

# Pain and Education

Avi I. Mintz

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Parents and teachers inflict pain on the young in many ways. They frustrate a child's desire for immediate gratification by, say, refusing to purchase them a treat in the grocery store. Or they embarrass a student by identifying, for example, a computational error in math class. Or they punish a transgression by isolating or striking the child. Or perhaps they simply neglect the student's or child's call for attention. One may be inclined to say that "pain" is too strong a term for experiences like disappointment or frustration, and that we should reserve it for describing a more intense experience resulting in physical or psychological harm. But such a definitional parameter should not be set casually<sup>1</sup> because it might fail to acknowledge the very real intensity of children's reactions to parents' or teachers' actions; adults might dismissively classify something as benign but adolescents might feel it acutely – even an unpleasant "disappointment" can play a role in cognitive, moral, physical, or what is generally sometimes called "character" development. In this chapter, I shall call these negative experiences "pains of learning" or "educational pains," and I include under this umbrella such varied experiences as shame, embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, perplexity, frustration, and the experience accompanying bodily injuries.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 15 on Social Pain Theory.

## **Pains of Learning in Teaching and Parenting**

Too often the pain inflicted on children is taken to be either good or bad, something to be completely embraced or rejected. An influential debate in educational theory is illustrative: Progressive educational theorists in the early twentieth century – those who often claimed to be followers of John Dewey, the century’s most influential educational philosopher – sought to liberate students’ interests and intellect by promoting an education that included active movement, hands-on projects, and by connecting the curriculum to the students’ lives outside of school (e.g, Dewey 1915/1979; Rugg and Shumaker 1928). These progressive educators viewed the strict disciplinary regime of “traditional classrooms” – those which featured students sitting silently in fixed rows of desks, drearily repeating some lesson they were coerced into memorizing – as oppressive and fear-inducing. Traditionalists sometimes justified students’ boredom, fear, and anxiety as experiences that were good for their character, arguing that the ability to persevere for little reward in unpleasant circumstances is of great value in life. Progressive educators would quip that, in essence, the old, traditional education entailed the belief that it mattered not what children were taught, so long as they didn’t like it. Isaac Kandel, a longtime critic of child-centered progressive education, retorted that, for progressives, “it does not matter what a student studies, so long as he does like it” (Kandel 1943).

Such a dichotomy – whether students should enjoy their education or overcome their aversion to it – possesses so little nuance as to render it virtually useless; few scholars would defend the position that *all* learning should be enjoyable, or that students’ enjoyment must be avoided in order to develop the right kind of character. Yet this kind of all-or-nothing thinking about pain and education persists. Parents of infants are confronted with, for example, advice to

form nurturing, supportive attachments with their infants and toddlers by, among other things, feeding on demand and co-sleeping in order to minimize the babies' and toddlers' stress and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Yet they are also presented with the opposite advice: to feed and put to sleep on a schedule, so that infants' and toddlers' pangs of hunger will encourage them to eat better when given the opportunity, and so that they will “self-soothe” (i.e., learn to cope with their distress) when left alone to sleep (e.g., Ferber 1985). While there are sophisticated arguments to be made on both sides of this debate, the public discourse tends to devolve into a choice between the need to shield versus the danger of shielding the young from unpleasant experiences.

In contemporary educational practice, a small minority of schools today keep alive the progressive vision that Isaac Kandell criticized, explicitly seeking to minimize the coercion and tedium involved in traditional schooling, offering instead the opportunity for students to pursue whatever they are inclined to do, whether that be music, literature, art, math, or video games.<sup>3</sup> At the other extreme, particularly in the United States, are the so-called “no excuses” schools that have promoted rigid routines, uncompromising emphasis on academic success, and, sometimes, public shaming of students who score poorly on tests or who misbehave (e.g., Taylor 2015; Green 2014). Some educational theorists look at the more typical schools of today – not no excuses schools nor the progressive schools but the kind of private and public schools that are the vast majority of schooling options – and argue that even they inflict “violence” upon students, causing “wounds” such as the anxiety caused by high stakes assessments, the spite that

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<sup>2</sup> The defenders of “attachment theory” are probably the best example of contemporary advocates for reducing children’s stress and anxiety. See, for example, Attachment Parenting International’s website (<http://www.attachmentparenting.org/>).

<sup>3</sup> Sudbury Valley School, for example, has about twenty schools in the United States and another dozen or so in Europe, Israel, Japan and Brasil. These schools in many ways resemble A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School as children spend their days planning and administering their own activities, choosing what to study (or not to study) and generally managing their days as they see fit (Neill 1992). For a discussion of the Democratic School of Hadera in Israel, see Hecht (2011).

arises by schools' cultivation of competitiveness, and the diminished self that results from being controlled and coerced (Olson 2009; Harber 2004). Additionally, corporal punishment in classrooms is still common in most of the world (Pate and Gould 2012), as well as other forms of punishment such as confining students outside of class times (i.e. detention), assigning extra tasks, revoking students' privileges, or denying them access to their usual activities (e.g. suspending or expelling them).

Are the pains that occur in the course of schooling ever ethically or educationally warranted? An unsatisfactory response is to say simply that we ought to find a middle-ground that is neither too indulgent of children's interests and whims nor too strict and punitive. While this position might hold some appeal in its broadest articulation, it provides little guidance in practice, nor is it particularly helpful as theory. What would that middle-ground look like, for example, in one of the many countries in which teachers routinely paddle students? That they ought to paddle a misbehaving child neither too frequently nor too infrequently, neither too strongly nor too softly? The worthwhile question is whether paddling is itself an ethical means of fostering students' development in schools. More generally, is there a justifiable, pedagogically valuable role for particular pains of learning in teaching and parenting?

### **The Case of Corporal Punishment as a Pain of Learning**

Punishment, particularly corporal punishment, has long been the focus of debates about whether parents or teachers ought to inflict pain on their students. The issue, I would suggest, has led to the neglect of many other important kinds of pain relevant to education and child rearing. But since corporal punishment has received so much political, public, and scholarly attention, I first discuss some of the research on the topic and discuss some prominent philosophical

responses to it. Thereafter, I turn to how educational pains unrelated to punishment might be, or might fail to be, pedagogically valuable.

Physical punishment for children's failures was routine a few generations ago and is still common in some schools and in many homes throughout the world, though its use varies dramatically by country. Japanese and American parents, for example, use corporal punishment far more frequently than European parents (Pate and Gould 2012: 63). In addition to differences among countries, use differs within countries. In Yemen corporal punishment is more than twice as likely to occur in rural homes as in urban homes (Pate and Gould: 63). In the United States, corporal punishment is much more common in fundamentalist Christian homes (Flynn 1996; Pate and Gould 2012: p.87). Indeed, American fundamentalist parenting has become a focus of public concern. A fundamentalist Christian parenting book, *To Train up a Child* (Pearl and Pearl 1996), that advocated spanking and other disciplinary measures was targeted in a campaign calling for Amazon to stop selling it. Alarming media accounts have drawn attention to parenting practices in fundamentalist Christian communities. One family, for instance, that had sought to apply the disciplinary recommendations of *To Train Up a Child* murdered their adopted child in the process of "disciplining" her (Joyce 2013). Because fundamentalist culture emphasizes subordination so strongly (of wives to husbands, children to parents, all to god), beliefs about the value of corporal punishment accord with their values such that those parents would be less likely to be swayed by "permissive" arguments against its use.

The modern "children's rights" movement seeks to limit the use of corporal punishment, sometimes through legal challenges and sometimes via broader campaigns to encourage nation states to change their policies (Parker-Jenkins 1999). The Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, an advocacy group, reports that, as of this writing, 126 countries

prohibit corporal punishment in schools and 72 permit it; 46 countries prevent corporal punishment in the home, while 152 permit it (2015). A prohibition against corporal punishment does not necessarily indicate an immediate elimination of its use (just as laws against tax fraud do not entail that no tax fraud occurs), but there is a correlation between prohibitions and the use of corporal punishment, and a prohibition may, over time, change a country's culture with respect to corporal punishment and result in decreased use.

The research on corporal punishment generally supports prohibiting it because, in addition to physical wounds, it may cause depression or increase aggression, among other things (e.g., Pate and Gould 2012). Some scholars, however, have pointed out that researchers have failed to demonstrate that the occasional use of mild forms of corporal punishment like spanking are indeed harmful (e.g., Larzelere and Baumrind 2010). Furthermore, some sociological research suggests the use of corporal punishment might be correlated with greater respect for parents (e.g., Lareau 2011). In addition, verbal discipline is often the fallback method for parents and teachers who do not use corporal punishment, and harsh verbal discipline has been shown to predict “adolescent conduct problems and depressive symptoms” (Baumrind et al. 2010: 161; Wang and Kenny 2014).

The fact that empirical studies have failed to find unambiguous harm from mild forms of parents' use of corporal punishment is only one complicating factor in determining whether it might be justified and ethical under certain circumstances. The second is the way that corporal punishment is employed across social groups. In the United States black families and working class and poor families are much more likely to employ it than are white, middle class families (Flynn 1996; Lareau 2011). Some scholars and advocates in minority communities have raised

concerns that many who call for eliminating corporal punishment are generally middle class and white and are promoting their own style of parenting in poor communities and communities of color. Parenting “remediation” programs that target these communities appear to some as an ethnocentric attempt to, what would be called in the not too distant past, civilize the savages (e.g. Brighthouse and Swift 2013). Recently, the American football player Adrian Peterson unwittingly generated a rare public discourse about the relationship of race and parenting after he was indicted for beating his four year old son with a switch so severely that he required medical attention. While many in the media were quick to deplore Peterson’s action, some argued that Peterson’s critics were out of touch with Southern, African-American parenting norms. For example, former National Basketball Association player, Charles Barkley, stated that, if corporal punishment were to become illegal, “every black parent in my neighborhood in the South would be in trouble or in jail under those circumstances” (Sieczkowski 2014). In an era in which public policy is increasingly sensitive to cultural differences within a country, advocacy that appears ethnocentric and targets primarily the parenting practices of poor and marginalized communities, will raise ethical concerns – regardless of the validity of the advocates’ argument (e.g. Brighthouse and Swift 2013).

### **From Corporal Punishment to Other Educational Pains**

As I mentioned above, despite the fact that corporal punishment would be most people’s primary association when asked about pain and education, corporal punishment is only one part of the terrain (and it is an area that, notwithstanding the caveats of some of the communities and scholars I described above, has seen a consensus against its use emerge). Arguably far more interesting and more important for parenting and teaching are other aspects of educational pain.

While this essay is not the place to discuss at length the history of educational pain in philosophy, a brief digression on the topic will help elucidate some relevant conceptual distinctions. In the seventeenth century, John Locke argued that “*slavish discipline* makes a *slavish temper*” (Locke, 1693/1996: §50, 34; Locke’s emphasis). Locke worried that obedience because of “the fear of the rod” does not alter the underlying problematic inclination because the punishment (or fear thereof) only focuses the child’s attention on his inability to satisfy the inclination (perhaps even inflaming it). Furthermore, the child should learn to obey reason, not the commands of others. Notably, Locke viewed using incentives like sugarplums to encourage virtuous behavior to be problematic as well. If a child acts virtuously to receive a treat, the child becomes acclimated to following the dictates of the appetites rather than following reason. To reason with children, Locke argued, is the surest path to developing a virtuous, rational adult. Despite his recognition of the problematic nature of harsh punishments and incentives that relate to the pleasures of the body, Locke did see a particular version of punishment and reward as essential to cultivating virtue. He advised that the great secret of education was getting children to internalize virtuous dispositions by praising or blaming their actions; the esteem or pain of shame experienced because of the child’s desire to please a respected parent or tutor would form a virtuous character without recourse to the baser pleasures or pains of the body (Locke, 1693/1996: §52-58).

In the eighteenth century, in perhaps the most important work on parenting and education in the history of Western educational philosophy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1979) argued that Locke did not go far enough. Praise or blame does not cultivate virtue. Rather, it subtly conveys that we should base our valuation of ourselves on what others think of us. He agreed with the Locke that the way children are typically punished for misbehavior teaches primarily



that a child must learn to do whatever the relevant authority demands of him. But rather than justify esteem or blame as Locke did, Rousseau sought to remove the authority from the child's horizon. Rousseau tells the story of a mischievous boy who, to cause a stir among the adults, broke the windows of his home. Rousseau did not scold him, nor did he reason with him (as Locke recommended).<sup>4</sup> He did not offer to repair the window or find other sleeping accommodations for the child. Any of those options would introduce punishment, subordination and obedience into the equation, and therefore threaten the child's autonomy. Whenever possible, Rousseau counseled, a child should come to his own conclusions about the effects of his actions. To appreciate the folly of breaking a window, the child should sleep in a cold room.

Rousseau's argument that students should learn at their own pace and through their experiences (rather than via textbooks or lectures) was historically pivotal in opening the door to a reexamination of the aims and methods of education. But Rousseau, like Locke, is also helpful for understanding the difference between the pain involved in an authority punishing a child and other sorts of pains that are pedagogically productive. Rousseau argued that human flourishing required an ability to bear the ills of life – the inevitable loss of loved ones, the inevitable humiliations of failure, the inevitable illnesses and injuries. He thought that education had a role to play in cultivating our ability to deal with these pains; we should allow children to experience pains they can bear to help them acclimate to them (Mintz 2012).

Rousseau recognized that children and youth suffer because learning something involves an encounter with the limits of one's knowledge or a discovery of an unsatisfactory aspect of their character or intellect. Confrontation with our ignorance or inadequacy is often unpleasant,

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau believed that young children were not yet capable of sophisticated reasoning. The children who were reasoned with, as Locke had advised, really just offered performances of reasoning to satisfy and impress adults. Rousseau, who valued authenticity, would prefer children to respond bluntly and directly (1762/1979: 89-90). Rousseau believed that the children who reasoned with adults were merely performing for accolades.

but it is nevertheless necessary for learning and development. As the psychologist Fritz Oser has argued, an encounter with our mistakes and our inadequacies provides us with essential insight into how we might do something correctly, and this recognition of inadequacy or failure is sometimes painful (Oser 1996; Oser and Spychinger 2005; see also English 2013). For example, learning about injustices in our communities and in our world causes students to suffer at the suffering of others; learning about a historical injustice like genocide or contemporary injustices (the plight of the homeless) causes students emotional distress, but many argue that such experiences are a critical bridge to social justice (Nussbaum 1996; Mintz 2013).

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on two main questions. First, how might we distinguish some of the necessary, valuable or inevitable educational pains from others? Second, what conditions might teachers and parents create such that their charges will respond productively to their educational pains?

### **Justifiable and Productive Educational Pains**

Despite the caveats about the potential for mild forms of corporal punishment to be ethical and developmentally valuable, corporal punishment *per se*, and punishment of all forms, introduces a variety of pains (e.g., shame, fear, anger, resentment) that might be detrimental to development and learning, particularly relative to other pains that might help achieve the same ends. Rousseau made the case that it is more educationally productive for the student to focus on her problem or activity rather than satisfying an authority, and that argument has found many supporters. John Dewey, like Rousseau, argued that children learn best when they encounter their own errors rather than have others point them out. Dewey was often criticized by his

contemporaries for failing to understand that “discipline” is one of the primary aims of education. Dewey countered that there are two educationally relevant senses of discipline. On the one hand, “discipline” means punishing the child for failing to act as the authority desires. Discipline of this sort depends on “various kinds of physical, social, and personal pain” to control the child (Dewey 1902/1976: 207). In another sense, “discipline” is the byproduct of sustained immersion in an activity in which one is interested. In this case it is the engagement in the activity – not the interest of avoiding “physical, social, and personal pain” – that cultivates discipline. One might best overcome inadequate carpentry abilities, for example, by continuously working with the wood, nails, and saws, eventually coming to master skilled use of them. The child who attempts to build her first birdhouse experiences a relevant sort of pain in these activities, because she is regularly confronted with obstacles, frustrations, and distractions. Focused on the task at hand, one develops the “power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty,” a power Dewey identifies as “the essence of discipline” (Dewey 1916: 129).

This characterization of the two senses of discipline exaggerates and oversimplifies two matters. First, it seems to suggest that learning is ideally *laissez-faire*; that is, the teacher or parent should simply get out of the way and allow the student to teach herself through immersion in an activity, in a rich environment. Second, it seems to assume that children’s interests will be sufficiently developed and robust to direct them to worthwhile activities. To respond to this latter point, it is certainly the case that interests are developed in many ways. Some adults who have a passion for playing a musical instrument, and continue to play because of intrinsic interest alone, were not interested when, as children, their parents or teachers required them to play; that is, interest may follow engagement with an activity, it does not always need to precede it.

Furthermore, some would argue that there are some things that must be learned regardless of the student's interest because such topics serve the needs of the state, the family, or the child herself. Without wading into the voluminous debates about the centrality of students' interests, I suggest that, minimally, children's interests ought to be utilized in their education to whatever extent possible. When interest is absent, parents and teachers should creatively attempt to cultivate interest or endeavor to make the activity worthwhile for the student.

Regarding the authority's role in learning and development, there is likewise much scholarly debate. I would argue that a teacher or parent possesses expertise and experience that might assist the child in the activity, and there is no reason to withhold guidance and correction completely. Ideally, however, the correction and guidance will not impose upon the child sufficiently to transform the activity from one in which a goal is pursued to one in which the child simply follows or attempts to please the authority. Psychologists have suggested a helpful, related distinction. Students' struggle or failure is more pedagogically valuable in the midst of "task involvement" rather than "ego involvement" (Nicholls 1989). When children are pursuing an activity with a dominant focus on how they compare to others (which characterizes ego involvement) they are less likely to maximize their learning compared to when they are primarily interested in the task itself. This may seem obvious, but a child who spends her time assembling model airplanes because of her inherent interest in the task will probably, though not necessarily, become better at assembling models than the child who is primarily interested in, for example, assembling models faster than other children. The Rousseauian insight that a preoccupation with comparing oneself to others and with seeking approval from an authority may detract from learning is sound.

A classic study of extrinsic rewards found that children who were rewarded for solving a puzzle were less intrinsically motivated to engage in the task again at a later date than those who had not been extrinsically rewarded (Lepper and Greene 1975; Kohn 1999). Nevertheless, ego involvement and extrinsic rewards can indeed be pedagogically effective. A professor who “grades on a curve,” and makes high grades a scarce resource for which competition is fierce, may both increase the effort that her students put into the class and their willingness to tolerate frustration, anxiety, and other educational pains. But, at the same time, the ego involvement that grading on a curve encourages, and the extrinsic rewards of the grade, may ultimately undermine learning and development as the student’s focus becomes divided between the material he attempting to master, winning the professor’s esteem, and comparing himself to his classmates. The educational pain of recognizing one’s inadequacy or error is often unavoidable. But if students come to recognize the pain on their own, in the course of immersion in an activity, they may remain focused on what needs to be improved. When an authority corrects the student, or when the student is focused on how he compares to others or on obtaining an external reward, the pain of recognizing one’s inadequacy or error is now compounded by additional educational pains that may not otherwise be present – the fear of reprimand, the fear of disappointing, the fear of *appearing* inadequate (as opposed to the fear that one is actually so). The more children and students can focus on the inquiry before them rather on their relationships with authorities, the better.

Thus far, I have suggested that the pains of learning experienced through immersion in an activity are more justifiable and pedagogically productive than those that arise in the attempt to please or obey a relevant authority (though the latter may be justifiable and productive as well).

Another issue that is of use in determining the value of certain pains of learning is task difficulty. Psychologists have found that if tasks are too easy, people are not inclined to pursue them. Yet tasks that are extremely difficult will be avoided as well. Ideally, tasks will have a moderate challenge – anything already mastered will be a bore, anything so far beyond one’s current abilities will cause frustration and anxiety and breed helplessness. Thus educators must find tasks that are sufficiently difficult that a student will struggle to complete them, but that are not too far beyond current abilities (e.g., Shernoff et al. 2003).

### **Promoting Productive Responses to the Pains of Learning**

The above analysis suggests that certain kinds of educational pains – those experienced through immersion in an intrinsically interesting task of moderate difficulty – are valuable and justifiable. But responses to pains vary widely. Why does one athlete get cut from a varsity high school basketball team and never try out again, while someone like Michael Jordan uses the rejection to fuel an intense effort to improve? Why do some students fail a moderately difficult math course and decide to take no further math courses, while another retakes the course and plans to take others? There must be more to the matter, for example, than whether the math course was of moderate difficulty. Scholars studying academic achievement in schools found that a challenging curriculum alone did not lead to high student achievement. Rather, only when that challenging curriculum was accompanied by strong social support – the support of teachers, family, and a student’s community who provide assistance and cultivate the confidence necessary for a student to persevere through frustration – did the standards yield the desired educational achievement (Lee et al. 1999). This lesson about the value of social support is

particularly important considering how often educational reformers call for more rigorous standards. The frustration and struggle associated with a challenging curriculum may be an obstacle to further learning or a catalyst for it depending on whether social support is present, among other things.

Furthermore, the struggle and frustration in the encounter with a challenging curriculum can be ameliorated when teachers offer explicit, concrete strategies and advice for success (e.g., Delpit 2006). Explicit discussion of strategies and social support are not, however, the same as guiding students through their work. Some teachers break math problems down into simple step-by-step procedures, thinking that “success breeds success” (Clifford 1990). Indeed, cross-cultural researchers in education have observed that Japanese teachers are much more likely than American, German, and teachers from many other countries, to present students with difficult problems and allow them to experience frustration and confusion. Japanese students are not only left to struggle with their failure, but Japanese teachers also seek to induce students’ struggle and frustration by selecting problems that will likely cause them to err. In a math classroom, for example, a Japanese teacher might ask students to add fractions with different denominators knowing that most students will do so incorrectly, and will then have to struggle to figure out what went wrong (Stigler and Hiebert 1999). On the other hand, teachers in other countries are more likely to try to protect students from their confusion and frustration. American teachers, for example, are much more likely than Japanese teachers to tell students the procedure for correctly adding fractions before presenting them with a problem, for example. They protect students from the pains of confusion and frustration while denying them an opportunity to grapple with the mathematical concept itself, something that improves students’ understanding of the topic (Stigler and Hiebert 1999).

In addition to the importance of social support and explicitly providing students with the foundational competence such that they understand how they can achieve their goals (while avoiding leading students through their inquiry), a third factor might promote productive encounters with the pains of learning: equipping students with a better narrative of learning. A striking study found that middle schoolers' math scores could be raised by merely telling them on occasion over the course of a semester that success in mathematics was based on effort (not on innate ability) (Blackwell et al. 2007).<sup>5</sup> The lesson we might learn as parents and educators is the following: we ought to provide our students and our children with a narrative about learning in which their educational pains – failure, frustration, anxiety and fear – are not indicators of innate deficits but are rather rungs on the ladder of educational success, a proper part of the educational journey.

### **Conclusion: Why Thinking About Educational Pain Matters**

Many young people routinely suffer in ways that society should help prevent – children are hungry, they are physically and emotionally abused, they are humiliated, and they are neglected. And in their homes and schools, they experience other pains such as self-doubt about their intellectual (or professional) potential. Because even self-doubt can be so painful some have argued that teachers should avoid criticism or correction that might harm self-esteem. The “self-esteem” movement in education that emerged in the 1990s in California explicitly argued for the educational value of affirmation (e.g. Mecca et. Al. 1989). Yet to shield a student from her own ignorance or ineffectiveness is anti-educational, and the implications of methods and aims of

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<sup>5</sup> The psychologist Carol Dweck has conducted highly influential work on praise, distinguishing praise of effort from less developmentally valuable praise of ability. She found that ability praise made students *more* inclined to avoid their mistakes and failures rather than overcome them (Cimpian et. al 2007; Dweck 1999; Kamins and Dweck 1999).



education devoted narrowly to enhancing students' self-esteem have been justly pilloried (e.g., Stout 2000; Smith 2002; Sykes 1995). But to posit simply that *all* educational pains are valuable is problematic as well. Certain educational pains are more justifiable and educationally productive than others. Parents and teachers must take care about which ones children will experience, and they must lay the foundation for children to have productive responses to the pains of learning.

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