

Exclusionary and Punitive Practices in the Context of Neurodiversity: Expulsion from Childcare and Preschool

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Overview

- Overview of preschool and child-care expulsion in the context of autism
- Contextual factors contributing to expulsion and dismissal
- Suggestions to creating neurodiversity-affirming school settings
- First-Person Perspectives from Autistic Students and Adults



A note on language:

You'll notice we are using identity-first language (e.g., “autistic child”) rather than person-first language (“child with autism”).

This language reflects the preference of a majority autistic adults.



How young is too young for a child to have a “record?”

- 250 preschool children are expelled every day in the U.S.
- Expulsion and/or suspension more common for children of color
- Black and male preschoolers at particular risk
- Expulsions are even reported in home-based child-care settings



The case of autism...

What is autism?

The Diagnostic & Statistical Manual
(DSM-V)

- **Deficits in social communication** and interaction across contexts
- **Restricted and repetitive behaviors**, including sensory sensitivities

The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network:

“We think differently. ...

- ✓ We **process our senses differently**. ...
- ✓ We **communicate differently**. ...
- ✓ We **socialize differently**. ...
- ✓ We might **need help with daily living**. ...

There are lots of different ways to be autistic.”

(ASAN, 2023)



What is Smooth Sailing?

- Foundational study: a unique sample 203 young autistic children ages 4 to 7
- Adjustment to school, academic development, well-being, and relationships with teachers
- Key predictor of children's later school adaptation: ***positive and warm student-teacher interactions***
- Teachers shared need for more support in understanding autism and building relationships



What our study found:

(Blacher & Eisenhower, 2022)

- 16% of these children—about one in six—had been expelled from a childcare or preschool setting
- Average age was 3.3 years
- More likely to be expelled from a private than a public program
- Expelled children went on to experience more conflict and dependency than the non-expelled group
- Teachers reported more externalizing behaviors in expelled group



Reasons for expulsion

- Due to **challenging behavior** such as aggression (e.g., biting, hitting, spitting, screaming): reported by **81%** of parents of expelled children
- Due to child's **lack of school readiness skills** (e.g., paying attention, sitting still, following directions): reported by **9%** of parents of expelled children
- Due to some **combination** of the above: reported by **19%** of parents of expelled children



Additional findings

- Previously expelled children **did NOT differ** from non-expelled children on a number of child characteristics as reported or observed by multiple informants (teacher, parents, researchers):
 - Cognitive ability or IQ
 - Language ability
 - Internalizing characteristics (such as anxiety)



Misinterpreting autism characteristics

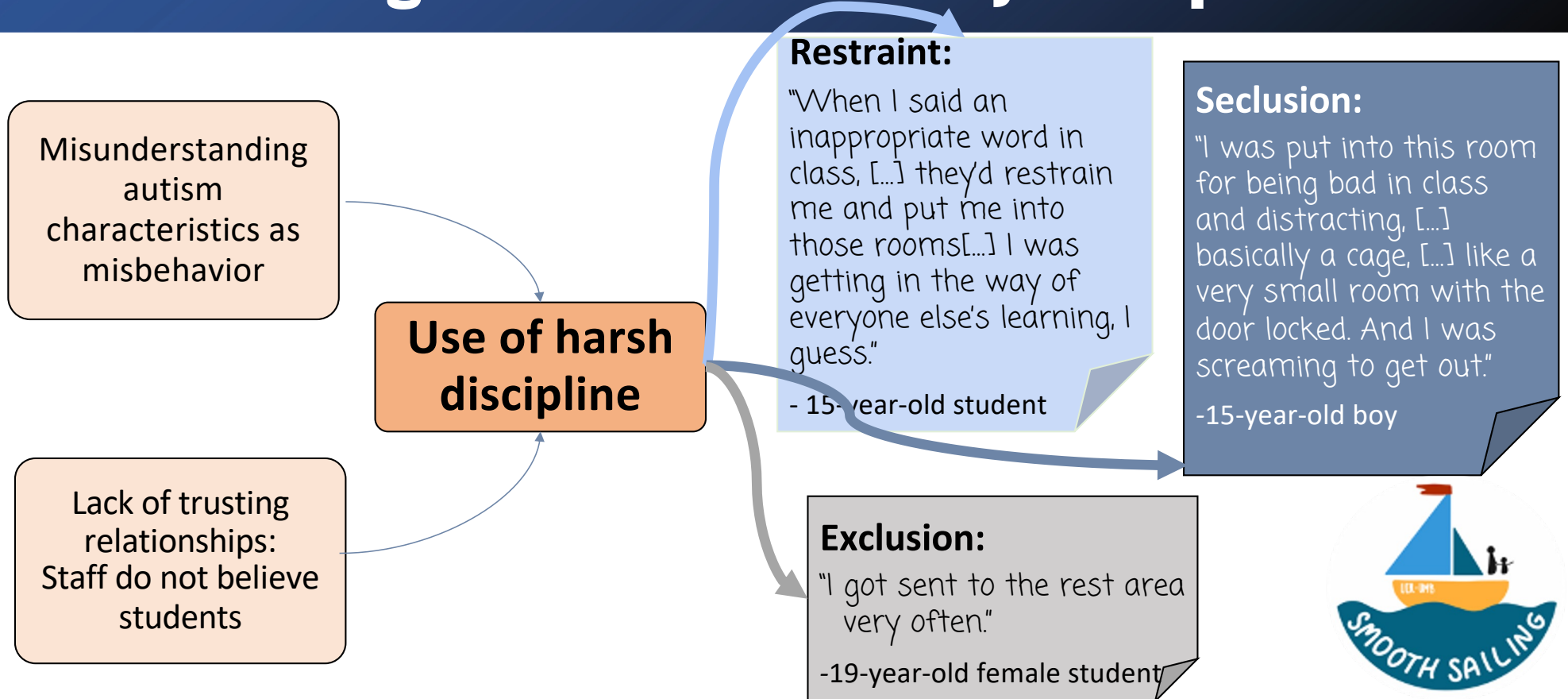
- Teachers misinterpreting restrictive and repetitive behaviors and sensory sensitivities as purposeful misbehaviors
- Attempts to speaking up for their needs interpreted as “talking back” or being willfully defiant
- Responding to student’s perceived misbehavior with escalating discipline

“I think, the teacher was making a sample out of me. ... there would be nothing I could have done because to them, it probably looked like I was refusing to spell it. ... having them not threaten me with the principal's office would have been the best choice.”

~ Esme, 18, Mexican & White



Perceptions of Misbehavior and Lack of Trust → An Escalating Use of Exclusionary Discipline



Why is preschool expulsion so detrimental?

- Targets young autistic children
- Long-lasting effects
- Expulsion interrupts relationships that the child might be forming with other children
- There are collateral effects on the parents of the expelled child



Suggestions for moving forward....

- **Build positive relationships early with autistic children**
- **Better supports for early childhood educators**
 - Compensate them in accordance with other educators
 - More staff in childcare centers
 - Autism specific training that is **neurodiversity-affirming**



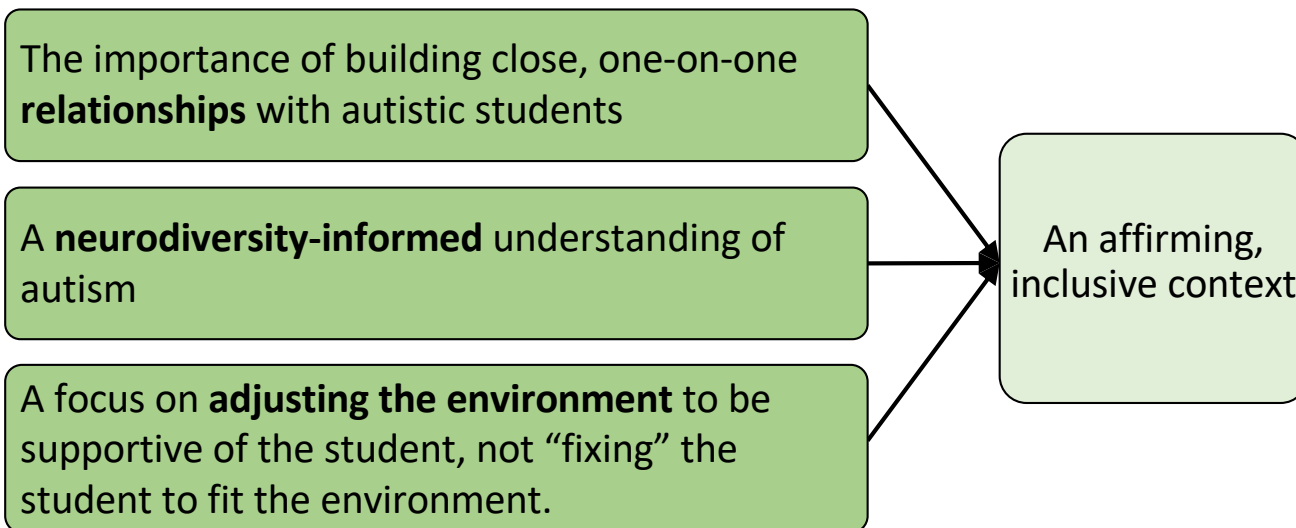
Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

- Smooth Sailing Professional Development Program as an example
- The K-12 years are marked by isolation, marginalization, and disproportionate exclusion for many autistic students.
- Only 8% of general education teachers have had the opportunity to access professional training in autism.
- 60% of autistic youth report that “having a teacher who understands autism” is *the main factor* that would make school better for them (APPGA, 2017).



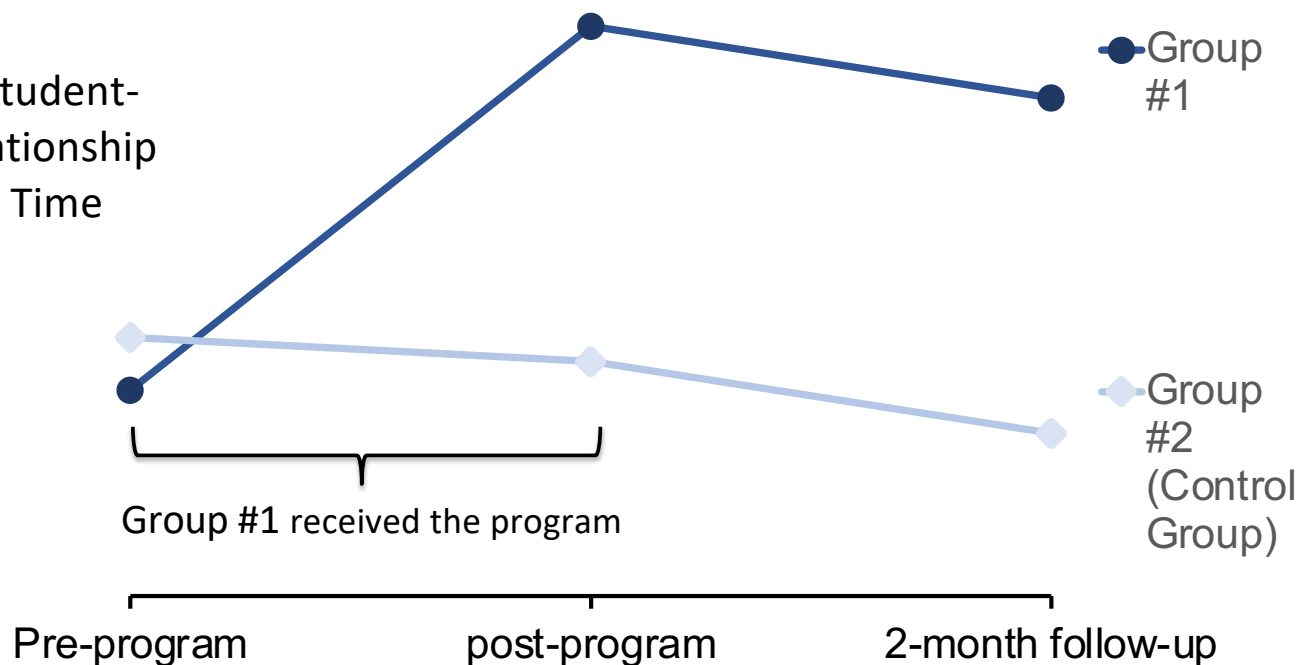
The Example of the Smooth Sailing Program

Key Components:



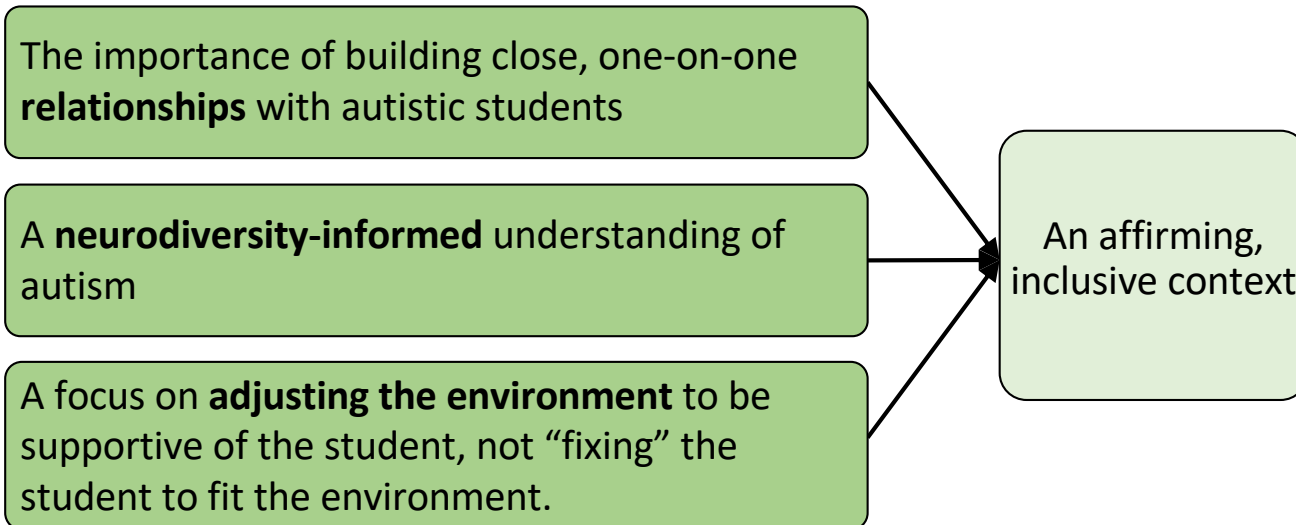
The Example of the Smooth Sailing Program

Changes in Student-Teacher Relationship Quality Over Time



Affirming School Practices

Key Principles:



Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

The importance of building close, one-on-one **relationships** with autistic students

"[These brief, one-on-one interactions] can really improve your relationship with this child, make your life easier. I know that we have very busy days, but everybody can find 3-5 minutes. ...It is such a simple strategy."

-Teacher

need understanding of

the environment to be
at, not "fixing" the
student.

- Intentional, regular, one-on-one time during school day
- Strategies focus on maintaining low-demand, child-directed interactions.
- Past teachers show this is feasible: 100% of teachers had weekly, 3-10 minute interactions, and 75% did so ≥ 2 /week.



Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

The importance of building close, one-on-one **relationships** with autistic students

"He valued me as a person and not just a student."
-17-year-old girl

"She really cared about how I was doing even outside the classroom."
-16-year-old non-binary student

"She just talked to me about her life sometimes. It wasn't always teacher stuff. She was willing to listen about my life. She wasn't just tolerating me."
-20-year-old autistic woman



Viewing Autism Through a Neurodiversity Lens

The importance of building close, one-on-one relationships with autistic students

A **neurodiversity-informed** understanding of autism

A focus on adjusting the environment to be supportive of the student to fit the

"Allowing them to be different and communicate in their own way, however that is."

-Teacher

- **Neurodiversity:** autism is viewed as part of the natural range of human diversity, not a set of deficits to be fixed.
- Autism characteristics are viewed as traits that may be assets in some contexts and liabilities in others.



Viewing Autism Through a Neurodiversity Lens

"Teachers have to let us be who we are. We might be weird and quirky but if you ... embrace who we are, you are going to get more out of us."
-17-year-old autistic girl

... one-on-one
students

A **neurodiversity-informed** understanding of autism

A focus on adjusting the environment to be supportive of the student, not "fixing" the student to fit the environment.

"Teachers didn't understand like spectrum-related stuff. Like they think 'oh, he's misbehaving purposefully,' you know. They would like call someone out in front of everybody."

-25-year-old man



Adjusting the Environment

"We all fall into wanting our kids to sit on the carpet nicely. [But] I have students that don't conform to those. We have to be open to their needs in allowing them to do what they need."

-teacher

one-on-one
sessions

Understanding of
autism

A focus on **adjusting the environment** to be supportive of the student, not "fixing" the student to fit the environment.

- The difficulties facing autistic children in school often stem from the fact that schools are set up for non-autistic learners.
- These difficulties are often manifested behaviorally.



Adjusting the Environment

"When I got really overwhelmed one day, she closed the door to the classroom and let me sit in the room and have my little breakdown so that I didn't have to do it in public. Then [she] explained to the [next] teacher, 'Sorry, we were talking. That's why she's late.'"

-22-year-old genderfluid student

one-on-one

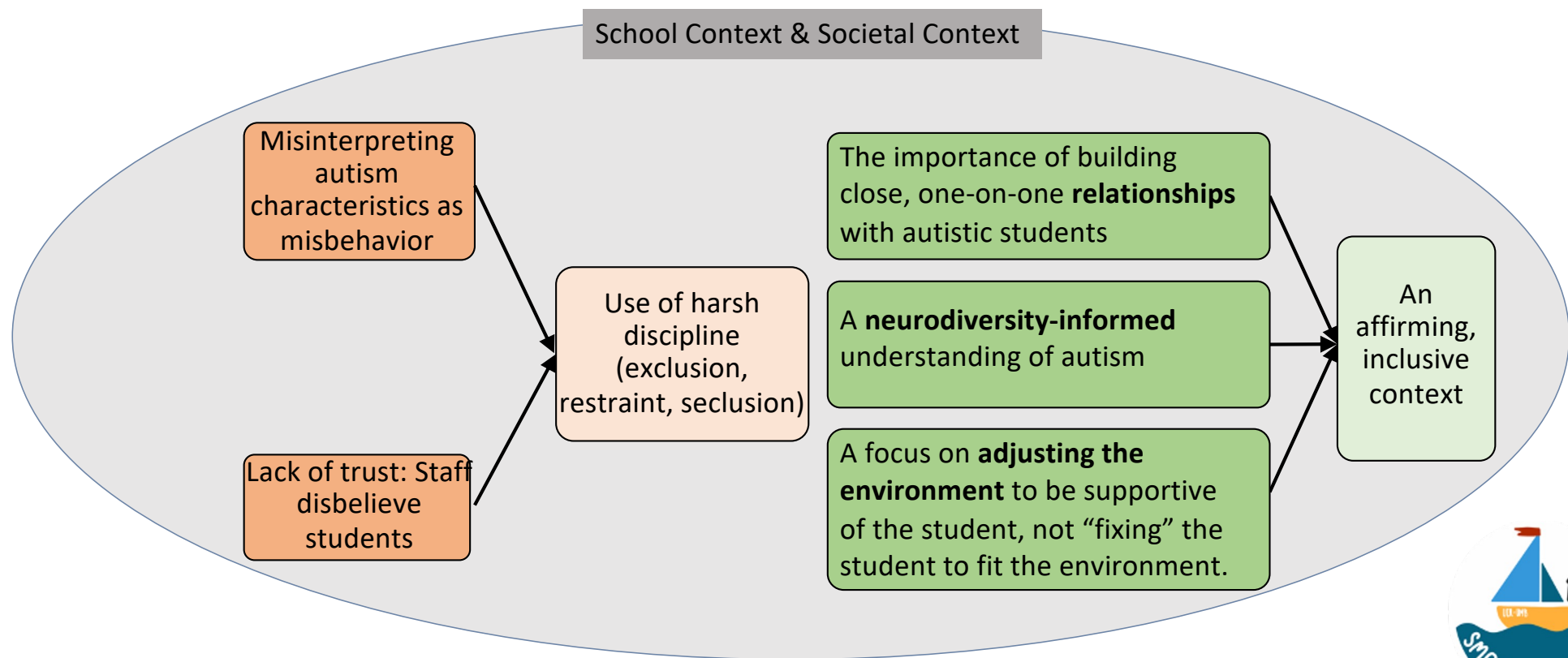
Understanding of

"Finally, I said, 'Hey, actually, I don't want to go to this [assembly because of the noise], and she goes 'we can just find a quiet room, and you guys can chill.' ...I almost started crying ... because I was so f***ing relieved." -19-year-old autistic student

A focus on **adjusting the environment** to be supportive of the student, not "fixing" the student to fit the environment.



Autism-Affirming School Practices: Positive Student-Teacher Relationships



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- Our website: www.smoothsailingstudy.org

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