

National Report on Bullying and Cyberbullying Policies and Practices

Partner Country: Croatia

Partner Organization: Hrvatski institut za razvoj obrazovanja (HIRO)

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1. National Policy on Bullying and Cyberbullying

In Croatia, bullying and cyberbullying are recognised as significant threats to the well-being, safety, and rights of children and young people. While there is no single standalone national law exclusively dedicated to bullying or cyberbullying in schools, these phenomena are addressed through a combination of child protection policies, education regulations, and national strategic frameworks focused on children's rights and digital safety

Policy and Strategic Framework

The primary national policy document addressing bullying and cyberbullying is the **National Plan for the Rights of Children in the Republic of Croatia 2022–2026**, which identifies digital violence and peer violence as priority areas for state intervention. This plan builds upon the earlier **National Strategy on the Rights of Children 2014–2020**, both of which emphasize prevention, education, institutional cooperation, and protection mechanisms for children exposed to violence, including online forms of abuse

Within these strategic frameworks, cyberbullying is addressed as part of broader efforts to:

- Protect children from all forms of violence
- Promote safe digital environments
- Strengthen preventive education and early intervention
- Improve institutional responses to reported cases

Although these documents do not constitute a dedicated national anti-bullying action plan, they establish a policy basis for coordinated prevention and response measures across education, social welfare, and digital regulation sectors.

Responsible Bodies and Institutions

Several national institutions share responsibility for the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying:

- The **Ministry of Science and Education** is responsible for regulating school policies, curricular guidelines, and school-level responses to peer violence. In its 2022 report on digital safety in schools,

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the Ministry acknowledged that a majority of primary and secondary school students have encountered online aggression, while also noting gaps in staff training and formal prevention protocols in many schools

- The **Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy** oversees child protection policies and coordinates implementation of national strategies related to children's rights.
- The **Agency for Electronic Media**, in cooperation with **UNICEF Croatia**, plays a key role in research, awareness-raising, and public education related to children's online safety.
- Educational and psychosocial institutions, including school counselling services and child protection centres, support intervention and referral processes at the local level.

Policy Gaps and Challenges

Despite the existence of relevant strategic documents, research highlights several systemic challenges in the Croatian policy context. Studies point to **inconsistent definitions of cyberbullying**, fragmented implementation at the school level, and the absence of unified, mandatory national protocols for bullying prevention and response

As a result, schools often rely on general guidelines rather than standardized procedures, leading to uneven practices across regions and institutions.

Experts therefore emphasize the need for a **more clearly articulated, nationally coordinated approach**, integrating education policy, digital literacy, emotional resilience, and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Such an approach would strengthen the existing policy framework and enhance the effectiveness of preventive and protective measures for children and young people in Croatia.

2. Platforms for Pupils and Parents to Report Incidents

- *Describe any national or regional online platforms, hotlines, or services where pupils, parents, or teachers can report bullying or cyberbullying incidents.*
- *Indicate if these services are anonymous, confidential, and how they operate (e.g., available 24/7, supported by psychologists).*

In Croatia, several national and regional mechanisms exist to support the reporting of bullying and cyberbullying incidents involving children and young people. These platforms operate primarily within the broader framework of child protection, digital safety, and psychosocial support, rather than as school-specific reporting systems. Research nevertheless indicates that reporting rates remain relatively low, suggesting a gap between available services and children's willingness or ability to seek help

National Reporting and Support Platforms

One of the key national mechanisms is the **Safer Internet Centre Croatia**, coordinated by the Agency for Electronic Media in cooperation with UNICEF Croatia and other partners. The Centre provides:

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- An **online reporting system** for harmful or illegal online content, including cyberbullying
- **Counselling and advisory services** for children, parents, and educators
- Educational resources focused on digital safety and responsible online behaviour

Services provided through the Safer Internet Centre are **confidential** and designed to be accessible to both children and adults. Support is typically delivered by trained professionals, including psychologists and digital safety experts, with referrals to additional services when necessary.

In addition, children and parents may seek support through **national child helplines and counselling services**, which address violence, abuse, and emotional distress more broadly. These services commonly operate:

- Via telephone and online communication
- On a confidential basis
- With professional psychosocial support available

School-Based Reporting Channels

At the school level, reporting of bullying and cyberbullying incidents usually takes place through:

- Class teachers
- School counsellors or psychologists
- School leadership or designated school teams

However, national research indicates that **only around 30% of children report cyberbullying incidents to adults**, reflecting limited trust in institutional responses or uncertainty about reporting procedures

This highlights the need for clearer communication, child-friendly reporting mechanisms, and stronger integration between schools and national support platforms.

Key Challenges

Despite the availability of reporting services, several challenges persist:

- Limited awareness among pupils and parents about existing platforms
- Fear of negative consequences or escalation after reporting
- Lack of standardized school-level procedures linked to national reporting systems

Experts therefore emphasize the importance of **strengthening visibility, accessibility, and coordination** between national reporting platforms and school-based support structures. Improving trust in reporting mechanisms is seen as a critical step toward more effective prevention and early intervention in cases of bullying and cyberbullying.

3. School-Level Policies and Measures

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Croatian schools are expected to prevent, identify, and respond to bullying (including cyberbullying) within a broader national child-protection and school-safety framework. While schools have flexibility in designing preventive activities, their **duty to act, document, and report serious cases** is anchored in national protocols and rulebooks that define responsibilities and cooperation with external services.

General policy framework and expectations for schools

At the operational level, schools follow national guidance that frames peer violence as a matter requiring **immediate protective action, documentation, and inter-institutional cooperation**. The national **Protocol on procedures in cases of violence among children and youth** establishes definitions of violence (including psychological and electronic/digital violence), and outlines coordinated procedures among relevant bodies (education institutions, social services, police, health services and others) when violence is identified or reported.

In addition, a national **Rulebook on the procedure for educational staff in taking measures to protect pupils' rights and reporting violations to competent authorities** sets expectations for how school staff should respond when children's rights are threatened or violated (which includes cases of peer violence). This rulebook clarifies schools' responsibilities for acting within the institution and escalating reports when required.

More generally, Croatia's government guidance on violence among children emphasizes that **reports can be made to the police, the Croatian Institute for Social Work, and educational institutions**, and that institutions are obliged to act upon received reports and cooperate with one another.

Are schools required to have their own protocols, teams, or action plans?

In practice, schools are expected to have **internal procedures** consistent with national protocols and the rulebook above. Many schools formalize this through:

- a school-level **prevention plan** (often integrated into annual school planning),
- designated roles for **class teachers and professional support staff** (pedagogue/psychologist),
- internal **reporting routes** to school leadership and (when needed) external services.

However, research and field reports indicate variability in how consistently these procedures are formalized and implemented across schools, particularly regarding staff preparedness and systematic prevention planning.

Examples of recommended or mandatory school-level activities

Across Croatia, school measures typically fall into two complementary areas:

A) Prevention and school climate measures (recommended and widely used)

- **Class teacher (homeroom) workshops** on respectful communication, empathy, digital citizenship, and peer relations (often supported by the Agency for Education and Training materials and wider prevention programming).

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- **Whole-school prevention activities** (assemblies, theme days/weeks, peer support initiatives), often connected to national and EU-level safety initiatives.
- **Parent engagement** sessions on online risks and reporting routes (especially relevant for cyberbullying).

B) Intervention and response measures (required when incidents occur)

- **Immediate safeguarding and documentation** by the teacher/professional associates, with escalation to leadership.
- **Cooperation with external institutions** (social work services, police, health services) in line with the national protocol when risk is high or when required by the case.
- Application of **pedagogical measures** for serious or repeated inappropriate behaviour, following applicable school procedures and national rules on pupil conduct/disciplinary measures.

Implications for bullying and cyberbullying prevention

Croatia has a recognizable framework that expects schools to combine prevention, early identification, and inter-institutional response. The continuing challenge is **consistent implementation**: ensuring that every school has clear internal procedures aligned with national protocols, and that staff have the training and capacity to address both bullying and cyberbullying effectively (including cases that occur off-site but impact school life).

4. Teacher Training and Capacity Building

In Croatia, building teacher capacity to prevent and respond to bullying — including cyberbullying — is part of the broader **continuous professional development (CPD) system** for educators. While there are *no mandatory national training modules exclusively focused on cyberbullying* within official teacher training lists (e.g., those provided by the Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency – AZOO), there are several **structural mechanisms, platforms, and thematic opportunities** that support teachers' competence in related areas such as student safety, digital citizenship, life skills education, and safe technology use.

Continuing Professional Development Framework

Croatia operates a formal system of **continuing professional development (CPD)** for teachers and professional associates (such as pedagogues and school psychologists). According to the national education system guidelines:

- Teachers are expected to engage in ongoing CPD as part of their professional career.
- CPD activities are organised at **national, county, and school levels**.
- Participation in CPD contributes to career progression and maintains teaching credentials. This framework provides the *structure* within which cyberbullying-related competencies can be developed, even if not formally labelled as cyberbullying courses.

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National and Regional Training Opportunities

Although the standard catalogues of professional development courses (e.g., those listed on AZOO's public portal) do not currently include dedicated "cyberbullying" modules, teachers can build relevant capacity through training in **adjacent areas**, such as:

1. Digital Competence and Safe Technology Use

These topics are often available through national and regional training opportunities and include:

- Digital citizenship
- Safe internet practices
- Online well-being and risk awareness

Such training is typically delivered by:

- **CARNET (Croatian Academic and Research Network)**
- **County-level professional development events**
- **School-organised workshops**

These trainings help teachers equip students with critical **digital literacy** and **responsible online behaviour**, which are key protective factors against cyberbullying.

2. Life Skills, Social-Emotional Learning, and Well-Being

Although not exclusive to cyberbullying, professional development related to:

- Life skills pedagogy (empathy, conflict resolution, communication)
- Social and emotional learning (SEL)
- Child protection and welfare practices

also contributes to teacher readiness for addressing bullying in all forms.

These thematic areas are often part of:

- **School-based training plans**
- **County educational events**
- **Collaborative training sessions with school psychologists and counsellors**

3. Use of National Platforms and Resources

Teachers have access to online repositories and learning platforms that support ongoing competence development in areas relevant to bullying and cyberbullying, including:

Edutorij (CARNET)

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A national open educational resource platform containing teaching materials, lesson plans, and resources related to digital well-being and online safety. While not formal training, these resources help teachers integrate cyberbullying prevention into classroom activities.

Safer Internet Programmes

Croatia participates in the **Safer Internet Centre network**, which provides:

- Webinars
- Resource packs
- Awareness campaigns

These initiatives are often used by schools to supplement teacher capacity in dealing with online risks.

Certification and Compulsory Requirements

As of the current policy environment:

- There are **no mandatory nationwide certification schemes** specifically for bullying or cyberbullying prevention.
- **No compulsory hours** exclusively focused on cyberbullying are required for teacher certification or re-licensing.
- Continuous professional development is expected, but schools and teachers have **flexibility in topic selection**, based on local needs and school development plans.

Teachers and professional associates may voluntarily participate in:

- Digital safety seminars
- Online risk mitigation workshops
- Peer-learning networks
- External training offered by NGOs or university partners

Implications for Capacity Building

The Croatian training landscape for bullying and cyberbullying is best understood as **embedded rather than isolated**:

- Teachers develop relevant competence through **cross-linked themes** (digital competence, life skills, SEL, child protection).
- National infrastructure (e.g., Edutorij, CARNET, EMA) supports access to resources and professional development offerings.

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- The absence of cyberbullying-specific compulsory modules highlights a **policy and implementation gap** in formal teacher education.

This reflects an opportunity for:

- Integration of cyberbullying content into mandatory teacher education
- Development of dedicated e-learning modules or certification pathways
- Strengthened collaboration between education authorities, NGOs, and digital safety networks

5. Relevant Publications, Reports, and Research

- *List key national publications, research papers, or evaluation reports related to bullying, cyberbullying, or life skills development in schools.*
- *Provide references, links, or DOIs if available.*

References

Agency for Electronic Media & UNICEF Croatia. (2020). *Djeca i mediji: Izvješće o sigurnosti djece na internetu*. <https://www.unicef.org/croatia>

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World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. (2022). *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study – Croatia National Report*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11593264/>

Council of Europe. (2014). *National Strategy on the Rights of Children in the Republic of Croatia 2014–2020*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/resource-centre>

Online sources:

[Protokol o postupanju u slučaju nasilja među djecom i mladima.pdf](#)

[Pravilnik o načinu postupanja odgojno-obrazovnih radnika školskih ustanova u poduzimanju mjera zaštite prava učenika te prijave svakog kršenja tih prava nadležnim tijelima Narodne novine.pdf](#)

[Pedagogical measures in primary school - gov.hr](#)

[Continuing professional development for teachers working in early childhood and school education](#)

[Aplikacija za organizaciju i praćenje edukacije - EMA - CARNET](#)

[Eduorij | NASILJE PUTEK INTERNETA - CYBERBULLYING](#)

[Live events | ChildOnlineSafety | European Schoolnet Academy](#)

6. Additional Comments or Observations

Research on bullying and cyberbullying in Croatia provides a strong empirical basis for understanding the scope, characteristics, and consequences of online and peer violence among children and young people. National and international studies consistently indicate that cyberbullying represents a significant and growing challenge within the Croatian educational and social context.

Large-scale surveys such as **EU Kids Online Croatia** report that approximately **23% of children aged 11–16 have experienced cyberbullying**, while around **12% have engaged in cyberbullying behaviour** themselves (Velki & Kuterovac Jagodić, 2017). These findings highlight the bidirectional nature of cyberbullying and the need for prevention strategies that address both victimisation and perpetration.

Complementary evidence is provided by the **UNICEF Croatia and Agency for Electronic Media (2020)** study, which found that **one in five children** reported experiences of online insults, exclusion, or threats. The research identified popular messaging and social media platforms—such as **Viber, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok**—as the most common environments in which cyberbullying occurs. Notably, the study also revealed low reporting rates, with only about **30% of children** seeking help, underscoring gaps in trust, awareness, and perceived effectiveness of adult intervention.

The **Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study – Croatia National Report (2022)** further contributes to understanding bullying dynamics, indicating that boys are more frequently exposed to repeated

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forms of bullying and highlighting **parental monitoring**, particularly maternal supervision, as a protective factor against risky online behaviour.

Research focusing on vulnerable populations has shown elevated risks and complex dynamics. A study by **Burušić, Šakić, and Smojver-Ažić (2021)** documented cyberbullying experiences among children in institutional care, with prevalence rates ranging from **4.7% to 14.4%**, both as victims and perpetrators. These findings emphasize the importance of targeted prevention and support mechanisms for children in alternative care settings.

The psychological consequences of cyberbullying are well documented in Croatian research. **Velki and Romstein (2021)** report associations between cyberbullying exposure and increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, academic difficulties, and self-harming behaviours among adolescents. Such outcomes reinforce the need for early prevention, emotional support, and school-based intervention.

From a programmatic and policy perspective, **Jeleč et al. (2020)** conducted a comprehensive review of cyberbullying prevention programmes in Croatia, identifying **inconsistent definitions**, fragmented implementation, and limited evaluation as key challenges. The authors argue for **systematic, multi-level prevention programmes** that involve students, parents, teachers, and professionals, and that include clearly defined protocols and coordinated institutional responses.

Policy-oriented documents, including the **National Plan for the Rights of Children 2022–2026** and earlier national strategies, frame cyberbullying as a form of violence against children that requires integrated action across education, social welfare, and digital regulation sectors. While these documents establish important priorities, existing research suggests that further efforts are needed to translate policy commitments into consistent school-level practice.

Annexes (if applicable):

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