

Principles For Effective Parenting

**“Education is the
indispensable foundation
of all human existence.”**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá



by *Don Dainty*

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Introduction

One of the most important aspects of life is often left to chance – the raising of children to become socially responsible adults, and, in turn, raise responsible children, thus completing a first among many cycles of anticipated positive family development. Such a continually improving family complexion will inevitably reflect beneficially upon the “ever-advancing civilization” defined by Bahá’u’lláh² as the purpose of our creation.

There is usually no mention made of such processes during our school years. And there are otherwise few programs devised to formally train parents for their delicate tasks; and family efforts to train children to ultimately raise a family in turn, are mainly indirect and often haphazard.

Formerly, and in more rural settings, one could frequently rely on a caring extended family to fill in this or that corner of a child’s needs, thus giving the parents a much-needed break from time to time.

Now, because of the rural to urban migration, the prevalence of the so-called “nuclear family”, and the broad economic swings that society experiences, many young parents find that both are, of necessity, bread-winners. This strains the child-raising process and means that others are given the task of training one’s children in their impressionable years, often at considerable expense.

This picture is further complicated by the frequent breakdown of marriage and the consequent significant rise of single parent families headed by over-stressed women who often exist “below the

poverty line”. Then there is, finally, the all-too-frequent opting out of the male from family responsibilities.

These, and other counterproductive symptoms, contribute to the learning of erroneous lessons by children, and the anti-social conditioning which plagues a large portion of this generation. And, what is worse, these circumstances are likely to be repeated for further generations unless positive actions are undertaken to jolt individuals, families and society off that relentless cycle.

Principles countering these trends have been marshalled into a Bibliography (see p. 15) from Bahá'í literature. It assists individuals and couples to take important remedial courses of action, such as are described briefly in this essay, and in more detail in the citations of the Bibliography itself.

The Source Of Guidance

Religion has been a traditional source for values, ethics and morals. The Jews believed that their guidance came from the Prophets who were inspired by God. Christ received His divine confirmation with the symbolic descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove. Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, similarly received His Revelation from the Holy Spirit in the symbolic form of the Maid of Heaven. In the astonishingly extensive Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and His Successors, fundamental principles are enunciated which bear on this all-important matter of parenting.

For Bahá'ís, this advice and guidance is truly “manna from heaven”, and speaks with sufficient authority to be the potent source of spiritual principle required to effect the necessary transformations that individuals, couples and society, desperately need.

A Cycle For Successful Family Development

(1)

As derived from these Writings, the elements in the cycle of development toward sound, socially-orientated and well-adjusted individuals and families, are the following:

- (2) serious preparation of adolescents and young adults for marriage and parenthood, involving the definition of roles of mother, father and children,
- systematic child training in major spiritual values*
- (3) beginning in infancy and continuing to adolescence, involving the standards of excellence, perfection and distinction in both spiritual and formal education,
- (4) deliberate fostering of a suitable family life as the cradle for the growth of all its members,
- (5) particularly given current conditions, institutional support for the family, not only when in acute need, but also during the developmental processes, and,
- with the beginning of a new generation, serious preparation of adolescents and young adults for marriage and parenthood, must be undertaken once again.

These elements are each briefly described below.

Preparation for Marriage

“O my servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders... I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves”³ is Bahá'u'lláh's statement regarding the exalted nature of the human creation. So, ultimately, from detachment comes the bounty of “knowing oneself,” being aware of one's strengths, needs, capacities and heartfelt desires, all matters of essential importance for every personal endeavours (see Bibliography item # 12).

Helpful in this respect is the injunction: “Bring thyself to account each day”⁴ in order to evaluate, according to spiritual standards, the day's benefits and short-comings. Thus one can gradually refine one's individual approaches to improve the chances of appropriate success and self-fulfillment.

* 52 virtues are defined in item 2 of the Bibliography listed on p. 15.

Now, regarding looking beyond one's self, the time has come for a major change in our attitude toward the opposite sex. "Divine justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of heaven. Dignity before God depends, not on sex, but on purity and luminosity of heart. Human virtues belong to all."⁵ As in all relationships, and particularly for the success of a marriage, this principle of the equality of women and men is best learned in childhood. On this principle rests not only marital success, but also the attainment of the wondrous potential latent in human society.

One aspect of marriage that seems less and less to be a part of pre-marital attitudes, is serious commitment. "Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may endure forever..."⁶ Becoming thoroughly acquainted with the character of one's future partner, and the simple mutual determination to surmount the inevitable array of daily tests, difficulties, misunderstandings and disappointments without succumbing to alienation, is a chief means of preventing marriage breakdown.

"Chastity before marriage and fidelity after" is enjoined upon the Bahá'í World⁷. And, "The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse, but condemns its illegitimate and improper expressions such as free love, companionate marriage and others, all of which it considers positively harmful to man and to the society in which he lives."⁸

"Bahá'u'lláh has urged marriage upon all people as the natural and rightful way of life. He has also, however, placed strong emphasis on its spiritual nature, which while in no way precluding a normal physical way of life, is the most essential aspect of marriage. That two people should live their lives in love and harmony is of far greater importance than that they should be consumed with passion for each other. The one is a great rock of strength on which to lean in time of need; the other is a purely temporary thing which may in time die out."⁹

It is widely recognized that lack of communication is a substantial contributor to marriage breakdown. About this matter of communication, we find in the Bahá'í Writings: "Settle all things, both great and small by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans..."¹⁰ Even though it may sometimes be difficult, effort to communicate frankly, but lovingly in marriage, is essential.

Such efforts assist in the development of love and unity between those betrothed, and among all the family members when children arrive. "If love and agreement are manifested in a single family, that family will advance, become illumined and spiritual; but if enmity and hatred exist within it, destruction and dispersion are inevitable."¹¹

It is therefore important, though admittedly very challenging, to exert oneself strenuously to acquire the instruments of virtue and capacity outlined above, and then employ them in daily life. The end is worth the sacrifice, however, as a successful, as well as a satisfying, marriage will result.

Parental Roles Defined

It's evident that the mother, certainly in the first five years of life, plays the major, and even the crucial, role. The child naturally bonds with the mother and looks to her for all its needs. As part of the guidance to mothers, Bahá'í literature affirms that: "... the mothers are the first educators, the first mentors; and truly it is the mothers who determine the happiness, the future greatness, the courteous ways of learning and judgement, the understanding and the faith of their little ones... Whensoever a mother seeth that her child has done well, let her praise and applaud and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary."¹²

Because this role is so vitally important as well as complex, it is made incumbent on the parents, and if need be, the Institutions

of the Bahá'í Faith, to assure the education of the girls in preference to boys, if choices must be made. This is so in order that their children will in turn have the benefit of an educated mother.

In the Western world there are presently serious uncertainties on the part of multitudes of women associated with the widespread failure of men to take up their role of supporter of the family, and to ensure it's security. Unfortunately, estrangement, abandonment, non-support, etc., are frequently preferred instead. In the Bahá'í scheme of things, the father's role includes this fundamental, major matter of assuring the necessary support for the family, not only financially, but emotionally as well. As this role is given the force of divine Law¹³, the deliberate education of boys, from infancy to maturity, to willingly fulfill this role, is of prime importance.

In addition to these primary matters, the mother and father share responsibility for numerous other child-rearing requirements. These include, not only love, affection, education/training/guidance, fine examples, discipline and mutual helpfulness, but also, the training of elder children to care for younger ones, and the maintaining of an orderly well organized home, among others. Exemplary behaviour on the part of parents cannot be over-emphasized as: "Qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious."¹⁴

Virtues Education In the Family

Just as guidance is necessary for the "what", or content of the educational processes involved in rearing children, equally important is the "how" of it. In this there is a parallel to the school teacher who needs not only the lesson texts, but also the techniques to effectively communicate the desired information to the students – a lesson plan.

The systematic training of children from infancy to maturity in the all-important matter of spiritual values, is rather like this. All religion has taught the same basic values, but, until this modern era, there has been little system to this matter of imparting virtues during child-rearing.

Now scholarship is systematically putting in place the psychological, pedagogical and other scientific aspects of the process. These findings, when joined to the spiritual insights of religion, form an effective team that will assure the continuing improvement of civilization in each successive generation. Bahá'ís, generalize this thought into a potent principle: as truth is one, there must be harmony between science and religion.

The Bibliography lists a number of fine examples of spiritual content for child education. In addition, the Virtues Guide (item #2), provides a suggested structure and methodology for imparting the 52 attributes listed, thus marrying spiritual virtue with scientific insights. It provides not only the content but also advice and guidance regarding the process, important remarks about attitude, and clearly described exercises. "It is based on four key principles:

- (1) the parent is the primary educator of the child,
- (2) children are born in potential; their natural qualities can develop into positive or negative traits depending on how they are educated in their early years,
- (3) character develops as children learn to make responsible, moral choices, and
- (4) self-esteem is a natural outcome of living by spiritual principles."¹⁵

The ultimate goal of such education is excellence, perfection and distinction.

Family Life

Whereas formerly, the family home was the major centre of activity, in the extreme, it has become a place in which to sleep after an exhausting day elsewhere.

The importance of family life is emphasized by Bahá'u'lláh. To begin with, He enjoins individuals and families to start and end the day with prayer. The former to inspire and direct our actions dur-

ing the day, and the latter to afford thanksgiving for, and evaluation of, the day's activities in retrospect.

All family members must constantly strive to establish and maintain family unity by cooperative endeavour, sharing meals and experiences, and consulting with one another in such a way that the opinions of all members are aired appropriately and considered valuable. The many difficult issues of life need to be discussed frankly, but lovingly, with patience and perseverance.

The children are instructed to pay respect to their parents, as parents are instructed to be scrupulously careful in the raising of their children. And family members should strive to acquire the virtue of being of service to one another in a spirit of cooperative, mutual helpfulness.

When in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, was asked: "What is the attitude of your belief towards the family?" He replied: "... the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught in the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individuals must not be transgressed... none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father likewise has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister, and other members of the household, have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the honour of one the honour of all."¹⁶

The family is the crucible in which racism is confronted and all other forms of prejudice combatted. The deliberate fostering of diverse relationships cross divisions of race, culture, religion, nationality, etc., can be a source of invaluable education for all family members. Further, the promotion of association among four or five families which share values and ideals can grace life with cooperation, mutual aid, and encouragement as well as sociability.

Because children emulate the activity of their parents, health, education and enjoyment can result from the sharing of recreational activities such as: sport, music, gardening, crafts, museum visits, and

simple picnics together. On the other hand, children should be given responsibilities in the home so that they learn to cooperate willingly – tasks such as making beds and cleaning rooms for themselves, and doing the dishes, mowing the lawn, etc. for the benefit of the family.

Then there are the increasingly difficult questions of the application of rules in the home, and discipline in the family to uphold and enforce the rules. In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh says: "...That which traineth the world is justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the source of life to the world."¹⁷ Thus rules and discipline come into focus, and their necessity emphasized. And thus it becomes important that both parents agree on the disciplinary measures to be taken, and then apply those measures with consistency.

Parents often can't face the unpleasant aspect of exerting discipline. The hope is that the school system will somehow make up the shortfall. It is clear that public schools don't, or can't, so perform. So, for most, this vital area remains with parents.

"Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral, or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element... Bahá'í parents cannot simply adopt an attitude of non-resistance towards their children, particularly those who are unruly and violent by nature..."¹⁷

While it's clear that children who have done well deserve praise and reward, it's also true that the application of appropriate consequences to fit each transgression is a prerequisite for successful child-rearing.

Finally, because, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said: "The reality of man is his thought"¹⁹ it is of the utmost importance that the family attitudes foster the acquisition of an education that fits the latent talents and capacities of each child. Thus will each child be given every opportunity to develop, resulting in substantial self-fulfillment and a personal potential for beneficial service to the human world.

Supportive Institutions

All levels of the Administration of the Bahá'í Community (world, national and local) have some responsibility to assure the security of the family and the education of the community to foster effective parenting. The main responsibility for such assurance rests at the local level where familiarity with individual needs is possible. In each community, where more than nine Bahá'ís reside, a Local Spiritual Assembly is elected to care for these and other needs of the community.

Accordingly, Bahá'í schools are instituted as an assistance to parents. These usually function each weekend during the normal school year, or in the Summer, often in the country, for a week or more.

“If parents are able to provide the expenses of this education, it is all right, otherwise the community must provide the means for the teaching of that child.”²⁰

In such schools, there is but one curriculum which applies to both girls and boys. It includes virtues education and intellectual stimulation involving discussion of principles like the equality of men and women, the fine aspects of multi-cultural and ethnic diversity, the fundamental agreement on spiritual principles manifested at the heart of the world's great religions, etc. The ultimate objective is to foster unity at all levels in preparation for, and anticipation of, an ever-advancing, world civilization.

Conclusion

The cycle is thus complete. Assuming a suitable level of effort on the part of parents, a new generation, better equipped than the former one to successfully surmount the challenges of life, is ready to begin its work.

An Invitation

If you identify with the beneficial aspect of these views, then you are invited to contact the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís in your locality to indicate a desire to participate and avail your children of the opportunities. Your enquiry will be welcomed!

References

- 1) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 129.
- 2) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 214-215.
- 3) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 326-327.
- 4) Bahá'u'lláh, *Arabic Hidden Words*, #31.
- 5) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 162.
- 6) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118.
- 7) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, #43.
- 8) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, #42.
- 9) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, #41.
- 10) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, #108.
- 11) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 144-145.
- 12) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 126-127.
- 13) Linda and John Wallbridge, *Bahá'í Laws on the Status of Men*, pp. 25-36; published in World Order: Fall 1984/Winter 1984-1985.
- 14) Margaret Ruhe, *Guidelines for Parents*, p. 13; published in 1986 by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India.
- 15) Popov, Popov and Kavelin, *The Virtues Guide*, p. 1; published by the Virtues Project Inc.
- 16) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 163.
- 17) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 38.
- 18) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Education*, p. 109.
- 19) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Prominent People*, p. 1.
- 20) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Education*, p. 73.

A Bahá'í Bibliography on Parenting

Following are nine useful works relevant to surmounting the challenges of marriage and parenting and related to the raising of children:

- (1) *Exploring a framework for moral education*, by Noguchi, Hanson and Lample; published in 1992 by Palabra Publications in the USA. (*1)
- (2) *The Family Virtues Guide - a handbook for parents teaching virtues*, by Popov, Popov and Kavelin; published in 1997 by Penguin Books. (*2)
- (3) *Guidelines For Parents – The Education and Training of Children*, by Margaret Ruhe; published in 1986 by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India. (*2)
- (4) *Bahá'í Education* – a compilation by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Haifa, Israel; published in 1997 by the UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust. (*1)
- (5) *Education in the Bahá'í Family*, by Madeline Hellaby; published in 1987 by George Ronald in the UK. (*1)
- (6) *Thoughts – Education for Peace and One World*, by Irene Taafaki; published in 1986 by George Ronald in the UK. (*1)
- (7) *Distinctive Aspects of Bahá'í Education* – proceedings of the third symposium on Bahá'í education, edited by Nikjoo and Vickers; published in 1991 by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the UK. (*2)
- (8) *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life* – a compilation published in 1983 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. (*2)
- (9) *Creating a Successful Family*, by Khavari and Khavari; published in 1989 by Biddles Limited in the UK. (*1)

- (10) *Marriage: A Fortress For Well-Being*, reissued in 1988 under the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly in the USA. (*2)
- (11) *When We Grow Up*, by Bahíyyih Nakhjavani; published in 1979 by George Ronald in the UK. (*2)
- (12) *Becoming Your True Self*, by Dan Jordan; published in 1993 by *UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust*. (*2)
- (13) *The Family Repairs and Maintenance Manual*, by Agnes Ghaznavi; published in 1989 by George Ronald in the UK. (*1)

Note 1: Document 2 is inter-Faith in nature, and has found wide acceptance by schools and churches in North America, as well as by the Bahá'í community.

(*1) unfortunately out of print

(*2) available from *Unity Arts*; see address below

Unity Arts

26 Concourse Gate,

Nepean, ON

Canada K2E 7T7

Tel.: (613) 727-6200

Fax: (613) 727-3704

Toll Free: 1-800-465-3287

Website: <http://www.bahaibooksonline.com>

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Books mentioned are available in most public libraries.

Local **Telephone** listings are often in your phone book under “*Bahá’í Faith*”.

In Canada **Vision TV** broadcasts *Bahá’í Perspective* the first Wednesday and Thursday of each month (check local listings).

Please feel free to contact any one of the following:

Bahá’í World Centre Web Site:

www.bahai.org

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada

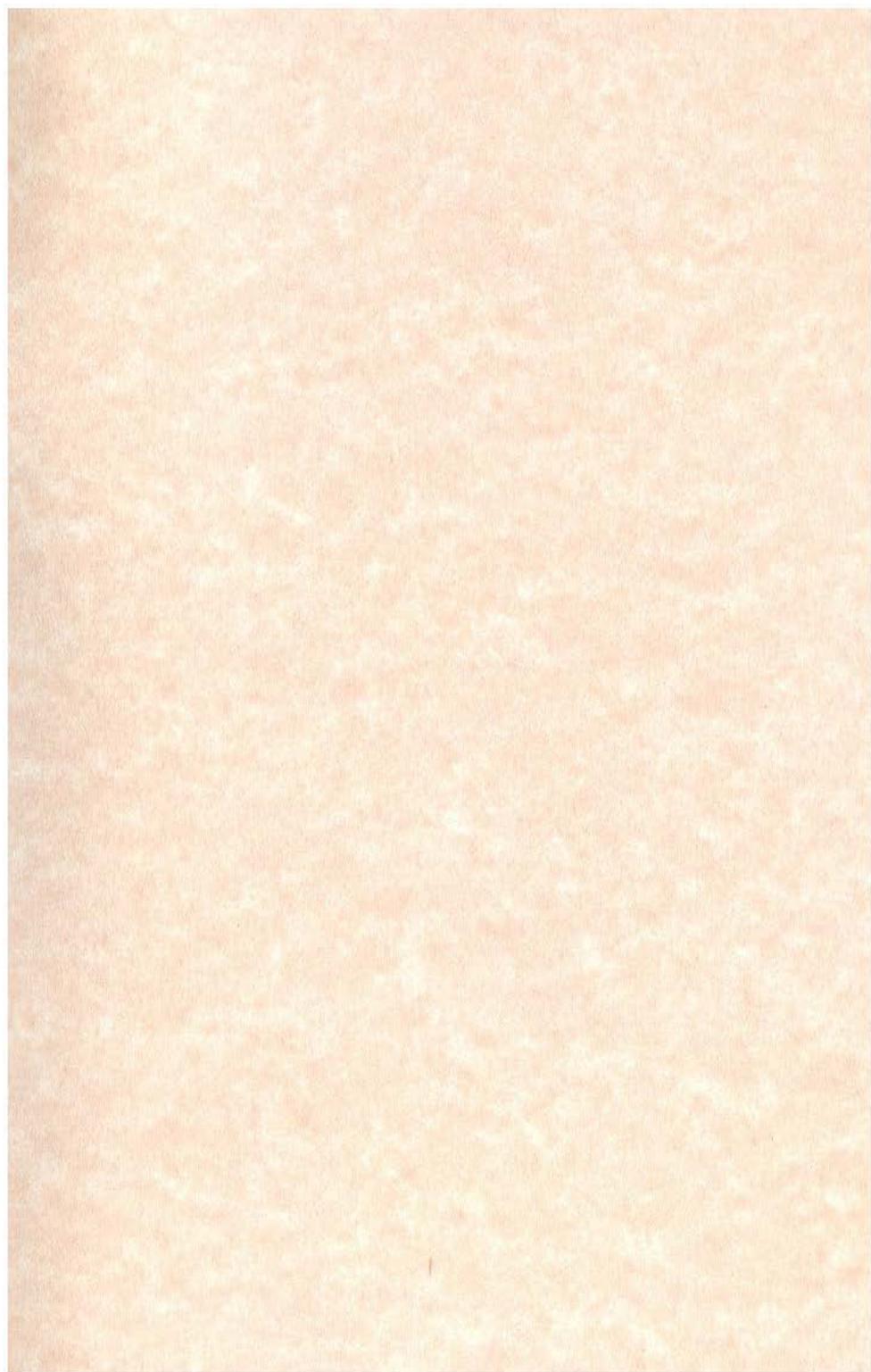
7200 Leslie Street,
Thornhill, Ontario L3T 6L8

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States

415 Linden Avenue
Wilmette, Illinois 60091

Bahá’í Information Line in Canada 1-800-433-3284 for recorded messages about the Bahá’í Faith, its teachings and perspectives on social issues, in English and French.

Bahá’í information is also available in many world languages.



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