Article

Child Welfare and Successful Reunification through the Socio-Educative Process: Training Needs among Biological Families in Spain

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Abstract: In Spain, an average of 480 children per 100,000 is receiving some type of temporary care, and the reunification process is typically lengthy. Providing the biological family with specific training as part of the reunification process is key to solving this problem. Although previous research and social policy have emphasized the importance of such training to reunification, the training has not been fully implemented in Spain. This study investigates the specific training needs during the transition phase of the reunification process in which the child prepares to return home. The data were obtained from focus groups and through semi-structured interviews with 135 participants: 63 professionals from the Child Protection System and 42 parents and 30 children who have undergone or are currently undergoing reunification. A qualitative methodology and Atlas.ti software were used to analyze the interview content. The results indicate three specific training needs: (a) understanding the reasons for reunification and the reunification phases; (b) empowerment strategies; and (c) social support. These findings suggest the best

practices for formulating specific support programs for this population during the reunification transition period.

Keywords: reunification; biological family training; educational needs; child welfare system; child protection

1. Introduction: The Situation in Spain

According to the official 2012 data, there are a total of 39,754 open cases of children receiving government protection in Spain or an average of 480 Spanish children per 100,000 [1]. These data indicate a slight downward trend since 2004, for both open cases and the number of guardianships. 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 [2]. Additionally, foster care stays in Spanish residential institutions are typically lengthy. López and Del Valle [3] indicate that the children who stay the longest are primarily those between 9 and 12 years old who present emotional and/or behavioral problems (42% of the children under care receive psychological support) and whose parents have serious psycho-social problems.

Another factor that is evident from official statistics about measures for child protection in Spain is the absence of unified data about the number of minors who return to their nuclear family. This lack of uniformity in data is because each autonomous community is responsible for recording the information. Consequently, Spain lacks official data about the number of children in care who return home with their biological family, and little research about this topic exists.

Organic Law 1/1996 on the Legal Protection of Minors, passed on 15 January 1996 [4], calls for the prioritization of family reunification. It declares that children have a basic right to development in their family context and states that in the case of separation, the primary objective should be to facilitate reunification with the biological family. The Spanish autonomous communities were charged with implementing this law and are allowed use placement alternatives that accord with their own priorities [5]. In its report about Spain, the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child [6] is also betting on the revaluation of the biological family and for interventions in child protection that support the preservation and reunification of families. Among other measures, it foresees providing parents with support mechanisms sufficient for fulfilling their responsibilities in raising their children and giving priority to the family itself for a process of reunification, despite the fact that legislation gives priority to family reunification. In fact, some studies have indicated that although family reunification is the most common idea among practitioners, it is not implemented in practice [7].

To encourage the reunification process, the Child Welfare Information Gateway [8] recommends training programs designed to empower families. Many researchers support this recommendation and tend to suggest the implementation of socio-educational programs for teaching parenting skills [8–10]. Other authors broaden this vision by also recommending training that addresses the specific needs relevant to each stage of the reunification process [11,12]. Spain is at the beginning stages with respect

to training programs. The international tendencies and research undertaken by different teams at Spanish universities have enabled the production of programs called third generation [13,14], where the main aim is to promote the quality of family functioning as a system through comprehensive long-lasting, multi-domain, multi-context interventions and through socio-educational group interventions with the whole family (parents and children) [15]. The Spanish parental education programs [16] are oriented towards promoting family communication that improves both the quality of the family system and parental skills. What predominates is the need to create an atmosphere that favors educating children in which organization is imposed over chaos [13] and in which the factors of protection that identify the capabilities are the best points of reference for a family intervention [11,16,17–19]. Nonetheless, in plans for family reunification, concrete objectives are addressed for the recovery of parents and improvement of the family context, but the introduction of specific training programs is not common practice.

This background situates reunification as one of the principal challenges for research and practice presently facing the Spanish system of protection.

2. Literature Review

In the Child Protection System, family reunification refers to the process through which children who have experienced abandonment, neglect or abuse return to the home of their birth families after a mandated separation period. It involves separating the child temporarily from the family and placing him or her in foster care and/or a residential placement. The reunification process begins the moment the child is separated from his or her parents. After the separation occurs, if reunification is the goal, the parents maintain contact with their children through visits in which they also receive training to become eligible for the child's return. Wade *et al.* [20] studied reunification in depth. Specifically, about the reunification decision and the consequences for maltreated and neglected children after four years of being away from home. In this study, there are some key points to highlight, such as: (a) the rates of admission, planning process, pathways and destinations of children to care vary by local authority; (b) the social workers based the decision to return home on improvements of problems that had led to the children's admission and on the level of risk to the safety of the children were considered to be acceptable , and (c) it observed more stability for those children who had been the entire time in foster care than those who had returned home; over half of the children who went home (59%) had made at least one return to care. As Wade *et al.* [20] explain, stability is not the only factor to take into account to evaluate the reunification; we have to consider the well-being of the children at home. The return home of the children is more likely to be stable when decisions to reunify maltreated children are based on clear evidence of change in parenting capacity, the reunification has been well planned, and there is a strong provision of support services to assist parents and children. When this happens, the stability and well-being of the maltreated and neglected children is higher, and for this reason long-term care can be a positive option for maltreated and neglected children, contrary to common belief.

Previous studies indicate the need to support the biological family with the fundamental aspects of reunification in each stage of the process; specific needs vary by stage.

This paper studies the phase—months and days—during which the children prepare to return home. Once a decision has been reached that the children may return home based on the positive changes achieved by the family, specific needs arise that must be addressed for a satisfactory reunification.

Some family intervention or support processes were previously excessively structured from the perspective of deficit, based on the deficiencies or limitations of those involved. The perspective of potentialities that considers the possibilities of some factors of protection or simply of some personal resources that can and should be strengthened was not always considered. Professional work consists not only of reducing the limitations and weak points but also of increasing the capabilities and strengths that are found in most people, even those in negative situations [21].

The ecological–transactional model [22] allows for observation of both risk and protection factors that interact dynamically on the various ecological levels suggested by Bronfenbrenner [23]. From this model, one may analyze the paths of families overcoming challenges and developing in the face of adversity typical of a situation of mistreatment and abandonment. The identification of these protection factors allows an intervention to potentiate the resilience of families that must cope with a process of reunification and move from an "ideal" model of family functioning to a "resilient" model [14]. Parental capabilities; the economic, family and social context; and attention to childhood needs are three areas that entail protection factors for families capable of facing great adversity. The empowerment of families so that they can develop these protection factors is a trend in more recent interventions: "The relevance of the construct of family resilience for this sample supports the application of this theoretical material within family-centered practice" ([24], p. 209).

However, the scientific literature is also beginning to identify the specific needs of a process of reunification—those that are substantial for a family that is in the process of recovering guardianship of their children. From this perspective, the ecological–transactional model and resiliency theory may provide a deductive argument for the need to focus on the following key factors in successful reunification: understanding the motives for reunification and the reunification phases, empowerment strategies, and social support. These three needs must be considered throughout the reunification process. However, during the transition to the family context, they become particularly important due to their influence on the successful reunification.

2.1. Understanding the Motives for and Process of Reunification

Reunification becomes possible when the family has satisfactorily undergone the change process that enables the child to return home. The commitment, willingness and desire of the family to accept and make the necessary changes contribute the most to promoting reunification and family resilience during this process [24]. The British proposal "The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families" [25] identifies three areas in which these changes should occur: (a) the family context, social support received and environmental factors; (b) parental competence in providing adequately for the child's needs; and (c) improved quality of life and child welfare. This interpretative model suggests that adequate change during the reunification process should be measured in these three related areas. Parental recognition of these essential changes and requirements is the first step to reunification [26]. According to Balsells *et al.* [12], developing an awareness of these changes is a gradual process. Families initially see the reasons for the separation as contextual, but in the

reunification phase, they begin to realize how their improved parental abilities make reunification possible. Therefore, awareness of the problem grows over time. However, according to the same authors, not all families are able to visualize how they will ensure the well-being and quality of life of their children at this stage of the process: they lack empathy and vision regarding the improved welfare of their children [11,12].

Another factor identified in the literature as relevant to the success of reunification is knowledge about the reunification process. Parents should become familiar with the different adaptation situations that may arise after the child returns home. At first, parents may idealize living together, leading to a harmonious "honeymoon" phase [15,26,27]. This idyllic stage can deteriorate over time and be interrupted by unresolved reunification problems or other issues that may lead to a crisis. Therefore, Del Valle and Fuertes [28] argue that parents should be prepared by learning about these phases and obtaining adequate resources to resolve a potential crisis.

2.2. Empowerment Strategies

The scientific literature indicates that family empowerment, particularly through identity reinforcement and the development of a group identity, is necessary as families prepare to be reunified. When a family considers itself a group, it makes a greater effort to stay together [24,29,30]. As children prepare to return home from temporary care, several strategies are used to reinforce the feeling of connection, such as increasing visitations and parental involvement in important events [10] or providing parental capacities [31,32]. Other authors have identified positive intrafamily communication as an element that increases the success of the reunification process [32,33]. Similarly, the family's relationship with support professionals is also crucial, and the literature emphasizes the importance of promoting trust through exchange rather than creating a relationship informed by power dynamics [34,35]. Parents value honesty, consistency and respect from professionals [36].

Family members' ability to manage emotions also supports empowerment. Parents should recognize and address their children's contradictory feelings, which may include conflicts of loyalty or dissatisfaction with their return home [30]. Parents may also experience mixed feelings, including happiness and fear, before the child's arrival. They may therefore benefit from emotional management training [37]. Managing these specific emotions is necessary in this stage of the process.

Because of the novelty of living together as a family, parents should develop conflict resolution skills to help the entire family adapt to the habits and attitudes adopted by the children during their placement [30]. Festinger [38] adds that in such moments, it is crucial for parents to understand the evolution of their children's behavior and adapt to their new needs.

2.3. Social Support

Several authors have used the Bronfenbrenner [39] model to emphasize the importance of supporting families involved in child protection measures. The research indicates the importance of both formal and informal support during the reunification process.

Authors such as Lietz *et al.* [40] assert that formal support from child protection professionals is essential to making and maintaining the changes necessary for successful reunification. Cole and Caron [10] state that maintaining relations with professionals that are based on trust and respect helps

families adequately adapt to the services and determine whether they are receiving sufficient support. Rodrigo *et al.* [41] add that all family members should be able to identify and apply the professional support offered by various institutions and maintain their earlier contacts.

Previous studies of informal support indicate that these families typically have weak social support networks. Therefore, many authors suggest that efforts be made to identify and maximize families' informal support resources [42,43]. Informal support facilitates reunification, as families rely on outside help to strengthen the family unit and prevent relapses [44]. Informal support can also help the family unit during the moments of stress and anxiety that occur during reunification, facilitate behavior change and prevent abuse and neglect in the family system [40].

Consistent with the literature reviewed above, the protection services that connect families to formal and informal support networks obtain better qualitative results in studies of the reunification process [41], leading many authors to recommend that professionals be involved in identifying and maximizing both informal [42,43] and formal support resources [24,34,45,46].

3. Methodology

3.1. Objective

This research aims to deepen the field's understanding of the specific needs of families undergoing the reunification process during the transition period prior to a child's return home from temporary care. It examines parents' various socio-educational needs during the months prior to reunification. The ultimate goal of the study is to contribute to the development of training programs designed to support the family reunification process.

3.2. Participants

The most important feature of the sample was its ability to provide a multi-informant perspective. Data were obtained from three population groups: professionals, parents and children.

The participants were contacted through child protection welfare services in four regions of Spain (Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Galicia and Cantabria). The research team and the welfare staff selected the families to participate in the study.

To participate in the study, the participants were required to be (a) professionals working in various capacities within the Child Protection System who had experience with foster care or residential placement; (b) parents with varying characteristics (age, family structure, *etc.*) who had already been reunified with their children or would be reunified in the subsequent two months, were involved in a reunification plan and were willing to cooperate and collaborate with the professionals; or (c) children and young adults between 12 and 20 years old with no mental or physical disabilities who had left placement services (residential or foster care) more than one year ago. Only those children whose parents had also been selected could participate in the research.

The total number of participants was 135, of which 63 were professionals, 42 were parents and 30 were children.

The professionals had experience in residential placement or foster care (33 with birth families, 16 with residential care and 5 with kinship foster care). Thirty-three worked as social workers, 10 as

educators and 20 as psychologists. The majority was women (74.60%), and the remainder men (25.40%). (See Table 1 for participant details).

Table 1. Characteristics of the participating professionals.

Characteristics	Professionals (*N* = 63)
Gender	
Women	47 (74.60%)
Men	16 (25.40%)
Age	
25–35	16 (25.80%)
36–45	29 (45.16%)
Over 46	18 (29.04%)
Training	
Social educators	20 (31.75%)
Pedagogues	10 (15.87%)
Psychologists	20 (31.75%)
Social workers	13 (20.63%)
Intervention type	
Biological family	37 (58.73%)
Residential care	16 (25.40%)
Family care	10 (15.87%)

Among the parents, 34 had been reunified and four were still involved in the reunification process; 76.19% were women, and 23.81% were men. (See Table 2 for participant details).

Table 2. Characteristics of the participating parents.

Characteristics	Parents (*N* = 42)
Gender	
Women	32 (76.19%)
Men	10 (23.81%)
Family situation	
Reunified	37 (88.09%)
Undergoing reunification	05 (11.91%)

Among the children and young adults, 21 had been reunified and nine were still undergoing the reunification process. They ranged in age from 12 to 20; 53.33% were girls, and 46.67% were boys. (See Table 3 for participant details).

Table 3. Characteristics of the participating children and adolescents.

Characteristics	Children and Adolescents (*N* = 30)
Gender	
Girls	16 (53.33%)
Boys	14 (46.67%)

Table 3. *Cont.*

Characteristics	Children and Adolescents (*N* = 30)
Age	
6–11	05 (16.66%)
12–17	17 (56.67%)
Over 18	08 (26.67%)
Family situation	
Reunified	21 (70.00%)
Undergoing reunification	09 (30.00%)

3.3. Tools

A focus group and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. Three tools were developed: (a) a questionnaire for gathering participants' personal data (name, age, place of residence, names of children, type of placement, placement duration, *etc.*); (b) a guide for the focus group questions and semi-structured interviews; and (c) a form on which the development of the information acquisition process could be recorded (date, duration, place, motives, atmosphere, *etc.*).

The scripts were prepared based on a review of the scientific literature on the subject determining key elements to be investigated. The questions sought to provide opportunities for participants to present their experiences in processes of reunification, including how it occurred, their feelings and what assistance they received *etc.* from the perspectives of the parents, children and professionals involved. In the scripts for the discussion groups and the semi-structured interviews, the language of the questions was adapted to the contexts and the participants. The data were peer reviewed to maintain the reliability and credibility of the data. Thus, if there were some discrepancies in the selection of a word, it was reviewed, and an agreement was reached regarding which words would be culturally appropriate in context.

3.4. Procedure and Analysis

First, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on the topic to determine which factors influence successful reunification during the transition period. A field study was then conducted using 22 focus groups and 18 semi-structured interviews, which were recorded with the consent of the participants. The confidential nature of the recordings was ensured. For participants who were under age 18, authorization and consent were obtained from parents and the Public Administration if it had legal custody over them at that time.

All the information recorded was transcribed, and the literal transcription was analyzed using a system of coded categories that several researchers designed and developed by applying the "bottom-up" strategy. An exhaustive process of content analysis was conducted to define categories and subcategories. Bottom-up content analysis was applied in several stages. The first stage of analysis was textual, selecting paragraphs, fragments and significant quotes from the transcription papers. The second stage was conceptual, to identify categories and subcategories that could be interrelated. Both stages were conducted and subjected to peer review, and categories and subcategories were defined when data reached saturation. To achieve analytic reliability, three focus groups were initially analyzed

by five judges (team researchers) to ensure that the categories were unambiguous and not mutually exclusive. Second, a system of double judges analyzed each hermeneutic unit. Each pair of judges had to read the analysis and codification individually, after which a consensus was found if any discrepancies surfaced. Finally, the codification was cleared using the software.

The Atlas.ti 6.1.1 software was used for the qualitative data processing. A Hermeneutic Unit Editor was created in which the literal transcriptions of the focus group (primary documents) were included, each category and subcategory was given a code (code) and textual notes were also included (memos). A conceptual network (network) was created to analyze the data as a basis for the connections established between the codes of the hermeneutic unit and the research.

The categories and codes included (a) understanding of the reunification process: (a.1) understanding reunification motives; (a.2) understanding the reunification process; (b) empowerment strategies: (b.1) active involvement; (b.2) communication; (b.3) emotional management; (b.4) adaptation; (c) social support: (c.1) formal support within the Child Protection System; (c.2) formal support outside of the Child Protection System; and (c.3) informal support.

4. Findings

4.1. Understanding the Motives for Reunification and the Reunification Process

The results indicate that parents' understanding of the difficulties involved in and the reasons behind the reunification with their children changed over time. When they are separated from their children, parents tend to blame environmental factors (*i.e.*, lack of economic resources, inadequate housing, *etc.*). Nevertheless, as they anticipate their child's return, many of them state that both environmental factors and an improvement in their parenting skills contributed to the reunification. Therefore, the results revealed a gradual evolution in parents' understanding of the reasons for the separation, broadening their vision beyond contextual factors and adding parenting skills to the factors that they believe contributed to their situation. However, many parents fail to understand the factors related to the improved welfare of their children. According to Balsells *et al.* [12], few parents achieve this understanding, and even parents who have already been reunited with their children continue to focus on the contribution of environmental factors, as this quotation from one of the mothers participating in our study suggests:

> "When they realized that they could not send them to another center, they said: So let them return to the mother." (Mother)

However, the professionals indicate that the majority of parents idealize their child's return home, requiring the professionals to underscore the importance of developing realistic expectations about their future lives together. They emphasize that establishing these expectations requires special attention and care because false expectations could lead to the reunification's failure. This description is consistent with the literature that identifies the "honeymoon" phase as a stage in which family members are optimistic and ignore the natural conflicts of daily life [27,29]. Despite the good relations established during this idyllic phase, an unresolved issue related to the separation–reunification process or some other type of issue eventually arises, resulting in a crisis that needs to be resolved. According

to Del Valle and Fuertes [28], observations made by support professionals indicate that parents should be prepared by receiving education about the phases of the reunification process.

4.2. Empowerment Strategies

Previous studies have indicated the importance of empowering parents to face the situations that arise during the transition process. The results of this study suggest that reinforcing group identity within the family is a potent empowerment strategy. Identity, stability and the cohesion of the biological family [47–49] support family reunification, but research should determine how these characteristics can be achieved. Our results reveal that the active participation of parents in the entire process strengthens family identity. Parental participation can be achieved by encouraging parents to be present during their children's most important events (visits to the doctor, school meetings, *etc.*). Indeed, professionals particularly recommend such involvement in the later stages of the reunification process:

> "If you do not make them participating parties with a right to voice their opinion, there comes a time when they stop believing that you are asking them, giving way to a sensation of being forced." (Professional)

This result is consistent with the literature. Del Valle *et al.* [30] demonstrate that the involvement of parents in their children's important events is crucial, particularly during the transition process. The parents participating in the research expressed that being treated as an active party and including all family members in important tasks facilitate the reunification process because they help them acquire new strength and unity as a family. This argument is consistent with the findings of Del Valle *et al.* [30], Osterling and Han [50] and Thomas *et al.* [49], who also detected associations between active participation, group identity and feelings.

Professionals, children and parents report that communication is an essential element of the reunification process. First, the parents and professionals interviewed indicated that communication with the spouse is a powerful strategy for overcoming difficulties and reuniting as a family. They also identify contact and good relationships with the children as factors that contribute to their desire to continue fighting for reunification. This result is consistent with previous studies. According to Wilson and Sinclair [32] and Farmer and Wijedasa [33], positive contact between family members is crucial because it increases the likelihood of family reunification.

Similarly, participants also consider communication between professionals and parents to be important because it provides the latter with support and an outlet. The narratives of the parents revealed what they considered to be the necessary content and characteristics of such communication. The content parents primarily desire is information about their children and their situation in the placement facility. They valued communication styles characterized by verbal language that accommodated their level of understanding and that expressed an attitude of trust and empathy for them. In the same context, Ghaffar *et al.* [36] found that honesty, consistency and respect from professionals were highly valued by parents.

Despite the importance of communication to all participants, the results revealed clear demands for improving this aspect of the reunification process. Parents request more regular follow-ups, including more personal contact, meetings, home visits and guidance.

> "My child has a learning disability of 38%, and I just found out now, when he is seven,
> that a report published five years ago indicates that my son has a disability." (Mother)

The professionals recognize that some information does not reach the parent and that it is necessary to conduct more direct work with the families. Milani [34] and Munro [35] found that the interaction between the family and the professional is a key factor in successful reunification, emphasizing the importance of communication based on mutual trust and not on unbalanced power relations.

Notably, differences were found in families' communication with the two specialized professional roles: family educators (professionals who conduct home visits and work directly with parents and children) and technical staff (administration professionals who perform the diagnosis, develop the work plan and perform the follow-up). Although the professionals claim that the families' relationship with the technical staff is crucial for reunification, the quality and quantity of their communication with the educators is usually better than that with the technical staff. The families report that the technical staff seems to have a more distant relationship with them, and they seem to be stricter and less flexible than the educators:

> "I think I felt better with the center's educators. Yes, the technical woman came around,
> and she is a lovely woman, but my doubts, my headaches, my problems, all this has been
> addressed by the educators from the center and not the technical staff." (Mother)

During the transition phase of the reunification process, specific emotions, identified through research, begin to appear, including stress, pressure, nerves, pain, suffering, depression, fear, feelings of loneliness, aggression, impotence, lack of calm, insecurity, frustration or feelings of guilt. Prior to reunification, parents may experience desperation caused by the length of the placement, anxiety to finally recover their children, disappointment if the planned dates fall through, and anxiety about the lack of information. Parents also experience low self-esteem due to feelings of inadequacy, fear about the return of their children, and a sense of being overwhelmed by their responsibilities. As explained by Jiménez *et al.* [37], parents experience a range of feelings from joy to fear as they anticipate reunification. Content analysis confirms the ambivalence and contradictory feelings parents experience immediately prior to their child's return.

The results indicate the importance of acquiring abilities that allow family members to adapt to the difficulties accompanying reunification. Parents not only need the abilities necessary to resume their roles, but they must also adapt to the children's developmental stage and to the changes they underwent during placement. These two aspects must be prepared for during the transition phase. Parents should assume that the children have grown, that they are in a new developmental stage, and that their needs are therefore different. Participants stress the importance of having personal knowledge of family members and coming to terms with each family member's personal and developmental changes. This result is consistent with the literature [38] and is exemplified in the following quotation from a teenager:

> "She still sees me as a little girl; when I was placed in a center, she obviously did not
> follow the stage of 'now she goes to the park', 'now she is trying her first cigarette', 'now
> she is drinking her first alcoholic drink'; she did not go through these steps from…from
> little girl to teenager and an adult." (Teenager)

Parents must assume that new attitudes and routines have become part of their child's life. The adaptation of parental responses to their child's new lifestyle is an essential part of preparing for the child's return home, as stated by the following teenager:

> "You are in a center, and you have your schedule. Now, you come home; all of a sudden, in a week, you are no longer in the center, so you do not go to sleep at nine-thirty; you are with your mother, who has never been with you, so you start saying: OK Mom, please let me go to sleep later…" [Teenager].

4.3. Formal and Informal Support

Formal support and informal support are two additional variables that facilitate family reunification [51]. The families themselves identify both as essential during the reunification process. Content analysis corroborates the importance of social support and differentiates between the contributions of formal support from specialized childcare services and the informal support of social services.

The results indicate that the support provided by the specialized social services of the Child Protection Service makes two primary contributions. Parents use these services to know what changes they should make and how to make them. Parents also state that support from professionals allows them to express their feelings and feel reassured. This finding confirms the results of Lietz *et al.* [40], who observed that formal support was a key factor in making and maintaining the changes necessary for successful reunification.

However, the quantity and quality of this support is questionable; participating families desire more dedication from support professionals and require more interaction with their children, family therapy, and parenting training:

> "More visits, more home visits; I want them to say 'look, this should be like this, this should be taken in this way, this has to go'..." (Mother)

The professionals claim that they need more resources for their specialized work. The lack of experience in and resources for providing biological family support in Spain is reflected in the professionals' discourse:

> "For addictions, child therapy and this type of thing, we do have resources, but the issue of the family, family therapy, parenting and these things: this is where we go wrong." (Professional)

Of the formal resources available outside the protection system, the one that is most sought after and appreciated by parents is psychological help. In fact, some believe that without professional psychological help, they would not have been able to follow through with the reunification process. Biehal [47] and Connell *et al.* [52] demonstrate that professionals must anticipate the recurrence of risk patterns and behaviors after families have been reunited. Therefore, support and follow-ups after reunification are essential to preventing the repetition of the events that led to the separation.

Finally, parents require different types of help from the formal help network, e.g., help in managing professional life alongside personal life, economic support, personal help and daily childcare. These resources are necessary to resolve serious difficulties, as explained by one mother:

> "Economic support, associations or a place where they could be cared for so that you can go back to work." (Mother)

In addition to the importance of formal support received from protective institutions and services, the informal support received by family members and through social networks is also important [53,54]. According to Simard [55], this support is essential to achieving satisfactory reunification. Maluccio and Ainsworth [56] found that weak social and community support is an obstacle to family reunification. The results of this study confirm the results in the literature that most parents undergoing the reunification processes have little informal support [42,43]. Both the professionals and parents confirm this. One father states:

> "I was alone, I have no family, I am alone, I was and am alone because, if I had a family, I would not have reached this situation." (Father)

Those who report that they received informal support primarily received it from their spouse (considered a crucial supporter by married participants), family members (grandmothers, siblings, sisters-in-law, *etc.*) or friends. Few parents mention other types of informal support (e.g., religious groups and communication technology). The literature indicates that this informal support is important and that families with informal support networks obtain better qualitative results during the reunification process [41]. Therefore, many authors recommend that professionals work with families to identify and maximize their informal support resources [42,43].

5. Conclusions

This study represents the perspectives of all those involved in the reunification process. The combined perspective of parents, children and professionals contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon and reaffirms the existence of specific educational needs during the transition phase of reunification. This study identifies further significant relevant needs and increases their specificity.

Prior research has emphasized the importance of understanding the reasons behind and the process of family reunification. This research indicates that parents desire more transparency about the needs and welfare of their children during the transition phase. Although parents gradually come to understand the reasons behind the separation and reunification, they are largely unaware of the improvement in the child's situation.

This research also indicates the clear need to develop strategies to help parents adapt to several significant changes, particularly developmental changes experienced by their children during the placement and changes in their routines and habits. Schofield *et al.* [57] and Thomas *et al.* [49] found that parental optimism, adaptability, flexibility, trust, security and autonomy were important reunification factors for their sons and daughters. They also observed that the adaptability of fathers and mothers, their openness to change, flexibility and the acquisition of trust, security and autonomy were necessary to overcome possible problems. This study identifies the areas that require further adaptation during the transition phase.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that one of the limitations in the study has been the small contribution of child participation. More recent policies and norms regarding childhood have moved significantly toward recognizing the right to participation of those involved in matters that concern them. This new view also includes research processes and child protection. Working from this perspective, children's voices have been collected in the proposed methodology for examining processes of family reunification. However, it can be seen in the content analysis that children have difficulty speaking about their experience, reporting little data regarding the information requested of them. This may be in part due to the scant tradition in our context of promoting experiments with child participation or investigative tools. Future investigations should find strategies that allow for greater expression for children and adolescents.

This study also contributes to the literature by revealing parents' desire to receive more formal support through the specialized network. The results indicate the necessity of meeting the specific needs that arise during the reunification process by providing specific support for families. These findings have important practical implications and underscore the practices that support family reunification and that can be incorporated into training programs. Both the results of this study and the literature reviewed lead to the conclusion that "providing adaptation and empowerment tools and strategies to parents and children for their return home" is fundamental in a training program for families. This general goal can be broken down into three specific objectives: (a) objectively planning, with the participation of all family members, the necessary adjustments for reconstructing the family unit and the return home; (b) being realistic about the changes undergone by providing reinforcement for all family members who consider themselves part of the family unit; and (c) understanding the characteristics of the reunification process.

To meet specific needs through training, the specific challenges of each stage mentioned by parents, professionals and children, in addition to parenting skills, must be addressed. The results of this study call for an approach that considers child welfare its primary discourse and objective.

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Author Contributions

M. Àngels Balsells is the director researcher of the study, and Crescencia Pastor is the co-director. M. Àngels Balsells, Crescencia Pastor, Pere Amorós, Ainoa Mateos, Carmen Ponce and Alicia Navajas participated in the study design, carried out analyses, interpreted the data and wrote the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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