



PODCAST Participation of children at risk. Episode 1 – 6. Interview with two social workers

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FULL VERSION

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. This is responsible for voluntary child protection. 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 must 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 must 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 not okay at home, then we will have to do something with it." The earliest you can

discuss this with a child is quite 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.

Nele: We are also here together because a colleague of yours was thinking of you, regarding a case, a specific situation. Would you like to tell this and then say where you were really proud of, and satisfied with what you did?

Cindy: I'm going to try to outline what I personally think is a gap and how we handled it. So the referral from OCJ to SDJ, we have our concrete steps, a 'commitment conversation' with parents. Children from 12 years on also sit at the table. Children under the age of 12 are 'forgotten' in this situation. I personally find this very difficult, because we, from OCJ, have already gone a long trajectory with those children. And from the moment we believe that we cannot change it sufficiently, we will take the step to the public prosecutor's office, to the juvenile court. Children often get stuck there with further explanation. Mom and Dad are at the commitment meeting, it blocks and then it stops somehow. It happens that we go to school one more time to give those children an explanation. But in practice, this is something that is not regulated.

The situation we are now talking about is the situation where we started with serious concerns in a case with already a lot of support. But, where we have a mom who 'can say it well', who has a very big need for help. Where everyone thinks, a cooperating mom. Where they kept their attention and focus on themselves. But, in which we had to conclude that the voice of the children, 6 children, has never been properly listened to. We started with that. The children told a lot, whereby we have asserted that these children could no longer live at home. The commitment conversation had therefore escalated with mom who said, "I'm leaving" and we don't know where to. We had to pass this on to you, juvenile court, with urgency. The children brought so much and could not get the explanation any further that they were now taken away from mom. And then it comes to you.

Jasmien: And then it comes to the juvenile judge. Then the juvenile judge says, "The children urgently need to get out of here." Then it's time to call the crisis line. That was partly prepared by the OCJ. And miraculously, the crisis line had 6 places for all 6 children at that time, which is not obvious. 6 in different places. We don't see that happening anymore nowadays. We see that the crisis line is currently overextended. But then we had 6 places and my colleague, and I went to pick up the children at mom's house. Very poignant, the children were already ready with their backpacks. And then we came to the service because we had to arrange where the children had to go, who to this place, who to that place. They had clothes in one big bag. That also had to be divided. And at that moment, when I drove down the street with 3 children in the car, they say: "Cindy, Cindy is walking there, our social worker, is walking there. And I say, "Yes, you know Cindy. She has come to talk to you." "We want to see Cindy." Yes, at that time it was not common for us to do anything with it. But then we really felt, yes, we must do something. My colleague then took care of the children. I went to see Cindy and said, "What do we do with this?" And Cindy said, "I'm coming down too and we're going to bring the story to those kids."

Whereby Cindy and I together, especially Cindy then from her role, have brought her story to the children: "Look, for such and that reason, because of what you have told, it is now to the juvenile judge. That's why you have to go to another place to live now, you can't be with mom anymore." And all the children were present in the same room. I think the oldest was 12 at the time but had a disability. And there were some children close to us listening. Some were playing. But everyone heard the same story. And that was super valuable for those children that we could do that at that time. Something that doesn't happen often, if at all. Something we could look back on proudly at that time, or afterwards, well we did that.

Cindy: We would like more of that. Actually, this was very valuable for those children. I also thought it was very valuable to exonerate them. They had brought a lot, but things that they also indicated, that this must stop, must change. And I said to them, "We're going to try, but we can't promise anything." At that time, the juvenile judge was able to intervene effectively. All the cards were super favourable on the table. We can no longer imagine this. Anyway, there has been an answer to the needs of the children. I think they also had the feeling, "we have been able to tell our story." It was also really not okay on all levels. I don't think it could have been more dramatic. But they have been heard in it. And they have also been able to feel that the grown-ups have decided. I think we also said to them a few times, "it is the grown-ups, we have decided, the juvenile judge has made a decision. Because it's not okay what's happening to you." I saw the oldest girl nod and the tears came and came. Yes, we could also put it into concrete terms. "It's not okay that you have to take care of your siblings, that you are punished because things aren't right." There was also abuse. That was very recognisable for the older children. It was a beautiful moment.

Jasmien : Yes, and then again that exonerated the eldest children. "What you do, taking care of the youngest children, that's very nice, but that's not your job and that's not okay. That's what adults should do." And I think at that point they did get the feeling that they were being heard. I think this is very important.

Cindy : "And whatever message mom has given you, you can feel good about where you are going now." I also thought that was very important, that they should have the mandate to say, "you can rest now, you will be taken care of." And then we also had the luxury that the children could stay where they then went. Which is not the case today.

Jasmien : And yes, the children have had to change places a few times. They are not all together at the moment. So for the children, it is still a lot to deal with. But mom continues to give the message, "you can feel good, be there." That means that the children are doing well.

Nele : Maybe you said it and I didn't hear it because I'm so impressed. What makes that mommy could say that too? What have you done to achieve that?

Cindy : It has already been a very long journey with mom. I think Mom has been in tremendous stress situations over the past few years. Her own childhood was very stressful, laced with assistance. And on that, Mommy had fought really hard. She fought very hard to keep her children with her. But at that moment I did notice a kind of relief from Mom, which may sound very strange. Not "pff my kids are in residential care." But "Wow, I can come to myself for a while. They are taken care of it." And, to this day, it is still unburdened from her. And you can see that she is still recovering from the past period. I think that's what made Mommy say, "It's just too much for me." And she now indicates, "I try to take care of myself. While I couldn't do that the last period." But of course, the children have

been taken away and are the victims of the situation. They have the feeling, “we are being punished for a situation at home and we really couldn't do anything about.”

Cindy : And very important in that story is the referral from OCJ to SDJ. I think that, no matter how young the children are, the youngest was just there, there was one who did not go to school yet, there was one who had just started, to talk to all the children separately. I think that's what made this situation last so long. There was support but everyone was so focused on mom. And eventually, they saw those children somewhere in the house. But the children's story was not told. In fact, it was harrowing on every level. The voice of the child is very important.

Nele : And actually it came when you started this.

Cindy : When we start in OCJ, we will always talk to the parents, but also to the children. That's part of it. That was actually something Mom blocked from the start at the OCJ. “Why do you have to do that? Listen to all the social workers involved.” We then withstood: “That's how it goes, we will talk to your children”.

Jasmien : I think this has also a long history. It's keeping the kids away from school, not to being able to talk to them. The children missed school. Really trying to avoid the social worker so that the children could not talk to us. I think that at that moment, this requires perseverance from the social worker to want to hear the story of the children and to go for it.

Cindy : I also think of the oldest girl. At that time, she was about 13-14 years old. She had already left home before. She had been referred before. But the girl was effectively collected by someone else when we said, "We need to see her." I wanted to go to school, but she wasn't there.

That was also a big challenge, how are we going to keep it sustainable for that child? She is telling us things. We must also be able to maintain that connection and remain reliable. That is always very difficult. We could do it in that situation. But that remains the greatest challenge.

Nele : What would the girl say that you have done?

Cindy : I think I kept on holding her, in every way possible. I think this was important to her. The moment mom was also at school to get her out of there.

Jasmien : And also, that girl told me afterwards, “Actually everyone listens to the story of mom. I'm glad my story was heard." She can bring that. Mom also brought her very double messages. Mom told us that she is having a hard time. Mom told her, "We're going to make those social workers stay far away." It was very difficult for that girl. But up to this day she can still say, "I'm glad you listened to me too."

Cindy : For me, it's nice to hear that story too. Because it is true that we from OCJ, are doing very valuable work. I still believe in it every day. But, we are also a start and when it gets to trajectories that it blocks, then we have to give up. I think that's great, a juvenile judge should be involved to really get what is needed for that child. But what does that mean for that child? I appreciate hearing you say, Jasmien, how the children saw me. And it was effectively so. At that moment you mean something to them, but you disappear afterwards. And in so many situations, it is often not possible to make that transfer so beautiful. I think we can empathise not enough what that means.

Jasmien : That is also so difficult about your OCJ role. Not all OCJ cases are forwarded to the juvenile court either. Often you can also close positively. But even then, you disappear from the lives of children. We are a bit the final point. And children know that they have to carry on with us.

Episode 4 Title IO2? When there is no answer, 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.

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 OCJ and SDJ.

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?

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."

Approx 44”

Episode 5 Triangle, child, parent, social worker... and more

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.

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.

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.