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Returning to the Family after Residential Care: Changes in Young People's Well-Being and their Assessment of the Transition

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Abstract
There is lack of research on the self-reported subjective well-being of young people returning to their families after residential care. This study examined the self-reported subjective well-being of young people before and after returning to their families ($n=79$) and compared it with that of young people who remained in the same residential care facility ($n=255$). In addition, the study examined returners' assessments of their transition to identify transition factors that are associated with an easier return. Data for this study were collected through a panel study that examines the personal lives of young people aged 12 to 17 in residential care in Switzerland. Using data from the 2022 and 2023 survey waves, the study found that returning to the family was the most common form of leaving residential care in this sample, at 49.9%. In addition, a significant increase in returners' subjective well-being was found upon their return, but it was not significantly different from that of the young people who remained in the same residential care facility. More than 60% of the returners reported that they were coping quite well. However, almost a quarter of the returners reported that they had a rather difficult time after their return. Willingness to leave residential care and good professional support during the initial period after leaving care were found to be significant predictors of a less difficult time upon returning to the family. Yet, only 48.7% of returners reported receiving good professional support after leaving residential care.

Keywords Return · Reunification · Residential Care (RC) · Out-of-home Placement · Well-being · Switzerland

Introduction

Out-of-home placement is a serious intervention in the lives of young people. According to Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), states should undertake such an intervention only when necessary to ensure the best interests of the child. Internationally, different child protection systems with different intervention thresholds have emerged, with family reunification being the ultimate goal of intervention in most child protection systems (Berrick et al., 2023). Although there is a long tradition of research on reunification in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Bullock et al., 1998; Festinger, 1996), the topic has only recently gained more attention in German-speaking countries (Lienhart, 2024; Osswald, 2022; Wolf, 2020). This study provides information based on a survey of young people before and after returning to their families from residential care (RC) in German-speaking Switzerland.

Research on Family Reunification[1] After Out-of-Home Care

Safety, permanency, and child well-being are considered guiding principles and desired out-comes in child welfare (Rosanbalm et al., 2016). Safety and permanency have traditionally been prioritized and considered indicators of success in child welfare, in part because they are more easily

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[1] in this article, the term "reunification" is used exclusively in the context of out-of-home care, reflecting common usage in social welfare. it Is noted that the term is also used in therapeutic settings—such as after parental separation, divorce, or disruptions due to military deployment or incarceration (see Faust, 2017, on Reunification Therapy)—but these contexts are not addressed here. the term's potential connotation—that returning a child is inherently appropriate or desirable—is also recognized, but such assumptions are not implied in this article.

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defined and measurable outcomes (Rosanbalm et al., 2016). Because re-entry into care after family reunification can be tracked by child welfare agencies, reunification research has developed a large body of research on risk and protective factors related to reunification stability (Davidson et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2022; Farmer, 2018; Fernandez & Lee, 2011; Font et al., 2018; LaBrenz et al., 2020; López et al., 2013; Martín et al., 2020; Mc Grath-Lone et al., 2017). Limited parenting skills and a lack of social support are considered the strongest predictors of re-entry, whereas addressing the reasons for placement, permanency planning, and long-term support services after reunification have been found to be the most effective factors in ensuring reunification stability (Davidson et al., 2019; Farmer, 2018). In addition, age at first out-of-home placement, time spent in care and age at return are identified as factors negatively associated with both the likelihood and the stability of reunification (Lutman & Farmer, 2013; Martín et al., 2020). Despite their undeniable importance to the body of reunification research, these studies focus exclusively on the recurrence of child maltreatment and related re-entry into care or reunification stability. In contrast, research focusing on the well-being of young people after they return to their families is a more recent tradition. For example, in a case-based study, Lutman and Farmer (2013) reported that nearly two-thirds of the 130 children who returned to their families had good or satisfactory well-being, while more than one-third had poor or very poor well-being. A study by Biehal et al. (2015), based on social worker assessments, found that young people who remained in care had higher levels of well-being in terms of safety, health, education, and positive leisure activities than those who returned to their families. These studies have undoubtedly enriched reunification research. However, they are based on administrative data. There are only a few studies that have focused on the perspective of young people. A study from the context of RC in Spain (Mateos et al., 2017) reported that children only receive little information about the reasons for their return and are informed of the decision only a few days in advance, leaving them little time to prepare. The study furthermore showed that returning to the family causes feelings of discomfort and ambivalence, demonstrating the importance of support from formal and informal social networks. Other studies have shown that reintegrating into the family of origin after an out-of-home placement is challenging and requires preparation and support (Balsells et al., 2016; Bullock et al., 1998). Access to education and sufficient financial resources have also been reported as important factors in supporting young people upon their return, particularly in the Global South (James et al., 2017; Walakira et al., 2022). Frimpong-Manso and Bugyei (2019) showed that children must also cope with the loss of important relationships that they develop in their out-of-home placement. James et al. (2017) reported that children who remained in care rated their well-being significantly higher than those who had returned. However, this Ghanaian study also pointed out that only a few of those who returned to their families received follow-up services. In German-speaking countries, research on family reunification is only recently gaining more attention (Lienhart, 2024; Osswald, 2022; Wolf, 2020). Lienhart (2024) argues with reference to Germany and Austria that out-of-home placements, especially in RC, are often seen as a last resort and therefore as a one-way street, so that a return to the family of origin is often not considered as an option. This may be one reason why reunification research in German-speaking countries is still in its early stages. Pilot projects in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have developed phase models showing that preparation, support services, and aftercare for families are crucial for successful reunification (Beer et al., 2021; Dittmann & Wolf, 2014; Lienhart et al., 2018; Moos & Schmutz, 2006; Schäfer et al., 2015). However, little is known about the extent to which this evidence-based knowledge is implemented in wider practice.

RC in Switzerland

In Switzerland, child and youth welfare services and child protection measures are provided by the 26 cantons, each with its own system (Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023). To this day there are no national statistics on out-of-home placements, so the total number of children in care is unknown. For this reason, only a few cantonal statistics and some estimates are available. Switzerland is one of the countries where RC is the predominant form of out-of-home placement. According to a recent estimate, approximately two thirds of children in care are placed in RC, whereas one-third are placed in foster care (Seiterle, 2018). Swiss RC is very diverse, ranging from semi-supported shared apartments to large facilities with full-time care. In simple terms, the facilities can be divided into three types: (1) Children's homes, where children are placed for child protection reasons and from where they attend state schools; (2) specialized boarding schools, where children with school-related problems are placed, either in addition to child protection issues or because there is no suitable specialized school near their parents' home; (3) intervention centers with non-secure, semi-secure and secure units for young people in conflict with the law and/or designed to keep them away from negative social influences. Out-of-home placements are usually considered only when other less intrusive child protection measures, such as counseling or family social work, have failed or are deemed inadequate. Placements with care orders account for only about 40% of all placements; around 60% of the children are placed with parental consent (Schnurr & Gautschi, 2023).

Due to the lack of national statistics, there is no national information on the total number of children returning to their families after placement, or rates of re-entries into care. Although guidelines and recommendations that are consistent with international research recommend preparation and support for family reunification (SODK & KOKES, 2021), there is a lack of research and evidence-based knowledge about reunification and return processes in Switzerland (Osswald, 2022). Research on care leavers has intensified in recent years only. These studies show that there is a lack of support for these young people as they leave care and transition into adulthood (Ahmed et al., 2020; Jarczok et al., 2021; Schmid et al., 2022; Stohler et al., 2021). As a result, many care leavers return to their families due to the lack of other options (Jarczok et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Reunification as a Transition Process

Landers and Danes (2016) note a lack of theory in the reunification literature, which is reflected in "many isolated pockets of research" (p. 139). They also criticize the narrow definition of family as a parent-child-relationship and emphasize that reunification should be seen as a process (prior to, during, and after). This process-oriented approach permits a more profound understanding of the support needed by the young people and their families throughout the reunification process, and of how structural conditions influence the reunification process. Furthermore, if the concept of reunification is extended to encompass the extended family, this will better reflect the socially expanded image of the family, and particularly the living situation of indigenous communities. Additionally, it should be noted that the term *return to the family* focuses more on the young people's perspective than the administrative term *reunification*. The question still remains, however, of where the young people return to. Wulczyn (2004) notes that the family environment may have changed significantly during the out-of-home placement. It is therefore possible that young people return to a family place that has changed considerably, for example due to changes in the family constellation (separation, additional children) or a move to another location. Returning can also mean a young person going to live with a parent or other family member with whom he or she did not previously live. Thus, the concept of return always lacks precision. The present study is based on an understanding of returning to the family that is not limited to returning to parents, but also includes returning to other family members, as well as returning to family places where the young people have not lived before. Furthermore, returning to the family is seen as transition process rather than a one-time event (Wulczyn, 2004). According to Raithelhuber (2013), transitions are considered challenging, particularly sensitive, or risky for a person's life course. From this perspective, transitions can be seen as a coping task (Schröer, 2013) that affects the young people's well-being. In addition to the task of reintegrating into everyday family life, young people must cope with being distanced from or even losing social relationships they developed in care (Balsells et al., 2016; Bullock et al., 1998). Lienhart (2024) argues that returning to the family should also be seen as a process of leaving care, as young people are literally leaving their care placement. Leaving care and thus returning to the family is as much a critical life event as entering care (Lambers, 1996), requiring willingness, preparation, and support to ease the transition process. On the other hand, research has shown that everyday life in RC facilities is often highly regulated and tightly structured (Ahmed et al., 2020; Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022; Rauktis et al., 2011). Hence, leaving care can also mean more freedom and more self-determination. On that basis, the present study is related to both research on reunification and research on leaving care.

Well-being

As defined by Ben-Arieh et al. (2014), well-being is a multifaceted concept encompassing not only subjective feelings and experiences, but also objective living conditions. It is described as "a desirable state of happiness, health, or prosperity" (p. 1). Lee (2014) notes that there is no consensus regarding the definition of children's well-being. In his theoretical framework, he identifies various domains (e.g., physical, cognitive, psychological, social) and contexts (e.g., family, neighborhood, school, peers) that can be operationalized on both an objective and a subjective level with both positive and negative indicators. Previous research on reunification has concentrated on the cognitive and psychological domains of well-being. For example, Bellamy (2008) examined the behavioral issues of children who had been reunified following long-term foster care, demonstrating an increase in the act of internalizing problems upon reunification. Biehal et al. (2015) employed risk behavior scales, complementing them with an array of dimensions of well-being, including health, safety, joy, achievements, and economic well-being. However, these domains were examined in terms of objective well-being, as the young people themselves were not surveyed. In contrast, Axford et al. (2014) emphasize the growing recognition in the social sciences that children and adolescents are active agents whose perception of their own well-being may differ from adult assessments. Considering this shift, Axford et al. (2014) underscore the importance of obtaining data on

subjective well-being directly from the young people themselves. In the long tradition of studying child well-being, the involvement of children and adolescents as the primary source of information about their own well-being is a recent development (Ben-Arieh, 2012). Against this background, this study is concerned with the concept of subjective well-being, which is defined as life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). This encompasses a multitude of aspects of a person's life, including family, housing, peers, school, health, material resources, and future prospects. Continuing the tradition of obtaining information about subjective well-being from young people themselves (Rees, 2017), this study focuses on young people's self-reported subjective well-being.

The Present Study

There is a lack of research on changes in the self-reported subjective well-being of young people before and after returning to their families. This study addresses this research gap by examining these changes in self-reported subjective well-being and comparing them with the development of self-reported subjective well-being of young people who remain in the same RC facility. In addition, this study explores young people's assessment of their transition to identify transition factors that are associated with an easier return. Finally, this study aims to contribute to the international discourse on family reunification with a study that is based in Switzerland, where research on this topic is currently scarce.

Table 1 Sample characteristics

	t1 (N = 559)	t2 (N = 430)
Gender		
Female	46.9%	49.1%
Male	49.9%	48.4%
Non-binary	3.2%	2.6%
Nationality		
Swiss	65.2%	68.1%
Non-Swiss	27.1%	25.6%
Unknown	7.7%	6.3%
Facility type		
Children's home	41.7%	
Specialized boarding school	51.3%	
Intervention center	7.0%	
Age	M = 14.85 (SD = 1.503)	M = 15.75 (SD = 1.531)

Methods

Data Collection

This study is part of the research project *StePLife (The personal of young people in residential care]*, a quantitative panel survey that examines the personal lives of young people in RC in German-speaking Switzerland. This study refers to the first two waves of the survey. The first survey was conducted between May and August 2022. Young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who lived in an RC facility in German-speaking Switzerland were asked to complete a self-administered online questionnaire in a classroom setting at their facility in the presence of either a member of the research team or a staff member at the facility. To reach the young people, 206 RC facilities were initially contacted. The total number of places in these facilities was estimated to be around 4000, although there is no information on the actual number of 12–17-year-olds in these facilities. Of the 206 facilities initially contacted, 113 agreed to support the study by informing the young people about it and helping with organizational issues. Before the survey, all participants were informed verbally and in writing about the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, data protection, and anonymity. All participants gave informed consent prior to the survey, and written consent was obtained from a parent or guardian for those under the age of 14. Participants were compensated with 15 Swiss francs. A total of 559 young people from 90 RC facilities in 15 cantons participated in this first survey. At the end of the first survey, the young people were asked for their consent to be contacted again for the follow-up survey and for their contact information. For the second survey, conducted between May and September 2023, the facilities were contacted again. Young people who were still living in the same facility completed the questionnaire at their facility, analogous to the first wave. Those who had left the facility in the meantime were contacted directly with a link to the survey so that they could complete the online questionnaire independently. All participants received 20 Swiss francs for their second participation. A total of 430 young people participated in this second survey, representing a response rate of 76.9%. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the total sample of the *StePLife* study for both research waves as well as the type of the RC facility at t1. Due to the lack of data on children in out-of-home care at the national level in Switzerland, it is not possible to make a reliable assessment of the representativeness of the sample.

Measures

Drawing the Subsample

The subsample analyzed in this paper includes 334 young people. This group is divided into two categories based on their living situation during the second survey. First, the sample includes all young people who lived with their mother, father, both parents, grandparents and/or other relatives at the time of the second survey. This information was obtained by asking participants about their current living situation. Since all participants in the *StePLife* study were living in a RC facility during the first survey, those who had left care and were living with at least one family member during the second survey, were classified as *returned* (n = 79). Second, young people who were still living in the same RC facility group during the second survey were classified as *remained* (n = 255).

Characteristics of the Returners

In addition to sociodemographic data on age and gender, participants were asked about the length of time they had lived in the RC facility, the approximate date they left care, and their age at the time of their first out-of-home placement. Their age on leaving care was calculated as the difference between their date of birth and the date they left care. The time since leaving care was calculated as the difference between the date of the survey and the date they left care. The type of RC facility (see Sect. RC in Switzerland) was categorized in the first survey. In the first survey, participants' emotional belonging to the RC facility was also assessed. To measure this, existing placement attachment scales (Hidalgo, 2013; Lewicka, 2011; Stedman, 2002) were adapted specifically for the RC context. Participants were asked to rate the following statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*: (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. The mean was calculated using all five items (α = 0.88).

Well-being

Subjective well-being was defined as satisfaction with various life domains (Rees, 2017). To assess this, participants were asked to rate 16 items on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = *not satisfied at all* to 10 = *very satisfied*. The items included satisfaction with the people respondents live with, their relationships with friends, their family, the way they are listened to by adults, the places where they live, school, health, possessions, time management, leisure, safety, future prospects, and self. The index was developed based on the *International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB)* questionnaire (Rees, 2017). 14 of the original 15 items from the German version of the ISCWeB questionnaire were included in this index. The ISCWeB item on neighborhood satisfaction was excluded due to the unique circumstances of young people in residential care in Switzerland, many of whom have multiple residences and thus multiple neighborhoods. Two items focusing on satisfaction with family and amount of leisure time were added, as these have been identified as particularly important life domains for young people in residential care in Switzerland (Ahmed et al., 2020). The mean score was calculated across all 16 items, allowing for up to two missing values. In this way, subjective well-being was measured in both waves of the survey.

Transition Characteristics

Participants who were no longer living in the same RC facility during the second wave as they were during the first were asked about their transition process. This included all those who returned to their families. They were asked to rate statements on a 5-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. To learn about the positive and negative consequences of their transition in a descriptive way, they were asked about their perceived freedom, their ability to determine their own lives, their feelings of loneliness, and whether they missed their time in the RC group. To summarize, participants were also asked how well they had coped since moving out, and how difficult the time had been since they moved out. As the current state of research on reunification and leaving care indicates that willingness to transition, preparation for the transition, and support from professionals are important factors in the transition process (see Sect. 1.1 & 2.1), these aspects were also measured.

Data Analysis

SPSS® Version 29 from IBM was used for the statistical analyses. Chi-square statistics ($\chi 2$) and the corrected standardized residuals were used to examine possible differences among the returners sorted by gender and RC facility type. Paired-samples t-tests and a mixed-model ANOVA were used to examine the longitudinal data. Pearson correlation, independent ANOVA models, and multiple linear regression were used to analyze the transition characteristics, despite their measurement via Likert-type scales. In the social sciences, it is common to treat Likert-scale variables as interval-level data, making the use of parametric statistics appropriate, as supported by several studies (e.g., Carifio & Perla, 2007; Norman, 2010; Tanujaya et al., 2022).

Hypotheses were tested at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Effect size estimates are based on Cohen (1992).

Results

Characteristics of Returners and Places of Return

Between t1 and t2, 79 respondents returned to their families. This represents 49.4% of all those who left the RC facility in which they were living at t1 ($n = 160$). 62 respondents (38.8%) were living in a different RC facility at t2, while 19 respondents (11.9%) were living independently. Thus, returning to the family was the most common placement change in this sample. In contrast, 255 respondents were still living in the same RC group. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the returners and those who remained in the same RC group.

There were no significant differences in the distribution of gender ($p = .829$) and nationality ($p = .550$) between the groups. Although returners were significantly more likely to have lived in an intervention center at t1 than to those who remained in the same RC facility, the distributions were not significantly different for the other two types of RC facility. Returners were on average almost three quarters of a year older than those who remained ($t(322) = -3.753$, $p < .001$). At the time of their return, returners were on average 15.6 years old ($SD = 1.18$, *min.* = 13, *max.* = 18). They had returned 6.8 months prior to t2 ($SD = 4.05$, *min.* = 0, *max.* = 14) and had lived in their last RC group for about 3.6 years ($SD = 1.82$, *min.* = 0.7, *max.* = 9.8). The average age of their first out-of-home placement was 12.2 years ($SD = 3.45$, *min.* = 0, *max.* = 17.6), which was not significantly different from those who remained ($M = 11.5$, $SD = 4.27$, $p = .197$).

Table 3 shows the places to which the young people returned. The most common form of return to the family was a return to the mother, followed by a return to both parents living together and to the father. Returning to multilocal family residences was less common. All respondents returned to at least one parent.

Changes in Well-being

As described above, respondents' subjective well-being was measured in both waves of the survey using a 16-item index. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of well-being for both time points, for returners and those who remained in the same RC group.

A mixed model ANOVA was conducted to analyze changes in the returner's well-being compared to that of respondents who remained in the same RC group. The between-subjects factor (group) did not have a significant main effect: $F(1, 303) = 0.001$, $p = .997$. However, the within-subjects factor (time) did have a significant main effect: $F(1, 303) = 6.129$, $p = .014$. The interaction effect (time*group) was also significant: $F(1, 303) = 11.542$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the development of the young people's subjective well-being over time differed between the two groups. Pairwise comparisons revealed a significant increase in returners' well-being at t2 with a small effect size ($MD = 0.607$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = 0.036$). In contrast, the well-being of respondents who remained in the same RC group did not differ significantly between t1 and t2 ($MD = -0.095$, $p = .347$). Despite the significant increase in returners' well-being, there was no significant difference in the well-being of these two groups at either time point, as indicated by the non-significant between-subjects factor. As Fig. 1 illustrates, at t1 the mean well-being of returners was below the mean well-being of respondents who remained in the same RC group,

Table 2 Subsample characteristics

	Returned ($n = 79$)	Remained ($n = 255$)
Gender		
Female	50.6%	49.0%
Male	48.1%	48.6%
Non-binary	1.3%	2.4%
Nationality		
Swiss	69.6%	69.0%
Non-Swiss	26.6%	23.9%
Unknown	3.8%	7.1%
Facility type		
Children's home	34.2%	42.6%
Specialized boarding school	55.7%	53.8%
Intervention center	10.1%	3.6%
Age at t2	$M = 16.19$ ($SD = 1.369$)	$M = 15.47$ ($SD = 1.523$)

Table 3 Places of return ($n = 79$)

	Frequency	%
Return to mother (unilocal)	35	44.3
Return to father (unilocal)	11	13.9
Return to both parents (unilocal)	26	32.9
Return to mother & father (multilocal)	3	3.8
Return to mother & grandparents (multilocal)	3	3.8
Return to mother, grandparents & other relatives (multilocal)	1	1.3
Total	79	100.0

Table 4 Well-being at t1 and t2

	Time	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Returned ($n = 73$)	1	6.693	0.181	6.338	7.049
	2	7.300	0.192	6.922	7.678
Remained ($n = 232$)	1	7.039	0.101	6.839	7.238
	2	6.944	0.108	6.732	7.156

1 = not satisfied at all/10 = very satisfied

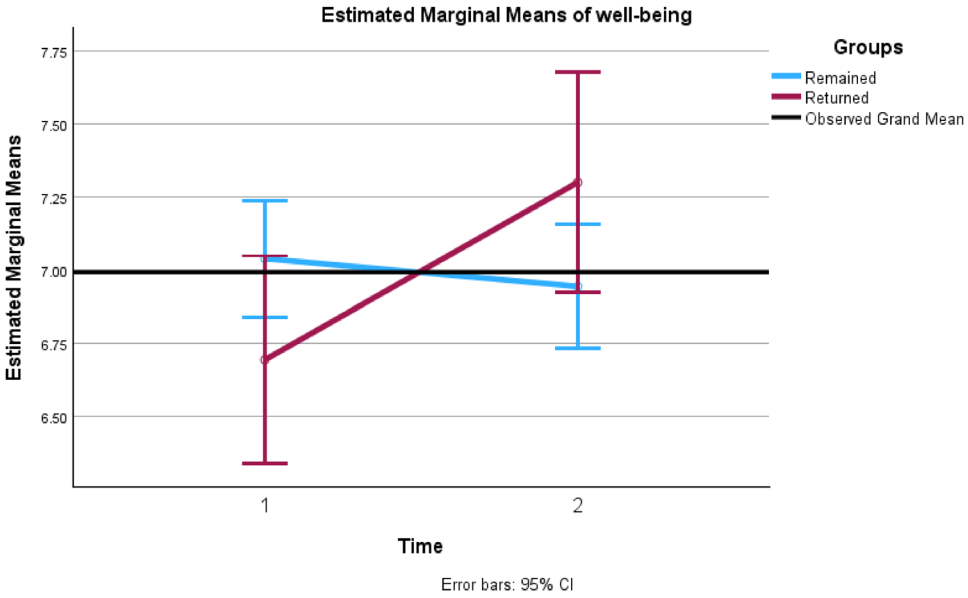

Fig. 1 Estimated marginal means of well-being at t1 and t2 by group. *Note*. This figure illustrates an increase in returners' well-being over time, while no significant differences between returners and remainers were observed at either time point, as shown by the overlapping error bars

Table 5 Assessments of returners' transition

	N	Mean	Min.	Max.	Std. Deviation	Median
Coping well after RC	77	3.87	1	5	1.162	4
Having a difficult time after RC	74	2.38	1	5	1.411	2
More freedom after RC	76	4.32	1	5	1.134	5
Determining own life after RC	76	4.12	1	5	1.045	4
Loneliness after RC	77	2.25	1	5	1.406	2
Missing the RC group	77	3.01	1	5	1.446	3
Willingness to leave RC	77	4.00	1	5	1.338	5
Transition preparation	77	3.87	1	5	1.321	4
Good support from professionals during the initial period after RC	76	3.20	1	5	1.575	3

1 = strongly disagree/5 = strongly agree

whereas by t2, this picture was reversed. Thus, although the well-being of the returners was not significantly different from that of respondents who remained in the same RC group, their subjective well-being was, on average, significantly higher after they returned to their family.

Paired t-tests for dependent samples separated by gender indicated that the effect of increased well-being after returning to the family was detectable for both female (MD = 0.790, $p_{\text{one–tail}}$ = 0.008, d = 0.406, n = 38) and male returners (MD = 0.463, $p_{\text{one–tail}}$ = 0.048, d = 0.294, n = 34). Regarding the type of RC facility, a significant increase in well-being after returning to the family was found for returners from specialized boarding schools (MD = 0.549, $p_{\text{one–tail}}$ = 0.034, d = 0.293, n = 41). The increase in well-being among young people returning from children's homes, on the other hand, was just above the significance level (MD = 0.613, $p_{\text{one–tail}}$ = 0.059, n = 25). However, the effect may not have been detectable due to the small sample size. The number of returners from intervention centers was too small for a reliable t-test (n = 7).

Assessment of the Transition Process

Descriptive statistics on how returners assessed their transitions are presented in Table 5. Most returners (61.1%) stated that they had mostly coped well since leaving their RC facility. Only 7.8% stated that this was mostly not the case. 81.6% stated that they had relatively more freedom since leaving the RC facility, and 73.7% stated that they were able to determine their own lives to some extent since moving out. On the other hand, 23% of returners stated that they had a relatively difficult time after leaving their RC facility, and another 23% partially agreed with this statement. 23.4% of returners stated that they felt relatively alone after moving out, and 40.3% reported that they missed their RC group to some extent.

In terms of *coping well after RC* and *having a difficult time after RC*, no significant differences were found related to gender (p=.503 and p=.082, respectively) or type of previous RC facility (p=.634 and p=.888, respectively). However, significant correlations with well-being at t2 were

Table 6 Correlations

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Having a difficult time after RC	–				
2	Willingness to leave RC	−0.401**	–			
3	Transition preparation	−0.019	0.342**	–		
4	Good support from professionals during the initial period after RC	0.279*	0.121	0.420**	–	
5	Emotional belonging to RC facility at t1	0.248*	−0.087	0.108	0.207	–

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 7 Coefficients[a] ($n = 71$)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3.313	0.671		4.935	< 0.001	1.973	4.652
	Willingness to leave RC	− 0.540	0.115	− 0.482	−4.713	< 0.001	− 0.769	− 0.312
	Good support from professionals during the initial period after RC	0.271	0.091	0.308	2.967	0.004	0.089	0.453
	Emotional belonging to the RC facility at t1	0.160	0.137	0.121	1.168	0.247	− 0.114	0.435

[a]Dependent Variable: Having a difficult time after RC

found for both *coping well after RC* (r=.391, p<.001) and *having a difficult time after RC* (r= −.272, p=.023).

Because promoting young people's wellbeing is recognized as one of the primary goals of RC along with safety and permanency (Rosanbalm et al., 2016), young people's well-being after leaving RC should be a professional concern in terms of sustained support. For this reason, it is important to identify the factors that can help reduce the difficulties young people face when they return to their families after leaving RC. Research suggests that willingness, preparation, and support are relevant factors in a transition process (see 2.1). Therefore, relationships between *having a difficult time after RC* and the factors willingness to leave RC, transition preparation and good support from professionals were examined. In addition, the relationship between *having a difficult time after RC* and the emotional belonging to the RC facility at t1 was also explored, as having a strong sense of belonging to the RC facility might influence the respondent's perception of having a difficult time after leaving RC. As shown in Table 6, willingness to leave RC and good support from professionals were significantly correlated with *having a difficult time after RC*. As expected, willingness to leave RC was negatively correlated, whereas good support from professionals was positively correlated. Transition preparation, on the other hand, had no significant correlation with *having a difficult time after RC*. However, transition preparation did have positive moderate correlations with both willingness to leave RC and good support from professionals. In addition, a significant positive correlation was found between emotional belonging to the RC facility at t1 and *having a difficult time after RC*. Temporal factors were also examined, but no significant correlations were found with *having a difficult time after RC*: age at return (p=.563), time since return (p=.547), length of stay in the RC facility (p=.075), and age at first out-of-home placement (p=.618).

To further explore the marginal effects of willingness to leave RC, good support from professionals and the emotional belonging to the RC facility at t1 on *having a difficult time after RC* as a dependent variable, a multiple regression was run. The overall model fit was statistically significant: $F(3,67) = 11.026$, p<.001. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.301 indicates that the model accounts for 30% of the variability of *having a difficult time after RC* among returners. Table 7 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis. The analysis of the individual predictors confirmed that willingness to leave RC and good support from professionals are significant predictors of *having a difficult time after RC* even after controlling for the effects of the other predictors. However, emotional belonging to the RC facility at t1 was not a significant predictor. Willingness to leave RC had a negative beta coefficient, as expected, and was the strongest predictor. Good support from professionals had a positive beta coefficient, confirming the positive association found in the previous correlation analysis.

Discussion

This study showed that in a comparatively large sample for the Swiss RC sector, returning to the family was the most common form of leaving RC. Given the absence of national statistics in Switzerland, it is not possible to verify this result with such data. However, this finding is noteworthy given that in German-speaking debates, residential care is often seen as a last resort to ensure the well-being of young people, and is therefore seen as a one-way street, where a return to the family is often not considered an option (Lienhart, 2024). The finding that returning to the family is a common form of leaving RC therefore challenges this supposed reluctance. As Wolf (2020) has argued, an understanding of RC as a last resort has meant that parental involvement in RC has often been neglected. However, previous research (Davidson et al., 2019; Farmer, 2018) has identified limited parenting skills as a contributing factor to unsuccessful reunification and re-entry into care. Therefore, parental involvement is crucial, as young people often return to their parents after RC, as this study has shown. In addition, this study found an average length of stay in the RC facility of 3.6 years prior to return. This suggests that, on average, young people in Switzerland return to their families from RC significantly later than the 18–24-month period favored by the U.S. child protection system and by some experts in Germany (Dittmann & Wolf, 2014; Schäfer et al., 2015). This average length of stay also contrasts with other findings showing that staying in out-of-home care for more than three years decreases the likelihood of family reunification (Martin et al., 2020). This may indicate that family reunification decisions in Switzerland are less time-critical in terms of placement duration than in other countries.

The key finding of this study is the significant increase in young people's subjective well-being after returning to their families. Although no significant difference was found between the well-being of the returners and that of young people who remained in the same RC group, the significant increase in returners' well-being further challenges the supposed reluctance to consider returning to the family. However, this finding contrasts with the results of other studies that have found significantly lower levels of well-being among returners compared to those still living in care (Biehal et al., 2015; James et al., 2017). One possible explanation for these disparate results may lie in country-specific circumstances. For example, James et al. (2017) explained that in Ghana, access to education and financial resources is often more difficult after young people return to their families. This may be less of a problem in Switzerland. On the other hand, Biehal et al. (2015) evaluated young people's objective well-being based on assessments by social workers. In contrast, the present study focused on young people's self-reported subjective well-being. It is possible that young people assess their well-being differently than professionals do. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Axford et al. (2014), it is equally plausible that individuals with suboptimal objective well-being may nevertheless report positive subjective well-being, depending on how they set their priorities when evaluating their well-being. Given that care leavers and young people living in RC often describe RC as highly regulated and tightly structured (Ahmed et al., 2020; Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022; Rauktis et al., 2011), the significant increase in the returners' well-being may well be related to a subjectively perceived greater degree of freedom and self-determination. This interpretation is supported by the present results, which showed that most returners reported having more freedom and self-determination after leaving RC. The average age of return of 15.6 years found in this study indicates that, in Switzerland, leaving RC and returning to the family often coincides with the end of compulsory schooling and the start of vocational training. Thus, many young people have to cope not only with leaving care and reintegrating into their families, but also with transitioning into the world of work or higher education. However, this study found that over 60% of the returners reported that they had coped relatively well after leaving their RC facility. Nevertheless, almost a quarter of the returners reported having a relatively difficult time after their return. Because promoting young people's wellbeing is recognized as one of the primary goals of RC along with safety and permanency (Rosanbalm et al., 2016), young people's well-being after leaving RC should be a professional concern in terms of sustained support. For this reason, the factors considered relevant to transition processes in the current state of research– willingness to leave RC, transition preparation and good professional support– were examined in terms of how they make things easier for young people who return to their families. As expected, this was the case for willingness to leave RC: not wanting to return to one's family is significantly associated with *having a difficult time after RC*. Although good support from professionals was also a significant factor, the correlation was unexpectedly positive. This may be related to the fact that in Switzerland, professional support is only granted if the need for support is recognized by the local authorities. Thus, the results should not be interpreted as meaning that better professional support leads to more difficulties when returning, but rather that anticipated difficulties prior to returning lead to the provision of professional support. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of post-reunification support services for successful reunification (Davidson et al., 2019; Farmer, 2018). However, less than half of the returners (48.7%) in this study said that they received good support from professionals during the initial time after RC. This raises the

question of how practitioners identify a need for support and on what grounds support services are granted. Future research should particularly explore the difficulties faced by returners and their needs for support. The finding that transition preparation was not a significant factor in reducing difficulties upon return may be related to the fact that most returners (67.6%) generally felt relatively well prepared, so there may have been too little variance in the data to detect any potential influence. However, transition preparation was significantly associated with willingness to leave RC and with good support from professionals. This suggests that transition preparation is part of good professional support and the willingness to leave RC, and thus may indirectly help to reduce difficulties upon return. In line with current research, this study showed that willingness and good professional support are important factors, also for young people returning to their families after RC in Switzerland. Furthermore, the results showed that the emotional belonging to the former RC facility is not a factor that makes it more difficult for young people to return to their families. Hence, the option of returning to the family does not contradict the professional requirement that young people should also have the opportunity to feel at home in their RC facility (van Santen, 2017).

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of this study is that it provides a counterpoint to studies based on administrative data. It is also the first study of this kind in the Swiss context, where research on family reunification is scarce. Another strength of the study is that it is linked to a longitudinal project, so data were available on the young people before and after their return. In addition, data were available on young people who were still living in the same RC group, allowing comparisons to be made between returners and those who remained in care. However, there are also some limitations to note. First, this study is not based on a random sample, as the young people in the first wave of the survey were approached for the study through the RC facilities. As a result, bias in the sample cannot be ruled out, and no claim to representativeness can be made. As there are no national statistics on out-of-home placement in Switzerland, it is also not possible to compare the sample retrospectively with the population of young people in Swiss RC. Second, although the underlying longitudinal project has a sample size of 430 in the second wave of the survey, and although returning to the family was the most common form of leaving care, the number of returners is relatively small at $n = 79$. Since longitudinal projects always depend on participants' availability and willingness to continue participating, it is possible that some of the young people may have dropped out of the study due to difficulties upon their return. Third, the available data are based on two survey waves conducted one year apart. Thus, the average time since return was 6.8 months. It is therefore not possible to make statements about the long-term stability of reunification, long-term well-being after return, or possible re-entries into care.

Implications and Conclusion

This study has shown that returning to the family after residential care is not an empirical rarity in Switzerland. Rather, it is an important topic that needs more attention in research, professional debates, and social work practice. In addition, the study showed that although most returners manage their transition well, there are still young people who face difficult times upon returning to their families. Future research should therefore focus particularly on the conditions under which young people return to their families and on their experiences during the transition process. Practitioners could benefit from understanding these experiences when developing and providing support services for family reunification. Furthermore, given that this study found an increase in subjective well-being for many returners, a valuable area for future research could involve comparing the experiences and attitudes of children in residential care with those in foster care, particularly with regard to the impact of reunification on well-being and the factors that contribute to successful transitions in both settings. In addition, future studies should focus on the reasons for residential care placements, how children perceive their time in care, and the reasons for their return to the family. Understanding these interconnected factors is essential for developing more tailored support strategies that address the specific needs of young people during the return process.

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Declarations

Ethical Statement The ethics committees responsible for the two universities OST and FHNW reviewed the research project and found it exempt from review, since it is not covered by the Swiss Human Research Act. According to swissethics (Umbrella organization of the cantonal ethics committees), research that is not covered by the Swiss Human Research Act does not require ethical approval in Switzerland. Both universities formally confirmed compliance with ethical standards. In addition, Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) approved and granted the recruitment procedure of the study participants.

Informed Consent All participants were given detailed verbal and written information about the study and received a written declaration of consent at the beginning of the study, which also included the option of withdrawing from the study at any time without consequences. For those under the age of 14, written consent was also obtained from their legal guardians before the study.

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