

Best Practices in action: how to transfer, implement, and sustain effective health promotion interventions for children (0-12)

Module 3 - Smart Family: a Best Practice to support and empower families in promoting well-being and healthy lifestyle

Session 3.3 - Implementation phase of Smart family

Unit 3.3.1 - "Implementing actions in Croatia"

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Slide 1

Hello everyone. My name is Maja Lang Morović. I come from Croatia, from Croatian Institute of Public Health, where I work in child health promotion.

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Thank you very much for inviting me to share our experience in implementing Smart family as a part of health for EU Kids joint action in Croatia.

Slide 3 - Setting the stage

So, let's start by setting the stage. Letting you know how we've decided to pursue in with implementation in Croatia. So first of all, we've decided to use educational setting as Smart Family could you be implemented either in health or educational setting. We've decided that at this point in time, educational setting would be most appropriate for us because health sector is a bit overwhelmed right now, and we have in really good place in collaborating with educational setting, specifically with kindergartens and their staff. And they have all the important human resources for implementing different projects such as Smart Family. They have teachers, nurses, psychologists, pedagogues and others, and we're very eager to participate. Besides the staff, of course more than 80% of children in Croatia attend kindergartens and their families are rather motivated to participate in different activities, and are prone to taking advice from kindergarten staff. So, we've decided that kindergarten is the best setting for implementing projects or interventions such as Smart Family.

We've approached the implementation by deciding to organize 2 trainings. First one would be general training for all kindergarten staff. So, whoever is interested can join it. And the second one would be implementing Smart Card only for kindergarten nurses. Kindergarten nurses have a special place in kindergarten because they take care of kindergarten, health and disease, they educate staff, they educate children and families. They do annual measurement of children so they know how their body mass is changing over time, and in case, that it's important, that they notice overweight or obesity in children, they talk to parents, they talk to kindergarten teachers and their health staff that's doing the intervention and consultation of everyone who needs to approach a child in a specific manner. So, Smart Card is a part of health sector materials in Smart Family, but we've decided to use it with health workers working in kindergartens. What we've decided to do next is to adapt different materials. There is really a plethora of different materials already existing in the Smart Family database from Finland,

but since we have a living healthy program in Croatia, it's a National Health promotion program, we've decided to combine different materials that are already familiar to kindergartens and fulfil them with new novel Smart Family activities from Finland.

Slide 4 - First training

So, once we have decided about the approach, we have also decided to implement the activities between these two trainings. So, we've offered activities to kindergarten and organized Health in healthy months in kindergartens, where they got the opportunity to implement all the activities. So, first training for everyone, for all staff was in March 2024. It was a one-day training. It was hybrid. We had 128 in person participants and 159 online participants.

Slide 5 - First training

People were really happy with what they've heard and very interested. So, we wanted to introduce Smart Family method and possibilities for its application in Croatian kindergartens with children, but also with families. And in this training, we wanted to outline the implementation plan for the Smart Family method in Croatia.

Slide 6 - First training

The content of this training was first we wanted to give the background, we wanted to talk to kindergartens about family lifestyles in Croatia, about big burden of childhood obesity in Croatia, about the lack of measurements in younger age. Also, we talked about policy of health promotion in kindergartens because health promotion is basic part of Croatian kindergarten curricula. So, Smart Family could have been implemented without worrying that it would reflect on goals that kindergartens needed to fulfil. We also gave theoretical background of Smart Family and showed different possibilities for the implementation and also suggested implementation plan.

Slide 7 - Implementation in Kindergartens

After this training, we got the picture about how many kindergartners were interested in participating, so over 100 kindergartens said that they are very eager to participate and want to learn more about Smart Family method. So, we have adapted different materials. We have categorized them and published them and shared with kindergartens, so we made five different brochures from Smart Family method materials. First, we've group activities for kindergarten classes that they could implement every day. When children are in the kindergartens, they could use these activities and work with children to promote healthy lifestyles. Second of all, we made educational materials, so those are materials that kindergarten teachers could give to the children. They could Xerox it or copy or give children the brochure to fulfil, to draw in it. And to have children actively think and produce their own material about health. Third brochure was materials for families, so if a kindergarten teacher wanted to give, let's say, a homework to the family, they could use these materials, take them and give to the family to use at home. It might be screen time plan, and it could be breakfast diary, it could be something that would help parents to engage in, let's say, healthier lifestyles or start behavioural change at their home. That would assist them in it. And also, we had material for supporting families. This is mostly theoretical materials about healthy lifestyles and about most often problems families have in pursuing healthy lifestyles, so kindergarten staff could use this material, read them and get educated about these topics. So, they would be better at talking and counselling parents about bringing in change in their family life. All of this was implemented in kindergartens in April 2024. We talked to them and told them that they have to implement the method if they've decided to join for at least one month...

Slide 8 - Second training – Smart Card & Manual

...and they were very happy about it. They've decided to pursue even longer than one month and we had 117 kindergartens joining. We have parental consent for the photos. So, it was, as

you can see, very happy, very joyful in kindergartens. Children loved the activities as they usually do, because whenever you talk about something that children feel good and they're always happy and they're eager to participate, most of these kindergartens decided to prolong the implementation of activities to the entire year, so they're all still enjoying different healthy activities and it helped them with their regular routine curricula. And part of them used assessment tools so they could show parents and they could show other kindergarten staff where each child was in different lifestyle and where children needed support. And so, they found assessment materials very important for setting goals, educational goals and health goals for each child.

Slide 9 - Second training – Smart Card & Manual

So, after that, we've decided to do the second training in Smart Card. So, as I said previously, there is a health sector part of Smart Family materials that we've decided to adapt for nurses in kindergartens. It's a Smart Card. It's a list of different behaviours related to healthy lifestyles that parents should use to get more aware about where they're at right now. It's not a checklist, it's just a list of different behaviours regarding nutrition and physical activity that can help Kindergarten nurses to talk to parents and to counsel them.

Slide 10 - Second training – Smart Card & Manual

So, we've decided to adapt this smart card. It looks like this in Croatian, but also, we've noticed that Kindergarten nurses would benefit from supporting material alongside with this card because sometimes they don't feel very relaxed and they're not very comfortable in counselling families. So, we've decided to make a manual that will be assisting material for the implementation and for conversation with parents and counselling for the Smart Card. We made a manual and we made cards...

Slide 11 - Second training

...so, it looks like this, so each claim in the Smart Card has following background that nurse communicating with parents should know and follow, and know how to advise family, and also has support in cards that families can use, bring home, and use to assist them in changing behaviours that they've stated they wanted to change. Because Smart Card is about motivational interviews and it's not about having checklist and persuading someone to change their behaviour but to supporting their wish to lead healthier lifestyles. So, it wasn't easy for health workers such as nurses, because they're used to checklists. They're used to focusing maybe on something that's not the way that should be and in Smart Card everything is about positive dialogue about focusing on positive behaviours and using them as a leverage to assist behaviours that families wanted to change. So, it was really difficult to talk to nurses about how to try to, let's say, neglect or not work on behaviours that family have decided that they don't want to change and weren't healthy behaviours. So, that was rather challenging.

Slide 12 - Second training

We did this training in December in 2024, we had kindergarten nurses, but also, we've been invited, due to sustainability, we've invited County Public Health Institute's representatives, because some county public health institutes have counselling services for healthy lifestyles for healthy diets and physical activity. So, we thought that they might benefit from this training and they are all health workers. We had four-day training. It was 4 or 1-day training. We had 30 to 40 participants per training because we wanted to give them hands on experience in using material and we wanted to do role plays, so we couldn't have huge groups and all together we had 139 in person participants. This one was in person training. Unfortunately, we would have had more participants. However, we had a really, really bad weather in Croatia, so some people from the coast couldn't arrive due to heavy wind. But we've decided to organize additional training for them as soon as possible and when we get the large enough group so it will continue.

Slide 13 - Second training

The goal of this training was to introduce the Smart Card as a family counselling tool and possibilities for its application in Croatian kindergartens. We also wanted to introduce Manual and we wanted participants to get comfortable with using Smart Card and counselling families.

Slide 14 - Second training

The content of this training was ideology behind Smart Family. We talked about motivational counselling about huge, huge problem that lies in obesity stigmatization. We talked about Smart Card and Manual that we presented about possibilities for implementation, and we had an exercise where everyone gets the opportunity to be both counsellor and counselled party, and see how easy it is to see someone else do the counselling and how really difficult it is to be a counsellor yourself.

Slide 15 - Looking into the future

So, that was what we did in Croatia. Now we have to kind of take the second step, the next step, and it's the sustainability step. So, we would like to support families to implement Smart Family method as routine in their kindergartens in counselling parents, in working with children. We would like to establish new collaborations. Basically, we want to include universities that train kindergarten teachers and nurses, and we want to present Smart Family materials to them as a tool to use in fulfilling health curricula for kindergartens. Therefore, we need to build capacity, so people know about Smart Family, and people are comfortable with it and want to use it. And then we have an idea of trying to reach health sector and start working with primary healthcare nurses working in paediatric services, in Primary Health service. So, all children in Croatia would get the opportunity to have support that's planned within Smart Family method.

Slide 16 - General recommendation

Some recommendations that we could give as an implementing country are: first, I would say, choose the setting wisely. It's really difficult to collaborate with the sector that is overwhelmed and has too much on its hands at the moment, such as was the choice in Croatia in health sector for us. So, even though we wanted to do huge impact and work with all primary healthcare services, we've decided that it would be smarter to talk to kindergartens and use educational setting as the best setting for Smart Family in Croatia. Second recommendation that I would give is: give continuous support and coordination in the implementation. If you want to implement it on the national level as we did, it's impossible to do it alone. However, it's also impossible to just give the material to someone and expect them to do it by themselves without any support. So, it's important to have enough time and resources to be there for people implementing the method. And the third recommendation that I would give is: make sure that whatever you've decided to do is aligned with national policies. So, dive into those policies, go to see what is planned, go to see what's the national priority. It's something that maybe isn't what you would do as a first step. However, if it's something that would help achieve goals for the following period, then it's something that you will get support from decisionmakers. And it would help both implementation and sustainability of the method in your country.

Slide 17 - Thank you all for your participations!

Well, that's it from me. If you would want to hear anything more about what I just talked about, feel free to contact either me or any of my colleagues. And I wish you best luck in implementing Smart Family in your country.