



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

By Agency Growing Up, Belgium, 2022

Part 6: Lessons learned

Nele : And what you say, by reflecting on this, what do you learn from this as a social worker for the future?

Jasmien : I think it is very important that in the rush we often work in, to take time every now and then to really reflect on this. To think about it, how can I bring in the voice of the child? No matter how often parents shout, that their voice is heard. And that is often possible at a team or a case meeting. Then I think that much more attention is paid to the voice of the child than before. There is always a colleague who says, “yes, but what does that child think?” Or “Have you talked with that child and parent yet?” Those are the moments where we are constantly reminded of that. The child's voice is very important.

Cindy : And continue to include it in your evaluation. Always from the start. We must also remain alert that we include them in the evaluation. And then it's best to talk to them alone. I don't always believe to on home visit where everyone sits together around the table in the living room. We really have to draw to listen to each other.

Jasmien : In some situations it can be very valuable, but sometimes it is still important to see the child alone and also in neutral environment. To see them at school, or somewhere where they are not with daddy, not with mom or not with a third party.

Nele : And as long as it is reconnected with each other. I am really impressed.

Cindy : I think we keep on learning from children. I've been working for a while now. But there is also such an evolution. Today's 10-year-old child is not the 10-year-old of yesterday. And in the future, that's again another 10-year-old.

Jasmien : And I think that children really help you to reflect. What are we actually doing? And a child who says “But yes, Jasmien, I've been placed here for so long now. And actually, most of all I really want to go home. But because my mom or dad won't do what you ask, or what the juvenile judge asks, that's why I still have to stay here?” Yes, then you also think about it, in fact that is also a kind of gap. If things go bad at home, and so bad that there is unsafety, then the children have to leave the house. We often punish the children. While the children often have to go to another school, they can no longer continue their hobbies, can no longer play with the friends in the neighbourhood. And I see that as a gap. We should be able to do more with the parents. While we try very hard. But sometimes children can say things that make you stop and think, what are we doing?

Cindy : Or we should be able to do things together, parents and children. And then I think some parents won't be able either. Because that percentage remains high. I don't think we should be naive about that. They may be parents who can still be powerful if they can do it together with someone else. If there is someone around who can take it over for a while. But we know there are safe moments together.

Jasmien : And we also see a lot more, for example, in residential care, for example when a baby is placed. In the past it was unthinkable that parents could visit every day, give a bath, and give the bottle along. Or that there are a lot of homes that have a context apartment. Or, for example, a service that I have worked with, they had a caravan on the domain where the parents could stay overnight with their children. It was not possible to let them sleep at home. But that they could have the feeling, despite the fact that we knew that the children may not be able to go home anymore, that they can have that family moment with parents. And we see that residential homes are thinking more and more about this.

Cindy : That everyone actively supports, and that children are not just parked. And I think that the services are already doing very nice things. I hope that foster care could also do more beautiful things. Because those are the group of children where the indication is often that the children cannot return home. But parents remain parents and the children remain children of mom and dad. This also needs to be dealt with better. I think this is so important. Because at the end of the journey, they somehow return. And it's so important that we can lay a foundation. That they also know very well, "who is my daddy, who is my mommy? What are their strengths? But why is it sometimes so difficult?" And that we can offer them solutions or some resilience. "That will remain your mom and dad. That will remain their working issue. But how can you try to be strong enough to deal with that?" Because we disappear at some point. And those children also grow up, but they continue to be confronted with these kind of things. I think we should continue to pay attention to that. For that resilience in that area. And that can only be done in contact with their parents. And I think there is a nice evolution coming. But it has to be in all kind of services.

Jasmien : And it can be even better.

Nele : And if you now think of "giving voice to children", let it resonate, what tips would you give?

Cindy : Don't be afraid to do it! Sit on the floor with those kids, no matter how young they are. Use material.

Jasmien : Go for a walk, if they block when they are facing you. I did that recently. A girl wouldn't talk to me. And the social service is by the sea. I went for a walk in the dunes with her and gradually she started to talk. I thought we should be able to do that more. Try it another way. Think outside the box. That's really important. Very often we see them sitting opposite each other at the table. But for many kids, that doesn't work.

Cindy : And keep trying. Just because it doesn't work one time doesn't mean it won't work the next. Don't let go, don't let them go.

Jasmien : And I also think it is very important to say, put yourself in the place of the child. A complete stranger comes there to talk to you about the problems at home. How does that person know? Where does that come from? Then it is not unusual that the child will not say much the first time. So keep trying.

Cindy : And try to explain. If a child is referred to us via the public prosecutor's office, which is actually the largest amount of referrals, take a police car toy with you. That is recognizable to them. The police were there. And then you can often continue. But I think we just, I see that with other social workers, that this is insecurity. "They are not yet strong enough verbally." Yes, true, but in their few words they can bring things or in a creative way.

Jasmien : Or let them draw.

Cindy : Or even if it's still a little one. Yesterday I had a home visit, where until recently I always saw the child sitting tight in his chair, staring straight ahead. In the meantime, there is somehow peace in the family. Yesterday I saw that baby for the first time and I thought, wow. That's a sign to me, it's better here. It's more relaxed. That child cannot speak yet, but the child shows "my development is improving again". A child can also say this to us, without words.

Jasmien : And that's why it's very important to see that interaction between parent and child. You sometimes have social workers who say, "We don't go when the kids are home. Because what if they hear something?" Then I think, it's just very valuable to go then. To see the interaction. That you can see how the parents treat their children. That you can see how the children are at home.

Cindy : That's also classic, "they're not supposed to hear it".

Jasmien : They know anyway.

Cindy : They know better than the social workers. That trepidation, I think, let it pass.

Nele : And whatever helped you to let go of that trepidation?

Cindy : That's a very difficult question. Because I think it's important to hear that voice of the child. I may have "the luxury" of being grown up, I was in regular contact with these children. These were children who were in my class. And those are children just like us. That was my experience then. And then I thought, actually you shouldn't speak to them differently.

I think that's a very difficult question. But I think if you choose a job within youth care, you choose to do something for children. And you can only work for those children by involving them. And you can only involve those children if you also know their story. And if you know what it's about. And I think we have seen so many times that parents bring stories from... we are not going to give the interpretation because it can be so different, but which are so at odds with the story that children bring. We must continue to pay attention to that. Because those are the forgotten children. The parents who ask for help with other things, which are actually beside the point. And then everyone thinks, there is assistance and it is running. "Look, mom and dad work with us." But that sometimes it is about very different matters than what the request for help is on. I think we've already seen some very distressing situations. Then we focused on something else all these years. Sometimes that is scary. We only know the top of the iceberg. Every time you go further, something else comes along. And those are the dangerous ones, the difficult ones. And those are the ones who are sometimes reported by the public prosecutor because something happened that could no longer be controlled. We can avoid that by seeing the children. Watch out, they won't bring everything either.

Jasmien : Especially if they don't get the mandate from the parents. If parents have a lot of anger at our services, you may not get further because the children do not have the mandate from their parents. That happens very often.

Cindy : I think that's important too. Conversely, I always try to do it. We announce to parents in advance that we work like this, "and that also means that we talk to the children." We will make an appointment at school. But in practice, parents will never know when I'm going. But it was announced somehow. And then, I will also start with the child by saying "I've already seen your mom and dad once. And they know I'm going to speak to you." And also at the end of the conversation, I usually give the child something, even if it is a drawing or a piece of paper, to let mom and dad know that I've seen the child. In such a way, transparency can also be provided. And that is, in our way, giving a mandate to the child: "Just say it, it's good. And I'm going to call mom and dad to say I've been here. And we're going to set another appointment. Will we do it together or how do you want it?"

Jasmien : Funny, because I do that too. That works!

Cindy : That works. For example, if you discuss with the child, "I'm going to go see mom and dad now. What can I bring from your story?" You can really see the burden reduce: oh yes, they've already seen mom and dad. And mom and dad are okay with being here. That is so important for the child.

Cindy : And also at the end, going back to class. Because sometimes very bad things have happened. Talking to the child, no one really should know what we have said here. So I'm literally going to say, "If a friend asks, what are you going to say? What could you say? What would you like to say?"

They can also be very creative at times. But hey, it's their story. It's not minor. That social worker who comes to chat about what's at home. And then you have to focus again on a little math or language.

Jasmien : I once had that the teacher called afterwards, "Wow, it has been quite difficult after your conversation." And then I thought, phew.

Cindy : Sometimes it are the little things. In the nursery and primary school, the teacher knows that we are there. But in secondary, last week there was another one, first secondary, she had started there for about 3 weeks. "I am now going to join you to the administrative office, we now ask for a note that you can give to the teacher that you will be in class later." Those are the children who otherwise get the question "where are you coming from now?" It's sometimes in those little things to make them feel, I've actually come here to bother you with this. And you don't have to answer again now. We should not underestimate, those children are looked at from a different perspective.

Jasmien : Sometimes they are also children who behave more difficult.

Cindy : Those are small things, but they appreciate it. You notice, "I can probably trust him."

Nele : I don't know if there's anything else you want to bring?

Jasmien : If we had much more time, we would be able to listen to their voice so much more.

Cindy : And that's right. We don't have that time. And where do you put your priorities? And it would be so nice if we could only prioritise there. And that we can get rid of many other things. Because that is actually essential of what we are doing.

Jasmien : And sometimes due to a multitude of other tasks, you really have to be aware of that, I'm going to talk to the child first. And before I do all that other stuff.

Cindy : I think the worst thing is having to cancel an appointment with a child. I had it again on Wednesday. I always find it hard to explain. Because actually they are entitled to that moment. But then something else occurs. Children are also incredibly resilient. But yeah, ...

Jasmien : We have to pay constant attention to it. But it is also a worn thing. I think it is important that we pay attention to it. But also everyone around the child. That it is not only the social worker. But that everyone around the child, and school, network, support, everyone is part of it.

Cindy : I just sometimes find it regrettable to see that we are apparently the only ones who dare to speak about those difficult topics.

Jasmien : And who brings this difficult message to the children. While our heart also breaks in those moments. But you have to do it and it must be done.

Cindy : And actually you see, if you were in a really difficult conversation with a child, the same for an adult, sometimes it's really so valuable for the future.