



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

By Nele Haedens, Agency Growing Up, Flanders, 2022

### Part 2: Case, child's voice

**Nele** : We're also sitting here together because a colleague of yours, thought of you, regarding a specific case. Do you feel comfortable outlining this and then giving back to us where you were really proud on 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<sup>1</sup> to SDJ<sup>2</sup>, we have our concrete steps, for example: 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. Mom, dad and the kids are at the commitment meeting, but it blocks there. From that moment on, because we cannot make sufficient change, we are forced to transfer the file to SDJ. The OCJ action then stops. The children then miss important information. It happens that we go back to the school to give explanations. But in practice, that is something that is not regulated.

The situation we are talking about now is the situation where we start with serious concerns in which there has been already a lot of support present. We have a mom who can articulate her request for help. Everyone then thinks this is a cooperative mom. However, there is a lot of attention and focus on herself. But, in which we had to conclude that the voice of the 6 children, has never been properly listened to, despite the presence of support in the family. We started with listening to the children. The children brought a lot. As a result, we have asserted that these children could no longer live at home. The commitment conversation then escalated with mom saying, "I'm leaving." We then had to pass this on urgently to you, juvenile court, SDJ. The children brought so much but could not get any further explanation that they were now taken away from their mom. And then it comes to you, SDJ.

### Yasmine :

And then it comes to the juvenile judge. Then the juvenile judge says, "The children need to get out of here urgently." Then it is calling the crisis line. That was a piece of preparation from the OCJ. And miraculously the crisis line at that time had 6 places, for all 6 children, which is not obvious. They were 6 different places. Today this no longer happens. We see that the crisis line is overextended.

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<sup>1</sup> OCJ=civil services, responsible for voluntary child welfare

<sup>2</sup> SDJ= court mandated child protection

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 really ready with their backpacks. We then went to the service, because we had to arrange where to take the children, who in to there and who in to there. They had clothes with them 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 really common for us to do anything with it. But then we really felt, yes, we have to 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."

Cindy, together with me, brought her story to the children: "look, for this and that reason, because of what you have told, the file is now to the juvenile judge. Therefore, you also have to go to another place to live, 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. There were some playing. But everybody was hearing the same story. And that was super valuable to those kids that we could do that in that moment. Something that doesn't happen much or actually never happens. Something that at that moment, or afterwards we could look back on proudly, well we did that.

**Cindy:**

We actually want more of that, because it's very valuable for those children. In that way, they were exonerated. They had brought a lot. They also brought things where they indicated: this has to stop, has to change. And I had said to them, "We're going to try, but we can't promise anything." At that point, the juvenile judge was able to intervene effectively. All the cards were super-favorably on the table, in the sense that a place was found for the children. We can't imagine that now.

Anyway, an answer to the children's needs was found. I think they also had the feeling, "we have been able to tell our story."

It was also really not ok on all levels. I don't think it could have been more dramatic. But the children have been heard in this. And they were also able to feel that the big people made a decision. I think we also said that a few times to them, "It's the big people, we have decided, the juvenile judge has made a decision. Because it's not ok what's happening to you all." I saw the oldest girl nod and the tears came and came. Yes, we could also put it in concrete: "It is not ok that you have to take care of your sisters, that you are punished because things aren't right." There was also abuse.

**Yasmine :** 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 was and is very important.

**Cindy :** "And whatever message Mom brought, you may feel good with where you are going now." That was also very important that I could tell them: "you can rest now, you will be taken care of."

**Yasmine :** And yes, the children have had to change their residence place for several times. They are not all together at this point either. So, the children still have to deal with a lot. But Mom continues to give the message, "You can feel good there". That is an important message. It makes that they 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?

**Yasmine**: Mom had already gone through a whole process. I think she has been in tremendous stressful situations over the past few years. Her own childhood was very stressful and with lots of assistance. Mom has already fought and struggled very hard to keep her children with her. But the moment her children were placed, I did notice a kind of relief. That may sound very strange. It was not like: "yes, my children are placed." But " I can come to myself for a while. It's being taken over from me." And, until this day, it is still being taken over from her. And you can see that she is still recovering from the past period. I think that's what made mom able to say, "It's too much for me for a while." And she herself now indicates, "I'm trying 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 a very important part of that story is the referral from OCJ to SDJ. I think it is very important, no matter how young the children are, to talk and listen to them. This had not been done before because the social workers found the children too young. I think this is the reason why the whole situation took so long. There was support but it was focused on the mother. And eventually they saw those children somewhere in the house. But they did not hear the story of the children, this was actually poignant. The voice of the child is very important.

**Nele** : And actually, it came when you started this.

**Cindy** : When we start at OCJ, we will always talk to the parents, but also to the children. That is part of it. That was actually something that mum blocked from the beginning: "Why do you do that?". But we just keep doing it and told mom: "That is how it goes; we will talk to your children".

We have also come a long way. For example, she didn't let the children go to school so we couldn't meet them there to speak. The children therefore also missed school. She really tried to avoid the social worker so the children couldn't bring a story. It really does take a lot of effort from the social worker to hear the story of the children and to go for it.

I also think of the oldest girl. She was at that time about 13-14 years old. She was already away from home. She had been referred before. It was a big challenge to hear her story. At school I couldn't listen to her, because she wasn't there. And when we said that we had to see her, she was brought by someone unknown, and that person waited also. She told us a lot. How are we going to keep it sustainable for that child? We must also be able to maintain this connection and remain it reliable. That is always very difficult. In that situation we could do it. But it remains the biggest challenge.

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

**Cindy** : I think I continued to hold her, in every way possible. I do think that was important to her. At that time, Mom was also at school to get her out of there.

**Yasmine** : And also, that girl has told me afterwards, "actually everyone is listening to the story of mum. I'm glad my story was heard also." She can bring that. Mom also brought her very double messages. To us, mum told us that it is difficult to talk with the girl. To her daughter she told, "we're

going to make that those social workers stay far away.” For that girl it was very difficult. 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 at the start, and if their trajectories is blocked, we must give it out of our hands. A juvenile judge should be involved in order to really get what is needed for that child. But what does that mean for that child? I appreciate hearing you say, Yasmine, 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.

**Yasmine** : 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.