

EARLY YEARS

POLICY ADVICE AND
FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS

A BERA Early Childhood Special Interest Group /
TACTYC: Association for the Professional Development
of Early Years Educators collaboration

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The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is a member-led charity which exists to encourage educational research and its application for the improvement of practice and public benefit.

We strive to ensure the best quality evidence from educational research informs policy makers, practitioners and the general public and contributes to economic prosperity, cultural understanding, social cohesion and personal flourishing.

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About TACTYC

TACTYC is a membership based organisation. It aims to promote the highest quality professional development for all UK early years educators in order to enhance the educational well-being of the youngest children. Our activities include:

- 'advocacy and lobbying' - providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;
- 'informing' – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through, for example, our international journal, *Early Years*, annual conference, website and occasional publications;
- 'supporting' – encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our newsletter and website.

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EARLY YEARS

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INTRODUCTION

Our aim is to enhance the quality of provision for young children from birth to six years and thus to enable their learning, well-being and confidence to grow. With improved knowledge, understanding and confidence all children, especially the most disadvantaged, will be better prepared to meet the challenges they face when participating in the compulsory school system. We offer the following substantive points, backed by rigorous research evidence to support our strategic suggestions on provision for young children to be included in policy development and election manifestos. These recommendations have been developed in collaboration between TACTYC: Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators and BERA Early Childhood Special Interest Group. They are based on contributions from a wide group of academics and leaders with extended experience in early years care and education, listed in Appendix 2.

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This collaboration is based on contributions from a wide group of academics and leaders in early years. See Appendix 2 for a full list of contributors, affiliations and reference groups

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THEME 1: PROFESSIONALISM – EARLY YEARS AS A CAREER

1.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

- Develop a Birth to Six teacher training programme with Qualified Teacher Status as the only graduate qualification for those working in educational settings with children from birth to age six. This ensures parity across all educational age groups.^{1,2,3}
- Develop Teachers' Standards (Early Years) with QTS, to *fully* include,
 - Care and education: play-based pedagogies for babies, toddlers and young children^{11,15}
 - Child development across the full age range, including attachment theories^{4,5,6}
 - Health and well being
 - Leadership (including leading quality improvement, leading practice)^{7,8}
 - Multi agency working
 - Parent partnerships
 - Reflective practice^{7,8}
 - Work with children from diverse communities and with a range of needs.
- Amend the Statutory requirements for qualifications, linked to the EYFS Statutory Framework and Ofsted Early Years inspection framework by September 2016. The amendments must reflect two issues, and be supported through adequate funding for children's places:^{9,10,11,12}
 - A member of staff with Early Years QTS (Birth to Six) must lead practice in every setting, although small settings and childminders might have shared leaders
 - All staff who are counted in staff: child ratios must, as a minimum, meet the criteria for level 3 Early Years Educator.
- Make transparent the mechanisms by which the current workforce, with existing qualifications such as EYPS, NVQ and Early Years Teacher can meet the criteria for the new Early Years Educator title and Early Years QTS (Birth to Six) in the move to standardisation of qualifications and titles.
- Develop, support and maintain local interdisciplinary communities of learning (including colleagues working in health and social services and the voluntary sector) across the range of settings and types of provision to maintain best practice by the early years workforce, relating to pedagogy,

inclusion, cross cultural perspectives, health and well-being, and leading practice. This benefits children.

- Review the processes, structures and training/professional development for effective interprofessional working in the early years sector beyond children's centres, particularly in light of the two-year-old offer.¹³

1.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- Develop a standard for professional development of the early years workforce, recognising the many routes available to enter the workforce, the complexity of the role, and the range of roles and settings within which the early years workforce is employed. Include interprofessional and multiagency working in CPD.^{9,10,11,12,14}
- Make clear the required content of pre-early years courses for sixteen-year-olds in schools and colleges, and the minimum standards to progress into level 3 courses in early childhood education and care.¹⁶

1.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- Parity is required in pay and conditions between those who are teachers within schools, and those who are teachers in the early years sector, including the Private, Voluntary & Independent sector. This would be a major enticement to attract high calibre staff into the early years workforce.^{7,8}
- Develop a register of EYEs and EYTs, with a requirement that there is an annual demonstration of the suitability of the individual to remain on the register and be fit to practice. This would include annual requirements for CPD relevant to the role.
- Establish a Teaching Council and/or other professional body for EY professionals.

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THEME 2: PARENTS AND FAMILIES

2.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

- Develop professional development opportunities for all graduate practitioners working with children aged birth to six so that they are better able to lead practice that supports and empowers parents and families from different backgrounds.¹
- In particular, identify ways to support key persons working with two-year-olds, so that they are better able to carry out the two-year-old progress check and share it with parents and health visitors.²
- Investigate ways to support parental choice of childcare options. This could include revising taxation / parental leave structures so that non-working parents can transfer their tax allowance to a working parent at any point during the first three years of a child's life, so that the carer receives a small wage, funded by transferred tax allowance.³

2.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- Ensure that all EY practitioners have a core understanding of social inequalities and cultural difference, and their impact on families and that they are able to look at the world from a parent's point of view, whilst still maintaining fully professional relationships that allow them to carry out safeguarding functions.⁴
- Ensure that practitioners are able to work in genuine partnership with parents and carers⁵, avoiding a 'deficit model' of parenting that constructs the practitioner as the 'expert' and the parent as the 'learner/ junior partner'.⁶
- Continue to revise taxation/parental leave structures in innovative ways to help parents and their close relatives to work together to provide home-based care for children under five, where appropriate. For example, enable parents/ grandparents/ to share a period of 36 months leave from the workplace to care for the child in a flexible fashion.⁷
- Continue to fund children's centres to provide a family hub for local communities.⁸ Extend their role by integrating services for the elderly with services for children and provide a venue for people of all ages to work together in various ventures.⁹

2.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- Find out more about how parents and families from a variety of different backgrounds understand 'quality' in early years provision.¹⁰
- Identify how different understandings of 'experienced' quality are related to quality as constructed in policy; that is, do measurements and judgments of quality capture what parents and families think is good about settings and what they would like improved?¹¹

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THEME 3: PLAY AND PEDAGOGY

We welcome the Government's aspirations and ambitions that young children in early childhood education achieve high standards that compare well internationally and would draw attention to the 20th May 2011 Council of the European Union's conclusions that that measures should be taken to promote curricula that:

...foster the acquisition of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, [and] recognising the importance of play, which is also crucial to learning in the early years.¹

In those European countries with successful outcomes, such as Finland, young children's entry to school is delayed to 6/7 years of age: it is preceded by play-led kindergarten provision that contributes to children's all-round development and so, we believe, to their high levels of achievement.

In order to improve learning outcomes for young children and families we make the following recommendations for immediate, mid-term and long-term action, and for the development of a research agenda.

3.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

- Develop Teachers' Standards (Early Years) with QTS to more fully include study of play and related pedagogy across the full age range as a crucial aspect underpinned by evidence-based research and exemplars from recent research to demonstrate what quality play looks like.
- Develop EYFS to ensure that high-quality play is given prominence with the importance of staff knowledge of up-to-date evidence emphasised. This would require the amendment of the Early Learning Goals and Ofsted's Early Years inspection framework, by September 2014.
- Emphasise the 'key person' approach^{2,3} throughout this age range, including in schools, to ensure there are individual adults who know, understand and can support children in their play.
- Promote staff documentation of children's play through 'learning stories' or journals

to further understanding of the role of all aspects of play in children's learning.⁴

- Ensure that the EYFS promotes learning across all contexts including play, emphasising i) an appreciation and understanding of the existing cultural knowledge children bring to their early childhood setting and explore in their pretend play;^{5,6} ii) respectful and democratic learning cultures in all early childhood settings across this age range⁷ and iii) rich talk and understanding.^{8,9}
- Ensure that contexts for rich, deep level play are provided and promote understanding of its role in fostering literary, scientific and mathematical achievements in later life. For example, an important aspect of mathematics is the *cultural* mathematical knowledge that enables children to make sense of the role and purposes of mathematics in society¹⁰. Recent research has shown how high quality, free and spontaneous pretend play enables children to explore and extend their home cultural knowledge of mathematics.¹¹ The social nature of rich pretend play has also been shown to provide meaningful contexts in which children can make extensive use of both literacy (emergent writing) and their emergent mathematical representations (*children's mathematical graphics*) to communicate, thereby providing strong foundations for subsequent literacy and mathematics in school.¹² Routine, brief and low quality pretend play will not fulfil these expectations.
- Ensure greater understanding of how children learn and of the importance of play among all staff working with children birth to 6 year age range and those who monitor that learning, including through initial training, CPD and higher level qualifications.

3.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- That 'Specialist Leaders of Education' (SLE) for play be introduced throughout England, to be accorded equal status and importance as SLE for subject areas such as mathematics.
- That the significance of OfSTED's influence on play and pedagogy in early years settings and classes be recognised:

in relation to this we recommend that OfSTED inspectors need to be highly knowledgeable about play and its value in order to make informed judgements across the entire EYFS age group. In connection with this we recommend that Ofsted's Early Years inspection framework be amended to reflect the importance of play and also of the 'key person' approach by September 2014.

3.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- That research practice into effective children's play and the pedagogy to support be promoted as an important and integral aspect of staff development in all early years settings, and that settings be encouraged to share their findings at a local and national level, since we acknowledge the value of practitioner research in early childhood settings as a means of developing professionalism and informing practice to achieve effective and high-quality play.

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THEME 4: LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND THE CURRICULUM

4.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

- Amend the legal requirements for physical space to ensure settings have sufficient indoor and outdoor space to provide daily opportunities for physically active play that supports young children's physical development.^{1,2,3,4}
- Revise the EYFS/training/Standards/assessment to ensure focus on the process of learning (the diversity of learners and learning, what learning is, what learners do) and pedagogy, rather than products of learning (outcomes/targets/predetermined goals).
- Review the EYFS and ELGs to ensure 'school' literacies take account of current research relating to how children develop and experience literacies within family and community contexts.^{5,6,7}
- Review the 'overarching principles' and philosophy of the EYFS to include a focus on children's voices and rights to highlight the importance of these issues.^{8,9}
- Provide guidance on ways to ensure that provision for two-year-olds in school settings is organised to promote the development of close and sustained relationships between children, key persons and a small number of other staff.^{10,11}
- Review the safeguarding and welfare requirements of the EYFS to ensure they have priority within the statutory documents.¹²
- Place more prominent emphasis on the importance of children's self-initiated play as a medium for learning.

4.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- Define 'school readiness' in light of children's diverse abilities and backgrounds.^{13,14,15}
- Review the EYFS, the Early Learning Goals and the Profile to ensure a more explicit focus on inclusive approaches to curriculum implementation and assessment, giving consideration to issues of ethnicity, religion, gender, class, disability and date of birth for children's learning and development.^{16,17,18,19}

- Strengthen the expectations for practitioners (early years teachers and early years educators) across EYFS settings to work in partnership with parents to support children's learning and development, including expectations to build on children's learning within families and communities.^{20,21}
- Endorse reliable, validated sources of neuroscientific, educational and psychological research that reflects a holistic, consilient approach to learning and development in order to frame a curriculum that effectively integrates the bio-psycho-social framework of learning.^{22,23,24,25}
- Emphasise the significance of relational pedagogy for children's learning and development and within the early years curriculum, including practices relating to supporting children's behaviour and well-being.^{26,27,28,29}

4.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- Review links between the EYFS and National Curriculum to ensure consistency with a play-based pedagogy, and continue the EYFS approach into Y1 and beyond for any pupils who do not reach the expected levels of development in the EYFS Profile
- Review the UK and international research evidence supporting the EYFS separation of areas of learning and development into prime and specific areas, with particular regard to implications for early mathematical development.^{30,31}
- Integrate the sustainability agenda into early childhood learning, development and curriculum to reflect and promote the roles, rights and responsibilities in relation to the promotion of sustainable futures for children.^{32,33,34}
- Undertake further research into how young children's self-initiated learning is supported across different settings.

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THEME 5: ASSESSMENT, TRANSITIONS AND SCHOOL READINESS

5.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

Review the level of the early learning goals for literacy and mathematics and the inclusion of Literacy and Mathematics in the 'good level of development'.

- Literacy and mathematics have been added to the areas monitored for the 'good level of development' and the expectations for these areas have risen in the 2012-2013 EYFS Framework; e.g. for example, the new maths goal for number is equivalent to Level 1 in Key Stage 1. Effectively therefore literacy and mathematics have become additional Prime Areas by default.^{1,3,4,5,9,10}
- The percentage of children achieving a 'good level of development' in 2012 was 64% and under the revised new Profile dropped to 52% in the recent Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (DfE, 2012; 2013). Thus according to the revised 2013 EYFS Profile, which focuses upon raised thresholds in maths and literacy, a majority of children have not achieved a 'good level of development' and are therefore deemed to have 'fallen behind' in their first year of schooling. Such negative labelling of children at a young age is inappropriate and undermines the central EYFS principle which states that children are 'strong and competent learners from birth'.^{1,13,14}
- The heightened levels for mathematics and literacy emphasise what the child cannot do as opposed to what they can achieve. For example, learning dispositions and the three characteristics of early learning (EYFS 2012) that are an essential basis for all later learning and are at the heart of the EYFS, are potentially sidelined within the new assessment regime and its simplistic focus upon maths and literacy.
- Assessment needs to benefit all children and not to focus resources on getting some children through to ELG. Assessment on the current model puts some children, especially boys, in a deficit position. Furthermore, only 30 per cent of summer-born children reached a 'Good Level of Development' compared to 52 per cent of

the autumn-born children, thus highlighting just one important difference between children's birth dates.^{1,2,5,9,11,12}

- Any proposed Baseline Check would inadvertently become part of the Primary school assessment system since pupils' progress in particular areas (such as literacy and maths) would be systematically monitored across Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 as a continuum. This would have the effect of side-lining the EYFS, especially if the Profile were to be made non-statutory.¹⁵
- Practitioners should work with health professionals to identify children with additional needs as early as possible.^{5,11,12}

5.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- Birth-to-Seven continuity means no need for summative assessment at four or five. (*Currently there is a fixed expectation of attainment at five through the 'good' level assigned to the outcomes of 12 of the 17 ELGs.*)^{5,6,7,8,9,11}

5.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- There are many ways to understand children's learning and there should be many interlocking ways to express this understanding. Early Childhood CPD should develop confidence to articulate and own a range of assessment strategies and be empowered by this.^{2,3,4,5,9,10}
- Schools should be ready for the children who arrive and not make children ready for them.^{1,2,3,4,6,7,8}

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THEME 6: BROADER POLICY ISSUES

6.1 IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

- Extend EYFS to age six in order to support a better transition from early years education and care to primary (as recommended in the Cambridge Primary Review and the Rose Review) in line with the majority of developed countries. Any children not reaching a 'good level of development' should continue to have access to EY pedagogy at least through Y1.
- Reinstate termly entry to the reception class in order to safeguard the interests of younger children, retain older role models in nursery provision, and acknowledge the value and impact of a coherent programme of early education.
- Finance education and care from birth to age six in line with funding for pupils from six to eighteen, and vice contributions from health and social services budgets so that universal Children's Centre services can be reinstated; cuts are a false economy and targeted services stigmatise families and reduce attendance. (Re)Consider the appropriateness of delivering early childhood education and care under market conditions, which disproportionately favour the richest quintiles of the UK under-fives population in terms of service access, affordability and quality.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is not standardised, and is therefore an inaccurate measure of developmental progress, administered under inappropriate conditions. Its use as an indicator leads to some misdiagnosis of SEN due to expected standards that most summer born children and many boys cannot reach. EY Profile should instead be applied to children in the term when they reach statutory school age. The Phonics Check in Y1 should not be compulsory, but made available for teachers in Y1 and Y2 to use on a voluntary basis.
- Develop multi-professional work with parents from conception onwards (WAVE report).
- Ensure that children's views are heard and taken into account in planning, delivering and evaluating provision.

- Revisit the government response to the Nutbrown Review of qualifications:
 - a. Implement the spirit and the letter of the Nutbrown Review of qualifications over time, with specialist Early Years teacher from Birth to Six and general status of QTS across the board (NOT Early Years Teachers without QTS as currently conceived).
 - b. Recognise Early Years as a specialism at all levels of training.
 - c. Make urgent provision in all forms of early years training, including QTS, for a focus on the needs of children under three in early years settings.
 - d. Include explicit reference to care and to work with families in the content of courses and the professional standards.
 - e. Explicitly promote children's emotional and social well-being in training and practice.
- Secure sustainable HE and FE courses to link with work-based placements in line with OFSTED findings; School Direct cannot provide adequate preparation for early years work.
- Review Ofsted's role:
 - a. Clarify Ofsted's role as an independent monitor and one of several arbiters of quality; enforcement should be based on expert knowledge of effective practice, not politics. As well as identifying problems and grading the quality of provision, experienced inspectors should provide constructive professional support. The role of HMI should revert to this model. Accountability to pupils should be the first priority rather than data-driven theories and unrealistic expectations.
 - b. Align criteria for Section 5 and PVI inspections. Section 5 inspection criteria place a strong focus on raising achievement, which can be interpreted unhelpfully in the early years, especially as this aspect of work in schools is no longer reported on separately. The definition of teaching used for PVI inspections could helpfully be introduced into all early years inspections: *"teaching should not be taken to imply a 'top down' or formal way of working. It is a broad term which*

covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities: communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges. It takes account of the equipment they provide and the attention to the physical environment as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do as well as take account of their interests and dispositions to learning (characteristics of effective learning), and use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress."

- Acknowledge the democratic and strategic role of Local Authorities in early years policy and provision, as well as community interests and influences, rather than centralising policy. Take account of developments in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland.

6.2 MID-TERM ISSUES

- Address the different knowledge bases and priorities of practitioners in relevant services, policy makers and Ofsted by disseminating information about how children learn in the early years and the implications for practice.
- Consolidate the future of specialist early years courses in FE and HE.
- Secure CPD for all working in the early years.
- Ensure that schools are ready for children, and that any pupils not reaching a 'good level of development' at the end of the Foundation Stage continue to benefit from an approach aligned to the underpinning principles of the EYFS.

6.3 LONG TERM ASPIRATIONS

- A coherent early years phase from birth to six or seven, with effective outreach to parents from conception.

- Recognition at all levels that Early Years is a specialism.
- An accessible climbing frame of qualifications and coherent CPD to support confident staff.
- Collaborative multi-professional working.
- Well supported transitions.
- Primary accountability to the wellbeing of children and families rather than to limited outcomes.

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APPENDIX 1: FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS

PROFESSIONALISM – EARLY YEARS AS A CAREER

- Research and development to consider the potential influence of early years pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and partnership-working on the professional development of school teachers.
- Undertake research into the impact of the new Early Years Educator and Early Years Teacher roles.
- Undertake research into best practice for development and maintenance of communities of practice.
- Undertake research into the effective development of pedagogy to improve outcomes for children.
- Undertake research into the effect on practice, pedagogy and children's holistic developmental outcomes of an emphasis on 'school readiness'.

PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- Carry out pedagogical research to find out what helps potential early years practitioners to understand the needs of families from different contexts; what helps current practitioners to work successfully with families experiencing difficulties and how can those leading practice best support practitioners to develop their skills and understanding to work alongside parents and families.
- Investigate how, in other countries such as Finland, knowledge of child developmental processes and valuing community cohesion feed into education and care practices (OECD 2013). Draw historical comparisons with care and education in Britain at different stages
- Undertake research in settings to investigate how they balance raising attainment and meeting the needs of working parents; what influences their decisions to tip the balance one way or another?
- Build up research evidence to identify understandings of what quality looks and feels like in practice for parents and families from different backgrounds

PLAY AND PEDAGOGY

- Conduct research into the quality of play in early childhood settings, e.g. comparing the provision for play in Nursery and Reception classes, and the pedagogy used by teachers and professionals to support the most successful and effective play.
- Conduct research into the extent to which the 'key person' approach is implemented throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Research the play of children of two years of age

LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND THE CURRICULUM

- Undertake research into the size and organisation of indoor and outdoor spaces in EYFS settings and the relationship with children's physical development.
- Undertake comparative research into the experiences of two-year-olds in different kinds of settings, including schools, and the implications for children's learning and development.
- Undertake research into ways that children's voices and rights are represented and shape the curriculum within EYFS settings.
- Undertake further research into inclusive practice to promote children's learning and development across EYFS settings, with regard to issues of ethnicity, religion, gender, class, disability and date of birth.
- Undertake research into the opportunities provided for children's mathematical learning and development across EYFS settings and the impact of different approaches.
- Undertake research that explores relational pedagogies in supporting children's learning and development in order to nurture and sustain social capital in early years communities.
- Undertake research that considers the implications, efficacy and credibility of recent neuroscientific research and neuroeducation for young children's learning, development and the early years curriculum in order to produce guidance and endorsement of reliable, validated and transferable sources of neuroscientific,

educational and psychological research findings.^{1,2}

- Undertake further research to explore the optimal 'tools' and contexts for promoting early literacies.^{3,4,5}

ASSESSMENT, TRANSITIONS AND SCHOOL READINESS

- Access local and/or regional / national data regarding the 'good level of development' and identify areas for closer research (e.g. *attainment by groups / by areas of learning / teachers' / practitioners' perspectives*)
- Explore the role of the learning journeys in assessment as seen through the lens of practitioners' views on 'readiness'.
- Seek parents', children's and practitioners' perspectives on transition into school at 3 or 4 and transition between EYFS and National Curriculum at 6.
- Explore the existence of developmental hierarchies of the objectives in Development Matters, (e.g. *the need for fine motor skills to be at expected level before writing skills are developed.*)
- Analyse the content and discourse of policy documents to identify how 'readiness' is constructed by policy makers.
- Examine the impact of the new assessment regimes, such as the revised EYFS Profile and the Phonics Screening Check, upon early years pedagogy.

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APPENDIX 2: WIDER REFERENCE GROUP

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