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## Parenting, Social-Emotional Development, and School Achievement of African American Youngsters

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In recent years, with the passage of No Child Left Behind Act (2001) (NCLB), renewed attention has been devoted to the achievement gap and the school achievement of ethnic minority children and youth. Ethnic differences in academic performance appear when children are young and continue into adulthood. For example, there are significant differences in the vocabulary scores of African American and European American three and four year-olds (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, see Jencks and Phillips, 1998). Among the nation's fourth graders, African American children perform below European American children on all subject areas assessed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000). The scores of African American 17 year-olds also fall significantly below European American 17 year-olds (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000).

Ethnic differences in achievement are partially related to ethnic families' economic resources. The rates of poverty among African American, Native American and some Latino families are two to three times higher than the rate for non-Latino White children. McLoyd (1998) noted that African American children are also more likely to experience long-term poverty and live in areas of concentrated poverty. Lee and Burkam (2002) have shown that ethnic differences in achievement decline when families' socioeconomic status (SES) is controlled. Specifically, when SES was taken into account, black/white differences in math achievement declined by nearly 50%. Also, gaps in reading declined by nearly 65%. Thus, in understanding the achievement of African American youngsters it is important to examine the influence of family economic resources on children's functioning, and the processes through which the effects take place.

The present chapter is guided in part by the family economic stress model (Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger, Rueter & Conger, 2000) shown in Figure 3.1. The model suggests that families' economic resources are linked to adolescents' adjustment including their school achievement and psychological well-being

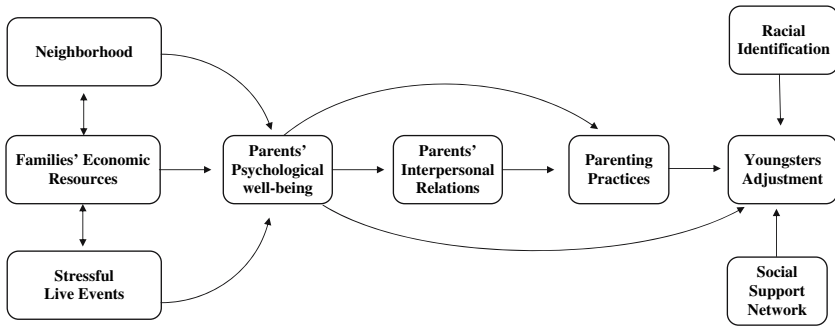


FIGURE 3.1. Conceptual Model Linking Families' Economic Resources And Other Important Social Variables With Youngsters.

through processes occurring in the family. To date, this model is the most comprehensive formulation linking families' economic resources to parents' adjustment, child-rearing practices, and youngsters' outcomes. This chapter also discusses how families' SES is associated with important social variables (e.g., family functioning, neighborhood conditions) that in turn, are linked to adolescents' well-being. Other social contextual variables including families' social networks, schooling, and some personal attributes (e.g., ethnic identity) of youngsters will be examined. The term, youngsters, used throughout the chapter refers to both children and adolescents although the majority of the literature involves studies on adolescents.

### 3.1. Economic Resources and Youngsters' Adjustment

Findings have generally shown that families' SES is significantly associated with youngsters' adjustment in the areas of internalizing (e.g., depression) and externalizing problems (e.g., problem behavior, conduct problems; for a review, see McLoyd, 1998).<sup>1</sup> For instance, lower family income is associated with behavioral problems of 3 and 5 year-olds (Liver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002). It appears that social class differences are associated with increasing rates of externalizing problems during the preschool and early school years (Stevenson, Richman & Graham, 1985). For older African American children (10–11 years), low family income, negative financial events, and economic pressures are significantly related to externalizing behavior and internalizing

<sup>1</sup> Adolescents' school achievement is one of several indicators of socio-emotional adjustment and well-being that are highly interrelated. In this chapter, school achievement will typically not be distinguished from the larger construct of psychological adjustment. Routinely, correlations found with one indicator of adjustment are likely to have significant implications for other indicators.

symptoms (Conger et al., 2002). Low SES in families is also associated with chronic delinquency and serious offenses (Yoshikawa, 1994), along with poor school performance (Lee & Burkam, 2002).

Advances in theoretical and empirical work on the role of families' economic resources in family functioning have made clear the importance of the duration and timing of economic problems (McLoyd, 1998). The central questions in this work have been whether the length of time children spend in poverty has a predictable effect on their functioning and whether economic problems have more impact in some developmental periods more than others. Significant numbers of African American children typically experience poverty of long duration (Waggoner, 1998). In addition, internalizing and externalizing problems increase the longer children experience poverty and economic problems (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, 1994; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thompson, 1997). Little available research suggests that links between low income and children's development are stronger for young children than adolescents (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

Two issues are important to note regarding the duration of economic problems and its timing. First, particularly with African American families and adolescents, research is needed on other potentially important outcome measures. For example, economic difficulties may influence adolescents' outlook on the future and may compromise important social and emotional coping skills that affect internalizing and externalizing problems. Second, moderating processes that may be linked to attributes of the adolescents have not been adequately assessed in theoretical or empirical work on family income. Thus, for example, personal attributes or capacities (e.g., intellectual functioning, social skills, and self-esteem) that appear to ameliorate the impact of low income need further attention (Masten, 2001). Attributes, such as physical attractiveness or self-confidence have also been found to promote youngsters' capacity to function in the context of economic disadvantage (Elder, 1974).

The families' neighborhood or community is another important social contextual variable linked to families' economic resources and associated with adolescents' well-being. As stated earlier, poor and working-class African American families are more likely to live in economically disadvantaged or distressed neighborhoods. Although research on neighborhood effects remains surprisingly sparse, past work (e.g., Rutter, 1985; Caspi et al., 1993) suggests that variables associated with characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., rate of poverty or rate of unemployment) are associated with an increase in delinquent behavior, deviant peers, and problems in school. Similar findings have revealed that as the proportion of low-income neighbors increases in a neighborhood, children's externalizing behavior increases (e.g., Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, 1994). Also, research has shown the more that economically disadvantaged African American mothers report their neighborhood has problems the lower the adolescents' self-esteem, and the higher their psychological distress and problem behavior (Taylor, 2000). Youngsters in disadvantaged neighborhoods may be

more prone to engage in problem behavior than youngsters in more advantaged communities because they have more opportunities to find problem behavior and have fewer social constraints (McLoyd, 1998; Brody et al., 2001; Brody et al., 2003).

### 3.2. Economic Resources and Parents' Functioning

In the family economic stress model (see Figure 3.1), families' resources impact parents' social and emotional well-being and in turn, affect adolescents' behavior. For example, unemployed men are more depressed, anxious, and dissatisfied with themselves than employed men. Unemployed men also are more likely to engage in risky behavior than employed men (for a review see McLoyd, 1989). When African American fathers' perceive themselves as a failure in providing for the family, their psychological adjustment declines (Bowman, 1988). Financial strain is also positively linked to fathers' pessimism about the future (Galambos & Silberstein, 1987). McLoyd (1989) notes that mental and physical maladies have also been associated with economic problems and may compromise parents' capacity to cope with daily life challenges, including parenting.

Economic resources are also significantly associated with mothers' psychological well-being (Conger et al., 1994; McLoyd et al., 1994; McLoyd, 1998; Taylor et al., 2004). Mothers' depression increases as their economic problems rise (Brody et al., 1994; Conger et al., 2002, McLoyd et al., 1994). In comparison, greater economic resources have been linked to mothers' outlook on the future (Brody et al., 1994; Taylor et al., 2004). For instance, when mothers report financial resources are adequate to meet the families' needs, they are more optimistic about their future (Taylor et al., 2004). Mothers' perceptions of their self-efficacy and self-worth are also negatively associated with economic problems (Brody et al., 1994). Similar to fathers, mothers with economic problems appear to be at risk of physical as well as mental health problems that challenge their coping capacities (e.g., Brody et al., 1994).

Neighborhood conditions and stressful life events are also important factors linked to parents' economic problems and associated with parents' adjustment. The effects of neighborhood conditions on parents' adjustment has revealed that the level of depressive symptoms is higher among residents of economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Ross, 2000). Ross found that in neighborhoods with a high percentage of households below the poverty level and a high number of mother headed households, social disorder was high and in turn, positively associated with depression. Similar findings are apparent when African American families living in rural economically disadvantaged communities are compared to those in economically more secure towns (O'Brien, Hassinger, & Dershem, 1994). It is not surprising that neighborhood disorder (e.g., vacant and deserted buildings, drinking and drug dealing in public) is associated with adults' psychological distress (Cutrona et al., 2000). These stressors add to family

distress, particularly for the mother. Other stressors significantly related to self esteem and distress for mothers are family disruption (e.g., divorce, death in family), work related events (e.g., job loss), and health problems (e.g., illness, injury) (Taylor, 1997).

### 3.3. Parents' Psychological Adjustment, Interpersonal Relations, and Parenting Practices

In the family economic stress model, family income is linked to adolescents' functioning through the influence of parents' well-being and their interpersonal relations (see Figure 3.1). The link between parents' well-being and the experience of conflict and problematic relations have shown that parents' psychological distress is associated with an increase in angry interactions among parents or caregivers (Brody et al., 1994; Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 2002). For example, parental depression is associated with a decrease in warm, harmonious relations and positively associated with parents' conflict concerning child-rearing (Brody et al., 1994). Lower depression in caregivers is significantly related to higher warmth and lower hostility (Conger et al., 2002). Mental health problems of parents (e.g., depression, anxiety, social dysfunction, somatic symptoms) are negatively associated with maternal and paternal support (e.g., Solantaus, Leinonen, & Punamaki, 2004).

Parents' psychological functioning and marital relations also spill over into parenting practices and relations with youngsters. Marital strife is often linked to the quality of parenting exhibited in the family (Conger et al., 2002). Nurturing, involved parenting decreases as parents display hostile, aggressive behaviors with one another. Marital conflict is associated with greater hostility toward adolescents (Conger & Elder, 1994; Solantaus et al., 2004). In addition, mothers experiencing marital problems are more likely to perceive their youngsters' behavior as more deviant and are more likely to issue commands and to be critical of the youngsters' actions (Webster-Stratton, 1988).

The model also suggests parents' adjustment and well-being have a direct impact on parenting practices (see Figure 3.1). Thus, parents' low self-esteem, depression or anxiety, are expected to have a direct effect on the practices they administer in the home. Depression in parents is associated with increased punitive behavior (Ge et al., 1994; McLoyd et al., 1994). Mothers' depression is also associated with more negative and hostile forms of punishment (scolding, yelling, hitting, threatening to send the child away, McLoyd et al., 1994). In addition, mothers' depression is associated with negative perceptions of maternal responsibilities. Based on mothers' self-report and the report of her spouse, depression may be associated with lower involvement and emotional support of their children (Conger et al., 1992). Finally, other indicators, such as drugs or alcohol are associated with less adequate parenting practices including less control of adolescent behavior (King & Chassin, 2004).

### 3.4. Parenting Practices and Youngsters' Adjustment

Economic resources influence parents' functioning, spousal relations and parenting practices, which in turn, influence children's positive or negative adjustment (see Figure 3.1). Research has examined parenting dimensions including control, support, and organization and their links to youngsters' adjustment. Parental warmth and involvement are positively associated with adolescents' school achievement, positive peer relations, and self-confidence (Conger et al., 1992). High quality parenting including emotional support and involvement are associated with lower externalizing behavior (Solantaus et al., 2004). Lower nurturance and involvement are positively linked to youngsters' externalizing symptoms (Conger et al., 2002). Harsher parenting is also associated with youngsters' conduct problems (Simons et al., 2002).

Evidence on parenting practices in controlling and shaping childrens' behavior have shown that more punitive forms of control and discipline (e.g., yelling, hitting, threatening) are associated with adolescents' cognitive distress (difficulty making decisions) and depressive symptoms (McLoyd et al., 1994). Youngsters' externalizing problems are also associated with increased punitive parenting (Solantaus et al., 2004). A number of sources employing different methodologies have revealed the importance of organization and structure in the family for youngsters' functioning (Clark, 1983; Taylor 1996; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). In families that are organized and structured around order and routine, adolescents obtain higher grades, engage in less problem behavior and experience lower psychological distress (Taylor 1996; Taylor & Lopez, 2005).

### 3.5. Moderating Processes

Moderating processes, as described earlier, represent experiences or relations that families may have that lessen the impact of economic resources on their capacity to function well. There are a number of social variables that may be linked to protective processes that diminish the impact of economic strain or enhance the quality of African American parenting. For example, when families are more likely to receive support from kin during economic hardship, moderating processes (e.g., emotional support from adult relatives) may be helpful to the adolescent (Dressler, 1985).

Kin support is positively associated with mothers' and youngsters' adjustment (Taylor et al., 1993; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Taylor, 1996). For example, kin social and emotional support is positively linked to school achievement and engagement (Taylor, 1996). Kin support may also enhance the quality of parenting, and higher quality parenting is associated with higher adolescent functioning (Taylor, 1996; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). Specifically, the negative association of family income with parent-adolescent communication problems is less apparent for families with high compared to low levels of kinship social support (Taylor & Lopez, 2005). McLoyd (1998) noted that adults outside

the home may indirectly influence youngsters' socio-emotional functioning by providing mothers support that enhances parental control. Nonparent adults may also model positive behaviors for both youngsters and their parents.

Other research on moderating processes has shown that the qualities of neighborhood in which families live may either buffer adolescents from problems or make negative behaviors more likely to occur. For example, the negative effects of harsh-inconsistent parenting and low nurturance on youngsters' conduct disorders are strongest among families living in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods (Brody et al., 2003). Also, children early in pubertal maturation residing in more disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to affiliate with deviant peers than early maturing children living in less disadvantaged neighborhoods (Ge et al., 2002).

### 3.6. School Context

Youngsters spend most of their waking hours in school and thus, school experiences may have important links to their functioning. Indeed, schools have been regarded as important social institutions in which to address problems of at-risk youngsters (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Eccles and colleagues (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Roeser et al., 2000) have argued that to the extent youngsters perceive the school as an environment in which they feel cared for and supported, they are more likely to develop the psychological resources that promote achievement and good conduct.

Much of the research on school experiences and social-emotional development has focused on school climate and its association with youngsters' functioning. School climate has been defined as organizational, instructional and interpersonal areas of the school environment (Loukas & Robinson, 2004). There is a significant link between school climate and youngsters' academic achievement (Roeser et al., 2000; Schmitt et al., 1999; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). For example, the more that youngsters perceive the school environment as emotionally supportive, organized and safe, the higher their school achievement and school engagement (Taylor & Lopez, 2005). A significant association between school climate and adolescents' psychological functioning exists (Roeser et al., 1998, 2000; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). For example, adolescents' perceptions of school climate (e.g., support for competence and autonomy, quality of relationships with teachers) are significantly associated with their psychological well-being (Roeser et al., 2000).

African American males are among several identifiable groups of students who tend to have multiple problems in school (e.g., poor motivation, poor mental health, poor academic behavior). These youngsters tend to report that the school encourages a competitive, hostile environment in which some ethnic groups are mistreated (Roeser et al., 2000). School climate may also moderate or buffer the effects of risk factors on youngsters' emotional and behavioral problems (Baker, 1998; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Loukas & Robinson, 2004.).

Students at risk of interpersonal problems are less likely to report poor adjustment when they perceive that the school climate has several positive features (e.g., high cohesion, low friction, Loukas & Robinson, 2004).

### 3.7. Other Social Correlates of Adjustment and Achievement

In recent years, there has been discussion of youngsters' ethnic identity and its role in their social and emotional development (Alvarez & Helms, 2001; Lee, 2005; Sellers et al., 1997). Some theorists (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1985) have argued that strong identification with their ethnic group may have a negative impact on the academic achievement and adjustment of African American youngsters. African American youngsters as a consequence of experiencing racial discrimination allegedly develop a social identity that is oppositional in nature and rejects school achievement as an appropriate goal (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). In comparison, others have argued that strong ethnic identification may promote youngsters' functioning by enhancing their self-esteem and psychological well-being and by moderating the negative effects of racism and discrimination (Azibo, 1992; Baldwin, 1980; Seaton, 2005).

Beyond the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), little empirical work has shown that ethnic or collective social identity is negatively associated with African American youngsters' achievement and adjustment. An exception has been work suggesting African American youngsters' racial identity in opposing school achievement is so pervasive, high achieving students must avoid contact with other African American students in order to sustain their performance (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Cook and Ludwig (1998) found no evidence of the negative effects of an oppositional social identity in assessing African American youngsters' alienation from school (e.g., educational expectations, drop-out rate, academic effort) or social standing among their peers. Other studies have also found that youngsters' experiences with racial discrimination are positively associated with racial identity development (Taylor et al., 1994). Students' ethnic identity is positively associated with their school achievement and engagement (Taylor et al., 1994). Other work has also revealed the positive association of youngsters' racial identity with their psychological adjustment. For example, racial identity is positively associated with self-esteem (Rowley et al., 1998; Seaton, 2005). Racial identity is also negatively associated with adolescents' depressive symptoms (Seaton, 2005) and problem behavior (Sellers, et al., 1998). The development of theoretical and empirical work on racial identity has made it clear that it is important to distinguish whether among other issues, African American youngsters regard their race as a salient and a positive aspect of the self. Indeed, youngsters who regard their race as central and positive function more adequately (Seaton 2005; Sellers, Morgan & Brown, 2001).

The role of racial identity development in moderating the impact of racial discrimination on adolescents' social-emotional adjustment has also been



examined. Racial discrimination is negatively associated with the mental and physical health of African American adults (Williams, Neighbors & Jackson, 2003). Perceptions of discrimination are also negatively related to African American youngsters' grades (Powell & Arriola, 2003) and positively associated with problem behavior (Guthrie et al., 2002; Prelow et al., 2004). Youngsters' racial identity appears to buffer them from some of the negative effects of perceived discrimination (Seaton, 2005; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Among African American college students, those in their racial identification, who believe and accept that other groups perceive African Americans in a negative light, experience less distress as a result of their experiences with racial discrimination (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Also, adolescents labeled as "Buffering/Defensive" view their race as personally salient and positive; and may perceive and accept that others hold negative views of their race (Seaton, 2005). Among this group, experiences with racial discrimination are not negatively associated with their self-esteem. Interestingly, however, "Buffering/Defensive" adolescents who experience racial discrimination also are more likely to report depression. It may be that youngsters' psychological defenses are not invulnerable. The formation of a racial identity as a central and highly evaluated component of the self-concept may offer some African American youngsters some protection from racial discrimination. However, youngsters' resources may not yet be sufficient to fend off all experiences all the time.

### 3.8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The chapter suggests that in order to understand the links between parenting practices in African American families and youngsters' emotional adjustment and achievement, it is important to consider the larger social context in which the family resides. Families' economic resources play a significant role in determining where families live and the nature of social resources to which they have access. To the extent that families have sufficient financial resources, parents and youngsters function more adequately. However, when families' resources fall short of their needs both youngsters' and parents' social and emotional well-being are at greater risk. The resources present in the families' neighborhood have also been linked to parents' and adolescents' well-being. Findings also indicate that youngsters' adjustment and achievement is significantly associated with the manner in which parents are affected by their economic circumstances.

For parents, being unable to provide for the family may lead to questions of self-worth, competence and depression. Parents may also have concerns about the future that further darken their outlook. Research indicates that parents are also prone to experience marital problems when they experience economic difficulties. The stress associated with living with insufficient resources may precipitate family conflict. Both family conflict and parents' depression are linked to parents' childrearing practices. Lower family conflict and lower parental psychological distress are positively associated with youngsters' social-emotional

adjustment and achievement. Social support typically from extended family and living in a community with more resources buffers youngsters from potential stressors and enhances the quality of parenting they are likely to experience. Also, the climate (organization, safety, emotional support, academic orientation) of the schools in which youngsters attend is associated with their psycho-social functioning. Finally, the development of adolescents' racial or ethnic identity appears to enhance their adjustment and buffers them from the negative effects of racial discrimination.

From the perspective of policy and practice, in order to address the adjustment and school achievement of African American youngsters, several conclusions are apparent. First, the research reviewed here suggests that it is important to improve the social and financial resources available to African American families. The most advantageous strategies are likely to be those that create employment opportunities, build skills and competencies, and enhance the social organization of communities. The findings reviewed suggest that parents function more adequately when they do not face the stress of struggling to make ends meet for the family. Improving the social conditions, including reducing crime and neighborhood physical deterioration and improving access to social resources should be part of any comprehensive plans for addressing the problematic links between families' resources, parenting practices and youngsters' adjustment.

Second, efforts should be devoted to enhancing families' social network. Research suggests that promoting the web of social networks in families' social surroundings (e.g., based in the family, connected to families' religious observance, originating and maintained in the community) will likely enhance family functioning and youngsters' adjustment and moderate the impact of stressors in the environment. Schools because of their prominent role in the community are in an advantageous position to serve as a conduit for social agents who serve families and the community. Schools also play an important role in promoting youngsters' psychological health. Thus, by creating emotionally supportive, safe, structured climates that are developmentally appropriate and reasonably free of racial bias, schools are likely to promote adolescents' adjustment and achievement. The work on school climate, indeed, suggests that it is those with the most challenges to their school performance and engagement who may benefit the most from positive changes in school environments.

Third, additional research is needed on the mental health and caregiver relations in African American families. In the family economic stress model utilized here, parents' mental health, marital relations and parenting practices are the mechanisms that link economic resources to youngsters' adjustment. Thus, with greater resources parents allegedly enjoy better mental health including less depression, and better marital relations, including less conflict, and in turn, display increased emotional support for their children. Unfortunately, there are important gaps in the literature for African American families. There is a scarcity of research on marital or caregiver relations and the impact on youngsters' adjustment. It is also likely that for economic, social and cultural reasons, African American families are underserved in assistance for problems in mental health and marital relations. Thus, one

point of advocacy for those working with African American youngsters and families involves the adequate examination and analysis of mental health challenges and an increase in access to appropriate services.

Finally, it is important to note that while the family economic stress model was developed to explain the social and emotional functioning of economically vulnerable families, there is little reason to believe that the basic processes of that model do not apply to all African American families. Working, middle-class and affluent families may be less likely to experience economic pressures that lead to depression, marital conflict, and less adequate parenting practices. However, the same set of processes is likely to exist for parents with higher SES just on a different scale. Psychological distress and caregiver conflict, no matter what their source, may impede the administration of good parenting practices. Also, the effective parenting practices identified here (e.g., warmth, control and monitoring, organization and structure) have been linked to youngsters' adjustment across families' socioeconomic status.

Recommendations based on the research reviewed in this chapter include:

- Devote greater social and financial resources to disadvantaged communities. Tax breaks and capital investment are possible strategies for investment in struggling neighborhoods. Also, targeted deployment of law enforcement personnel to troubled neighborhoods has proven useful in some urban areas.
- Locate important social services (e.g., well-baby clinic, GED and adult literacy instruction) in schools so that schools in urban communities can connect social networks serving families and the community in a more comprehensive manner.
- Work with city, state and community leaders to increase psychological services devoted to poor communities. Services aimed at addressing psychological distress and marital relations are likely to benefit children and parents.
- Educate parents regarding the role of parenting practices and marital relations in the well-being of youngsters.
- Educate parents concerning the value and importance of good mental health and the availability of services for adults and youngsters.
- Inform educational personnel regarding the relations between non-instructional factors (e.g., poverty, family functioning, school climate) and youngsters' school achievement.
- Educate schools personnel regarding the complexities and challenges of serving an increasingly more racially diverse student population.

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