

The Importance of Reunification Expectations for Young People's Sense of Belonging in Residential Care in Switzerland

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Introduction

- Decisions about family reunification depend on an assessment of risk and protective factors
- For stability and a sense of belonging, the principle of permanency is upheld (e.g. Biehal 2014)
 - The length of placement is also an important factor in placement decisions
 - Assumption that a certain length of placement leads to a sense of belonging to the care place and alienation from the family of origin
 - Family reunification is ruled out after a certain period of time → 12 to 18 months
(e.g. USA → Davidson et al., 2019, Dittmann & Wolf, 2014)
- But belonging has not only a past-related but also a future-oriented dimension (Allen et al. 2021)
 - young people's expectations regarding their future placement situation

Sense of Belonging in Residential Care

- Belonging is a basic human need that refers to the feeling of connectedness and closeness within one's own social world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; May, 2013)
- Many studies have shown that there is a strong desire to belong among young people in out-of-home care (e.g. Biehal, 2014; Emond, 2014; Negård et al., 2020; Roche, 2019).
- Emotional attachment to the RC facility is significant for the young people's subjective well-being (Magalhães & Calheiros, 2020); emotional attachment to RC facility increases over time (Magalhães & Calheiros, 2015)
- Research has overlooked the extent to which the expectation of family reunification might influence the sense of belonging of young people in care

Research Questions

- 1) How many young people in RC expect to return to their families?
- 2) How do young people with reunification expectation rate their sense of belonging with the RC facility and their family place(s)? Are these ratings different from young people who expect to stay in the RC facility until adulthood?
- 3) Is there a correlation between the time spent in the RC facility and (a) the young people's placement expectations (reunification/stay) and (b) their sense of belonging?

Research Design and Sample

StePLife Study (The personal life of young people in residential care)

- Research project by the FHNW and the OST
- Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)
- Panel Study with 3 waves
- Quantitative data collected through an online-based survey

Wave 1: Data collection between May - August 2022

- Sample ($N = 563$)
- Young people aged 12 - 17 years ($M = 14.85$, $SD = 1.50$)
- 90 different residential care facilities
- 15 German-speaking cantons

Research Instruments – Places of Residence

- 1) RC (true for all respondents)
- 2) with my mother
- 3) with my father
- 4) with both my parents together
- 5) with my grandparents
- 6) with other relatives
- 7) with my foster family
- 8) with my boy-/girlfriend
- 9) in my shared apartment with friends

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Family Place(s)

Research Instruments – Sense of Belonging

- 1) I feel good here.
- 2) I feel safe here.
- 3) I can be who I am here.
- 4) When I am not here for a long time, I miss this place.
- 5) I feel at home here.

Answer options: 1 to 5 (strongly disagree ↔ strongly agree)

(Lewicka, 2011; Stedman, 2002; Hidalgo, 2013)

Research Instruments – Placement Expectations

Reunification (short-term)

- Leave RC facility within next year
- Afterwards: family place(s)

Reunification (long-term)

- Stay in RC facility for the next year
- Leave RC facility before adulthood
- Afterwards: family place(s)

Staying in RC facility into adulthood

- Stay in RC facility within the next year
- Stay in RC facility until adulthood

Findings – Placement Expectations ($n = 547$)

	Frequency	Percent
Staying in RC until adulthood	111	20.3
Change within care system	64	11.7
Family Reunification	203	37.1
Leaving care to independence	45	8.2
Leaving care or subsequent place of residence unclear	124	22.7

- Family Reunification is the most common placement expectation
- Of those, 52.2% ($n = 106$) expect their reunification within the next year (short-term)

Findings – Sense of Belonging

	Belonging RC facility	Belonging to family place(s)
Reunification (short-term)	$M = 2.80$ ($SD = 1.05$) $n = 95$	$M = 4.62$ ($SD = .71$) $n = 97$
Reunification (long-term)	$M = 2.69$ ($SD = 1.10$) $n = 88$	$M = 4.70$ ($SD = .63$) $n = 92$
Staying in RC facility until adulthood	$M = 3.35$ ($SD = 1.09$) $n = 62$	$M = 4.12$ ($SD = .94$) $n = 62$
Total	$M = 2.90$ ($SD = 1.11$) $n = 245$	$M = 4.52$ ($SD = .78$) $n = 251$

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One-way ANOVA: $F(2, 242) = 8.79, p < .001$
 Contrast 1: $t(242) = -3.83, p < .001, d = -1.13$
 Contrast 2: $t(242) = .725, p = .469$

Kruskal Wallis: $H(2) = 25.357, p < .001$
 Contrast 1: $p < .001, r = .32$
 Contrast 2: $p = .646$

Findings – Time spent in RC facility

	Time spent in RC facility (years)
Reunification (short-term)	$M = 2.6$ ($SD = 2.00$)
Reunification (long-term)	$M = 2.2$ ($SD = 1.94$)
Staying in RC facility until adulthood	$M = 2.1$ ($SD = 2.21$)

- No sign. difference between Reunification (long-term) and Staying in RC facility ($p = .624$)
 - sign. difference would have been an indicator of a relationship between placement expectation & time spent in RC facility
- No sign. correlation with sense of belonging to RC facility ($p = .103$)
 - positive correlation would have been an indicator of increased belonging over time
- No sign. correlation with sense of belonging to family places ($p = .576$)
 - negative correlation would have been an indicator of family alienation due to time spent in care

Conclusion & Implications

- Expectation of family reunification is not uncommon among young people in RC
 - Reunification is an important topic for the young people
- Placement expectations are important to young people's sense of belonging in RC
 - Empirical evidence of the importance of the future-oriented dimension of belonging
 - In assessing the young person's sense of belonging when deciding about the option of family reunification, placement expectations should also be considered
 - Length of placement is not sufficient to assess the young people's sense of belonging
 - Pathway planning is important; as young people with unrealistic family reunification expectations might deny themselves a sense of belonging to the RC facility

Thank you for your attention!

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StePLife 

www.steplife.ch

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