



PODCAST WITH FOSTER CARE SOCIAL WORKERS

By Lisselotte Lowagie, Agency Growing Up, Flanders, 2022

Part 6 Foster Care guideline and the evolution of participation in the organization.

Katrijn

What we do use in all our conversations is our three-goal framework. That is our guideline.

1. What is the goal? The perspective must be clear to everyone, both the child and the parents, as well as the foster carers.
2. The safety of the child must be ensured. And how do we do that, and how can we contribute to it?
3. There must be a shared world, so how do parents, children, and foster carers come together? Where is that piece in common, and how do I do it?

That framework is the guideline for the guidance of the parents, the foster carers and the children. With the children we do this more playfully, with the parents and the foster carer this often happens a little more formally.

Lisselotte

Looking back to the beginning of your working career and comparing it to now, do you notice a difference in terms of participatory work?

Katrijn

I used to be a group supervisor at a facility for special youth care. I'm not sure anymore, but it seemed that this was less. I remember a call about the importance of the voice of parents and that, as context counselors, we were also very much working to contribute to that. We also organized a residents' council with the living group. But that wasn't a priority. If something else happened in the living group, we postponed it.

It seems to be higher on the agenda now than it used to be, but not for everyone.

Lisselotte

What do you mean?

Katrijn

I think everyone does, but they're not aware that they're doing it. They are working on the things that we already mentioned here in their guidance work. They are working on their relationships with the foster family and are facing the same challenges we mentioned. But without really mentioning that participation is important and the ideas behind it, they are not so aware of that.

Nele

What do you think can help to make them more aware?

Which tools are used in the organization so that people are more aware?

Katrijn

I think we came to a critical point in our organization where we wanted to look for this. How can we be more intentional about things? We expect everyone to be committed to our meeting groups. We actively work on that and do our best to keep those groups running. We repeat this to supervisors. Make sure you inform your family about this so they will come to the meeting groups. You need to keep that present because this is one of the many things an attendant has to deal with.

Ilse

We want this way of working, our offerings to the different groups, and the voice in it to become obvious.

That this is embedded in the organization. That is a fixed offer, and everyone is welcome there.

We want this way of working to be more supported. "Why do we do that? Why do we have these meeting groups? Why is that voice so important, and what happens to it?"

Nele

Interesting, yes, what happens with that?

Ilse

Detected signals in practice go to policy and management.

There is a real need for more time and space, for example, to be able to do or make things happen. In the groups for young children, space and time are now limited.

With the parents or the foster carers, for example, there was great concern about the special costs. This has been signaled to the management.

The management will then take this into account. How can we simplify that? That proposal is coming back to us. Do we agree with the proposal?

The goal is that something happens with the signals.

With young children, it may be even more difficult to make this voice so concrete. If we really want to hear that voice, it takes time and space to stand on that level with this child and hear what the child wants to say. And of course, you take this into account in your guidance work and in your advice to the counselors of the juvenile court and everyone who is around the child to ensure or support the well-being of that child.

Katrijn

We indeed take things about young children less to the policy level.

But the fact that we often do not know the children who join the meeting group is valuable. Sometimes you know them from your own guidance, but often they are all children you don't know. You also get to know the supervisor of the child. A supervisor can ask how the child was in the group. Sometimes you get special reactions, like: "Did he participate so well? Most of the time, he's so withdrawn. Then we can give our observations that show that the child felt safe in the group.

Very concretely, a child had once come, and the supervisor thought it would be difficult in the group, but the boy had participated very well. He was talking a lot about his own situation. The supervisor then said: I've been accompanying that boy for three years, and he doesn't say anything. But because the child was in a small group with other children, one of whom told me that he did not live with mom and dad, and the boy also started to talk.

Nele

So what does that situation teach you? Because it usually takes a long time before a relationship of trust is built up. What do you learn about this?

Katrijn

You notice that because of the setting, children start to trust you faster. Children sometimes mean more to each other and do more for each other than we realize. Sometimes you create more than you might think during the meeting. We should also not always seek ways to bring content into the meeting.

In one case, a child that I supervised started to talk about the fact that he was no longer with mom and dad. The child already felt safe. But he did also spontaneously ask the other boy, the unknown child. I was completely amazed that this happened, and then you learn that these are the kinds of moments that are important.

Ilse

The informal is also very important, isn't it?

Nele

Yes that can not be underestimated, I think for a child, peers are very important.

Katrijn

They often wonder if they are the only foster child at school. How often do we get the question: if there are also foster children in the village, in the street, or in the school. We can't answer that question. Sometimes this becomes clear during the school year. They want to know if they are not alone.

Nele

Yes, and that's nice, the normalizing nature of such a group.