



PODCAST WITH FOSTER CARE SOCIAL WORKERS

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PART 5: Participation with very young children, a story from practice

Lisselotte

If you look back at your work for a moment, which story lingers? What experience in practice has really stuck with you, specifically regarding young children?

Ilse

I recently had a home visit with a foster family that offers weekend care for a 3-year-old boy. The boy comes to the foster home 2 weekends a month. During the week and the other weekends, the boy stays at the CKG Het Sloeberhof. The mom and dad are in jail. The dad has distanced himself from the story and from fatherhood.

So the boy has been going to the family for about 6 months now on the weekend, and I had planned a home visit, and the foster family said that the boy would be there at that time and that maybe we could do something together. I found that interesting but also exciting. So I had brought the house with the Duplo dolls and thought, "Okay, let's set this up and see what happens." First, he wanted to show his tractors and his cranes; he was a big fan of them. So the whole table was full of his cranes and tractors when he opened the house. and I asked him, "What do you think of that house?" Does your tractor fit in there somewhere? His first reaction was to empty the house because it contained furniture, a bed, and dolls. Then he threw in another doll and pushed her into the house again. because everything has to be locked, and he left. After a while, he would tell me that the house was a prison and that Mom was in jail. The foster family is on top of the roof, and he came to rescue them with his crane. So that was his story. That stuck. It was also not so clear from the beginning what was happening there or how I should interpret it. That worked, but over time, it became clearer and clearer, and he gave it in his own language. The fact that he wants to save the foster carers on the roof with his crane was very valuable.

Those are things that stick and then I think, this is valuable. That's nice to hear what's going on in that little boy, what he's doing.

Nele

And what makes this valuable to you?

Ilse

To get a little insight into what that boy is doing. How does he look at the foster caregivers? How important are those people to him? If he wants to save them every time, then that shows that they are important to him. It is an interpretation, so it's not objective, but that's how I interpret it. I also discussed it with several colleagues from my team, and they confirmed that.

It was enough, then. I didn't elaborate anymore. Maybe at another meeting, I can bring the methodology of the house back. He will also be a bit more familiar with that house. I can ask him in another meeting a little more specifically how he feels towards his foster mom and foster dad or towards his mommy.

Katrijn

We are also always paying attention because we are not therapists. Sometimes we hear something that we did not expect to hear, and we have to decide what to do with it. After an hour and a half, we're out of there; we'll leave those people behind then. So we have to think about what that did to that child, and what did that do to the foster carers? They saw that too, and that was probably the first time they saw it so visually and heard how the child felt. We always have to find the balance—how far will we go in this? You do indeed want to know how the child is doing, and during the meeting you are looking for ways to hear that little voice. But you also have to know how far you can go in this. You do indeed want to know how the child is doing, and during the meeting you are looking for ways to hear that little voice. But you also must know how far you can go. Where should I stop? You really need your team for that. You need them to know what I'm doing next time and what I'm going to work on. Is external help needed, or do I continue with it?

Lisselotte

But what is exactly the purpose of those home visits?

Katrijn

In the end, the foster care service is always called in. We are given an assignment, often a very clear framework, by the juvenile court, for example. The assignment is to support the family situation but also to inform the juvenile court about our experiences.

Lisselotte

You may be seen by foster parents and parents as a kind of control?

Katrijn

Sometimes it is, sometimes it is seen that way. Although we often say that we are not controlling but come to support. When things are not going well, for example, when things are difficult in the family, and we see that in the behaviour of the child, we make this negotiable. Then we will think with the

family how to deal with this, how it can be done differently or to look for external help. We do this together. But often we are seen as inspectors.

Nele

And in the case of the boy, how did you explain this to the foster carers what you were going to do?

Ilse

We made the appointment on a previous home visit. They invited me to meet the boy. The foster parents wanted me to meet him. I thought it was good, but I found it a bit exciting because I wanted to hear and see him but didn't know what to expect. Then I came up with the idea of the house. They were very enthusiastic about this and were open to it. They also picked up the little boy earlier at the CKG so he could have some time to get home and first. They told him in advance that I was coming to play with him. So the foster family was very inviting and helping.

Katrijn

He could have also just played with the house, and that would have been good too. Because often you go to the child with a certain purpose; for example, mom or dad has asked a question about extending the visit, going on a trip, or something else. Then you go on a home visit to find out how the child feels about this. Sometimes you do this by using a methodology; we sometimes take that house with us, or we take a drawing or using other methods. But that doesn't mean that it always works out to have the conversation, sometimes the child just wants to play.

Nele

And doesn't do what you expected.

Katrijn

Yes, he's just playing. Then you think, "Next time, try a different method. Or just leave it", and that's also good. Sometimes it's not clear to him what you want. It may mean that the child wanted to avoid the subject but realized it anyway. Or that it didn't realized it and just wanted to play.

Lisselotte

Do you use the same exercises and methods for the parents, or is there a strict separation between them?

Katrijn

I think that's a bit different. With children, this happens more playfully. You also feel that when the child is getting older, there is more trust, and they know that you want to speak to them when you come. Some kids say: 'I see you want to discuss something, so let's just discuss it.' Then we take the games and make them a bit more lighthearted.

With the parents, we use more forms of conversation. Sometimes we use the dolls or duplo to show how their child feels about that situation. We don't do this always.