Bullying: Can It Begin in Preschool?

BY BETSY EVANS, HIGHSCOPE FIELD CONSULTANT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION SPECIALIST

A preschool child goes to the lunch table, anticipating sitting next to a new friend. When another child sits in the hoped-for seat, the child cries out angrily, “Move or you’re not my friend!” An adult quickly comes over and begins to problem-solve with the two children.

A preschool child sits at the lunch table and, just as she has done many times previously, points across at some of the children at the table, loudly saying, “You’re my friend, you’re not my friend, you’re not my friend, you’re my friend,” as she does every day. The child then directs specific children where they are to sit according to who is a “friend.” All the children look frightened. As they switch seats as directed by the child, an adult says to no one in particular, “Come on now, let’s be nice. We’re all friends here.”

In the scenarios above, which one of these children has actually engaged in “bullying”? Who is responsible when developmentally predictable preschool behavior actually becomes “bullying”?

In this article we will address this and other questions about a growing concern: just what is bullying and how does it get started? Bullying is a pattern of verbal or physical intimidation of someone with less social or physical power. In the first scenario given above, a child expresses frustration, as children often do, with a verbal threat. This is not bullying; however, this is an opportunity to prevent bullying from taking root. In this example, an adult intervenes by helping children learn to problem solve and express feelings constructively. In the second scenario, a child expresses angry feelings, targeting particular children, and she has done this repeatedly. This is bullying. Intimidation of certain children has become a pattern because adults have not intervened to set limits or to problem solve.
Why Discuss Bullying?

Bullying is a set of behaviors, seen in all age groups, that is currently receiving a great deal of attention in communities everywhere — and rightly so. What is the focus of the concern? There have been many well-publicized incidents of severe bullying and its negative impact on those who are bullied. Recent data show that bullying behaviors are directly linked to health problems, relationship problems, and learning difficulties (Craig, 1998). The focus is usually on children, both those who engage in bullying and those who are targeted. But the focus also needs to be on adults who ignore, downplay, or even model bullying behaviors.

In this issue of Extensions we will discuss how to identify bullying, how to intervene, and the importance of modeling constructive communication and problem solving. There will be no reference to “bullies” or “victims” because such labels put the responsibility for the problem on an individual child, rather than on the social environment of that child.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying is a set of actions that happen when a child who is, or who wants to feel, more powerful targets a weaker and/or smaller person by hurting or frightening that person, and does so repeatedly. The bullying exists when a power gap between children is tolerated by adults. A hurtful preschool behavior becomes bullying when it is repeated, intense, and targeted. The behavior in this targeted form is potentially the beginning of a pattern of bullying, but only if adults allow it to continue.

If done repeatedly and with specific targets, the actions listed in the sidebar on page 3 can result in preschool bullying. It is important to understand that ALL of these actions exist in every preschool and do not by themselves constitute bullying. Without intervention, however, they can become a pattern of intimidation and result in long-term relationship problems for children (Pepler & Craig, 2007).
Actions That Can Result in Bullying

- Name-calling
- Exclusion
- Put-downs
- Teasing
- Hitting
- Ignoring
- Breaking possessions
- Hurting feelings
- Scaring
- Threatening
- Kicking
- Lying
- Acting superior
- Laughing at others
- Being bossy
- Pushing
- Taking people’s things
- Making fun of people’s appearance or disabilities

Since preschool children are very physically expressive and have rudimentary social skills, all of these behaviors can be observed at some time in preschool classrooms. This by itself is not a reason for concern — in fact, early childhood teachers must expect these behaviors. Instead, adults who work with young children must concern themselves with two challenges. First, they must understand the difference between the behaviors listed above, which children use to express feelings because of their undeveloped skills in self-awareness and communication, and the very same behaviors deliberately and repeatedly used to hurt and/or scare a weaker person. The second challenge is to be willing to take an honest look at the adult-child interaction strategies used in the classroom that may, in fact, be bullying by adults.

How Do Children Learn Bullying Behaviors?

Bullying behaviors become learned behaviors when they work. If a child threatens others and the threat succeeds in getting the child what he or she wants, the behavior is reinforced. Bullying behaviors become a pattern when adults do not intervene or guide the growth of more constructive emotional and social skills at the time the child engages in hurtful behaviors toward others.

It is even more important to understand that bullying behaviors are also directly taught by adults who bully children when they yell, threaten, shame, and punish children (see sidebar on p. 4) rather than staying calm, setting limits, problem solving, and following up with positive interactions. To effectively eliminate bullying by children, we must eliminate bullying by adults. Negative communication patterns can form between children and adults when adults engage only in limit-setting interactions with children. To prevent continuous cycles of constant “No, stop, don’t” interactions with children, adults must follow up limit-setting statements with five positive interactions (Remig, 2009). Otherwise, hurtful or destructive child behaviors result in constant limit-setting responses, and the adult and child become stuck in a negative loop. In classrooms where bullying exists, it is very important to look at adult behaviors, at home or school, as a possible source, noticing when negative interactions have become the norm, and noticing when adults bullying children is actually the root of the problem.

Adults also reinforce bullying when they label a child as a “bully” rather than understanding that bullying is a set of actions, not a person. Once a child is labeled as a bully and is punished, without problem-solving and replacement behaviors and solutions, the behavior becomes more difficult to change. When the adult expects negative or bullying behavior, the child fulfills the expectation. Instead, adults can help the child learn a replacement behavior, such as talking through a problem and agreeing on a solution; for example, to share a toy truck by using a timer or finding a way for the child to play with the truck with
another child. This will enable the child to build a repertoire of constructive solutions that replace previous hurtful behaviors, while also experiencing the pleasure, and the power, of being collaborative with another child.

What Verbal Bullying by Adults Sounds Like

- “I don’t care how upset you are...get over here and sit down!”
- “Look at me when I’m talking to you!”
- “Do what I say — or else!”
- “I’ll give you something to cry about!”
- “You are being ridiculous — you are old enough to know better!”
- “You’re being such a cry baby!”
- “Don’t you say a word! Have a time-out and think about what you did!”

Why Do Children Engage in Bullying and What Can Adults Do?

The list of hurtful actions given in the sidebar on page 3 are also signs of a child experiencing difficulties or challenges in life. Behavior is a means of communication. When adults frequently observe a child engaging in hurtful actions toward others, the child must not be seen as “mean” or “bad” but as experiencing emotional, physical, or social challenges that are overwhelming. Those behaviors will become a pattern if there is no intervention by teachers or parents.

Children who express themselves by being repeatedly hurtful, physically or verbally, are crying out for adults to investigate their underlying needs and challenges. Every behavior has a goal — to get something desired, to get attention, and/or to express frightened, frustrated, or angry feelings that are overwhelming the child and are being ignored by adults. If children who bully succeed in attaining their goals, however inappropriately, then the bullying behavior will continue. The bullying behavior is a red flag that the child needs limit-setting, followed immediately by problem-solving help, not punishment.

If children merely are punished for their behavior, with no attention to the reason for the behavior and no help with other ways to express their feelings, it is likely the behavior will continue, perhaps in a more sneaky, surreptitious way. When children’s behaviors are understood in their developmental context, adults can recognize the hurtful actions as an opportunity to support new, more constructive skills. In this way the behavior is kept from...
becoming a social pattern. It is up to adults to supervise and intervene, stopping hurtful behaviors and supporting replacement behaviors. Children will learn and repeat the skills that help them succeed in meeting their needs and receiving the attention they need.

Remember the 1:5 ratio for limit setting statements to positive interactions. That is, to keep a limit-setting interaction from becoming dominant, follow it up with at least five positive, encouraging interactions. This can result in a reversal of any negative behavior patterns. For example: “Johnnie, jumping on the doll bed and shouting ‘get out’ needs to stop [1 limit setting statement]. It’s scaring Owen. The problem is that you want to jump by yourself? Okay, let’s find another place to jump that’s safe” [first positive interaction]. The adult sits down and watches as Johnnie chooses to jump up and down on a mat [second positive interaction]. The adult comments on how high Johnnie is jumping and tries it once herself [third positive interaction]. The adult then follows Johnnie, commenting on his choice of a puzzle [fourth positive interaction] and doing a puzzle with him [fifth positive interaction]. Owen joins them. The child has now experienced the replacement of negative attention-getting behaviors with the fun of being a leader and engaging in positive interactions with a
Strategies for Preventing Bullying by Young Children

1. Understand the difference between a pattern of bullying and predictable preschool behaviors.
2. Problem-solve when there are conflicts or hurtful comments.
3. Set limits on any intimidating behaviors and follow up with positive interactions.
4. Recognize hurtful behaviors that are intense and repeated as a possible red flag that children need more attention to the reasons behind their behaviors and support as they learn to express their feelings constructively.
5. Eliminate bullying by adults: examine adult behaviors for the use of yelling, shaming, threatening, and/or punishing in interactions with children.

It is also important to appreciate the fact that, for children, making these changes is analogous to going from crawling to learning to walk—a major developmental milestone that needs our support and encouragement as much as any other.

References
Strategies for Intervening During Hurtful Behavior

BY BETSY EVANS

Every verbally or physically hurtful incident in the classroom requires a response from an adult. The steps outlined below can help you assist children in problem solving and developing constructive replacement behaviors.

1. **Stop verbal and physical hurting.** Take steps to stop the hurtful behavior by setting clear limits. Adults know they must stop physical hurting immediately but often don’t realize that they also must stop verbal hurting as well. If hurtful words have become a regular pattern (versus an emotional outburst to an isolated problem), the response must be an interruption of that pattern.

2. **Facilitate problem solving.** Use HighScope’s six problem-solving steps to help children find solutions and to learn constructive communication skills.

3. **Observe and write anecdotes.** Make a plan for responding to and interrupting a pattern of bullying by closely observing the behavior and objectively writing anecdotes about the behavior – the “when, where, and who” of each incident. It is also useful to note any events that occur immediately before and after the behavior, including the children’s and the adult’s response. Behavior is communication of a need or goal. The behavior functions to create a result. Document, over a period of time, the details of each incident so you can gain some understanding of the children’s needs. Children often engage in bullying to gain social status, to feel in control, and to gather more attention to themselves. If power is taken away when adults stop the bullying, it may be important to address the child’s need for power and control in a different, more constructive way.

4. **Empower children.** Find ways to empower children by giving many opportunities to make choices. Create leadership roles for children during various parts of the day, perhaps using a job chart that engages children in real responsibilities (for example, feeding a pet, “reading” to a younger child, or taking the part of problem-solver, or problem-solving partner). Help children recognize the positive ways that they are “powerful” when they help someone with a coat, help think of a creative solution to a problem, comfort someone who is sad, or find a lost toy. With small groups of children, discuss ways that they can be powerful by helping others.

5. **Be a role model.** Adult behavior has a huge impact on children, who will imitate both respectful and disrespectful behaviors. Consider whether the classroom adults regularly use intimidation or punishment of children as a strategy for responding to certain behaviors. Discuss replacing punitive consequences with logical consequences. A classroom that has fully implemented supportive HighScope interaction strategies is a consistent model for respectful communication.

6. **Provide proactive support for relationship building.** Talk to children about their relationships with one another — encourage (notice and describe) how they cooperate as they clean up together, push each other on the swing, and figure out problems together. Read stories that highlight relationship problem solving. Engage in small-group problem solving. Provide extra support to children who are having difficulty entering play constructively.
Steps in Resolving Conflicts

1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.
   • Place yourself between the children, on their level.
   • Use a calm voice and gentle touch.
   • Remain neutral rather than take sides.

2. Acknowledge children’s feelings.
   • “You look really upset.”
   • Let children know you need to hold any object in question.

3. Gather information.
   • “What's the problem?”

4. Restate the problem.
   • “So the problem is...”

5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together.
   • “What can we do to solve this problem?”
   • Encourage children to think of a solution.

6. Be prepared to give follow-up support.
   • “You solved the problem!”
   • Stay near the children.

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to help him recognize, label, and regulate his emotions and act with empathy.

When Lukas first entered our program two years ago, he would hit and even try to bite other children when he was frustrated or didn’t get his way. He did not have very developed language skills and would become frustrated easily. At that time, we would help him with the vocabulary he needed. We would label his emotions and try to help him define the problem, for example, by saying “Lukas you are upset, you are very sad that Lanorma is sitting in the yellow chair.” We often used the six-step approach to conflict resolution, speaking for him and giving him the words he needed. This calmed his emotions quickly, and he was able to learn to regulate his actions and emotions.

We have used photographs and pictures of various emotions with several engaging songs, stories, and rhymes to expose him and the other children to emotion words. We have also taken photos of children in the class posing with happy, sad, surprised, and angry expressions, and we have posted the photos next to the mirror. The children like to look at the photos, imitate the faces, and look at themselves in the mirror. In Lukas’s current classroom, the teacher likes to use a few basic emotion words that will work in many situations. She begins by using words like upset or sad to name children’s feelings, and as the children are ready, she expands their emotional vocabulary to angry, mad, frustrated, worried, and so forth.

As we have employed these strategies in the classroom, Lukas’s emotional reactions have calmed — we know he has begun his journey of learning to play with others. But now we are seeing new behaviors emerging, some of which could be hurtful to other children. We make sure to stay aware of Riley and other children in the class whom Lukas is likely to approach, but we also remain very aware of Lukas as a person and what his needs are. The adults in the class have learned to put aside some of their own emotions and

When we see a child do something that “bullies” another child, we are looking at an opportunity to teach, to make a difference in a child’s life. We are observing social and emotional learning in action, and need to understand where a child is developmentally in order to scaffold that learning appropriately. In order to do so, we must first realize that when children bully, they do not intend to be mean or bad. They are simply experiencing certain desires and emotions, and have not yet learned how to express them in ways that are more appropriate.

The skills for social and emotional learning are just as important as those for physical growth or academic learning — and with intentional teaching on our part, children can learn them. When we see “problems,” what we are really observing are opportunities to do what we love — to teach children. As with any area of development — literacy, mathematics, the arts — the key to successful teaching is understanding child development and using the ingredients of active learning.

Consider the story of Lukas, a four-year-old boy in our preschool who has some of the characteristics of autism. It is his second year in our class, and although he has become quite talkative, his language is still delayed for his age, and his peer relationships are not well-developed. Recently we have noticed that when Riley — a boy who is younger and smaller than Lukas and who has significant cognitive impairment — tries to play with Lukas or use the same materials, Lukas pushes him down. Lukas will even look around first to see if an adult is watching and then push Riley down.

These types of actions are concerning for teachers. Initial responses might be to scold Lukas, to have him make some kind of amends to Riley, or even to put him in time-out. But if we take a closer look, we will realize we have an opportunity to teach Lukas and facilitate Lukas’s progress to another level of social development. So let’s take a look at how we, as Lukas’s teachers, took this opportunity to help him recognize, label, and regulate his emotions and act with empathy.

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past experiences and take this opportunity to teach Lukas the social coping skills he needs.

During work time, the adults stay aware of Lukas and quickly intervene if Lukas pushes Riley down. The intent of the adult who responds is to support both boys, giving Lukas the sentences and Riley the words to resolve the problem. On one day it went something like this: “Lukas, you look upset that Riley is playing next to your fire truck. And Riley, you would like to play on the road Lukas made, huh?” Both boys nodded their heads yes. The adult asked, “Riley, can you ask Lukas if it is okay for you to play on the road?”

Riley made some unintelligible utterances and Lukas replied “No” and went to push Riley. The teacher gently put her hand up and said, “It’s not okay to push. I am afraid someone will get hurt. Lukas, are you nervous that Riley will break your road? Lukas responded that, yes, he was. The teacher said, “Riley, Lukas is afraid his road will get broken and so he wants to drive on it alone. Riley made some sounds and began to drive his truck on the road. Lukas began to get upset and the teacher intervened, saying “Lukas, Riley doesn’t understand what we’re saying to him — what can I do to help you? Lukas again stated emphatically that he wanted to play on the road alone. The teacher then suggested that maybe she could stay with the pair and play with them to help protect the road. Lukas’ shoulders relaxed and he agreed.

Since these behaviors from Lukas are new (but also recurring from his initial month in our class), we have searched for other causes. One of the teachers has noticed that Lukas has been coming to school looking like he was coming straight out of bed. This seemed uncharacteristic, as Lukas’s mother owns a children’s clothing store and usually sends Lukas to school looking well-groomed.

The teacher contacted the mother, not to complain about Lukas’s behaviors, but to ask if she had noticed anything at home, and to share some of her anecdotal notes and ask whether Lukas had been ill and sleeping late. The teacher discovered that Lukas’s dad had been out of town a great deal, and that his mom had been busy opening a third store in a community about 40 minutes away from the family’s home. Older siblings or a nanny were orchestrating Lukas’s morning. The teacher has been aware that changes in routine are upsetting to Lukas — he (like most children) feels safer with familiar routines.

The two women exchanged some ideas, and they made a plan. Lukas’s mother rearranged her work schedule so she could get Lukas ready for school herself and help keep his morning routine stable and calm, as it had been before. She also arranged for a close family member to pick up Lukas after school. Lukas’s teacher and mother also spoke at length about the six-step approach to conflict resolution, going over language that would be helpful for his mother to use with Lukas (see p. 7).

Lukas’s mother found that labeling and acknowledging her son’s emotions, as well as those of the other child engaged in the conflict (such as his six-year-old sister, Sophie) to be particularly helpful. Because Lukas has characteristics of autism, he has difficulty recognizing emotions and “reading” social information in the faces of others. She identified both emotions that were upsetting to him and positive emotions. As a conflict deescalated, she would comment again, by saying something like “Lukas, you look calm — and look at Sophie’s face: she looks happy too!”

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We know it will take time for Lukas to learn to identify and express his frustrations, but we know he will; and we are happy to have supported his mother as she gains problem-solving skills to support him in the future.

Jan Dowling is a HighScope field consultant. She works as a speech-language pathologist for the Alpine School District in American Fork, Utah, where she specializes in work with preschool children with special needs. She co-authored the book I Belong, an Active Learning Approach to Educating Young Children With Special Needs (HighScope Press, 2009).
Recognizing and Responding to Bullying

BY BETSY EVANS

This two-hour workshop enables participants to define bullying and reflect on bullying situations. The objectives of this workshop are for participants to (1) reflect on the negative effects of labeling others; (2) define bullying and distinguish it from developmentally predictable behaviors; (3) reflect on different scenarios to determine if a situation could become a pattern of bullying; (4) role-play intervention strategies to resolve conflicts so they don’t become bullying situations; and (5) plan ways to implement classroom strategies to empower children by giving them a choice of being a problem-solving partner.

What You’ll Need: Index cards, sheets of paper, tape, and pens (Opening Activity); chart paper and markers (Central Ideas and Practice); the book You’re Not My Friend Anymore! and/or the video Supporting Young Children in Resolving Conflicts (Central Ideas and Practice); handout created from “Strategies for Intervention” and “Steps in Resolving Conflicts” (Application Activity).

Opening Activity
(20 minutes)

Using a large index card, write, in large letters with a marker, your “other” childhood name (not a nickname). This is often a characteristic that became a way that people referred to you that you remember hearing. Examples might be: “spoiled,” “sweet,” “bossy,” “quiet,” “loudmouth,” “brat,” and so forth.

After participants have written a word or two on the card, ask them to move around the group and find others with similar (not necessarily exact) labels. When they do so, ask them to form a small group by a posted sheet of paper, taping their index-card “labels” on the wall by it. The group then discusses and writes down how they were affected by these labels. Then discuss these effects as a large group. Be sure to talk about how labels are based on the occasional behaviors or actions of children. Talk about how the label makes the child, not the actions, the problem, and it also creates an expectation for the child — an expectation that children rise to, making growth and change very difficult.

Central Ideas and Practice

Define “Bullying”
(40 minutes)

In small groups, list the actions that participants consider to be bullying. List these on chart paper, and with the entire group ask which of these actions are developmentally predictable for preschool and which describe “a pattern of intimidation by verbal or physical hurting of children with less social or physical power.” Discuss that bullying is repeated verbal or physical hurting with intention. Ask participants if the children engaging in these behaviors are able to consciously recognize what they are doing, versus most preschool children, who may act out aggressively on an impulse to try to get something they want. Caution participants who are referring to children as “bullies” or “victims” that these labels contribute to the very atmosphere of negativity and name-calling that we are trying to prevent.

Reflect on bullying situations, asking could this situation become bullying? What does the adult need to do to prevent a pattern of aggressive behavior from developing? For situations to discuss: use scenarios #11, #13, #14, and/or #16 from You’re Not My Friend Anymore! (HighScope Press, 2009). Show video examples from Supporting Young Children in Resolving Conflicts (Tommy and the keys conflict, or the conflict of children sharing space sitting in the house area), tell a story of a situation, or use the situations given at the beginning of the feature article in this Extensions issue.

Application Activity

Responding to Bullying
(40 minutes)

Discuss the six steps to conflict resolution (see sidebar on p. 7). With the trainer as mediator, ask two participants to be children, with one yelling “sissy” at the other and telling her she can’t come in the house area. Role model the six steps for the participants, coming to a resolution that the two “children” agree on. Start by saying, “You both look very upset. Name-calling needs to stop. What’s the problem?”

Using the Strategies for Intervention handout, ask participants to get into groups of three for a role play, and role-play a similar name-calling and exclusion conflict.

Discuss together the strategies for empowering children by giving them the choice of being a problem-solving partner.

Implementation Plan
(20 minutes)

Ask participants to plan what they will do as a result of this training and share these ideas as a group.
NEWS BRIEFS

Coming Soon...Online PQA!

We are working diligently to get HighScope’s Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA) into an online format. It will be ready soon...keep an eye out for coming announcements on this convenient new delivery system for the PQA!

2011 Annual HighScope International Conference a Great Success

The 2011 HighScope International Conference, held May 4–6, attracted 627 people from 13 countries and 30 states. It was the largest attendance ever at what is considered to be one of the highest quality early childhood conferences presented. Participants traveled from all across the U.S. and from Canada, Chile, China, England, Iceland, Mexico, the Netherlands and Netherlands Antilles, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, and Sweden.

At the conference, HighScope Vice President Clay Shouse presented the David P. Weikart Achievement Award to Kathleen Dunn Priestley, from Westfield, New Jersey.

The award is given annually to a person outside of the HighScope staff who the Foundation feels has demonstrated exemplary dedication to HighScope’s vision and mission.

Ms. Priestley has taught both typically developing children and those with special needs in kindergarten and first grade. She has also served as Early Childhood Education Program Development Specialist and Coordinator and Manager of Professional Development in Trenton, New Jersey. In January, 2005, Ms. Priestley was named Supervisor of Early Childhood Education for the New Jersey Department of Education — Office of Early Childhood Education. In 2008, Ms. Priestley left the Department of Education and formed KDP Consulting, LLC, providing educational consulting for early childhood and special education.

The 2012 HighScope International Conference is scheduled for May 2–4, 2012.

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ASK US

BY BETSY EVANS

I have a big three-year-old in my class who frequently hits other children. She’ll walk into an area and randomly hit someone on the head and take a toy. I say “no” and redirect her, but I’m beginning to think of her as my class bully. Is she?

— A Preschool Teacher

Many young children, especially in group settings, express their feelings and needs physically. Because of their size, or other factors, this strategy may have gotten them what they wanted, so they are repeating it.

We must expect young children to be physical, as they do not yet have the verbal skills to say what they want or need. The behavior of the three-year-old that you have described is definitely not bullying. Her socially young behavior is, however, an indication that she needs adult support as she learns how to relate to the others in your classroom and, specifically, how to enter an area when she wants to play.

When you see a child using hurtful behaviors repeatedly, it is important to give that child extra help as he or she moves around the classroom, intervening before the behavior happens. Immediately give the child a substitute action (“Let’s talk to them”) and words (“Say ‘Can I use that truck?’”).

For example, as the child walks to an area, quickly kneel down by her and say “It looks like you’re interested in playing here. Is that right? Tell me what you want to do and then we will talk about playing here.” And because children aren’t going to learn a new skill in one day, here’s the most important thing to do every day: stay with the child and ensure multiple positive interactions happen, between you and the child or the child and others, so that the behavior is reinforced by successful play. This close supervision and problem-solving intervention will need to continue until the child is able to verbalize her needs and is experiencing successful play, without any need for hurtful actions.

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