



PODCAST Participation of children at risk 1. Interview with two social workers

By Agency Growing Up, Belgium, 2022

Part 1: Child and social worker

Nele: Good afternoon, I'm Nele Haedens, policy officer at Agency Growing Up. I am very pleased you want to do this, share your experiences about the participation of young children in child protection. I am so happy we can have this conversation because you do this within your practice.

Perhaps it would be nice to introduce yourself so that people know who is sitting around the table.

Cindy: I'm Cindy. I work as a social worker at the Youth Care Support Centre (OCJ) in Ypres. And that has been since 1995.

Jasmien: My name is Jasmien and I work at the juvenile court social service (SDJ) of Ypres, about 6 years now.

Nele: Then we'll just get straight to it. What does participation of young children mean for you?

Cindy: Ultimately, we work with parents, children, and families. Everyone has a voice, especially children. After all, we work here, on a daily basis around children, and we think it is really important to include their story. No matter how young they are, even babies, we expect that we can already see them. The interaction with their parents is their way of saying something. Regarding the development, but also from the moment that they communicate with language, which is usually when they start at school (2.5 to 3 years), that we also try to talk to them.

Jasmien: Also, often in a creative way with Duplo or with the 3 houses (Signs of Safety), where we talk with the children playfully, how are you doing, how are you doing at home, what is going well but also, what is going less well.

Cindy: When it doesn't work well with words, with materials, just seeing the child is also very important. Who are they and how do they function? That is something that is very much in evolution. I can make a comparison with the past. I think it's great because that's what it's all about. The children can tell us very important things. I think there is evolution within childcare. But the consideration is still made that young children cannot express themselves; they are too young to say what is happening. While we have to conclude that this is not the case at all. How young they are, they can tell us a lot.

Jasmien: And it is also important as a social worker that the children can see you or feel who we are, why we are coming to our family. To build up a relationship, it helps to talk to children. It is not

always obvious, especially with children who are not so verbally proficient. But we always manage to get children involved in one way or another.

Nele: Cindy, you just said, children can tell us many things. Not everyone is convinced of it. You clearly do, I see that too when you're talking about it. They bring you something and what do you do with it?

Cindy: Initially always listen to their story. I think this is very important. And try to indicate to them who we are, why we come. First, explain what our social service is. That is not always easy. But even with young children by drawing or Duplo, we can explain, "We are here to see if everything is going well with the children. That's why I'm here, to talk to you. We also work with other people." Also be very clear to them, "I also want that it goes well with you and what can we do for mom and dad."

Children sometimes tell us things and we also talk about feelings. Even very young children know what it is, to cry, to be afraid. They can tell us things that make us say, "Look, if there are things that need to change, what do you want us to do? Who can we talk to about that?"

Jasmien: The feedback to the parents from the children's story is also very important. We often notice that children are okay with that. And of course, that we tell their story with the necessary care. And some children and young people say it's okay for them to be there themselves. Or that they can tell it themselves in our presence. For example, by drawing the parents can accept it more when the children can bring it themselves, more than when we tell it without the children being present. Of course, there is a complete process beforehand. You have to discuss it with the children, discuss it with the parents, "Do you agree too?" Sometimes that works and you come to very beautiful things.

Cindy: Kids are very brave too. I am often surprised too. We will prepare it. But the moment Mom and Dad are at the table, they can say, "That's why I drew that."

Especially children from a case that is already closed because it was ok. Mom ends up with a new partner, in a situation of intra-family violence. The moment I talk to that girl, first grade (6 years), she knows, from the last time, she already knew Duplo and the drawings. And then she can say, "it's happening again". I found it touching because for a child this means more than we thought, "that's where I have to tell it, it's in that place that something can be done."

In doing so, we must be careful that we always remain honest with the children. I think it's always very important to tell them, "We're going to try to talk to mom to change that. We will also bring other people to the table who can help, but we cannot promise that we can solve it." We must remain honest with the children.

Jasmien: We cannot promise that we won't do anything with their story. If they bring stories about abuse or an emergency, we say that we have to do something about that. We will always discuss very clearly what we are going to do with it. But we are not going to promise that we won't do anything.

Nele: I try to imagine it. But, for example, what is the youngest age that you should do this, tell them that you are worried and that you should do something about it? Because maybe children can think, I'm going to tell something, it's safe, it will stay here. How do you do that then?

Jasmien: it is always very important to tell that in advance. As Cindy said, it is very important to introduce ourselves: who are we, what does our service do? I think it is very important to say that always in the first conversation, "we treat what you say very confidentially. But if you tell us certain things that are really not okay at home, then we will have to do something with it." The earliest you

can discuss this with a child is fairly early. I think the age of 5-6 years, this is already possible, provided the necessary tools.

Cindy: I just had a child who literally went to put daddy in the corner with the Duplos. "Daddy has to stand in the corner, Daddy hits." This is their way to indicate that it is not okay, that it is not allowed. So, it's like, "Nobody can hit, Daddy can't hit either." It is difficult to indicate to the child that I am going to do something with it. But by saying every time "this is not allowed, this is not okay", I think you are giving the child a sign. Recognition also for their story, "what happens to you is not okay. Or what happens at your house is not okay." Then you often see a burden falling off their shoulders.