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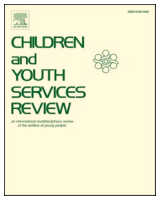

'None of this is homely': The absence of home in residential care

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ABSTRACT

Residential care, a form of out-of-home care, meets demand for children and youth removed from their biological families when Statutory bodies have insufficient kinship or foster care homes. We explored the concept of home while centering children and youth's experiences in residential care. As part of a larger study, phenomenological interpersonal interviews were held with children and youth with experiences living in residential care (n = 17). Guiding the deductive analysis were Boccagni and Kusenbach's (2020) multiple dimensions of home including: familiarity, security, control, personal expression, comfort, intimacy and meaningful relationships. Children and youth in residential care understood home as an absence of unsafe environments. While their experiences of home were punctuated with absence or lack across the domains of home such as control, familiarity, intimacy, comfort, security and relationships with workers. Domestic pets, for those youth who had them, provided a sense of comfort, intimacy and relationship, providing consistency and unconditional love within residential care. Piecemeal practices of homemaking occurred within a relational vacuum and absence of familiarity due to a high turnover and inconsistency in residential care staff or movement of youth. Simultaneously, a home and a workplace, residential care created a site of liminal borderlands making building a sense of home challenging. Thus, experiences of home are limited by institutional practices and policies creating unequal social relations and inequities for children and youth in care.

1. Introduction

The concept of home is more than a residential building. Home is a crucial site for identity development, a sense of belonging, emotional and psychological wellbeing and trust (Easthope, 2004). Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) have suggested that the concept of home is 'common sense, unreflexive' (p. 597) and that it is only when 'home is absent, missing or patently at odds with the normatively positive attributes it 'should' hold' (p. 597) that we wonder about its meaning in people's everyday lives. In this study we consider a group of children and young people who may never have experienced a sense of 'home', and therefore have not experienced the associated emotional and psychological wellbeing, trust and sense of belonging.

Children and youth in residential care (RC), a form of out-of-home care, have been '… removed from homes, placed in homes (both foster homes and institutions) and left home' (Natalier & Johnson, 2015, p. 124). They are expected to make sense of alien spaces, unfamiliar routines and uninvited relationships, eroding their sense of agency, safety and belonging (Natalier & Johnson, 2015; Schmid et al., 2025). Cameron-Mathiassen et al. (2022), in a systematic review of the literature on the experiences of young people living in RC, found that while these living situations might meet material needs, the institutional context limits young people's autonomy and control. This may occur through an explicit authoritarianism and surveillance (Boel-Studt et al., 2023), but is also evident in less obvious denials of agency, such as failing to welcome young people into decision-making (Parmenter et al., 2025; ten Brummelaar et al., 2016). Informed by the tension between what home might be and the experiences of young people in RC, this paper aims to strengthen understandings of the meaning and relevance of home in this context. It explores the needs and desires of children and young people in RC, through a focus on both young people's and workers' interpretations and attempts to create home as part of daily life.

RC, as a form of out-of-home care, aims to provide an alternative safe 'home' environment, accommodating and supporting children and youth who are unable to live in their home due to their parents' unsafe behaviours and environments (Galvin et al., 2022). Australia's out-of-home care system is the jurisdiction of the State and Territories, with

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minimal involvement Federally which has been described as 'fragmented' (Mendes et al., 2023). Defined as: 'where the placement is in a residential building whose purpose is to provide placements for children and where there are paid staff' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025), RC holds a somewhat contested place in many out-of-home care systems. There are mixed views on the value and benefits of RC for children and youth. While some see it as 'one of the most severe interventions in the field of child and youth care' (Schmid et al., 2025, p. 2) and the option of 'last resort' (Galvin et al., 2022, p. 34; Moore, McArthur, Death et al., 2017, p. 1), others argue that it can be a 'positive and a preferred choice for many young people at appropriate times in their development' (Knorth et al., 2008, p. 124). Regardless of these tensions, RC remains a key – and expensive (Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023) – element of child protection systems across multiple jurisdictions. In Australia RC is less commonly used than relative/kinship care and foster care, and is far less widespread than in the OECD, with 9.5% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025), as compared to OECD countries where around one third (OECD, 2022), of children and youth in out-of-home care are living in RC. Aboriginal[1] children and young people are over-represented in both care and in residential care (Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023; McLean, 2018). In South Australia, the site of this study, 16.7% of children in out-of-home care are living in RC (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024; Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023), costing nearly AU500,000 per child per year (Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023). These high rates have been explained as resulting from rising numbers of infants, children and young people entering care, insufficient family-based care and the complex needs of children entering care (Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023).

In Australia, RC has been reserved largely for children and youth who are deemed 'too difficult' or 'too old' to place (Moore, McArthur, & Roche, 2017). It behooves us to challenge the locus of 'the problem' as lying within children and youth, recognising that children and young people in RC have come from disrupted and harmful environments, marked by turbulence, fear, abandonment and trauma (Slaatto et al., 2023). They have often experienced further trauma associated with multiple placements, and many struggle with inter-personal coping strategies (Moore et al., 2018), contributing to behaviours that might be seen as difficult and challenging. As a group, children and youth living in RC have poorer health, educational, employment and housing outcomes and are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system and experience homelessness (Mendes et al., 2023; Mendes & McCurdy, 2020), reflecting their multiple, pre-existing and complex needs (Mendes et al., 2023). These patterns broadly reflect findings from European jurisdictions including England (Munro, 2019), Wales (Sacker et al., 2021) and Norway (Paulsen et al., 2023).

Conceptually, home integrates the relational, physical and emotional/ psychological dimensions of children and youth's needs, thus providing a strong basis for interrogating the practical and day-to-day experiences of living in RC (Clough et al., 2006; Hillan, 2006). This paper draws on Natalier and Fehlberg (2015, p. 111) definition of home as 'the interrelationship of the material and psycho-social dimensions of where and how children live, including their experiences, relationships and the physical context'. When it is a positive experience, home can be experienced as a haven, a physically and emotionally safe place over which people feel control. Its social and psychological dimensions – 'feeling at home' – include a sense of belonging, comfort and freedom, a place that is 'unquestionably "our" place, where our presence needs no justification' (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). These experiences are facilitated through meaningful relationships and the routines and rituals shared with others (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015). Home also requires shelter, a physical place in which these other dimensions are pursued and experienced (Natalier & Johnson, 2015). However, home is not simply the aggregate of these dimensions; they are interrelated within a shifting relationship between a space and people's interpretations and experiences of that site (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020; Easthope, 2004).

The normative, positive associations of home are countered by more critical explorations that highlight the ambiguity and ambivalence of home as a concept. Wardhaugh (1999, p. 93), writing about women's experiences of domestic and family violence, described the feeling of 'homeless at home', reflecting the 'tension between the binary opposites of safety and risk, security and fear, privacy and invasion'. This notion of 'homeless at home' may also resonate with children and young people in RC, who may experience home as an 'adult geography' (Costa Santos et al., 2024; Luzia, 2011). An adult geography resulting from the presence of a rotating adult workforce within the residential building. The complex dynamics of home are particularly evident in the experiences of young people living within institutionalised sites. Moore, McArthur, Death et al. (2017), in their work children and youth in RC, found that supportive relationships, stability and predictability, fair rules and having some control over their environment were consistently identified as elements contributing to a sense of safety in RC. Limited agency over how spaces are used and decorated has been noted across diverse contexts though: for example, in crisis and temporary accommodations, rules about legitimate practices and interventions can limit homemaking practices and a sense of home (Hoolachan, 2022). However, these limitations can be resisted to claim a space and create different versions of home (Pleace et al., 2022), often through small, seemingly unimportant, modifications such as wall stickers (Harris et al., 2020), as a 'way of claiming space, being oneself, feeling at home and "homing oneself"' (Palludan & Winther, 2017, p. 37).

The importance of relationships has also been identified as a key theme across the literature (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022; McPherson et al., 2025; Parmenter et al., 2025). For many young people, peer relationships provide critical support and a sense of community; however they can also create fear and insecurity, through psychological and physical violence, for example (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022). For others, RC is marked by feelings of alienation and loneliness, with young people feeling that they do not belong (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022). Some research suggests that family-based care may present less risk of violence and, when young people feel they have a voice and are listened to, are more likely to be experienced as supportive (Moore et al., 2018). These connections have been found to be particularly significant to young people's belief that they matter to others (Slaatto et al., 2023), but are also tenuous and readily disrupted by staff transience (McPherson et al., 2025; Moore, McArthur, Death et al., 2017; Parmenter et al., 2025). We draw on these insights as we respond to the research question: Whether and how children and young people experience home in residential care in South Australia?

2. Methods

This research is located within a larger phenomenological study exploring the experiences of home across multiple forms of out-of-home care (Goudie et al., 2025). The data analysed in this paper were generated through an interview-based exploratory qualitative study, that centred young people's voices.

2.1. Recruitment and sample

Partner organisations identified potential participants who were best placed to engage in the research without significant disruption to their emotional wellbeing. The partner organisations included statutory authority and non-government organisations responsible for providing support to foster and kinship carers and/or young people in transitional housing programs. These organisations were typically the closest point of contact for families and young people and were best positioned to assess the appropriateness of engaging specific children and young people. As such, children and youth in crisis, those recently taken into state care and those actively in the process of reunifying with their

biological families did not participate in this study.

Although the Department for Child Protection provided overarching consent for the researchers to engage children and young people in care, assent by the young people was then reaffirmed prior to and during the interview. This was achieved by providing partner organisations with information about the project and recruitment tools including plain English information sheets and a low literacy comic for children and youth. Based on this information potential participants – young people – could then decide if they gave permission for the services to provide their contact details to the researchers. Researchers then contacted the interested participants, orally explaining the assent process, reiterating their right to withdraw from the project at any time. The purpose of audio recording was explained, and when one young person declined recording, the interview proceeded with detailed handwritten notes. All participants were made aware of the researcher's responsibility to notify relevant authorities if there was reason to believe that there was risk of harm to the child or young person and/or others. Children and youth were provided with a $40 gift voucher for their time.

Overall, 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with children and youth (n = 17). The children and youth comprised (Table 1): one young person currently in foster care after moving from RC (n = 1), children and youth currently in RC (n = 5), youth who had just exited RC (n = 11). The children and youth interviewed were aged between 10 and 19 years old (with an average age of 16 years). Given the average age, in reporting the participants will be referred to as youth or young people. Six of the youth identified as male and eleven as female. The 17-youth lived across fifteen households, with two participants being siblings placed together and sharing their interview, and another two participants were housemates within Supported Independent Living Services (SILS)[1]. Their time-in-care averaged at just over eight years, ranging from two to 17 years. The total number of placements youth had experienced was not quantified, however, one young person stated this was their 10th or 11th placement, and others also mentioned having had multiple placements in, before or after RC. The length of interviews ranged from 15 min to 1 h and 15 min with an average time of 38 min. Children and young people in residential care were interviewed in their current placement (n = 5). Support workers were aware of the interview and were nearby and/or available for debrief. Those young people who had transitioned from residential care into foster care or transitional housing support were interviewed either in their home (n = 9), or at their request at the University (n = 2), over the phone (n = 1), or at a community library (n = 1). When interviews occurred outside residential care settings, support workers were informed of the scheduled times and locations. Young people were encouraged to contact their support workers if they wished to discuss the interview further or if they wished to withdraw their consent.

Table 1
Sample demographics.

		Children & Young People
Total Participants		**17**
Gender	Female	11
	Male	6
	Non-binary	0
Aboriginality	Aboriginal[1]	4
	Non-Aboriginal	10
	Not Stated	3
Age	10–14 years	4
	15–17	9
	18–19	4

[1] In this paper we use the term 'Aboriginal', unless a source refers directly to 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'. This research was conducted in South Australia where the Indigenous peoples of the land self-identify as Aboriginal, hence we use the term in consideration of the preference of the Aboriginal people involved in this research.

[1] Supported Independent Living Services (SILS) in South Australia is a form of Out of Home Care. It is provided to young people in care including accommodation and individualised support, based on their assessed need and preparation for independent living.

2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to encourage participants to share their experiences in ways that were meaningful to them, and to provide the space to engage with issues to the extent they felt comfortable doing so. During the audio recorded interviews, youth were invited to discuss: (i) how they define home and in what contexts (past or present) they feel at home?; (ii) what supports them to feel 'at home'?; (iii) how does the presence and absence of home impact upon their lives and wellbeing?; and (iv) recommendations on how to help youth in state care to feel at home. To support young people to feel more comfortable during the interview process they were provided age-appropriate materials such as blank paper, textas, stickers, and stamps. And while a prompt was given that they could use these to draw what home meant for them, they were also able to draw whatever they wanted.

2.3. Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was undertaken using Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) seven aspirational dimensions of home: security, familiarity, control, intimacy, comfort, personal expression and relational. This conceptualization of home offered a framework that was not connected to particular social context but, rather, sensitized us to a range of possible dimensions of home (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020) that may not have otherwise been available to the study population.

The research team engaged in deductive reflexive thematic analysis, acknowledging that their own values and assumptions regarding home would impact on the reading of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the first stage of analysis the research team individually read through a subset of transcripts, familiarising themselves with the data, before meeting together to discuss initial perceptions and identification of potential codes and themes. These discussions were further enriched by variations in the researchers' perspective, based on their different roles in their data collection process. An initial coding framework was developed from these discussions, providing the basis for coding all the interviews systematically using NVivo software.

2.4. Positionality of authors

The authors are all non-Indigenous Australian female-identified adult social work and social science researchers. Three of the four have social work practice experience. We were mindful throughout the study of our positioning and how this impacted research design, data collection and analysis. Throughout the study we engaged in reflective critical conversations and respectful challenges of each other's assumptions.

2.5. Ethics

The research was intentionally developed to promote meaningful connection with participants while balancing young people's right to participate with their need to be protected from exploitation (Warming, 2006). Across all interviews, consent, information and participation were ongoing and recursive, with an emphasis on checking on young people's comfort and wellbeing in the moment and being sensitive to the implications of participation after the interview ended. The interview

process focused on young people's experience of home but did not seek detail or information about the events leading up to the young person going into care. At the beginning of each interview, young people were reminded that they could pause the interview or decline to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. In situations where siblings or housemates lived together, they were offered the choice of being interviewed individually or jointly; one sibling pair and one pair of housemates chose to be interviewed together. Due to small numbers and to ensure the privacy of young people involved in this study, ages are not reported with their pseudonym. The same consciousness was applied in interviews with workers, in recognition of the challenges of their work in RC. The study was approved by University and the Aboriginal[1] Health Research Ethics Committee.

3. Results

We report how children and young people in residential care experience Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) aspirational dimensions of home – familiarity, security, control, personal expression, comfort, intimacy and relationships. While the findings are organised according to the domains, the analysis itself involved interpreting patterns within each domain. The themes presented therefore reflect higher-order concepts derived from the domains, consistent with a deductive analytic approach. While presented separately for analytic purposes, these dimensions were interrelated in discussions of home and its absence. Indeed, the absence of home was the overarching theme across interviews with youth, highlighting the tensions between the desire for home as a lived experience and the logic of RC as a workplace and a site of organizational practices.

3.1. Absence of familiarity

In their interviews, young people spoke about frequent changes in care accommodation and care workers – changes that were simultaneously destabilising and normalised. Chloe was clear: 'This is not a home… Because if it's home you don't kick kids out. … Have to go to a dumb other home'. Mary reflected: 'I've been moving around different houses; this is probably my tenth home or my eleventh home'. While both young women used the word 'home' to refer to RC, their experiences indicated it was anything but. The threat and reality of being moved undermined the possibility of familiar routines, spaces and people. Even when staying for an extended period in one place, familiarity was undermined by staff changes; when asked how many workers Mary has in a week, Mary could not remember exactly but stated, simply, 'A lot'. Change and the associated absence of familiarity was evident across young people's reflections on RC.

Familiarity – and specifically, its absence – creates context for the other dimensions of home. Familiarity should involve consistent, reliable and predictable care, including familiarity within environments. The theme of familiarity links with the practice and language of placement stability and permanency planning and, relatedly, the emphasis on continuity of relationships and challenges associated with workforce stability. The implications of this absence are evident in participants' reflections on security, control, to which we now turn.

3.2. Security and safety as core to understandings of home

Children and young people consistently named a safe and secure physical environment as a necessary component of home in RC. Their awareness of this was perhaps heightened given the 'lack of safety' within their biological family that resulted in their removal and placement into the care of the State. Brothers Isaac and Jonathon stated: 'Home means safe place… and a place where I can chill out' (Isaac); and simply, 'safety' (Jonathon). Another child, Ivy, who has been in several RC facilities reflected on her current experience in RC: 'they're trying to make me safe here so that's what they're doing…some places they don't really make me feel as safe but this – the carers are lovely and they make me feel really safe here, that is a good thing…'. Ruby, however, recognised that while the nature and experience of home is contested, safety remains at its core:

> I feel like saying that is kind of hard because everyone has different interpretations on what home is like. So, like some people, home might be actually a bad experience to them, so I think it shouldn't necessarily be home but maybe a place that feels safe

Jasmine started her description of home with: 'Home is a word that can be different meanings depending on the person. Home is a place where you feel like you belong and a safe place'. Here, Jasmine speaks to, not only, the importance of safety but also the imperative of a sense of belonging.

3.3. Surveillance results in a lack of control

Youth in this study expressed their desire to have control over their environments and decision-making, however this was often far from their reality. The absence of worker consistency discussed above undermined young people's familiarity with the practices and people shaping their daily lives, eroding their sense of control. As articulated by Florence:

> it's hard to realise that you're going to have different carers every day because you would wake up not knowing who you were going to have the next day or you'd wake up knowing oh yeah, I'm going to have this person and then they don't rock up and then it's another person. It's just really stressful because you kind of plan your day out based on that.

Young people's desire for control extended to personal independence, relationships with others and the boundaries of their own space. Jonathon, 10-years-old, for example, compared the constraints he faced with the perceived freedoms of young people who have aged out of care: 'Being able to do stuff that I'd like to do and things like that as well… Yeah, they're [adults out of the system are] free to do whatever they want'. For many, surveillance was a defining feature of living in RC, as reflected by Rosa:

> In resi [RC] you wouldn't be allowed to get out of your room for something. And you would have to have people watching you in the bathroom, it's like that's not the best thing. … Especially for like a teenager too. And in here the first night I spent here [in foster care] I was so confused. … I'm like, what the hell is this? I got to have a shower by myself. I got to watch electronics before I go to bed. I got to chill in my own room. I had my own space kind of thing….

Rosa's comment indicates a simultaneous discomfort with surveillance and its normalisation in the RC setting, such that the experience of autonomy in a different care setting felt abnormal and confusing.

Jasmine contextualised an absence of independence and control over space within the workings of RC. After residing in standard RC units, Jasmine had recently moved into an 'Independent wing' which gave her more freedom and control:

> Just this one [RC placement] you get more control and get to do more things and get away with more things than in the other placement because I was living, I didn't have an independent wing. So, I was living with another kid, and I only had my bedroom that was my own space. And I'd have to share a bathroom, kitchen all that, which was pretty hard and here you don't get harassed when you're out with [someone] the carer's [not] calling you 24/7 wondering where you are because you're independent…It gives me more space and freedom.

Jasmine's comments make explicit the juxtaposition between young people's desire for an experience of home, and RC as a workplace. Cassie further exemplifies this in her observation that:

> in residential care they fucking log everything so it doesn't really matter, nothing's going to feel like home if they're writing down what fucking time you took a shower and you're 14-years-old. They lock everything, they lock your food up after 9 pm. It doesn't matter what your age is and what your opinions are because if there's a child that's in the house that is younger than you, they are going to [have] rules around that child as if I should have the same rules as a 9-year, as a 6-year old boy when I'm a 14-year-old girl.…They'd [RCW] just write in the log book … she [RCW] feels the need to tell them everything…But none of this is homely. (Cassie).

The demands of this workplace, particularly its requirement of surveillance and risk mitigation, trumped the possibility of independence and control that might contribute a sense of home.

It was clear that children and young people's bedrooms were one of their few sites for (imperfect) control. This was particularly so when young people were required to share their living space with unknown or unwelcome others and were subject to surveillance of their movements and relationships. Florence described her own bedroom as a necessary 'personal safe space' and central to her sense of home while also making clear that this could be breached at any time by uninvited others: 'your room is your number one spot; as soon as someone barges in and you're in there you're feeling like someone is invading your personal space and stuff and it's like, I don't agree with that stuff. I think regardless kids need their personal safe space.'

Thus, bedrooms offered a physical locus of control, a retreat and the opportunity to express one's identity and manage relationships. Personal bedrooms were valued but as emphasized by Liz, could not be guaranteed: 'It [having your own room] is very important. I have never agreed with sharing a room with another Resi kid; I've had to do it before. I don't agree with it because that child could become quite aggressive or just not a good person to be around.' In the interviews with young people, it seemed clear that their lack of personal control eroded the relational, spatial and personal autonomy and safety that underpins a sense of home.

3.4. Personal expression through personalising bedrooms

The importance of bedrooms as a locus of control highlights the place of personal expression in young people's understandings of home. Bedrooms were often young people's only 'own' space; their only sanctuary and a place in which they could express themselves. Florence stated: 'it's what makes – a lot of people when they're in resi they make their room who they feel like they are, and I find that is what a lot of resi kids do'. Liz further observed that: 'having your own space is always good because you can decorate it the way you want. You can arrange the room however you want, and you can just make it your own space, and that's really important to a lot of other kids not just myself'.

Reflecting the limited control experienced by many young people, organisational rules and limited resources imposed constraints on personal expression, particularly in shared spaces. This meant that they had to rely on workers to attend to their preferences. For example, Nick expressed his appreciation for the efforts made by his RCW:

> She did attempt to build what I would call a home environment because she would always get tablemats in the colours I liked, or she would get photos of me and get them printed and put up on the wall. … she got a trampoline approved for the backyard and just things like that. To me that was – and getting me involved in cooking dinner. …it was not just the workers sitting in the carers room eating their own dinner, it was the workers sitting down at my table eating dinner with me like, like home would be.

Nick's reflection also highlights the importance of having a space that reflects their preferences and desires. These physical elements of personal expression were interwoven with homemaking practices that reflected what young people liked to do. In these ways, the presence of caring workers could facilitate personal expression and, hence, a sense of 'being known' for the young person, enabling the creation, albeit in seemingly small ways, of something 'like home could be'.

3.5. Comfort through teddies and pets

Physical and emotional comfort were key elements of home for young people but were largely missing from workers' interviews. While no longer in RC, for Daisy, continuity of physical comfort was enabled by personal expression and familiarity:

> My teddies. On the couch I have this giant…cushion and then in my room I've got so many squish mellows. Not as much as my other friends but enough and everywhere I go [from RC to SILS[2]] I bring them with me. They feel, they just have the sense of comfort to them that I don't think I could ever just leave or abandon (Daisy).

Daisy's description of her teddies suggests the emotional comfort of connection and stability entwined with their physical softness.

The importance of emotional comfort was also explicit in Daisy's definition of home: 'Home is a house but it is also a feeling, and it is about comfort and happiness and safety'. However, Daisy said that in RC she did not feel cared for, and this absence of emotional comfort eroded her sense of home, making her teddies particularly important to her. For Mary who had a dog in a previous foster care placement, this emotional comfort came from pets rather than teddies. Mary reflected on the comfort from pets even though she no longer had one in RC:

> I love dogs and cats, but dogs are more like there with you, and they like – I don't know how to explain it. But like you feel more comfortable and when you give them your trust they will have then give – Yeah and then they will give you their trust and it's probably better because some dogs are really cuddly. And when you like have anxiety or – And when you cry, and they will be there for you and cuddle with you. (Mary)

Absent from young people's descriptions of comfort were the people within their home, including workers, as well as in their understanding of intimacy, to which we now turn.

3.6. Lack of intimacy and connection with residential care workers

Young people talked about intimacy in terms of connection, care and love. When asked 'what is home', Mary stated:

> I don't know, I've just been moving around, and I don't think … this home has been the right home for me. … and like I don't feel loved and stuff like that at the moment … home means people who love me, who care about me, who will always be there for me and with a family. That's mostly home to me

The following quote from Daisy, a young person in RC, highlighted the tension between young people's wish for home in RC and the necessity of RCW treating it as a worksite.

> … some carers I have found…have too much of the sense of professionalism about them. It's terrible, I know I'm a client but don't make me feel like a client…just also let yourself be comfortable. Let yourself, let your personality shine through. I mean maybe don't talk about anything heavy that's going on but tell us [if] you have a cat or a dog. Tell us you have a partner that you love so much. Tell us that you have kids that you love so much. Tell them, tell us that you have this weird yoghurt addiction and that's why you always have yoghurt in the fridge. Be honest with us… let us in as well. Not only do you try to make the space for us [to] let you in, let us in as well.

Daisy explicitly contrasted the alienating expectations of 'professionalism' from workers, with her desired connection and relationship with RCW, through the intimacy of mutual knowledge and respect that might grow from sharing lives as well as a home/work space. Cassie's

experiences of a lack of intimacy also speak to the alienation of feeling unknown and disregarded by the RCW and the young people with whom she lived:

> So, at the times I didn't feel at home, like when I was paired with young people I didn't like, when I was not invited on activities… when I was told I couldn't go on activities I wanted to go on. When I was told to pay for my own food, my own takeaway and I was told that there was no money in the budget for clothes shopping. I felt pretty bad, I felt that my opinion didn't matter at all, and I felt like, that I just had to say yes to everything that they just said, because otherwise I'd get left behind and totally forgotten about. I knew I was mostly forgotten about already.

For Cassie, failure to acknowledge her individuality was experienced as an absence of intimacy encompassing emotional harm and material lack. Her comments also offer a nuanced account of control, where workers constrained her participation in activities that might connect her with others and simultaneously required an independence in meeting her physical needs.

In the absence of intimacy with other people, some young people had the opportunity to turn to animals for connection. While the ability to have pets in RC varied across sites, depending on organisational policy and resources. Young people described how the presence of pets in RC provided the intimacy that was lacking. Jasmine stated:

> I do have 2 rabbits now; we're babysitting them for now……they came from abusive family so we're taking care of them….but I feel like, [it] doesn't have to be people as a family it's also animals…as well. I love animals, so animals [are] like home to me, like dogs, cats, any animals

Young people's search for home in an organisational context, and their desire for intimacy, relied on a connection that was largely lacking in the professional relationships experienced by many young people, as discussed next.

3.7. Relationships

The importance of comfort – particularly emotional connection – and intimacy in young people's accounts points to the importance of relationships as a foundational element of home. Three sub-themes were identified in the relational understandings of home: people, particularly care workers, peers, and pets.

3.7.1. Absence of relationship with care workers

In their imaginations of home, young people in RC reflected on the centrality of people and relationships. For example, Mary's definition of home drew on the distinction between physical shelter and connection; home, for her, meant living with family and other important people:

> It doesn't really matter to me where like, where I live, it just matters that I have a family. That's the only thing what matters to me and like having people there. Like if I was homeless and I didn't have anyone that would not be a home but if I had people with me that would be a home. Doesn't matter where it is and it doesn't matter if we're homeless or not, I would just want a family and have people around me.

In this imagined scenario, Mary centred family as the foundational element of home. For other young people in this study, family were missing from their accounts. Some focus instead on their meaningful relationships with carers. Jim commented that: 'we had a really good carer…and he really taught me and my brother how to be a man and how to actually evolve. … he really taught us what it means to live.' Reflecting the experiences of many, Daisy observed that: '[RCW] did not make an effort to try and hang out with me or begin to build a relationship with me and I felt so out of place there'. Overall, few youths reported having positive relationships with RCW.

3.7.2. Peers as a source of relationship

In the absence of meaningful relationships with family and carers (sometimes in addition to), friends and community were important elements of home for young people. Jasmine, who brought with her a pre-prepared statement outlining her understanding of home, expanded on these relational components of home, drawing together different connections to emphasise home as relational, not merely shelter. As Jasmine explains, home is more than a place:

> But home isn't just houses or places it's also the people around you, like maybe a youth group, or a sports team. It can also be your friends and family around you. Home isn't, home, doesn't have to be with your family, home can also be my youth group or my care team. I get along and connect more with adults than kids my own age because I can reach out to them and know that I won't feel judged and know that someone's looking out for me… And it's also not the places, it's not a house or anything either.

As suggested by Jasmine, while youth in RC seek relational engagement from peers outside of RC, through school or other activities, there are limits on their ability to engage. Young people may not be able to spontaneously go to a friend's house for a sleepover after school, nor have them over to their care facility. As stated by Mary: 'When it's like a sleepover or you know, … I know you have to ask permission but when you say I have to get it approved it makes it sound really difficult' (Mary). The limits of control are evident. In the following quote Jasmine shares the impacts of RCW surveillance, intruding on her time with her peers in ways that eroded control and intimacy:

> I feel like [RCW] not always calling the kids when they're out with their friends and stuff. I used to have that problem when I was in my old house, my carers would call me every hour or so to check up on me… if it was getting dark then yeah, but… I think they're just worried and making sure that we're okay, but the kids' best thing is for space and time. Even if they're in a happy mood, they still need space and be able to go out and hang out with friends.…because most kids just want a family or just somewhere to live that's actually just like every other family. Being able to bring their friends over, or stuff like that, … just kids hang out with their friends and being able to go more free space, free time

For Jasmine, sharing where she lived with friends was a marker of being 'just like every other family', an indicator of the importance of 'normal' activities that may be taken for granted in other homes. Such relationships could be particularly important when young people in RC felt unsafe, as highlighted by Tammy: 'first one [RC] I was placed with a 12-year-old girl and I completely didn't feel safe, she threatened to kill me. She did, like smoked weed, she was doing drugs, she was going out, I mean she was sleeping with 30-year-old men so I just completely didn't feel safe'. Here, the difference between Jasmine's desired relationships and Tammy's experiences is stark.

3.7.3. Pets as 'home'

Meaningful relationships were not restricted to people but also included pets. As described earlier, pets were sometimes the only source of unconditional love, comfort and intimacy. While not with her in RC, Mary was explicit about the importance of her pet dog in an otherwise alienating and often unfamiliar RC: '…They [dogs] made me feel like home. [The relationships are] Love[ing] and caring about me and just being there by my side when I really need it'. For Laura who was one of the few young people with continuity of having her cat in RC: 'I've had him since I was 12, so – and he's come with me from, I think, in total, four different places now. So kind of he's my home, you know? Like he's the only thing I've had with me for all of the time.' Laura's relationship with her cat was 'healing', providing emotional comfort and intimacy through knowing and responding to her cat's needs. She stated:

> I would recommend every person to have a cat – Have a pet because it told – It showed me like how to be kind and how to look after like – Because no-one was there for me and I had to teach myself. And I've got this little thing which I got a month old and he [pet cat] didn't have anyone and he [pet cat] needed someone to rely on, and then you – it's kind of like healing, you know? because no-one could help me, but I can help him

For the young people we spoke to, caring relationships were a deeply important element of home; building and expressing emotional comfort, familiarity and intimacy. The absence of meaningful connections or intimacy sits alongside the other absences within RC. The absence of security through experiences of physical threat and absence of familiarity and control through workers' professional distance, when combined with young people's own and RCW's transience can create an experience that is not at all home.

4. Discussion

Young people participating in this research offered clear understandings of home aligned with normative cultural definitions, however their experiences of home were often punctuated with absence and lack. Home was a place of daily life, expressive of oneself and constituted through relationships with others. Other research, focusing on young people's experiences of state care, has highlighted the importance of home in its absence (Natalier & Johnson, 2015), with Samuels (2009) concluding that, 'The promise of "home" and achieving a real permanent family loomed over youth as ever-present yet enduringly absent' (p. 1237). Adding to this small body of home-focused research, these findings suggest home is a recognisable and resonant idea for young people, even when they are living in contexts that do not obviously align with normative expectations of 'proper home-like settings' (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). Applying Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) conceptual framework of home highlighted its multiple dimensions: home was a place of familiarity, security, control, personal expression, comfort, intimacy and meaningful relationships. Thus, home offers a conceptual tool for understanding the material, relational and interpretive dimensions of young people's lives in the everyday. As emphasised through our analysis using Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) domains of home as an analytic guide, these dimensions may be experienced by young people in RC as largely 'aspirational' given the many constraints with which they live.

Shared amongst youth in RC was an understanding of home as, ideally, a safe place. Reflecting the less-than-ideal reality of RC, though, young people referred to incidents threatening their physical safety and personal boundaries throughout the interviews. This supports findings in other studies (Attar-Schwartz & Khoury-Kassabri, 2015; Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022), suggesting that young people seek both physical and emotional security. Young people were concerned that without positive relationships, familiarity and control, RC could not be a home.

Safety included emotional as well as physical safety, with young people in RC aspiring to intimacy and a sense of belonging. Rarely, however, was RC a place in which young people felt loved or where carers and young people 'functioned like a "family"'. Identified as a function of quality in residential care (Castro et al., 2024), young people's relationships with RCW have been considered central to young people feeling a sense of home and family (García-deLeón & Vallejo-Slocker, 2025; McPherson et al., 2025). The transience and lack of intimacy with RCW, as those with whom young people spent most time, threw into relief the absence of meaningful relationships in their daily lives. Some youth understood the absence of intimacy as inherent to the professionalism of the RCW role, echoing (Côté & Clément, 2022) finding that youth did not conceive of affect and love as part of the role of RCW. Nonetheless these connections were missed. In their absence, relationships were built with young people's peers or pets. Connections with peers were, like other dimensions of home, shaped by organisational policies and risk mitigation. Italian philosopher Coccia (2024) whose study of home includes pets reflects: 'when we succeed in building a relationship of intimacy – in other words, a domestic relationship – with one of any living form, the biological distance that separates us on a taxonomic level becomes purely incidental' (p. 144). While farm animals have previously been recognized as a therapeutic aid in residential care (Castro et al., 2024), we identified the value of the domestic pet/youth relationship. This relationship is of critical importance and needs to be nurtured, especially given the levels of trauma and mistrust in adult affect held by youth in residential care. Pets in RC, when allowed, perhaps offered the straightforward and uncomplicated relationships and sense of home. They fulfilled the youth's need for intimacy through connection.

The inter-related dimensions of control, personal expression and comfort were also important for the young people, and there was evidence that RCW attempted to facilitate these. Relationships with RCW were central to this and through encouraging decision-making have been found to support choice and control for young people in RC (Göbbels-Koch & Gupta, 2025). Our findings align with others identifying the significance of one's own space (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022) and bedrooms in particular (Boel-Studt et al., 2023; Slaatto et al., 2023), as well as opportunities for self-expression (Parmenter et al., 2025) in often small and personally meaningful ways (Hoolachan, 2022). However, the resourcing and administration of RC as a physical site sometimes made this difficult to achieve. In our study, youth in RC were not easily able to access the personal expression dimension of home, highlighting the significance of transient objects of comfort brought with them such as teddies or cushions. Young people's accounts suggest that homemaking was a challenge. This is not to say that young people did not engage in homemaking through spatial, material and social practices. However, systemic practices and policies, such as permissions to make changes, decorate or purchase homely items, lack of access to spaces through locks on doors, constant surveillance and being 'risk managed', consistently challenged their efforts. Where they could, there was evidence that RCW supported them, but this support highlighted young people's limited agency and reliance on relationships with RCW (Parmenter et al., 2025). Home was an 'adult geography' (Costa Santos et al., 2024) but one in which the adults themselves felt constrained. The tensions between aspiration, experience and the multiple, interrelated and contingent dimensions described by young people are a reminder that: 'Even in the here-and-now, a sense of home, wherever and whenever located, is a matter of degrees and thresholds (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017), rather than a full and unconditional achievement' (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020, p. 597).

In recognition of the potential for the construct of home within residential care, practice manuals offer strategies on how RCW may build home-like environments (Mitchell, 2019). We suggest that the co-existence of the potential of home and the actuality of institutionalised workplace were key to shaping these 'degrees and thresholds' (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). RC facilities sit at the intersection of the public (workplace) and the domestic (home), in a liminal space. Identified as the 'cracks between worlds' (Zufferey, 2022, p. 73) these liminal borderlands were also observed by Söderqvist et al. (2016) in their study of unaccompanied young people in RC units in Sweden. Söderqvist et al. (2016) found that: 'the presence of both controlling elements and surveillance practiced by the staff is inevitable, as a part of the aim of guaranteeing the young people's well-being and observing their behaviour, which is reported to the responsible person at the social welfare office.' (p. 597). In our study, the youth felt both the constant gaze or surveillance of the RCW and the limits of organisational systems defining appropriate homemaking activities and as a result could not experience a home that allowed them to pursue control, personal expression and comfort, to let their guard down; in short, 'to feel at home'. Further hampering young people's ability to secure all dimensions of 'home', the out-of-home care system is plagued by both a high turnover of workforce in RC and high mobility of young people

within placements in RC facilities (Côté & Clément, 2022; McPherson et al., 2025; Verso Consulting, 2011), reflecting particular institutional logics. Intimacy, security, relationships and familiarity were eroded as a result. This means that while children and young people in RC are secure and safe in relative terms, they may be unable to access the other benefits of home including emotional and psychological development, sense of belonging, identity development, health and wellbeing (Easthope, 2004).

4.1. Study limitations

Our discussion and findings must be read considering the implications of the research design. This is a small sample of young people and workers, and, like all small qualitative studies, cannot be generalizable. Due to the small sample size separate analysis of Aboriginal[1] youth's understandings of home was not undertaken. Missing from the sample are the experiences of children under the age of 10 years of age. In the jurisdiction where the data were collected, 41.4 percent of children in RC are under 10 years old (Guardian for Children and Young People, 2023); future studies could offer additional insights into what dimensions of home are important and experienced as absent for young children in RC. We are also aware that our sample included Aboriginal[1] young people but the flow of the interviews and subsequent analysis has not allowed for exploration of the place of Indigenous identity in shaping home in RC – an important consideration given that Aboriginal[1] young people are over-represented in RC and the state care system generally, and experience the ongoing impacts of colonization (Gatwiri et al., 2021). However, this paper offers a first step in amplifying the voices of young people, as they seek home in RC.

5. Conclusion

Our findings highlight the gap between young people's imaginings of home and their experiences of RC as home. For some children, there was an absence of home; others described glimmers of home in the presence of pets that provided comfort, private spaces, shared meals and connections with others. These were often transient or reliant on RCW or local policy and practices. RC as simultaneously home and workplace created a site of liminal borderlands in which building a sense of home was challenging. Regardless of these challenges, home remained a resonant idea for young people. This paper suggests home may be a useful tool for challenging our thinking about what might be possible in a space that is both home and workplace.

Youth in RC have high rates of adverse childhood experiences, psychological and developmental challenges and colonial trauma histories that are compounded by with the trauma associated with child protection involvement, removal and growing up 'in-care'. These disrupted subjectivities (Zufferey, 2022) call for expanded ways of understanding the potentialities for creating a sense of self, safety, belonging, stability in everyday life. We look forward to further research that identifies ways to align young people's imagined home and their experience of home, and to incorporate this into emergent therapeutic responses.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Michelle Jones: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Kristin Natalier:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Sharyn Goudie:** Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Kate Seymour:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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