

# How do cartoons teach children?

## A comparative analysis on preschoolers and schoolchildren

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**Abstract.** *The study assesses which cartoons are the most popular amongst kindergarten and schoolchildren, and whether they have an impact over their behavior. In a context in which children watch long hours of television everyday, the goal of the research is to comparatively analyze how animation films influence children of different ages. Methodologically, we chose to conduct focus groups, interviews, and a survey. The study has been conducted in one of the largest cities of Romania, namely Cluj-Napoca. The results show that there is a certain level of influence coming from the cartoons. Depending on the age category, they seem to affect children mostly at the language level. Parents take a very important part in this process as they can turn a negative experience into a learning one.*

**Keywords:** *cartoons, impact, preschoolers, schoolchildren*

## **Introduction**

The study aims to analyze the impact of cartoons on preschoolers and school-children. In a context in which the use of media has greatly increased in the past years, children are the primary consumers of media platforms (Rideout, Foehr, Roberts 2010). With the development of media technology and information transfer, children now have the possibility to access media everywhere, at any given time, starting from very small ages. Even though they now have the chance to enrich their knowledge using technology, this is thought to be having a more negative impact on their behavior on different levels, including aggression, prosocial behavior and cognitive skills (Davidson 1979). Children between 3 and 8 years old tend to be the heaviest users of television. On average, a pre-school child spends more than half or, in some cases, equal to an adults' working week sitting in front of the television set (Patel 2008). Unfortunately, much of today's television programs are violent. Therefore, there may exist implications for schoolchildren and preschoolers' behavior that need to be analyzed.

The research questions of the study are the following: which are the cartoons that preschoolers and school children watch most and which are the most noticeable differences between the two analyzed groups?; to what extent can we talk about a different impact of cartoons on preschoolers and schoolchildren?; and what is the perception of parents and educators regarding the impact cartoons have on children?. Based on these research questions, the study focuses on both children and adults. By analyzing the issue of cartoons' impact from these two different perspectives, the paper has a holistic image on the role of animation films within a child's life.

## **Children and television violence**

Television is one of the most people use. Therefore, almost all individuals are exposed to it at some time or another. Based on a large number of studies, children are believed to be the heaviest users of television. Young children spend between 3 and 4 hours watching television each day. On average, a pre-school child spends more than half, or in some cases equal to an adults' working week sitting in front of the television set (Patel 2008).

In this respect, it is important to consider the link between TV and aggressive or violent behavior. Since the 1950s, the literature has asked whether there is a link between exposure to media violence and violent behavior. As children are so easily influenced they are the primary concern to researchers. The research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to "aggressive behavior, to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed" (Boyse 2010). Watching violent shows is also linked with having less empathy towards others. Nowadays the statistics show that: two-thirds of all the programs contain violence; programs specially designed

for children often contain more violence than those for adults; most violent acts go unpunished on TV and are often accompanied by humor (Boyse 2010).

Lynette O. Friedrich and Aletha Huston Stein (1973) have conducted a study where ninety-three preschool children, enrolled in a 9-week nursery school session, are shown one of three types of television programs each day during the 4 weeks of the session. The programs are aggressive cartoons (“Batman” and “Superman”), prosocial programs and neutral films. Observations of aggressive and prosocial interpersonal behavior, and self-regulation in free play are carried out during the entire nursery school session. The effects of the programs are assessed by the changes that occurred from the baseline period to the periods during and after exposure to the programs. The results show that the aggressive television programs produce effects on aggressive behavior and on self-regulation. One of the most interesting findings is the decline in rule obedience and in tolerance towards emotions by children who have seen the aggressive programs. Thus, the aggressive programs are believed to reduce willingness to exert self-control or to tolerate minor frustrations (Friedrich and Stein 1973).

A large number of studies on the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may become “immune” or numb to the horror of violence, they may gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems, they can start to imitate the violent behavior that they observe on television, or they can identify themselves with the victims and/or the victimizers (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2011).

### **The impact of cartoons**

Since children watch cartoons from early ages, they tend to naturally adhere to the behavior they see and consider it normal. The program does not necessarily need to include violent content. Scenes with low to none educational value can also have certain effects on a child’s development. Preschoolers, for instance, have a limited comprehension of television content, and they possess little or no understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality (Peters and Blumberg 2002).

Gregory Fouts, Mitchell Callan, Kelly Piasetin and Andrea Lawson, (2006) assess in their study the degree of demonizing characters that appear in cartoons or highly viewed Disney movies. As the results show, from 136 principal characters analyzed, 18% are demonized. They are named by using words like *evil*, *wicked*, *devil*, and *demon*. There are several implications of these findings. First, a child may learn and use certain labels against other people when they perceive certain behaviors as inappropriate. Second, learning to use such demonizing labels in their relation to others, it may attack the self-esteem of the victims labeled. Finally, studies have shown that nightmares are directly linked to watching movies. Thus, children may exaggerate the fear they perceive in TV programs, by failing to distinguish fiction

from reality (Fouts *et al.* 2006). Cartoons are often characterized as reflecting themes of good and evil in order to reinstate the feelings of loyalty and punishment. The conflict between good and evil is considered appropriate and justified, mainly in the context in which, in the end, the good wins. Moreover, as children perceive the cartoons' characters as role models, they can get the idea that some types of aggression or violence are accepted (Peters and Blumberg 2002).

Medical studies show that children's brains can be differently affected, depending on the quantity of time they spend daily in front of the TV. The 3-4 hour viewers are more likely to develop attention deficit disorders than children who do not watch TV at all. The actual factor that is believed to affect the attention functioning is the displaying speed of images (Christakis *et al.* 2004). In the same respect, one of the most important neuro-scientific evidence for the negative effects that TV has on young children is that higher levels of television viewing correlate with lowered academic performance, especially reading scores. The American Academy of Pediatrics considers that this may be because television substitutes reading practices (Choma 2004). Another very important research issue is the effect that cartoons have on the emotional development of young children. The neuro-imagistical studies show that having a non-mature brain leads to the impossibility to make the difference between the feelings of real characters and those of fictional ones (ShiHui *et al.* 2007).

When it comes to social-emotional areas of children's' lives, studies show significant evidence of the negative effect cartoons have on gender development and on the early understanding of social roles. There are some cartoons that present characters that do not have a specific gender feature and thus they cannot be classified as female or male. This is a very important concern when it comes to the role models that the cartoons shape in the children's minds. In addition, it is being discussed whether it is healthy to promote some early examples of what most societies stand against and consider exception from the norm (transsexuals, homosexuals or bisexuals). Kats and Boswell have found that peers and media influence on gender development is believed to be stronger than parental influences. Moreover, media can affect future expectations for future jobs, or personal responsibilities amongst children (Thompson and Zerbinos 1997).

Emily S. Davidson, Amy Yasuna, and Alan Tower (1979), have found that children do notice, if any, the difference between the way female and male characters are presented in cartoons, and that is shown in the way they relate to different job preferences for males and females. As the children can depict these differences, they can easily have their vision about their future role in society distorted. This can have a great impact on the socialization process for them as children, and later as adults. Moreover, this can also interfere with their development of relationships and appropriate behavior or even their future decisions, as television can foster misconceptions of people, places or things (Davidson, Yasuna, Tower 1979). Children

learn through cartoons that men have more important roles in society than women do and that they can see these stereotypes in most of the characters portrayals. Acting negative or violent are likely to be depicted in male characters, while being a victim or demonstrating romantic behavior is almost every time seen in a female character (Campbell *et al.* 2006).

### **Implications for parents**

Bulut Pedük's research has revealed that parents have a very small implication in what their children watch on television or other media. The data show that out of 100 subjects, 67 parents have no or very little information about TV viewing. Only 32% of the participant parents use to supervise what cartoons their children watch, and believe that scenes like fighting, murder or slang talking in cartoons could harm their children and influence their behavior. In addition, parents tend to believe that it is up to the broadcasting companies or teachers to inform them on programs or possible negative behavior within a television production (Bulut Pedük 2012).

The fact that children spend, in average, more than two hours in front of the TV (Jordan *et al.* 2006) has great implications for parents, who either are not informed enough about this practice, or they do not have the time to watch television with their children. However, data show that there can be negative effects either if parents spend time with the children in front of the television or not. In spite of this situation, parents that watch TV with their children are advised to offer explanations related to the context, thus the negative influence can be turned into a positive learning experience (Christakis and Zimmerman 2006).

The research conducted by Jordon *et al.* (2006) shows, on a number of 180 subjects, with ages between 6 and 13, that parents do not know the exact number of hours their children spend watching cartoons. Parents perceive that their children spend fewer hours (an average of 116 minutes per day) than children have declared (an average of 189 minutes per day). Although parents might be worried regarding the bad influence of cartoons, they do not know what to offer their children in exchange (Jordan *et al.* 2006).

As the television has an impact on the socialization of infants, it can create communication problems with the family or other friends. However, this can be solved through parents teaching children to use media devices as learning tools and not as "*electronic babysitter*" (Zolten and Long 2006)

### **Methodological design**

The study aims to comparatively assess the impact of cartoons on preschoolers and schoolchildren. As building the research, the research questions are the following.

**RQ1:** *“Which are the cartoons that preschoolers and school children watch most and which are the most noticeable differences between the two analyzed groups?”*

This question is designed to give information about the TV channels and the type of cartoons children watch most. Giving the extensive range of TV stations and cartoons altogether, we want to find out which are the children’s favorite animation films and what does this mean given the possible effects. Moreover, this question aims to analyze if there is any noticeable difference between the cartoons the two age groups watch.

**RQ2:** *“To what extent can we talk about a different impact of cartoons over preschoolers, and schoolchildren?”*

This research question is designed in order to draw a line between the two age groups, and to discover whether we can discuss about a different impact on children considering the difference of age and social context.

**RQ3:** *What is the perception of parents and educators regarding the impact cartoons have on children?*

This question aims to emphasize the perception of educators and parents regarding cartoons’ effects on children. Moreover, the goal is that of having a comparative perspective between what educators and parents believe and see and what children actually do and why.

In order to sustain our research questions, the methods used are focus groups with kindergarten and schoolchildren, interviews with educators and teachers and a survey for parents. The use of these methods can give different perspectives from all the actors involved in the socialization of a child. We chose one kindergarten and one school to conduct our study, a number of 91 children (33 preschoolers and 58 schoolchildren), and these children’s parents. The study has been conducted in one of the largest city of Romania, namely Cluj-Napoca.

### ***The focus groups***

The total number of participants in the study is 91 out of which there are 18 children aged 4-5 years, 15 aged 5-6 years, 37 children aged 7-8 years and 21 aged 8-9 years. The group interviews have been conducted by a moderator and at least one observer. The duration of the focus groups has been of 30 up to 50 minutes, depending on the number of participants and the language level they used. There have been 4 groups at the kindergarten level and 6 groups for the school level. Each group is composed of 8 to 10 participants.

Typical procedures of the focus groups are followed. There is a list of 10 questions that have been asked on all of the occasions. The goal is to investigate the subjects’ opinions and preferences regarding animated cartoons. Specific questions like “Which cartoons are your favorite ones?”, “What TV channel do you usually

watch?" or "Which are the cartoons you dislike the most?" investigate the preferences of young children. Other questions investigate the quantity of time spent watching them: "How much time do you spend watching cartoons?" and "When (what time of the day and week) do you watch cartoons?". Moreover, there are some questions regarding the presence of others during cartoon watching, and the level of control pupils have on choosing the program and cartoons. The ending question is "What do you want to become when you grow up?".

### *The Interviews*

There have been conducted six interviews with the teachers and the educators of the classes of children where the focus groups have been applied. There have been interviewed three educators from each educational level. The questions are focused on the children's behavior in class and whether they impersonate different cartoon characters while under their observation. A question like "Do you believe there is a connection between the child's behavior and the cartoons he watches?" is included in order to measure the general belief and knowledge on this aspect.

### *The questionnaires*

There have been built a twenty-seven items questionnaire for the parents. The introductory questions are about parents' general belief about television viewing and about their family's program for television in general. We have also created more in-depth questions to estimate the time the children spend watching TV, their favorite characters and programs and the impact of the cartoons reflected in the infant's behavior. The questionnaires have been given to the educators, teachers respectively, in order to be given to the parent. The final sample is formed of 65 respondents.

## **Results**

The results of the group interviews are, in some aspects, very similar but also different based on the age particularities of the participants. For the first general question, whether they like cartoons and why, all the participants answer affirmatively in a very enthusiastic way. The most mentioned reasons are that the cartoons are "*nice and beautiful*", "*funny and amusing*", "*colorful and interesting*". In addition, children like cartoons because they can learn from them or provide good feelings. Some of the school-aged children have said they like cartoons because they can dress up to look like cartoon's characters: "*I like the ones with real people and real settings*". One of the participants has said that he likes cartoons because he can watch them while his mother watches her own TV series. When asked who are they watching the cartoons with, the school-aged children's most frequent answers is by themselves, with their older sister or brother, or smaller siblings. There is a smaller number of

children that claimed that they watch cartoons with their mother or father separately or with their cousins or friends. Younger children seem to watch cartoons more often in the presence of their parents. Only very few of them have declared that they watch animation films on their own. When it comes to the actual choice of the cartoons or program, younger children stress that the father is the one who usually chooses it for them, and very few choose it for themselves. The majority of school-aged children have answered that they choose the program and cartoons by themselves, and a small part of them have said their older sister or brother chooses it for them. For only two or three schoolchildren, the choice is made by the mother or by the father. Some of the participants have judgmental reactions towards the idea of someone telling them what to watch, considering themselves old enough to decide what cartoons to watch.

Regarding the time spent watching cartoons most of the children answer: *"a lot"*. When asked to be more specific, the answers of the younger children are *"until it is bed time"*, or they watched *"long cartoon movies"*. A few of them have said they watch TV in general for very short periods. In addition, when asked about the time of the day and week when they watch more cartoons, most answers are *"in the evening, before bed time"* and on weekends. The older children's answers are more specific, ranging from a half an hour a day up to 10 hours a day. Most of them have said they start watching cartoons *"when I get home from school until my parents arrive home"*. This confirms their approximation of 5 to 6 hours a day in front of the TV. When asked what time of the week they watched cartoons the most, some of them have named the days from the middle of the week (Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday). However, most of them agree on the days of the weekend starting with Friday: *"in the weekends when we can stay the mornings in bed"*. The older groups of participants also add holidays as the period when they watch the highest number of cartoons. They tend to have a stricter program comparing to preschooler children. One of the educators from kindergarten emphasizes that *"sometimes they stay home to watch their favorite cartoons in the mornings, and come in at about 11"*.

The table below summarizes the cartoons' channels and the favorite cartoons the two groups of children watch. In addition, the table presents the most disliked cartoons.

A between-group comparison can be made when it comes to the preferences that children have, according to their age. Younger children watch TV channels that have cartoons for toddlers and little preschoolers like Disney Junior and MiniMax. They prefer Disney characters like Mickey Mouse's Friends, Tom and Jerry and Scooby Doo. Furthermore, they do not seem to choose cartoons according to gender, as it was expected. Small children tend to watch more universal cartoons, or ones that portray animals or fantastic creatures, as opposed to the older children that mostly choose programs that fit their personal profile. The channels that they watch include

**Table no.1** - List of the most frequent answers regarding cartoons' preferences

	<b>PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN</b>	<b>1<sup>ST</sup> AND 2<sup>ND</sup> GRADE CHILDREN</b>
<b>TV Channels</b>	1. Disney Junior 2. MiniMax 3. Cartoon Network	1. Disney Channel 2. Cartoon Network 3. Boomerang 4. MiniMax 5. Disney Junior 6. Pro TV
<b>Cartoons Watched</b>	Mickey Mouse, Tom and Jerry, Lightning McQueen, Fireman Sam, Spiderman, Scooby Doo, SnowWhite, The Aristocrats, Sleeping Beauty, BEN10 etc.	Courage, Pink Panther, Looney Tunes, Phineas and Furb, Garfield, Tom and Jerry, Violet, Hannah Montana, Spiderman, The Magicians from W.P, Little Pony, Lazy Town, Handy Manny, Shake it up, Barbie, Good luck, Charlie, Scooby Doo, The mouse, My nanny the vampire, Ben 10
<b>Favorite Cartoons</b>	Fireman Sam, Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse. Lightning McQueen, Scooby Doo, Sleeping Beauty, Ben10.	Courage, Violet, The Magicians, Garfield, Spiderman, My nanny is a vampire, Good luck, Charlie, Shake it up, Barbie, Lightning McQueen, StarsWars, Phineas and Furb, IronMan, The Ninja Turtles, Magicians from W.P, Ben 10, American Dragon, Power Rangers, Scooby Doo, Tom and Jerry, Hannah Montana, The Green Lantern
<b>Disliked cartoons</b>	Spider Man, Scooby Doo, Masters, Stories.	Hannah Montana, Tom and Jerry, Barbie, Handy Manny Violet, Pphineas and Furb, Scooby Doo, The Mouse, Garfield, My nanny is a vampire, Spiderman, Ben 10.

cartoons for older age groups with more complex stories and characters, like Courage the Dog, Ben 10, My nanny is a vampire. Moreover, the older schoolchildren prefer movies with real-life characters like Violet and Hannah Montana or Power Rangers. Some of them underline that *“we role-play the Hanna Montana series, and we like to sing and dance to her music”*. The list of preferences is longer for the older participants and the most common ones are Tom and Jerry, Scooby Doo, Spiderman, Lightning McQueen and Ben 10. Scooby Doo and Spiderman are the most controversial characters, as they have been mentioned by both age groups and in both like and dislike lists: *“I enjoy Scooby Doo sometimes because I think they are funny and they eat too much all the time”*, *“...and Spiderman has superpowers and he always wins”*, *“I do not like Scooby Doo because I think they are scary”*, *“I do not like them because I do not like that in each episode they have to find a monster, but I do not think that monsters are real”*

Regarding the future profession children would like to have when they grow up, most of the answers are inspired by their favorite cartoon characters: Sam The firefighter, Jerry the mouse, Doc McStuffins, Princesses or Super Women. These answers are a proof that children are, in a way or another, influenced, in different degrees, by their surroundings and habits. A comparative analysis between the two age groups shows that, as they grow older, children trade the fantastic cartoons for the “real” ones, as they believe them to be closer to what they can actually do in life. Even if the smallest children like to dress up as their favorite characters, they

do not seem to pay as much attention to their behavior as the older ones. Their role-playing games tend to be transformed into their own fantasy, and not really “follow the script”, as in the case of the older children.

As far as the interviews go, all six teachers have given a firm, positive answer about the existence of a link between cartoon viewing and the children’s behavior: *“Yes, they invoke the characters and imitate them while playing, they take up after their behavior and language as well”*. Educators are emphasizing their answers with exclamations like *“of course”, “obviously”, “100% sure”* to state that there is a definite connection between these two factors.

Based on the interviews from kindergarten’s educators, the main conclusion is that the television effects that occur in the children’s behavior are most visible at the verbal level. Children tend to frequently use words that are used by their favorite characters: *“even though they do not really understand all the jokes and references, they use several well-known lines from the cartoons”*. Schoolchildren also imitate the cartoons characters’ behaviors and attitudes in their relation with others. Teachers consider this to be a problem because: *“even though they do not really understand all the jokes and references, they call their colleagues names, and they cannot always make the difference between what it is ok to say and what it is not...but they are not to be blamed because they do not get it”*.

Besides verbal and behavioral imitations, children frequently ask for clothes, toys or other items that represent their favorite characters or cartoon programs. Hearing the discussions that the preschoolers have, teachers have stated that children give high importance to cartoons. Out of the six interviews, only two teachers claim that children have a violent or aggressive behavior towards their peers. The other teachers have said that these attitudes are rather rare and isolated. Most frequent behavior that appears in both preschooler and schoolchildren groups refers to using inappropriate language for their age: *“I definitely hear them in breaks calling each other words like “jerk” or “dumb” and I do tend to think they catch on to them from things like superheroes punishing villains. I don’t think they learn that at home”*.

The questionnaires reveal that most parents come from the urban area and the majority of them are between 30 and 35 years old. Comparing with the children’s answers, the parents’ perceptions are mostly similar. Parents claim that the favorite cartoons of their children are Mickey Mouse, Tom & Jerry and Violeta for the schoolchildren. The differences appear at the cartoon programs that they usually watch. Parents claim that the schoolchildren still watch programs like JimJam although they consider them to be addressed to younger children. Regarding the implications in their children TV viewing programs, 54 % of the parents let the infants watch a number of one or two hours a day. However, children say that they watch cartoons all day long. Most of the parents are aware of the risks of TV extensive viewing and recognize its strong impact.

Data show that 27% of the parents consider that their preschooler children use to imitate the language and the tonality within cartoons. While 23% of the interviewed parents stress that children usually use cartoons' elements in their games, only 9% of them refer to the imitation of cartoons' actions or characters within the social behavior. When it comes to the schoolchildren, 35% of the parents observe that their children imitate cartoon characters in their social behaviors towards others, and 27% of them said that they assume the language and tone. As in the case of the smallest children, the schoolchildren's parents also claim that children take on behaviors in their games (19%). As they grow up, they tend to imitate more than just the language, emphasizing the social behavior more and more.

Parents admit that the impact of cartoons mostly materializes into energetic or fun behavior, rather than aggressive or negative. However, 9% of the schoolchildren's parents state that their children's behavior is sometimes bossy, and 19% admit that their children have a tendency towards physical aggression. The parents also emphasize that TV in general has become an important object in their children's lives, mostly as a form of entertainment, or a way to avoid boredom, and not for its social, or educational purpose. Nevertheless, 23% of the parents said that they believe television to be a very important element in the intellectual development of the children. In addition, 58% have declared that TV is an essential entertainment source for the child. When it comes to preschoolers, 58% believe that TV is a very important source of fun for the infants, but they do not find it very useful for the intellectual and social development of the child. More than 30% of the parents have answered "no" to both intellectual and social need of the television. Moreover, some of them actually stay and watch cartoons with their children in order to answer any possible questions regarding the situations presented.

### **Conclusions and discussions**

The paper has aimed to study the impact of cartoons on preschoolers and schoolchildren. This issue has been analyzed from the perspective of children, of teachers and educators, and of parents. There is a noticeable difference between the two age groups. Preschoolers use to enjoy funny cartoons like Mickey Mouse and Tom & Jerry, while schoolchildren enjoy more mature programs that are closer to real life and portray children like them (Violeta, Hanna Montana, Courage). A great difference between the two groups is the preference in TV channel they watch. Preschoolers enjoy Disney Junior that shows cartoons that are more educational. Older children watch Disney Channel that portrays more artistic and real skills. Another distinction is that the schoolchildren consider Disney Channel much more appropriate for their age, even though they have used to watch Disney Junior earlier on. Although they want to become a more mature audience and declare that they watch Cartoon Network, their parents state that they also tend to watch JimJam and other educational channels.

Regarding the cartoons' impact on children's behavior, data have not revealed any violent or aggressive ones, even though some isolated cases have been mentioned. All of the children adopt most of all the language particularities that they hear, either positive or negative. The parents and the teachers agree that they hear the children impersonating their favorite characters, or talking like them while playing with their friends. Some of the infants from kindergarten even act like their favorite cartoon characters on a daily basis. Moreover, some of them wish to become similar to those characters when they grow up. Another important influence is the fact that children desire and frequently ask for toys or other cartoon related items. Considering age diversity, one important difference between preschoolers and schoolchildren is related to the level of violence in the language they use with teachers and mates. Schoolchildren are more violent in this respect. Teachers state that children use an aggressive language, which they do not necessary understand, and that it is clearly inspired by the TV programs they use to watch.

The imitation behavior can be perceived as a rather usual act mainly in the context in which children want to become similar with their favorite characters when they grow up. Cartoon characters are real role models for children of all ages and they seem to shape not only their play preferences but also their social interactions and emotional knowledge.

### **Limits and research perspectives**

This study can be considered a pilot analysis for a larger research that aims to investigate the impact of cartoons on different age groups in Romania. Thus, the results of the actual paper are nor relevant for the entire population. Having a convenience sample has given us the possibility to remark in which way our instruments can be further improved. In addition, methodologically speaking, we have realized that interviewing small children through focus groups is not the best solution as they tent to copy each other's answer. However, given the context and this stage of the project, a peer interview would have been unfeasible. In the same respect, it is also important to sadly remark the unwillingness of parents to answer the questionnaires. Nevertheless, conducting a larger study, at the national level, might be a stronger impulse for them to get involved in developing knowledge.

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