



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

By Nele Haedens, Agency Growing Up, Flanders, 2022

### Part 1: Child and social worker

**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 have been working since 1995 and in 1998 I started as a social worker at the Youth Care Support Centre (OCJ) in Ypres.

**Yasmine**: My name is Yasmine 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. We try to engage them. No matter how young they are, even babies, we expect that we can see them because their development says something. The interaction with their parents is their way of saying something. Also, from the moment that they enter the language world, which usually start at the age 2.5 to 3 years, we try to talk to them.

**Yasmine** : Also, often in a creative way with Duplo or with the 3 houses (Signs of Safety). 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 or with materials, it is also very important to see the child. 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. The children can tell us very important things. I think there is evolution within childcare. But the consideration is still made that young children can not 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.

**Yasmine** : And it is also important as a social worker that the children can see you or feel who we are, why we are coming into their family. When you want to build up a relationship, it helps to talk to the 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 also try to indicate to them who we are, why we come. First, explain what social service do. That is not always easy. But even with young children by drawing or using 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?"

**Yasmine** : We also bring the children's story to the parents. That is also very important. We often notice that children are okay with that. And of course, 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, the children's drawings, parents can accept it better if the children can bring it themselves, more than when we tell it without the children being present. Of course, there is a complete process involved. You have to 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."

Example from a situation where the case was already closed, and is later re-opened. Mom ends up with new partner, in a situation of intra- family violence. The moment I talk to that girl, first grade (6 years old), she remembers the Duplo and drawings from last time. She can then say: "it's happening again." I thought that was kind of catchy that it means more to a child than we had thought. The girl remembered "it's there that I have to tell, it's there that something can happen with it."

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.

**Yasmine** : 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 have to 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?

**Yasmine** : 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 really not okay at home, then we will have to do something with it." The earliest you can discuss this with a child is fairly 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." Recognition 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.