

Promoting Resilience With Children Impacted by Parental Incarceration

Angela Tomlin

Indiana University School of Medicine

Karen Ruprecht

ICF Child Care State Capacity Building Center
Fairfax, VA

Joyce A. Arditti

Virginia Tech

Abstract

In prison, jails, and detention centers, the United States incarcerates more people than any other country, and most of these individuals are parents. As a result, early care and intervention professionals are likely to encounter infants and young children affected by parental incarceration. This article will review the scope of the problem, the effects on children, and discuss how providers can best help young children by being aware of their own bias, recognizing and supporting resilience, responding sensitively, knowing and sharing resources, and advocating as appropriate.

The United States is a world leader in mass incarceration, with approximately 2.1 million people confined in the nation's prisons and jails and 1 of 38 adults under some form of correctional control in 2016 (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Because most incarcerated individuals are parents, significant numbers of American children are at risk to experience parental incarceration (Mumola, 2000). Although data have been challenging to access and interpret, most scholars estimate that more than 2.5 million U.S. children currently have a parent in prison or jail (Sykes & Pettit, 2014) and as many as 5 to 8 million children have experienced parental incarceration within their lifetimes (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Documentation of the actual numbers of young children affected by parental incarceration is inconsistent and varied at best (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018). However, on the basis of the available information

compiled by the Bureau of Justice, it is estimated that about 22% of children with an incarcerated parent in state and federal prisons are under 4 years old (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). This figure excludes children whose parent(s) may be confined in local jails, held in detention centers, and those under correctional control related to probation, for example. In the U.S. population as a whole, 5% of all U.S. children younger than 5 years have experienced parental incarceration (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

The risk of experiencing parental incarceration is not evenly distributed. Incarceration can be seen as both stemming from risks (e.g., poverty, minority status) and leading to other risks (e.g., stigma, reduction in family income) for incarcerated persons and their families. Minority status increases the likelihood that a child will experience parental incarceration. According to Gramlich (2019), African Americans' rate of incarceration (33%) is more than double what would be expected by their representation in the overall population (12%). The opposite is true of White Americans, who represent more than 60% of the population and 30% of those who are incarcerated. Racial disparities in

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prison populations extend to children. For example, by the time children born in 1990 reached 14 years old, 1 in 4 Black children had a father in prison compared to less than 1 in 25 White children (Wildeman, 2009).

Given the large numbers of children who experience parental incarceration, a wide range of professionals who work with young children less than 5 years old and their families are likely to be serving those who are impacted by parental incarceration. This article will discuss the experience of parental incarceration as a potential traumatic event in and of itself and as related to other risks. Furthermore, we will encourage viewing parental incarceration within relationship and developmental perspectives as well as within the context of overall risks and resilience that young children may experience. Finally, we present information, resources, and strategies for preschool teachers and other early care professionals about supporting affected children.

Effects of Parental Incarceration

Parental incarceration is typically conceptualized as an adverse childhood experience (Felitti et al., 1998), carrying with it risks to development, physical health, and emotional well-being. Parental incarceration may negatively affect children's well-being in multiple areas with impacts across physical health, developmental, educational, behavioral, and social domains reported in children and adolescents (Bell, Bayliss, Glauert, & Ohan, 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan, Sugrue, Duron, Ciro, & Messex, 2018). Infants and young children may be most vulnerable; parental incarceration that occurs in this age range coincides with the time at which the child is most dependent on a caregiver (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2018). Effects in preschool children include challenging behavior (aggression), internalizing symptoms, decreased school readiness, disruptions to sleep and eating, and other health effects (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009; Haskins, 2014; Jackson & Vaughn, 2017). For infants, risks include relationship issues, discussed in the next

section, and physical health problems. For example, parental incarceration is associated with an increased risk of infant mortality (Wildeman, 2012).

Although there is agreement that parental incarceration confers risk, the circumstances that parental incarceration occurs within can vary widely, as may children's responses and reactions (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). Therefore, although parental incarceration is believed to pose a risk to child well-being above other stressors (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014), it must be understood within context as children's experiences are not homogeneous. Specifically, as with other risks, stressors, or traumatic events, the intersection of parental incarceration with the child's age and developmental trajectory is relevant. In early childhood, parental incarceration can function as an adverse experience that disrupts the young child's attainment of two important and related social-emotional milestones: formation of attachments to parents and the development of coping and other self-regulation skills (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019). From an attachment perspective, a consistent relationship with a caregiver resulting in a secure attachment is necessary to help children develop a number of positive social-emotional skills, including self-regulation skills. These skills carry into adulthood and become assets that can provide protection or buffering from stressors throughout the lifespan. Conversely, less secure attachment status and difficulties in self-regulation may lead to persistent deficits in social-emotional and other skills, and have been associated with undesirable outcomes.

Attachment and Loss

Consistent with this developmental perspective, early childhood researchers have considered the effects of separation from parents due to incarceration using an attachment lens, with attention to how incarceration may change or disrupt attachment relationships (Poehlmann, 2010; Poehlmann-Tynan & Ardit, 2018). Globally, the incarceration of a parent who has a relationship with his or her child has been described as a "significant event" for most children, although the removal of a violent or abusive parent could potentially improve the family's situation (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019; Comfort, 2008). The effects of parental incarceration are theorized to be magnified if the parent was engaged in caregiving prior to confinement (Burnson & Weymouth, 2019); significantly, the majority of incarcerated parents lived with the child prior to arrest and confinement (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). These results are not surprising, because even short-term separation from parents has been demonstrated to be connected to negativity and aggression in preschool children (Howard, Martin, Berlin & Brooks-Gunn, 2011). Research on attachment security in young children experiencing maternal incarceration has suggested higher rates of insecure attachment representations (see Burnson & Weymouth, 2019, for a review). Although this issue has been particularly applicable to young children whose mothers were the primary caregiver before being incarcerated (Arditt, 2012), there is increasing interest placed on understanding effects on children with incarcerated fathers. For example, a study of attachment in children 2 to 6 years old with

jailed fathers indicated that witnessing the arrest was related to insecure attachments (Poehlmann-Tynan, Burnson, Runion, & Weymouth, 2017).

In instances in which the incarcerated parent was not in residence or even known to the child, an experience of loss is still possible. Intriguing qualitative evidence suggests that children experience parental incarceration as an ambiguous loss and may yearn for parents that they do not know (Arditti, 2016; Arditti, Molloy, Spiers, & Johnson, 2019). Lack of information about the incarcerated parent may contribute to the possibility of ambiguous loss. Although some caregivers do provide simple and honest information to their children about incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005), many families choose not to share the events around a parent's incarceration, including his or her whereabouts, with young children least likely to be provided with information (Dallaire, 2007). Poehlmann (2005) found that young children who were not given honest information about their incarcerated parent were more likely to hold representations of insecure attachment with caregivers.

In addition to disruption of the parent–child relationship, parental incarceration is also associated with other risks and stressors both for the child directly and through the incarcerated and non-incarcerated parents (or substitute caregiver) that can affect the child. Children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to have experienced other relational stresses including divorce, death of a parent, foster care placement, and witnessing domestic and community violence (Arditti & Savla, 2015; Dallaire, 2007; Murphey & Cooper, 2015; Poehlmann-Tynan, et al., 2017). Stresses to caregivers include loss of the caregiver role for the incarcerated parent and strain or burden on the non-incarcerated or substitute caregiver. For example, in interviews of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other family members caring for children during a parent's incarceration, 58% of respondents reported negative effects of the incarceration (e.g., financial strain, lack of help with child care and household) compared to 22% who reported positive effects (Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). Respondents who cared for children with incarcerated fathers reported more negative effects than when mothers were incarcerated. Negative effects were more likely when the incarcerated parent was described as significantly involved in the child's life.

Beyond factors related to the child's age and developmental level, factors that may affect the child's reactions to parental incarceration include the caregiving context, children's responses to visitation and contact, and the overall environmental context (Arditti, 2016). Key factors that influence child response to parent incarceration may be relationship-specific, including whether the mother or father is incarcerated, if the child and parent were co-residing prior to incarceration, and the overall quality of the relationship prior to the incarceration.

In addition, it is important to consider the circumstances of the incarceration (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018). Incarceration-related factors include the arrest and what the child saw or was told; the type and length of sentence along with the uncertainty of the court system; and the ability of the child to



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Minority status increases the likelihood that a child will experience parental incarceration.

have contact during the incarceration. The cascade of events that can follow an incarceration should also be considered (e.g., changes in caregiver, reduced family financial situation, stigma). Larger contextual factors are also influential and can include the reactions of the incarcerated parent, the quality of the relationship with the substitute caregiver, and overall social context including the availability of supports (Murray et al., 2012). Examples of disadvantages that may occur for incarcerated persons and their families include lowered income, residential instability and homelessness (Arditti, 2012; Giordino, Copp, Manning, & Longmore, 2019; Muentner et al., 2019). Finally, because most incarcerated individuals expect to return to their families and children after incarceration, reunification and family and community reintegration have also been identified as potential stress experiences for children and families (Foster & Hagan, 2009; Shaw, 2019). The effects may be compounded as children of incarcerated parents are less likely to have access to all types of health care, including mental health services that could help them cope (Turney, 2017).

In summary, to the extent that parental incarceration is associated with pre-existing or resultant family instability, material hardship, and parenting stress, one can expect young children to be adversely affected (Arditti, 2016, 2018; Besemer & Dennison, 2018; Burnson & Weymouth, 2019). However, as with other populations who experienced stressors, clinicians and researchers identified sets of children of the incarcerated who had positive outcomes, leading to a surge of interest in the factors that led to this resilience (Poehlmann & Eddy, 2013). We next consider resilience in children with incarcerated parents.

Resilience to Adversity

Although resilience has sometimes been thought of as an individual's personal ability to cope with and overcome life stressors and hardships, more recently, researchers have begun



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to consider resilience processes developmentally, across time, and in context. A given child's ability to adapt to and cope with the experience of parental incarceration is influenced by the systems that surround her, including the culture, community, family, and especially specific caregiving relationships (Masten, 2018). Protective factors in early childhood can include the presence of other supportive relationships and families' ability to access supports and resources. The well-being of parents, parent-figures, and other supportive caregivers (e.g., teachers, child care providers) is highly related to overall child functioning, particularly in the face of stressors or trauma events (Luthar, 2015; Luthar & Cicciola, 2015).

A nuanced view of risk and resilience that parental incarceration poses is emerging. On the one hand, there is evidence that parental incarceration is a risk to child well-being both on its own and as understood from within a range of risk that may precede or follow it. On the other hand, some children, despite this risk, are able to draw on environmental and internal resources to demonstrate resilience. It becomes critical for providers serving young children of incarcerated parents to recognize that although resilience is possible, it is not a given. Reacting to stressors such as parental incarceration cannot be seen as representing a fault or a weakness in the child. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that some children will appear to be unaffected by the experience but may have subtle or hidden symptoms. Practitioners should strive to strike a balance, neither assuming the worst nor minimizing the real challenge of parental incarceration to young children. Staying on this tight-rope allows the provider to acknowledge risk while holding the idea that resilience is possible.

Given the numbers of families that experience incarceration, it is likely that practitioners from all service sectors, including child care, education, home visiting, and health care, will encounter children who are affected. Although there is little information specifically about how early care and education providers can

help children of the incarcerated, there is a growing literature exploring the ways these providers can help a similar population, young children who are at risk for or already involved in the child welfare system. For example, in a research brief, Klein (2016) suggested that participation in early care and education services may promote child safety, permanency, and well-being.

How the Workforce Can Promote Resilience

The following sections outline strategies for supporting children who have experienced parental incarceration and other risks related to parental separation and family disadvantage. Many of these strategies may be used to support young children separated from parents or other key caregivers for other reasons, including divorce, foster care placement, deportation, or even deployment.

Be Knowledgeable

Incarceration carries stigma that continues after the person is no longer under correctional control (Besemer & Dennison, 2018). Formerly incarcerated individuals are likely to continue to experience stigma when they are looking for work or attempting to participate in their communities. The stigma attached to incarceration can also affect the person's family and children. Although many children have an absent parent because of events such as divorce or deployment, parental absence due to incarceration can be highly stigmatizing for children, leading many families to hide this fact from peers and teachers (McGinley & Jones, 2018; Phillips & Gates, 2011). Because of the high level of incarceration in the US, early childhood providers must recognize the high likelihood that children of the incarcerated are in their care. Providers need to know that any parental separation, including parental incarceration, has the potential to be experienced as a traumatic event (Arditti & Savla, 2015). They must also know that parental incarceration may carry burdens that other types of separation do not, including stigma, uncertainty, and loss of economic security.

Finally, early childhood providers should know that young children can have behavioral, developmental, and emotional responses to adverse experiences, and they should understand how these reactions may manifest in early childhood. Training in trauma-informed care, including recognizing and responding to children affected by parental incarceration, is needed. Providers should realize that the return of the parent to the family and re-engagement in the parenting relationship may also be challenging for children and the parents. Providers can help when they recognize these events as difficult for some children and when they communicate with parents to learn when these events are happening.

Be Sensitive

Providers who serve children with incarcerated parents are in a unique position to help by being sensitive to the child's

situation. The providers can build on their awareness of the likelihood that children with incarcerated parents are participating in early childhood programs by monitoring their own reactions and seeking to have helpful responses. Strategies for increasing sensitivity include: attending to one's own thoughts and behaviors, building relationships that allow for open communication with the child's caregiver, being aware of possible triggers for children and planning accordingly, and seeing and promoting resilience in children and families.

It is important to be aware of and monitor for personal bias that can result in further stigmatizing children and their families. In one empirical study, teachers of school-aged children estimated the competence of a fictitious child described as being separated from her parent. Teachers in this study rated a child as less competent when they believed the child had an incarcerated parent than when they believed the child's parent was away for other reasons (Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010). Unconscious bias can also lead providers to discount the possibility of parental incarceration when the children in their care have apparent privilege, such as living in a two-parent family or being of the dominant culture, or when they work in affluent communities. Although parental incarceration may be more likely in under-resourced or disadvantaged communities, children with incarcerated parents can be found anywhere in the country, including in more resourced areas.

Providers can monitor their language to avoid making even unintentionally disparaging comments about the child's parent. Biases can also lead providers to have judgmental attitudes or lowered expectations for affected children. But expecting all children to be unaffected or to rebound from the experience of separation from parents due to incarceration may also be damaging. Providers are most helpful when they can strike a balance, neither assuming the worst about a child nor dismissing the real difficulties that the situation may pose.

Sensitive response includes careful communication with parents about their family's situation. For example, it is helpful to ask what has been shared and not shared with the child about the parents' absence. Family choices about what to share vary widely. Some families may feel it is best to withhold all information, some provide curated information, and others tell children frankly what has happened and is happening (Chui & Yeung, 2016). Following the family's lead is particularly important for those working in early childhood, as the younger the child the less likely the child is to have been given accurate information about the parent's whereabouts (Poehlmann, 2005). Similarly, some families choose to let their children's caregivers know about an incarceration, but others may not share information. In some cases, the information is shared despite family preference. This can happen when the provider learns about an incarceration in the news or through social media or when children rather than caregivers disclose the information to the provider. Other times a parent may disclose reluctantly when a provider inquires about changes in child behavior. In all cases, the providers can ask caregivers to discuss how they can work together to support the child.



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Providers should know two important potential triggers: interactions with the incarcerated parent (including visits and phone calls) and events which the parent is unable to attend. Families make different choices about children seeing their parents during incarceration; but overall, children are likely to have some contact with the incarcerated parent, whether in person, by phone, or through mail. Visitation may be positive for some incarcerated persons, but this is not uniformly true. Children's experience of visitation is also not homogeneous; factors affecting the success of the visit include the child's age, the visit setting, practices and attitudes of custody staff, and issues related to travel to the location (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzi, 2019). For example, traveling to the prison or jail can be cost- and time-prohibitive for the caregiver. Travel is often an issue when a child's mother is incarcerated. Because there are fewer prisons for women than men, the prison is more likely to be located at a distance from the family, so a journey to visit often takes many hours and may require an overnight stay.

Getting into the prison or jail may include being searched, which may be uncomfortable or confusing for young children. Local jails may not have a space for visitation at all. Although some prisons have child-friendly spaces, many still have visitation rooms that are not set up for children, do not allow touch, or even require a child to "visit" from behind a glass window (Arditti, 2003; Schlafer, Loper, & Schillmoeller, 2015). Finally, custody staff members are not always kind or respectful to families of the incarcerated, including children. As a result, researchers have suggested that a visit to an incarcerated parent can serve as a traumatic reminder for some children (Arditti & Savla, 2015). Care providers can be sensitive to the possibility that the much-anticipated visit may not have been a positive as hoped. Even when the visit goes well, a child may have strong feelings that carry over.



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Given the strong relationship between poverty and incarceration, providers can help families through sharing any general resources that support families in need

Activities that typically include family members can be challenging for any child with an absent parent, including those who have experienced or who are experiencing parental incarceration. This difficulty may occur whether the child knows and has a relationship with the parent or not. Children may struggle at holidays or family celebrations including birthdays when their parent cannot be present. Events at school or child care that involve parent attendance can serve to highlight a parent's absence. Even for children whose parents have been released, these events can be problematic. Individuals who have certain convictions, for example, may not be able to pass background checks needed to volunteer or attend events held at a child care or school venue. Setting the event up from the beginning to include a variety of special adults (grandparents and other extended family or close neighbors or family friends) can allow children in this situation to participate.

Be Resourceful

In addition to being aware of and sensitive about given children's situations, providers can ensure that their program includes materials that depict a variety of family types and situations. These materials may include items that speak to feelings that children can have related to acknowledged and ambiguous or unspoken losses in the family. Providers can know, use, and share general information about caregiver absences and specific resources designed to support children who have incarcerated parents. For example, providers can ensure that their settings include materials, such as books or other media, that depict families with absent parents, including those affected by incarceration. There are a number of children's books that address these topics, including divorce, deployment, foster care placement, and death of a parent. Similarly, there are a range of books that address issues that may come up for children with incarcerated parents, including how it feels to be apart, what visitation is like, and how to talk about this experience. Creators of the long-running children's educational show *Sesame Street* have developed a set of materials that provides information for

children and their caregivers about how to navigate a parent's incarceration (Oades-Sese, Cohen, Allen, & Lewis, 2014; Shlafer, Wanous, & Schubert, 2017).

Given the strong relationship between poverty and incarceration, providers can help families through sharing any general resources that support families in need. These resources could range from concrete supports (e.g., food pantries, rent assistance) to information about services such as counseling or health care. Many local communities have programs specifically intended to support families that experience incarceration. These may be a component of the local correction agencies or operated through a faith-based group or other community system (Kjellstrand, 2017). Programs may be targeted to the incarcerated parent (e.g., parent training, support to communicate) to the child (e.g., Angel Tree programs, mentoring), and supports to maintain contact such as special visitation rooms and activities.

Be an Advocate

Another way that early childhood professionals can help children with incarcerated parents is by participating in advocacy. Here we consider advocacy broadly to encompass supports to individual children and families, as well as social justice activities that can inform policy. At the public policy level, providers can stay informed about legislation that may affect incarcerated individuals and their children. A good site for information about policies that affect young children is the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center (ZERO TO THREE, n.d.). Information may be available through the providers' professional associations. When appropriate, providers can share their professional knowledge and experiences with lawmakers. Examples include sharing ideas via phone calls and emails, giving testimony about personal experiences, and providing research information. In addition, practitioners can become social justice "allies" for children in justice-involved families by not only encouraging healthy adaptation to stress, but working to address systemic problems such as poverty, racism, and disenfranchisement (Anderson, 2019).

Summary

Long overlooked, children with incarcerated parents have deservedly come to the forefront for child-serving sectors in the US. Given the large numbers of children who have experienced parental incarceration in this country, and the risk that this experience confers, all adults who work with these children and their families must be equipped to serve them well. For the workforce that serves infants and young children, both the chances of serving affected children and the stakes are high. Professionals across promotion, prevention, and intervention sectors can make a difference in these young children's lives when they are informed, sensitive, and skilled.

Angela Tomlin, IMH-E®, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM). At IUSM, she directs the division of Child Development and

Riley Child Development Center, Indiana’s LEND interdisciplinary training program. Dr. Tomlin provides clinical services to families with children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, supervises graduate trainees, provides reflective consultation in the community, and is a frequent presenter on topics including autism, behavior management, and infant mental health. She is the author or co-author of 20 publications and with Stephan Viehweg authored *Tackling the Tough Stuff: A Home Visitor’s Guide to Supporting Families at Risk* in 2016. With team members, Dr. Tomlin was selected to participate in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leader Program, with a research focus on supporting children of incarcerated parents.

Karen Ruprecht, MPA, PhD, serves as a managing director of early childhood systems at the Child Care State Capacity Building Center. Her research and professional interests are focused on the intersection of research, policy, and practice for young children. She has evaluated quality rating and improvement systems, state-funded pre-k programs, professional development efforts, and has conducted research on the practice of continuity of care for infants and toddlers. She is an alumna of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leader Fellow program where she researched the impact of parental incarceration on young children, families, and child care providers.

Joyce A. Arditti, PhD, is a professor of human development and family science at Virginia Tech. Her research interests include family disruption, parent–child relationships in vulnerable families, and public policy. During her three-decade long career, she has published numerous empirical and review articles in therapy, human services, family studies, and criminal justice journals. She is the author of the book *Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers*, for which she was the 2014 recipient of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Outstanding Book Award. In August 2016, she was awarded the Alumni Award for Research Excellence by Virginia Tech for her research achievements of significance in the area of parental incarceration. She is a fellow of the National Council on Family Relations and recently was a visiting fellow at the Griffith Criminology Institute in Brisbane, Australia. She serves on various editorial boards and is actively involved in national and international research projects dealing with families involved in the criminal justice system.

Learn More

To learn more about mass incarceration, including research and policy recommendations

Vera Institute
<https://www.vera.org>

Prison Policy Initiative
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org>

For more information about supporting children of incarcerated parents

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu>

National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice
<https://nicic.gov/children-of-incarcerated-parents>

Child Welfare Gateway
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/support-services/incarceration>

Sesame Street
<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration>

Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One Is Incarcerated
B. Birtha (2017)
Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman and Company

Kofi’s Mom
R. Dyches (2011)
Lockwood, CA: Family Bridge Network

Visiting Day
J. Woodson (2015)
New York, NY: Penguin Books

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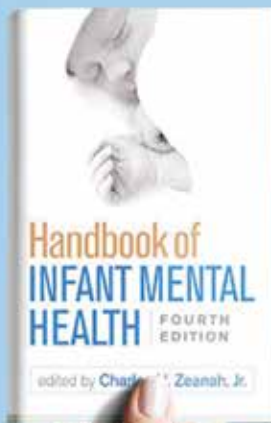
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