Parenting is a very demanding and responsibility driven role in the life of any person who decides to become a parent. Quality parenting is aimed at protecting the best interests of the child. In this sense, the parent should behave with care, provide the child with structure and guidance, respect the child as an individual and empower them at every opportunity. Today, however, parents do not have much time to raise their child. The employment of both parents necessarily includes other adults in the upbringing of children. So, parents become coordinators of educational factors by choosing "other educators" for children in an out-of-home environment. Thus, the parent becomes responsible for the upbringing in their family as well as for choosing extra-family influences. A modern parent is faced with many expectations: from knowing the characteristics of the child's psychophysical development to recognizing the needs and abilities of the child, and knowing the ways to satisfy and encourage them. Therefore, it is necessary that the parent is competent, skilled, and knows how to successfully educate. That they are well informed about the opportunities offered by society, be it legal, social, health, educational, and other related resources. That they know how to choose the best for their child, and to cooperate with those who care for their child. Thus, modern parenting has become very demanding, influenced by a number of societal changes, different from those faced by the parents of previous generations. Therefore, a successful parent should constantly learn, check their actions, and strive to improve their parenting skills. In this paper, parenting is considered as a dynamic process that has its developmental stages depending on the age of the child. With this in mind, research has been conducted with the aim of understanding the challenges of modern parenting during the process of growing up children at different stages of development. For data collection and analysis, the focus group method was applied as a qualitative form of research that includes a group discussion on the experiences and challenges of parents. The aim of this approach was to capture the subjective feelings and perceptions of parenting role in parents of children of different ages and to encourage discussion about values and attitudes related to parenting, but also personal challenges and experiences. The focus group method was implemented in various cities of the Republic of Croatia (in Zadar, Split, Varaždin, Benkovac, and Biograd n/m). The paper will present an analysis of qualitative results and will consider specific topics for groups of parents of children of different ages with the categorization of experiences and challenges. The results of this research will help professionals in preparing and organizing programs aimed at strengthening parenting competencies and developing quality parenting.

Keywords: contemporary parenting, focus groups, parental competence, parents experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

The role of a parent is undoubtedly very demanding and responsible, and many who become parents consider it the most crucial role in life and the backbone of their own identity. The concept of parenting is very complex and includes various components: the experience of parenthood, parental care, parenting procedures and activities aimed at achieving parental goals, as well as the parental role and parenting style or overall emotional atmosphere where all parent-child interactions take place [1]. Earlier research in the field of parenting was based on the one-way influence of parents on the child. However, Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecosystems is taken as a broader theoretical framework for the modern understanding of parenting [2]. It presupposes mutual, two-way influences of parents, child and the wider social environment, whereby child with his characteristics and behaviour influences the parent and his parental actions and subjective experience of parenthood with his characteristics and behaviour. In general, the contemporary literature on parenting today dominated by various integrative theoretical models, reflects the above-mentioned Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model [2], and parenting is seen as an outcome of the interrelationships between child, the parents, and the broader social environment [3], [4], [5].

Many parents today are likely to agree that, compared to previous generations of parents, they are under more significant pressure to perform the parental role in a quality way aimed at protecting the child's
best interests. Some authors point out that dramatic changes in the experience of parenthood have been noted in recent years and state that parents are more concerned about success in their parenting role [6]. They also have high expectations about the child's developmental achievements [7]. Many expectations are set before the modern parent: to know the characteristics of the child's psychophysical development, recognize the child's needs and abilities, and learn ways to meet and encourage them. Therefore, it is necessary that the parent is competent, skilled, and can act successfully. He needs to be well informed about the opportunities offered by society, whether it is legal, social, health, educational or similar resources, that he knows how to choose the best for his child and cooperate with those who also take care of his child. Thus, modern parenting has become very demanding; it is influenced by many social changes, different from those faced by parents of previous generations. In addition, today's parents are often exposed to the demands of different roles, such as in families where both working parents leave part of the care of the children to other persons outside the family or social institutions. Thus, parents become coordinators of educational influences by choosing "other educators" for children in an out-of-home environment and become responsible both for their family's upbringing and determining out-of-family impacts on the child.

Most research in parenting focuses on the impact of parenting practices and parenting styles on adjustment and developmental outcomes in children. These parenting practices and styles reflect parental upbringing values and goals [1]. For example, an authoritarian or strict parent whose main upbringing goal is to "shape" an obedient and self-controlled child will resort to methods more stringent of disciplining and punishing the child. On the other hand, a permissive parent who wants his child to be happy and spared from all pain and frustration will show great emotional warmth in their relationship with the child. Also, he will not set almost any limits or demands on him for fear of emotionally hurting him. Different parenting practices of parents who use different parenting styles will have other consequences for the child's development. Most parents are genuinely motivated to be good parents, although that term does not necessarily mean the same things for all parents. Research shows, with some cultural variations, that good parenting can be equated with an authoritative parenting style that represents a balance of high emotional warmth and support for the child on the one hand and adequate supervision of the child on the other. In doing so, the child is set to clear boundaries that give him a sense of security. Good parenting is often called "constructive parenting" [8]. It is adapted to the child's age, i.e. the stage of development and the child's needs in different developmental periods. Thus, in the first two years of a child's life, good parenting is focused on the child's healthy socio-emotional development and the development of the child's cognition and motivation through the parent's sensitivity to the child's needs, acceptance and accessibility, care for the child's safety and organization of learning environment [1]. In the preschool period, good parenting is primarily focused on developing the child's social skills, encouraging initiative, independence and resourcefulness in the environment, and motivation to achieve results [1]. This will enable parents to set clear boundaries to the child's behaviour within a warm and supportive parenting environment. Good parenting in a child's primary school period should be aimed at developing self-regulation, social adjustment and good relationships with peers, prosocial behaviour, intellectual development and a positive self-concept [4]. The period of a child's adolescence is hugely demanding for parents. It sometimes represents a sudden but temporary cessation of good relations between parents and children, with increasing conflict, failure of parental supervision and reduced parental expression of warmth and acceptance of the child. Even in this period, the authoritative style of parenting, which retains the characteristics of a warm relationship with the child and positive methods of supervision and rewarding desirable behaviour, has the best influence on the child. Also, in the period of the child's adolescence, the following are emphasized: the importance of communicating with the child on topics that are important to him, involving the child in joint decision-making, involving parents in school, expressing mutual respect and love in the parent-child relationship, etc. [1], [9]. It is also possible to notice that trends in the development of adult children (increasing involvement of young people in higher education, delaying choosing a career and postponing marriage and parenthood) affect changes in age expectations of developmental tasks and roles. This, consequently, results in increased developmental diversity and more extended dependence on parents [10], [11].

In general, in every period of a child's life, the parent should behave with care, provide the child with structure and guidance, respect the child as an individual and build his self-esteem. Therefore, a successful parent should constantly learn, review his actions, and continuously improve his parenting skills. Maintaining an optimal parenting style requires special adjustments, especially while children become adults. Imbalance in expectations can lead to disputes between parents and children because attitudes about children and periods of child development are an essential component of the subjective experience of the parental role but also a determinant of parental behaviour [12].
In this paper, parenting is considered a dynamic process that has its own developmental stages depending on the child's age. With this in mind, research has been conducted to understand the challenges of modern parenting during the growing up of children at different stages of development. As mentioned earlier, most previous research on parenting has addressed the impact of parenting styles and procedures on the child's adjustment. Much less research is devoted to the subjective dimension of parenthood, i.e. the subjective perception of good parenting, the subjective experience of parenting, personal changes that parents experience due to parenting experiences and perceived sources of support in parenting. This is very important to explore because beliefs about what a good parent should be and the subjective experience of parenting affect the well-being of parents, parenting procedures, disciplinary methods, etc., which in turn affect the child's development. A qualitative approach can provide precise and meaningful answers to these questions, such as focus groups with parents that include group discussions about parents' experiences and challenges. Therefore, this research aimed to use the focus group method to examine the subjective feeling and perception of the parental role in parents of children of different ages and encourage them to discuss values and attitudes about parenting and personal challenges and experiences.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research. This research aimed to deepen the knowledge from parents' perspective about the changes that parents report as a consequence of parental role, the characteristics of "good" parents and raising a child, or the usual educational procedures in everyday life with children of different ages. It was also considered what forms of support parents have and use.

Method. Parents of children of different ages participated in the qualitative research conducted using the focus group technique. Parent selection was based on volunteering and motivation to participate in the study. A total of 8 focus groups were conducted during September, October and November 2021 in Split, Zadar, Varaždin, Benkovac and Biograd n/m, and the duration of discussions ranged from 65 to 83 minutes. The moderator was a psychologist and psychotherapist with experience conducting interviews. Each focus group consisted of 4 to 10 members. During the research conduction, the ethical principles of protection of privacy and confidentiality, the declaration of informed consent to participate and permission to record the interviews were respected. In this paper, in accordance with the set goals, part of the data collected within the research project "Parenting Today: Experiences and Challenges" was used, and the research questions were related to:

- Perception of personal changes in the role of parents - What changes did you notice in yourself when you became a parent? How has parenting changed and affected you personally?
- Perception of good parenting - What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of a good parent?
- Everyday parenting practices - Can you describe your usual parenting practices and methods that you use as a parent?
- Support in raising a child - Who is your most significant support in the role of a parent? What forms of support and education do you use to improve your parenting skills and knowledge?

Sample. The convenience sample of parents was selected according to the criteria of the research topic (theoretical sampling). The condition was that the parents were homogeneous according to the child's developmental period in each focus group. Participants in the focus groups were parents from Split, Zadar, Varaždin, Benkovac and Biograd n/m, a total of 56 parents. Of these, 51 mothers and five fathers participated. According to the age categories of the child, the total participants were: 14 parents of preschool children; 13 parents of children of early primary school age (1st-4th grade of primary school), of which three parents were male; 13 parents of adolescents (7th and 8th grade of primary school), of which two parents are male and 16 parents of "adult" children. There were significantly more mothers (91%) than fathers in the sample, and the average age of the participants was 41 years (M = 41.15, SD = 12.02). Most participants have completed college education (65%).

3 RESULTS

Data analysis was performed in several phases. Auditory group discussions were recorded first, followed by verbal transcription of audio recordings. The transcripts were then coded by two researchers independently, followed by a thematic analysis, which was also conducted by two researchers independently. In this paper, an analysis of four thematic units will be presented:
Before describing the answers under specific topics, it should be emphasized that the data obtained are not quantified, which is in line with the aim of the research - to deepen knowledge from parents' perspectives. Also, one should note that it is not possible to draw causal conclusions from the conducted data analysis. Still, the obtained results will be used to develop questionnaires and conduct quantitative research on a representative sample in the future.

The first topic was the perception of personal changes in the parental role. Given this, the respondents were asked: What changes did you notice in yourself when you became a parent? How parenting has changed you and affected you personally? The results showed that the changes that parents see in themselves could be categorized into several subtopics: change of priorities, change of parents’ personality, change of interest, increased fear and concern, higher level of responsibility (Figure 1).

Parents of children of all ages pointed out that one of the first changes was the change of life priorities (“So, the family or parental role did not change me for the better or, the worse. It just changed my priorities”). Your needs are subordinated to the needs of the child (“So you start living for your children, not for yourself, not for something else, but for them.”). At the same time, parents of early primary school children pointed out the neglect of themselves and their needs (“The first thing you forget about yourself completely. Now they are number one in everything.”). Still, as a child grows up, changes occur again. Hence, the parents of "adult" children point out that they have the opportunity to go back to previous habits and interests. Some of them said: "I must also admit that at some point I was completely subordinate to my children, and I cannot say that I neglected myself. But as the children grew up, I began to rediscover myself, my needs that I had before, and which I was not aware of because then it was enough for".

Another sub-theme that stood out was related to parental personality changes. In this regard, parents of preschool children pointed out that they are braver and more assertive in representing their views (“But when it comes to them, something strange wakes up in me. I sometimes may not even recognize that attitude I have, especially to defend them.”). Parents of early primary school children say they now have more patience, are more resilient and tolerant, but have lower expectations of themselves and others (“Well, I don’t know; maybe I’m a little calmer. I have more patience than I had before. Maybe I lowered my expectations of myself and others.”). On the one hand, adolescents’ parents emphasize a complete change of personality and personal growth and, on the other, an increase in nervousness, impulsiveness, and constant review of personal decisions (“I mean, I didn’t behave well when I was

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**Figure 1.** Graphic presentation of the sub-theme of perceptions of personal changes in a parental role.
young, since I had a baby I've changed 100%. So you have to take care of yourself to be able to take care of them."). Parents of "adult" children cite changes in maturation, increased empathy, and general personal growth and enrichment ("I think children make us better, less selfish and that is the change that is taking place. It is this focus that you transfer from yourself and shift to children who are initially completely dependent on you.").

The sub-theme of interest change was the next. All respondents noticed this change in themselves and, as a result, stated changes in life goals and more investment of energy in the organization of obligations around children ("From lifestyle to thinking. So what used to matter, what interested me, I mean my hobbies and all that, was fun, but I was already bored in life."). These changes have also affected the activities they used to do (e.g. sports) and seeing friends, which is now much less common. Parents of "adult" children also state different changes, depending on the differences between the children ("When I was younger, I was a lot more relaxed with that first one.").

In addition to these subtopics, some parents cite a constant sense of fear and concern for the child change ("I was much braver until I had children. Now when I have kids, I’m always worried about something, I’m always worried! "). Then the fear that something might happen to them or the partner (...take care of yourself, because if I'm not there, who will take care of them?). They report thoughts about life and death and a desire to stay alive as long as possible to be with their children ("There are better days, that are worse, but I'm not the same person anymore, I just am not. Some fear has crept into me; of course, you want to bring up that child in the best possible way, and that's your mission."). Only the parents of 'adult' children did not express fear and concern about the change they noticed in themselves.

The last sub-theme referred to the increased responsibility of parents in all groups. In addition to accountability, parents of preschool children emphasize the extra strength they feel: "Suddenly, you are now responsible for someone, and you are everything to them. I mean, out of all that, you find the strength that even when you can’t, you have to! There’s nothing you can't do!"

Parents of primary school children associate greater responsibility with the awareness that parents are the primary role models for children: "Exactly that need to give your best every day because you know that they look at you and that you are their role model and that they absorb on a conscious and unconscious level."

The second topic was the perception of good parenting, and parents were asked: What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of a good parent? The results showed that we could analyse this topic through four sub-themes: personality characteristics, communication skills, factors related to upbringing procedures, the relationship of parents to themselves and the child (Figure 2).

Personality traits highlighted by parents are patience ("Patience I think is crucial in many things. If you listen with patience, if you react likewise and slowly then the possibility of mistakes is much less than in a hasty reaction would be."). Being patient is followed by caring, gentleness, warmth, attentiveness, accessibility, generosity, humility, self-criticism and morality. Parents highlighted these characteristics in all groups. Parents of preschool children paid particular attention to the emotional maturity that is necessary to achieve all the above features ("I think there are a lot of parents who have a child and don’t have emotional maturity at all."). Parents of children of early primary school age see the parent as a role model for the child ("... by his example of something, he simply shows it to the child. So it learns through the example of its parent something positive, something that is good.").

The second sub-theme included communication skills. In this regard, parents of all focus groups stressed the importance of being communicative, open, honest and accessible. ("Remember that children need our time no matter how busy we are… in the sense that they know we are always there, and you do not say, "I have work to do now, leave me alone and so on..."), able to listen to the child
("Know how to listen to your child without a previous reaction. So listen to him first, then react."). Understand it and thus create opportunities to create mutual trust. Mutual trust and tolerance were emphasized by the parents of "adult" children.

The next sub-theme refers to the characteristics related to upbringing procedures. In this regard, parents highlighted consistency as a critical trait. Parents of preschool children stressed the importance of a balance between giving criticism and praise to the child ("I think a good parent should be an angel and a devil. One should be careful and considerate and compliant sometimes, and on the other hand one should really be consistent, sometimes strict, responsible, one should find some balance."). Supporting a child is also a significant feature ("Support in both bad and good things. When a child makes a mistake in life, the parent should be the one to whom the child will come first."). Parents of children of early primary school age are more focused on encouraging independence and work habits in children. They say: "the child is with me 24 hours a day, he watches everything mom does, so you have to let him touch the flour if you are making a cake, you have to let him start the washing machine…. you have to let him simply participate in life."). Parents of "adult" children believe that it is essential to maintain authority healthily by setting rules and clear boundaries. In this sense, they emphasize that the parent should not be too strict but should be fair, and in this developmental stage, the parent advises the child more than making demands.

The last sub-theme is the parents' attitude towards themselves and the child. According to parents of preschool children, a good parent successfully balances between caring for themselves and caring for the child, not necessarily putting the child in front of them ("They say that you should put yourself first, to be a good parent, and maybe balance that…"). They also point out that it is important to know the specifics of the stages of the child's development because then the parent can adapt and reduce expectations from himself and the child. At the same time, the parent can better organize, do all the chores at home, at work and those related to children. Parents of early primary school children have warned of the importance of accepting a child as they are ("I would point out that you should learn to accept even those parts of your child's personality that you don't like ").

The third topic covered everyday parenting practices, and parents were asked: Can you describe your usual parenting practices and methods you use as a parent? On analysing the respondents' answers, six sub-themes were singled out: praise and support, agreement, conversation and explanation, rewards and punishments, emotional manipulation, setting boundaries and shifting responsibility to children (Figure 3.).

![Figure 3. Graphic presentation of the sub-theme everyday parenting practices.](image-url)

The parenting practices that parents use daily are remarkably diverse. All respondents expressed praise and support. Parents of preschool children emphasize recognition to praise the child's efforts, but this should not be exaggerated. Praise the child when he puts in the effort ("…specifically praise something or specifically some process, something he made, drew, how he drew it, explain, not just say, this is great…"). Parents of early primary-school-age children pointed out support for everyday situations that
motivate children ("Both in bad and in good things. When a child makes a mistake in life, the parent should be the one to whom the child will come first."). Parents of "adult" children associate support with guidance, i.e. to support children in making some decisions, but also to help them make the right choices. Respect for the child's personality is also fundamental: "I think they have a right to their personal secrets which they will only share with their friend. I think we have some limit here, and I respect that..."

Agreement, conversation and explanation are present in all parents. Parents of preschool children see the agreement in a way that they explain to the child what is expected of him in certain situations ("I don't mean an agreement, in the sense that I ask him if you want this or that, but I tell him, you will be like that now because that's how you should behave there and after that... we will go where you want."). Conversation, discussion and explanation are the main upbringing methods for parents of children of early primary school age. However, parents point out that it is necessary to be calm and have enough time to talk ("First, we must not be nervous. And that's hard today, we have a little time, but then as soon as I told him to forgive me three times, it means that I'm nervous. We need to talk, we need time."). Parents of adolescents also emphasize negotiation and conversation with children. Through conversation, they set specific rules that children should follow ("So we put the rules through conversation; a lot of conversation. And when the rules are broken, we go on to revoke the privileges, but I also try to make it somehow logical."). In such situations, they try to achieve a sense of mutual trust so that the child can confide in the parent in the future and seek advice when he needs it.

The third sub-theme was the procedures of rewarding and punishing. Parents use these procedures in all focus groups. Parents of preschool children point out that it is essential to be consistent when rewarding and punishing ("...from an early age I act, when it is good, reward, when it is bad, punishment. Punishment comes down to making a schedule with him/her, for example, ten days without a cell phone, and we stick to that. The most important thing is not to give up and stick to what has been said."). Sometimes parents also use stronger disciplinary methods ("With him, I know it's not a method I should use, but he/she's a kid who just needs some firm hand. Me, until I yelled..."). The range of punishment goes from mild measures to threats to the child. Parents of children of early primary school age also use rewards and punishments by taking away something that the child likes. Sometimes they make a child stay in their room. They also point out that punishing and disciplining each child is different ("Basically you have a different way towards everyone because their characters are different. Somehow you know them, and then you will treat someone in a certain situation."). In these situations, they emphasize that the authenticity of parents is important. To act and speak in accordance with what they think because each of them recognizes when this is not the case. They also emphasize the importance of consistency in parenting methods ("...one should be consistent, not once letting something go and then forbid it. So you are actually confusing the child, stick to what you really think is important and be consistent."). Parents of adolescents punish their children by stopping giving them positive reinforcements. They forbid them to use mobile phones, play games, send them to bed earlier, they have to tidy up their things, look after younger siblings, etc. ("My greatest punishment is when I say, "Take your brother out, go for a walk with him!"). Parents of "adult" children did not emphasize the method of punishment as a standard upbringing procedure.

The fourth sub-theme that stood out was related to achieving the goal through manipulating emotions. In this regard, parents of preschool children cited an example of how they accomplished this ("...mom is sad now, mom can't sit down with you to do something, now I have to pick up the toys for you...."). Parents of children of early primary school age point out that it is important in certain situations to admit when a parent makes a mistake and ask forgiveness from the child. This has a positive effect on his behaviour ("...when I approach and when I admit that I may have made a mistake, that I may have exaggerated, it means a lot to them. It means a lot more to them than anything else we agree on or punish at that point..."). Sometimes, parents of adolescents resort to making the children guilty to achieve a specific goal. ("He always triggers off when he sees that I have to do something instead of him. That is his greatest punishment."). This behaviour was not found in the parents of the "adult" children.

Setting boundaries is the next sub-theme in everyday upbringing practices. This method was common to all focus groups. Parents of preschool children pointed out that the boundaries mustn't be too strict because the child must be free to explore and learn from their own mistakes ("So, if we narrow that boundary, hold it rough, the child will not be so free to explore and thus build his character."). Parents of children of early primary school age believe that parents and children should set the house rules together and stick to them. ("We set the rules, which we designed together...everyone suggested a couple of rules of their choice and everyone cooperated strictly and we put up a bulletin board..."). Setting boundaries is also significant for parents as they believe that in adolescence, parents should have clear boundaries and talk about everything with the child. ("We need to have boundaries and be
strict, but not by taking away something they like, so we need to communicate with them.”). Parents of "adult" children believe that parents today are too afraid to set boundaries to their children. They are more insecure because they are afraid that it would negatively affect children, so they become more lenient. ("It seems that the younger generations of parents are worried to upset their children and leave them some trauma. That is why we go to another extreme, and there are no boundaries. In essence, there is no middle ground.").

The last sub-theme was the transfer of responsibility to children, especially emphasized by parents of children of early primary school age and parents of "adult" children. Parents of early primary school children believe that they should shift the responsibility to children for the situations they themselves should be responsible for, such as doing homework. ("Whether they do their homework or whatever they need to do is their responsibility. I can't take their responsibility and do it for them."). On the other hand, the parents of "adult" children talk about the child's taking responsibility, which they achieve by accepting the child as an equal and gradually shifting daily to prepare him for independent living ("…we respect their opinions, we put them in equal positions. There is no such thing: You will not go to the game because I said so. Now it doesn't work anymore. Children achieve one level of equality. Of course, the parent accepts his responsibility.").

Finally, the fourth topic was the type of support parents have/do not have in their parenting role. They were asked questions: Who is the most significant support in your parenting role? What forms of support and education do you use to improve your parenting skills and knowledge? The analysis of the respondents' answers highlighted five sub-themes: support of spouses, support of family members, conversation with colleagues and friends as support, books, texts on the Internet and social networks, professional support, education and workshops (Figure 4).

The first sub-theme and the most important type of support mentioned by all parents is the support of the spouse ("I will say briefly, husband and I think we both have the same views, opinions."). In the case of parents of children of early primary school age, the support of partners who are not the child's biological parents is also commented ("Husband too, he is not the father of the girls, but he definitely participates equally in their lives as if he were."). Some parents pointed out that they prefer to rely on themselves and their intuition.

The next sub-theme is family members. This group includes participants' parents ("In particular, from my parents, I absolutely have unconditional love. In the beginning, it is parental love and this is felt from childhood and for life."), brothers, sisters ("…she is definitely the first person I will call whatever it is, from parenting onwards, she is the first phone call I will make.") and other relatives. This type of support is also found for respondents in all focus groups. Parents of preschool children state that although they have the whole family's help, they know that this does not mean everyone has the same views on raising a child. ("I am supported by everyone, by the whole family. Again, as I said, we don't all have the same idea about raising a child.").

Colleagues from work and friends were singled out as the third sub-theme ("…in some kind of upbringing method, I think it shaped me a lot, in fact, some groups where we exchanged experiences the most."). Parents of "adult" children especially highlighted conversations with other parents who served as
sources of support ("It is always easier if you share some of your fears and some of your worries with others and come across an understanding, a solution to a problem."). Parents of preschool children also cite the experiences of others that support them in their parenting role, but then take into account what can be applied and what is not ("So theory and practice are two different things. Many times I use something or take notes, filter and then apply. So the experience of other people. I watch, follow, listen and apply. It’s all a kind of circle.").

This is followed by a sub-theme related to books ("Well, I started reading books during my pregnancy and I read a lot…"), texts on the Internet and social networks, and parents in all focus groups list it. Parents of preschool children point out that advice via the Internet often confuses parents because there is too much of it. It is challenging to implement everything, and it sometimes makes parents feel that they are incompetent. ("Fortunately, or unfortunately, I read too much on the Internet about how to act, and I admit being pressurized from everything telling me what a parent should be like and how to treat children. It is hard for me to follow those rules."). Social networks are also mentioned by the majority of respondents who are also members of certain groups on Facebook and Instagram. Parents share experiences and thus manage to find out some information about parenting and topics that interest them. Parents are aware that this information requires the selection and can apply it in everyday life, but it is essential not to be too critical of yourself if you fail.

The last sub-theme was professional support, education and workshops. Parents of all categories recognized this type of support as valuable and significant. Parents of preschool children singled out the advice of psychologists and psychotherapists and the advice of kindergarten teachers as support ("I am delighted to take advice from the teacher, why not. A child can show one picture at home and another in kindergarten."). Parents of "adult" children point out that you learn to be a good parent. In that sense, it is important to turn to professionals for advice ("I think that parenting is learned and that it is good to ask someone more experienced, and not to be ashamed because you think your child is not perfect, none of them is perfect.").

4 CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, there have been dramatic changes in the perception of parenthood [15]. Parents today are making increasing demands on themselves and are more concerned about competence and success in parenting [6]. The relationship between family members is dynamic and constantly changing, and adjustments of parental behaviour to the child's developmental changes are necessary. However, although specific forms of parental behaviour change with changes conditioned by the child's development, the research results indicate significant stability of parental behaviour towards the child [13]. This research used a qualitative research method to improve understanding of the challenges of parenthood in different stages of children's development. More specifically, the aim was to examine the changes that parents cite as a consequence of their parenting role, their perception of the characteristics of a "good" parent, the challenges of raising a child and the sources of parenting support that modern parents use. There are very few studies that focus on parents, especially qualitative research focusing on the subjective experiences of parents of children of different ages. The study results that we conducted provided us with an insight into the personal experience of parenthood in parents of children of different ages (children in early and late childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood). Four separate topics were discussed: the perception of personal changes in the role of parents, the perception of good parenting, everyday upbringing practice and support in raising a child. Parents of children of different ages have similarities and differences in the observed topics. Parents differ depending on how old their children are and their previous experiences. The perception of personal changes in the role of parents is manifested from differences in life priorities and interests to changes related to the behaviour and attitudes of parents towards children and upbringing practice and awareness of parental responsibility in accordance with the child's developmental status. The perception of good parenting in the respondents includes several characteristics necessary for quality parenting. It relates to personality characteristics, communication skills, various upbringing practices and the parents' attitudes toward oneself and the child. Everyday parenting practices also vary with the child's age, but parents agree that praise and support are critical. The agreement, discussion, and explanation are combined with reward and punishment processes, and setting boundaries is related to parental behaviours. The transfer of responsibility to children is more pronounced in parents of adolescents and adult children who are expected to be more independent, and parental control weakens. Sources of support for parents in modern times are diverse. Still, preference is given to spouses and extended family, followed by friends, literature, the Internet and professionals from various educational institutions.
Given the lack of similar research in Croatia, the data obtained represent a valuable analysis of parents’ experiences of children of different ages and a more detailed view of their perception of the parental role. However, the qualitative research has certain shortcomings, bearing in mind that we dealt with a convenience sample of parents, which was biased because of the voluntary participation of parents in the focus groups. Therefore, it is possible that descriptions of experiences of parenting, especially upbringing methods, are narrow compared to the general population of parents. However, our primary goal was to deepen the knowledge from parents’ perspectives about the changes and experiences parents report as a consequence of parenting. Besides, the obtained results can serve as a starting point for designing future quantitative research in this area. The results of this research are part of a larger research project funded by the University of Zadar entitled "Parenting Today: Experiences and Challenges", which aims to understand the factors that are important for successful parenting in the modern context. The obtained qualitative data, which indicate the extreme complexity and dynamics of family interactions and the specific relationship between parents and children of different ages, will develop new measurement instruments that will consider the cultural specificity of parental challenges and behaviours [14].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted as part of the institutional project "Parenting Today: Experiences and Challenges" at the University of Zadar.

REFERENCES