Promoting Nurturing Environments in Afterschool Settings

Emilie Phillips Smith[1] • Catherine P. Bradshaw[2]

[1] Department Head of Human Development and Family Science, (emilie.smith@uga.edu),

University of Georgia, 305 Sanford Drive, Athens, GA 30606, USA

[2] University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA

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Abstract

Given the rise in dual career and single-parent families, and the need for monitoring and supervision during out-of-school time, afterschool settings are becoming important contexts for the prevention of problem behaviors and the promotion of the positive development of youth. Research indicates that high-quality afterschool programs can have positive effects on children's academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral outcomes. But less is known about how these influences occur and potential mechanisms involved in this nurturing and promotion process. This paper draws upon the current theoretical and empirical literature in school settings and beyond to examine ways in which afterschool settings can be leveraged as a potential nurturing environment. We apply the conceptualization of nurturing environments put forth by Biglan et al. (Am Psychol 67(4):257–271, 2012. doi:10. 1037/a0026796), which attends to the minimization of toxic social and biological conditions, reinforcement of diverse prosocial behaviors, limiting opportunities and influences for problem behavior, and promoting psychological flexibility in the pursuit of one's values and goals. This paper concludes by identifying potential future research directions and practice implications regarding afterschool settings as nurturing environments for all youth.

Keywords Afterschool programs • Settings • Quality • Disciplinary disparities • Praise • Reinforcement • Psychological flexibility • Child socio-emotional outcomes • Self-regulation • Positive youth development • Good Behavior Game

Promoting Nurturing Environments in Afterschool Settings

Children grow and develop in a number of different settings, most notably and proximally within their families and schools. However, as they age, other community-based and recreational settings become increasingly important contexts for their development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998). Compared to the attention given to family and to school contexts in the literature, there has been less consideration of impact of afterschool settings on youth, and their potential influence on the promotion of well-being and social interactions of youth. Much of the interest in afterschool began with the initial approval of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers through which the federal government committed to funding afterschool programs across the country. Although funding levels have since atrophied (Gardner et al. 2009), the premise is that afterschool programs support families by keeping their children safe, but they also offer academic enrichment, particularly for children struggling in school, supporting their socio-emotional and occupational development. Despite the large number of youth who participate in afterschool programming, there has been relatively limited rigorous empirical research on characteristics of these out of school environments which are critical for nurturing youth and promoting positive youth development and potential mechanisms of this process (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017).

The conceptual framework of nurturing environments outlined by Biglan et al. (2012) is useful in exploring the potential influences of afterschool settings on youth. The purpose of the current paper was to review research on and relevant to afterschool settings in relation to the following four defining features of nurturing environments: 1) minimization of toxic social and biological conditions; 2) reinforcement of diverse prosocial behaviors; 3) limiting opportunities

and influences for problem behavior; and 4) promoting psychological flexibility in the pursuit of one's values and goals (Biglan et al., 2012). We also consider challenges as well as opportunities for the promotion of youth development in afterschool settings, and conclude with some suggested areas for future research to address in afterschool environments, particularly in relation to practice and programming. The overarching goal of this paper is to enhance our understanding of the potential of influence of afterschool settings, through the lens of the nurturing environments framework.

Minimization of Toxic Social and Biological Conditions

Living in a socially toxic environment puts children at risk for problematic development. For example, the effects of social rejection and community violence exposure on the onset and persistence of externalizing behavior problems among high-risk children are well documented (for reviews, see Bradshaw and Garbarino 2004; Garbarino 2001; Laird et al. 2001). Social learning theory suggests that exposure to these socially toxic factors can increase the likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors, like aggressive behavior (Bandura 1973, 1977) through aspects of social cognition. Specifically, a series of social-cognitive mechanisms are theorized to mediate the association between these risk social-environmental factors and aggressive behavior (Crick and Dodge 1994). Many of the empirical studies examining this hypothesis have focused on children and youth exposed to relatively high-levels of social-environmental risks, such as harsh physical punishment by parents, high levels of community violence and violent victimization, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Bradshaw and Garbarino 2004).

Although most children and youth do not live in extremely toxic environments, even milder forms of stress can negatively impact youth. For example, exposure to deviant peers can increase youths' engagement in problem behaviors (Dodge et al. 2007). Youth who are poorly

supervised and those from inconsistently managed settings are more susceptible to these types of problematic influences. Adults play an important role in buffering exposure to a range of potentially harmful experiences.

In fact, adult supervision and monitoring is important for all youth, especially those from socially toxic environments. Yet, the increase in dual-earner or single-parent families over the past decade creates even more of a need for the monitoring and supervision of children during the hours of 3-6 pm afterschool, which is also when youth are more likely to be involved in crime and delinquency (Snyder and Sickmund 2006; U.S. Departments of Education and Justice 2000). This is an important work-family issue because parents need to know their children are well supervised during these hours. Indeed, the research is fairly conclusive that when youth are unsupervised during these hours, they are more likely to be involved in substance use and experimentation, early sexual activity, and other types of problem behaviors (Little et al. 2008; Mahoney et al. 2004; Osgood et al. 2005).

Afterschool programming serves as an important context for positive youth development, and can help buffer against the effects of a socially toxic environment. However, it is critical that the afterschool program itself not convey similar socially toxic risks, like exposure to deviant peers or non-supportive adults (Dodge et al. 2007); rather, the afterschool setting should also serve as a nurturing context to combat these and other types of risks (Dodge et al. 2007; Mahoney et al. 2004). In fact, there has been growing interest in understanding how afterschool settings serve as an ecological context for implementing prevention programming (Frazier et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2017; Tebes et al. 2007).

Particularly germane to social toxicity is the important issue of disciplinary and academic disparities, and the degree to which more intentional and integrated practices might reduce these

disparities (Bottiani et al. 2016). For example, research on educational settings indicates that African American children are more likely than White children to be expelled or suspended from school, and these sanctions are more likely to be for more subjective behaviors (such as defiance or disrespect) than for dangerous or violent actions (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Skiba et al. 2002; Wallace et al. 2008). One in five African American students (19.6%) are suspended compared to less than 1 in 10 White students (8.8%, KewelRamani et al. 2007). The data on Latina/o students is mixed with some work finding them to experience disproportionate disciplinary practices while others finding them subjective to disciplinary practices at rates similar to Whites (Krezmien et al. 2006; NCES 2003). Research in schools also suggests that approaches that equitably and intentionally use disciplinary practices based upon warmth and high expectations, clear guidelines, and contingencies hold promise for reducing disciplinary disparities (Gregory et al. 2010; Skiba et al. 2002). However, even with the implementation of these effective, evidence-based strategies, explicit attention to the degree to which these strategies indeed reduce disciplinary disparities is necessary.

There are decades of research on strategies that are more equitable and intentional, likely impacting disparities in managing children's behavior. The research on proactive, cooperative and engaging strategies, like the Good Behavior Game (GBG), indicates the strongest effects tend to be among the most aggressive males in urban locales (Ialongo et al. 1999; Kellam et al. 2008). These youth benefitted the most from the cooperative, team-based game, with clear behavior standards, and supportive encouraging behavioral approaches provided through the GBG. Similarly, research on Positive Behavior Support suggests that youth with baseline patterns of aggressive and problem behavior are most likely to benefit from the school-wide model (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Yet, in application, some practitioners worry that the most at-risk

children will not respond to these types of positively oriented universal prevention strategies, which requires children to self-regulate and minimize disruptive behavior in order to earn a tangible or activity reward. For children displaying high levels of disruptive behavior, the Paxis Institute's version of PAX GBG includes strategies that require the child to be a "team of 1" so as not to disqualify a group of other children from "winning" the game and to assume personal behavioral responsibility. Yet, the issue of whether these prevention and promotion strategies in school and afterschool need to be combined with additional strategies for youth who present with multiple individual, familial, justice, and mental health issues is a critical question worthy of further consideration (Biglan 2004; Weisz et al. 2005). Initiatives that combine strategies to promote self-regulation might also be integrated with initiatives that address mental health, health, special education and child welfare.

Reinforcement of Diverse Prosocial Behaviors

Because there has traditionally been less focus of both research and programming in afterschool settings and out-of-school time, we leveraged some of the relevant school-based research, contexts with which researchers are more familiar, and considered it in relation to afterschool settings. Schools are facing increasing school accountability and have a mandate to focus on grades and achievement, thereby leaving less time for prevention initiatives. Therefore, it is important to consider the extent to which some of the strategies originally found to be successful in school settings might prove to be equally appealing in afterschool, especially given the need to offer more content and structure during out-of-school time (Mahoney and Zigler 2006). In fact, research on youth programming targeting out-of-school time has attended to characteristics that might be important to the development of youth socio-emotional, academic, and physical development. Based upon the research in school settings, supportive relationships

with teachers and school staff that promote bonding and connectedness, clear behavioral expectations, developing youth social skills and promoting their roles as agentic contributors to their settings are all important features to consider (Battistich et al. 1996; Bradshaw et al. 2014; Catalano et al. 2002, 2004; Hamre and Pianta 2005; Wilson et al. 2003).

A related line of research suggests that supportive interactions with adults in afterschool using evidence-based practices are beneficial to youth in terms of academic achievement, socio-emotional skills, and other aspects of youth agency and civic engagement (Durlak et al. 2010; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lauer et al., 2006; Pierce et al. 2010). This area of research is germane to Biglan and colleagues' (2012) conceptualization of nurturing environments as richly reinforcing prosocial behaviors, encouragement and praise are attributes that are meaningful to youth self-esteem and confidence, and ultimately to how they might behave in these settings. For example, research by Pierce and colleagues has aimed to understand what typifies caring behavior, including tone of voice, eye contact, face-to-face interpersonal conversation about topics of interest to the children, along with physical contact characterized by warmth and appropriate touch, genuine interest, and support (Pierce et al. 2010). Both this research and work by Miller and colleagues demonstrates the important role of positive staff-child interactions upon child engagement, reading and math achievement (Miller et al. 2005; Pierce et al. 2010). In many ways, some of the characteristics of support for child and adolescent development bear similarity to characteristics that might be meaningful across the lifespan in the multiple contexts of families, schools, and afterschool settings, those of genuine care and concern. In contrast, research in family settings has also found that environments that are harsh and caustic in their treatment of children results in diminished self-perceptions and increased likelihood that children will manifest more anxiety, conduct and emotional disorders (see for example Berlin et al. 2009;

Deater-Deckard and Bell 2017; Lansford et al. 2009; Patterson et al. 1989). A recent randomized trial in afterschool programs reported similar effects in that staff who are overly harsh and critical adversely impact the prosocial development (i.e. caring, listening, and sharing) of participating elementary-school children (Smith et al. 2017b); this provides further evidence supporting the importance of nurturing, positively reinforcing, afterschool environments.

One form of reinforcement commonly used in both school and after-school settings is praise, which is typically viewed as verbal statements that increase the likelihood of behavior, in this instance, specifically achievement and accomplishment. Yet, teacher praise is not synonymous with positive reinforcement in practice, as cautioned by Brophy (1981), in his classic review and critique of teacher praise. In fact, some scholars debate the value and effects of praise. Kohn (1993, 1999) has argued that praise is still judgement and may in fact be counter to the development of intrinsic motivation. Indeed praise for extremely easy tasks may actually undermine self-perceptions of ability (Graham 1990) and autonomy, using examples from research on food preferences (Birch et al. 1984). Based upon these concerns and others related to intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, there is some opposition among schools and community-based organizations that challenge the long-term value of programs purely based upon praise, and extrinsic positive and negative reinforcers (Adelman and Taylor 2006). Yet, empirical evidence indicates that praise, even among older high school students, has powerful behavioral effects (Lum et al. 2017). Research across multiple time points also reveals that praise can result in both short- and long-term effects (Henderlong 2000).

In fact, the research on praise has become far more nuanced, revealing particular forms of praise that are most reinforcing for youth. For example, person-based praise focused upon personal attributes such as “that’s a good girl/boy” has less clear implications for what the young

people did to merit the praise and doesn't provide a clear message on what is necessary to earn a similar recognition (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). On the other hand, praise linked to effort, can foster more persistence, e.g., "I like how you hung in there and made it work" communicates that some activities demand more intellectually and behaviorally (Henderlong and Lepper 2002; Mueller and Dweck 1998; Schunk 1984). Praise, like positive reinforcement (words, activities, or tangible items that by definition increase the frequency and likelihood of behavior), may initially be extrinsic, but ultimately, the reward of success may become a more powerful and intrinsic motivator (Corpus et al. 2006; Dweck 2000). Behavioral principles suggest that extrinsic motivators that are given in increasingly lengthier intervals actually help youth develop intrinsic motivation based upon their experiences of success, and increasing awareness of the value of their efforts academically and occupationally (O'Leary and O'Leary 1977).

In our experience conducting randomized trials with adults who are diverse in terms of gender and racial-ethnic background, we have heard resistance to the use of only positive communication strategies, like praise, with children and youth. One argument is that children need to be resilient and able to handle the caustic treatment of dangerous neighborhood contexts and discrimination while still being able to thrive (Spencer et al. 2002). Their concern is that practices including only supportive and encouraging communication will not prepare these youth for the realities of living environments where they may receive far less verbal encouragement and endure challenges based upon their race ethnicity or gender. Yet, research suggests that in settings where adults are more supportive, characterized by warmth, praise, encouragement, and genuine interpersonal interest, youth report a greater sense of collective efficacy (i.e. connectedness and positive group influence) along with more respect for adults and positive behavioral patterns (Smith et al. 2017b). It is possible that the support is complementary, helping

to account for the lack of support in other settings. This does not discount the need to socialize youth to prepare them for discrimination, and other socio-environmental challenges they will face (Hughes et al. 2006); rather, it highlights the role of warmth and praise as a potential buffer.

We also recognize that the role of praise may be more complex for youth in more collectivistic cultural contexts, and youth may actually be embarrassed by references to their personal behavior (Salili and Hau 1994). For example, in some Asian cultures, parents may not routinely communicate high regard through verbal behavior but instead by their implicit provision of basic needs and expectations (Henderlong and Lepper 2002; Salili and Hau 1994). Yet, it has been proposed in research comparing behavioral practices among schools in the USA, China, and Japan that praise is consistent with the Confucian value of harmony and in fact praise and positive reinforcement are more prominent in China and Japan than the frequent dismissals and suspensions that are growing in use in the USA (Bear et al. 2016). Thus, environments that are rich in praise and positive reinforcement can prove to be nurturing for children and youth, particularly when coupled with an acknowledgement of their own contexts and multiple demands for success (Lum et al. 2017).

In summary, praise and reinforcement can be effective in multiple cultural contexts, as one way to support youth in challenging circumstances, supporting values of respect and harmony among youth. These are powerful tools that can foster long-term intrinsic motivation and positive behavior, when used functionally, contingent upon behavior, and clear in terms of what behavior is expected in the future.

Limiting Opportunities and Influences for Problem Behavior

In terms of limiting opportunities and influences for problem behavior, the structure and focus of afterschool programming matters greatly. Gottfredson et al. (2004) report that the

quality of programming in the afterschool setting mediates the degree to which children are indeed safer and less vulnerable to negative peer affiliations and behavioral problems. They found that participation in structured organized afterschool programming resulted in reduced delinquency for middle school students. In studies with ethnic minority samples, culturally oriented afterschool programs demonstrated not only increased socio-emotional skills, but also an enhanced sense of ethnic identity, self-worth, and reduced aggression and drug use (Belgrave et al. 2004; Riggs et al. 2010; Tebes et al. 2007). The quality of programming matters in that international research on recreational centers has shown that insufficient monitoring and supervision has iatrogenic effects on youth by attracting deviant peers to these settings who engage in problem behaviors (Mahoney et al. 2004).

The growing emphasis on providing a safe and supportive learning environment has also provided leverage for the implementation of a range of prevention programs during the out of school time (Durlak et al. 2010; Taylor et al. in press). Some of these programs have an orientation toward promotion, such as positive youth development or school climate, whereas others have targeted particular skill or competency development (e.g., social emotional learning, character education, life skills). Another set of programs have been more problem focused, thereby addressing particular issues such as bullying, substance use, violence, aggression, and mental health problems. Although a comprehensive review of such programming is well beyond the scope of the current paper, there are many such programs which have demonstrated significant impacts on a range of student outcomes (see for example Bradshaw 2015; Bradshaw et al. 2014; Durlak et al. 2009; Farington and Tofti 2009; Olweus and Limber 2010; Weisz et al. 2005). Similarly, research among afterschool programs has examined the degree to which afterschool does indeed reduce delinquency by increasing access to supervision (Cross et al.

2010). The impact of afterschool upon cognitive, socio-emotional skills, and a positive ethnic identity has been found to be a function of dosage, and participation in quality programs (Riggs et al. 2010). The most effective afterschool programs are those which are considered "S.A.F.E.", that is, sequenced (appropriately structured), active, focused (on skill development) and explicit (goal-oriented); these S.A.F.E. programs have been shown through meta-analyses to significantly improve academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and reduced problem behavior (Durlak et al. 2010).

For example, we recently tested one such program which aims to promote a nurturing environment in after-school settings. We focused on PAX GBG in afterschool, which emphasizes shared adult and child norms, and cooperative teams who share responsibility for regulating behavior. Our analyses via hierarchical regression models found youth collective efficacy, that is, a sense of connectedness and positive behavioral influence among adults and youth in the program to be particularly related to reduced emotional symptoms among youth (Smith et al. 2013). Furthermore, youth participating in PAX GBG reported more prosocial behavior (i.e., sharing, caring, and listening), and less hyperactivity (Smith et al. 2017a).

Promoting Psychological Flexibility in the Pursuit of One's Values and Goals

Biglan et al. (2012) referred to a fourth aspect of nurturing environments, that of fostering *psychological flexibility.* They describe psychological flexibility as "being clear about one's values and mindful of one's thoughts and feelings, and acting in the service of one's values, even when thoughts and feelings discourage taking valued action" (page 9). As such, there are multiple dimensions to psychological flexibility, being aware of one's thoughts and feelings. Numerous comprehensive prevention and promotion projects have sought to address enhancing the ability to understand and control their emotions (see for example Farrell et al. 2001; Kam et

al. 2003; Rones and Hoagwood 2000; Shure, 1993). Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is one such socio-emotional learning approach that teaches children emotional awareness and regulations. PATHS and other such socio-emotional learning curricula typically teach youth to recognize their emotions and the triggers to their emotions, as well as healthy and less healthy options for expressing those emotions. These strategies have been found to be related to children's increased knowledge and awareness, and socio-emotional competence, as well as reductions in violence and aggression (Durlak et al. 2009).

Consistent with the nurturing environments framework, intervention at both the individual and environmental levels are also valuable for improving youth outcomes and reducing problem behaviors (Biglan et al. 2012; Hawkins et al. 1999). Integrated approaches that combine individual and setting-level strategies for fostering self-regulation, and an environment that is richly reinforcing, minimizing problem behavior appear quite promising (Domitrovich et al. 2010). Recent research integrated the PATHS social-emotional learning program with the PAX GBG classroom management strategy, which helped youth and adults develop a shared vision for a peaceful school and classroom; it also set clear behavioral expectations and provided activity-based rewards and ample praise for students meeting those expectations. The advantage of the integration of PATHS and PAX GBG is posing a shared conceptual framework, integrated language and training model that minimizes teacher burden in seamlessly implementing both the individual and settings strategies. A recent randomized study of the integrated model in school settings indicated that the integrated PATHS and PAX GBG program demonstrated stronger effects relative to PAX GBG only (Ialongo et al. 2017). Interestingly, this integrated program also impacted the social-emotional skills and beliefs and

perceptions more broadly of the teachers trained in the integrated program (Domitrovich et al. 2016).

Building upon integrative, comprehensive frameworks for promoting psychological flexibility in schools and summer camps (Embry 2002; Pelham et al. 1997), recent efforts in afterschool leverage recreational settings to teach socio-emotional competence combined with PAX as a way of fostering a more positive and intentional behavioral environment (Frazier et al. 2015). This integrated afterschool strategy, implemented in communities with high-crime and poverty demonstrated some evidence of decreases in problem behavior, and enhanced social skill development across multiple time points. This early work demonstrates that afterschool programs can be used to foster skill-building approaches with youth in this setting as well.

While one dimension of psychological flexibility concerns the ability to be aware of and regulate one's own emotions, another important aspect of this concept concerns being able to do so in ways consistent with one's social values. Researchers focused on civic engagement in youth explore to what degree young people become agentic, proactive sources of influence in their communities (Larson 2000). For example, Flay and Allred (2010) examined school-based prevention approaches that not only fostered character, but sought to help youth develop character and a positive identity. A focus upon civic engagement and character is not new to afterschool settings. In fact, some of the earliest work by Heath and McLaughlin (1994) advocated for leveraging out of school time, to integrate arts, language, and theater to promote socio-emotional, academic, and occupational success among urban youth. This emphasis on positive youth development is a thread that continues in research on afterschool. In work with high schoolers in afterschool programs, Ozer and Wright (2012) have combined ethnographic approaches and participatory action research to expand "collegial interactions,….domains of

student influence, and ….opportunities to influence policies and practices" among high school students. Taken together, these findings suggest that afterschool, with its flexibility and need for appropriate learning opportunities, is an inviting context in which to foster psychological flexibility, and youth development.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research, Practice, and Policy

Despite the great need for high quality and nurturing out of school environments (Afterschool Alliance 2014), there has been scant attention to this issue in the literature. Relative to school-based programming and school-focused research more broadly, there has been considerably less attention to afterschool settings as a contextual influence on youth and a potential nurturing environment (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2017). To provide a framework for advancing research related to afterschool settings, we applied Biglan et al. (2012) conceptualization of nurturing environments. Through this lens, we were able to elucidate a number of opportunities for afterschool settings to serve as a nurturing environment for youth.

For example, the available research suggests that many youth are in need of afterschool programming to help minimize toxic social and biological conditions they face in their homes, communities, peer groups, or even schools. While afterschool settings have the potential to serve as a buffer for a wide range of socially toxic influences, these programs must be sufficiently structured and supervised to ensure that prosocial norms remain dominate in these settings. Additional research is needed to better understand issues of access to quality and nurturing afterschool settings, to ensure that even our most highest risk youth have the opportunity to benefit from the buffering effects of these settings. Additional research is also needed to explore

the extent to which issues of equity and inclusion play a role in influencing outcomes achieved through afterschool programs.

With regard to reinforcement of diverse prosocial behaviors, an obvious challenge to embracing this feature is the perception that praise and other forms of positive reinforcement are somehow inherently undermining youth's ability for choice and free will related to intrinsic motivation for change. While this issue has received considerable empirical attention in schools, there has been less consideration of the extent to which reinforcement and praise-based strategies are as effective, in afterschool settings as they have been shown to be in schools.

Another critical challenge for the field is training after school program leaders and facilitators to consistently monitor youth in afterschool settings, which is particularly relevant to the third aspect of nurturing environments focused on limiting opportunities and influences for problem behavior. We need to work harder to incorporate explicit coursework on aspects of quality and nurturing into the training of teachers and potential afterschool staff. These include both preservice and in-service approaches, particularly for afterschool staff who may or may not be pursuing advanced degrees. In terms of teacher training, integrating training on behavioral management and fostering self-regulation preservice is an important, long-term, but achievable goal.

And finally, delivering socio-emotional programing and other preventive efforts in afterschool settings appears to be a promising approach for promoting psychological flexibility among youth, and potentially even the adults who deliver those programs (Biglan et al. 2012; Domitrovich et al. 2016). Again, after-school program facilitators need in-service training and technical assistance to sustain implementation of evidence-based practices, like social-emotional programing and behavior management strategies.

In conclusion, the nurturing environments framework appears to be a useful model for conceptualizing some of the opportunities and challenges associated with afterschool programming for youth. We believe that the field, and youth themselves, will benefit from additional research on these settings. Only through additional attention to practices and policies which can help strengthen the nurturing aspects and qualities of afterschool settings will we be able to increase the impact and reach of afterschool programs for youth.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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