



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Grandparents Who Care

Literature Review

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly one quarter of children under 5 years old are in the care of their grandparents for some period of time every week while mothers work (2013). The **Grandparents Who Care** project explores the benefits and challenges of such kinship care and provides guidance concerning grandparents' needs and how best to address them. In preparation, we interviewed experts in the field, reviewed research on the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and examined studies on grandparents who have assumed a caregiving role. This document summarizes our key findings.

Who's Minding the Kids?

In 2011, almost half of the 20.4 million children under 5 years old in the United States received care in informal settings, according to the Informal Caregivers Research Project, a study commissioned by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Thomas, Boller, Johnson, Young, & Hu, 2015). Further, "forty-two percent of children under five received care from relatives, with grandmothers the most common relative to provide child care" (Thomas, Boller, et al., p.1). By 2010, grandparent-provided child care was the main source of child care for 19.6% of U.S. children under 5 with employed mothers, up from 13.9% in 1988 (Laughlin 2010, as cited in Ho, 2015).

Caregiving grandparents are an especially important source of support for families with low socio-economic status; data show that mothers experiencing poverty rely to a greater extent on grandparent care (30%) than on child care centers (16%) or family child care providers (4%; Thomas, Boller, et al., 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, research finds that relative care in the child's home is a more common primary arrangement for infants in households with one of the following characteristics:

- income at or below 150% of poverty,
- family members of Asian descent,
- a single parent,
- Spanish as the primary home language,
- mothers who have a high school degree or less, or
- mothers who are looking for work or not in the labor force (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2009).



Grandparents as Caregivers

The relationship between grandparent and grandchild is often seen as transformative for both generations. Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, physician, psychiatrist, and the author of eight books on grandparenting, described the grandparent-child bond as second only to the parent-child bond, a basic human relationship deserving of celebration. For many grandparents caring for grandchildren, this relationship brings meaning to life, providing both “spiritual illumination and physical transformation” (personal communication, February 10, 2017).



Grandparents fill a gap, and kids know that. —Arthur Kornhaber, MD

In a national survey for the AARP, “the most common initial response to the question about how [grandparents] felt about being a grandparent was ‘joy.’ Many characterized grandparenting as providing the enjoyable aspects of parenting without some of the negative aspects, particularly the primary responsibility for care and discipline . . .” (Lampkin, 2012, p. 4).

Grandparents carry a sense of personal triumph when they see their grandchildren mastering the skills they previously taught their own children. The gratification of grandparenthood also comes from the ability to shape another generation. —Lampkin, 2012, p. 4

The care provided by grandparents clearly benefits their adult children and grandchildren as well.

Amy Goyer, writer, and for many years the AARP's expert on grandparenting, described the advantages of caregiving grandparents:

The more loving adults in a family focusing on a child, the better children do . . . Grandparents as caregivers provide a sense of security; the parent is generally more relaxed, and kids pick that up. Grandparents provide continuity, and their care changes the grandparent-grandchild relationship throughout their lifetime (personal communication, February 6, 2017).

Greg Link, a program specialist at the U.S. Administration on Aging, identified similar benefits:

For kids, especially when they're young, a sense of stability [is offered by grandparents]—the more solid the footing, the better. The working parent has the security of knowing a family member is providing care. Stress levels are reduced (personal communication, January 17, 2017).

Some studies have shown mental health benefits for children cared for by grandparents; "one study assessing the role of grandparents on the mental health of African American youth found that having a grandparent in the household was associated with lower depressive symptoms and less deviant behavior" (Hamilton, 2005, as cited by Pulgaron, Marchante, Agosto, Lebron, & Delamater, 2016, p. 261). Another study exploring the impact of nuclear and extended family living on the mental health of three generations in British Hindu and Muslim communities found that "children and grandmothers were better adjusted in extended families than nuclear families" (Sonuga-Barke & Mistry, 2000, p. 129). A 2010 study, rare because it examined the effects of *non-residential* grandmother involvement, found that involved grandmothers served as a buffer for young children at risk for low social competence and externalizing behaviors due to mothers' harsh parenting or grandchildren's negative emotional reactivity (Barnett, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger).

On the other hand, the impact of grandparent care on grandchildren's physical health can be a cause for concern. In a 2016 literature review of 26 studies from 14 countries on a variety of health topics (Pulgaron et al.), five studies seemed to suggest a connection between grandparent involvement and childhood obesity. The Pulgaron literature review also considered injury and safety topics. One study "indicated lower levels of safety in grandparents' homes for infants at 10 months compared with infants being cared for by nannies" (Leach et al., 2008, as cited by Pulgaron et al., p. 266). Another study showed grandparents were less likely to anchor car seats securely than parents were (O'Neil et al. 2012, cited by Pulgaron et al., p. 266). Research from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia also suggested that grandparents are less





likely than parents to follow the latest recommendations regarding the use of car seats. But if accidents occur, children are less likely to be hurt if a grandparent is at the wheel (Norton, 2011).

According to a survey of more than 600 grandparents conducted by Dr. Andrew Adesman of the Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York, grandparents aren't always familiar with the latest child care techniques; nearly a quarter of grandparents surveyed were unaware that infants should be put to sleep on their backs, and more than two thirds did not know that wounds heal better when covered (Jimison, 2017).

Defining Grandparent Caregivers

Variations in the time grandparents spend caring for grandchildren as well as the circumstances that prompted the need for caregiving make it difficult to generalize about their experiences. However, according to Amy Goyer (personal communication, February 6, 2017), one consistent issue is that grandparents providing less than full-time care are often overlooked by service agencies providing resources and support to grandparents in the community.

Caregiving arrangements vary in intensity, beginning with a "skipped generation" arrangement, in which the parent is not present and grandparents serve as the child's primary caregivers and guardians. A "multigenerational" arrangement describes a situation in which grandparents and parents share the household and caregiving responsibilities. A final, third category of caregiving describes an arrangement in which grandparents provide child care or "babysitting" to grandchildren who do not live with them (Goodman & Silverstein, Waldrop & Weber, and Presser, as cited in Luo, LaPierre, Hughes, & Waite, 2012). Generally speaking,

Grandparents with higher levels of education, income, and assets are more likely to start and continue babysitting. . . These results suggest that nonresidential care is discretionary; grandparents seem to undertake such care when they are willing and able to provide it. . . Grandparents who provide coresidential care, however, may be forced more often by circumstances to undertake that care. (Luo et al., p. 1161)

In a large study examining the prevalence and profiles of grandparents providing extensive care for a grandchild (more than 30 hours per week or 90 nights per year of child care), caregivers "appeared to resemble custodial caregivers to a much greater degree than did those who provided only occasional child care. For example, although just 8% of occasional child care providers lived below the poverty line, the figure was far higher (18%) for extensive caregivers" (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2001, p. 207).

A 2003 study (Vandell, McCartney, Owen, Booth, & Clarke-Stewart) set out to examine variations in care provided by grandparents, interviewing 1,229 families at 3-month intervals for 36 months. The researchers identified "four mutually exclusive and exhaustive groups" based on the duration and amount of grandparent care:

- extended full-time care (30 or more hours per week for at least 1 year),
- extended part-time care (fewer than 30 hours per week for at least 1 year),
- sporadic care (routine care for less than 1 year or in varying amounts), and
- no routine grandparent care.



Type of Care Provided for Grandchildren

According to a 2012 study conducted by Generations United and MetLife, 13% of grandparents surveyed said they provide care for grandchildren on a regular basis, as follows:

I'm raising them	15%
Babysitting/caregiver fewer than 5 days per week	42%
Babysitting/caregiver 5 days per week or more	32%
I'm providing regular care for a disabled or special needs grandchild	1%
Other	10%

Reasons for Providing Care

Because I want to/enjoy doing it	58%
So their parents can work	53%
To save money on day care	37%
To help out my child who is a single parent	37%
To pass down family values	22%
So that my grandchild(ren) can do better in school	15%
I am their legal guardian	14%
The grandchild(ren) don't have parents	4%
Other	8%

Generations United and MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2012, p. 11-12

Mothers of color and mothers who had more extensive full-time employment were more likely to use extended full-time grandparent care than the other types of care. Sporadic care and extended part-time care were more likely to be used when mothers worked nonstandard hours. Younger mothers (average age = 25) were also more likely to use sporadic care.

In a study published in 2015, Christine Ho examined factors influencing the amount of child care and financial support supplied by grandparents. Two factors likely to increase time spent caregiving were the birth of a new grandchild and geographic proximity. Those factors were also positively related to financial help (financial transfers) from married grandparents to their adult children.

In addition, the cost of formal child care was also positively related to married grandparents' financial transfers towards the younger generation. On the other hand, it seems that single grandmothers were potentially decreasing their leisure time in order to help take care of grandchildren. Married grandmothers also adjusted their labor supply in the face of grandchild needs while grandfathers do not seem to adjust their labor supply by much. (Ho, 2015, p. 371–374).

See the box on page 6 for more information on the types of care provided for grandchildren and grandparents' reasons for providing that care.

The Impact of Caregiving on Grandparents

The impact of caregiving on a grandparent's health is a question that has been explored by many researchers. A study by Hughes, Waite, LaPierre, and Luo (2007), found that "health declines as a consequence of grandchild care appear to be the exception rather than the rule" (p. S108). In contrast, they found "scattered evidence" that grandmothers who babysit grandchildren experience health benefits such as more exercise and fewer functional limitations, as well as a decline in depressive symptoms (p. S115). A survey of 312 grandparents in Barcelona, Spain, who provided 10 or more hours of weekly care also found benefits for the caregiving grandparents. "Results indicated that auxiliary care for grandchildren is more a source of positive emotions and an opportunity to establish a rewarding affective relationship than a burden or a stressing responsibility" (Triadó, Villar, Celdrán, & Solé, 2014). A 2016 study published in



Evolution and Human Behavior found that caring for others increased longevity, and it included grandparents who took care of grandchildren on an occasional basis in its sample (Hilbrand et al., as cited in Sifferlin).

Other research paints a less rosy picture of the impact of child care on grandparents providing care, finding that grandparents who provide substantial amounts of care may be more likely to report stress or marital discord. For example, one study (Wang & Szinovacz, 2015) found that caring for grandchildren can affect grandparents' perception of the quality of their marriage. Grandmothers who provide more than 500 hours of care per year are 24% more likely to report high marital strain (e.g., spouse criticizes, lets you down) than grandmothers who provide no child care. There was no association for grandfathers. Perceptions were more positive when grandparents shared child care equally, which was "associated with higher closeness and less strain for both genders" (p. 445). Bowers and Myers (1999) found an even greater impact on the marriages of grandparents who provide full-time care, with 44% of grandmothers surveyed reporting a negative change in their relationship with their spouse as the result of caring for grandchildren. In contrast, only 7% of grandmothers providing part-time care reported a change in their relationships with their husbands.



Protective factors such as social support and self-care may mitigate the stress of caregiving. Musil and Ahmad (2002) found that grandmothers who provided primary or partial/supplemental care and who used active coping strategies (e.g., talking to someone or making a plan of action and following it) reported reduced impacts of stress on their mental and physical health.

Common Challenges for Grandparent Caregivers

What challenges do families face when two generations share parenting responsibilities? Ana Beltran, special advisor for Generations United, said that generational differences concerning discipline, use of technology, and lifestyle (e.g., setting up play dates vs. urging kids to go outside and find somebody to play with) need to be carefully navigated in families in which grandparents provide care (personal

communication, January 17, 2017). Finding a balance between the grandparent's approach and the parent's approach can be challenging for both adults, but particularly for grandparents. In interviews with a small group of caregiving grandmothers in Singapore, Low and Goh (2015) found caregiving grandparents "lived with a reduced sense of power where childcare methods were concerned. Grandparents chose to give in to their adult children's methods and not insist on their own method in order to maintain harmony. They managed these potential tensions between generations by suppressing the ambivalence and the conflicts they faced" (p. 315).



There's a big need for alignment regarding parenting philosophy, agreed Christine Crosby, editorial director of GRAND Magazine. Today's parents have access to a lot of child-rearing information and may be less likely than previous generations to ask grandparents for advice, Crosby said, missing an opportunity to foster bonding and respect (personal communication, February 10, 2017). "Tuning In," ZERO TO THREE's National Parent Survey, reported similar findings. While 91% of surveyed parents reported that "how they were raised" was a source of parenting information, only 64% rated this information as helpful (ZERO TO THREE, 2016). Cheryl Harbour, executive editor of GRAND Magazine, cited the difficulty of resolving conflicts inherent in many family systems, noting that parents may face challenges in setting boundaries without insulting grandparents. She added that there may be unresolved issues from the adult's childhood that are triggered in co-parenting with a parent (personal communication, February 10, 2017).

Greg Link also emphasized that clear, healthy communication is critical for successful parent-grandparent relationships and leads to lower stress levels and enhanced family cohesiveness. He suggested that agencies develop tools and resources that could guide discussions about caregiving roles and responsibilities for parents and grandparents, noting: "If the question of 'Who will do what?' is answered, it will help mitigate conflict" (personal communication, January 17, 2017).

Amy Goyer characterized conflicts with parents as the primary challenge in a grandparent-as-caregiver arrangement and observed that grandparents are often uncomfortable turning down their adult child's request to care for grandchildren. Acquiescing to an adult child's request for help with child care can be problematic in some cases when "grandparents also want to have a life; maybe they're working, or they're retired and [caregiving] is not what they pictured." She said families need to have the tools necessary to negotiate caregiving roles and frequency in healthy ways,

and she recommended an informal child care agreement in writing, or, failing that, a family discussion of important issues (personal communication, February 6, 2017).

Matt Kaplan, professor of intergenerational programs and aging at the Pennsylvania State University, also recognized the push and pull on grandparents who act as caregivers. “Families appreciate having a grandparent around—a lifesaver! And yet, for grandparents who are still working, this may be a huge sacrifice” (personal communication, January 13, 2017). An often-unanticipated drawback of providing care for grandchildren is greater isolation from one’s social network. Melinda Perez-Porter, director of Relatives as Parents Program for the Brookdale Foundation Group, observed that caregiving can cause grandparents to feel isolated from friends who don’t share this experience (personal communication, January 13, 2017). Melissa Barnett, assistant professor of family studies and human development at the University of Arizona, reported that grandparents feel most satisfied with their caregiving role when the time commitment lines up with their desires (personal communication, January 24, 2017).

Low and Goh (2015) suggested that the “literature has tended to hide the possible conflicts, tensions, and undercurrents pertaining to grandchildren care across the generations” (p. 305). Their interview-based research revealed the perceived costs to grandmothers who elect to provide child care while parents work: “One of the chief costs was freedom” (p. 309). Finances were the second most frequently mentioned cost, as caregiving grandmothers cut down on the hours they worked outside the home. Those who were no longer working reported they would have sought part-time employment were they not caring for grandchildren.



Kaplan acknowledged that “sometimes the ideal of a family working together doesn’t match reality” (personal communication, January 13, 2017). He stressed the need for constant communication regarding shared values. He would like to see community agencies develop training or group experiences that take an intergenerational approach to promoting caregiving strategies such as healthy eating and outdoor play. Kaplan refers to this approach as a “child-inspired team” that includes all of the child’s caregivers.

According to Amy Goyer, caregiving issues are magnified for low-income families due to an additional layer of

financial pressure. For example, parents may hold several low-wage jobs at non-standard hours to make ends meet (personal communication, February 6, 2017). This work schedule may leave them with few options other than care by family or friends, with grandparents either working long hours in caregiving roles or caring for children overnight.

Arrangements in which grandparents provide care for young children have potential benefits for all three generations. But these arrangements are not without compromise, both in how family resources are allocated and in how child care decisions are handled. The relationship between a caregiving grandparent and the child's parent(s) is a complicated one requiring careful navigation of roles and alignment of caregiving strategies.

Access to Resources

It's hard for caregivers to admit they're struggling, says researcher Melissa Barnett, so one challenge for agencies providing resources and services is figuring out how to offer help pre-emptively and proactively (personal communication, January 24, 2017). The key is connecting grandparents in an on-going fashion to the resources and supports available in their communities. See the box Questions for Caregiving Grandparents for a list of questions to assist with making these connections.

According to the *Understanding Informal Systems of Care* study, "There is a great need to connect people so they are ready to reach out for resources. These ... needs such as language skills, mobility, and Internet accessibility may seem mundane, but there is an immense difference when a person is given these tools—it gets people out of isolation. . . . Connecting to a trusted community of peers is key to sparking a hunger for information awareness, access, and support" (Concept Hatchery, 2015, p. 12, 15).

Providers need to consider potential obstacles to making this connection. Ana Beltran addressed

Questions for Caregiving Grandparents

Those agencies and organizations offering support to caregiving grandparents should assess their needs and available resources by exploring issues like the ones outlined below.

- Learn whether the caregiving situation is voluntary—or is it circumstantial? If the situation is: "You're the only thing we've got/can afford," that will influence a grandparent's level of comfort.
- How comfortable are grandparents with this arrangement? If not, what is making them uncomfortable?
- On what topics or issues do caregiving grandparents want more information or support? Where do they see their strengths?
- How connected are grandparents to community resources?
- Who would grandparents go to for help or support? What is their current support network?
- Has their social network grown or shrunk because of this role?
- Are the caregiving demands such that they are being socially isolated? How can they stay connected to peers?

Greg Link, U.S. Administration on Aging (personal communication, January 17, 2017)

obstacles related to poverty in this way:

“Everything’s easier with resources. A grandparent who’s struggling financially may ask himself ‘Can I afford 5 more gallons of gas [to attend a grandparenting group]?’” Beltran said that a best practice for agencies serving grandparent caregivers is to offer food, child care, and transportation as part of any in-person program. Effective community outreach should also be considered for middle-class clients, who may lack connections to government agencies that might typically serve low-income families (personal communication, January 17, 2017). See the box **Informal Caregivers’ Access to Resources** for a list of potential barriers and recommendations.

Support Groups

The benefits of face-to-face support groups are well-known to organizations such as the Brookdale Foundation Group, which supports “skipped generation” families in which parents are absent from the home. “It’s helpful to talk to a supportive audience of peers—others who’ve gone through what they’re going through,” said Melinda Perez-Porter, director of Brookdale’s Relatives as Parents Program. Program veterans serve as mentors, guiding those new to the group through individualized education plan meetings, court dates, and the public assistance application process. Perez-Porter recommended having someone committed to monitoring group needs and connecting members to resources. Group leaders may also play a role in convincing organizations such as the YMCA to offer reduced membership fees for grandparents and grandchildren. Perez-Porter recommended conducting ongoing surveys of participants to elicit ideas for programming and to better understand their needs (personal communication, January 30, 2017).

Low and Goh (2015) also suggested support groups for grandparents who are providing care, describing full-time caregiving for young children as “physically and psychologically taxing” (p. 316).

Informal Caregivers’ Access to Resources

In a 2015 study, interviewers asked 58 informal caregivers and parents about their needs and preferences in accessing information, activities, and materials related to child safety and development.

Barriers to participation:

- Logistical barriers: lack of transportation, unsafe neighborhoods, undocumented migrant status
- Language barriers: limited English proficiency, illiteracy
- Technological barriers: lack of Internet access
- Financial barriers: costs associated with programs and trainings

Reported methods of obtaining information: Text messages, telephone, Internet, social media, YouTube, email

Recommended methods for outreach:

Text messages, television ads, mailings, bulletin boards at community buildings, materials distributed through schools.

The study’s authors pointed out “an advantage of low-tech methods—in particular, those that do not rely on Internet access—is that they are more inclusive and can reach older, less educated, and less connected individuals.” (Thomas, Johnson et al., 2015, p. 4)

Arthur Kornhaber pointed out that grandparents “have nobody a generation older to advise them.” He suggested that communities could provide a child-friendly setting where grandparents can bring their grandchildren and meet others in the same situation to share stories, advice, and support (personal communication, February 10, 2017). Doing so supports grandparents in building a social network of other adults who are also balancing caregiving with other responsibilities. Social engagement, and a reduction in isolation, is central to healthy aging (Eakman, Carlson, & Clark, 2010; Power et al., 2007 as cited in Elder & Retrum, 2012).

Online Resources

Differences in access to online resources provide insight into how best to reach grandparents online.

Age

The average age of first-time grandparents in the U.S. is about 52; about half of today’s grandparents are under 65 (Jayson, 2016). Older Generation Xers and the youngest Baby Boomers access Internet resources at much greater rates than their counterparts who are over 65. According to a 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 89% of American adults ages 50–64 years old use the Internet, with 67% use among those 65 and older (Rainie, 2017). Thus, online resources may be a primary strategy for this younger segment of grandparents, though many older grandparents (almost 70%) may benefit from Web-based content as well.

Race, Language, and Income

The same Pew Research Center study found Internet use to be less frequent among those with low household incomes (81% for households under \$30K per year vs. 91% to 99% for other income groups). Low-income households were also less likely to have broadband access at home (53% as compared with 71% through 94% for other income groups.) “Spanish preferers” are less likely to use the Internet or have access to broadband at home than “all adults.” Both home broadband and smartphones are less commonly used in rural areas. That said, 13% of poor households, 12% of African-Americans, and 13% of Latinos depend on smartphones for all Internet access.

Internet access is not as difficult as it was before, due to the young age of grandparents. Think about grandparenting apps and social media for the future. —Amy Goyer

These data show what all strong agencies understand: As with any communications approach, a variety of modalities is critical to reach the widest audience possible.

GRAND Magazine was in print for 5 years before switching to digital in 2009. The age of the average reader dropped from the mid-60s to the mid-50s. Users communicate through the magazine's website, newsletter, and social media. —Christine Crosby

However, online resources remain a promising low-cost method to reach many younger grandparents via both broadband and smartphones.

Written Materials

In one study (Brintnall-Peterson, Poehlmann, Morgan, & Shlafer, 2009), researchers evaluated the use of online fact sheets targeted to custodial grandparents and the professionals who serve them. The fact sheets focused on child development and family relationships. Early drafts were shared with “three ethnically, geographically, and economically diverse custodial grandparent focus groups” and reviewed by “six external reviewers with expertise in child development, gerontology, child welfare, and adult education” (p. 278). The reading level of the materials was reduced to grades 6–9.

Between 2003 and 2008, 404 users completed anonymous online surveys regarding their use of the fact sheet series. . . Respondents indicated that the series was helpful because it increased their knowledge base, provided insight into the experience of grandparents and children, and helped custodial grandparents feel like they were not alone. In addition, professionals found the fact sheets easy to adapt for unique audiences and specific purposes such as training, and some grandparents felt that the information affirmed their efforts to create a better life for and more loving relationship with grandchildren (Brintnall-Peterson et al., 2009, p. 278-281).

One grandparent wrote:

[The fact sheet series] allows you the ability to change the way you raise your grandchildren as you understand the way the child actually sees the world around them, and so gives you the tools to help them become stable, secure, loved, nurtured and feeling safe as well as feeling like they belong (Brintnall-Peterson et al., 2009, p. 280).



Research efforts like this one highlight the importance of the continued use and development of “traditional” written resources as another important way to reach, inform, and support grandparents.

The Next Generation

Although families of all socioeconomic groups rely on informal child care, low-income families are most likely to use this type of care. Families value informal child care because it’s flexible, affordable, and accessible (Thomas, Boller et al., 2015). However,

Structural quality of informal care is consistently rated lower than that of regulated family care and levels of cognitive stimulation in informal settings have been shown to be low. Mitigating factors include low-child-to-adult ratios and warm, supportive caregiver-child interactions (Susman-Stillman & Banghart, as cited in Thomas, Boller et al., p. 2).

Young children in the care of their grandparents represent tremendous untapped potential—*untapped* because informal caregivers may lack access to the resources typically available in more formal child care settings; *potential* because the early years present such a powerful opportunity for cognitive and social-emotional growth.

Research has definitively established that a child’s early experiences in the first 5 years shape the development of his brain architecture, setting a child on a path of healthy development and learning, or putting a child’s development at risk (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). The quality of early caregiving is a critically important part of these early experiences. Responsive and nurturing experiences in care contribute to a child’s ability to build a strong neural foundation for future learning and development (Luby et al., 2013). When grandparents are providing child care to their young grandchildren, they are doing much more than babysitting: Grandparents are helping to build the brains of these young children, our country’s next generation of leaders and thinkers.

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