

‘They didn't tell me anything; they just sent me home’: children's participation in the return home

Ainoa Mateos, Eduard Vaquero, M. Àngels Balsells, Carmen Ponce

Abstract

The reality of child protection systems typically demonstrates a lack of attention to the voices of children. There are studies that confirm this fact and offer evidence of the benefits of participation, but gaps remain regarding the elements and processes that favour it. This qualitative study attempts to contribute to knowledge in this area through a detailed analysis of the perspectives of the actors involved and the role that children play in the return home.

This article analyses the elements involved in the participation of the children when a return home is proposed after a period of family or residential foster care. As part of the study, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted and 22 discussion groups were created with a total of 135 participants (63 child protection services workers, 42 parents and 30 children and adolescents). The data were analysed using a content analysis process and underwent a peer review process in Atlas.ti. The results indicate that the participation of children and adolescents in the return home centres around (i) understanding the return home, (ii) strategies and emotional processes and (iii) social support.

Keywords: child protection, children, participation, qualitative study, returnhome, reunification

Introduction

Current child protection policies advocate giving voices to children and recognizing their right to participate in matters concerning them, including child protection processes (Mitchell *et al.* 2010; Fuentes-Peláez *et al.* 2013; Schnoor 2013).

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child established the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives (Hart 1992; Alderson 2000; Shier 2001; Bachman & Chase-Lansdale 2005; Van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013), including situations involving child and adolescent protection (Mitchell *et al.* 2010; Fuentes-Peláez *et al.* 2013; Nybell 2013; Schnoor 2013).

However, the practices used in protective services typically demonstrates a lack of attention to the voices of children in decision-making processes. Along these lines, Cossar *et al.* (2014) note that participation by children remains a complex area of practice. However, Nybell (2013) notes that in social services, an increasingly significant movement supports giving a ‘voice’ to children and adolescents to enable them to express their views and to have those views considered in matters that affect them. Goodyer (2014) has conducted a study based on interviews with children, adolescents and young people who have gone through the protection system. The results confirm that decisions do not consider the perspectives of children and adolescents, nor does the system usually respond to their need to be informed about the measures taken and the changes that will occur in their lives. Similarly, Mitchell *et al.* (2010) note limited child participation and a lack of information and time in which to process information.

In Spain, the official 2012 data notes that there are a total of 39754 open cases of children under government protection. The rate corresponds to 479 measures per hundred thousand children and represents a reduction from the previous year (Ministerio de Sanidad y Política Social. Observatorio de la Infancia, 2014). Unlike other countries, in Spain, residential care is used in 75% of placement cases and is the primary resource for children who are placed in out-of-home care. Another particular characteristic of Spain is the predominance of kinship foster care

among foster care cases: kinship foster care is provided in 85% of family placement cases (Palacios & Jiménez 2009). However, the absence of unified data from the official statistics in Spain concerning the number of children who return to their biological family is evident. According to the children's participation, Montserrat (2014) finds that, depending on the study, between 66.7% and 73.4% of children and adolescents considered their entrance to protection systems traumatic: it happened to them suddenly, they were not consulted and they were given very little information about where they would go, why they would go there and what would happen.

Therefore, this study focuses on the children's participation on the process of family reunification.

Children's Participation in Family Reunification Processes

In child protection systems, family reunification refers to the process through which a child who has been abandoned, neglected or abused returns to the home of his or her birth family after a mandated separation period. It involves temporarily separating the child from the family and placing him or her in foster care and/or a residential placement. The reunification process begins when the child is separated from his or her parents. After the separation occurs, if reunification is the goal, the parents maintain contact with their child through visits during which they receive training to ensure that they become eligible for the child's return.

Farmer (2014) notes that two moments are particularly relevant in the life of a child in a child protection system: the moment of separation and that of the return home. When the child returns home, research emphasizes the importance of understanding the reasons behind and the process of family reunification (Balsells *et al.* 2014). For children and adolescents, understanding the decision to return home is related to different factors, such as age and the amount of information they possess regarding the process of returning home. Regarding age, some studies attempt to determine the child's capacity to participate in the process (Holland & O'Neill 2006) and demonstrate that professionals use chronological age as a determining factor for that capacity (Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Holland & Scourfield 2004; Archard & Skivenes 2009). Cossar *et al.* (2014) establish three levels of understanding of the processes of the protection system: (i) minimal understanding; (ii) partial understanding and (iii) clear understanding. According to their study, the majority of children demonstrate partial understanding, and the oldest participants (ages 14–17) are most likely to have a clear understanding.

However, the age of a child or adolescent is not the only factor that emerges in the literature; other studies highlight relevant factors that modulate the influence of age on the process of returning home, including the extent to which the child or adolescent understands the measure, his or her capacity to manage emotions and the support he or she receives.

First, regarding the extent of a child's understanding of the measure, some studies indicate that a lack of information and participation in the process modulates the child's understanding of and adjustment to the return home and suggest that policies encouraging children to attend dependency hearings are viewed positively and are not harmful to children (Block *et al.* 2010; Weisz *et al.* 2011). For their part, Barnes (2012), Mcleod (2007) and Schofield & Beek (2005) all note that listening to and informing children guarantees that protection plans have more positive and effective results. One key to the success of this measure is making information about the family's situation and resources that can help the children and their families face the changes that affect them available (Amorós *et al.* 2008; Jiménez *et al.* 2010, 2013).

Second, emotional management of the child's feelings at the moment of reunification has also been noted as a necessity particular to this phase (Balsells *et al.* 2015). Situations involving abandonment and foster care have significant emotional impacts (Mateos *et al.* 2012), and aggressive management of the resulting emotions is required, particularly immediately prior to the achievement of the objective of family reunification: the return home (Balsells *et al.* 2014). In this sense, Fernández del Valle & Fuertes (2007) note the importance of saying goodbye to all individuals who have accompanied the child most intensely during his or her period of

separation from the family (Fuentes-Peláez *et al.* 2014; Balsells *et al.* 2015) because of the importance of the bonds the child has created while staying with peers, professionals or host family members, among other reasons. Saying goodbye to the host family or centre is crucial to the success of the return home. Despite being an anticipated moment and one of happiness regarding the imminent return to the parents, it is also a moment of sadness, denial, anxiety or fear concerning the new situation (Fernández del Valle & Fuertes 2007). Managing these emotions and adjusting expectations is part of the specific nature of the process (Jiménez *et al.* 2010; Balsells *et al.* 2014).

Third, the scientific literature establishes the availability of support that is both formal (Rodrigo *et al.* 2007; Cole & Caron 2010; Lietz *et al.* 2011; Balsells *et al.* 2014) and informal (Nickerson *et al.* 2007; Kimberlinet *et al.* 2009; Fernandez & Lee 2011; Lee *et al.* 2013) in nature during the reunification process as an important factor in the use of child protection measures to protect families. In this sense, some authors note the relative lack of formal support received by children and adolescents during the family's separation and the process of preparing for reunification (Fuentes-Peláez *et al.* 2013). This support is often very minimal and geared more towards the needs perceived by professionals than the needs felt by foster children (Balsells *et al.* 2010), and at times, it is directed more towards reinsertion in the job market than towards family reunification. A central issue of formal support is the importance of establishing trusting relationships with professionals that allow children and adolescents to express their voices, feelings and emotions (Nybell 2013; Cossar *et al.* 2014). On this point, the study by Mitchell *et al.* (2010) concludes that it is necessary to respect and understand the difficulty and stress of the family reunification process. Thus, the children who participated in the study suggested to the professionals that they might want a mentor to inform and advise them during the process. The children believed it would be beneficial to have someone present with them during the process who had gone through it previously and who would understand them and be able to help them by answering any questions they might have and reduce their anxiety.

Method

Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the most important aspects of children's participation in the return home as part of the process of family reunification.

Participants

The sample was selected for its ability to provide a multi-informant perspective. Data were obtained from three population groups: children, parents and professionals.

To participate in the study, selection criteria for the children, the criteria were as follows: (i) age between 11 and 21 years old and related to the biological families selected; (ii) time spent in foster care of at least one year or waiting to be reunified in the next two months; and (iii) no physical, mental or sensory incapacity. Selection criteria for the parents were as follows: (i) families who were already reunified or were waiting to be reunified in the next one or two months; (ii) families that had undergone or were undergoing a reunification plan; (iii) families with the predisposition and desire to collaborate with professionals; and (iv) families with various characteristics related to age, family structure, etc. For the professionals were as follows: (i) working in the children's protection system; (ii) experience in residential or family care; and (iii) representative of the multi-disciplinary nature of the professionals, that is, of various areas of training, including social educators, pedagogues, psychologists and social workers.

The total number of participants was 135, of which 30 were children, 42 were parents and 63 were professionals. Of the children and young adults, 21 had been reunited with their parents, and nine were still completing the reunification process. They ranged in age from 12 to 20 years; 53.3% were girls and 46.7% were boys. Of the parents, 34 had been reunited with their children, and four were still completing the reunification process; 76.2% were women and 23.8% were men. Of the professionals who had experience in residential placement or foster care, 33 worked with biological families, 16 worked in residential centres and 5 worked in extended family placement. Thirty-three worked as social workers, 10 worked as educators and 20 worked as psychologists. The majority were women (74.6%), and the remainder were men (25.4%).

Research methodology

There is a broad consensus regarding the importance of participation by children and adolescents in research processes (Mateos *et al.* 2012). The methodology aims to adopt a qualitative research design; specifically, we use a multi-informant design because it can capture the perceptions of different agents in the children's environments, providing a more complete perspective on the phenomenon. The importance and value of this research stem from the fact that it considers and includes the perspectives of children and adolescents in the protection system, giving voice to those who had previously been silenced on certain issues. In this sense, we emphasize the contribution that this focus has with respect to the transformations taking place in research on children (Cojocar 2009), namely, the principal goal is to enable children to directly participate in processes that affect them. Therefore, the research design calls for a sensitive and committed study based on children's right to participate, on the importance of which a broad consensus has been reached by the scientific community (Mateos *et al.* 2012) because it is essential to collect children's voices and make them known.

Measuring tools

A focus group and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Three tools were developed: (i) a questionnaire for collecting the participants' personal data (name, age, place of residence, names of children, type and duration of placement, etc.); (ii) a set of questions for the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews (Table 1) and (iii) a form with which information about the acquisition process could be recorded (date, duration, place, motives, atmosphere, etc.).

Table 1. Focus group and semi-structured interview questions for children and adolescents, parents and professionals

Participants	Focus group and semi-structured interview questions
Children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What things do you think facilitated and helped with your return to your parents (or are facilitating it now)? - What information or help did you need that you did not have? - What do you think your parents or other parents in this situation need to make your return home easier? - Do you feel you have had support from professionals? - What did you need that you did not have in this process? - Do you or did you feel you needed some training or support to make it easier (for you and your parents) to live together? - [For those not reunited] What do you think you will need to facilitate living together? - If you had to make recommendations to others in this situation, what advice would you give them?

Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What elements of the process stood out for you? (For example: you received training, assistance or guidance) - Did you feel you had support or guidance from professionals? - What things or types of support would have been useful to you or do you currently lack? - Would you say that you had any other type of support (from family, friends, other professionals etc.) that was particularly helpful? - In what ways did they help you? - Of the types of support or help provided by professionals during this phase, what was the most useful to you? - What support or help did you lack? - Can you give a concrete example of something that made your child's return home go smoothly? (For example: help, support or training) - What helped your family continue and face the difficulties you encountered?
Professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you think your family was able to successfully achieve the return of your child/children? What was most important in this respect? - How do you prepare biological families for reunification? - What key aspects must be considered? - Which interventions work particularly well? - Which ones do not work well? - How could you improve the process? - With minors? (Preparation for reunification) - With foster families? (Preparation for reunification) - With professionals at the protection centers? (Preparation for reunification) - What support and what work do you usually do after minors have returned to their biological families? - What support do you think foster families and biological families need during reunification? - Which types of professional intervention have had good results, and which have not? - Is there anything else you think should be incorporated into your work with biological families, foster families, professionals at centers or young people in foster care that you think would make reunification more successful?

Procedure

First, a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic was performed to determine which factors influence successful reunification during the transition period. A field study was then conducted using 22 focus groups (9 with professionals, 8 with parents and 5 with children) and 18 semi-structured interviews (16 with adolescents and 2 with parents), which were recorded with the consent of the participants. The confidential nature of the recordings was ensured.

Data analysis

A content analysis of the data was performed using Atlas.ti version 6.1.1. A literal transcription of the recordings was produced and then analysed using a system of coded categories that several researchers had designed and developed by applying a 'bottom-up' strategy. The process of extracting codes and categories was evaluated by various judges. Therefore, as the content analysis was, it was subjected to peer review to ensure that the data extracted were as reliable and credible as possible.

The categories included (i) understanding the return home, (ii) strategies and emotional processes and (iii) formal and informal support.

Ethical considerations

To develop the investigation, ethical considerations were taken into account. A document to provide informed consent was prepared so that participants would understand the study and could grant their authorization. The document explained the goal of the study, the scientific purpose, the individuals' rights as participants and the confidentiality of the data collected. Before the interviews were done, they were encouraged to ask any question or to ask for any clarification to assist with their understanding and desire to participate. Similarly, the fact that they had the right to refuse to answer any question was emphasized. In the case of the children under the age of 18, it was fundamental to ask for the authorization and consent of either the parents or of the public administration that held legal guardianship.

Results

The results demonstrate the elements involved in children's participation when a return home is proposed after a period of family or residential foster care. These results provide the perspective of children and adolescents, family members and professionals on the important issue of reunification. The views of these different actors contribute to the understanding of and broaden the knowledge of methods for considering 'children's voices' and help identify some of the relevant factors that favor doing so.

Understanding the return home

When they return home, children report receiving little information and, therefore, often do not know why they are returning to their families or what changes have occurred to allow this. Children feel uninformed regarding the changes that they and their parents have had to make and the changes in their circumstances that have been made during the process of separation and foster care. The result is a lack of understanding of the motives and changes that led to the family's reunification, and therefore, the process of returning home involves little awareness on their part.

They told me I had to pack my bag because I was going back home. I packed my bag, they came to get me, and I left. They just brought me home, and that's it. They didn't tell me anything; they just sent me home.

(Child interview)

In some cases, children know that there have been changes but cannot grasp what they are or what they mean and are less conscious of the 'why' behind their return home. However, when the reasons for separation had more to do with the behavior of the child than with parental competence or aspects of the socio-familial context, the children and parents showed a greater understanding of the reasons for family reunification and, therefore, for the changes that had occurred and that they themselves brought about.

Information regarding the factors, causes and changes that brought about the child's return home is not provided by family members or by the child protection professionals involved. This fact demonstrates that treatment is based on the protection or overprotection of children in foster care in lieu of treating them as rights-bearing subjects who deserve information because they are key players in the process of fostering and reunification.

When she was older, yes, but not when she was little. I told her I had to have a house, a job, and that's it, and when I had it we would leave the center. Sometimes she would ask me questions, but it's true that sometimes I told her she was too young to understand.
(Parent focus group)

The results reveal that in many cases, children are informed of the decision to return them to their homes with relatively short notice (days), and there is not enough time for them to adequately prepare to return to their families of origin. Children and adolescents must become aware of the importance of returning home and saying goodbye to all the people who accompanied them while they were separated from their families of origin because of the importance of the bonds created between the child and peers in the residence, host family members and professionals, among other reasons.

Adolescents ask to be more involved and that information not be hidden from them so that they can be informed transparently about their evolution and that of their parents. Meanwhile, they and professionals also point to the need to be informed about the implications of family reunification because there are often changes in family dynamics, a change of a parent's partner, a different house or school and so forth.

Parents should be more understanding, they should be more understanding with us and know how to listen to us and when to let us talk too because we also have the right to be listened to, just like we listen to them.

(Adolescent focus group)

It should be taken into account that they must be treated as participants, especially the older ones. After a certain age, the child has to be a participant.

(Professional focus group)

Strategies and emotional processes

The experience of returning home causes feelings of discomfort and ambivalence, and therefore, it is essential to delineate strategies and skills for adaptation and empowerment to help children deal with the challenges of family reunification. The results show that during the final visits, when a return home is prepared, children may experience contradictory feelings and conflicts of loyalty; they may even reject returning to their fathers and mothers. While separated from their parents, the children have lived with other people and created affective ties with friends, welcoming individuals and/or professionals. The views of children, parents and professionals

note that there are frequently feelings of sadness upon separation from the new relatives or of disloyalty towards people who have welcomed them.

When children or adolescents spend long periods without family members who give them a sense of security and trust, they have feelings of constant abandonment. If you don't work on the return, the changes in family or center are experienced as disruptions or as further abandonment.

(Professional focus group)

The return home is a time of intense emotions in which the reactions of the actors – the child and the biological family – can vary from enthusiasm to emotional blocking. Despite being an anticipated moment of happiness because of the imminent return to the parents, it is simultaneously a moment of sadness and denial regarding the new situation. Children need to face the changes implied by becoming part of a 'new' family unit, which means identifying their roles in the family. In particular, if very young children do not consider themselves active parts of the process of returning home, they often assume passive roles. Meanwhile, adolescents are accustomed to perceiving their own behavior and, therefore, their roles as influential in the process, and they play roles that are more active during that phase. Even some parents claim roles that are more central and require more space in which to participate, be heard and become involved in the process.

On one side is the family, and on the other, the children, and efforts must be made to communicate and specify timetables and reasons.

(Parent focus group)

Children generally demonstrate a need to adapt to the new situation; however, younger children do not think they need to make specific changes to adapt, leaving the responsibility of adaptation to the parents. Meanwhile, when family reunification occurs, adolescents highlight the importance of adapting their own behavior. In both cases, participants reported not having worked specifically on strategies for identifying and resolving everyday problems after the return home, such as strategies for managing emotions or feelings during this phase of the process.

One day your children want to sleep in bed with you. Other days they're afraid. They have a bad time when they come back.

(Parent focus group)

Honestly, sometimes I look around and say, this is so tough, right? But that's what it is. And, sometimes you get tired of being strong because you want to be happy without having to be strong, but, well...

(Adolescent focus group)

The results reflect the need to work on empowerment strategies that allow feelings and emotions to be managed both at the moment of reunification and return and during the initial days at home.

Formal and informal support

The results underscore the importance of figures that offer formal and informal support to children throughout the process of reunification. Participants positively evaluate the educators at residential centers as agents of indispensable formal support. In some cases, these educators offer concrete tools to assist with the return home, such as providing information about the timetables, intentions and situations that may arise. In other cases, support is limited to being present alongside children or adolescents, i.e. playing an accompanying role. All participants perceive this figure as vitally important when the professionals understand their situations and are concerned about them. This is the point at which children and adolescents establish trusting relationships with these professionals that allow them to become close to them; then, they allow themselves to be helped. Recognizing that this figure is an agent of support that is capable of providing help at crucial moments is key to changing children's attitudes and helping them to better manage the challenges involved in returning home.

When there was something that made me feel bad, I would talk with my educators, and they would give me advice and talk with me. Whenever they were there, they gave me advice, and when I would talk with my mother and argue, well of course they would tell me what I could do ...

(Adolescent focus group)

Many times, as a tutor, during visits or weekends if they get permission, if you have a good connection, they seek you out, and the children confess some of the things that happen in the family to you.

(Professional focus group)

The results also show that participants view some of the formal support received from resources found outside the protection system, such as psychologists, teachers, therapists and coaches, positively. These figures are particularly highly valued by children and adolescents who used the support resources available in the community. When these types of support were less readily available, all participants state that they would have benefitted from them, which indicates their desire for greater support. This highlights the importance of connecting children and adolescents with local resources and of working on and strengthening the establishment and configuration of formal and informal support networks.

Well I think that... starting life over again from zero has been [possible] thanks to them. I think that they give you the opportunity to move forward from zero. For me, it was like being reborn. Well, maybe [it is] not that dramatic, but for me it was.

(Parent focus group)

In addition, informal support is very relevant; all participants believe that their families provided key support at the time of reunification. For example, support among siblings when they are together in a foster facility is a very important source of mutual support. Specifically, children and adolescents view members of their extended families, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, who are actors in their informal support networks, positively.

In some cases, mutual assistance among peers is especially valuable as a source of informal support because young people help one another feel better and recognize that they can serve as actors capable of providing one another with help and support during specific moments.

I came away with eleven friends from the center. Eleven from there and eleven from another residential center that I was in, and they're friends for life. They helped me and I helped them with what I could. I learned a lot from them.

Finally, during the initial days at home, the participants consider it important to continue receiving help from their formal and informal support networks. Among the providers of formal support, children note the importance of figures such as educators, social workers and psychologists as actors who guide and provide help with the establishment of family dynamics during the first moments of reunification. At the same time, they highlight the importance of informal support agents such as neighbors, friends and family members. The continuity of formal and informal support is a key element of the assistance provided during the reunification phase and the return home to guarantee the success of family reunification and prevent re-entry into the protection system.

Discussion and Practical Implications

The present study contributes to the understanding of the reality and the importance of the participation of children in the protection system and during the process of reunifying them with their families. The results provide evidence for the most important aspects and can contribute to improving the responses of protection systems and thereby improve the quality of life of children and adolescents (Balsells *et al.* 2014; Ministerio de Sanidad y Política Social 2014; Balsells *et al.* 2015).

The first contribution of this study is its demonstration of how understanding the return home requires children to participate in their own preparation; they must be informed in advance, be made to feel as though they are important parts of the process and recognize its merits and changes (Nybell 2013). In this way, it appears necessary to make adaptation plans that include the active participation of the child or children in response to certain questions: When and in what way will the reunification occur? What form will it take? What changes have been made in the home? What are the implications for the family unit?

The ability to identify changes made in the home and/or family structure varies with age: adolescents were seen to have a greater understanding of the reasons for reunification, which confirms the results of authors such as Cossar *et al.* (2014). In this sense, the systematic study of life histories (Jiménez *et al.* 2013), which help children learn about their personal and family histories and understand the reasons for which they were fostered and returned home, contribute to the development of positive identities as a result of their foster care experiences and subsequent reunifications.

Regarding strategies and emotional processes, this study demonstrates the need to prepare children for the moment of reunification. It is important to anticipate and introduce the situations the children will be confronted with when they arrive home (Balsells *et al.* 2014). Previous studies by authors such as Goodyer (2014) identify the desire of children to have someone to accompany and support them as they experience the feelings that arise during the process. Along these lines, Mitchell *et al.* (2010) note the importance of sharing emotions. Our results confirm the need to develop strategies for managing change and to assist children as they adapt to the return home. In our study, children and adolescents have shown that they need to establish spaces for communication with professionals and with parents to prepare to return home.

An important finding with implications for practice is the need to strengthen joint communication in spaces in which parents, children and professionals are present as equals. This is necessary for involving children in this phase of reunification. To help children and adolescents participate on equal terms and become active and central parts of the process, they must be made aware of the return home, the reasons for it and its timetable and implications. At

the same time, gradually incorporating the child or children into the family dynamic, adjusting expectations and providing space and time for the child or children anticipate the return home helps with the management of emotions and with adaptation to and coping with the new situation.

Formal and informal support has also been shown to be very beneficial during the family reunification process. In terms of formal support (inside and outside the protection system), this study highlights both the need to link children to formal resources available locally and the need to provide the support of professionals in the protection system who can be very important mentors for children during the reunification process (Lietz *et al.* 2011).

The study also points to the need to promote informal support networks comprising figures such as friends in protection services and family members. Children have indicated that they can depend on other children who have gone through this process (support among peers), and the presence of someone who has gone through the process and can understand, offer help and answer questions appears to be beneficial (Mitchell *et al.* 2010; Balsells *et al.* 2016). Family members, especially parents, are also parts of informal support networks. Therefore, because children express the need for a great deal of affection from their parents, intervening professionals should consider helping biological parents find ways to communicate assertively with their children. This is about building collaboration, establishing trusting relationships that support parents in their efforts to bring about personal change and, at the same time, protecting and involving children (Keddell 2012).

We are most certainly situated, as Anthony *et al.* (2009) note, at a paradigm shift in which family engagement and joint decision-making signify a promising focus on improving the results of family reunifications. This new perspective, with its focus on children and improving their situations, directly influences the process. The lessons learned from this study include the following method for making children and adolescents more visible and prominent to guarantee that they are prepared before they return home:

- Ensure that children and adolescents are part of the processes of evaluation (understanding that their parents have improved, in what ways they have improved and what changes they have made) and decision-making (deciding how, when and why) that affect their return home.
- Ensure that they accept losses upon returning home as they confront the feeling that they have lost people who have been part of their lives, such as foster family members, educators or peers in a residential center.
- Ensure that they have access to support during the reunification process: given the difficulties of this process, it is very important to have a mentor who can offer information and advice.

Acknowledgements

This study was developed by the investigation group GRISIJ (Research Group for Social-Educational Interventions in Infancy and Adolescence) and financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (EDU2011-30144-C02-01 and EDU2014-52921-C2-1-R), the Department of Innovation, Universidades y Empresa of the Generalitat of Catalunya (2009SGR1392 Consolidated Projects), the University of Barcelona (ARCE) and the University of Lleida.