



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

By Agency Growing Up, Belgium, 2022

Part 3: Reflecting on the case

Nele: What I still found striking is that you say “they see Cindy”, and then you've decided, no matter what, we're going to sit together with Cindy. What was your motivation to do that?

Jasmien: The children's question. And at that moment, to pick up the kids, is emotionally very difficult. And then those kids ask something, and you say, “yes, we have to do that.” Because that was their only connection. Cindy was their only support. They didn't know me. They had never seen me. And then you have to go for it. Cindy was here. That presented itself. I don't know if we'll ever have that again, but at the time, it was pure instinct. The children ask, so we do.

Cindy: But that would also be nice if that could be expanded more. Even if it is in such a situation, that is wishful thinking, that we will collect the children together from OCJ¹ and SDJ².

They also miss a lot, because parents will come to that commitment meeting. And suddenly we are there with an obstruction. And this is so important. Therefore, we were able to say to them, “Jasmien is now following up.” That we can do that transfer so beautifully. And, “I believe this is going to go well. Jasmien will also listen to you.”

Cindy : And in the ideal world, we should be able to do that a lot more. Because for children it is sometimes very unclear. OCJ, SDJ, what are you doing differently?

Nele : Yes, for a child it doesn't matter.

Cindy : No, above that, there are sometimes changes of social workers within the same social service, which is sometimes unclear for children. And then it's all the better that you can do it that way.

Nele : And if we could ask the children what that moment meant to them? What do you think they would say?

Jasmien : I find that very difficult because at that time all those children were in crisis. We know that children in crisis absorb very little. It must have meant something to them. But I think that it is because of that crisis that it is very difficult to assume, what has that meant for them?

¹ OCJ=Civil services, voluntary child welfare

² SDJ= Court mandatory social services

Cindy : It was indeed very emotional. But what I do remember, the oldest girl was 10 years old then. I do know that I said to her, "It's okay". And then suddenly those tears came. We sorted clothes together because there was a lot there. But I think it was good for her that she could get that message, "it's good, it's okay the way it is". And the fact that she had been strong all along, also for those little ones, because she really had a caring role there. And then came those tears. And then, "It's alright, girl, just cry."

Cindy : Really the message, "You can be sad too. You just had to say goodbye to your mom. It is uncertain when you will see her again." And at that moment gave the child permission, "Okay, let it go."

Jasmien : It was also so beautiful. I remember when we arrived in the crisis foster family that the sister could let the youngest child go along with "it's ok, you can go with that lady."

Cindy : I thought so too, as a sister. But I think she was only able to do that because we tried to give her that reassurance.

Jasmien : At that moment she gave her sister the mandate to go to a complete stranger. Which, of course, was screened by the foster care service. But hey, a 10-year-old kid doesn't know that. And actually, at that moment, she gave her sister permission, "Go on, it's okay."

Cindy : That was nice. I think, otherwise, she would have kept her very close to her. Because she also had that caring role.

Nele : And what do you think contributed to that, that she was able to say that anyway?

Cindy : Maybe that reassurance too. Even though they were in crisis. And, I don't know, maybe I was there as a trusted person after all. Because, "Actually, you can trust that here. It is okay."

Jasmien : Because I don't know if that would have worked if I had been alone with her. She didn't know me either. While Cindy knew them well. That is the tiny piece of trust that made it possible for her to do it.

Cindy : And can see that very clearly with children, let someone walk along. Whichever way to go, just hold them. I'm back with my trajectory person. That's so important, especially to those little ones.

Jasmien : They really look at those faces. Sometimes it's simply that box of Duplos that you use. But it is a landmark for them. While older children or adults are going to listen more to what is being said. And there you can make that transfer easier. For children, it is sometimes in those small things, for us common, but recognizable to them.

Cindy : I'd like to go into that. If it goes from OCJ to SDJ and we can do a transfer like that, kids can indeed say, "Ah, but you're like that lady with the Duplo dolls who's been to me once." That is often a landmark for them. "That lady then said such and such, are you going to do that too? Do you also talk to my mom and dad?"

Jasmien : That is so recognizable to them. It also happens that sometimes they no longer know the name. Usually, we also go to the school to see the children. That is a familiar environment. But it also happens that they have to come here sometime. And yes, "that's that lady from Ypres." Okay, that's their link then. But you are recognizable and that is important.

Nele : It's a distressing situation, but in that distressing situation you can be a support for those children. And that has happened. Of course, you want it differently, that they stay together.

Cindy : I think the strength was also that the kids were all together.

Jasmien : I had actually seen all the children separately. I always try to talk to the children separately. And that usually works. And for me, it was the first time that I really saw them all together. And they didn't know who said what either. And I think they also got the message, that's the shared story here.

Nele : And what exactly did you do at that moment?

Jasmien : I think we told them that we too know very well, actually it was about different areas. There was also sexual unsafety there. Either child was a victim, a witness. We also had basic care that was not as it should be. Really everything actually. I think we also mentioned it to them. "What are you entitled to?" Also about the sexual. Because that's not okay. And also especially that we could say, "Look, we know that mommy loves you very much. We know that mom wants to keep you very close to her. But actually, you haven't been able to get the help you need. Mom told a lot to everyone. But it also prohibited you from getting the help you needed. That you didn't get to school. That you didn't get new shoes. That there was no food. Those bad things happened to you too." You could see the recognizability in those oldest children. With the little ones, for them, it's something else. But I remember the child that was just going to school at the time, there was also a daddy taken away from the family, and also abuse towards one of those older children. That she asked, "Where is my daddy now?" And that was the answer she wanted, no matter how young she was. Okay, that was her way then.

I think this is the part I remember of it.

Cindy : As I said before, also the fact that all the children were present in the room. Not only the oldest ones but also those who were playing. We know that no matter how young they are, children always catch something. Very often we have parents who say, "They are in their cribs. They have not heard that." For example, if there is domestic violence. But then we can tell the parents, no matter how young they are, there is always something they hear. And that's why it's so important that they can hear the story. Sometimes parents are scared. "Did my kids say that to you? We thought they didn't hear that. That they were in their bed. Or that they were playing outside."