



**Starting school:
a critical moment
to support reading
enjoyment**



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Summary

Supporting reading enjoyment at school transition

What changes around school entry



Changing reading practices

From playful sharing to more structured, skill-focused reading



Different kinds of reading at home

Balancing school books, child choice, shared stories and read-alouds



Support is an important equaliser

Parents and carers have different starting points and are open to guidance



Pressure on family routines

More tiredness, less flexible time and more competing demands

Reading enjoyment drops around school entry
(age 4 to 5)

What schools and early years settings can do



Reassure

Keep messages low-pressure and encouraging



Model

Show what enjoyable shared reading can look like



Make space

Protect time for reading aloud, child choice and book talk



Connect

Use books, stories, songs and rhymes across home and school



Include

Make support accessible, varied and responsive

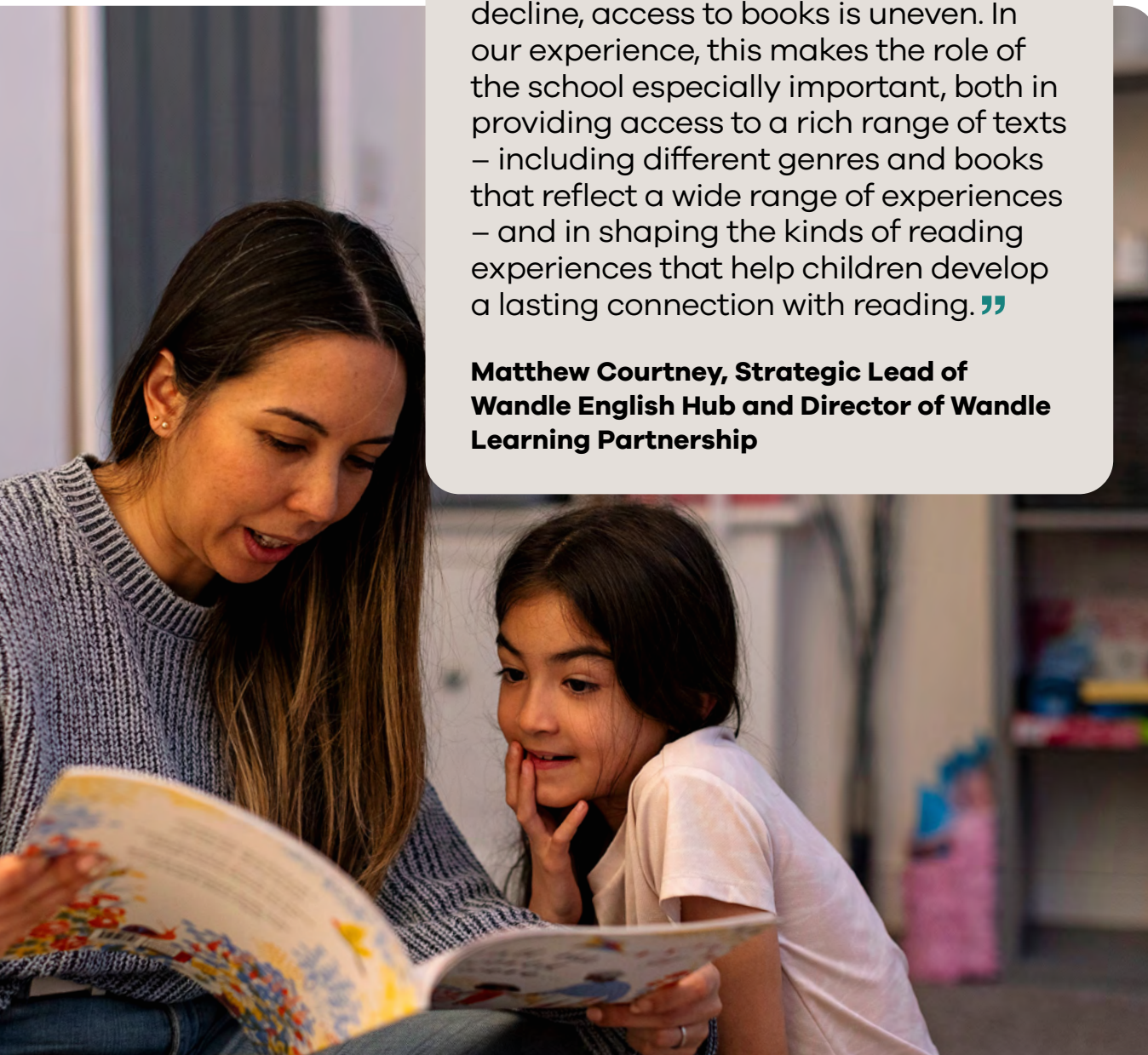
Why starting school is a critical moment

Starting school is a key milestone of childhood. Yet children – and their families – do not arrive here from the same starting point. In fact, it is here that differences in children’s developmental foundations, such as attention, self-regulation, communication and language, become more visible.¹ These differences often reflect uneven early experiences, shaped by financial pressure, less predictable daily routines² and unequal access to support.³ Inequalities in these underlying conditions do not disappear when children start school – they continue to shape the time, resources and support available to parents and carers during this transition.

Gaps in children’s outcomes, born from these uneven foundations, can persist and even widen as children grow older.⁴ Reading, with its wide-ranging benefits, can play an important role in reducing these gaps.⁵ However, while most children are reported to enjoy reading in the early years⁶, both reading frequency and enjoyment tend to decline as children get older.⁷ Starting school marks a critical inflection point for this decline.

Our landmark report [Trends, drivers and inequalities in UK childhood reading](#) shows how differences in family time, confidence, routines and wider support affect how easy it is to sustain positive reading experiences at home. The transition into school reshapes family rhythms and priorities, and the support around them. It also introduces the serious business of learning to read. Support at this point is therefore not simply a question of whether educators should prioritise reading skills or reading for pleasure. Framing it in this way risks obscuring the underlying issue – inequality. Instead, the question is how to support *all* families to sustain a rich mix of reading practices as children grow and their needs change.





“ At the very point when children’s reading enjoyment begins to decline, access to books is uneven. In our experience, this makes the role of the school especially important, both in providing access to a rich range of texts – including different genres and books that reflect a wide range of experiences – and in shaping the kinds of reading experiences that help children develop a lasting connection with reading.”

Matthew Courtney, Strategic Lead of Wandle English Hub and Director of Wandle Learning Partnership

About this guide

This guide draws on evidence and practice to show why the transition into primary school is a critical moment to support reading for enjoyment at home. It outlines how early years settings and schools can help families continue reading together as children become more independent readers, building on the enjoyment of books and stories that many already share.

Policy context

The UK Government’s [Best Start in Life](#) agenda and guidance on [Supporting a smooth transition into Reception](#) both emphasise the importance of helping children feel safe, confident and ready to learn. Practice in schools that builds children’s enjoyment of reading plays a key part in providing the foundation children need to fulfil their potential. The home learning environment also remains central. Shared reading, storytelling, book talk and reading aloud are a key part of the support to children’s language, literacy, executive function⁸, wellbeing and relationships, helping them feel ready to engage in school life.

What does the research tell us?



Reading enjoyment drops around school entry

Children's reading enjoyment remains high in the early years but shows a noticeable drop between ages 4 and 5. The drop is more pronounced when looking at children who are reported to 'love' reading.



81% of children aged 5 are reported to like or love reading, compared with **89% of children aged 4**.

44% of children aged 5 are reported to love reading, compared with **55% of children aged 4**.



In our survey, 'reading' is defined in age-appropriate ways that reflect how young children typically engage with books including sharing, looking at or reading books.

For many children, and their parents and carers, age 4–5 is the point at which a new set of school routines and expectations begin to form. This suggests that school transition is an important moment to support children's changing relationship with reading and embed it within these new routines and expectations.

Understanding what's happening at this stage is important for finding the right solutions. Our research suggests it's not simply about children losing interest in books.

As children start school:



Reading experiences change



Different kinds of reading require balance



Family routines come under pressure



Support is an important equaliser



Reading experiences change as children start school

Our research with families shows that reading behaviours, and the role of books and sharing stories, evolve as children grow.⁹ As children start primary school, reading often begins to change in both meaning and practice. It can become more closely linked with school expectations, phonics, reading records and progress. During the transition into school, there is a shift in the kinds of shared reading practices parents and carers report using. Playful, expressive practices become less common, while instructional and dialogic practices become more common.

Instructional and dialogic practices are valuable, supporting children's language, comprehension and early literacy.¹⁰ But these approaches can make reading feel more focused and effortful, especially when families are also navigating new school routines. This makes it important to protect relaxed, playful and child-led reading as well.



Playful and expressive practices become less common



14% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report they act out stories using puppets, toys or objects, compared with **23% of parents and carers of 0–3-year-olds**.

62% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report they use different voices, tones, expressions or actions, compared with **73% of parents and carers of 0–3-year-olds**.



Instructional and dialogic practices become more common



43% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report they encourage recall of the story from memory or in the child's own words, compared with **33% of parents and carers of 2–3-year-olds**.

54% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report they ask their child questions about the story, compared with **38% of parents and carers of 2–3-year-olds**.

53% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report they explain or teach sounds, letters or words from the book, compared with **45% of parents and carers of 2–3-year-olds**.



Different kinds of reading require balance

As children start school, many families begin receiving reading books, phonics books, and digital resources and guidance on how to support early reading. Different kinds of reading play distinct, complementary roles. Phonics books help children practise and apply developing skills. Child-chosen books, shared reading and reading aloud help sustain enjoyment, motivation, conversation and emotional connection with books.

For some, it's hard to achieve this balance at home: 16% of parents and carers of children aged 5 agree that it is difficult to find time to share books and stories their child chooses because they prioritise school assigned reading. For others, access to the range of books that help both phonics and child-led choice may not be balanced.

85% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report their child brings home phonics or reading scheme books from school.

76% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds report their child brings home free-choice books to read for fun from school.

“ We find now that we're not reading as many books... outside of the books coming home from school. So we do need to get back into the habit of that. We just kind of changed priority just because we know that she has to read that one, you know. ”

Parent of 5-year-old, Northern Ireland





Family routines come under pressure

Starting school can change the rhythm of family life. Children may be more tired, evenings can feel less flexible, and reading has to compete with new routines, homework, clubs, screen time and school-assigned reading.

Children are more tired

64% of parents and carers of children starting school said their child was more tired in the evening.¹¹

Family time feels squeezed

54% of parents and carers of children starting school agreed they had less time to spend having fun with their child.¹¹

Screen time becomes a bigger concern

34% of parents and carers of 4-year-olds say they worry their child spends too much time on screens, rising to **41% among parents and carers of 5-year-olds**.

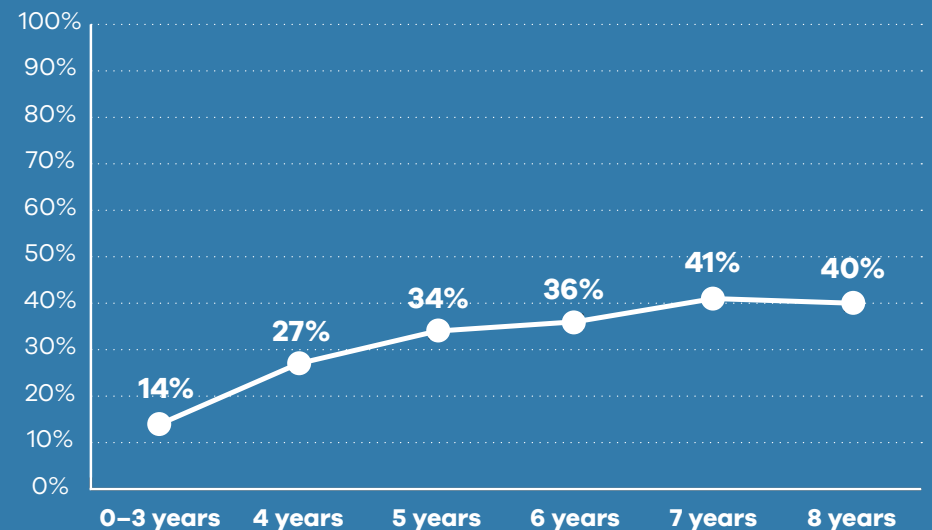
Daily shared reading becomes harder to sustain

Daily shared reading falls from **55% at age 4 to 47% at age 5**.

Competing demands increase with age

As children get older, parents and carers increasingly report that competing demands make it harder to read or share books and stories as often as they'd like. These competing demands include clubs, homework, screen time and school-assigned reading.

% of parents and carers reporting competing demands as a barrier to reading or sharing stories as often as they'd like





Support is an important equaliser

The majority of parents and carers place a high value on reading and understand they play a vital role.

92% of parents and carers of children aged 5 believe they play a vital role in developing their child's reading ability.

79% of parents and carers of children aged 5 want their child to spend more time with books.

Differences in time, confidence, familiarity and access to books and support shape how easy it is to sustain children's reading enjoyment at home. Children in low-income households are less likely to experience daily shared reading, and this gap persists over time. At age 5, 42% of children in low-income households are read with daily, compared with 50% of children in non-low-income households.

Starting school is a moment when parents and carers may be feeling particularly uncertain and many are open to support.

“ Starting school is a powerful moment. Families are often motivated and open, but not all have the same time, confidence or access to support. If we get the right support in place – accessible, practical and reassuring – we can turn that moment into a real opportunity to narrow gaps and build a strong foundation for children's lifelong love of reading. ”

Lizzie Catford, Director of Children's Books



64% of parents and carers of 5-year-olds say they would like more information and support to help their child spend more time with books and stories, compared with **57% of parents and carers of 4-year-olds**.

37% of parents and carers of 5-year-olds say they feel unclear about how to support their child to enjoy reading, compared with **29% of parents and carers of 4-year-olds**.



Parents and carers increasingly look to teachers as a source of reading support at this stage. 51% of parents and carers of 5-year-olds say they have received support, found ideas or learned tips about reading and sharing stories from teachers and schools. However, not all families are receiving the support they need. Around a fifth of parents and carers say they have not had information or support to help their child enjoy reading: 22% of parents and carers of 4-year-olds and 20% of parents and carers of 5-year-olds.

Support at this stage needs to recognise a wide range of families' confidence, knowledge and access to resources, and provide clear, accessible and reassuring guidance that builds on their existing practices and strengths.

Transitions into school are not experienced equally. For some children, particularly those in adoptive, foster or kinship care, this period can bring added uncertainty and raise questions about identity, family background or differences between home and school life.¹² In this context, schools play a vital role alongside a wider network of professionals, working with carers to support children's emotional wellbeing, sense of belonging and confidence as they settle. Shared reading can help by providing a consistent, low-pressure anchor that supports continuity and connection across home, school and care settings.

How can we nurture reading enjoyment as children start school and beyond?

We've identified three key ways teachers and early years professionals can support children's reading across early years settings, school and the home learning environment:

Embedding reading and sharing stories within the school preparation journey



Supporting parents and carers at a moment of openness and uncertainty

Keeping the balance between reading for enjoyment alongside learning to read





Embedding reading and sharing stories within the school preparation journey

53% of parents and carers of 4–5-year-olds say reading and sharing stories has helped prepare their child for starting school. This suggests it already plays a role but greater awareness is needed – both for supporting skills but also as a routine that can provide stability and connection during a time of change.

Practical ideas

- **Use within transition moments:** Including books, stories, rhymes, songs or oral storytelling in stay-and-play sessions, home visits, settling-in days, welcome packs and the first weeks of Reception can help children get to know people, spaces and routines in a low-pressure way.
- **Reassure families:** Offering clear, low-pressure messages can reassure that children don't need to start school already reading, and that enjoying books, stories, songs and rhymes together is a great way of helping children feel familiar with what they will experience in school.
- **Use books to explore change:** Sharing and recommending stories about starting school, friendship, separation, routines and feelings can support conversations at home about the experiences that accompany transition.
- **Create continuity between home and school:** Using book bags, lending libraries and shared recommendations can create familiarity and continuity. A book a child has enjoyed at school can become a bridge into shared reading at home.

Useful BookTrust resources

Our top 5 starting school books:



- 🔗 [More books to read to a new class](#)
- 🔗 [Resources for teachers, including lesson plans, to support children starting school through reading and sharing stories](#)
- 🔗 [Information for parents and carers on how books and stories can help get your child ready for school and top tips for reading together](#)
- 🔗 [Video from author Tom Percival about how books and stories can help open up conversations about how children are feeling](#)





Supporting parents and carers at a moment of openness and uncertainty

The transition into school is a time when many parents and carers are open to guidance, creating a valuable opportunity for schools and early years settings to build positive relationships, align approaches between home and school, and support families' confidence in sharing books and stories so children continue to see reading as enjoyable and valued.

Practical ideas

- **Provide reassuring guidance:** Consistent messages emphasising that enjoyable, informal reading at home is valuable and doesn't need to be perfect can help parents and carers keep this in mind at a time when they have lots of information to take in.
- **Offer small, flexible suggestions:** Encouraging manageable actions and providing suggestions helps build on existing routines and strengths, rather than appearing like fixed 'homework'. For example, suggest spending five minutes with a familiar book, talking about the cover, asking what they notice in a picture, joining in with repeated words, or telling a story in the family's home language.
- **Show what shared reading can look like:** Using demonstrations, for example in informal book-sharing sessions or short videos in newsletters, can help translate advice into concrete behaviours. This may be especially helpful for parents and carers with less prior experience.
- **Make support accessible and inclusive:** Reducing practical and psychological barriers can help more families feel that reading is achievable. For example, visual prompts or translated materials can support a range of literacy experiences and preferences.

Useful BookTrust resources



- 🔗 ['Shared Reading Together': teacher resources for Reception parent workshops \(designed by BookTrust and Wandle English Hub\)](#)
- 🔗 [CPD resources for teaching assistants in developing best practice for reading in EYFS and Key Stage 1](#)
- 🔗 [Practical tips for parents and carers to help motivate children to read at home](#)
- 🔗 [Easy ways to make sharing stories fun when reading at home](#)
- 🔗 [Find your child's next favourite read using our Bookfinder search tool](#)



Keeping the balance between reading for enjoyment alongside learning to read

A balanced approach that combines phonics with reading for enjoyment supports both skill development and deeper engagement. While phonics builds decoding and fluency, reading for enjoyment fosters motivation, confidence and connection to books, and gives children access to richer language and stories beyond their reading level.¹³

Practical ideas

- **Protect space for enjoyment:** Creating regular opportunities for pressure-free reading with no links to performance helps children keep the connection between reading and enjoyment. For example, try daily story times, quiet browsing time, picture book exploration or adult read-alouds.
- **Read aloud regularly:** Using expressive, engaging read-alouds gives children access to stories, vocabulary and ideas beyond their independent reading level, supporting listening, imagination, comprehension, attention and positive reading attitudes. For example, choose books that give opportunities for expression, pause, repetition, props or actions that bring reading to life.
- **Offer choice and connection:** Providing supported choice and a diverse range of books that reflect children's interests, experiences and languages helps with children's motivation through providing agency and relevance. For example, let children choose between two or three books, vote for a class story, or pick from a small basket linked to their interests or lives.
- **Make reading social and visible:** Social reading can reinforce reading as a valued classroom practice and help children develop reader identities. For example, book talk, peer recommendations, shared responses and opportunities for children to say what they liked, disliked, noticed or wondered. Adult enthusiasm can help normalise reading as enjoyable and meaningful.

Useful BookTrust resources



BookTrust's book recommendations:

- 🔗 [Great Books Guide: books for 4-5-year-olds](#)
- 🔗 [Best books to read aloud to ages 4 and 5](#)
- 🔗 [Suggested books for reading in the autumn term in Reception](#)
- 🔗 [What to read after your favourites](#)

Explore further tips from BookTrust here:

- 🔗 [Top tips on how to encourage and support more book choice](#)
- 🔗 [Teacher toolkit on being a teaching role model](#)
- 🔗 [How to read aloud](#)

Appendix

Research methodology

This guide draws on a range of research, including:

- BookTrust’s National Family Survey, a representative online survey of 3,508 parents/carers of children aged 0–8 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, conducted between 16 October and 5 November 2025.
- Mixed methods research with parents and carers, teachers and pre-school practitioners conducted in 2024–2025.
- Wider evidence and historical BookTrust research.

Unless otherwise stated, statistics are from our National Family Survey. BookTrust’s National Family Survey 2025 was conducted using a weighted, nationally representative sample of 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, covering all income groups. Fieldwork took place in Autumn 2025.

Quotas were set on child age (within gender) and on parent or carer gender, region, working status and household income. Weighting was applied to these variables, with additional weighting for child ethnicity and parental education, to reflect the offline population. This report draws on the third wave of the BookTrust Family Survey.

In this survey, ‘reading’ is defined in age-appropriate ways that reflect how young children typically engage with books:

- **Ages 0–2:** sharing, looking at or playing with books (including story books)
- **Ages 3–5:** sharing, looking at or reading books
- **Ages 6–8:** reading or sharing a book

Shared reading refers to children reading with a parent, carer or another adult, as reported by parents/carers. For children aged 4–8, this excludes reading during school lessons.

Some questions were asked only of parents and carers of children in specific age groups, based on developmental relevance. As a result, age comparisons vary depending on which groups were asked each question.

As with any large-scale survey-based research, the findings presented here should be interpreted in light of several limitations. As with all parent-reported measures, some over-reporting is possible for high-profile behaviours such as reading. To help address this, we interpret reported enjoyment alongside behavioural and constraint-related indicators (such as routines, time pressure, access and barriers), which show coherent patterns across the dataset. While the survey sample is weighted to be nationally representative, it was conducted online and may underrepresent families experiencing digital exclusion or lower literacy. Findings should therefore be understood as broadly representative of the target population, within the limits of online survey participation.

Bases for age groups and income groups

Bases are weighted and may not sum exactly due to rounding.

Age band	Low income (weighted base)	Non-low income (weighted base)	Total (weighted base)
12 months or less	145	206	351
13–23 months	165	221	386
2 years	184	201	385
3 years	145	241	386
4 years	155	247	402
5 years	158	247	405
6 years	164	208	372
7 years	182	218	400
8 years	164	257	421
Total	1462	2046	3508

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About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. We work with over 34,000 partners, operating in every local authority, and each year we reach over 1.4 million children and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together with our partners we deliver evidence-informed programmes that make a measurable difference to children's reading behaviours. Our work is rooted in the belief that every child, especially those from low-income or vulnerable family backgrounds, deserves the chance to enjoy reading and all the lifelong benefits it brings.

Visit booktrust.org.uk to find out more or contact [**queries@booktrust.org.uk**](mailto:queries@booktrust.org.uk).

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