

listening to children

# HOW CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS WORK



by Patty Wipfler

 hand in hand

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### The Work of Parents Deserves Support

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It's great to be a parent! Children are fresh, open, and ready to love and be loved. They bring out the best in us. We work incredibly hard to make their lives good. Our lives are rich with the excitement they feel about life, the tenderness they share, and their sense of humor and fun.

But being a parent isn't easy. Our society doesn't put much resource toward supporting the work of parents. Economically speaking, parenting is treated like gardening or owning a dog—it's your choice, your responsibility, your expense, and your tough luck if things become difficult. In the U.S., families aren't well protected from poverty, stress and strain.

For the best outcomes for children and families, we need to move decisively to build a society that is far more supportive to parents. With more of an economic handshake, parents could worry less and play more. With more time to spend together, nurturing children would challenge and enrich parents, not exhaust them. For the time being, when hard days, hard weeks, or hard years come along, it's important for us to remember that hard times don't mean that there's something wrong with us or with our children. Hard times are virtually guaranteed because our society neglects the work of parenting.

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# Full Lives, Big Feelings

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Part of what makes parenting both wonderful and hard is that children are full of feelings. Their joyful feelings make our hearts swell with pleasure. But from a child's first day, there's also lots of crying going on! There's not a way for parents to prepare for being with such passionate people. And there are no arrangements made for the emotional fallout that dusts the days and nights of every parent.

Early in their lives, most children develop at least a few hot-button issues that easily generate big feelings for them. Separations, sharing, going to sleep, getting dressed, sibling tussles, and the limits you set are the kinds of things that can send a young child into an upset. It doesn't take long to develop a good feel for the kinds of situations that can generate emotional heat in your child.

Children's feelings spark lots of emotion in the adults around them. A child's cry is like the first firecracker in a long string. His feelings ignite, and emotional fireworks go off all around him. Parents, neighbors, and bystanders all feel a twinge, a twist, a slow burn, or a blast of feeling. The child's issue is usually simple. But the cascade he sets off all around him complicates life quickly.

The expectations on the shoulders of parents at emotional moments are enormous. Make your child happy. Solve the problem. If you can't solve the problem, make him stop so others aren't bothered or inconvenienced. Be a loving parent. Discipline him. Prove to everyone that you're in charge. Make sure he doesn't go through the worst of the troubles you went through as a child. Make sure he doesn't get spoiled.

We want to offer you some tools to help you navigate these kinds of everyday moments. We know these moments are wearing. We know they can be confusing. We want to give you proven ways to beam the deep love you have for your child straight toward his heart. He was born to thrive on your love, and you have so much to give.

This booklet will give you a few basic understandings that will help you to support the special relationship you have with your child. We'll offer you

Listening Tools that will help reduce your child's stress level, and your own. We think that you'll find these tools useful now and in the years to come. The heart of our message is this: You can help your child to heal from the emotional dings and scrapes of childhood. And as you help him with his feelings, you will free his mind for learning and keep his heart open for friendship, cooperation, and fun.

This booklet will introduce you to a parenting approach called Parenting by Connection. The other six booklets in the Listening to Children series will fill in more details about how you can center your parenting in your love and caring, and make the most of your child's deep desire to be connected with you.

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## Your Child Is Unique

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Your child learns at an amazing rate during the first years of his life. He absorbs many experiences, learns a language or two, discovers what he likes and what he doesn't like, and develops a personal learning style. He builds unique relationships with you and with each of the other important people in his life. He's a learner and a genius at finding play and fun at every possible moment.

There is no child in the world just like your child! He's special, and the path that has brought him to this day is also unique. His mind is active, growing, and distinctive. Your child's development may be similar to the path of other children, but your child's mind will always be unique.

Your child's uniqueness has probably delighted you and also baffled you. How can a child who is so loving and wise have a passionate upset about which way his toast is cut just moments later? Why does that hour you spend playing the games your children love suddenly turn into a blow-up over who gets to carry the snack from the counter to the table?

The explanation lies in how your child's mind works. Feelings play a surprisingly important role in your child's life, and in yours. This booklet will outline how your child's feelings work, and give you an introduction to the Listening to Children booklets that follow. We hope the ideas intrigue you. We hope you'll try them.

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# Your Child Thrives on His Connection with You

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Your child's mind is truly a wonder of the world. With its hundred billion neurons and its million billion neural connections, it is active, plastic, and growing in complexity every day. But it needs to be fueled by the attention of someone who knows him, cherishes him, and has his best interests in mind. That's you!

Children benefit from a close relationship with their parents. Feeling close enables them to learn, and to successfully handle the stresses in their lives. We now know, through studies in the fields of neurobiology, brain development, and psychology, that the human brain is a profoundly social organ. Humans are hardwired to be in contact with each other's minds. During a child's early life, the back-and-forth flow of communication with warm, positive adults is especially important. Communication with you literally builds your child's intelligence.

When your child and you are feeling close and connected, his brain forms the neural pathways that allow him to learn, remember, and think. His brain is building capacity every day. Just as his body needs good food, his brain needs the presence of an adult who can read his signals and respond to him with an attitude of interest and support. The times your eyes meet his, the times you watch him with a smile as he leaps from the sofa, the times you bend down to see if he needs help with his shoes all build his intelligence.

When he feels safe, loved, and connected to the adults around him, a child's intelligence is in full gear. He can learn, cooperate, be flexible about his wants and needs, and tune in to the needs of others. A sense of connection allows all parts of his brain to work together.

Connection helps a child build intelligence, and it helps him use the intelligence he already has.

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# When a Child Feels Connected:

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- **His brain stem**—the self-preservation center of his brain—is going about its business of governing his reflexes, his heart rate, his breathing, and other basic bodily functions. It detects no threat in the environment, so it signals his whole body that all is well.
- **His limbic system**—the social and emotional hub of his mind—senses the good intentions of those around him. Your child's limbic system is like an invisible radar beam. It sends out a steady stream of inquiry: Is there someone here who knows me, likes me, and is attentive to me? It reads the answers through nonverbal signals like eye contact, touch, facial expression, tones of voice, and body language. These signals tell the story of a person's inner state without a word being spoken. When you or another caring adult signal "I'm here, I like you. I'm available," and his brain stem senses no danger, your child's brain has the connection it needs. His limbic system can then coordinate communication between all parts of his brain. With his whole mind in gear, he feels confident, safe, and sure that life is good. He is eager. He is ready to learn.
- **His prefrontal cortex**—the seat of your child's reasoning, impulse control, short-term memory, judgment, and the governor of his attention span—lights up. Your child's brain stem says, "There's no danger," his limbic system says, "Good, attentive people are here," so your child's cerebral cortex can engage. When all parts of his brain are working together, he can remember what he learns, develop new skills, and his judgment improves over time.

When your child feels connected, he can concentrate on an activity that interests him. When he feels connected, he can allow his little sister or a friend to play with a favorite toy. When he feels connected, he can put on roller skates for the first time, and enjoy learning he slips and slides on the pavement with help from you. His need for positive connection is met, so he can be a learner. He can be good company.

In short, your ability to connect with your child is vital. When he can carry the feel of your warm attention inside him, new experiences are welcome. If he can fill up on your caring several times in the day, he'll learn quickly and well.

Difficulties will come his way, of course. When they do, he will have a harder time learning and getting along with others. But when that happens, he's not "bad." He just needs you to reach for him and reconnect, so his brain can work properly once again.

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## Broken Connection: The Invisible "Off" Switch

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When your child feels threatened, when he is frustrated, or when he has lost his sense of connection, his prefrontal cortex shuts down. He literally can't think. It's an instantaneous process, and you've seen it happen hundreds of times. It has also happened to you!

- You may have seen your child cross over from being easygoing to being balky and irritated after just a half-hour of TV before dinner. Before the show, he's playing well. Afterward, he is prone to upsets over small things like being asked to set the table, or having to sit in one chair, rather than another that he prefers. You wonder what came over him!
- Perhaps your child is playing well with a younger sibling as you fold clothes, watching them casually. You turn away to answer the phone, stay on the line for ten minutes, and come back to two children who are bickering loudly. You think, "What's wrong with you two! Can't I leave you alone for ten minutes?"
- Perhaps you have planned an evening out, and have been looking forward to it for several days. Your patience with your children is strong. The sitter calls and cancels. A moment later, your child asks for a glass of milk, and you snap. You tell him that he can get it himself. Your irritation grows, and you decide that, as a matter of fact, he needs to pick up his toys right this minute—the house is a mess and you never get enough help around here.

Difficulties at moments like these aren't your child's fault, or yours. They are the result of how our intelligence is constructed. Our minds are designed to be in steady communication with others, and to function in a cooperative and nurturing environment. TV and phone calls seem harmless enough, but they are among the many things in life that can fray a child's sense of connection. On the

parents' side, long days of work and worry can create a sense of isolation that eats away at parents' good will, so that caring for a child feels difficult.

When the sense of safety and connection breaks down, we all experience feelings of upset. Tripped up by our feelings, we can't think well, and we don't assume the best about the people we're with.

Without a sense of connection, the limbic system can't do its job of coordinating all the parts of the brain. It can't bathe the brain's reasoning, planning, and learning centers with the vital signal that all is well. It can't coordinate the processing of incoming information. Negative feelings flood the limbic system and paint the next moments or hours with upset.

Just as all nutritious food contains some indigestible matter, every good day will have some moments of disconnection. And just as the body has an elegant system for processing both what's digestible and what's not, both you and your child have an elegant system for recovering from the upsets that are part of everyday life.

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## Emotion is Your Child's Friend, and Yours

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Your child was born with a sturdy emotional repair process. When he feels upset, and can't think, he immediately tries to remedy the situation. If you move close and listen to him, he'll cry hard, or have a tantrum. Or he may set up a situation that lets him laugh. These emotional responses are vital. A good laugh, a good cry, or a good tantrum with your support will reset your child's mind so he can feel your caring. Then he can reason, learn, and cooperate once again.

While your child is crying, having a tantrum, or laughing long and hard, he's releasing the tensions that have gripped his limbic system. He's doing his part to untangle the crossed wires in his mind. **He will benefit greatly if you move close, keep him safe, and give his mind the time to unload big feelings and absorb your caring!** He'll also thrive on playtimes during which he can laugh, tussle and enjoy you, close and engaged.



Many of us have been raised on the belief that rewarding bad behavior with attention promotes more bad behavior. Some psychologists in the last century thought that treating children with the cool reason of a detached observer would be an improvement over emotional responses to children's behavior. They experimented with setting up systems of rewards for good behavior, and systems of indifference or unpleasant consequences when children misbehaved or were emotional, thinking that this would result in civilized, unspoiled citizens. They were mistaken.

**Brain research has shown that children really need the adult attention they crave.** Systems of rewards work imperfectly, at best, and pretending to ignore off-track behavior or emotional response drives a child toward ever more desperate attempts to hijack adult attention. And fifty years of studies show that physical punishment and verbal threats make children's behavior more challenging, and interfere with their ability to learn.

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## As You Listen, Crying Heals the Hurt

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This means that you can help your child by listening to her when she cries, for as long as she cries! We call this Staylistening. It's a strategy that restores a child's emotional equilibrium by giving her a chance to fully express how she feels. If she wants something she can't have, you listen to her, offering your caring in place of the thing she wants so badly. Staylistening is the opposite of what most parents feel like doing when a child has a meltdown, so the first time you try it, you will probably have to gather your courage before you plunge in!

For example, let's take a child who loves Auntie Kim, who is visiting. Auntie Kim plays tag with her, tries out gymnastic tricks with her in the living room, and gets her laughing. When it's time for bed, Daddy breaks the news, and the child becomes upset. She gets angry and stomps off. Daddy follows, trying to guide her into the bathroom to brush her teeth, but she won't go. She bursts into tears.

If Daddy puts his arm around her, and says "I know it's hard. But you need to brush your teeth," looks into her eyes, and listens, feelings will pour out. Love will

pour in. When she is finished, her mind will clear, and she'll feel especially close to Daddy. She'll brush her teeth willingly, then get a deep, restful sleep. The next day, she'll be more relaxed and ready to learn.

A child who is feeling tension carried over from earlier difficult times might cry hard or tantrum loudly over a very small issue. We don't know exactly why children's biggest feelings come wrapped around the smallest issues, but you can count on it. It happens in every family.

**Your caring has great healing power during emotional moments.** A parent who moves in close and listens gives his child an absolutely vital gift—a loving connection, and the chance to get free of tension.

When you listen to your child's upset, her feelings will become intense, last awhile, and then evaporate. Her topsy-turvy limbic system heals fastest when it has her full concentration, and yours, on these feelings. Then, feelings ejected and connection made, it rights itself.

When you try to reason with or lecture a child who is upset, both you and the child become frustrated. While she is upset, a child can't make sense of anything you try to get across. Her limbic radar is looking desperately for connection. Reasoning doesn't work, because the child's prefrontal cortex has shut down. She can't connect along a verbal or rational pathway while she is upset. When you listen, you bathe her limbic system with exactly what it needs: warm, nonverbal signals that you're paying attention. It takes awhile, but this nonverbal pathway leads you toward your sweet, rational, cooperative child.

When parents adopt a strategy of Staylistening through their children's upsets, a close relationship between parent and child can continue into adolescence. Children learn that it is safe to fall apart when their minds are snarled. They feel that their parents understand them, and know that what they say while they're angry or crying is what they need to say to get rid of the feelings. And parents learn that intense feelings that a child expresses are feelings that will soon be gone. They learn that emotional moments are prime times to communicate love.

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# How to Use the Listening to Children Booklets

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The Listening to Children booklets outline what we call Listening Tools. Used together, these Listening Tools—Staylistening, Setting Limits, Special Time, and Playlistening—will give you specific ways to help your child with the challenging moments in her life.

There's much more information about Staylistening in these Listening to Children booklets: Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears, and Reaching for Your Angry Child. We've included many anecdotes from parents' experience, so you will get practical tips on how to help the children in your family in this deeply effective way.

Staylistening is a tool for handling your child's feelings about getting up and dressed in the morning (start early!), separation, troubles with sharing, aggression, fear, and frustration when learning isn't going smoothly.

It's also a tool that helps your child learn when you must set limits with her.

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## Setting Limits and Expectations

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Although we encourage parents to listen to a child's tears and tantrums, Parenting by Connection isn't a permissive form of parenting!

**Parents need to stop off-track behavior as soon as it crops up.** It doesn't make sense to allow your child to whine, to pout, to pester her siblings, to give up on learning tasks, or to engage in other behaviors that aren't cooperative or thoughtful. She is sending up flares: "Help me! I can't think!" She's not a bad child, but she is off track.

She needs your help to recover and connect. Talking to her, reasoning with her, negotiating with her, or punishing her are strategies that miss the point: her brain is unable to function properly. She needs connection.

When your child goes off track, try setting limits or expectations in a way that addresses the underlying cause of her troubles. The minute you see that your child's behavior isn't making sense:

**Move in close**—your child needs a connection with you so she can think again.

**Bring the limit**—physically intervene, without harshness, to stop any behavior that doesn't make sense.

Move in to hold her arm so she can't throw a toy.

Move in to hold her leg so she can't kick the door.

Move in and follow her to her bedroom as she stomps off in anger.

Move in to hold her pajamas in front of her when she refuses to put them on.

Move in to keep her from hopping onto the chair that she knows her little sister wants.

Move in to put your arm around her when she throws her lunchbox down after a hard afternoon.

**Say the limit, set the expectation.** Do this as your child's ally, not as her foe or her overlord. She needs you on her side while her mind is in disarray. She needs a sound intervention, without apology and also without anger, if possible.

"I won't let you throw this."

"I won't let you kick the door."

"I know it's hard when I have to say 'No.' I don't want to leave you alone."

"I know you want to play more. But here are your pajamas. It's time."

"No, honey. Your sister was ready to sit in that chair."

"Hard day? What happened?"

**Hold the limit**— stay with her and keep holding out the expectation that she will cooperate, but don't hurry her. Her mind has to fight through lots of emotional gunk before she can feel enough connection to cooperate. That fight is a healing one. Holding the limit will mean doing things such as:

Keeping your hand on her arm so she can't throw things.

Continuing to hold her leg so she can't kick.

Putting your hand on her back as she buries herself in her pillow.

Reminding her that her pajamas are right next to her, as she cries and protests about going to sleep.

Putting an arm in front of the chair she's trying to grab, then moving quickly to provide a barrier when she tries to climb on from another angle.

Following her to her room after she's squirmed away from you in upset

**Staylisten.** Offer eye contact, gentle touch, and your attention. Expect a passionate emotional response. Children hate to feel unsafe and disconnected. The amount of emotional charge they unleash can be great if they are clearing out an extra load of feelings that have been bothering them for awhile.

**Don't give in. Offer warmth instead.** The limit you set, if it's reasonable, is useful to her. She'll hate it, tell you all her feelings, finish, and relax. If you're offering warm attention, you're giving her what she really needs—a refreshed connection with you.

Setting Limits and Staylistening are tools to use on the spur of the moment, when there's trouble afoot. Two further tools will help you to connect and reconnect on a regular basis. You can use them to make sure that you get the kinds of fun times that make parenting a joy.

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## Special Time and Playlistening: Building Closeness, Having Fun

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The booklets *Special Time* and *Playlistening* describe two Listening Tools that will help you keep your connection with your child strong. These tools help you deliver "attention vitamins" to your child. They provide a path toward fun, physical play, and laughter.

*Special Time* warms up the parent-child connection. You let your child know that, at a specific time, you will play whatever she wants to play for an amount of time that works for you. On a tight schedule, five minutes can be useful; when things are more relaxed, you might want to devote twenty minutes or half an hour. Show delight and interest in whatever your child chooses to do. (If you fear she'll choose something you can barely stand to do, then propose a shorter *Special Time*!)

*Special Time* gives your child a chance to be the leader as she builds a play experience for the two of you, moment-by-moment. Most of the thousands of parents who've tried it have been surprised at the positive changes that take

place when they establish Special Time as a part of their schedule. You'll read some of their stories and learn more about what to expect in the Special Time booklet.

Special Time helps a child connect with you, so she is more likely to keep you informed about her life. You may have already noticed that questions from adults about school or day care often get one-word answers from children. You want to know what your child's day has been like, but she is not always set up to tell you after being away from you for hours. Special Time brings her closer and puts her in charge of your relationship. It rebuilds the communication highway between you by creating a playful path.

We highly recommend setting up at least five or ten minutes of Special Time with your child each day, or longer chunks of twenty or thirty minutes a few times each week. Some parents do Special Time for five minutes each morning before starting the routine of dressing and breakfast. This connection with you will fuel your child's mind, and set the stage for learning.

Another prime time for Special Time is after school or day care, but before the dinner routine begins. Your child will look forward to these interludes of "emotional nutrition," and use them well. In a few years, when there's homework to contend with, Special Time will help her decompress from the tensions of school, connect with you, and regain the sense that her life is good. It's a great way to begin or end a school night.

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## Playlistening: Engaging the Healing Power of Laughter

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Playlistening is a Listening Tool that helps your child gain or regain confidence. It's the art of noticing what lets your child laugh and keeping her laughter going, usually by taking the less powerful role as you play. Laughter in play (not laughter forced by tickling) helps a fearful child feel safer and more adventurous. And play with laughter is a great way to relax a child who tends to become aggressive when she feels scared or separate.

For example, if your child complains about an assertive classmate or sibling,

you can set up playtimes in which you play a silly version of the behavior she's cowed by. She'll laugh while she pelts you with pillows, or while she wrestles you to the ground. In play, you make sure she is the strong one, the smart one, the winner! You allow her to laugh and experiment. A series of these Playlistening times can give her the boost she needs to more confidently handle a challenging situation.

Playlistening can also help a child who tends to be aggressive. Vigorous, physical play with you is a constructive outlet for the tensions that lie beneath a child's aggressive behavior. Over time, your use of Listening Tools can clear your child's emotional deck well enough that he can handle challenging situations in more peaceable ways. You'll find several ideas on how to help children with specific behavior snarls through play in the Playlistening booklet.

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## A Good Listener Can Make a Difference for Parents

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**It's not easy to listen to children's feelings.** Every time your child's feelings surface, you'll have your own set of feelings to deal with, too! Most parents try to brush away those twinges of fear, irritation or sadness that get stirred up at a moment's notice. But it will help your child if you can manage to find a listener, and take emotional inventory. What do you remember about your early years? What happened that was fun and exciting for you? What sounds and smells and interactions do you recall? Who was kind to you? Who made life difficult?

**Talking about your childhood experiences will ready you to support your child well.** Something quite beneficial happens for a parent when someone listens. It's a relief to talk unhurriedly about how parenting is going, and the great juggling act it takes every day to lead a family. It helps to think back to what happened to us as children—what nourished our spirits, and what felt sad or difficult. A good listener won't try to fix anything, and won't give advice. That person listens with the goal of learning about you, and concentrating on connection.

Parents can learn to listen well to each other, in a simple arrangement called a Listening Partnership. One parent listens respectfully, without giving advice,

while the other parent talks. Then, they trade roles, taking approximately equal amounts of time. This more formal exchange of listening can feel awkward at first. But listening to another parent's story can help a parent notice that he's not the only one who is challenged by parenting. The chance to talk without being interrupted or judged can do wonders for a parent's mood and clarity of mind. If emotions come to the fore, it's OK. The listener lets the parent think and explore at his own pace. We hope that you will experiment with this kind of listening exchange, and that it will help you gain a fresh sense of what a good and caring parent you are.

**Hand in Hand** offers a booklet called Listening Partnerships for Parents. It outlines what you need to know to set up a listening exchange with another parent. It's a powerful way to build emotional stamina and to counteract the isolation that settles in on parents in this fast-paced world. More information and a listing of local parent support groups are at **Hand in Hand**, [www.handinhandparenting.org](http://www.handinhandparenting.org).

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## Your Child is Good

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We hope that you are reassured that when your child is nearing an emotional meltdown, it's not because there's something wrong with him or with you. It's a good sign, a sign that you are trusted. As you connect and listen, you beckon your child's smart, loving self toward you once again. With you on his side, your child will use his intelligence well, let you know when he needs your help, and thrive.



**Hand in Hand** helps parents when parenting gets hard.

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