, is not influenced by the paternal level of education ($F(2,206) = 0.28, p > 0.05$).

Table 3. Results on the Angry outbursts scale (items and total score) before and after the programme ($N = 220$)

	time of measurement	M (SD)	N	t	df	d
1) anger and yelling	before	2.39 (0.75)	219	3.99*	218	0.27
	after	2.18 (0.74)				
2) hard to control own irritation	before	2.25 (0.85)	219	1.45	218	0.10
	after	2.15 (0.75)				
3) fighting and yelling at each other	before	1.85 (0.74)	219	0.71	218	0.05
	after	1.82 (0.69)				
4) get angry and 'explode'	before	1.80 (0.79)	220	1.39	219	0.09
	after	1.74 (0.69)				
ANGRY OUTBURST	before	2.07 (0.62)	220	2.75*	219	0.19
	after	1.97 (0.57)				

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Differences in positive and negative parent-child interactions were analysed by the nonparametric Wilcoxon Sign test, since the frequency scale in the present study was not an interval one. Results regarding *positive parent-child interaction* (Table 4) indicate that fathers enhanced the frequency of *undivided attention* and *storytelling* upon completion of the programme but retained the frequency of other positive parent-child interactions (*common meal*, *playground* and *problem-solving*). Results regarding *negative parent-child interactions* (Table 5) reveal the exposure of children to parental violence: within a 7-day period before starting the programme more than a third of the participants carried out some kind of psychological violence (77.8% -

yelling; 37.6% - threatening the child with beating) against their child and more than a fourth of the participants reported committing at least one act of physical violence. Participation in the “Fathers’ club” programme was followed by a significant reduction in the frequency of *yelling* at the child and *hitting* the child. However, reduction in the frequency of *threatening* a child with beating did not reach statistical significance ($z = 1.69, p = 0.09$).

Table 4. Fathers’ assessment of frequency of *positive parent-child interaction* during a 7-days period before and after the “Fathers’ club” ($N = 220$)

parent-child week interaction	time	<i>not once</i>	<i>once a week</i>	<i>several times a week</i>	<i>once a day</i>	<i>several times a day</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>z</i>
undivided attention	before	1 (0.4%)	3 (1.3%)	56 (23.8%)	76 (32.3%)	99 (42.1%)	235 (100%)	2.67**
	after	0 (0%)	3 (1.4%)	43 (19.6%)	71 (32.4%)	102 (46.6%)	219 (100%)	
storytelling	before	25 (10.6%)	33 (14.0%)	76 (32.2%)	81 (34.3%)	21 (8.9%)	236 (100%)	2.30*
	after	17 (7.7%)	19 (8.6%)	84 (38.2%)	80 (36.4%)	20 (9.1%)	220 (100%)	
common meal	before	0 (0%)	8 (3.4%)	38 (16%)	127 (53.6%)	64 (27%)	237 (100%)	1.02
	after	0 (0%)	4 (1.8%)	49 (22.3%)	110 (50%)	57 (25.9%)	220 (100%)	
playground	before	10 (4.2%)	32 (13.5%)	119 (50.2%)	63 (26.6%)	13 (5.5%)	237 (100%)	0.97
	after	7 (3.2%)	25 (11.4%)	125 (57.1%)	52 (23.7%)	10 (4.6%)	219 (100%)	
problem- solving	before	2 (0.8%)	19 (8.1%)	116 (49.2%)	50 (21.2%)	49 (20.8%)	236 (100%)	1.83
	after	2 (0.9%)	24 (10.9%)	114 (51.8%)	44 (20%)	36 (16.4%)	220 (100%)	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5. Fathers' assessment of frequency of recent *negative parent-child interaction* during a 7-days period before and after the "Fathers' club" ($N = 220$)

parent-child week interaction	time	<i>not once</i>	<i>once a week</i>	<i>several times a week</i>	<i>once a day</i>	<i>several times a day</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>z</i>
yelling	before	52 (22.2%)	87 (37.2%)	81 (34.6%)	10 (4.3%)	4 (1.7%)	234 (100%)	5.12**
	after	79 (35.9%)	79 (35.9%)	58 (26.4%)	3 (1.4%)	1 (0.5%)	220 (100%)	
threatening	before	148 (62.4%)	38 (16%)	48 (20.3%)	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)	237 (100%)	1.69
	after	135 (61.4%)	54 (24.5%)	29 (13.2%)	2 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	220 (100%)	
hitting	before	174 (73.4%)	48 (20.3%)	14 (5.9%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	237 (100%)	3.85**
	after	184 (83.6%)	30 (13.6%)	6 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	220 (100%)	

** $p < 0.01$

Perceived benefits from participation in the "Fathers' Club"

To investigate fathers' perception of the programme's outcomes (problem 3) qualitative data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis with three researchers working on identifying the codes and developing categories appropriate for the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Fathers' perceived *personal gains* from participation in the "Fathers' Club", ranked from the most frequently reported categories to the less frequent ones, are presented in the Table 6. Most fathers pointed out benefits of inputs received from professionals regarding the programme content (information, knowledge about children's early development, parents' roles, communication skills and co-parenting skills).

Table 6. The most valuable gains from participation in “Fathers’ Club” for *fathers*

CODE (statement example)	CATEGORY
New knowledge and expert advice („New and useful information related to upbringing and guidance on some things that we unknowingly do wrong”)	ACQUIRING SCIENCE-BASED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PARENTING A YOUNG CHILD
Acquiring theoretical base („Acquired theoretical knowledge of children’s behavior in general”)	
Practical examples („Several new perspectives of what and how to do to be a better dad”)	
Adopting active listening techniques („Listening to a child, communication techniques”)	
Intention to implement acquired knowledge („Learned some facts that I will try to put into practice, e.g. reading and quality time”)	
Exchange of experiences („Useful experiences of other participants”)	CONTRIBUTION OF GROUP WORK
Exchange of advice („Useful advice from other fathers in the group”)	
Normalization of problems and challenges in raising a child („Feeling that others face similar situations”)	
Reconsidering previously used parenting practices („Reflecting on some actions and behavior towards children”)	INCREASED SELF-REFLECTION AS A PERENT (RETHINKING OWN FATHERING)
Becoming more aware of parent role („Raising awareness of my role in raising a child”)	
Realizing the need to change parenting behavior („I learned what I do wrong and I will change it in the future and work on the relationship with my child”)	
Understanding yourself as a parent („Emotional development, understanding yourself”)	
Reflecting on relationships in the family („Fighting with partner vs. cooperation with partner”)	
Reassurance of good parenting („Confirmation that I’m on the right track”)	AFFIRMATION OF GOOD PARENTING AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT
Stimulation to improve parenting („Even deeper realization that I constantly need to work on being a better dad”)	
Better understanding of the child’s needs, feelings, and behavior („Thinking about the child’s feelings, actively seeking solutions and alternatives”)	IMPROVED ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CHILD
Talking to the child more and spending more time together („To find more time to play and talk”)	
More responsive fathering („I listen to the child more, react more calmly in conflict situations, I put myself more in the child’s shoes and try to see how he sees”)	
Importance of the fatherly role in child development („Realizing the need for the father involvement in raising a child from the very beginning and the importance of it”)	CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE ON FATHER’S ROLE
Importance of father’s relationship with the child („Realizing the importance that the father’s relationship with the child for the child’s development”)	
New perception of fatherhood („Different view of things I have taken for granted”)	
Acquired work – life balance („I have found balance between job and fatherhood”)	BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IN OTHER ROLES
Calmer relationship with partner („Less shouting, more discussing about situations in front of children”)	

Most fathers also highlighted benefits of inputs received from other fathers in the group (information, advice and normalization of difficulties in parenting). These two dominant categories of responses were followed by self-reflection and changes in self-perception in parental role (increased insight, self-efficacy and change of perspective) and finally by categories related to the changes in cognition and behaviour considering father-child interaction.

Programme *gains* from the *child's perspective*, as perceived by the father, ranked from the most frequently reported categories towards the less frequent ones, are presented in the Table 7. Most fathers reported their child did/would benefit from the change in paternal attitudes and behaviour towards the child, emphasizing a more engaged parenting and everyday interaction. This was followed by heightening emotional responsiveness, and finally by categories related to positive paternal role and child wellbeing. Only two fathers could not see additional assets of the “Fathers’ Club” for their children.

Table 7. The most valuable gains from “Fathers’ Club” for *children* (father report)

CODE (statement example)	CATEGORY
Changing approach and behavior towards the child („Change negative adult behaviors”)	A NEW FATHER-TO-CHILD APPROACH
Acquiring knowledge, skills, advice, and new experience („New skills that will help me to understand her better”)	
Higher-quality upbringing („Although I have previously educated myself through professional literature and educations, this one additionally strengthened my concern for the relationship and the way I raise my child”)	
Setting boundaries („To set limitations in a quality way”)	
Techniques of active listening and peaceful conflict resolution („Less shouting”)	
More patient and calm father („More patience, less impatience”)	
Wider perspective of fathers („He got a dad that sees a bigger picture”)	
Recognizing mistakes („He has a better father who is aware of the mistakes he has made so far”)	
More responsible father („I am hoping to be a more responsible father”)	
Application of acquired knowledge („Everything I learned, I either started applying or am still trying to”)	
Spending more (quality) time together („We will spend more quality time together, reading, playing, peacefully resolving conflicts, etc.”)	
Paying more attention to the child („I hope he will receive even more of my attention and understanding”)	
Involvement in the child upbringing, his activities and development („He will get a father who will be more involved in his upbringing”)	
More talking („He will get more...calm conversations”)	
Realizing the importance of the role a father plays in a child's life („Father's awareness of how much his child needs him”)	ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE UPBRINGING AND ACTIVITIES OF THE CHILD
Better understanding of a child („He will have a father who may better understand him and his needs”)	
Better relationship with the child („Calmer parent-child relationship, with more understanding”)	
Availability for emotional bonding („Encouragement for emotional bonding – “I can do it””)	
Solving problems together („I hope we can handle the crisis more easily”)	CLOSER EMOTIONAL FATHER-CHILD CONNECTION
More equal relationship („Calmer parent who sees his child as his “partner””)	
Child got a better father („Ultimately a better dad”)	
Thinking about parental role and working on yourself as a parent („That I realized or got closer to the idea what father I want to be”)	
Confirmation of good parenting and aspiration for further improvement („That I did well with my child so far and that I can do even better”)	BETTER FATHER
More competent child („... can better express himself and progress, security”)	
More satisfied child („He will be more satisfied”)	IMPROVED CHILD WELLBEING
No changes („I believe that, even before this programme, I have given my child all that I could, even what we mentioned in the workshops so... I cannot see something I would call a gain for my child”)	
	NO GAINS

All except four fathers provided a response to the question “What would you change, add, take out...in the “Fathers’ Club” programme?”. The most frequent answer was that they *would not change anything* and that they fully accepted the programme. Some fathers proposed to *increase the number* of the “Fathers’ Club workshops”, while a few others suggested a *continuation* with similar educational programmes like this one. Additionally, several fathers proposed *including other family members* (partners/mothers and/or children) and *more participants* (fathers) in the group. Several participants believed the programme would benefit from *more practical examples and advice* from professionals. Some fathers referred to the need of a *more adequate space for conducting workshops* (avoiding usage of children’s tables and chairs in kindergartens) while a few suggested *shortening duration of each workshop* on 90 minutes.

DISCUSSION

Pre-post intervention changes in parental beliefs and practices

This evaluation of the “Growing Up Together Fathers’ Club” provided initial evidence of the programme’s potential to change fathers’ parenting beliefs and self-reported interaction with their young children in the direction of/towards a more involved fathering. After completing the four weekly workshops that constitute the programme, the participants reported a higher parental self-efficacy (in particular an increased confidence in their own knowledge and skills), a more frequent engagement in one-on-one play activities and storytelling with their children as well as a more attempted understanding of children’s perspective when responding to their misbehaviour (particularly underlying motives and children’s feelings and thoughts). On the other hand, they reported a less frequent engagement in yelling at and hitting the child, as well as less anger and

yelling when confronted with child's misbehaviour. Their attitudes were even less tolerant towards parental coercion than they had been before the programme.

While the presented results suggest effectiveness of the “Fathers’ Club” in accomplishing its aims, there are several limitations of the current study. First, the study used pre- and post-intervention design, without control group – the evidence would be much stronger if a (quasi-) experimental design was used. Second, there was no follow-up after the end of the “Fathers’ Club” – it would be beneficial to explore the existence of long-term effects of this programme. Third, though the outcomes of the programme were measured by short versions of the scales included in other parenting programmes’ evaluations (e.g. Giannotta et al., 2019), they rest only on fathers’ self-report, while family members’ or professionals’ perspectives on the programme’s outcomes were not considered.

Since the heuristic model of fathering (Cabrera et al., 2014) proposes that father’s educational level may influence paternal involvement with his children, possible moderation effects were considered but not found significant. This finding could be attributed to relatively homogenous sample - most participants of the “Fathers’ Club” included in the analysis had higher education; others had secondary education. Effective engagement of fathers with lower education in parenting support/maltreatment prevention programmes remains a challenge (Smith et al., 2012).

The current study allows us only to speculate about the processes underlying the observed changes at post-intervention. According to Planalp and Braungart-Rieker (2016), fathers engage in more caregiving and play when they are more strongly identified with their role as a father, so the programme’s focus on influencing fathers’ social cognitions (view of a father’s role in

supporting young child's development, beliefs about parental self-efficacy) as 'the most readily accessible avenue for changing parental behaviour' (Holdern, 2010) seems to be well chosen.

Perceived gains for programme participants and their children

Qualitative data about the programme's outcomes support and complement the programme effects demonstrated on the quantitative data. Fathers readily responded to the open-ended questions and expressed a wide range of benefits from participation, suggesting that they considered the programme to be beneficial for them and their children. As the most useful gains fathers highlighted learning about parenting a young child from professionals and other fathers in similar situation. These dominant categories of responses referring to the 'intake' of information from group-leaders and peers were followed by internal processes of self-reflection, reassuring realization of own parental competence and heightened motivation for its improvement. Science-based and practice-oriented content, in combination with exchange of common experiences encouraged fathers to 'rethink' their fatherly role and embrace its multidimensional nature, reconsider their own parenting values and practices, learn new approaches and advance in communication and relationship-building skills. Although less frequently, fathers also mentioned a change of perspective on father's role and actual observed changes in their increased engagement with the child, more responsive fathering and behavioural changes in other roles, which is in line with parenting models (Belsky, 1984; Cabrera et al, 2014) and results of other father-focused programmes (e.g. Jenkinson et al., 2016).

Moreover, fathers identified a number of ways in which their children benefited from them embracing a new parenting approach that includes a more active participation and closer emotional connection. What many fathers recognized as children's gain from the programme, besides an

improved quality of father to child relationship, and even in some cases improved child's wellbeing, was simply – a better father.

In conclusion, the results of evaluation reported here highlight positive outcomes of participation in a relatively short parenting support programme (8 hours long in total) on empowerment of fathers in their parental role. Future studies are needed to determine sustainability of these outcomes and investigate the role that positive experience of participation in a shorter, tailor-made parenting support programme plays in inclination to engage in a more comprehensive one.

Practical implications

“Growing Up Together Fathers’ Club” was designed in response to the low rate of fathers participating in the most widespread parenting support programme in Croatia - “Growing up Together” (Pećnik & Starc, 2010). Besides learning about the outcomes of the first fathering support programme in Croatia, present work wanted to provide the participants with the opportunity to co-create the programme, and thus, hopefully, increase its future uptake and effectiveness. Thus, though majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with the programme as it is (and would not change a thing), several key suggestions made by the rest of the participants had vital impact on the future outline of the programme. Suggestions for the programme improvement related to increasing the dose (number of workshops) and ensuring sustainable provision of this or similar programmes, revealing fathers’ interest in group-based, father-only parenting support. Another proposal was to include other family members (partners and children) in the programme. This has led to a redesign of the “Fathers’ Club” (Pećnik et al., 2019) into a five – workshops programme for fathers (joined by their children on one additional session)

accompanied with one workshop for their partners/mothers only – making the programme even more useful for future participants.

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