



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

By Agency Growing Up, Belgium, 2022

Part 4: No answers, no place

Cindy : I think we have to think about it, what we do, you make something rolling anyway. Our conversations go very deep. We are also not therapists or those who can talk to those children every week. That remains very difficult for me as a social worker. We go very deep to know what is happening and what is going on. And in the whole Signs of Safety idea, that is such a beautiful thing. But at the same time so brittle, so fragile. We open a drawer somewhere. We can't hold tight and we don't always know what happens to it. Very often, we are also unable to provide the answer that is needed. Specifically, today I am facing a harrowing situation which is a bit similar. But the girl is not so lucky. There is no crisis bed, there is no possibility. She has to return home after 14 days. And that's something, the child's voice is so important. I want to hear it every time. But how am I going to explain it to that girl tonight, I don't know myself yet. There is no answer to that. That is also something, listening to children. If there is an emergency, there must be an answer. We are also very weak. I find that immensely difficult, in addition to the beautiful stories.

Jasmien : Then we come back to that reliability. That is so important, but how reliable are you if you can't bring them into a safe situation, because there is a lack of places. Everywhere, we constantly have to say to people who have a request for help "sorry sir, madam, young person, for that support you may have to wait for another 1, 2 3 or maybe even 4 years.

Cindy : And above all, when I think about the child I have in mind, the siblings are still at home. "Why me and not the others?" There is no explanation for that. And I have to say very often, "I don't know either". However, that is at odds with listening and trying to act. I think we always try and that is tonight trying to make as many appointments as possible in the hope that it can become a bit okay. But actually, you know it's not right. That is also the hardest thing to explain to the child. At that point, you have to go over there and give the explanation. And that breaks your heart.

Jasmine : That's right. I was now thinking, how do I do 'word and pictures' then. We have it very clear in this situation, why the children can no longer live at home. But how do I explain then, "but actually you have to go home again." Or how do I explain, it was little brother this week, "you've been there for 2 weeks now, and you have to go to another place now". The only question I got was a 6-year-old child, "What have I done? Why am I being punished again?" "You are not punished, boy. But there is no place there now." "There is a place there. I slept there last night in that bed. I do not believe you". And then you must, beyond your own limits, get that boy into your car and then go to another bed, another place, of which we know, Wednesday it will come our way again. What will it be on Wednesday?

If I want to say something about the child's voice, I think, listen to it, because that's what it's about. These are also attachment problems that we help to maintain.

Cindy : I also had it this week, in a family, a mom who said “you want me to have stability in my life, that I have a steady partner, that I have a permanent place to live, but all you do, is just constantly letting my child go from place to place because there is no fixed place. How do you want me to have stability?” Yes, then she is so right.

Jasmien : A child is always entitled to an explanation. But those are also the moments when we can't give an explanation. But also, there is no safety or support to explain to the child about his own situation. Because we must not forget that, if a child goes to residential care, we must be able to explain it. You can explain it if the child can feel secure. Then it can be understood. But we cannot give that security to those children. That's difficult.

Nele : What are you doing at such a moment?

Cindy : At such a moment, still tell the story. But I know it may not be understood and I know I have to repeat it again. And I will keep repeating that. That child is entitled to that. But the problem is, there's no one else to catch that story either. As social workers, we can't constantly sit next to the child. We come for a moment and then it is important someone can keep connected to the child. “What has been said here? What are those drawings? What did that mean again?” But if a child is in a crisis bed, it is not there. Is there anyone who can hold it? That's like, we want to, but we can't do it all.

Jasmien : Sometimes, it is said literally: bed, bath, bread. And yes, a child has no one to hold onto at that moment. They cannot go to the same school because those crisis places are often spread over the entire county. Every time to a new school. Some are going to a new school every two weeks.

Cindy : Or not being able to go to school anymore. I had 4 children on September 1 who could not go to school. While they would love to. Then you're just on the other side of the county.

Jasmien : And then often also a place that parents can't reach to visit because it is so far. That the children then feel alone.

Cindy : And yes, what do you do at that moment?

Jasmien: You often see a child clinging to you during a transfer. As a social worker, that face you see again. And then you think, you really shouldn't cling to me. Actually, you should be able to cling to a good carer who will go along with you for a while. Or even better, people within your network. But there are none, because of other choices you have to make. And that's hard! Presence, reliability, availability, but actually I don't know where it all goes. And for those kids, I think you should agree with them. You are not reliable. You say, “You have a bed that you can rest for a while. And then I have to leave again.”

Nele: That's the other side of the story. But still, in that difficult work, in those difficult circumstances, you do beautiful things to take children along. Quite rightly so and somehow this also needs to be said.

Cindy: And that part, if I tell from the OCJ story, it is very difficult if it has to go to the prosecutor's office and juvenile court. I think we still have the luxury that things usually go smoothly. But we also have other public prosecutor's offices where it can take a very long time before a social worker of the juvenile court comes. Or that the juvenile judge arrives. And that is so difficult, what does that

mean for those children? And there is really nothing to explain to them. And those are the things in day-to-day work, where you say, that's an injustice done to children from the systems in which we work. Likewise, children who should be able to stay in a crisis bed, but still have to be taken away because there is no alternative. That is an injustice. And then we can say a lot about the voice of the child. And then we're going to listen to that voice. But it blocks there.

Jasmien : I don't have an answer either, only anger and keep on persevering. And knocking on all doors wherever you can. Because I don't know, that's how we feel, but I don't know if it's so clear to the 'higher levels' what it's like in practice. I had to explain something to a child on Wednesday, and again tonight. And that's the challenge, how do I stay in contact with that child.

Nele : And that's something you can influence. You can rightly be very angry about those other things. It's unjust. But I think we all have to look at what I can influence to be able to do the best possible for that child.

Cindy : That's true, but then I agree with Jasmien's comment, we don't always have the time for that, but we make time for it. But this also does not happen between 9 and 5 o'clock. Those are the evenings, the afternoons.

Jasmien : We also see that a lot of social workers drop out. To involve everyone, that's not 'nine to five'. And to fill in all the paperwork, documents and questionnaires, yes...

Cindy : But those are also the things that are not measured. Everything else is measured, registration system and stuff. Do you talk to that child, how many times do you talk, do you give a nice explanation, when do you do that? While that is actually the core business.

Jasmien : And this has to be measured.

Nele : We'll say this has to be included in the registration system (laughter).

Cindy : Yes, sometimes we don't dare to register anymore.

Nele : And then the 'higher levels' can't see, don't know... I understand what you're saying. Because actually, we should measure what counts. And what counts?

Cindy : And in the system, that file isn't registered yet as it should be. I've been dealing with that for a month.

Jasmien : And then you can't...

Cindy : Yes, I can, but I don't know when.

I think we should also not forget that the pace is immense.

Jasmien : And higher and higher. And we see that more and more of our clients no longer participate in this. We see that more and more.

Cindy : And that's unmeasurable. But indeed, how are you going to make things visible.

Nele : But also the reason why you want to make something visible. I think, as a social worker you also want to make a difference in the lives of children. And what is that? How can you find out? How do you see that what you have done has had an impact?

Cindy : You can hardly write that down. One sees it differently than the other.

Jasmien : It's also a long-term thing. I think we can write down very clearly what the impact can be if the child stays in that situation. But the impact of what we do is long-term.

Cindy : Sometimes I think it's nice, young people who approach me on the street. I think it's great that you still recognize me. I also have to think about who that is. And they can also say something about it. Who at the time, as my client, was very angry about what you were doing. But who can now say, "It has been necessary."

Nele : Those 3 who were in the car with you, you had an impact.

Jasmien : But we often don't see that anymore. It is recognizable what you say. I recently received a text message from a girl. She is now an adult and has a child. She was often very angry at me. She often had to go to a closed setting. And now she says, "Actually, I'm glad you were there for me." Many people ask why I keep doing that, being a social worker. Because it is intense. But those are the moments when I think we can make a difference.

Cindy : It is again about reliability and acting consistently. Do what you said you will do, even if it's hard. You actually notice that this works. And they come back to that later. What I'm talking about is still as it was in the past. In that way, that we could go on a longer trajectory with young people. I also think that when we talk about the voice of children and the short trajectories we have to walk. We also have a lot of gaps there. Not only when a case has to be transferred to the juvenile court, but also when it is closed.

Because we trust that the social worker who follows up will continue following the family. We hope that. But sometimes we see that children are referred again later and this has not happened. And in which that social worker was forced to close it. I think of the child guidance centre who had a very good intention. But parents at some point decided to switch school. And then you see everything happening again. And I think, that's something to reflect hard on. Ok, our services, it is good that we are a limited time in the life of a child, on the one hand. If you don't have to be in youth protection, you shouldn't be in it either. But at the same time, that hatch is also there.