

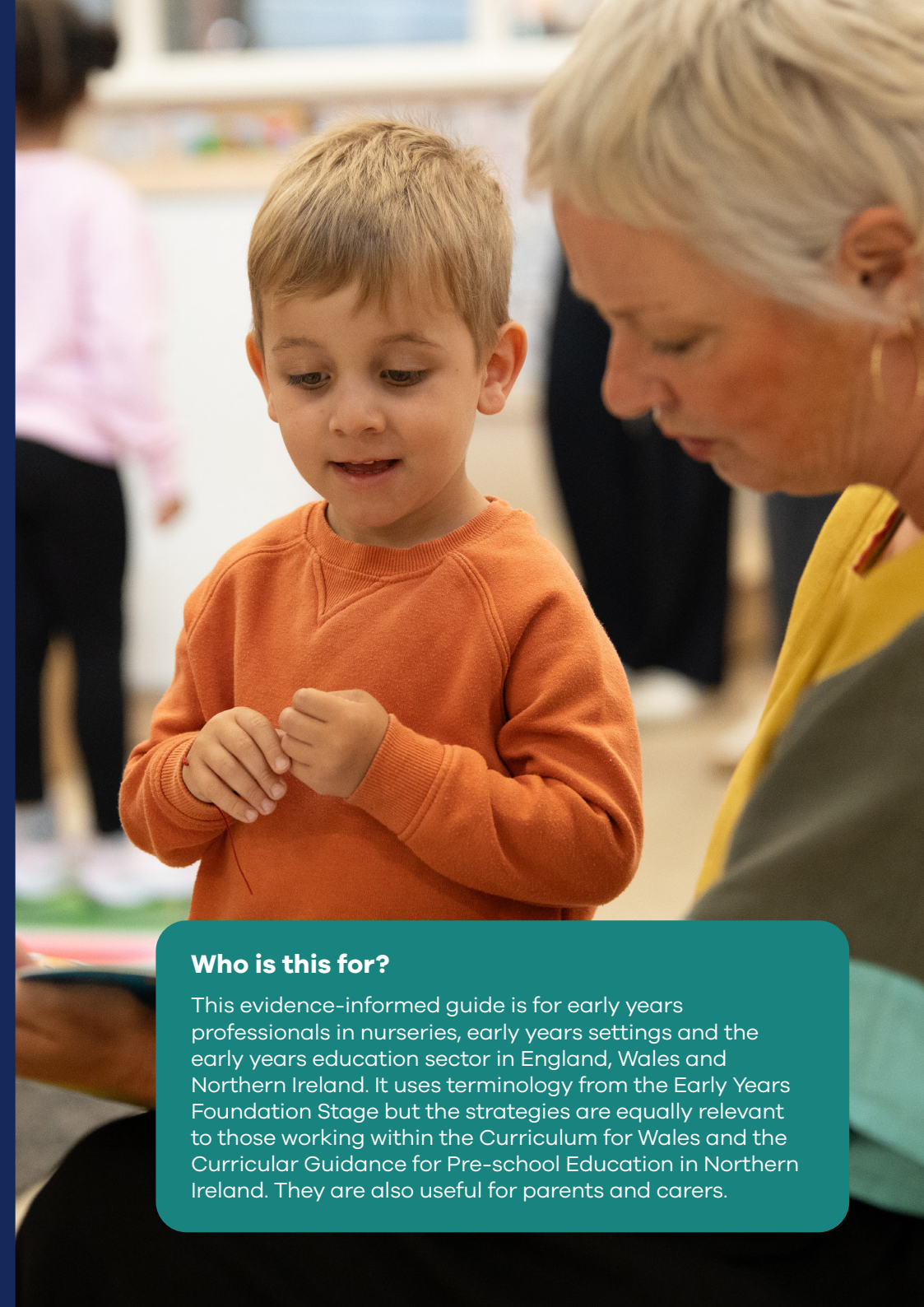


Reading, executive function and self-regulation:

How shared reading builds key
life skills in the early years



Contents



Who is this for?

This evidence-informed guide is for early years professionals in nurseries, early years settings and the early years education sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It uses terminology from the Early Years Foundation Stage but the strategies are equally relevant to those working within the Curriculum for Wales and the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland. They are also useful for parents and carers.

1. Foreword by BookTrust and the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF)



Julie Hayward
Director of Partnerships at BookTrust

BookTrust's evidence shows that children's early years are a powerful window of opportunity – when foundational skills take shape and small, everyday moments can have lasting impact. Among these essential early skills are executive function and self-regulation – the building blocks of attention, flexible thinking, emotional understanding and self-control. While these concepts may sound complex, the ways we support these skills to develop don't need to be.

This evidence-informed guide brings together evidence, insights from best practice, and practical tools to show how early shared reading can play a vital role in developing these life-shaping capabilities.

This resource highlights how, with small shifts in approach, shared reading can become a powerful way to strengthen thinking skills, emotional regulation and learning readiness.

The strategies and ideas in this briefing are for all those working with young children across the early years and primary school education. We hope this continues to inspire our partners to look at early shared reading as a space not only for literacy, but for helping children grow into happy, confident, curious and capable individuals, supporting them to thrive in their early years and beyond.



Dr June O'Sullivan OBE
CEO at LEYF

At our nurseries, we see first-hand the transformative power of reading with children. It begins with the right book – one chosen with care to help children explore characters' feelings in ways that are playful and relatable. Reading then becomes more than a quiet activity; it becomes a conversation.

Through interactive story sharing, children are invited to ask questions, make connections, and identify, express, and regulate their emotions. This builds confidence, empathy, and executive function skills such as sharing, turn-taking, and reflection. Ultimately, it helps children make sense of themselves and the world – a gift that we know lasts well beyond the nursery years.

But they can't do this alone. As professionals supporting children in the early years, we have a significant role to play. Later in this briefing, you will see more on how we have been harnessing the power of story sharing at LEYF to support children's self-regulation and emotional regulation, against the backdrop of challenges around school readiness since the pandemic.

We're really pleased to contribute to this resource, which shows why these capabilities are important and what we can do to support them. The case study example we've shared shows how when stories are brought to life, not only can they be loved and enjoyed, but they can also act as springboards into wider experiences.

2. What are executive function and self-regulation?

Executive function is a set of different capabilities that support children's purposeful, goal-directed thinking and behaviour:

- **Inhibitory control**

Resisting impulses, distractions or automatic responses

- **Working memory**

Holding and using information in mind

- **Cognitive flexibility**

Switching between tasks, ideas or perspectives

- **Metacognition**

Monitoring, reflecting on and adjusting thinking and learning strategies

- **Emotional regulation**

Recognising, managing and responding to emotions in ways that support learning and social interaction

- **Self-regulation**

Together, these core capabilities underpin self-regulation – the ability to manage attention, emotions and actions in response to changing demands or goals. In early childhood, self-regulation develops through co-regulation* with supportive adults.

 * Co-regulation is the warm, responsive support adults provide through calm presence, modelling, cues and simple structure, helping children manage attention, feelings and behaviour so that self-regulation can develop.

3. Why do these matter for children?

Executive function and self-regulation help children focus their attention, manage emotions, remember and reflect on experiences, and respond flexibly when things don't go to plan. These capabilities support children to thrive – shaping emotional wellbeing, relationships and readiness for new learning across home, early years settings and everyday life.¹

Evidence highlights its positive effect on:



Closing the disadvantage gap

Differences in executive function and self-regulation appear as early as age three and often mirror wider socio-economic differences,² but early support can narrow the gap.³



Academic achievement

Executive function, especially working memory, predicts later success in reading and maths, even when differences in children's starting ability and family background are considered.⁴



Socio-emotional development

Long-term studies show better executive function at age six is linked to fewer behaviour problems and reduced risk of later anxiety, depression, ADHD and conduct difficulties through to age 14.⁵



How these capabilities fit with frameworks and curriculums

In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for England and the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland, executive function and self-regulation are integral components of personal, social, and emotional development. These skills are also reflected in the characteristics of effective learning, which include persistence, exploration, and reflective thinking.

In the Curriculum for Wales, these capabilities align closely with Health and Well-being and Languages, Literacy and Communication areas of learning and experience, particularly in supporting children's self-awareness, emotional development and early decision-making.

4. What does the evidence say about how shared reading supports executive function and self-regulation?

The evidence highlights the positive role that shared reading can play in developing executive function and self-regulation. The impact is greatest when adults share books frequently, interactively, and in ways that are responsive to each child.⁶



- ★ Neuroimaging studies show that shared reading activates brain regions linked to **language, self-regulation, and cognitive control** when it is emotionally rich and responsive.⁷
- ★ Behavioural research confirms that embedding brief cognitive challenges within shared reading – such as remembering, switching, or inhibiting responses ([see table](#)), can improve pre-schoolers' **working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attention**.⁸
- ★ Dialogic reading, which encourages turn-taking, questioning, and child-led discussion, strengthens children's **executive function, early learning, and attention by improving the quality of adult scaffolding**.⁹ The benefits are especially pronounced in families with lower income or education levels where scaffolding and interaction quality may be constrained.¹⁰



What shapes and supports children's development

Children's early development is shaped by their home environment, culture and family circumstances.¹¹ Low-cost, flexible, and culturally sensitive approaches can help reduce early gaps, especially when families are well supported and engaged over time.¹²

5. How does shared reading support executive function and self-regulation in practice?

The benefits of shared reading for executive function and self-regulation are varied, especially because by definition executive function is made up of different capabilities.

In the table on the following page, we explore in more detail how shared reading helps strengthen these specific capabilities in practice.

Key features of shared reading that support these capabilities

- Interactive engagement
- Attention to narrative structure, characters and perspectives
- Space for emotional connection



Table: How shared reading supports different capabilities

	How shared reading helps	How it works in practice
 Inhibitory control	It offers natural opportunities to pause, take turns, and watch how characters manage their urges or frustrations	It strengthens impulse control by practising waiting and observing models of self-restraint in story characters
 Working memory	It encourages children to remember earlier events, follow plotlines, and make predictions	It activates working memory by holding and updating information to track the plot, connect events, and anticipate outcomes
 Cognitive flexibility	It engages children in shifting perspectives, imagining alternative actions, and adapting to story twists	It trains mental switching by requiring flexible thinking about characters, motives, and evolving situations
 Metacognition	It prompts children to think aloud, reflect on characters' decisions, and consider strategies for understanding the story	It develops self-awareness of thinking by encouraging children to evaluate, plan, and monitor their own comprehension
 Emotional regulation	It opens space to talk about emotions, coping strategies, and relate to characters' experiences	It supports emotional learning through adult co-regulation, emotion labelling, and safe symbolic rehearsal of emotional challenges

6. What we hear from families

When we hear about the benefits of shared reading from parents and carers, many observe how it helps children develop these core capabilities. Some examples include:

“That book opened up so many questions. He started asking more in the last couple of months. I think sad emotions make him a little bit sad too, and he asks why. He'll say, 'Oh, why is he sad?' He gets really engaged – like, there'll be lots of questions.”

Parent

- Metacognition
- Emotional regulation

“When my daughter was a baby and we did all the actions, she wasn't talking yet, but she knew what was coming. As soon as we got to the 'he huffed and he puffed' part, her little feet would start going and her hands would wave – she'd get so excited because she knew what was coming on that page. Seeing her reaction made it all worthwhile – doing the voices and actions really brought the story to life.”

Parent

- Working memory



7. Top tips for supporting executive function and self-regulation through shared reading

These strategies work best when adults are responsive, patient, and tuned into the child's cues. Co-regulation provides the bridge to self-regulation.



1. Take your time – and take turns



Why it helps:

Waiting and listening helps children practise attention and develop self-control – key parts of self-regulation.



Try saying:

“Let’s pause for a moment and see what’s happening”



Helpful to remember:

Rushing or doing all the talking can make it harder for children to stay focused or take part.

● Inhibitory control ● Self-regulation

“ When we do a Rhythm and Rhyme session with a book like *Just Breathe Bear*, we can show children life’s not about rushing onto the next thing. Even for young ones, it’s about showing them it’s ok to just stop, take a minute and breathe. Being able to use the book like this means we can bring a topic like anxiety down to a child’s level.”

Library Assistant, Glengormley

2. Think out loud together



Why it helps:

Talking through thoughts shows children how to reflect, plan, and adjust – building metacognition and emotional regulation.



Try saying:

"I wonder why he felt nervous going into the cave..."



Helpful to remember:

Over-explaining or jumping in with answers can limit children's chance to explore their own ideas.

● Metacognition ● Emotional regulation

4. Talk about feelings



Why it helps:

Talking about emotions helps children learn to recognise and manage feelings – essential for emotional regulation.



Try saying:

"How do you think the rabbit feels now? What might help him feel better?"



Helpful to remember:

It is okay if children do not want to talk about emotions.

● Emotional regulation

3. Ask open-ended questions



Why it helps:

Open questions encourage children to hold ideas in mind, make connections and think flexibly – supporting working memory and cognitive flexibility.



Try saying:

"What do you think might happen next?" or "What else could she have done?"



Helpful to remember:

Too many questions or looking for the 'right' answer can make it feel like a test instead of a conversation.

● Working memory ● Cognitive flexibility

“ The use of books in our work is amazing, because it can then stem on to anywhere. After the story's finished, it can be: 'What happens next? What do you think happened next? Where did they go? What are they going to do? I'll tell you what, let's build what we think's going to happen next...' And you can always carry on. The story doesn't have to stop at the end of that book. ”

Nursery Manager, Walsall

5. Let them lead the way



Why it helps:

Letting children make choices supports autonomy, motivation and self-directed thinking.



Try saying:

"You pick the book today!" or "You can turn the page when you're ready."



Helpful to remember:

It is harder for children to feel ownership and agency if every part of the session is controlled.

● Inhibitory control ● Cognitive flexibility



At our nursery we run 'Show and Tell Wednesdays' where we invite children to bring books or drawings from home, giving them an opportunity to speak confidently while including families in the learning process. Staff prompt children with open-ended questions, like "I wonder why you chose this book?" to encourage reflection and discussion. ”

Nursery Manager, London

6. Celebrate the trying



Why it helps:

Praising effort and strategies helps children monitor their own thinking and build persistence – key parts of self-regulation and metacognition.



Try saying:

"That was a tricky bit, but you kept thinking – great job!"



Helpful to remember:

Focusing only on getting things right can miss the valuable learning that happens through effort.

● Metacognition ● Self-regulation

7. Choose stories with real feelings and big ideas



Why it helps:

Stories where characters wait, plan, or face tough emotions provide a safe space for children to practise cognitive flexibility and emotional coping.



Try this:

Pick stories where characters wait, plan, or deal with tricky feelings like fear or disappointment.



Helpful to remember:

Stories with emotional ups and downs can help children explore real-life challenges, even when there is no neat, happy ending.

● Inhibitory control ● Cognitive flexibility

8. A practice perspective from LEYF

How shared reading can support children's self-regulation and emotional regulation in preparation for school and beyond

In recent years, across its network of 40+ nurseries spanning 13 London boroughs, LEYF has seen an increase in parents expressing concerns and seeking guidance about how to support their children's emotional growth. Staff have also found a noticeable change in children's readiness for school since the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly around self-regulation, and in turn, emotional regulation.

In response to this, better understanding these key capabilities has become one of LEYF's priorities, especially for those preparing for school. CEO June O'Sullivan highlights the integral role that staff and other adults play – including as 'co-regulators'.



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Nurseries

“ We can't expect children to think well or be well if the adults around them are stressed and disconnected. An adult being attuned, available, and responsive can help them navigate big feelings and impulses. Our own regulation matters: children learn from every interaction they have with us and when we teach children to recognise and manage stress – and when we model it ourselves – we're giving them the building blocks for resilience, empathy, and lifelong learning. ”

Dr June O'Sullivan OBE, CEO, LEYF

Books and story sharing have been a key part of the strategies LEYF have put into practice to support children's emotional regulation and self-regulation:

- **Staff are encouraged to co-regulate with children** especially during moments of heightened emotion or stress, using techniques such as reading quietly together, sitting calmly with the child, practising breathing exercises, and helping the child settle by syncing to the adult's slower, steady heartbeat.
- **Some nursery environments have been thoughtfully redesigned**, with designated indoor and outdoor spaces to foster a sense of calm. These areas are also shaped to reflect children's individual identities and interests, including a selection of books, helping to create a sense of belonging, safety, and emotional expression.
- **Self-regulation is embedded in different ways across nurseries**, from induction processes and parent workshops to leadership training that supports cascading this knowledge. These approaches often emphasise the role of books and story-sharing in supporting children's emotional development.

LEYF reports that the result of putting these – as well as wider strategies – in place, is calmer children, more confident staff, and fewer “behaviour incidents”.

Prioritising this area has helped children be better equipped with the transition to school and beyond.



“ Understanding self-regulation is not a “nice to have” in our profession. My challenge to our nurseries is this: make it part of your daily practice and your way of being with children. In the end, everything we do in Early Years is about preparing children not just to be ready for school, but to be ready for life. ”

Dr June O’Sullivan OBE, CEO, LEYF

Case example: LEYF Bushy Tails Nursery and Pre-School



Putting into practice some of the strategies adopted by LEYF, at LEYF Bushy Tails Nursery and Pre-School in Teddington, teachers have recently been prioritising learning experiences that use story sharing as a key way to help children identify, express, and manage their emotions.

Emma Miller, Nursery Manager from LEYF Bushy Tails talks about what's worked for them, and some of the benefits they've seen to children's development.

What's worked for us

- 1. Starting with the right book.** Our teachers thoughtfully select books that encourage children to explore character's feelings. We find it's important that these books approach emotions in a way that's playful and relatable for children, helping them make meaningful connections to their own experiences.
- 2. An interactive approach to story sharing.** It's not enough just to read children a book. Using dialogical reading, and inviting children to actively participate, ask questions, and explore has been fundamental to our approach. It opens up meaningful conversations and helps uncover underlying thoughts and feelings.
- 3. Using the books as a stepping stone to other activities,** sparking further curiosity and engagement. A particular success has been the story sacks created by our teachers. These include props and activities alongside the books

themselves, which together are designed to encourage dialogue, interaction, and reflection. They also create a link with home – as parents are encouraged to explore the stories with their children, use the props, and continue the dialogue at home. It also gives families a structured yet playful way to engage in conversations about feelings that might otherwise be difficult to know where and how to start.

Building story sharing into creative activities using art and craft materials has been particularly popular with the children. Seeing things visually and being able to touch them really helps the children engage in a concrete way, connecting abstract emotions to objects they can hold and explore.

- 4. Staff have also been encouraged to self-reflect and embed co-regulation strategies across their practice** in-line with the Birth to Five Matters guidance (DfE, 2024).

“ In our nursery, we've tried out different ways to create the right learning environment for our children to explore and develop emotional regulation and other executive function capabilities. We know these are really important especially for our pre-schoolers. ”

**Emma Miller, Nursery Manager
from LEYF Bushy Tails**

By embedding these activities into our nursery routines, we have seen children learning to identify and express feelings, helping them manage emotions more effectively.

We've also seen the benefits it's had on other related executive function capabilities. This includes **metacognition**, where children have begun to understand and articulate what they are experiencing having reflected on their feelings, and **inhibitory control** – demonstrated via children's abilities to share, wait for and take turns improving the more they engage with different stories and props.

“ It's been wonderful to see improvements in children's emotional regulation and how they've built their confidence through story sharing activities. We hear children referencing the stories and characters when they discuss their own feelings and see the real difference it's made to children who were less socially confident – they are now much more willing to engage in group activities. We see our role as helping to prepare children for their 'next step' and it's been rewarding to see them become more ready to navigate new social and academic environments especially for those embarking on their school journey.”

**Emma Miller, Nursery Manager,
LEYF Bushy Tails**

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9. Book recommendations

We've picked some of our favourite books that support executive function and self-regulation:

	Recommended books – baby and toddler		Recommended books – pre-schooler	
● Inhibitory control		<u>Dear Zoo</u> This classic board book implies patience is required to find the perfect pet.		<u>Lenny Has Lunch</u> Lenny waits for Daddy to prepare the meal.
		<u>Babies Laugh at Peekaboo</u> Find a baby's face under every flap, leading babies to anticipate this.		<u>We're Going on a Bear Hunt</u> A classic story that uses repetition, and a sequence that goes forwards, then backwards.
● Working memory		<u>Bun on the Run</u> This funny story has a building sequence of characters to recall.		<u>The Crocodile Who Didn't Like Water</u> There's a twist in the tale of the crocodile who's too scared to swim.
		<u>Where's Mr Lion</u> Who is under each flap? It's someone different every time!		<u>Rosie's Walk</u> The words tell one story and the pictures tell another!
● Cognitive flexibility		<u>All Aboard: Train</u> Follow the train on its journey round the town.		<u>The Bumblebear</u> Is Norman the bear's plan to dress up as a bee a good idea?
		<u>The Little Things</u> A panda and cub explore themes of love and kindness.		<u>Pip and Posy: The Super Scooter</u> Friends squabble over a scooter.
● Emotional regulation		<u>Just Breathe Bear</u> Bear uses a calming technique when he's overwhelmed by his feelings.		<u>Where Are the Yellow Chicks, Spot?</u> With colours to notice, as well as animals to spot, there is much to follow and to enjoy in this charming board book.
		<u>The Gruffalo</u> This modern classic prompts anticipation, the tracking of events, observation of restraint and a plan – and contains two twists!		

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About BookTrust

As the UK's largest children's reading charity, we want every child to read regularly and by choice. We work with early years settings and professionals in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to deliver our Bookstart Baby, Bookstart Toddler and Bookstart Pre-schooler programmes. These programmes help professionals to get families sharing books and stories together so they can experience the transformative benefits of reading.

Visit our [website](#) to find tips, story activities and book recommendations to help children and families get started on their reading journey. Our support, designed to deliver reading behaviour change, is based on evidence including research with parents, carers and practitioners.

About LEYF

London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) is an award-winning charitable social enterprise that runs over 40+ nurseries across 13 London boroughs.

Over 75% of LEYF's nurseries are intentionally sited in areas of deprivation where children do not typically have access to high-quality education and care.

This is because high-quality Early Years Education and Care has the power to transform children's lives, supporting them to achieve their full potential.

The biggest driver of high-quality provision is an expert team. LEYF prioritises staff training underpinned by a strong social pedagogy, our teaching and learning model, that ensures all children are given a fair start, regardless of their background.



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