Young gifted children:
Meeting their needs

Louise Porter

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Introduction

Giftedness occurs at the same rate in the population as does disability. Historically, we have defined those whose skills fall in the lower 3–5 per cent as having significant learning difficulties (which we call a disability), while those with skills in the upper 3–5 per cent of the population are considered to be significantly advanced (which is called giftedness). Many children with particular learning disabilities or talents will be catered for effectively within a regular program but some—and especially those who are extremely advanced—will need modifications to a regular program so that they have access to intellectual peers and an appropriate level of intellectual challenge.

Definition

Children are usually said to be gifted when their development is proceeding at least one-third faster than normal. This means, for example, that a three-year-old's skills resemble those of four-year-olds. Giftedness can be displayed in just one skill area, or can occur across many developmental domains. It also differs in degrees, ranging from mild advancement to exceptional giftedness.

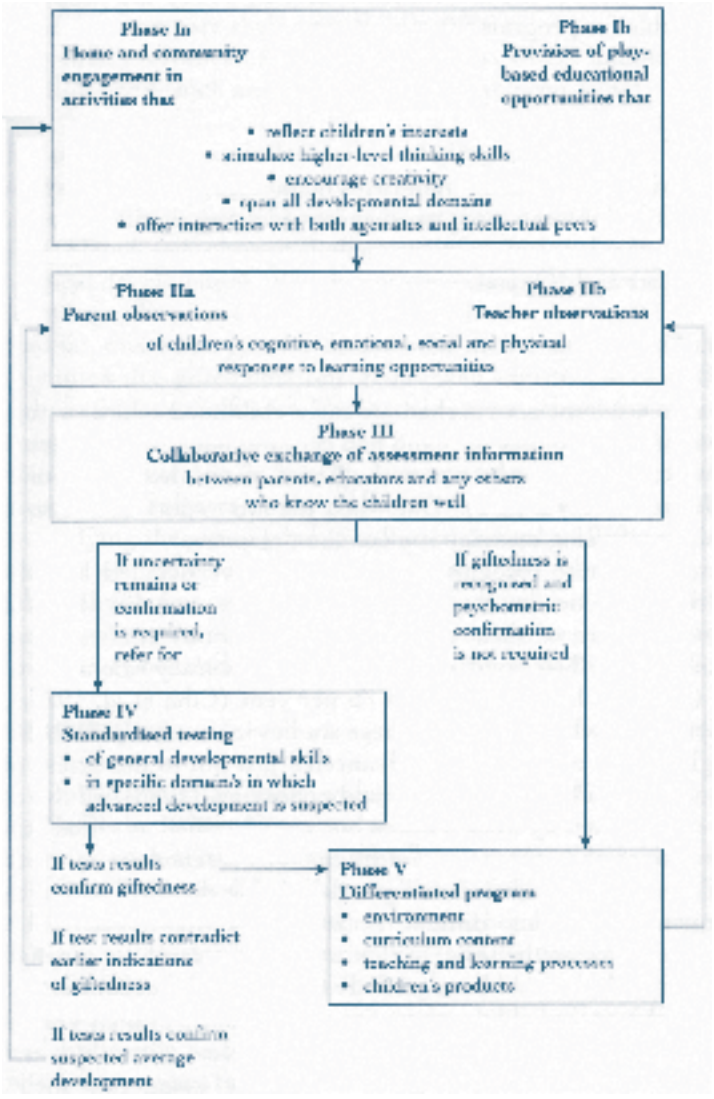
In the past the term *giftedness* was reserved for advanced intellectual skills, while *talent* was used to refer to special abilities in a non-academic skill such as music, sport or fine arts. However, this implies that some skills are more valued than others. So today many use the term 'gifted' to refer to *potential* and 'talent' to refer to advanced *performances.* This distinction between potential and demonstrated giftedness allows the gifted category to include those children who have the potential to excel but whose abilities are not being displayed in everyday circumstances. Many reasons can contribute to this: for example, the educational program might not be challenging enough for them to display the full extent of their abilities; they might be disadvantaged by poverty (Borland & Wright, 2000; Kitano & Perez, 1998), by having English as a second language (Frasier, 1997), or as a result of restrictions placed on them because of their gender (Kerr 2000; Randall 1997); or they may have a disability which masks their gifts (Yewchuk & Lupart, 2000).

Although these kinds of circumstances can lower children's achievements, 'hot-housing' or pushing children cannot make them excel beyond their natural abilities. Rather, these abilities are enabled by a soundly functioning brain, which has been set down both genetically and by a conducive prenatal environment. An optimal level of environmental stimulation and emotional and social support then allow those innate skills to flourish into the expression of talent.

Identification of giftedness

To provide a developmentally appropriate program, educators need to know at which levels individual children are functioning. This necessitates assessment, which must be ongoing, authentic, collaborative and comprehensive. The phases of a recommended assessment process are illustrated in Figure 1. The first phase of this is observation by parents and educators of children's responses to a range of stimulating activities.

Figure 1: A process for identifying advanced development



(Porter 2005, p. 127)

Parental observations

Despite the myth that parents' reports are biased, parents are the most reliable informants about children's development, interests and preferences. Professionals trust parents' reports that their child has a disability; we can similarly trust their observations of their child's advanced development. This is verified by research finding that parents have a success rate at identifying giftedness of between 66 per cent and 100 per cent (Louis & Lewis, 1992; Ciha et al., 1974; Jacobs, 1971; Silverman et al., 1986).

In contrast to the myth that 'all parents think their child is gifted', the most common error parents make is underestimating their children's abilities, especially when they themselves are highly educated (Roedell et al., 1980). (In comparison, teachers generally have an accuracy rate of between 4.4 per cent and 48 per cent (Gear, 1976; Jacobs, 1971), although this rate improves when they have some training in gifted education.)

Teacher observations

The next phase of assessment is for educators' own observations and parents' reports about their child's abilities in other settings to be interpreted to gauge whether the child's performances are advanced. This necessitates comparison to a list of typical developmental milestones.

Checklists

Work samples - including examples from home - and children's observed behaviours can be compared with lists of some common signs of giftedness. Checklists, such as that in Appendix I, serve a vital function of alerting parents and educators to the possibility that a child may be advanced. However, their items can be difficult to interpret. For example, it is not necessarily clear what learning 'quickly' or 'often' means, nor how many of the listed qualities individual children have to possess to be considered gifted. So more information may be required.

IQ tests

As already mentioned, giftedness means 'significantly advanced development'. By definition, this means advanced *compared to the average*. If, despite their observations and reference to checklists of normal and gifted development, parents or educators remain uncertain whether a child's skills *are* 'significantly' advanced, more information can be obtained by referring the child to a psychologist for an IQ test. This assessment information can then inform programming, including the suitability of gifted education provisions.

An IQ test compares children's intellectual achievements to the average for their age. Their resulting score is expressed as an Intelligence Quotient (or IQ). An average IQ score is 100, with giftedness conservatively defined as IQ scores above 130.

Psychologists will sometimes report test scores in the form of *standard deviations*, with numbers above +2 signifying the gifted range. Alternatively, they will might report test scores as a *percentile ranking*. This number tells us that this child 'did as well as, or better than,

x per cent of the cohort'. For instance, if a child's percentile ranking was 83, this means that she achieved as well as or better than 83 per cent of children of her age. As giftedness is defined as (roughly) the top 3 per cent of the population, anyone who is gifted will have a percentile ranking of 97 or above.

These statistics, however, might not be very useful to a teacher attempting to meet a child's educational needs.

It is difficult to teach to an 'IQ of 130' or a 'percentile ranking of 97'. Therefore, it can be useful to convert these figures into a mental age. This can be done arithmetically—by multiplying children's present age by their IQ per cent. So, if a four-year-old has received an IQ score of 150, although educators might not know how to teach to '150', they can convert this number to a developmental age thus:

Mental age = Actual age x IQ%

= 4 years x 150%

= 6 years

This calculation tells educators that this child will generally need educational activities ordinarily suited to a six-year-old. (This is a rough guide only and it must be borne in mind that the child may not be equally advanced in all skill domains.)

Educational provisions

The purpose of assessment is to enable educators to understand children's needs and subsequently to devise a curriculum that meets these. Of course, there is no single prescription for adjusting gifted learners' programs any more than there is for children with disabilities: curricular adjustments must be responsive to individual needs.

The aim of educational provisions for gifted learners is not to ensure that in future they 'reach their potential', as gifted children have no greater obligation than anyone else to excel, and because there is no way to assess what their potential may be. Instead, the aim—as in all special education—is to respect and meet the children's atypical needs as these manifest *now,* regardless of how the children ultimately function educationally or in later life.

To respond to learners' atypical needs, four aspects of programs can be adjusted: the environment, curricular content, teaching and learning processes, and the products by which children demonstrate what they have learned (Porter, 2005).

Environmental modifications

The most important modification to the environment for advanced learners is to adjust their placement to give them access to like-minded peers. This can mean placing them with older children or clustering the very able children together for short instructional bursts, supplemented by more self-directed activities.

A second environmental adjustment requires flexible time allowances. With certain tasks, gifted children will become passionately absorbed in a topic or activity and will need extra time to explore it in depth; and at other times they will master a task quickly so will not wish to repeat it.

A third adjustment is to supply supplementary resources. Although not all intellectually advanced children are similarly advanced academically, those who are will need access to appropriately challenging books and writing activities—but without simply providing a downward extension of an academic program. Although some gifted children are intellectually ready for advanced reading prior to school, they might not be emotionally equipped to cope with the mature content of older children's books. Therefore resources must be selected carefully.

Differentiation of program content

Early childhood educators in particular have detailed knowledge of child development. This is a great asset but sometimes can set a ceiling on our expectations of children, resulting in the provision of activities that are insufficiently challenging. When tasks do not absorb children, they might not engage deeply with the activities, could have difficulty separating from their parents—both because of their close attachment to their parents but also because the program is not attracting them to leave—and some may become disruptive out of boredom. Such behaviours may signal the need to offer more complex learning opportunities.

The main requirement of curricular content for gifted learners is that it keep pace with their advanced learning rate, which will include requiring less exposure to and repetition of tasks they have already mastered. It also means tailoring activities to the children's interests and complexity of thinking, and providing some structure but also open-ended activities that allow them to pursue their ideas in depth. Typically, advanced content will provoke higher-level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem solving, so that the children advance in their use, comprehension and application of knowledge, as well as being able to generate new ideas.

Early entry into an older grouping or to school is a key means of giving the children early access to more complex activities. This is typically referred to as 'acceleration', but this term implies that we are compelling children to go faster when, in fact, we are simply providing a developmentally-appropriate placement in response to their already-hastened learning rate. In the past, there has been concern that early entry (and later early exit from the schooling system) would create social and emotional difficulties for children. However 50 years of international research evidence refutes this, concluding that, when teachers, parents and the children themselves support an advanced placement, the children are subsequently more engaged educationally and better adjusted socially and emotionally (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991).

Adjustments to teaching and learning processes

The year prior to school is when most children are acquiring metacognitive skills—that is, control over their own thinking and learning. Gifted children achieve this earlier and more quickly than most, with the result that some are not even aware that they are using processes such as planning, rehearsal or checking their work. To highlight that they are indeed in command of their own learning, these children need feedback about their use of such processes, and cues about when to use these. Without this feedback, on those occasions when they do not learn a task instantly, some will give up in the belief that they do not know how to learn. They will also be emboldened to take intellectual risks when they feel safe about making mistakes.

Learning processes that you can highlight can be classified into three sets of thinking and one group of emotional dispositions (Lambert & Clyde, 2000; Ritchhart, 2001).

- The *creative* dispositions encompass imaginativeness, being open to new ideas and experiences, tolerating ambiguity, being curious, exploring, being playful.
- *Reflective* skills include the use of metacognitive strategies of self-awareness, self-control and self-monitoring to regulate their own thinking.
- *Critical* thinking skills include planning, inquiring, investigating, being intellectually rigorous and logical (seeking truth, reason and evidence).
- *Emotional* dispositions include the *motivational* cluster such as interest, confidence and enthusiasm for learning; and goal-directed *behaviours* that include engagement, persistence, patience, independence, cooperativeness, and delay of gratification.

Individualising children's products

Early childhood programs routinely offer a range of mediums in which children can demonstrate mastery of concepts. In addition to the usual sociodramatic and artistic expressions of their learning, sand and water play, audiotapes, videotapes and photographs of their work, gifted children who already have literacy skills might still need an adult to scribe or might be able to master keyboard skills themselves so they can report in writing on what they have achieved.

Gifted learning disabled children

Children who are intellectually gifted can simultaneously have sensory or physical disabilities or even learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Often the children's gifts allow them to camouflage their learning difficulties, while their disabilities suppress their giftedness—so both can go undetected altogether or are not recognised until late into their school years. These children with dual exceptionalities need programs that both remediate their difficulties and nurture their strengths.

Emotional and social needs

When their needs are met, gifted people are generally well-adjusted, emotionally mature individuals who achieve at high levels. As children, their emotional development generally exceeds their actual age although is typically not as advanced as their intellectual skills, as they have not yet had that much life experience. This is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Emotional maturity of gifted children

x x x

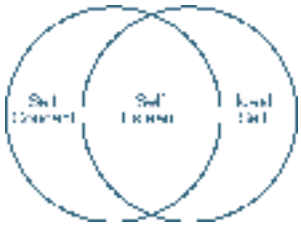
Actual age | Emotional status | Intellectual level (mental age)

However, in the early childhood years, there are some impediments to achieving this level of adjustment. These can be explained in terms of children's core emotional needs for self-esteem, to belong, and to exercise autonomy or self-determination.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem can be understood as a comparison between our concept of ourselves and what qualities we would like to have (our ideal self). This is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Self-esteem as the overlap between the self-concept and ideal self



In terms of their *self-concept*, gifted children are aware from a young age that they are different from others and might assume that there is something wrong with themselves. To avoid this, it helps to explain to them that they are learning more quickly than others.

With respect to their *ideals*, it is true that some gifted children are perfectionists—but only in the sense that they strive for high achievement because they know they are capable of it. A more destructive form of perfectionism—known as dysfunctional perfectionism—occurs when individuals are dissatisfied with their performances, no matter how proficient these are. Gifted learners are no more prone than others to this form of perfectionism (LoCicero & Ashby, 2000; Parker, 1996; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Parker & Mills, 1996).

In terms of their *self-esteem*, gifted children generally feel positively about their talents, with less confidence about their lower skills. As with all individuals, they can develop a low self-esteem, however, if they fail to recognise their talents (in which case their self-concept is impoverished) or if they expect of themselves standards that are impossibly high (their ideal self is too demanding). Low self-esteem for either reason can be prevented or repaired by adjusting the feedback we give children so that they receive *information* about their achievements (acknowledgement) rather than a *judgement* of these (praise or other rewards). The differences between these two styles of feedback are:

- Acknowledgement teaches children to *evaluate their own efforts:* 'What do you think of *that?*'... 'Was that fun?'... 'Are you pleased with yourself?'...'You seem pleased that you did that so well'. In comparison, praise approves of work that meets *adult* standards.
- Unlike praise, acknowledgement *does not judge* children or their work, although you could give them your opinion of their achievement. For example, 'I'm impressed that you tried something new', replaces the judgement that a painting is 'creative'.
- Acknowledgement is a *private* event that does not show children up in public or compare them with each other. Unlike praise, it does not try to manipulate other children into copying a child who has been praised. Acknowledgement simply describes—in private—what the adult appreciated: 'Thanks for helping to pack the equipment away' replaces the judgement that a child is a good boy or girl for helping.

As well as being non-judgemental, our feedback needs to focus on the processes the children are using, particularly the learning style or dispositions that are useful to them. These were listed earlier.

Social needs

All children choose friends who are at their developmental level, as these playmates can share their interests. But young gifted children are less independently mobile than their older counterparts so can find it difficult to access intellectual peers. This lack of true peers can leave them socially isolated and, in turn, can lead to loneliness or introversion, whereby the children become self-sufficient or rely especially keenly on their parents for intellectual stimulation and intimacy. Introversion is not necessarily an emotional disadvantage, although a lack of peer relationships means that children can miss out on the many developmental, emotional and social benefits that friendships bring.

Some cooperative games and activities and the provision of toys that invite social play can pair up children who have not spontaneously chosen to play together but who, as a result of their joint activities, might develop a friendship. However, it is important that gifted learners are not required constantly to help the less able children. Although altruism is laudable, repeated peer tutoring robs them of learning time, when they have the same rights as all other children to be given opportunities to progress from their present skill levels.

Autonomy

Gifted children tend to develop an internal locus of control, which means they consider that their own actions—rather than luck or uncontrollable events—determine outcomes. This is ordinarily an advantage for learning, as they expect that, if they put in more effort, they will achieve higher-quality outcomes. However, it can be detrimental if they accept too much responsibility for their failures or for solving adult issues, as they might become helpless and even stressed when they cannot influence these.

A second manifestation of their advanced skills is that gifted children expect adults to treat them as equals so, more than most, resist adults' attempts to control them and their behaviour. Adults who believe that their status relies on their expertise rather than their power will not interpret this as a threat, however, but will lead (rather than boss) the children. Leaders will employ guidance methods that teach thoughtful behaviour, rather than punishing infringements. They will deliver informative feedback (acknowledgement) rather than judgements of children's successes (as already mentioned) and will employ the core communication skills of listening, being assertive, and solving problems collaboratively when children's behaviour disrupts others (Porter, 2003).

Collaboration with parents

As already stated, identification of giftedness involves close collaboration and exchange of information with parents. Once a child's giftedness is recognised, parents can be useful informants about appropriate educational provisions for their child. Although they are often accused of pushing their 'star' child for their own aggrandisement, most parents 'just want their child to be happy' and seek an education that balances their child's intellectual and social-emotional wellbeing.

During their child's early years, when parents are first coming to terms with his or her atypical needs, support from their child's educators can be tremendously valuable. Recognition of their child's giftedness can arouse fears in parents because of how their own or another family member's giftedness was handled; it can generate worries about their child's emotional adjustment (because of the many misconceptions incorrectly linking giftedness with emotional problems); and they can mourn the fact that their child may never fit neatly (academically or socially) into the schooling system (Solow, 2001). Most are embarrassed at having to appear pushy when advocating for their child but recognise that little may happen for him or her if they do nothing. Some will need your support to clarify with their child's next teachers that they are not asking for a *better* education for their gifted child, but a *developmentally appropriate* one. To provide this is not elitism: it is the core business of education.

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www.gifteddevelopment.com

Appendix I

Indicators of advanced development in young children

Intellectual giftedness

Children who are intellectually gifted often achieve early proficiency across many of the following domains:

- early achievement of developmental milestones (at least one-third sooner)
- keen observation of the environment
- deeper knowledge than other children
- early understanding of abstract concepts (e.g. death or time)

Academic giftedness

Children who are intellectually *and* academically gifted might:

- read, write or use numbers earlier
- write words other than their own name prior to school entry
- show advanced preferences for books and films (unless too sensitive to older themes)

Learning style

Many gifted children not only achieve more than average, they also approach tasks with a sophisticated style. When appropriately challenged, they display a range of the following learning skills. They:

- are alert
- are responsive to novel stimuli
- learn quickly
- have quick and accurate recall
- recall skills and information introduced some time ago
- elicit stimulation from the environment
- process information with speed and efficiency
- are willing to reflect when necessary in order to maintain accuracy
- prefer challenge and complexity
- are open to new ideas and experiences
- are motivated and curious in a search for understandings
- have wide-ranging interests

- immerse themselves in an area of interest, in order to achieve a depth of understanding
- possess longer than usual concentration span on challenging topics of interest (but may 'flit' from one activity to another if activities are not challenging enough)
- use metacognitive skills early to manage their own thinking processes
- have an internal locus of control
- can be independent at challenging, non-routine tasks
- are willing to take risks
- persevere in the face of obstacles
- tolerate ambiguity

Creative thinking style

Children who are intellectually *and* creatively gifted might display the following learning styles, applying these across domains or in a single domain in which they excel:

- imagination
- creative problem solving
- use of intuition (that is, allowing some of their thinking to occur at a preconscious level)
- fluency, which reflects an ability to employ a range or quantity of ideas
- flexibility, which refers both to the quality of ideas brought to bear on the problem and to skill at adapting their learning style to the task demands and goals
- being nonconforming and rejecting limits

Auditory–sequential style

Children who learn by listening and ordering ideas often display a range of the following qualities. They:

- learn sequentially: one idea at a time
- are analytical—that is, can break problems down into their parts
- attend well to details
- learn well from verbal instructions
- are able to follow instructions to do several things in succession
- think logically
- have good planning skills
- are organised

- are less impulsive than age mates
- have a clear understanding of cause-and-effect
- use rehearsal to remember
- once in school, achieve reasonably consistent grades across all subjects

Visual–spatial (or holistic) style

Children who learn by forming visual images of concepts may be later than others to excel, but nevertheless display some of the following learning patterns. They:

- learn concepts all at once
- synthesise ideas—that is, put them together
- see the big picture and, correspondingly, may miss details
- learn intuitively
- learn instantly and so do not benefit from rehearsal or repetition
- once in school, obtain uneven grades across subjects

Verbal giftedness

Intellectually gifted children with advanced verbal skills often show:

- early comprehension
- advanced speech in terms of vocabulary, grammar and clear articulation
- use of metaphors and analogies
- ability to make up songs or stories spontaneously
- ability to modify language for less mature children
- early use of language for a real exchange of ideas and information
- a sophisticated sense of humour

Physical giftedness

Many intellectually gifted children have fine motor skills that lag behind their intellectual level, with resulting average handwriting or drawing skills. On the other hand, those who are gifted in the motor domain can show a range of the following characteristics:

- early motor development, particularly in skills that are under cognitive control, such as balance
- can locate themselves within the environment
- can put together new or difficult puzzles

- are able to take apart and reassemble objects with unusual skill
- make interesting shapes or patterns with objects
- have advanced drawing or handwriting
- display high levels of physical energy

Artistic giftedness

Although most young children may not yet have been exposed to the arts in any formal way and so may not be showing artistic talent, some display early signs of instinctive art skill, such as:

- superior visual memory
- assigning elaborate characters to dolls, teddies or imaginary playmates
- creating and performing in plays
- enjoyment of drama, role-playing
- advanced skill at drawing, painting or other artistic modalities

Musical giftedness

Musical giftedness may be among the earliest to emerge—by the age of one year—although very young children's motor ability can block their musical performance. Musically gifted children:

- are enthralled by musical sounds
- have a deep appreciation and understanding of music (with or without musical performance)
- are sensitive to musical structure—tonality, key, harmony and rhythm
- appreciate the expressive properties of music—timbre, loudness, articulation and phrasing
- have a strong musical memory that permits them to recall music and play it back later either by singing or through an instrument

Social giftedness

Intellectually and verbally advanced young children typically are also advanced in their social skills, showing some of the following characteristics:

- highly developed empathy for others
- less egocentricity: they can deduce the cause of others' emotions
- advanced play interests
- early ability to play games with rules
- early ability to form close friendships
- seeking out older children or adults for companionship

- withdrawing to solitary play if intellectual peers are not available
- often being sought out by other children for their play ideas and sense of fairness
- leadership skills
- early development of moral reasoning and judgement
- early interest in social issues involving injustices

Emotional giftedness

Some intellectually gifted children are emotionally gifted as well. These children might display:

- emotional sensitivity, intensity and responsiveness
- for some, early spiritual or existential awareness
- early development of fears
- early development of self-concept and awareness of being different
- self-confidence in their strong domains
- perfectionism, in the sense of having high standards
- over-sensitivity to criticism
- frustration, which can lead to emotional or behavioural outbursts
- acceptance of responsibility usually given only to older children
- nonconformity

Source: Porter (2005).

Young gifted children: Meeting their needs

Well-known psychologist and educator Louise Porter provides an updated, revised edition of her previous book of the same title, outlining a range of strategies for those seeking to meet the needs of young gifted children. A comprehensive list with indicators of advanced development provides a ready tool for the initial stages of the identification of giftedness, prior to formal testing. Sections covering the emotional and social needs of this group and how to adjust educational programs to provide appropriate challenges make this a very useful resource for early childhood professionals. Collaboration with parents is also emphasised.

Gifted young children: Meeting their needs is a must for all services and will also greatly assist parents of gifted children.

Early Childhood AUSTRALIA INC.
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