



PODCAST WITH FOSTER CARE SOCIAL WORKERS

By Lisselotte Lowagie, Agency Growing Up, Flanders, 2022

PART 1: Presentation & participation general within foster care

Lisselotte

Good afternoon, we are sitting together this afternoon to talk about the participation of young children. My name is Lisselotte Lowagie and I will try to steer this in the right direction, but please introduce yourself first.

Katrijn

My name is Katrijn Verhulst, I have been working in Foster Care East Flanders for almost 7 years now, and I work part-time as a parent counselor in foster care and part-time as a family researcher. I also participate in the meeting group for children from 6 to 12 years old.

Ilse

My name is Ilse Grieten, and I am new to the organization of foster care in East Flanders. I work part-time as a foster care counselor and part-time as a coordinator of the participation work, and I organize and coordinate the various meeting groups.

Lisselotte

I hear a lot of participation. What exactly does this mean for you?

Katrijn

Within foster care, we work on participation in various ways. Most of it happens in our meeting groups, but we also pay attention to participation in the guidance work. Depending on the type of meeting group or the age of the children in the meeting group, this works differently.

Participation plays a role in the guidance work, but that is also mainly dependent on the child.

Lisselotte

You say it's different according to age. How does that approach differ?

Ilse

The approach changes according to age. We are going to invite a young child in a completely different way—to think along or to give his or her vision about the assistance. How does the assistance feel for the child?

With a parent, we will do that differently, and with a foster carer, in yet another way. So for us, participation really depends on the person sitting in front of us.

It is very important to be on an equal level and to be able to speak in their language.

With young children, this is mainly done playfully.

Lisselotte

And, how can I imagine that for a 3-year-old child?

Katrijn

We do not organize meeting groups for children under 3 years old, but we do for children from 6 to 12 years old.

With young children, we mainly look at the foster care supervisor. In any case, the supervisor regularly visits the foster family. By being present frequently, he manages to build a relationship of trust with the 3-year-old child. This relationship of trust is very important. **Only then you can ask their opinion** about the assistance or about the things that are important in their life. We build that **trust relationship** by playing together. First, ask the child questions such as "*What are you doing here?*" and "*What things are you playing with?*" and then ask if you can play along or read a book together. This usually happens in a safe environment.. Often, you also do that in combination with the conversation you have with the foster carers. Sometimes the children wait and see, especially during the first conversations that you have with them. That is also okay. You just say a "good day" to the child so that they get to know your face and get to know you. In that way, it becomes clear who the person is who suddenly comes into their house now and then.



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PART 2: Meeting as a form of participation

Lisselotte

If you look specifically to the participation part with young children, what challenges are there?

Katrijn

Young children are a real challenge for us. I am now mainly working with children from 6 to 12 years old. We feel that this is also a young age. Also, the age category of 6 to 12 is very diverse; a child of 6 is not at all like a child of 12.

We feel that the children who come to that meeting group mainly come to meet purely. We sometimes try to start conversations about the assistance or about how the child feels at home. There are certain things that we think are important in the story of a child, but often they do not actually want to go into it.

So it is often a bit of a search to really work with them in terms of content. We don't always have the right methodologies or the right tools for that. We are therefore looking for ways to use the time we have with the children together.

We also invite widely; everyone is welcome. As a result, the group is always different, which does not ensure that it becomes a safe group. A few children always come. But often there are also new children. This makes it difficult to talk about vulnerable issues.

That is why we mainly focus on the meeting. We ask ourselves to what extent should we put substantive issues on the table here?

Ilse

Actually, that meeting has the biggest theme and the biggest goal. We organize activities and play together. The next activity is the Halloween- activity. Then we go to a sports hall and play a trip around the world. That's where we play, so we don't talk about guidance efforts.

We notice that this is the way to let children speak. We suddenly see things arise. Then a child suddenly says: "*Do you also live with your grandmother?*" After which a whole conversation follows, and children of 3 or 4 are talking to each other about this. "*How do you feel about living with your grandmother?*" "*And how's that for you?*"

These are things that arise spontaneously during meetings and that we, as supervisors, respond to. But as a supervisor of the meeting group, you will start with substantive themes and do fun things

together. We go to the zoo, to a football stadium, do crafts together, bake cookies, go to the forest, etc.

Katrijn

We really let the experiences come from that group and the spontaneity of the children.

Ilse

Yes, and above all, letting them experience that they are not the only foster child, that is the greatest strength in that meeting. By seeing that there are still children who do not live with their own mom and dad, I am not alone here and that is sometimes enough to give a little trust and recognition to those children.

Nele

What motivated you as an organization to organize this meeting? Where does this come from?

Ilse

My opinion, participation is thinking and knowing along. You can only create this by organizing meetings, by bringing people together, like-minded people who get to know each other, who can grow - passing on signals to improve the aid.



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PART 3: Value of a 3-years old child's voice

Lisselotte

How does this work with very young children (3 years old)? Is there sufficient value attached to this group?

Katrijn

The child cannot put it into words. But the child's change in behavior can be observed by all those who are around the child.

What can certain changes (visits, school) mean for the child? You must listen to the answers that people around the child give to those questions. Can the child cope with certain things? What does the behavior tell us?

The behavior of a child says a lot. To the supervisor: *"Look at this carefully."* To the foster carers: *what do you see in the child's sleeping- behaviour, eating-, and body language?*

You can also see the child's experience during play moments. Using tools like puppets and duplo can also give images to language. By playing along and asking questions during and about the game,

"What does the house look like?" With "story stamps" completed, how does the child experience this supplement? In what way will the child bring this out? These are not objective facts and it is still an interpretation, but they do give a bit of a view or it can raise a few points of attention.



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PART 4: How to strengthen participation? What works, what slows down?

Lisselotte:

Everything is probably not going smoothly, which things can further strengthen the effect?

Ilse

Time, space, and resources.

We visit the families, take time to talk to children and play.

That sounds ideal but sometimes there is not enough time. Conversations that are necessary, but you do not have the time and space to build a relationship of trust with the child.

Supervisors also change a lot, so building the relationship of trust is not easy. Then supervisor number three comes to the child, that is not ideal. You need more time to build trust, you can't do this so quickly.

As a supervisor, you do have to discuss matters such as the visiting arrangement. Here you want to get input from the child.

The caseload does not always allow working on the relationship of trust.



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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.



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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.



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PART 7: Working with the life box

Ilse

I think the life box that we designed is a very nice method to work with children from the age of 5 to 6 years.

It consists of a box that is playfully designed. In the box are all kinds of tokens and stickers and a whiteboard with a weekly schedule, on which you can stick things. The box belongs to the foster child himself. It gives the child the space to actually draw out their own life path. There's a kind of friend book in there. There are also interview questions for the foster carers and the parents to get started with their own life stories. That way, they can use words and images. They can collect photos and other things in it.

That box is personal. They can take the box with them to any home they go to. They chose what they did with it. A parent can join in to do something with, and/or the foster carer, a supervisor. It happens at the rhythm of the child. The box stays with the child and helps to make things more visual, like the story. Who is all around me? Who is in my power tree? Who comes my way?

Nele:

Do you shape it together?

Ilse

That's possible.

Katrijn:

It also depends on the age of the child, how much you support this.

Ilse

With the young children, I give this to the foster carers, and they introduce it to the child. The child gives it a place. The child often discerns different things from it. There is a poster with a tree or a rainbow. There are all kinds of sticky things, from pets to police officers to ordinary people, men, women, young and old. And then the kids start pasting. This is me, and who is standing around me here? Some are a little further, some are a little closer. And so a conversation can arise, or not at all. In this way, the child takes this process into their own hands, and you can connect where necessary or possible.

Lisselotte

These are serious assignments to shape one's life path. For a six-year-old who has already experienced a few tragedies, such as a placement, it is not easy to do this.

Nele

That is precisely why this is so valuable.

Ilse

Yes, that's why it's so important. So many figures have already been cut out

Lisselotte

It offers a different way to come up with a story, to form a story

Ilse

Yes, but it also offers the opportunity to show that there are still many people around the child. "You're still very much liked. Yes, and you're worth it too. You have a somewhat different story and a lot of things have happened.

Katrijn

And children who have been placed in foster care at a very young age do not always know where the decision came from.

Sometimes the children also feel guilt. Then it's just right to go and see with mom and dad, if possible. Okay, how are we going to tell that story here. Are there any pictures from when you were born, can we put them in the box and give them more story? That way, you can take away the guilt that a child feels. And that it becomes clear to the child, "That is the reason why I live here; it is not my fault." That they realize that there was joy once, when they came into the world, when they were born. Sometimes they don't even remember that there was once something cheerful around them.

Lisselotte

Because the placement is not always up to 18, is it? Surely it is possible that the parents can take care of the child again?

Katrijn

Foster care is always temporary. We always look at whether there is a possibility for a return home. But there are so many factors at play.



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PART 8: Shared world, focusing on parents to be parents

Katrijn

Where parents, can be parents, we try to involve them as much as possible. For example, parents can always go to the hairdresser with their child. If they can continue to take on that task, then that is very fine. If they can continue to take on other parental tasks, such as parent contact at school, they are allowed to do so. There are so many parental tasks that they can no longer do because that parenting responsibility suddenly no longer belongs to them. But if you can share certain things in consultation with the foster carers and parents can do that, that's the best fine. If you can build that back, when you see those parents stabilizing again, then yes, we should try to do that.

But I think you have to take into account the place of everyone . and also the time it takes for everyone. You also have to discuss this very transparently with the parents.

You don't achieve something like this in a week or month. Everyone's voice is very important.

We talk with the foster carers in advance, and they do know that their guidance is temporal. Although they know that it can suddenly be done, that does not make it easy.

Then you hope, as a foster care supervisor, that even if the child returns to his house, the contact still remains. That this shared world still exists, even though there is no foster care situation. That is the ideal situation, and that would be the best thing for the child.

Nele

That is the best situation for the child.

Lisselotte

Yes, that shared world is the most beautiful.

Katrijn

That is one of our three goals, but the shared world facilitates the other two. When we have reached a shared world, we can achieve a lot of success.

Ilse

That also supports a child's loyalty. A child has a very great loyalty to the parents and the foster carers that is built up.

Nele

Yes, besides the foster parents, the child is also connected to the parents. You can't take that away.

Katrijn

Of course, but it's not easy. As a supervisor, you want to be able to rotate that triangle (child, parents, and foster carers) as well as possible.

But especially with a network placement, they often have such a past, and together with the parents, you notice that in the beginning that triangle cannot turn, and you are already happy that you can just be the intermediary.

The child also sees that there is no shared world there yet. Then you use what you have from the beginning, and you can only hope that one day they can sit together at the table.

Nele

A shared world, I think that's a nice concept.

Lisselotte

Yes

Katrijn

That's a great goal though.