Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare – Best/Better Practices

This literature review will convey and explore existing knowledge and best/better practices designed to overcome challenges and barriers related to efforts in the identification, location and contact phases that must occur prior to father engagement in general. This also includes conveying and exploring existing knowledge and best/better practices on successfully engaging fathers in children and family services. It also serves the dual purpose of exploring the best/better practices designed to overcome challenges and barriers related to efforts in establishing and maintaining engagement for fathers from cultural communities. Ultimately, success in working with and engaging fathers requires more than mere contact. This literature review strives to offer suggestions in moving forward from what has been discussed on engaging fathers in child and family services.

Issues in Identifying, Locating and Contacting Fathers

Many caseworkers rely primarily on mothers for access to information about the father and may not consult other resources to identify him. In the *What about the Dads?* study, mothers were the most frequently utilized means of identifying non-resident fathers, with 84% of caseworkers reporting that the child's mother was asked to identify the non-resident father (Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006). The effectiveness of this practice is questionable, as caseworkers also reported that less than one third of the time did the mother actually provide information about the father's identity (Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006).

Mothers as Gatekeepers

While some mothers who deny knowing the identity of the child's father may not have information to provide a good lead, others may be engaging in "gatekeeper" behaviour, in which the mother works to limit the father's involvement with the children due to her anger with him, or her

perception that he has not been a responsible father, financially or otherwise (McBride et al., 2005; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). At times, mothers may want to exclude the father due to a history of domestic violence, as many studies suggest that child abuse and partner abuse have a relatively high incidence of co-occurrence (O'Leary, Slep, & O'Leary, 2000).

Mothers can either facilitate or block access to both resident and non-resident fathers (O'Donnell et al. 2005; Huebner et al. 2008). In a qualitative Canadian study with twenty-two caseworkers, Parent et al. (2007) noted that more than half of the caseworkers believed that the mother had the right to accept or refuse involvement from her partner. Drawing upon focus group evidence from individual cases with 34 child welfare staff, caseworkers outlined several reasons why a mother may choose not to provide information about, or access to the father. These may include reluctance about letting the father know that child welfare services are involved, fear that the father may gain custody, anger at the father for being in a new relationship or fear of the father's reaction, particularly if there has been a history of domestic abuse (O'Donnell et al. 2005). The decision to conceal a father's identity may also rest upon financial incentives, as the mother may receive more money informally from the father or assume she qualifies for more welfare benefits if his presence in the home is not known (O'Donnell et al. 2005). This perceived financial disincentive to identify fathers is noted in Dominelli et al.'s (2011) study, which is based on qualitative interviews with 11 fathers of children in the Canadian public care system.

A mother who has a positive relationship with the father may not identify him due to her concern or fear of potential consequences associated with alerting state agents of an undocumented immigrant father, a father with an outstanding arrest warrant, a father who is delinquent on his child support obligation, or a father without a child support order, who may be identified and required to pay support (Smithgall et al., 2009). Within these circumstances, a mother's reluctance to identify the father may be seen as an effort to protect him from "the system."

It is important to note that in some cases the mother may be perfectly justified in her fear, as

some men exhibit behaviours that necessitate restricted contact with children due to the risk of serious harm. It should also be noted that not all mothers will restrict access to fathers. In focus groups with 17 women service users, Roskill (2008) found that many women strongly expressed that the involvement of men with children's services is very important.

Essential Elements of Engaging Fathers

"Simply contacting fathers is unlikely to affect outcomes for children, but . . . contact should support fathers' engagement or re-engagement in their children's lives" (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008).

Early identification and involvement

For young fathers without employment or educational prospects, fatherhood can offer them something meaningful which can help them to feel valuable (Ferguson & Hogan 2004). These fathers may be keen to take on the role of father but may need early help and support in making this transition. The early identification and involvement of fathers corresponds with higher levels of engagement later on within the child welfare process (Garbers et al. 2006). In a qualitative study with vulnerable fathers in Ireland, Ferguson & Hogan (2004) note that "without exception those professionals who were most successful in engaging fathers and 'holding' them in the work were those who invited the father to attend from as close to the start as possible" (p.13).

The best time to reach fathers is when they are experiencing change and are looking for support. This most clearly happens during the prenatal and postnatal periods. Dads begin to look seriously at their future, their lifestyle, and if they have the tools necessary to raise a child. Motivation is high and new fathers have a strong interest in accessing services and programs. This presents caseworkers with an opportunity to establish a good working relationship with fathers that encourages their involvement, educates them about the positive impact they will have on their children, and connects them with other fathers. It also mediates the couple's adjustment to life with a baby (Cowan and Cowan, 2009).

Parenting programs need to start prenatally, be offered once the baby arrives and be continued throughout the first few years of the child's life (Crill-Russell, 2003).

Good father, bad father: Polarized perceptions and preconceptions in practice:

A significant obstacle to father engagement and involvement in the child protection process is dichotomous thinking, where men become labelled as either a 'risk' or 'resource' for their children, as opposed to potentially a complex mix of both elements. Brandon et al. (2009) found a tendency for professionals to adopt what they term 'rigid' or 'fixed' thinking. Fathers were labelled as either 'all good' or 'all bad', leading to attributions as to their reliability and trustworthiness. In the course of child protection work, social workers can feel as though they are bombarded with men who are posing a risk to children through physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment (Scott & Crooks 2004). Practice philosophies can become polarized between those who are perceived as 'men bashers' and those who are seen as 'letting men off the hook' (Scourfield and Dobash, 1999), and strengthened by team members, who tend to reinforce each other's' positive or negative construction of male service users (O'Donnell et al., 2005).

In a case study of 24 vulnerable fathers, 12 mothers, 12 children and 20 professionals in Ireland, Ferguson and Hogan (2004) found that fathers' identities were sometimes constructed by professionals in collaboration with family members, with fathers often labelled as dangerous without the professional having had any direct contact with the man. Based upon this limited assessment, the fathers are generally excluded. The diffusion of negative stories about fathers has also been discovered in an ethnographic study within a UK social work office, where Scourfield (2003) identified a number of pejorative discourses, including those of men as absent, irrelevant, a threat and of no use (although some men were regarded more positively in contrast to 'failing' mothers, and some couples were seen to be 'as bad as each other').

Labelling fathers prevents workers from taking the views expressed by 'bad fathers' seriously

(Maxwel et al., 2012). There are also apparent difficulties in how to label 'bad fathers', who have successfully completed interventions, as workers may struggle to balance their evaluations of the fathers' ability to change alongside past patterns of behaviour (Brandon et al., 2009). Polarized perceptions and preconceptions of fathers are unhelpful, as openness towards a range of interventions is necessary in addressing the complexities within lives and families.

Adopting a strengths-based and proactive approach to engaging fathers:

Constructive attitudes towards men further enhance engagement, so workers must be willing to include, invite and have positive attitudes towards working with fathers (Ghate et al., 2000; Ashley et al. 2006). In the context of family support work, the most effective interventions adopt a strengths-based approach, which focuses on the important contributions that fathers make to their children's lives, where workers are positive about the father's abilities, and use solution-focused thinking to emphasize, develop, and build confidence around a father's existing skills (Berlyn et al. 2008; Gearing et al. 2008).

Essential to engaging fathers is ensuring that they are viewed and treated as essential allies, instead of being solely defined as the cause of the problem(s). Role models are essential in helping to shape young father's' attitudes, as outside positive reinforcement is needed to withstand dominant norms, which reinforce stereotypical notions of masculinity in the context of parenting (Crooks et al., 2007). Fathers are more likely to respond to mentorship provided by other men, who provide role models to whom they can relate while engaged in family and children services (Crooks et al., 2007). Crooks et al. (2007) explain that men need to know that their participation in these initiatives will lead to a positive outcome, such as skill-building, and must have a system of support and acceptance within a proactive and strength-based approach.

Research findings suggest that fathers prefer services that have been designed specifically for them, provide the opportunity for them to spend time with their children, and facilitate their access to peer support (Ghate et al. 2000; Lloyd et al. 2003; Garbers et al. 2006; Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007; Berlyn et al. 2008; Bayley et al. 2009). While a significant minority of men are responsible for domestic and parental violence, abuse and neglect, all men must be a part of the solution. Taking the stance that men have to be involved in assessments and family interventions requires that services be accessible outside of typical business office hours, necessarily removing a barrier to access for working fathers and mothers.

Make services accessible and relevant to a diversity of fathers: Acknowledging men and their needs:

Fathers exist in a diversity of positions that do not reflect the traditional family structure. They may be single fathers, stepfathers, newcomer fathers, young fathers, gay/bi/queer/transgendered fathers, Aboriginal fathers, or fathers from cultural, racialized and marginalized communities. Men raising children can be grandfathers, uncles, step-dads, adoptive dads or big brothers. Considering the vast cultural and racial diversity within the Canadian landscape, all types of fathers need to feel welcome, to be able to connect with other dads, and to have facilitators who they can identify with (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012).

There is not only one model of manhood in any given society and not all masculinities are equal. Hierarchies of social power contribute to the construction of hegemonic, marginalized and subordinated masculinities, in recognition that there are hierarchies of social power (Connell 2005). The concept of marginalized masculinity is especially relevant to the clients of child protection services, which can include low-income fathers, immigrant and refugee fathers, fathers from cultural and racialized communities, and gay/bi/queer/transgendered fathers.

Fathers from marginalized communities face barriers in accessing support services because they typically work long hours and are unable to attend appointments and workshops scheduled during the regular business hours of most support agencies (Bhandari, Horvath, and To, 2006). Bayley et al. (2009) highlight the need to make services available to all fathers, including those who are employed

and suggest flexibility of service provision; while 9–5 week day hours will be difficult for some, evenings and weekends may be difficult for others.

The perceived responsibility of men as the "breadwinners" or key providers for the family household is a very strong aspect of their sense of self and masculinity regardless of nationality, education, family background and expertise. The strong pressures on immigrant men, to be and appear to be, the breadwinner puts them in a difficult situation, as they must often deal with a range of personal, social, educational and institutional barriers that hinder their ability to settle and meet these expectations (Donaldson and Howson, 2009). Both Potter & Carpenter (2010) and Cullen et al. (2011) describe the need for 'a hook' to draw men into parenting services, with Weinman et al. (2002) suggesting that employment may be one such effective 'hook' for marginalized fathers. In a US qualitative study on young fathers and risk, Weinman et al. (2002) found that despite the presence of multiple risk factors in the lives of marginalized and young fathers, these fathers did not perceive a need for parenting support or substance abuse counselling. When asked about service needs, the majority of fathers wanted employment services as they saw this as a way of establishing themselves as 'provider' and in turn, gaining access to their children (Weinmanet al. 2002).

In Canada, 20% of lone-parent households are led by fathers (Statscan, 2011). Becoming a single father requires a significant adjustment by men. They need to separate from their partner while maintaining a strong relationship with their child and adopting parenting skills to new circumstances. Many will require clear and accurate information about their legal rights and responsibilities (Whitehead et al, 2008).

Identifying and Engaging Newcomers

Newcomers to Canada represent a diverse and rapidly growing demographic in Canada. This is particularly true for the region of Waterloo. Family and Children Services must establish creative and

effective methods for supporting families, as the significant and steady increases in the number of immigrants coming to Canada over the past thirty years, as well as the growing number of countries from which immigrants and refugees have originated, have contributed to a steady increase in social support needs for immigrant fathers in this country (Esté, 2006). Twenty-seven percent of the City of Kitchener's current population is comprised of people who identify as immigrants (City of Kitchener 2008). According to Crewa and Kotheri (1999), the reasons for migration are complex, varied, and many are non-economic.

High caseloads with limited resources often result in "child welfare staff act[ing] more as decision makers and less as service providers" (Cohen 2003). Settlement is a challenging lifelong process (Kriz 2012) and fathers are particularly confronted with many barriers and necessary readjustments in negotiating a bi- or multicultural existence. Thus "child welfare agencies and staff, as well as their community partners, benefit from understanding how culture mediates the decion making process, especially in cases of neglect" (Cohen 2003). Despite Canada's celebratory policy on multiculturalism, studies show that racism is equally prevalent in both Canada and the US, although in Canada it is more covertly manifested and not as openly discussed in our society (Williams 2004). Increased engagement of the father in child protection cases decreases the burden on the mother and facilitates an easier transition to living in Canada for the children. (Bhandari, Horvath, and To, 2006)

Canadian studies show that personal and structural barriers often result in the inadequate engagement of fathers, who are newcomers to Canada, which is often a result of caseworker fears that they will reproduce racial discrimination and cultural isolation or judgement (Brown et al., 2007). The consequence is that problematic behaviour is often normalized, or in other cases, overly intrusive interventions are utilized (Cohen, 2003). Data also shows that personal values and biases impact these decisions more than prescribed rules, regulations, and ethics in practice (Cohen 2003). In custody negotiations, people from racialized and cultural communities must often rely on disempowering stereotypes to secure custody, furthering their disengagement with the system (Williams 2004). By

recognizing the unique barriers faced by newcomer fathers, as well as the integration of current better practices, Family and Children Services of the Waterloo Region can establish processes that are more collaborative and engaging for newcomer fathers.

Best/Better Practices & Gaps

Case Example #1: Dad Central / Papa Centrale, Ontario

Dad Central/Papa Centrale, Ontario, is an organization that works to provide relevant and wellcrafted information for fathers and for individuals, agencies, and programs working with fathers. This organization provides training workshops, parenting programs, one time seed funding to support activities and events related to father involvement, as well as awards of recognition to organizations/individuals for involving fathers in practice. The organization's approach to engaging men is centered on the care of children and the family within the context of health promotion, the importance of well-being, and development of the child. The organization's mission is to promote both understanding of and concerted action towards responsible father involvement, as a supportive and protective condition of healthy child development and resiliency. The primary objectives of the organization are to increase awareness and knowledge about the importance of father involvement in healthy child development; to expand the awareness of father involvement at the community level, province-wide and across Canada; to encourage the creation of networks linking the development of healthy public policy together with concerted action, in support of responsible father involvement; and to educate and support fathers in their role as positive contributors, in shaping the lives of their children.

Case Example #2: Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA)

FIRA is dedicated to the development and sharing of knowledge around father involvement.

FIRA was conceived as a broad-based Canadian alliance of individuals, organizations and institutions

dedicated to the development and sharing of knowledge focusing on father involvement. The organization has operated to develop partnerships, research projects and other undertakings which will further knowledge and understanding of father involvement in contemporary families. FIRA conducted a community-university research alliance project between January 2004 and December 2009. FIRA recognizes the intersections of identities of "father" within Canadian society and supports developing a richer understanding of parenting from the father's perspective. The research clusters are: immigrant fathers, gay/bi/queer fathers, separated and divorced fathers, new fathers, young fathers, and fathers of children with Special Needs.

Case Example #3: The Parenting Partnership

The Parenting Partnership is a couples' program developed by Invest in Kids and now administered by the Phoenix Centre for Children and Families, in Pembroke, Ont. The Parenting Partnership begins in the prenatal period and continues on a flexible schedule until the child is approximately 14 months old, using a combination of 20 semi-structured group meetings, 73 weekly web-based sessions and electronic communication between parents and facilitators. Participants are also given access to over 1,200 online articles. The program was piloted in 20 Ontario centres over a three-year period.

Case Example #4: Caring Dads

Caring Dads is a 17-week intervention program designed for fathers (including biological, step, common-law) who have physically abused, emotionally abused or neglected their children, exposed their children to domestic violence or who are deemed to be at high-risk for these behaviours. The program was developed by a multi-disciplinary team led by psychologist Katreena Scott of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and piloted over a five- year period. Caring Dads has been offered in Thunder Bay, Brantford, Toronto and other cities in Ontario. Program and training materials are available for fathers and for individuals, agencies, and programs working

with fathers.

Gaps in Existing Practices

When we think about engaging our communities in general, deep consideration in regards to race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, language needs to be incorporated. While Dad Central/Papa Centrale, Ontario and FIRA acknowledge the intersectionality of fathers, they are heavily informed and guided by public health policy and "health discourse" in Canada; specifically, discourses that focus on a particular model of healthy child development. The oversaturation of child services approaches with dominant health discourses can present significant challenges when engaging fathers from newcomer, cultural and racialized communities. A focus on health discourse fails to acknowledge the values, lived realities, and identities of a diverse range of fathers who may for example, view parental roles differently and child development from a holistic perspective, which can serve to further isolate marginalized fathers and families. Dad Central/Papa Centrale and FIRA's use of health discourses to guide their practice does not encourage respect for and understanding of cultural difference; rather, it seeks to "train" all fathers to adopt dominant parenting practices. Rather than universalizing approaches for engagement, an approach to respecting difference must be taken into account. Engaging men with children involves far more than just providing one set of generic training or facilitating one set of generic workshops.

While the *Parenting Partnership* engages fathers in early identification and involvement, together with *Caring Dads*, these organizations offer our vast diversity of fathers a universal intervention strategy in the form of a "training" program. Universalizing an intervention strategy across difference is not conducive to success, as all fathers have unique identities, values and beliefs, life experiences, challenges, barriers, and needs.

The power dynamics between the expert service provider and non-expert fathers within these intervention strategies make it challenging to engage fathers, as the failure to consider them experts of their own lived experiences and identities, serves to alienate and isolate fathers, which may in turn

provoke resistance. Organizations must adopt a strengths-based approach that engages fathers as the experts of their own experiences, and should identify problems, as well as design and implement interventions collaboratively in order to understand and address situational complexities and the underlying needs of each individual father.

With increasing migration rates to Canada, Family and Child Services throughout the country have tried a diversity of approaches to fostering increased engagement. In recognition that there has traditionally been an over representation of white female workers, increased cultural competency and humility training, as well as the hiring of caseworkers from different populations are important strategies to be adopted. At the same time, this can contribute to an unrealistic expectation that added community-based staffing and training will solve complex issues (Cohen 2003). While it is important to discover and consider the needs of every cultural community, this has proven to be insufficient, as needs change and there are specifics to sub-communities that this training can fail to capture (Miller 2003). These methods also fail to address the structural violence and racism, which often results in an overall lack of trust and scepticism from families, who may believe that social services will view them negatively. When done without the input of members from newcomer communities this training can also contribute to a worker's belief that newcomers don't have access to the resources needed to be engaged, resulting in a negative self-fulfilling prophecy (Cohen 2003).

It has also been noted that the decor within Family and Child services can have a significant impact on engagement. Including culturally diverse art and advertising a safe space can dispel negative stereotypes of newcomer males, which can improve the likelihood of engagement (Long 2008). Ultimately, while these methods are an important step towards fostering better engagement in newcomer men, it is vital that they are seen as only one part of the process rather than as a solution unto themselves.

Studies with newcomer families have found that a diversity of tactics in fostering engagement is more likely to achieve better results. Families' suggestions for crisis-prevention and support include

more communication between schools and families, increased staff who are identified with their respective cultures and can speak their languages, increased cultural sensitivity and humility training, language access policies, increased collaboration between family services and cultural community-based organizations, and increased community outreach and education (Earner 2007). Often collaborative, coordinated and relevant services would foster better involvement; however, these services are rarely present (Cohen 2003). Data demonstrates that community-based settlement and immigrant services are the most effective (as opposed to CIC services) at minimizing the effects of barriers to migrant families, and men in particular, partly because they employ a transformative approach (Long 2008). Establishing a Child and Family presence within settlement services can go a long way to diminishing the fear associated with interacting with social services (Earner 2007).

Newcomers have clearly taken the position that engagement with their community must begin before needs are identified or crises erupt, in order to achieve genuine engagement (Miller 2003). This work should include the engagement of male leaders from cultural communities in the facilitation of community conversations where expectations, supports, and processes can be transparently detailed. These conversations can help workers to develop deeper understandings of the lived experiences of newcomers so that they may better establish rapport with fathers and put less responsibility on the mother after the crisis has occurred (Williams 2004). An example of one such program is *In Reach*, which strives to "emphasize that the design and delivery of human service policies and programs need to be informed/transformed continually by input from those they are meant to serve" (Long 2008). This program takes into account notions of what fatherhood means amongst men from different cultural communities (Long 2008). It encourages the workers to be more self-reflexive and collaborative with the fathers and communities they are trying to reach by providing opportunity for the community members to share their impressions and feel they have a voice and input, in the way they are related to and valued. This practice has a record of removing deeply-entrenched biases and stereotypes, and challenges misunderstandings.

Much work has also been done to establish practices that foster better engagement after the crisis has taken place. Fear and misunderstanding often interrupt engagement; newcomer men are often unsure of what is expected of them or how they can safely express any challenges they may have in meeting those expectations. Communication must be very clear with regards to rights, responsibilities and how and when communication is going to happen. The whole process may require increased effort and resources in maintaining clear communication (Miller 2003). Many immigrants come to Canada in pursuit of a better life for their families and recognizing and honouring this can go a long ways towards establishing a collaborative relationship (Long 2008). As the cultural needs of each person may vary from the worker's previous experience it is vital that they recognize and work with each newcomer to establish their needs and to develop a support plan. This plan should strive to provide fathers with an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about being able to transmit their own cultural values, a context for fathers to examine the impact of culture conflict on children and their families, and opportunities for fathers to learn about universal as well as culture-specific values related to children and child-rearing (Shimona et al., 2000). In this regard, Altman (2007) has developed a strengths-based assessment tool (AID) designed to address the unique circumstance of newcomers, incorporating premigration and post-migration coping strategies. These tools can help workers to move through their discomfort regarding their cultural clumsiness and break down cultural barriers.

Barriers to Engagement and Moving Forward

The barriers faced by newcomer families and newcomer fathers in particular are unique and must be understood by agencies before they can begin to practice methodology that fosters engagement. It is impossible to discuss the barriers faced by newcomer fathers without exploring the impacts of employment. "While it is normal for immigrants to move through various phases of settlement over a period of time, the unemployment/underemployment of highly-trained immigrant men has trapped many of them in a psychological phase of loss and anxiety that prevents them from

moving forward" (Bhandari, Horvath, and To, 2006). Studies have also shown that "immigrants faced discrimination in the housing and employment markets" (Bhandari, Horvath, and To, 2006). Consequences of discriminatory and exploitative labour practices for newcomer fathers in Canada are economic stress, compulsion to work long hours, insufficient time for children and duties at home, frustration/loneliness/helplessness, conflict in the family, problems with mental and physical health. (Bhandari, Horvath, and To, 2006). Given the disproportionately unfavourable employment conditions facing newcomers, particular attention to accessibility with regards to hours of availability must be paid if maximizing engagement is a fundamental goal (Miller 2003). Any failures to honour and recognize the impact of employment insecurity can become a significant barrier in the engagement of newcomer fathers.

"In this community when someone from the government knocks on your door, a family member disappears." (Earner 2007)

Workers failing to adequately understand the implications of a newcomer's status can also act as a significant barrier to the engagement of newcomer fathers (Earner 2007). Recently there have been significant changes in Canadian policy with regards to how status shapes the life and well-being of a newcomer, resulting in new and challenging experiences related to international students, migrant workers, refugees and people in the process of being sponsored as permanent residents over the last few years. The changes range from available employment options, rates of pay, access to medical services, potential for deportation and immediate detention for up to twelve months (CIC, 2013). Caseworkers' failure to recognize and accommodate the unique challenges that arise out of tenuous status or fear of loss of status, can cause a complete disruption in the engagement of newcomer fathers (Long et al., 2008).

A recent study exploring newcomer families' feelings found fear to be the emotion most frequently associated with working with family services, and that it was most often linked to a fear of loss of status (Earner 2007). Other feelings included powerlessness (not having the resources or 'right'

supports), feeling silenced (barriers to language and understanding), vulnerability (not knowing rights), and a sense of loss (family, culture, hope) (Earner, 2007). Additional barriers to engagement for newcomer fathers can also arise from a loss of identity associated with changing family roles, or cultural clashes that may arise between fathers and their children (Kriz 2011). "Consequently, best/wise practice father support programs will facilitate successful settlement by helping immigrant and refugee men to reflect critically on their place as fathers in a new setting, enable them to develop certain intercultural and relationship skills, and help them to build healthy relationships by cultivating natural networks of support" (Long 2008: p.11). Another barrier to engagement arises from a failure to attend to issues of reunification if a parent first migrated without their child. Missing the tensions that arise between the mutual happiness, disappointment, stress, and reconfiguration of family issues that result from international reunification can result in a failure to develop rapport (Altman 2007). Failure to recognize trauma held by the father can also act as a barrier to rapport building (Kriz 2012).

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