



## **TOY TO SHARE, PLAY TO CARE**

### **Monitoring and Evaluation Report of the TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs**

*Period: 1 February to 31 December 2021*

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## Introduction

### What is TOY for Inclusion?

TOY for Inclusion is an approach that promotes inclusive community-based early childhood education and care and brings services for children and their families to where they are needed.

It was developed by International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) in partnership with NGOs and local authorities in 8 countries.

TOY for Inclusion involves different sectors and agencies working together with the community to come up with flexible solutions and responses to the specific needs of young children (0-10 years old) and their families.

It provides play, learning, and socializing opportunities for children and their parents. It also promotes intergenerational activities which involve grandparents and other older adults living in the neighbourhood. All these activities take place in a Play Hub, which puts TOY for Inclusion at the heart of the communities.

### What is a Play Hub?

Play Hubs are safe, non-formal, high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care spaces where the relationships between young children (0 to 10 years) and families, from all backgrounds, are built. These are inclusive spaces where:

- children and adults of all ages meet, spend quality time together, and play with each other.
- children can borrow toys and educational materials to bring home.
- parents, grandparents, and practitioners can informally learn and exchange information about child health, early learning, and development.

Play-based activities are organized to support creativity, increase confidence, develop social, emotional, and verbal skills, and unlock each child's potential. These activities help children in their transition to formal education. This is particularly relevant for families from a Roma, migrant or socially disadvantaged background, to whom the Play Hubs give extra attention. Play Hubs are a flexible solution that offers educational opportunities for all the children who are often excluded from formal educational services.

### Who is responsible for initiating a Play Hub?

In each country, a national TOY for Inclusion partner organization runs the programme. These partner organizations have the experience, knowledge, and networks to open and run a Play Hub. Each national TOY for Inclusion organization guides the process, trains Local Action Teams, and

works with the municipality to monitor the Play Hub. They also have a role in connecting and coordinating learning exchanges between Play Hubs from different communities. The TOY for Inclusion national partners are:

- [International Child Development Initiatives – ICDI \(international coordinator\)](#).
- [Educational Research Institute - ERI \(Slovenia\)](#),
- [Open Academy Step by Step – OASbS \(Croatia\)](#),
- [Associazione 21 luglio \(Italy\)](#),
- [Centre for Education Initiatives – CEI \(Latvia\)](#),
- [Wide Open School – WOS \(Slovakia\)](#),
- [Partners Hungary \(Hungary\)](#)
- [Salvation Army \(Netherlands\)](#).

### **What is the role of Local Action Teams?**

In each community, a Local Action Team (LAT) is responsible for designing, running, and monitoring the ECEC Play Hub's activities. Keeping sustainability and social cohesion in mind, the LATs ensure a wide community representation, and can include, for example: ECEC practitioners, directors of preschools, teachers, health workers, social workers, members of municipal councils, parents, etc.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of Play Hubs**

Monitoring and evaluating the implementation and quality of the activities in each Play Hub is an integral part of the TOY for Inclusion approach. Through M&E, we ensure that the Play Hubs are:

- reaching their goals.
- maintaining and improving the quality of the services they offer.
- increasing the number of children and families they reach out to, with particular attention to vulnerable groups.

ICDI, as overall coordinator of TOY for Inclusion, requests the national partner organisations to collect relevant data, on an annual basis, using common data collection instruments. Data include:

- number of active Play Hubs in each country
- sources of funding
- number of activities organised
- number of beneficiaries reached (children disaggregated by age, families, educators/practitioners)

- number of facilitators
- means through which activities took place
- number of toys present in the Play Hub and available for lending
- main success and challenges reported by Local Action Teams
- response to emergencies (e.g., COVID-19)

This report summarises the findings for the period 1 February to 31 December 2021.

# Findings

## Active Play Hubs

All Play Hubs, except the Play Hubs in Slovenia, were operating during the reported period and despite the COVID-19 restrictions. Many Play Hubs were operating in hybrid modalities, using online as well as face-to-face activities. Altogether, TOY for Inclusion includes 17 Play Hubs in 7 EU countries.

Table 1 – Number of Play Hubs

| Country      | Number of Play Hubs |
|--------------|---------------------|
| Slovenia     | 2                   |
| Slovakia     | 4                   |
| Croatia      | 4                   |
| Latvia       | 2                   |
| Italy        | 2                   |
| Hungary      | 2                   |
| Netherlands  | 1                   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>17</b>           |

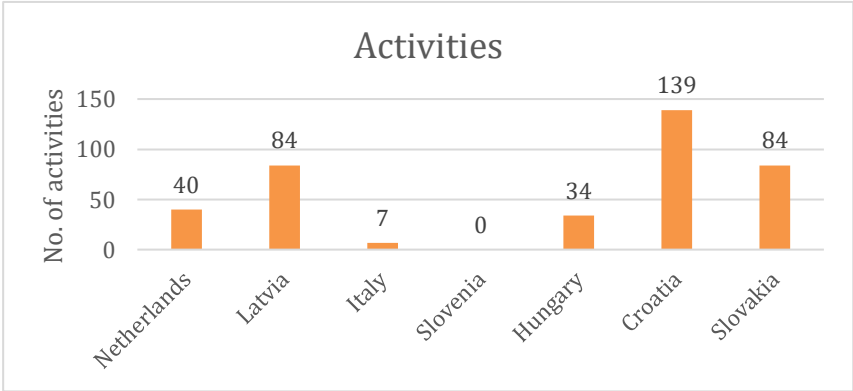
Play Hubs received financial support from a variety of sources, including municipal budget, national grants, national and international foundation, INGOs, and own funding.

During 2021, 4 new Play Hubs were opened, 2 in Croatia and 2 in Slovakia. 1 Play Hub ceased to operate in Turkey.

## Activities

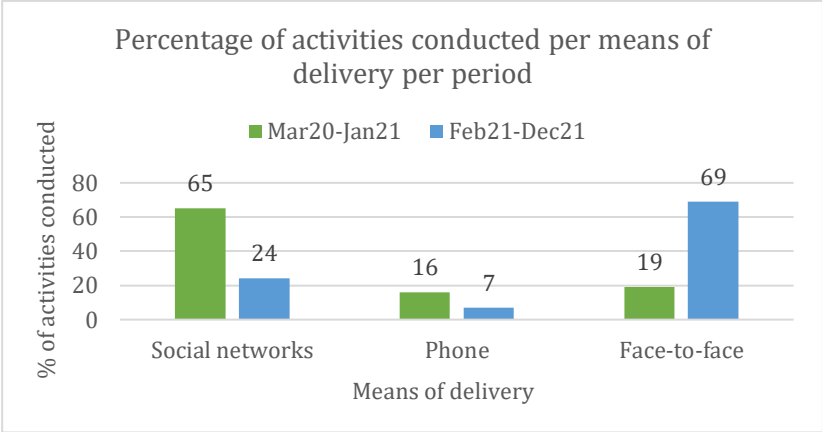
During the 11 months of functioning (2021), there were 390 activities organised in the 17 active Play Hubs.

Chart 1 – Number of activities organised per country



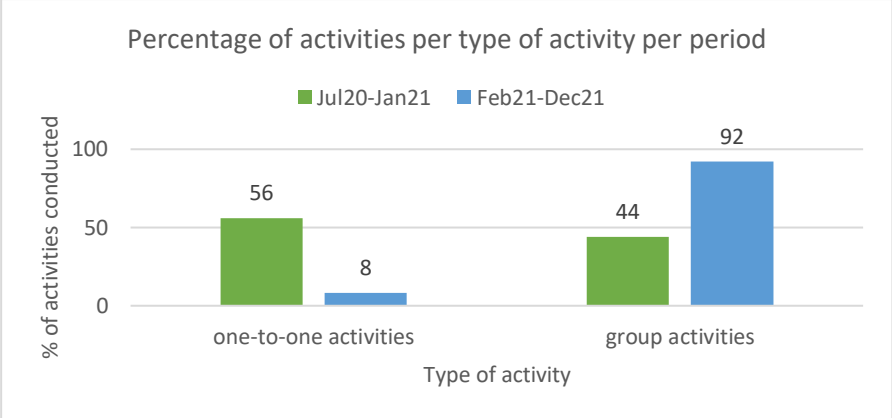
Despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the activities (69%) took place face-to-face in the Play Hubs (both indoors and outdoors). 24% of the activities were delivered to children and families through social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. Only 7% of the activities were delivered by phone. There was a significant increase of activities taking place face-to-face compared to the period of March 2020 to January 2021, during which 19% of the activities were conducted face-to-face. Regarding the other means, in the period of March 2020 to January 2021, 65% of the activities were conducted through social media and 16% took place by phone. This difference demonstrates how Play Hubs were able to adapt to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in all countries by constantly adjusting their activities according to new regulations and by increasing opportunities for social contact.

Chart 2 – Means through which activities took place, Mar 2020-Jan 2021 and Feb-Dec 2021



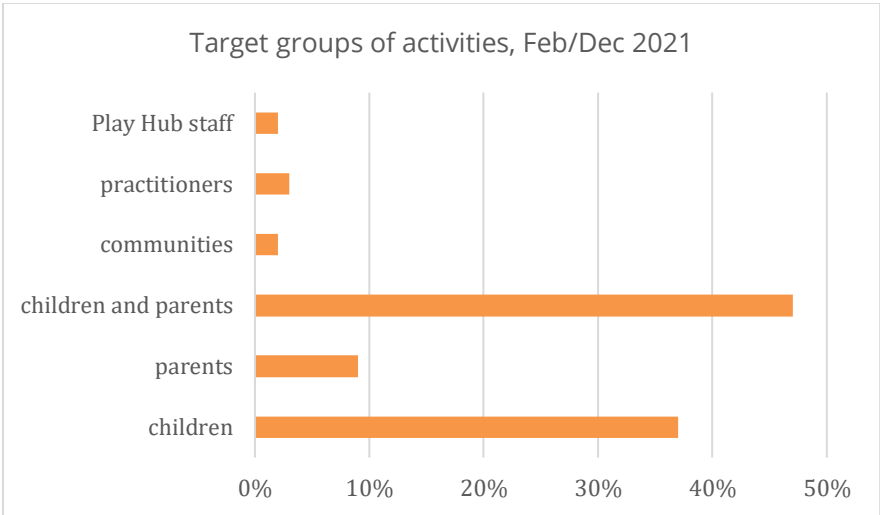
From February to December 2021, 92% of the activities were delivered to groups, compared to the previous period (July 2020-January 2021) during which most of the activities were targeting individual children and care givers (56%).

Chart 3 – Individual and group activities, Jul 2020-Jan 2021 and Feb/Dec 2021



Most of the activities organised in and by the Play Hubs targeted children and parents together (47%) or children alone (37%). Activities targeting parents only represented 9% of the total of activities. Only 7% of the activities targeted practitioners (internal or external to the Play Hubs) and the community as a whole. This finding is in line with data from previous M&E reports.

Chart 4 – Target groups of activities, Feb/Dec 2021



**Members and toys**

Children and families can become registered members of the Play Hubs to access the toy library lending services and to be able to bring home toys and educational materials. Children and families who are not registered members can participate freely in all the other activities organised in and by the Play Hubs. Given this distinction, we collect data on members as well as participants, and we also keep track of the available toys and educational materials available for lending.

In the period of February 2021 to December 2021, Play Hubs had 1018 members and 2469 toys. Slovenia did not report on members nor toys, as both Play Hubs were unable to operate because of COVID-19.

Table 2 – Number of members and toys per country, Feb/Dec 2021

| Country     | No. of members | No. of toys |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Netherlands | 25             | 20          |
| Latvia      | 154            | 682         |
| Italy       | 43             | 87          |
| Slovenia    | 0              | 0           |
| Hungary     | 30             | 270         |
| Croatia     | 252            | 570         |



|              |             |             |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Slovakia     | 514         | 840         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>1018</b> | <b>2469</b> |

The last time we collected data on members and toys was in March 2020, before the COVID-19 outbreak. At the time, 13 Play Hubs were operating, with a total of 1182 members registered. In March 2020, the Slovenian Play Hubs counted on 424 members. If we assume that most of these members will come back to the two Play Hubs in Slovenia once they reopen their doors, the total number of members in all countries will reach approximately 1400.

Similarly, in March 2020, Play Hubs reported having 2465 toys and educational materials available for children and families to play with and to borrow. In December 2021, there were 2469 toys and educational materials, without counting those in Slovenia (241), which are not accessible right now but that are still part of the Play Hubs' equipment and will become accessible again once the Play Hubs reopen.

## Participants

From February 2021 to December 2021, 4536 people participated in the activities organised in and by the Play Hubs. The majority were children. The country that reached most participants was Croatia with 3131 children, adults, and practitioners.

*Table 3 – Number of participants (children, adults, practitioners), Feb/Dec 2021*

| Country      | Children    | Adult      | Practitioners |
|--------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| Netherlands  | 50          | 10         | 12            |
| Latvia       | 120         | 8          | 6             |
| Italy        | 56          | 50         | 6             |
| Slovenia     | 0           | 0          | 0             |
| Hungary      | 263         | 197        | 15            |
| Croatia      | 2942        | 165        | 24            |
| Slovakia     | 506         | 85         | 21            |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>3937</b> | <b>515</b> | <b>84</b>     |

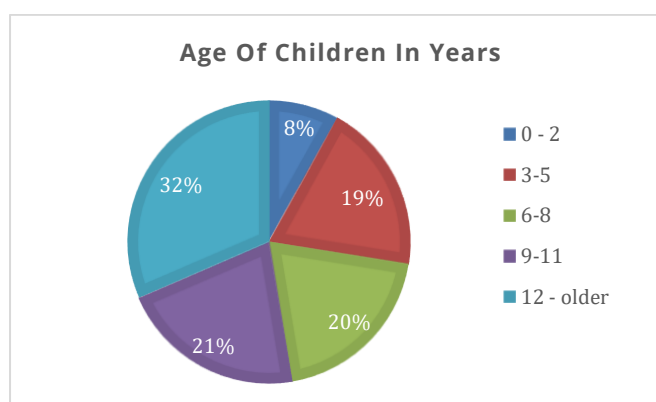
Out of the total number of participants, 57% ( $N = 2565$ ) were children, adults, and practitioners from vulnerable groups, with 95% ( $N = 2437$ ) of these being Roma and 5% ( $N = 28$ ) being migrants and refugees.

Table 4 – Number of participants (children, adults, practitioners) from vulnerable groups, Feb/Dec 2021

| Country      | Children from vulnerable groups | Adults from vulnerable groups | Practitioners from vulnerable groups |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Netherlands  | 45                              | 9                             | 1                                    |
| Latvia       | 20                              | 4                             | 3                                    |
| Italy        | 56                              | 50                            | 2                                    |
| Slovenia     | 0                               | 0                             | 0                                    |
| Hungary      | 38                              | 30                            | 1                                    |
| Croatia      | 1700                            | 70                            | 6                                    |
| Slovakia     | 450                             | 75                            | 5                                    |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>2309</b>                     | <b>238</b>                    | <b>18</b>                            |

From the children participating in activities, 47% ( $N = 1419$ ) were aged between 0 and 8 years old, the primary target age group of Play Hubs. Significantly, 32% ( $N = 943$ ) were 12 years old and older and 21% ( $N = 633$ ) of participants were aged 9 to 11 years old.

Chart 5 – Age of children in years, Feb/Dec 2021



These data show that Play Hubs have become an attractive and important service not only for young children under 8, but also for older children and teenagers. This is a trend that was observed already in the previous reports but has become stronger during the two years of COVID-19 pandemic. In this period, many formal and non-formal services were not operating, and many children and young people found a welcoming and stimulating space in the Play Hubs. It is also evident that Play Hubs were capable of adapting their activities to the needs and desires of older children, due to the flexibility provided by the LAT and the overall TOY for Inclusion approach.

## Successes, challenges, and necessary adjustments

The **capacity of LATs and Play Hubs to adapt to the changing context in times of pandemic** was mentioned as one of the main successes in all countries. Partners reported that Play Hubs were able to remain open and **combine online and face-to-face activities**, to **lend toys** through the pandemic, to attract over 4000 participants and to organise successful activities **indoors and outdoors** for younger and older children.

Particularly in Italy, two **mobile Play Hubs** (vans equipped with toys and educational materials) were able to bring the activities to different neighbourhoods, reaching children and families that would not normally go to the Play Hubs.

In Slovakia, the Play Hub has become an **important COVID-19 prevention and education space**, for communities where other services lack. Play Hubs have provided additional services such as a home visiting program, homework tutoring support, and materials support such as food, hygiene products, and clothes to the most vulnerable households.

During the period of February 2021 to December 2021, 57% of participants were from vulnerable groups, those that were also most affected by the consequences of COVID-19 restrictions, including isolation, increased poverty, increased domestic violence, lack of access to educational services, etc.

Among the main **challenges** mentioned by partners are: the **isolation and loneliness** impacting children and families, the **COVID restrictions**, and the **reluctancy of Roma families to get vaccinated** and receive the certificate to access services, including the Play Hubs. This situation has required LATs to work harder to keep a sense of community, ownership, and solidarity.

In Croatia, the Play Hubs also had to face the challenges posed by the turnover of 4 LAT members, which required them to re-train the LATs and rebuild a common vision among the members.

LATs in the Netherlands, Latvia, and Slovakia reported **shortage of staff** (professionals and volunteers) as their main challenge.

In Latvia, the **loss of Roma Play Hub assistants** who refused to get vaccinated was a very serious loss for both Play Hubs. The local partner is currently trying to convince these assistants to get vaccinated and return to the Play Hubs.

In Hungary, LATs mentioned that they need to work harder towards **involving more Roma families** in the Play Hubs.

In Italy, the LATs express their intention to reach out to more families and **increase the number of beneficiaries**.

In **Slovenia**, the Play Hubs were completely closed during the reported period. They are located in two public libraries, which were closed to the public due to COVID-19 restrictions. The Slovenian partner reported that the Play Hub staff was very worried about their regular jobs (teachers, social workers, and educators) and the adjustments regarding COVID-19. They are now planning to reopen the Play Hubs in the Spring of 2022.