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Date:

Dear XXXXXXX,

# Effective Practice Guide

# Learning through play in the early years

This document is about supporting play for young children with a vision impairment. It covers early play and exploration and developing play using Tina Bruce's 12 features of play. It also recommends ways of creating play environments as well as choosing toys and making treasure baskets and sensory development boxes.

## Contents

[1. Play, movement and touch](#_1._Play,_movement)

[2. Treasure Baskets](#_4._Treasure_Baskets)

[3. Sensory development resource boxes](#_5._Sensory_development)

## 1. Play, movement and touch

Here you will find suggestions and ideas for exploring the tactile world, as well as examples of toys and items that will contribute to offering a wide variety of tactile experience to support the development of a child with vision impairment.

### Contents

[1.1. Early days - making sense of a baby's environment](#_1.1._Early_days)

[1.2. Encouraging touch and offering tactile experiences](#_1.2._Encouraging_touch)

[1.3. Helping children develop tactile skills](#_1.3._Helping_children)

[1.4. Encouraging movement](#_1.4._Encouraging_movement)

### 1.1. Early days - making sense of a baby's environment

It is important to ensure that babies and young children who cannot make sense of the world visually do so by other means. Families are encouraged to develop their baby's sense of time and space with clearly identifiable sensory clues throughout the day. This informs the baby about what will be happening next and assists in developing independence and autonomy. Examples of this include:

#### Bath time

It helps if daily events, like bath-time, always happen at the same time each day, perhaps as part of a bed-time routine. The bathroom usually echoes, so is a good place to sing and splash as well as smell the bubble baths and shampoos. It is also an ideal time to become aware of body parts and to experience different skin sensations, oil, soap, bubbles. This is always followed by drying, cuddled up in a big towel, with some time for more rhymes about fingers and toes.

#### Bed time

The bedroom will have different smells, sounds and textures and will signal settling down (with any luck). Stories, especially those with plenty of repetition, like some of the traditional ones, cannot be started too early in a child's life. A familiar tape can be gradually lowered in volume until sleep takes over. In this way, a small baby can begin to differentiate between night-time sleep and a daytime nap taken in day-clothes and, if necessary, downstairs.

#### Outdoors

Daily routines vary according to family practice and children's individual needs and preferences. One baby may become aware that it is time to go out when he hears the pushchair coming out of the cupboard under the stairs. Another knows which granny he is visiting as soon as the pram wheels crunch over the gravel path. Every event and space can be identified by a smell, sound or texture, mostly more potent than words. This is, of course, in addition to the constant verbal explanations and conversations which all babies love and learn by. Outdoors also offers the opportunity to experience different weather conditions. The child can get to know and understand rain, wind and snow, by feeling them.

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### 1.2. Encouraging touch and offering tactile experiences

For a child with severe vision impairment, it is important to offer as wide a range of tactile experiences as possible right from the beginning.

#### Fabrics

A box of toys can include fabrics of all kinds, such as:

* a chiffon scarf for 'peekaboo'
* a foil survival blanket to scrunch and reflect
* florists' cellophane stitched inside a stockinet dishcloth to kick
* a flat silky cushion containing polystyrene beads or chamois leather to clutch
* and all kinds of donated scraps of embroidered saris and veils to touch and enjoy.

### Use interesting items

Anything that feels interesting is ideal. Items can be purchased from a pound shop, or borrowed from the bathroom or kitchen The more hinges, flaps, and holes the better. Examples might include:

* brushes
* shower flowers
* pan scourer
* lemon reamer
* pasta strainer
* a sturdy fabric softener bottle with a handle makes a very satisfactory pull-off push-on toy with Velcro cotton reels (perhaps covered in fur fabric)
* film cases filled with different sounding objects
* small Pringles cases, when covered, make good casings for those toys which make noises when inverted.

### Tactile nursery rhyme prompt cards

Tactile nursery rhyme prompt cards are useful. These can be made from A4 card and link touch to a particular song. For example, a piece of fur fabric stuck on card can link with 'Round and Round the Garden like a Teddy Bear'. It is best not to make any attempt at visual representation so long as the feel is right. For children with partial sight, these cards may have a tactile or sound element but can also be visually interesting. The song 'Mary, Mary quite contrary' could be represented by a fluorescent green jagged pattern against black card with jingling bells sewn on. 'Twinkle, twinkle little star" might be a single diffractive silver star stuck onto dark blue card. In time, the child will be able to choose a favourite rhyme between two cards offered.

### Tactile books

The same production principles apply to the adaptation of books into tactile form. There are tactile books commercially available including some with braille and print. These are useful for sighted carers, teachers, and parents to accustom children to the notion that braille dots carry meaning - in the way that print does for sighted people.

### 1.3. Helping children develop tactile skills

Exploring and manipulating objects and books will develop strength, dexterity and sensitivity. But most of all, it will encourage curiosity and tolerance towards new experiences. Learning materials should be tailored to the individual child. Before they start to explore with their hands, infants gain a wide variety of information through their mouths, so it is essential that blind babies have opportunities to suck and mouth foods of different consistencies as well as objects that are pleasing - and safe! The child will need to be encouraged to hold, reach out, grasp, squeeze, twist, press, poke, explore texture, weight and hardness. They will need to move from using the whole palm to finger pads in order to determine shape pattern. These are the prerequisites of braille, should this become their preferred medium.

### 1.4. Encouraging movement

Touch is not confined to hands. From the beginning babies learn through touch and enjoy close handling, such as rough and tumble, tickling and blowing raspberries, which help them become aware of whole body movements and to learn to tolerate different positions, such as being placed on their stomach. If they are slow to roll or crawl, brightly-lit and sound-producing toys will provide motivation, reinforced by an encouraging voice.

Placing a favourite toy on a sofa will encourage the child to pull to standing, and a push toy can give them confidence to move forward. From there, they can really begin to explore through touch on their own. Rearranging furniture, to provide a logical sequence that supports movement, to meaningful locations can help 'mental mapping' of the environment.

Touch is not just about textures - it also includes things which are hot or cold, vibration, and the movement of air. All of these sensations are detected by our skin; we decide whether they are pleasant or not and act accordingly.

The child's reaction is the clue to the next step. Work to make the most of it, always striving to provide interest and fun. It is not necessary to spend a long time making these materials, some are found ready and others need very little preparation and do not need to be beautiful to be useful. Once parents become involved, they often come up with the best ideas.

## 2. Treasure Baskets

Here we cover the concept of 'Treasure Baskets' - an idea originally created by Elinor Goldschmied. Treasure Baskets are now a popular activity used in many early years' settings to promote learning with babies.

Treasure Baskets are particularly relevant for babies and young children who have a vision impairment (VI) because they can offer a range of direct hands-on sensory experiences. It is a simple, fun and very effective way of enriching the early experiences of children with VI and it is also a resource that parents can create cheaply and easily at home.

### Contents

[2.1. What is a treasure basket?](#_4.1._What_is)

[2.2. What does a child gain from a Treasure Basket?](#_4.2._What_does)

[2.3. Why no plastics?](#_4.4._Why_no)

[2.4. Items in a Treasure Basket](#_4.5._Items_in)

[2.5. What else can I put in my Treasure Basket?](#_4.6._What_else)

[2.6. Popular objects](#_4.7._Popular_objects)

[2.7. Points to consider - safety](#_4.8._Points_to)

[2.8. Points to consider - maximising play opportunities](#_4.9._Points_to)

[2.9. The 'Be Active Box' - and 'Little Room'](#_4.10._The_'Be)

### 2.1. What is a Treasure Basket?

A Treasure Basket is a shallow sturdy basket containing a collection of everyday items, none of which are plastic. Most of the objects are in everyday use by adults and are made of natural materials. The items in the basket vary in weight, size, texture, colour, taste, temperature, and sound, and all the items are chosen to stimulate one or more of the five senses. Children explore the Treasure Basket using their senses to discover what an object is, what it is like and perhaps what it does when shaken or manipulated.

### 2.2. What does the child gain from a Treasure Basket?

Children learn by exploration and experience. A Treasure Basket brings many items within reach that a child may not have had the opportunity to handle. A child can feel items with their hands, feet, fingers and mouth. By having this opportunity a child discovers weight, texture and size. Does it have a smell? Can you taste it? Wave it, does it make a noise? Drop it and what happens? Can I put it inside another object? Can I join two items together? What happens when I bang one item against another?

Particularly for a young child with a vision impairment, it may be some time before they are ready to move confidently around their environment and find different objects for themselves. This is because children with VI are often later learning to crawl and walk. At times a child can seem less confident to handle unfamiliar objects and textures and this type of play, introduced early on, can help to avoid this. It is also much easier and more pleasurable to learn about the properties of objects when each one is distinctly different.

### 2.3. Why no plastics?

Many plastic objects are similar in many ways. They are often all smooth, have no smell and no taste. In our manufactured world, adults and babies use plastic objects everyday and a child gains experience of these objects from handling bottles, cups, toys and rattles. By offering a whole range of objects, which are not plastic, we increase the opportunities for a child to explore and learn.

### 2.4. Items in a Treasure Basket

The items contained in the basket fall under six headings. The following list gives ideas for each heading. You can experiment with likes and dislikes. It is sometimes best to start with a small number of items at first and to introduce new objects gradually. This way a child can find their favourite objects and notice when something new has been presented:

#### Natural objects

* pumice stone
* a lemon
* natural loofah

#### Natural materials

* little basket
* wooden nail brush
* paint brush

#### Wooden objects

* curtain rings
* clothes pegs
* egg cup

#### Metal objects

* spoons
* bunch of keys
* bunch of bells

#### Leather, rubber, textiles

* leather purse
* bath plug and chain
* ribbon and lace

#### Paper/Cardboard

* greaseproof
* paper
* boxes
* tubes

### 2.5. What else can I put in my Treasure Basket?

Here are some more ideas to get you started:

#### Objects that rattle.

Choose varying shapes and materials that produce different sounds. These offer instant reward for effort and their entertainment value for a child is immense.   
  
Objects that fit inside one another, such as boxes and pegs or graded measuring spoons.

These help children to discover ideas about size, shape and combining objects.

#### Building and demolition articles, which fit together and take apart, such as wooden blocks, zipped leather purse, a box with a lid.

These may encourage your child to combine objects and to notice smaller details and encourage finer manipulative skills.

#### Objects to follow, such as wooden eggs, balls and tubes that roll.

Children can use sound to follow the object as it makes a noise on the floor, perhaps encouraging them to reach out. They can use sweeping movements with arms and legs to try to find the object by touch. Many children can also use their vision to follow an object - particularly if it contrasts well against a plain background.

### 2.6. Popular objects

The following items have proved popular. Find out what a child enjoys best:

* spoon
* pastry brush
* wooden egg cup
* natural loofah
* cane coaster
* empty boxes- various sizes
* wooden and metal curtain rings
* glasses case
* leather bag and purse
* avocado pear stone
* bottle brush
* maraca
* velvet hair bands and scrunchies
* orange
* lemon
* shells
* cork
* pinecone
* shaving brush
* little baskets
* toothbrush
* bamboo whistle
* large beads on a string
* small bowls
* wooden lemon squeeze
* scent bottles
* closed tins containing different sounds
* small egg whisk
* cloth bags containing scent
* bean bag
* various fabrics - satin, lace, chamois leather.
* powder puff
* nylon pan scourer
* chain - various lengths and thickness
* wooden foot massager
* honey drizzler
* survival blanket
* ...and many, many more!

These are just a few objects you could include. There are many more interesting items you will discover.

### 2.7. Points to consider - safety

* Choose a basket that is strong and durable, without jagged edges.
* Objects should be washable, disposable, and replaceable. For example, pieces of fabric.
* Each object should be clean and safe. Always check the basket regularly.
* Be watchful of painted or varnished items. Check they are non-toxic and if in any doubt do not include them.

### 2.8. Points to consider - maximising play opportunities

* Aim for a variety of shape, texture, weight and colour.
* Be wary of including 'soft' toys, as their information and interest value can be limited. Often cuddly toys do not offer a solid shape (the shape changes when hugged, bent or squashed) so some young children do not recognise them as an object.
* Consider where to place the Treasure Basket in relation to the child. For example, would the child find it easier to reach in front, or to one side? Have you made exploring the basket as easy as possible?
* Find out what the range of the child's vision is so you can use the Treasure Basket within this range. If you know the child has better vision on one side, present objects from this side. For some children you will need to place the Treasure Basket where it is touching them so they remember where it is and can keep returning to find different objects.
* Consider lighting conditions in the room. For example, it is preferable to sit the child with their back to a light source or window so that they are not affected by glare. The glare from a window can stop a child with a sight problem from seeing objects as well as they could.
* Try to provide a good contrasting background that the objects can be seen against. For example, sit the child with their Treasure Basket on a plain tablecloth or floor rug.
* Allow the child the time to look or feel for fallen objects. If necessary help the child by taking their hand towards the object or moving the object in towards their body where they can feel it or hear it, rather than putting the object straight into their hands.
* Observe how the child interacts with, and explores, the Treasure Basket. Do you need to offer some new objects to explore? How can you make it more interesting? Is there an object that the child doesn't like?
* Children all develop at different rates. With regard to exploration, be aware of the stage the child is at. You may choose to introduce one item at a time.

### 2.9. The 'Be Active Box' and 'Little Room'

Treasure Basket ideas can also be adapted for children who are not yet sitting. Items can be put in a 'Be Active box' or 'Little Room', or suspended from a baby gym.

The 'Little Room' is an idea devised by Lilli Nielson for children with sensory difficulties. You can make a little room from a large cardboard box. Place the box down on its side with the child lying just inside the opening. Line the sides with textured materials and suspend objects securely from the top so that they hang down within the child's reach. In this way, the environment is brought in closer to the child so that it is easier for your child to see, touch and hear the objects. The 'Be Active box' and 'Little Room' are available commercially (See section 11 for more details).

## 3. Sensory development resource boxes

In this section we explore the use of Sensory development resource boxes. The following ideas for toys and resources are useful for early years practitioners, and parents or carers, who are working to support a young child who has a vision impairment. The ideas are suitable both for babies and very young children with a vision impairment (VI), and for young children who have VI and other additional difficulties.

### Contents

[3.1. Introduction to sensory resource boxes](#_5.1._Introduction_to)

[3.2. What is a sensory experience?](#_5.2._What_is)

[3.3. How sensory play helps the development of a child with a sight problem](#_5.3._How_sensory)

[3.4. Successful sensory play](#_5.4._Successful_sensory)

[3.5. Thinking about the environment](#_5.5._Thinking_about)

[3.6. Tactile selective behaviours](#_5.6._Tactile_selective)

[3.7. Repeated behaviours](#_5.7._Repeated_behaviours)

[3.8. Ideas for Sensory Development Resource Boxes](#_5.8._Ideas_for)

[3.9. Sensory resources that are less portable](#_5.9._Sensory_resources)

### 3.1. Introduction to sensory resource boxes

A sensory box can be put together simply and at low cost. It can be moved between rooms, transported with the child for overnight stays, or can follow the child between rooms in a childcare or nursery setting. The items might be used with a small group of children, which includes the child with a vision impairment; used with a child quietly in a separate area; or taken with the child into a specially designed sensory room if this is available to you.

The sensory activities described are designed to motivate children to notice the changes in their environment and then to begin to explore these changes by listening, looking, tasting, touching and moving.

### 3.2. What is a sensory experience?

When you offer a child objects and toys to look at, listen to, smell, touch or feel on their body, the child may respond in different ways. Some children will react immediately whereas others it might take longer and reactions may be more subtle. Some children go very still in response to a stimulus such as a bright shiny rattle. Their body stops moving and their breathing may seem very quiet or rapid. This is a sign that they are responding to the play. Other children presented with the same stimulus may smile or become excited, moving their body and reaching to touch the object or toy. Either way, you are giving opportunities for children to notice and respond to sensory experiences in their environment. As adults we can then learn about how the child communicates about things that are liked, disliked, familiar or strange.

### 3.3. How sensory play helps the development of a child with a vision impairment

A child learns about their body, their environment and other people by having direct experiences and through looking, listening, tasting, moving, feeling and making sounds or words. The activities and games that can be played with sensory materials help children explore, and in doing this they develop experience of:

* Moving their eyes, head, hands, feet and body (physical co-ordination).
* Focussing on an object (fixation and concentration).
* Focussing on an object and following its movement (fixation and tracking).
* Looking at and touching objects (hand-eye co-ordination).
* Understanding how to make something happen again (cause and effect) - through curiosity and enjoyment.
* Telling others what is enjoyable or uncomfortable (communicating needs and making choices).

For a child with little available vision they may be relying more on how the objects feel and sound rather than how they look.

### 3.4. Successful sensory play

A child needs to be alert to the experiences on offer. Avoid more challenging activities when they are tired and irritable, and stick to activities you know are enjoyed and familiar at these times.

Make sure the child is in the most suitable position to use their hands and eyes to best advantage, whether they are standing, sitting up or lying down.

Encourage the child to explore the sensory materials in the way they enjoy. This may be with their feet or face as well as their hands.

If a child uses repeated behaviours try to think up ways you might develop this. For example, if the child bangs everything they hold, try putting different textures underneath to make different sounds. In this case a soft cushion, crinkly paper, or a hard tray will each provide a different sound and feeling.

Watch the child’s reactions and listen to their vocalisations. Use these observational skills to help you know when the child needs a change of activity.

### 3.5. Thinking about the environment

Sensory activities can be presented in a variety of different ways depending on the needs of the individual child. This might depend on how much available vision the child has or whether a child is sitting up independently or holding objects for themselves. Some children will be able to pick up objects to manipulate, whereas for other children it will be the adult that manipulates the objects on, and around, the child’s body.

#### Lighting

Do consider the general lighting conditions in the room. For example, it is preferable to sit the child with their back to a light

source or window, so that they are not affected by glare. The glare from a window can stop a child with a sight problem from seeing objects as well as they could.

For babies and young children who respond better to objects with lights, it is a good idea to set up a quiet play area where the lighting is dimmed. To do this you might close the curtains and turn off the lights in the room, or you could create a small dark den using a play tunnel or small tent. By draping a blanket or old curtain over these you can cut out more of the light in the room so that the child can focus their attention on the light-up toys you are using. Some early years settings have a special sensory room, or dark room, that you might use. You could contact them to see if they let parents or practitioners come in to use it.

#### Concentration

Some children find it difficult to concentrate on their play, and are distracted by talking and movement in their environment. If this affects a child, and you want them to focus on sensory play, remember to switch of the radio or TV and find times when the child can play in a quiet area away from other children.

#### Presenting and placement of objects

Some children are unable as yet to pick up and manipulate objects for themselves, but might enjoy having sensory objects hung down around them for them to look at, touch and listen to. You could hang objects from an A frame or baby gym, but remember that once a child is able to grasp strongly and pull at these objects they may pull a frame over.

You could also make the child a waistcoat and onto this securely attach sensory materials for him to find, or sew sensory items onto a playmat that a child can lie or sit on and feel with his body and hands, or roll around to discover different textures and sounds. A child might play with a lightweight sensory rug placed in his lap. These sensory waistcoats and rugs can be very useful for long car journeys.

If a child is able to hold and manipulate objects either sitting up or lying down then think about presenting a small collection of objects for the child to choose from. Allow the child the time to look or feel for fallen objects, and if necessary, help the child by taking their hand towards the object or moving the object in towards their body where they can feel it or hear it.

Consider where to place the sensory objects in relation to the child. For example, some children find it easier to reach in front of them, whereas others prefer to reach to one side. Find out what the range of the child’s vision is so you can use the sensory objects within this range. If you know a child has better vision on one side, present objects from this side.

#### Visibility of objects

Think about the visibility of objects. Are they boldly coloured or reflective? How do they contrast against their background? Objects will show up better against a plain rug, sheet or tray than they will against a busily patterned carpet. Black and white are an effective contrast, as are yellow and black, or red and yellow. Some sensory objects are chosen for their texture, smell or feel and so then the colour of the object may be less important.

### 3.6. Tactile selective behaviours

Sometimes children with vision impairment find it difficult to touch and manipulate objects that have unfamiliar or unusual textures, perhaps because they do not have the same level of visual information that another child might rely on to tell them about the nature of the object. Such a child may be unsure initially about handling something unfamiliar. If this is the case go slowly, but do not respond by discarding objects altogether. If the child comes into contact with them regularly, over a period of time, these sensory objects they will begin to become more familiar.

### 3.7. Repeated behaviours

Young children need to do the same actions over and over again. This is the way they learn. Children naturally explore objects by putting them in their mouth, where the tongue and lips are very sensitive to changes of temperature, taste and texture. Usually babies and young children gradually reduce the amount of mouthing of objects as they learn. However, a child who has a vision impairment is very likely to mouth objects for much longer than other children because they do not have the same level of visual information that another child might rely on. If a child continues to mouth objects, you do not need to discourage this, but do continue to show the child other ways of exploring objects, such as manipulating them with fingers, or banging and shaking the objects.

Similarly, all babies and young children enjoy dropping and throwing objects and learning about what happens when they do. A favourite game for children is dropping something from their high chair both to hear it land and also to have an adult come running to pick it up again! Children with a sight problem may continue with this sort of dropping and throwing play for some time. They are continuing to learn about where objects go when dropped and that they still exist if they, or someone else, searches for them. They may continue for longer with this type of play just because they do not see this visually in the same way as other children do.

### 3.8. Ideas for Sensory Development Resource Boxes

The following ideas for sensory items are split into sections. Try to include at least one or two items from each section in your sensory box.If you have been creative and resourceful, and have gathered a large number of items, you could split these into several boxes, but try to include items from each section in each box. Individual children will have personal favourites so get to know what a child’s favourite items are. These favourite items are a good way to start your sensory play times, or the best items to use when the child needs to relax with play that is familiar.

### Some practical thoughts

The cost of any individual item varies from 50p up to £30 and over. Start small and spend little. Later, if you discover sensory play is something a child will enjoy and benefit from for a long time to come, you could add to your collection.

Inevitably the following sensory materials may not be designed to be used as ‘toys’. This means an adult must always be at hand to watch a child closely. If you are at all concerned about the safety of an item, do not use it.

#### Section 1. Light reflecting materials

* child sized plastic mirror
* holographic wrapping paper to hold and scrunch or stick onto card shapes which can then be manipulated
* small hand held mirror ball
* cheerleader pom pom
* survival blanket

#### Section 2. Light emitting objects

* small / large torch for the adult or child to hold. Try shining a torch onto the mirror ball, reflective surfaces or behind a white sheet. Use different coloured filters on the torch i.e. cellophane
* light rope
* push button light-up toys
* battery operated novelty light-up toys
* push operated light switch

#### Section 3. Things that move

* sparkly ball
* scented or smelly ball
* hand puppet
* finger puppets
* wind-up or battery operated mechanical toys
* tub of bubbles for blowing
* strong balloon, partly inflated, fill with rice or coloured water

#### Section 4. Contrasting sounds

* bells
* chains
* string of beads (plastic or wooden)
* string of ping pong balls
* string of small metal or wooden measuring spoons
* music box
* wind chimes

#### Section 5. Textured or messy play

Use a plain coloured tray with a lip all the way round, or a plastic cat litter tray, to contain:

* gloop (cornflour mixed with water)
* squirty cream from a can
* pasta or dried beans and pulses
* water (add food colouring for contrast)
* herbs from the garden in summer
* cereals, such as rice crispies

#### Section 6. Vibration

* drum
* rainstick
* vibrating toys
* bumble or jiggle ball

#### Section 7. Air movement

* portable fan
* hand held fan
* large bubble blower

#### Section 8. Easy things to hold

* small lightweight rattle
* small handbell
* wristbells
* wristband with bells or streamers attached
* slinky
* soft, squashy or hard textured objects such as a koosh ball or hedgehog ball
* beanbags made from bright or glittery materials. Fill each one with something different: rice, buttons, old keys, a piece of survival blanket, corks

### 3.9. Sensory resources that are less portable

The following items are less easy to carry around and move from place to place, but if a child responds well to sensory play and often prefers this to the sort of toys available in toy shops then you might also consider these:

* portable bubble tube
* vibrating mattress
* portable keyboard
* mini trampoline
* bhodrum (large drum made with natural materials)
* foot spa (add food colouring to the water for contrast)
* resonance board

### For further information about RNIB

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) provide a range of services to support children with vision impairment, their families and the professionals who work with them.

RNIB Helpline can refer you to specialists for further advice and guidance relating to your situation. RNIB Helpline can also help you by providing information and advice on a range of topics, such as eye health, the latest products, leisure opportunities, benefits advice and emotional support.

Call the Helpline team on 0303 123 9999 or email cypf@rnib.org.uk

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