



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

By Agency Growing Up, Belgium, 2022

Part 5: Triangle child, parent, social worker and...

Jasmien : I think of another situation in which children can draw that so explicitly. What they hear but also what they think that is happening. Sometimes it's even more intense for them.

Cindy : For example, I had a girl who said, "I think it's worse to lie in my bed because then I can't protect mom. Then I can't be in between. Because if I'm in the middle, Daddy won't hit me. But when I'm in my bed, I can't protect mom." And that girl wanted to say that to mom and dad. And that really moved them.

Jasmien : I'm also thinking of something else. Sometimes it is also in the concreteness of how children are telling things. In that situation, there has been a fight. Dad was then locked out of the house. And he tried every way to get in. And basically, that kid was going to tell it and draw it, "There was a bang on the window. A hundred times, no, a thousand times, no, what is that called?" We then tried to draw it. And she told it to mom and dad too. "Yes, but she was sleeping, wasn't she?" It is then in that concreteness. They hear that banging and then you notice, by being able to make connection with something, towards those parents, because "there had been no quarrel" for them. Then you can talk about it. Because when it comes to that knocking on that window and whatever it was at that moment, then you see two parents looking at each other, "it is indeed so". And then you can proceed. They can sometimes say, "Mum really had blood here and brother that", so you also bring those people along to the concreteness of the situation. And, then you often see some change among the parents. It is so powerful what the children have brought in their childish way. I think as an adult, we wouldn't be so specific. We don't think about that. But a child has seen it.

Nele : I think that's great, because of what you say, you don't just talk to those children. But how do you manage to reveal that to those parents. I think that's really remarkable.

Cindy : That doesn't always work. But the moments when it works, you can really move on and sometimes work more with parents than before. It is sometimes only then that parents realise, "something should change here."

Jasmien : That's a very powerful lever. The police report it states "that and that and that". "But no, that's not true, that's an exaggeration." But a child that tells something, is what touches parents more. And you can start with those parents. I believe in it. And, they often come up with solutions themselves. So beautiful, so powerful. Occasionally you also have parents that don't touch them.

Well, those are different people. And then we also know that we will have to walk different paths. The request the kids have. Actually, they are making a serious demand.

Cindy : Yes, we know it works when we tell the story together with the children. Or let the children tell the story and we're there too. We know that works. We see that this really has added value. And we really try to do that. There are often children who say, "We don't like that." But then we try to talk to them anyway, "How could we do that?" Without coercion. But really by discussing it with them.

Jasmien : It's so strange, but actually, children often want to start that conversation. And I often notice that with referrals or people who don't have that much experience with it yet, that insecurity. And, "That's not going to work yet, they're not going to want it." But no, it's just the opposite. And, also in their childish way. I think of an alcohol problem, a child was drawing such a curl. And I didn't understand. "If daddy is in the car and has been drinking, he drives like this. And then he drives into the canal and then I'm so scared." Just daddy, he says "I don't drink". "Look dad, that's what's happening. That is what your child is afraid of. That you're going to have an accident." And I recall, that man really started to cry. "Look, I should do something about it." I think we have thousands of examples, those examples that make it so beautiful. And those are often things in which we should not continue to play a very active role. Because people themselves...

Cindy : And also become to realise that something has to change. And often you see a relieve if children can talk about it to their parents. Because that is often something they have already thought about, "How could I say that to mom or dad that I don't like that." But if you give them the tools to do that together. Or to draw, sometimes they don't think about that. "Maybe you should draw. Maybe then mom and dad will understand." Yes, sometimes you really see a relieve.

Jasmien : Not only with the children, but also sometimes with the parents. Sometimes it's there, and they can't cope with it themselves. And that sometimes they need that last push to do something with it. And that are also sometimes referrals of which social workers say, "Dad or mom doesn't want to do anything about that alcohol problem." And then they ask us, "they need to be in psychiatry." That's not what we do. But well, that's how we deal with it.

Nele : How should I depict that, especially with those younger children? They may not be present to tell the parents themselves?

Cindy : You can make agreements about that with children. For example, "Is it okay if I come over on a Wednesday afternoon when you're home too? That you might be playing, and meanwhile I'll tell mom and dad. That mom and dad also know that I know your story? Or would you rather sit there?" Or make agreements about what happens next, if we know that this will have a major impact on the parents. We know that there may be a chance of aggression, so we can make arrangements. "Can I perhaps take you to aunt or uncle afterwards? Or should we inform the neighbours?" That they know that the child can go over there. Or who can I call? I think this is very important. That we're going to tell the parents, but that you have a plan B. And that you always talk about that plan B with them too. Some children also ask, "can I come with you, if you have told mom and dad that?" And then you have to say, "You can't come with me, but we can find a solution. We can find out if you can go to someone who you also know well. Until it calms down a bit." I think this is very important, that you don't just tell it, but very clearly discuss with children about what comes next.

Jasmien : Preparations are super important. And I also hear you make the link to networking.

Cindy : I also think of a situation where the child said, "I want to do it myself with mom. And I really want to be there. But with stepdad, I don't dare to do that yet." And then we also said, "That's okay. Who else can be there who could later talk to stepdad?" And actually we started with mom, the girl and someone from her network. And we actually went through that together. That didn't work out well with mom. It's not always a success story. Mom has also her own problems. We also had the feeling that it didn't moved her, no matter how intense it was at the time what the child was talking. But it was then the network figure said very severe to mom, "Did you hear what your child said here?" If I had said this, this would not be accepted. But the fact that the network figure was able to point this out to mom again, "that's intense here." And in the next conversation we tried to involve stepfather. I appreciated how a network figure took contained the child's story. And actually, that network figure first visited mom and stepfather. What was discussed here and based on the story of the child, that made that stepfather also came to us. We can tell the story of the child, thanks to the presence of the network figure, who also took the girl home. But where we have agreed, if we continue the conversation, the girl will go with her home.

I think those are the beautiful stories. And yet we can continue. That was someone the police couldn't get in contact with. He refused to speak to anyone. That man also said during the interview, "I have to do something about my aggression, huh." In the meantime, he has even started group meetings, without us saying that it is necessary. Mom is another story. It's still not affecting her. But meanwhile, we have stepfather with us.

Jasmien : We can see, if the network can take care of the concerns, this can also be a relieve for children. Because they also know that grandma, uncle or aunt or the neighbours will approach the parents if it happens again.

Nele : It also gives confidence to children, if they say something it can also end well.

And that's also important to say it again to the children together with the network figure, "actually, we want you to say it to that person too. Look, mom is there. Mom also hears that we want that too. And that's okay." Then you also broaden their environment a bit because we are not always there either. And usually not when they need us.