



12. CosmoKidz

Helping Children Make Better Social Worlds

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There is little doubt that communication patterns begin at birth and from the early weeks of life infants learn how to coordinate with caregivers to signal hunger, frustration, discomfort, and most importantly build bonds. Over a decade ago, Trevarthen and Aitken (2001) described the process of intersubjectivity as mothers and infants mutually seek communication and initiate the beginnings of attachment. Their findings showed these early attachments and coordinated acts are critical in the formation of later relationships.

Daniel Goleman's (1995, 2006) research on emotional intelligence was supporting his claim that the ability to get along with others is the glue of healthy human development. Initially we find this in the infant/caretaker relationship, but it quickly grows to include the expanding social world of peers and others. Recent longitudinal research is supporting Goleman's claim by demonstrating that the development of social skills in kindergarten correlates with their success as adults two decades later (Scelfo, 2015).

We point to a term introduced by Hillary Cottam "relational welfare" (Cottam, 2016). Relational welfare is grounded in the belief that we need new ways of addressing social change that also fosters the development of healthy relationships. This, along with the impressive work of Trevarthen, Aitken, Goleman, and others inspired us to create CosmoKidz. CosmoKidz

is a series of activities designed to increase compassion and awareness so children can discover new ways of acting and being together.

The three of us are co-developers of CosmoKidz. And although the aforementioned research, not to mention our experience of being parents and grandparents, informed our thinking about CosmoKidz, our scholarly work in communication theory, and specifically our use of CMM, was the most influential lens we used. CMM invites us to subsume traditional views of communication into a larger framework.

Generally, traditional views of communication assert people use communication to express their inner purposes, attitudes, and feelings. Within a traditional view, communication is thought of as a tool to describe events, objects, and ideas. While this appears to be a straightforward and an accessible idea, scholars and practitioners of CMM feel this oversimplifies the complex act of communication and falls short of understanding what people do together. The frame of CMM asserts that what we are doing together is *always* making social worlds. It is through the process of communication we advance our sense of self, others, and larger groupings of people such as a family, community, and even our culture. More than this, CMM stresses the importance of understanding the implications and consequences of our actions. When we understand the implications of our actions and the consequences it produces, we are better equipped to participate in constructing better relationships in all spheres (Pearce, 2007). CMM provides concepts, heuristics, and models to show how particular social worlds get made and how participants can help make better social worlds (Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001; Pearce, 1989, 2007; Pearce & Cronen, 1980).

For over forty years CMM has been used in a variety of contexts such as therapy, organizational development, conflict resolution, community building, and education. Within these contexts, impressive research projects have been undertaken and have yielded useful insights into the co-construction of our social worlds. The most recent research context has been our work with young children using the activities of CosmoKidz. CosmoKidz is an outgrowth of a concept developed by Barnett Pearce (1989) called "Cosmopolitan communication." Among other things, this is a form of communication that suggests everyday differences between people can be a starting place for deeper understanding, trust, and respect. The assumption underlying CosmoKidz is that children who learn how to talk together productively about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences will develop the skill set of cosmopolitan communication (empathizing with others, handling conflicts in productive ways, connecting with diverse children who are not like them, managing their strong emotions, and naming their own feelings

and emotions). If these skills are reinforced over time, they become part of the repertoire for ways of acting and being in the world. Daniel Goleman would call this emotional intelligence and Hillary Cottam, relational welfare.

We also developed CosmoKidz with the recent findings in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) in mind. Researchers in the field of IPNB are demonstrating that our interpersonal relationships deeply influence the structure and function of the developing brain and the formation of the maturing nervous system (Cozolino, 2006; Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2001; Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2007, 2011a, 2011b). What we refer to as mind or mental processes are the result of our inner neural connections as well as our interpersonal relationships. Simply put, experience modifies brain development. Teaching children how to become more aware of what they experience and not simply be reactive, creates different kinds of neurological experiences. Among other things, every scenario in the CosmoKidz activities ask children to focus their awareness on the internal state of thoughts, feelings, and their body. This is intentionally done in order for children to begin to change thoughts about a situation and find new patterns of behavior, ultimately changing a neural map. This process of interoception is accessed through basic mindful practices such as breathing, body awareness, and processing empathic feelings.

An Overview of CosmoKidz

The simple yet profound underpinning of CosmoKidz: All of us, including young children, are part of making the social worlds in which we live. We want young children to understand this and to develop the skills and abilities to help make better social worlds. How does CosmoKidz achieve this?

It begins with a set of 31 topics that comprise a young child's social world. The topics in CosmoKidz were chosen by kids themselves. We asked a variety of children to tell us what they face in their lives that they find difficult and challenging. The scenarios on each of the 31 cards in CosmoKidz represent the topics that these children expressed to us. As we were developing the questions and activities, we also piloted these activities with a variety of children in different learning contexts, different socioeconomic levels, and in two different countries. Doing this demonstrated the value of the cards in helping children name a wide range of feelings, emotions, and thoughts, as well as ways that they can act with more awareness into difficult situations to help make a better outcome

These topics include issues like making quiet time, making new friends, sharing, and bullying. Every card includes:

- a topic (in the purple bubble on the left side of the card)
- a scenario related to the topic, under the word “imagine”
- questions to help children meaningfully explore the topic
- activities to help children act more productively into a similar future situation (Act a and Act b)
- an illustration of the scenario on the reverse side of the card

An example of what each card looks like is included on the following page.

CosmoKidz also includes the acronym SOAR and a SOAR song that children can sing and dance to (the song and video can be downloaded for free at www.cmminstitute.net). SOAR stands for: Sense what’s around you, Open your hands to help others, Act with kindness, Respect other people. The children below are having a short break from “traditional” class-room activities in order to recharge themselves through joint movements, music and fun.

Additionally we provided a SOAR bulletin Board for the teacher to display in the classroom and refer to throughout the school week. Teachers or other adults can refer to SOAR by asking children if their behavior is an example of SOARing behavior, and if it is not, what the children can do to SOAR.



Figure 12.1. The girl picked this card as she wants to talk about how hard it is to focus attention and be quiet in the classroom.

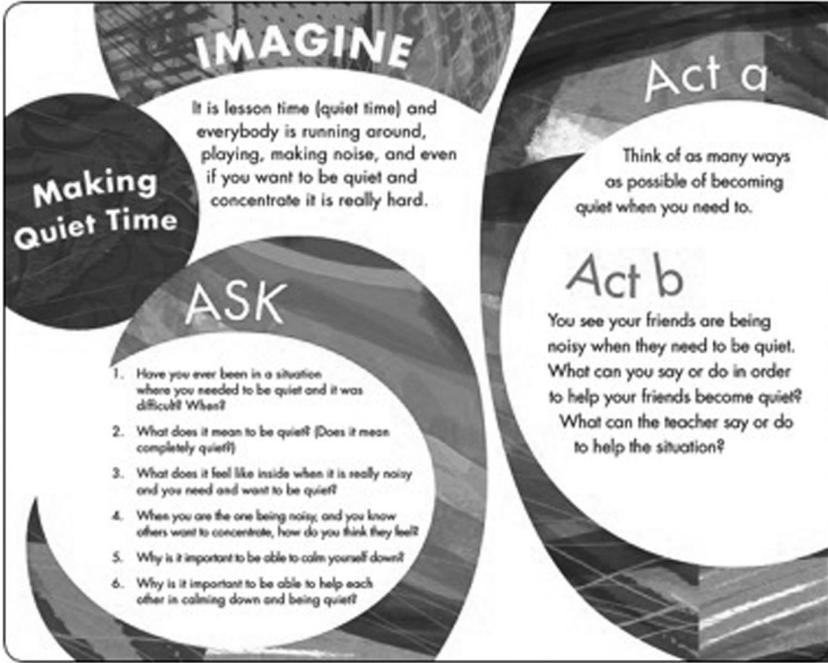


Figure 12.2. The flip side of illustration in Figure12.1 contains supporting questions for the teacher/adult.



Figure 12.3. Children doing a SOAR song-and-dance to re-focus energy and revive their attention in class.



Figure 12.4. The SOAR acronym works as a short-cut to remind the children about how to act into their social worlds.

We also supplied each teacher with a male and female puppet. Each puppet has a happy face on one side and a sad face with tears on the other. Below is a sample of children play-acting and interacting with the puppets:

We invited the teachers to use the puppets to engage the children in naming emotions and emotional states as they talk about the weekly topics. Each child also has his or her own hand puppet to use during the CosmoKidz conversations.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to the on-going two-year research project that as been conducted at Mountain Vista School in Oracle, Arizona and what we are learning about the development of children's communication skills and emotional intelligence using CosmoKidz.



Figure 12.5. Children talking about their feelings through using the CosmoKidz hand puppets.

Information about Mountain Vista School in Oracle, Arizona and Our Research Using CosmoKidz

Oracle, Arizona is a small community approximately 50 miles north of Tucson and 100 miles south of Phoenix. The median worker income is just shy of \$34,000 and the poverty rate is just over 17% of the national average. Consequently, Oracle is an economically challenged community. Mountain Vista School is a K-8 public school servicing the town of Oracle. Due to budget cuts the school has eliminated or cut programs such as art, music, and physical education. And like most public schools, there are no programs designed to increase students' social skills and emotional intelligence. And yet laudably the Mountain Vista Student Pledge is based on social/emotional skills. The pledge is based on 3 Rs: "To Respect myself and others, take Responsibility for my actions and develop positive Relationships with adults and peers based on integrity." These three Rs are just as imperative as the more traditional phonetically talked about Rs of reading [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic because they serve as the bedrock of "communication and relational skills."

This is one reason why the then School Board President, Linda Thomas, the Superintendent, Dennis Blausner, and Mountain Vista's Principal, Nannette Soule, were excited about their school being the site for a research project to test the usefulness of CosmoKidz in kindergarten through second-grade classes. The research began in January, 2014 and is continuing to this day. Two kindergarten, two first-grade and two second-grade classes are involved in the research.

The teachers have been asked to use the cards daily or almost daily but in small increments. We wanted to see if CosmoKidz could be used without adding to the teacher's workload or interfering with the core subjects that must be taught. The teachers were only given minimal instructions for using CosmoKidz; we wanted the teachers to be creative in their use of the topics, scenarios, and puppets. We suggested that the teachers begin each week by choosing one of the topic areas in CosmoKidz; for example, teasing. After selecting the topic, we asked the teachers to spend about 10 minutes each day doing the following:

Monday: Announce the topic of the week and show the children the illustration that is on the card. Spend the first day asking the children to look at the illustration and invite the children to comment on what they see.

Tuesday: Remind the children of the topic. Choose one or two of the “ask” questions as a way of helping the children name and explore their own experience with the topic.

Wednesday: Remind the children of the topic. Use one or two of the “ask” questions as a way of helping the children explore how the topic may be affecting other people.

We encouraged the teachers to send home a supplemental activity sheet on the topic of the week on Wednesday (this is the day that weekly folders are sent home). Each activity sheet includes a “right brain” creative component and a “left brain” linguistic component. On the topic of teasing, for example, the activity sheet asks the child to make a drawing using colors that tell about hurtful feelings. And then to make a drawing using colors that make you feel good. Finally, to write one sentence that describes how these colors are different. We include these activity sheets to reinforce repetition and learning for the child, and to provide an opportunity for parents to talk with their child about what the child is learning that week.

Thursday: Remind the children of the topic. Choose one of the activities in the “act” section and help the children visualize positive ways of acting in a similar situation in the future.

Friday: Remind the children of the topic. Continue with the activity from Thursday or chooses the second “act.”

We formulated three research questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent are children ages 5–7 able to meaningfully discuss the topics in CosmoKidz?

Research Question 2: How does the use of CosmoKidz over the course of a school year affect children’s interpersonal communication skill sets and actions?

Research Question 3: How does the use of CosmoKidz over the course of a school year affect interpersonal communication skill sets and actions across contexts?

Our study was qualitative using teacher interviews and questionnaires, parent surveys and questionnaires, student recall tests, and observations as the primary means of data collection. Research Findings are based on data collected from January, 2014 to the Present (as of this writing in early 2016). Due to the limitations of space we aren’t able to provide the details of our

research in this chapter. Comprehensive results are available in three separate reports found on the CMM Institute website, www.cmminstitute.net/resources/documents.

Research Results

The data we have collected in the last two years has been extremely positive. We know that children as young as four years old can have useful conversations about the topics of their social world. The children at Mountain Vista have enthusiastically engaged in these daily conversations about topics such as sharing and teasing and making new friends. Some of the first kindergarten students using CosmoKidz in January, 2014 are now in second grade and they continue to stay engaged in the CosmoKidz topics.

The data is also reinforcing our hypotheses that children's interpersonal skills and actions have improved over time and across contexts (at school and at home). An interesting side-note is that the teachers are also noticing a difference in their own communication patterns after using CosmoKidz for the past two years. We have heard a version of this quote from every teacher using CosmoKidz: "Sometimes I'm upset about something and I'm now thinking what I am saying to these kids that isn't SOARing or respectful. I may be upset with something that has happened _____ (gives a few examples of contexts) so I am thinking more about how I react to them. When we are talking about SOAR, I think it makes me think more about behaviors" (kindergarten teacher).

One reason for the children's ability to apply CosmoKidz and SOAR in their daily lives is their understanding and recall of SOARing behavior. We tested the students' recall this academic year by asking the teachers to survey their students on their ability to recall what SOAR stands for and to provide an example of SOARing behavior that they demonstrated during their summer vacation. The teachers were instructed to not mention CosmoKidz or SOAR or to have any visible information about SOAR for the children to see prior to taking this survey. The results of the survey are as follows:

Current 1st grade students (last year's kindergarten students): 37 Responses.

- 69% remembered "Sense what's around you"
- 70% remembered "Open your hands to help others"
- 88% remembered "Act with kindness"
- 75% remembered "Respect other people"

Sample comments from the children: I did something nice for my brother; when my brother was crying I gave him a hug; I gave my great-grandma a

card; I helped my sister when a bully pushed her; I helped my friend to climb on the monkey bars.

Current 2nd grade students (last year's first-grade students): 33 Responses

- 81% remembered "Sense what's around you"
- 97% remembered "Open your hands to help others"
- 97% remembered "Act with kindness"
- 98% remembered "Respect other people"

Sample comments from the children: My friend fell down and I helped him up; Emily fell and I helped her; I helped my cousin stand up; I helped my brother in the pool; I let my sister put her toy in my box.

Current 3rd grade students (last year's second-grade students): 42 Responses

- 80% remembered "Sense what's around you"
- 89% remembered "Open your hands to help others"
- 90% remembered "Act with kindness"
- 99% remembered "Respect other people"

Sample comments from the children: I helped my brother when he fell; I helped my sister clean up; I helped my brother swim; I helped my sister when she fell off of the monkey bars; I helped my dog get an ant off; I helped my friend who fell. I'm happy. She is too.

These survey results show that an overwhelming majority of the children remembered SOAR. The sample comments also point to the specificity with which the children can name their SOARing behavior. There were very few generic responses such as, I was nice or I was kind.

To provide a window into the teachers' experience of their students' behavior based on CosmoKidz and SOAR conversations, we are providing quotes based on teacher interviews.

A kindergarten teacher after using CosmoKidz for four months:

In my kindergarten classroom, I have already noticed several changes with the ways that my students relate to one another and interact with each other. I think the changes can be more subtle in kindergarten because our young students are just starting the CosmoKidz program and they are at an age where they are just learning how to problem-solve, handle conflict, and manage their emotions. However, I think that the CosmoKidz program has really helped our youngest students in learning social and relational skills. Since we began the program in August, I have witnessed my students thinking through their actions and problems more successfully and I have seen them have more of an understanding of good choices versus poor choices. I have also witnessed a significant increase in the helpfulness of my students. Small children, by nature, seem to thrive on

recognition and feeling important and they seem to love to be helpful and it seems that they have been more aware of how they can reach out to help their teachers and classmates without even being asked or prompted. I was delighted to witness some of my students helping and comforting a fellow classmate who had fallen on the playground recently and their abilities worked so well that I didn't even have to intervene! CosmoKidz seems to aide our classroom in having a sense of community and togetherness! Also, I have witnessed my students become more aware of words and terminology they can use when problem-solving and, after having to be coached and guided at first, they are turning into valuable problem-solvers! Often, we just have to point out SOARing students and behaviors with very few words and behaviors have a tendency to change instantly! We still have our problems and conflicts occasionally, but this seems to be decreasing drastically as our kindergarteners strive to be CosmoKidz. The delight of being recognized as a "CosmoKid" in our weekly classroom newsletter and monthly school newsletter has definitely helped in more ways than one as well!

A first-grade teacher after using CosmoKidz for four months:

My class consists of 22 first grade students. We have had two new students in the past week. Another change is we have had one student move unexpectedly and another student leave and come back three times. These changes have been difficult for the class.

The class has embraced the language of SOAR. Students will ask another student if they are SOARing. They point out SOARing behaviors. They reference past soar cards when similar situations come up.

I continue to have a sort of spiral pattern of behaviors but when they come around again, the duration is shortened through SOAR. I may say "remember that card . . ." and what would normally be a long discussion becomes a quick reminder. We have a background of knowledge to draw from that helps repair whatever was broken down between students.

The greatest difference I have seen this year is in one student. He started the year extremely egocentric with an extreme lack of empathy. He has become amazingly aware of how he is creating his social world. When situations come up in our class he will bring up the appropriate CosmoKidz card and remind the class of our discussions around that topic. For example, when a new student arrived, he very animatedly reminded the class of the "Feeling Included" card and what we could do to make the new student feel included. He has also expanded his social circle from just one favorite friend (that no one else could play with but him) to playing with the rest of the class. He still favors his friend but not in that possessive controlling way.

A second-grade teacher after using CosmoKidz and SOAR for four months:

We were playing a game and a team of girls won. A—(student's name) said that the girls won because girls are smarter than boys. Before I could even address it

she apologized to the boys. After she said she was sorry, she looked at me and said that she apologized for saying that because that was not SOARing.

We are watching Bernstein Bears videos in class. On their own the children were commenting on the behaviors of the characters and they pointed out behaviors that were not SOARing behaviors. When the video was over they were commenting on the lesson that was being taught. They were able to catch on to the lesson being taught in the videos, which were helping others try new things and not bragging. I feel that the cards have helped the kids become more aware of “nonsoaring” behaviors as well as SOARing behaviors all on their own.

A first-grade teacher after using CosmoKidz and SOAR for an academic year:

I have seen an increase of independent behavior. Students will attempt to use SOAR first to resolve conflict or issues. If this strategy does not work, then they will approach an authority figure.

Students are much more aware of each other, other’s feelings, and other’s behavior. They try to help each other by correcting the behavior, pointing out feelings, and apologizing when they feel they are in the wrong. At times, this can overcompensate with some students being overly concerned with other student’s behavior.

When speaking to each other, I have seen a shift in word choice and a move from generalities to specifics. At the beginning of the year, it was very common for a student to use statements such as “he/she is being mean” and “He/she hurt my feelings”. Now, I hear specifics such as “When you wouldn’t share the ball with me I felt sad and mad.” This is repairable and much less emotionally damaging than the generalized almost personal attacks.

Through the SOAR conversations we have had over the year, students are identifying how they feel inside and putting words to those feelings instead of just reacting. I have seen an increase in thinking before speaking and a decrease of knee jerk reactions to situations. For example, at the beginning of the year if someone ran into someone else in line, the common reaction was to push them back. Now, I have seen a decrease in that physical behavior and an increase in discussion.

At the beginning of the year, students came to me to resolve problems and even small issues. Over the year there has been a shift over from me to them. When students come to me I can remind them to use SOAR and talk to each other, they are able to do this now since we have modeled and practiced it.

We also wanted to know if parents were noticing any changes in their child’s behavior. We surveyed parents at the beginning, middle, and the end of the school year. Our questions asked parents to indicate the frequency of: (1) Mentioning SOARing behavior; (2) pointing out SOARing behavior; and, (3) Exhibiting SOARing behavior. In response to the questions of exhibiting SOARing behavior, parents in all three grade levels overwhelmingly responded with “sometimes” or “frequently”; few parents responded with “never.” In terms of mentioning or pointing out SOARing behavior, most

parents said that their child did these things at least “sometimes” with a few parents saying “frequently” or “never.” Our take-away is that most parents are seeing improvements in their child’s social skills and behavior. Children are not just practicing these skills at school, they are also using these skills at home. With amusement, a parent of one of the kindergarten teachers told the teacher that she overheard her child tell her two siblings during an argument that they weren’t SOARing and that they should be nice to each other. This is the kind of carry-over we hope for in the children using CosmoKidz!

Reflections on Our Learning and Future Directions

The first question an adult often asks the children when showing the picture side of a CosmoKidz card is “What do you see?” The question invites a variety of responses, depending on the number of children present as well as the adult asking more than once, “what else?” Without actively “teaching” anything at all, children are becoming aware that they may see different things, and that one child’s description is no more right or wrong than another child’s answer. They learn the very fundamental idea that how I perceive and manage meaning may be very different than how you make sense of the world. They learn about diversity.

Further explorations support them in recognizing and naming possible stories, as well as helping them to see that how they choose to act into every situation “makes something”. These “somethings” have names like “fight”, “new friend”, “feeling calm”, “sharing”. As they are supported to explore, express and reflect on their thoughts, feelings and possible effects of different choices without being judged or corrected, they learn about how patterns of action are made and sustained. They learn about coordinating and managing meaning.

Yet CosmoKidz offers more than just reflections. It is designed to bring the reflections into action in various creative and expressive ways. Children with different learning styles get to explore possible actions in a variety of ways through, for example, role playing, use of puppets, talking about a scenario, coloring, singing and dancing. Because of this, and because of systematic work and repetitions, the likelihood of real learning happening over time is very high.

One of our curiosities as we were creating CosmoKidz, was whether this kind of learning was possible for children as young as four years old. We now know that children as young as three years old have things to say about the pictures they are looking at, even though at a “simpler” level. This makes sense in light of recent research on young children and the development

of attachment theory, which shows how we are socially disposed through our bodies (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2003): In a Norwegian study (Lund, Godtfredsen, Helgeland, Nome, Kovac, & Cameron, 2015), researchers are observing how toddlers are socially interacting with each other, already growing skills of relating, coordinating and managing meaning. Interestingly, at this age, they are moving in and out through a larger group of children and adults alike. As the children turn three years old, the researchers notice a movement towards more dyadic relationships, where one friend becomes more important than others. They also notice that some children, even at this age, are less able than others to relate to their peers in ways that makes friends. The importance of learning social skills and emotional intelligence become apparent. The patterns of interacting early in life, have a tendency to carry on into the tween and teen years (Lund, 2013).

We wonder whether the importance of building relational competencies early in life has potentially preventative consequences for the experience of health and well-being later in life. What we do know is that our research shows CosmoKidz actively supports the development of such skills, even in children who initially could appear totally lacking of them. We know that the classroom climate for learning other skills improves. The children become more able to solve their own relational difficulties in school and at home. Having practiced the skills rather than just learning the content of how they should and should not act, they are largely able to transfer the skills into a variety of contexts.

We wondered how the use of CosmoKidz would affect the adults' view of social worlds. We were delighted when our research confirmed that teachers using CosmoKidz with their students became more aware of their own behavior and how it affected others. Using CMM language, the teachers gained an increased awareness of what was made, depending on how *they acted* into a situation.

As previously mentioned, the teachers in our research did not get a lot of training before using the CosmoKidz activities. They were encouraged to be creative, while making sure there was a certain level of continuity and practice over time. The results indicate it is possible for any teacher or care-giver to use CosmoKidz with little or no training. Having said that, we also think some background understanding and training is preferable, and will increase the possibilities for a preferred outcome.

The CosmoKidz activities do not offer a panacea to instantly build children's interpersonal skills, but it does represent a series of activities with wide applicability to teachers, parents, mental health professionals, and others working with children to increase the empathy and compassion of children

they serve. This is one alternative to traditional ways of addressing the needs of children and it comes at a time when new ideas are needed. Moreover, these activities are grounded in the communication perspective and IPNB, which have much to offer.

We are aware of other efforts within the year to apply the CosmoKidz activities in a workshop/camp-like setting for children. We are hopeful more programs will follow and will include research on the efficacy of CosmoKidz in non-classroom contexts.

We recognize that children are not just Human Beings; they are Human Becomings (Prout, 2005). What they become—and what they make—are shaped in relationships. Through the activities of CosmoKidz and SOAR, children are becoming better equipped to meet and influence what is yet to be made.

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