

The destructive behavior of the child's emotional organization

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Abstract:

This study explores the role of emotional organization in shaping destructive behavior in children, focusing on how poor emotional regulation may contribute to such behaviors. It addresses how emotional disorganization influences the emergence of destructive actions in childhood. Drawing on developmental and clinical psychology, the paper looks at how difficulties in emotional awareness, regulation, and expression may lead to behaviors such as aggression, defiance, or property damage. The findings suggest that these behaviors are not always intentional misconduct, but often reflect underlying emotional imbalance. The study also highlights the importance of early emotional support and intervention, as improving emotional organization may help reduce such behaviors. Overall, it provides a clearer understanding of the link between children's emotional functioning and their behavioral outcomes.

Keywords: The destructive behavior – emotional organization - child

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1. INTRODUCTION

Destructive behavior in children is broadly defined as any repeated pattern of behavior that is harmful either to the child themselves, to others, or to the environment. It encompasses a range of actions such as physical aggression, intentional property destruction, defiance of authority, and disruptive behaviors that go beyond developmentally appropriate mischief. While some degree of defiance or frustration is natural in childhood, persistent destructive behavior reflects deeper emotional, cognitive, or environmental issues that must be understood in context (Kazdin, 2000). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), such behaviors may also fall under specific disorders such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Conduct Disorder (CD), depending on the severity and consistency of the behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The early identification and understanding of destructive behavior in children are essential for several reasons. Firstly, such behavior can significantly hinder a child's academic performance and social development, leading to exclusion, peer rejection, and isolation. Secondly, if left unaddressed, destructive behaviors can escalate into more serious conduct problems in adolescence, such as delinquency, substance abuse, or even criminal behavior in adulthood (Loeber et al., 1998). Moreover, destructive behavior often signals underlying issues such as trauma, family conflict, or mental health disorders. Effective early intervention can reduce the long-term impact and



improve the child's psychological trajectory (Campbell, 1995). Thus, studying this phenomenon helps in designing appropriate preventive and therapeutic programs.

Understanding the relationship between destructive behavior and emotional organization in children is essential for developing effective intervention strategies. Destructive behavior is not merely a behavioral issue but often a symptom of deeper emotional disorganization. Children who lack emotional regulation skills are more likely to exhibit aggressive, impulsive, or harmful behaviors as a way of expressing inner turmoil. Recognizing this connection allows educators, psychologists, and caregivers to shift from punitive responses to supportive, therapeutic approaches that target the root of the problem. A deeper understanding also informs the development of preventive measures to reduce future.

The objective of this article is to explore the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between destructive behavior and emotional organization in children. This exploration includes a comprehensive examination of definitions, types, and triggers of both phenomena, followed by an analytical discussion on how emotional dysregulation contributes to the emergence of destructive behavior. By drawing on recent psychological and developmental research, the article aims to offer theoretical insights and practical implications for preventing and addressing destructive tendencies in children through emotional support and therapeutic strategies.



Destructive behavior among children—manifesting in forms such as aggression, defiance, or property damage—has become a growing concern for parents, educators, and mental health professionals. While various factors contribute to such behavior, emerging research suggests that emotional organization plays a critical role in its development. Many children who exhibit destructive tendencies struggle with identifying, managing, or expressing their emotions appropriately. However, the exact nature of the relationship between emotional disorganization and destructive behavior remains insufficiently explored. This raises a fundamental question: To what extent does emotional disorganization contribute to destructive behavior in children, and how can improving emotional organization help mitigate such behavior? Understanding this relationship is essential for developing more effective intervention strategies that promote emotional competence and reduce behavioral problems in childhood.

3.The study's objectives

The main objective of this study is to better understand how poor emotional organization contributes to destructive behavior in children. More specifically, it focuses on identifying the key components of emotional organization and examining how emotional difficulties are related to behavioral problems. It also looks at how deficits in emotional regulation may lead to destructive actions. In addition, the study aims to provide a clearer theoretical basis that

may help guide future interventions for children with behavioral difficulties.

4.The operational definitions of the study variables

Destructive behavior: *In this study, destructive behavior is understood as repeated actions that can cause harm to the child, others, or the surrounding environment, including behaviors such as aggression, defiance, or intentional damage to objects.*

Emotional organization: *Emotional organization refers to the child's ability to recognize, manage, and express emotions in ways that are appropriate to different situations.*

Poor emotional organization: *This term describes difficulties in dealing with emotions, such as problems in understanding feelings, controlling emotional reactions, or expressing them appropriately, which may result in maladaptive behaviors.*

5. Destructive Behavior in Children

5.1 Definition of Destructive Behavior in Children

Destructive behavior in children is generally characterized by actions that cause harm to the self, others, or objects. It may include both overt forms such as hitting, biting, or throwing objects, and covert forms such as lying, stealing, or damaging property secretly. These behaviors often go beyond the bounds of normal developmental misbehavior and may signal serious emotional or psychological difficulties (Hinshaw, 2003). The key distinction lies in the intensity, frequency, and context of the behavior. For example, a child who



occasionally becomes frustrated and breaks a toy is different from a child who repeatedly destroys classroom materials or hurts other children intentionally. Such behaviors may reflect underlying distress, lack of emotional regulation, or exposure to adverse environments (Patterson et al., 1992).

Destructive behavior in children has been defined in various ways depending on the disciplinary perspective (psychological, educational, psychiatric), but all definitions converge on the idea that such behaviors are harmful, persistent, and socially or developmentally inappropriate.

***Clinical Definition (APA, 2013)**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) classifies destructive behaviors under several disorders, including Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). These are characterized by patterns of behavior that violate societal norms or the basic rights of others. Behaviors include aggression to people and animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness, or serious rule violations. These behaviors are not isolated incidents but occur over a sustained period and significantly impair functioning.

***Developmental Psychology Definition (Kazdin, 2000)**

Kazdin defines destructive behavior as persistent behavior patterns that include noncompliance, aggression, and antisocial behavior,



which deviate from age-appropriate expectations and often signal deeper emotional or contextual problems. He notes that these behaviors are often influenced by reinforcement patterns within the child's family and school environments.

***Educational Perspective (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995)**

From an educational standpoint, destructive behavior refers to actions that disrupt the teaching-learning environment, including aggression, defiance, tantrums, or property damage. These behaviors often lead to disciplinary consequences and poor academic outcomes. Educators view such behavior as a signal of unmet needs or difficulties in emotional regulation and social adjustment.

***Behavioral View (Patterson et al., 1992)**

According to Patterson's Social Interaction Learning Theory, destructive behavior results from coercive family processes, where children learn aggressive or defiant responses through repeated negative reinforcement cycles with caregivers. In this view, behavior is shaped by interactional patterns rather than innate disposition.

***Humanistic View (Maslow & Rogers inspired)**

Some theorists approach destructive behavior as a response to unmet emotional and psychological needs, such as love, safety, and belonging. When these fundamental needs are not satisfied, the child may express distress through rebellion or destructiveness as a way of regaining control or attention.

 In summary, destructive behavior in children encompasses a broad

spectrum of actions that are harmful, persistent, and disruptive to personal, social, or academic functioning. While definitions vary by field, the common elements include:

- Persistence and intensity
- Violation of norms or rules
- Interference with development or learning
- Reflection of deeper psychological or environmental issues

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5.2 Types of Destructive Behavior

Destructive behavior in children can be broadly categorized into several subtypes:

- **Aggressive behavior:** This includes physical or verbal acts of aggression such as fighting, hitting, yelling, and bullying. These behaviors are usually directed toward others and often signal frustration or unmet emotional needs

a. Physical Aggression

This includes hitting, biting, kicking, or pushing others. These behaviors are usually direct and observable, often emerging from frustration, inability to express feelings, or imitation of violent models. For example, a child who feels ignored by parents may resort to hitting peers to gain attention. (Tremblay, 2000).

b. Verbal Aggression and Bullying



Some children use words as weapons—name-calling, threats, or spreading rumors. Verbal aggression is particularly damaging because it is often overlooked, yet it deeply affects peer relationships and emotional security (Olweus, 1993).

- **Destructive acts toward property:**

Children may engage in acts such as vandalism, breaking toys or furniture, or intentionally damaging school materials. This often reflects an externalization of inner emotional turmoil or a response to environmental stress ; Children may break toys, tear books, scribble on walls, or damage school furniture. Such actions are usually manifestations of internalized anger, helplessness, or a desire to provoke adult responses (Frick & Morris, 2004).

- **Neglectful or self-destructive behavior:**

Some children may show signs of apathy, self-harm, or refusal to take care of personal hygiene or responsibilities. Though less overt, these behaviors may indicate internalized distress or depression

These include procrastination, refusal to follow rules, deliberate underperformance, or indifference to personal hygiene. Though less visible, they can be just as harmful in disrupting classroom dynamics or family cohesion (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2000).

5.3 Causes of Destructive Behavior in Children

The causes of destructive behavior are multifactorial and often interrelated:



a. Family Environment

A chaotic, abusive, neglectful, or overly authoritarian family setting is one of the strongest predictors of destructive behavior. Children raised in such environments may model aggressive or oppositional behavior learned from their caregivers (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Lack of parental warmth, inconsistent discipline, or exposure to domestic violence can all contribute to emotional dysregulation and behavioral problems.

Children growing up in homes characterized by conflict, neglect, abuse, or inconsistent parenting are at significantly higher risk of developing behavioral problems. Exposure to violence or verbal aggression teaches children that such behaviors are acceptable ways to express anger or solve problems (Cummings & Davies, 2002). For example, witnessing parental arguments may lead a child to replicate such conflict with peers or siblings.

b. Psychological Pressure

When children experience continuous psychological stress without healthy coping strategies, they may externalize their frustration in destructive ways. For example, excessive academic expectations or peer pressure can create emotional overload, leading to tantrums, defiance, or even physical aggression (Evans et al., 2005).

c. Psychological or Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD),

Conduct Disorder (CD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and mood disorders often co-occur with destructive behaviors. Impulsivity, poor emotional regulation, and difficulty interpreting social cues may exacerbate aggressive or harmful actions (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007).

d. Peer Influences and Media Exposure

Children who associate with aggressive peers are more likely to model similar behavior. Likewise, prolonged exposure to violent content in media or games can desensitize children to aggression and normalize destructive acts (Anderson et al., 2003).

6. Emotional Organization in Children

6.1. Definition of Emotional Organization in Children

Emotional organization in children refers to the structured and dynamic process through which children identify, interpret, modulate, and express emotions in ways that are adaptive and socially appropriate. It is not a singular ability but a composite of various emotional and cognitive functions that evolve through developmental stages. This organization enables children to respond to emotional stimuli with flexibility and intentionality rather than impulsivity or withdrawal. Proper emotional organization allows children to maintain emotional balance, interact harmoniously with others, and develop a coherent sense of self.

Researchers such as Saarni (1999) emphasize that emotional organization forms the foundation for emotional competence, which



includes awareness of emotional states, understanding emotional expressions in others, and effective management of emotional arousal. (Saarni, C. 1999).

6.2. Components of Emotional Organization

Emotional organization consists of multiple interrelated components, each of which contributes to a child's ability to function emotionally and socially in a stable manner:

- **Emotional Awareness**

This is the capacity to identify and label internal emotional experiences accurately. Children with strong emotional awareness are more likely to articulate their feelings, which is essential for seeking help, setting boundaries, and engaging in self-reflection. Emotional awareness develops progressively through interaction with caregivers and emotional education. (Denham, S. A. 1998)

- **Emotional Regulation**

This component refers to the ability to modulate emotional responses, especially in situations involving frustration, disappointment, or excitement. Emotional regulation involves both physiological and cognitive mechanisms, such as attention control and reappraisal strategies. It is essential for preventing behavioral outbursts and fostering prosocial behavior.

Children who can regulate their emotions are more resilient and less prone to developing behavioral problems such as aggression or

anxiety (Eisenberg et al., 2001).

• Emotional Expression

Emotional expression includes the verbal and non-verbal conveyance of feelings. It serves as a communication tool in social interactions and is essential for building trust and empathy. A well-organized emotional system allows children to express emotions appropriately according to context, which reduces misunderstandings and enhances social integration.

Inappropriate emotional expression (such as excessive anger or emotional suppression) may signal developmental issues in emotional organization. (Halberstadt, A. G., Denham, S. A., & Dunsmore, J. C., 2001)

6.3. Importance of Emotional Organization in Children's Emotional and Behavioral Development

The emotional organization system plays a crucial role in children's psychological and behavioral adjustment. Well-organized emotional processes help children cope with adversity, adapt to changing environments, and build secure attachments. Emotional organization enables children to inhibit impulsive reactions, negotiate conflicts constructively, and recover from distress—skills that are essential for academic success and peer relationships.

Deficiencies in emotional organization are frequently associated with developmental psychopathologies, including oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and mood disorders. Research shows that



children with poor emotional regulation and awareness are more likely to engage in disruptive, destructive, or avoidant behaviors, especially under stress (Thompson & Goodman, 2010).

Early intervention programs targeting emotional skills—such as emotion coaching by parents or social-emotional learning curricula in schools—have shown significant efficacy in improving children's emotional organization and reducing problem behaviors.

7. The Relationship between Destructive Behavior and Emotional Organization in Children

7.1. Examination of the Relationship between Destructive Behavior and Emotional Organization in Children

The relationship between a child's emotional organization and their behavioral outcomes is fundamental. Emotional organization refers to the internal ability to identify, manage, and express emotions in socially acceptable ways. When this process is disrupted, children may become unable to modulate their emotional responses, resulting in behaviors that are impulsive, aggressive, or destructive.

Developmental psychology has established that destructive behaviors in children often originate from difficulties in managing emotional responses, especially in high-stress environments. Emotional organization acts as a buffer that allows children to assess emotionally charged situations without resorting to inappropriate behavioral responses. Therefore, emotional disorganization weakens this buffer,

increasing the risk of externalizing behavior patterns such as tantrums, object breaking, or social defiance. (Eisenberg, N., Spinrad, T. L., & Eggum, N. D., 2010)

7.2. How Emotional Dysregulation Can Lead to Destructive Behavior in Children

Emotional dysregulation refers to the inability to manage the intensity, duration, and expression of emotional experiences. In children, this often manifests as uncontrolled anger, anxiety-driven defiance, or physical aggression. These children may react to minor frustrations with explosive outbursts because they have not developed internal strategies for managing distress.

Research in neuropsychology has shown that the prefrontal cortex—responsible for impulse control and regulation—is still developing during childhood. When this development is compromised (due to trauma, attachment issues, or environmental stressors), emotional dysregulation becomes more pronounced, directly fueling destructive behavior. Children with poor emotional control may misinterpret neutral events as threatening and respond with aggression, not out of intent to harm, but as a maladaptive coping strategy.

Moreover, emotional dysregulation is strongly associated with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD), both of which involve patterns of hostile, disruptive behavior. (Thompson, R. A. 1994)

7.3. Examples of How Emotional Organization Can Influence



Destructive Behavior in Children

Let us consider concrete examples that illustrate this dynamic:

- Case A – Emotional Competence and Reduced Aggression: A child who is taught to recognize the emotion of frustration and use words to express it ("I'm angry because I lost the game") is less likely to throw the board game or punch another child. This emotional competence is the result of healthy emotional organization reinforced by caregivers.
- Case B – Emotional Confusion Leading to Destructive Behavior: A child exposed to inconsistent or neglectful parenting may not understand what they are feeling. A buildup of unrecognized emotions like jealousy, fear, or shame may erupt into destructive behavior like breaking school materials or bullying others.
- Case C – Role of Emotional Coaching: Parents and teachers who practice emotional coaching—helping children label feelings and problem-solve—contribute to better emotional organization, which in turn reduces impulsive behaviors. These children show higher resilience and less destructive behavior even when facing academic or social stressors.

Through such real-world examples, it becomes evident that emotional organization is not just a personal trait but a skill that can be shaped by environment, guidance, and consistent modeling of emotional

expression. (Denham, S. A., Blair, K. A., DeMulder, E., et al. 2003)

The interdependence between emotional organization and destructive behavior in children points to a developmental trajectory where emotional literacy, self-regulation, and environmental support determine behavioral outcomes. Emotional organization does not eliminate negative feelings like anger or frustration—it offers tools to manage them. Without these tools, the child is left with raw emotions and limited means to act, leading to destructive expressions. Conversely, strengthening emotional organization functions as a preventive measure against behavior disorders. (Gross, J. J. (2002)

8. The Impact of Early Trauma on Emotional Organization and Destructive Behavior in Children

8.1. Definition and Types of Early Childhood Trauma

Early trauma refers to adverse experiences occurring in a child's early years that overwhelm their capacity to cope. These may include physical or emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, the loss of a caregiver, or persistent poverty. Such events can deeply affect the developing brain and nervous system, especially in the domains that regulate emotions and behavior.

Traumatized children often struggle with heightened emotional reactivity, difficulty calming down, and misinterpretation of social cues—all of which can contribute to aggressive or destructive responses. (van der Kolk, B. A. 2014)

8.2. How Trauma Disrupts Emotional Organization



Emotional organization depends on the brain's ability to regulate internal states. Chronic trauma can impair the development of the prefrontal cortex (which governs rational decision-making) and over-activate the amygdala (which processes fear and threats). As a result, traumatized children may live in a constant state of alert, interpreting neutral situations as threatening.

These neurological changes hinder emotional awareness and regulation, leading to emotional dysregulation—one of the strongest predictors of destructive behavior in children. (Perry, B. D., & Pollard, R. 1998)

8.3. The relation between Trauma and Destructive Behavior

Numerous studies have found that children exposed to early trauma are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors such as aggression, defiance, and destruction. These behaviors often serve as maladaptive coping mechanisms to manage overwhelming feelings of fear, sadness, or shame. Rather than expressing vulnerability, some children act out to regain a sense of control or to avoid emotional pain.

For example, a child who has experienced abandonment might break toys or disrupt class activities when feeling ignored, as a way to gain attention or prevent further rejection. (Ford, J. D., Chapman, J. F., Mack, M., & Pearson, G., 2006)

8.4. Protective Factors and Trauma-Informed Care

Despite the damaging impact of trauma, emotional organization and

behavior can be improved when children receive consistent, supportive care. Trauma-informed approaches emphasize safety, trust, empowerment, and emotional validation. These environments allow children to gradually develop secure attachments and learn adaptive emotional strategies.

Interventions such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), mindfulness programs, and consistent caregiving can rebuild the child's emotional regulation system and reduce the risk of destructive tendencies. (Cohen, J. A., Mannarino, A. P., & Deblinger, E. 2016)

Early trauma acts as a powerful disruptor of emotional development and behavioral stability. By understanding its long-term effects, practitioners, parents, and educators can shift from punitive responses to compassionate, trauma-sensitive care. Healing emotional wounds early is essential not only to prevent destructive behavior but also to promote resilience and emotional competence throughout life.

9. The Role of Parents and Educators in Supporting Emotional Organization and Preventing Destructive Behavior

9.1. The Critical Role of Caregivers in Emotional Modeling

Children learn how to regulate emotions through observation and interaction with their primary caregivers. When parents or educators model healthy emotional expression—such as calmly discussing frustrations or labeling feelings constructively—children are more likely to internalize these strategies. Modeling also helps normalize



emotional experiences, reducing the likelihood that children will see emotions like sadness or anger as threatening or shameful.

For example, a teacher who acknowledges a student's frustration during a difficult task and helps them name the feeling ("I see you're frustrated; this is a hard puzzle, but you're doing your best") fosters both emotional literacy and resilience. Such responses strengthen the child's emotional organization and reduce the risk of outbursts. (Morris, A. S., Silk, J. S., Steinberg, L., Myers, S. S., & Robinson, L. R., 2007)

9.2. Providing Safe Emotional Spaces at Home and School

A critical foundation for healthy emotional organization is the availability of safe and supportive environments where children feel free to express themselves without fear of punishment or rejection. In emotionally validating environments, caregivers actively listen, encourage emotional expression, and guide children in understanding and regulating their feelings.

At home, this might involve daily check-ins, open conversations about emotions, and reassuring responses to emotional distress. In classrooms, structured emotional learning programs (like SEL – Social Emotional Learning) can teach students to recognize their emotions and develop self-control strategies.

Such supportive settings not only foster emotional regulation but also lower the likelihood of destructive reactions to stress, confusion, or

interpersonal conflict. (Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., Reyes, M. R., & Salovey, P., 2012).

9 3. Intervention Strategies to Improve Emotional Organization

Both parents and educators can play an active role in intervention by using structured techniques to build emotional awareness and reduce behavioral issues:

- **Emotion Coaching:** Teaching children to label emotions, understand causes, and learn regulation strategies.
- **Calm-down Techniques:** Using breathing exercises, mindfulness, or emotion thermometers to help children monitor and adjust their emotional state.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Praising emotionally regulated behavior reinforces its use in the future.
- **Consistent Routines:** Predictable environments help children feel secure, which supports emotional stability.

These strategies have been shown to reduce the incidence of externalizing problems, including aggression, tantrums, and defiance. (Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C., 1996)

9. 4. Parent-Teacher Collaboration as a Protective Factor

The collaboration between parents and educators is crucial. When both parties share consistent emotional expectations and behavioral responses, children receive a coherent framework for managing emotions. This consistency minimizes confusion and helps embed



emotional regulation strategies into everyday life, whether at school or at home.

For instance, when a child shows signs of emotional dysregulation at school, communication with the parents can ensure supportive strategies are applied across environments. This kind of teamwork significantly lowers the risk of escalation into destructive behavior. (Sheridan, S. M., Bovaird, J. A., et al.2012)

Parents and educators are gatekeepers of a child's emotional world. Their influence in shaping emotional organization is profound and direct. With the right tools, attitudes, and environments, they can transform emotional vulnerability into emotional competence, thereby reducing the expression of destructive behavior. Emotional organization is not an isolated psychological trait—it is cultivated through ongoing, supportive human relationships. (Denham, S. A., & Burton, R. 2003).

Conclusion

Destructive behavior in children remains one of the most pressing concerns for parents, educators, and child development professionals. It is not merely a behavioral issue but often a reflection of deeper emotional and psychological struggles, particularly those related to the child's emotional organization. This article has highlighted the significant link between destructive behavior and emotional regulation, suggesting that many behavioral issues stem from unresolved emotional difficulties.



Throughout the discussion, it became evident that emotional organization—comprising emotional awareness, regulation, and expression—is essential for healthy behavioral development. When children lack these skills, they are more likely to express distress through destructive behaviors such as aggression, defiance, or withdrawal. Studies confirm that emotional dysregulation is a key predictor of externalizing problems in children, especially when coupled with adverse family or environmental conditions.

Moreover, the role of family dynamics, social context, and psychological pressures cannot be overlooked. Children exposed to emotional neglect, inconsistent parenting, or traumatic events often struggle to develop effective emotional regulation strategies, increasing their vulnerability to destructive behaviors. These behaviors, in many cases, are not intentional acts of defiance, but rather cries for help from children unable to process or articulate their emotions in constructive ways.

Recognizing this connection empowers caregivers and educators to intervene more effectively. Early intervention programs that teach emotional literacy, provide psychological support, and foster secure attachments can significantly reduce the risk of chronic destructive behavior. Schools and mental health professionals should also work collaboratively to build environments that nurture emotional resilience and empathy among children.

In summary, destructive behavior in children should be viewed through a psychological and emotional lens, not just as a disciplinary



issue. Emotional disorganization is both a contributing factor and a consequence of such behavior. Therefore, supporting children's emotional development must become a central focus in efforts to prevent and manage destructive behaviors. By doing so, we not only address the surface behaviors but also promote the emotional well-being and long-term adjustment of children.

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