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The Hard Talk: White Parents Discussing Racism with White Children

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Photo of Danielle McDonald and her son.

Today I read a post on Urban Cusp's Facebook page stating, "White parents there is work to be done and you have a critical role to play." This was posted above a tweet that had been originally posted by Jessica Luther that said, "A 5yo black girl survived last night by playing dead. Surely my 6yo white son can survive a conversation about why she matters." I read that over and over and over contemplating all of the ways I have been guilty of just this – avoiding the conversation.

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My son is 8 years old. I, like most parents, do whatever I can to protect him from the awful truths of the world. I'm not afraid to let him out of my sight nor do I want to put him in a bubble, but I do try to shield him from what I have always viewed as adult stuff. I turn off the TV, for example, when the news reports of shootings, police violence, and war come across the screen and he is in the room. My thought on this has always been that childhood is short and he will have his entire adult life to contemplate these things.

The funny thing is my son has always known better and has taught me the invaluable lesson that he can handle much more than I give him credit. A couple of years ago, for example, he and I were walking to a restaurant when we passed a young man who was probably twenty years old. He had a small card board sign that read he was homeless and please help. We said hello to the man and went in to eat. My son had a million questions. What does it mean to be homeless? Why would someone not have a place to go? Can't they just go to their parent's house? Can he come and live with us and stay in the quest room? We spent the entire meal discussing what I would have earlier deemed much too adult for this little 6 year old boy. By the end of the meal all he could talk about was how he wanted to help and build houses for people who didn't have one. It was then that I realized how he viewed homeless men and women for the rest of his life would ultimately be shaped by this experience. Right now. Today. We bought the man a meal and took it out to him, but more importantly we stopped and talked to him. We introduced ourselves and shook his hand. His name was Jason. It was important to me that he saw this young man for what he was - a person just like us. My son still asks questions about the homeless we see on the street, but now his questions tend to be of the nature of what can I do? This topic is now a part of his consciousness and last night while playing Minecraft he told me, "This is the house I built for me and over here are the houses I built for the homeless." I told him I didn't know Minecraft had homeless people and he replied, "The villagers just wander around they don't have anywhere to go, so I built them a house."

As difficult as the conversation about the homeless had been, it is nowhere as difficult for me as the topic of race. I don't even know where to begin. My son has friends who come from all different backgrounds and he embraces and loves them all. I had hoped this would be enough somehow. However, once again my son knew better. He came home from school last winter and told me how horrified he had been to find out about the Civil War. Had I been aware that Africans had been brought to this country as slaves? Did I know that not

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that long ago he would have gotten into trouble for hanging out with his friends Tyler and Sean? I asked if he had been learning about this in school and he replied he found out about it on his own from books in the school library and began to recount some of the horrific pictures he had seen. We talked about what had happened and I answered as best I could his many questions.

The problem now is not that we haven't talked about race, but rather I have only had discussions with him about things that have happened in the past. We've talked about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders as well as slavery and the Civil War, but I have continued to shield him from the police shootings, the protests, the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, along with the act of terrorism and hatred that recently took the lives of nine people praying in a church. I have done this because I was trying to protect my son, but by doing so I now recognize that I am doing just the opposite. I have unintendedly created a world for him where he believes everyone is equal and all have equal opportunity in life to get ahead. The problem with this is that it is obviously not true. I will never have to sit my son down and have the talk about how to interact with the police or why I don't want him to wear the hood on his sweat shirt even if it is raining. I will never have these conversations with my son because he is white.

However, there is a critical conversation that I should be having with my 8 year old son and that is that race does matter. That still today, in 2015, people are treated differently and have access to different opportunities based on nothing more than the color of their skin. I want him to understand there are still people out there who do unspeakable things to other people for no other reason than hate and a will to destroy and terrorize. I want him to understand this because it is up to his generation and mine to change this. However, one cannot change a broken system, if they were never aware that it was broken.

The Urban Cusp was right when they stated, "White parents there is work to be done and you have a critical role to play." Our children look to us for guidance and to help them make sense of the world. We must discuss the reality of racial inequality with our children, so it can become a part of their consciousness. Only then can they start to imagine the solution for change.

Danielle McDonald, Ph.D.
Associate Professor Criminal Justice
Northern Kentucky University

December 2013

November 2013

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Bill Lukens

JUNE 22, 2015 AT 6:56 PM

And please remember that racism is not just a white/black dialogue. While that meaning is getting headlines today, race & racism are words used to denote "otherness", not "our" people. The fear of "others" is the basis of violence and murder seen in every corner of human existence. We can love our sameness and laud our differences, both are needed to be fully human.



♠ REPLY



Danielle

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 6:55 PM

Thanks Bill for taking the time to comment. I really appreciate the feedback. I agree that cultural diversity is an awesome thing and we must always remember to celebrate our differences as well as what brings us together. I also agree that the concept of race is something that was socially constructed in order to create fear and otherness and is based in colonialism and slavery. However, I disagree that race is not a white/black dialogue in the US. This can be seen in the one drop rule, where if you had one drop of African/Black blood your race was considered black. It also can be seen after the Mexican American War, where the Mexicans who resided in what was now the US after the war asked to be classified

as White because of the fear of how they would be treated if they were categorized as Black. I do believe that hatred and discrimination extend beyond black/white and are felt by a large number of groups, but when we talk about race in the US I believe we are referring to Black and White. Thanks again for your comment.

← REPLY



Kelly Matthews

JANUARY 6, 2016 AT 2:06 AM

Danielle thank you for getting back to and focusing on the ROOT of the problem! It seems, however well intended, that whenever the scab of racism is ripped off & we are forced to deal with the very core of America's racial divide there's a tendency to want to throw all injustices to all minorities in the conversation; when in fact the very crux of where it all began is the white/black paradigm. Example #1 #blacklivesmatter ... Uh no, black folks sorry, all lives matter...

Although statistic after statistic proves that African Americans continue to be the most widely oppressed, targeted, jailed, denied & literally killed by the very authorities/institutions we pay taxes to there's always an uphill battle to convince otherwise decent whites that these atrocities still occur today. Why is this? Well because America is in deep denial about her history, how her power structure was built & the legacy of privilege that today's whites enjoy but are unwilling to admit & do the very heavy lifting of educating their children to these truths so at the very least we may have a frank conversation about these life & death matters to hopefully to the tide for future generations.

So thank you again for standing up & not only addressing this issue in your home but by also writing this article to inform/engage others because this is a very real example of how if one isn't apart of the solution then they are apart of the problem!

← REPLY



Michael Baran

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 12:01 PM

Great article. I'm a cultural anthropologist and wanted to create digital tools to help parents with this exact issue. I made one mobile app that's a fun game that sneaks a whole lot of learning about race into the game and gives parents tips on how to have these conversations. It's in the iTunes app store, and is called Who Am I? Race Awareness Game. There's another web-based interactive game that's more for older kids and adults – it's called (Don't) Guess My Race. It's also used i college classes, if you ever teach about race. It's at

http://www.eddontguessmyrace.com. Thanks!





Danielle

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 6:58 PM

Thanks for your feedback Michael and for sharing your apps. I will definitely check them out. I also teach a Race, Gender and Crime class and am interested to see how I might be able to incorporate the app for adults as well. Thanks again.





Michael Baran

JULY 14, 2015 AT 9:48 PM

Great, Danielle. The (Don't) Guess My Race program works great for adults and is used for many classes. Let me know if you have any questions at all.





Rachel Dangermond

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 7:30 PM

we have that app – thanks for creating it!

♠ REPLY



Michael Baran

JULY 14, 2015 AT 9:49 PM

Thanks for your feedback Rachel!





Mary Jo Macklin

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 2:53 PM

I am totally against slavery and racism but really find it hard to tolerate the fact that only one race gets the blame for it when in fact the black people were sold into slavery in Africa by their own people and in the 1600 and 1700 there were black slave owners in this country not to mention the the white slaves that came from Ireland. The American Indian and early settlers were the first to have problems with our differences and both sides suffered because of it. Too often the blame is focused on one party when in fact that is merely simplifying the problem. People today are not responsible for what happened hundreds of years ago However, we are responsible for what is happening today. People of all nationalities and races have to own up to the wrong that was done by their ancestors and resolve not to repeat their mistakes. What ever happened to the Golden Rule....."Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you?"





Kelly

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 4:01 PM

Mary Jo, your argument that (you) "find it hard to tolerate the fact that only one race gets the blame for it when in fact the black people were sold into slavery in Africa by their own people" is terrible. No one is blaming you for those events, history blames the participants. You are right when you say people are responsible for what happens today. And the people most responsible are the people who have the most power, the most benefit, and the most influence over the privileges they have over others. "White" people aren't to "blame" for racism but they are largely responsible for fixing it, as in today, right now.





Danielle

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 7:24 PM

Thanks Mary Jo for taking the time to comment and for your feedback. It is important to know our history and where we have been, so we can learn from it and grow. But we also have to be careful not to get stuck there. I think this is the trap a lot of us fall into. However, like you said we are only responsible for our own actions and inactions. The first step is to acknowledge that racism does exist and then we can start talking about it and what can be done. This is why it is so important for Whites to talk to their kids, families, friends, colleagues and neighbors about race and what is going on in the US today. Most Whites don't believe that people should be treated differently based on their skin color, but most Whites also have remained silent in the discussion on racism. Silence is complicity and is no longer acceptable. Thanks again for your post.

← REPLY



ann

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 1:53 PM

Really? The "race" dialogue should apply to ALL. Not just whites! It's been 150 YEARS since this country's people were no longer enslaved! It's been over 50 years since integration was enforced! Frankly I am sick of the whole racial issue!

Whatever the color of your skin, in this country you have the opportunity to better yourself. Yes, it is more difficult for those who have no parental guidance and support. Yes, it is more difficult if you come from limited means But it has been demonstrated over and over, people can overcome their limitations IF they forsake the "victim mentality". As long as you play the victim role, you don't have a chance to change your circumstances.

♠ REPLY

Danielle



JUNE 25, 2015 AT 3:55 PM

Ann,

Thanks for your comment. I think this interview with Bryan Stevenson, the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, does an excellent job of discussing racism post slavery and the reality of equal opportunities. I would love to hear your thoughts after you've had a chance to read the article.

https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/24/bryan-stevenson-on-charleston-and-our-real-problem-with-race

← REPLY



Hector

JANUARY 8, 2016 AT 10:11 AM

I am enjoying this conversation. I especially like the fact that this sensitive topic is being discussed without an ugly negative tones. Regarding the topic of slavery, it is important to keep in mind that as an economic tool it had to be protected by those in the position to do so whether black or white. Racism was a manufactured response to protecting the flow of free labor which was crucial to the country's initial decades. There is a highly informative video on YouTube from Dr. Joy DeGruy called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. It is a deep dive into the beginnings of racism and the generational implications that remain as of this writing. The version I recommend is the one that is 1:21:36 long. It will grab hold of your intellect and hold it captive (pun intended). Blessings to all.

← REPLY



Danielle

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 7:31 PM

Thanks Kelly for taking the time to comment. I couldn't agree more. People tend to visibly cringe when the words White Privilege are used, but I think that is because they tend to view it from a guilt perspective. However, I agree with you it is so much more than that. My hope is that if people will honestly discuss the topic of race in the US they will begin to see their own privilege and then how they can use this privilege to make a change. Thanks again for your comment.

← REPLY



Danielle

JUNE 23, 2015 AT 7:36 PM

Also be sure to check out Sachi Feris' blog Raising Race Conscious Children for some great discussions and resources for talking to kids about race. Thanks Sachi for sharing this with me.

http://www.raceconscious.org/blog/

← REPLY



Jennifer

JUNE 24, 2015 AT 2:03 PM

Great article. This is so hard. My four year old daughter heard something on NPR the other day when my radio woke us up. She turned to me and said, "Why were nine people were killed in South Carolina? They were shot! Where they bad?" I said, "The people who were shot were not bad, they were good. And most people are good, but a small number of people are very very bad. And a very bad person shot those 9 people and killed them." I did not elaborate on why he shot them. I just did not know how to talk about it. I am afraid of scaring her. I am afraid of her "pitying" Black people. I am afraid of screwing it up.

← REPLY



Missy

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 3:06 AM

Be assured that by avoiding the conversation you are indeed "screwing it up." I am sure you will have the conversation once you feel she is old enough to handle it, but because so many parents

avoid this education of their children for too long or never get to it, the world is filled with entitled adults who believe that racism ended with MLK. Because if it were actually a thing my parents would have mentioned it at least once. But they didn't. So it's not something that I need to concern myself with. This is how we create another generation of those people.





Danielle

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 4:00 PM

Jennifer,

Thanks for your comment. It is hard to know what to say. My advice would be to answer her questions as honestly and openly as you can when she starts to ask you questions about race. It sounds like you're already doing this by your conversation with her about the shootings. You'll know what to say when the time comes.

← REPLY



Dawn BJUNE 24, 2015 AT 11:26 PM

Great article! Here are some teaching resources made available from the Southern Poverty Law Center. They are a great resource on actually HOW to talk to your child about these issues. This is sorted for grades 1-2 but they have teaching lessons available for multiple grades.

http://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources? keys=&type=All&topic=All&grade=3&domain=218&subject=All

← REPLY



Danielle

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 4:01 PM

Thanks Dawn! This is great. The SPLC are an excellent resource. Thanks for sharing!





Ryan

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 8:44 AM

I have to say Danielle, that your fear, and the fear that is expressed by the other moms and commentators is what aids in the proliferation of white privilege. So many children grow up, unexposed to the discriminatory realities of our world, that they genuinely and understandably believe that racism does not exist. So when they become adults, and are exposed to some harsher realities, they see it through their lens of equal opportunity for everyone. It does a great disservice. As you said, the first step is acknowledgment, not placing blame. The goal isn't to lay guilt upon your child, but to properly expose him to the truth, which is honestly, one of the hardest yet most important things to do as a parent.

Thanks for your time





Danielle

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 4:05 PM

Ryan,

Thanks for your feedback. I agree with your comment on white privilege. This is what I was attempting to explain in the article. Thanks again for taking the time to comment.





Kim

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 12:56 PM

I cannot help but wonder if you are as concerned with teaching your son about the Irish slaves as well. It is largely ignored in the history books. I am very proud of the fact that my own son never noticed a difference in skin tone until he was in first grade and had come home in an excited wonder because he just realized his best friend for more

more than 2 years from preschool, had brown skin. The thing is though, my son was a victim of bullying... By two white kids and one boy of color, in separate situations....the boy in question attacked my son repeatedly on the bus even though my son had tried to be his friend, for no other reason than that he was white... In a predominantly white school, this seems odd. But he hated my son because of the color of his skin and the color of his hair. And when we were trying to find out why my son was coming home with bruises and bite marks on him and he finally told us that this boy (a kindergartner as well) was threatening to Kill him and break his bones.... I asked the boys name and my son didn't know... I asked him to describe the boy and with "he had black hair and it was curly. We took this to the principal and through that determined which child it was and that it was one of the few black kids In the school. My point is, to my son, who didn't notice race or color even in a sea of white faces, a black one was not different to him, but to that boy, in a predominantly white school... He chose my so.n to attack... For being nice to him and for being white. Even though my sons best friend had brown skin as well. So my son was attacked for his race, and the school Ends up doing nothing about it because they were afraid the boy's parents would accuse them of being discriminatory ... And even through two and a half years of being bullied for being white...my son did not grow into a racist. He still barely noticed skin color. And I am proud of him for that. We have many different nationalities in our circle of friends and there are black and white and mixed in our family. We love them all for who they are, not the color of their skin. Racism is taught and it is ingrained in a person from a very young age and those seeds of hate must be carefully tended to with more hate or those seeds don't survive. ... But we don't have to fight against it... We need to fill that space with love.





Danielle

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 4:59 PM

Kim.

I actually do plan to teach my son about Irish slaves as well as how the Irish were conscripted into the Civil War right off the boat along with how they were treated in the coal mines. The largest mass execution in US history was the hanging of the Molly Maguire in PA. 4 men were hanged in one town and 2 in another on the same day because it was believed they were involved in labor disputes with the coal mines. Since this time many of the men have been posthumously exonerated.

I'm truly sorry to hear that your son was bullied. It is always heart breaking to watch your child suffer, especially when it is at the hands of another child. It leaves us feeling so helpless. I'm also glad to hear that your son has not held this experience against others who look like the child who bullied him. I'm guessing this has a lot to do with your parenting and having friends from different backgrounds, so your child can see not all people who look like _____ behave like _____.

However, racism of the past was something that we could point to. Look at that racist over there burning the cross or wearing bed sheets or trying to stop school integration, etc. Today racism is not always as obvious, although it still occurs. For example, Blacks do not commit more crimes than Whites yet they are extraordinarily overrepresented within the criminal justice system. This is particularly true for drug crimes. This also applies to a lot of other areas in life, for example, getting a job, taking out a mortgage and buying a car. Racism as it occurs today is not as obvious, but it is institutionalized. Blacks are not able to ignore this because it directly impacts them. However, Whites can ignore this because we don't typically have these experiences. This then causes Whites to sometimes believe that all have equal opportunities and race is not taken into consideration because that is their experience. When this happens it makes it difficult for us to empathize with people who have had experiences different from our own because it so far out of our narrative that it is hard to believe. I agree with you that racism is taught, but ignoring the experiences of others makes us complicit. I think there is room to talk about the issue as well as imagine a solution and hopefully that will include love as well. Thanks again for your feedback.

← REPLY



Rachel Dangermond

JUNE 25, 2015 AT 7:29 PM

A therapist friend says that when a parent thinks it is time to have a conversation about sex with their child, the conversation should have happened five years before. That is the same with the timing about conversations about race. Children of color have these conversations in utero because their parents equip them with survival mechanism and are constantly giving them a second skin against the barrage of messages that come from our racist society. I'm currently writing a book that is part memoir but also speaks to parents about how to

speak about racism. I'm hoping it makes these conversations easier and a normal part of parenting.





Jaga JUNE 27, 2015 AT 2:48 AM

Wow. Interesting commentary. Not simplistic, or full of dogma. Grappling with the gray area.

I liked "acknowledge" vs. accepting blame.

I liked the goal of not sheltering so that our children don't wake up one day as adults and resent that some begrudge them their assumption of what some would call privilege, but what we provided as a nurturing secure esteem-building environment. Complicated.

A couple years ago now, besides my parents, the conservatives I k ew were my male contemporaries - white, now feeling blamed, and discriminated against, victims of "reverse-racism". Today's Supreme Court decision for me put one thong in focus: Civil Rights is Civil Rights. Though I am straight, White, and have never sought abortion (and in fact am disturbed by it on a core level), the Civil Rights Movement, Roe V Wade, and same sex marriage are about Civil Rights – and I feel inexplicably . . . What's the right word: joyous? relieved, victorious, normal? I was struck today by statements about gay couples feeling legitimate and recognized by their country - of and up which they are happy proud to be a part. And racism still exists. Are there as many White criminals as Black? No idea. But I will say that every crime committed against me personally where the perpetrator was known, they were black. If we figure in White Collar crime, please, please incarcerate (and NOT in "Club Fed") the contractors and anyone accountable for the SF Bay Bridge.

And here for me is an elephant in the room: My friend is worried about her 6'-3" teenage son, who is Black and she must coach that there are limitations on him simply based on the color of his skin. I do not mean to dilute the importance of this issue or the anguish of his mother. However, I seek compassion and empathy with every parent who must explain to their child that it's open season on them, and they must adjust their behavior to protect themselves. Young Black males, or all our female children, it's deplorable. And I am asking to include under re umbrella of Civil Rights that I can walk home at night as freely as my male peers. And the same communal social conscience that is appalled by double standards based on race or sexual orientation rejects rape of girls and women as unavoidable status quo. I genuinely feel for my

friend who talks her son to stay below the radar; and I'm increasingly disturbed by our society's acceptance that we must coach our girls the same.

Overall, refreshingly complex dialogue.

← REPLY



Jessica

DECEMBER 14, 2015 AT 9:11 AM

I love how you reply to each comment with a lot of thought so that you make sure to stay positive. My son is two and a half and I wonder how I will talk to him about all of this in the future. My entire family is white except for him. His father is black.. But he is only half black but appears more black than any other race, so technically my son is black also, a quarter black so it is very possible that he could experience bullying and racism on his own at a young age but it is doubtful because he looks completely white and everyone is shocked to see that his father is even black. I guess where I'm going with this is how do you talk to a child about race and minority when technically they are a part of that minority but they don't physically look like they are?

← REPLY



Stephanie Wilson

JANUARY 6, 2016 AT 12:34 AM

I am an African American and the single mom to a son who is now 33. We live in a predominantly white environment and so I have struggled with how much my young man should be told about this crazy country we live in. What I found was that my shielding him from our racist society began to produce a fissure in our relationship. By the time he was 18ish he wasn't sure if he could trust me to be honest, and began getting his info elsewhere. He would hear or read something and ask me why I didn't tell him about it. My response was that I was trying to protect him, or I would say something like "the subject just never came up." He knew differently though. I learned to be careful what I tried to protect him from...such a delicate balancing act. I realized that instead of hiding things from him I needed to be more open which required longer and more detailed conversations. Like you I'd rather he hear it from me than from someplace else.





Shari JANUARY 6, 2016 AT 3:15 PM

Well written Danielle I, well written





Paige Winikoff
JANUARY 6, 2016 AT 8:29 PM

Hi Danielle.

Thanks so much for your article. We are a white family raising a black daughter adopted from Ethiopia. One of my facebook friends shared your post - it's making its way around our little community of families who adopted from Ethiopia and we all appreciate the post and it's thoughtfulness. The funny part (or maybe this is the sad part) I never even considered these issues before adopting – before it affected us personally. But in reality, I now realize how much a part of all our lives diversity and tolerance is and always has been. Not that I am an expert. I am stumbling through this like everyone else... But I did have a very strange experience recently that white people in our community actually go out of their way (doing anything they can) to avoid mentioning race. It is so extreme, it is actually hard to get things done sometimes. I wrote a post of my own about it if you are interested. http://www.politicsofplaydates.com/2015/05/why-are-we-soafraid-to-mention-race.html So, thanks again. Keep writing and ignore negative comments because you are making more of an impact than you realize (in a positive way).

REPLY



Brook JANUARY 7, 2016 AT 11:13 AM

Here's some explanation why many of the points in these comments (All Lives Matter, everyone is racist, I shouldn't feel guilt, historical events, etc.) refuting the article are founded not in objectivity and reason.. but instead fallacy and ignorance.

https://lonoxiii.wordpress.com/2016/01/07/497/

← REPLY



Jen Cort

JUNE 18, 2016 AT 8:40 PM

Thank you Raising Racially Conscious Children for publishing my letter to my 16 year old about his privilege status and his response https://www.facebook.com/JenCortConsulting/posts/1738234156401420?

comment_id=1738287656396070¬if_t=share_comment¬if_i d=1466290819922207

← REPLY

9 TRACKBACKS / PINGBACKS

- **%** A True Story about Race − Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church ~ Celebrate Life ~ Create Community ~ Seek Justice
- % Everyone equal problem White parents
- **%** Curriculum for White Americans to Educate Themselves on Race and Racism | Citizenship and Social Justice
- % 30+ Resources to Help White Americans Learn About Race and Racism Everyday Feminism
- Nothing More*, or the Longest of Cons | Unsettling Librarian
- Curriculum for White Americans to Educate Themselves on Race and Racism | Keep Ypsi Black
- % Friday Links: 1/8/16 @ Like Me Like You Kids
- Curriculum for White Americans to Educate Themselves on Race and Racism–from Ferguson to Charleston by Jon Greenberg pedagoglog
- % Principal's Corner | Lawrence PTO

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