

# Easy Targets: Bullying and ASD

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# Who am I?

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For starters,  
let's do a poll...

# Bullying and ASDs

- Bullying is a major issue for many children, youth, families, schools, communities.
- **Children with disabilities, and particularly ASD, are especially vulnerable.**



# What we'll cover

- What is bullying?
- Types of bullying
- Bullying roles
- How common overall and in those with disabilities/ASD
- Risk factors
- Consequences and coping
- Possible interventions



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# What is bullying?

- Must occur **repeatedly**
- Must involve a **power differential**; victim is perceived as less physically, psychologically, or socially powerful than the aggressor.
- **Types of bullying**: threats, aggression, teasing, gossiping, shunning, using looks/gestures to deride.

# Cyberbullying

- No safe haven – can reach a person anywhere
- Texts, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, etc.
- Shame aspect: Can't hope nobody saw – humiliation can be “shared” fast as lightning



# Bullying Roles...

- Bullies
  - Aggressive
    - Overt, obvious
  - Follower
    - Helps, encourages
  - Relational
    - Covert, indirect



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- Which do school personnel tend to recognize?



# Bullying Roles...



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## Victims

- Passive
  - No provocation; easy targets (shy, few friends, few verbal skills, “different,” etc.)
- Provocative
  - Antagonize, incite
- Relational
  - Caught in social dynamics beyond his/her control

# Bullying Roles...

- Bystanders
  - Can be part of the problem or solution



# What's a 'bully victim'?

- Another term for the “provocative victim”
- A child who is bullied *and* bullies others  
(Unnever, 2005)
  - More reactively aggressive than usual bullies
  - Impulsive
  - Misinterpret that peers intend them harm when not true and respond aggressively

*“They are disruptive and impulsive, with poor social and problem-solving skills. Their parents punish them, their teachers dislike them, and their peers do not want to play with them. They insult bullies or retaliate (ineffectively), goading their attackers and alienating other children.”*

*(Berger 2007)*



# Prevalence: Overall

- Estimates vary... but all show bullying is very common.
- 15,686 U.S. students in grades 6-10 in public/private schools surveyed in 1998 regarding “current term”
  - 10.6% were bullied only
  - 13.0% bullied others only
  - 6.3% -- both!  
(Nansel et al., 2001)

# Prevalence: Disabilities/ASD

- Based on 2 U.S. national data sets, children with disabilities were bullied at high rates during “the current or past school year”
  - Elementary school: 24.5%
  - Middle school: 34.1 %
  - High school: 26.6%
- At greatest risk of repeated victimization
  - Teens with orthopedic impairments in HS
  - **Children with ASD** in elementary/middle

# Prevalence: Disabilities/ASD

- In one U.S. study including 830 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students with ASD within past school year:
  - 46.3% were victims
  - 14.8% bullied others
  - 8.9% were bully-victims
- **46.3%** victimization rate for teens with ASD substantially higher than 10.6% rate for typical teens.



# Prevalence: Disabilities/ASD

- In 2012 study of 1,148 U.S. children with ASD, ages 6-15:
  - 38.0% had been bullied in the past month
  - 9.3% had bullied others



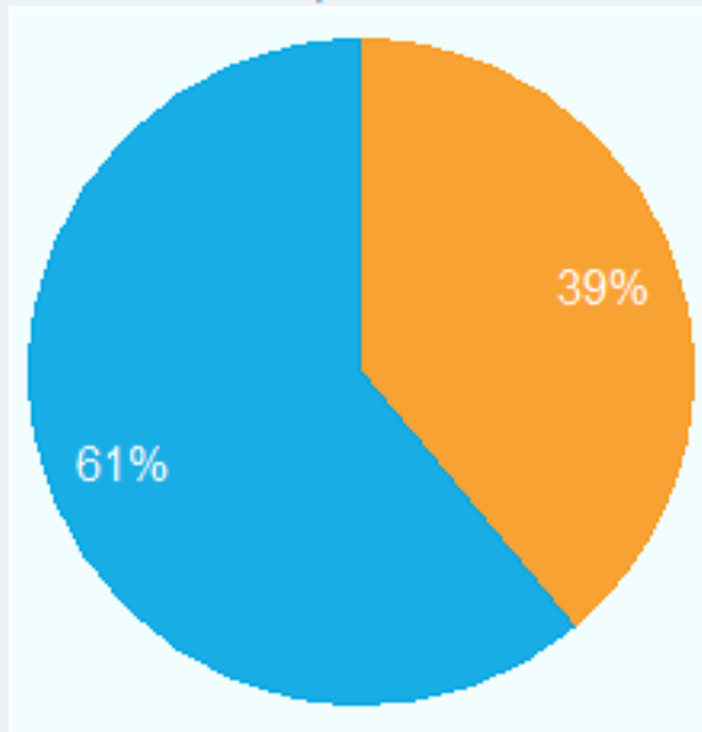
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# IAN Study: Comparison w/Sibs

## Bullied in Past Month?

Child with ASD (n=1079)

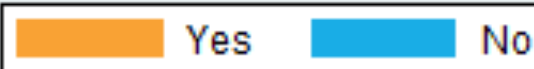
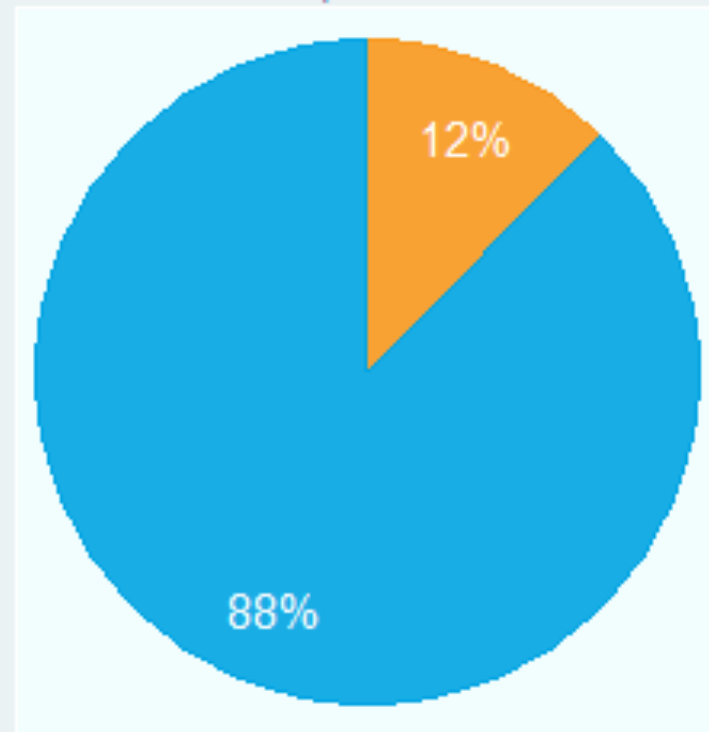
IAN data updated Mar 7 2012



## Bullied in Past Month?

Typical Sibling (n=795)

IAN data updated Mar 7 2012



Graphs by Sib

# Bullying and ASDs

- Parents of children with Asperger's reported:
  - A child had found the eyes had been scratched out of his picture on the classroom bulletin board.
  - A child had been told to "run like a bull" (p. 150), then taunted that he was a freak when he complied.
  - A child who had endured prolonged bullying expressed a desire to be "put in the street and run over."
  - A teen found her locker, decorated for her birthday by a friend, had been vandalized; students told her everyone hated her.
  - Results: School phobia, migraines, suicidal ideation



# Vicious Cycle: Bullying and Social Isolation

- Small study of 20 teens (7 with ASD) in a school setting:
  - 92.4% of typical teens significantly connected to social network.
  - 71.4% of teens with ASD were isolated or peripheral (Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010)
- Study of 398 children (17 with ASD) in regular 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms:
  - Children with ASD experienced lower acceptance, companionship, and reciprocity
  - ...but didn't report greater loneliness (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007)

# Vicious Cycle: Bullying and Social Isolation

- Not having friends makes a child with ASD vulnerable to bullying
- Being a victim makes a child with ASD less likely to get friends.



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# Why socially isolated?

- “Social blindness” -- Core challenge for many with ASD which impacts:
  - Knowing how to make friends, read others’ signals
  - Understanding social hierarchies
  - Knowing what’s “cool”
  - Knowing hidden social rules
  - A million more...

# Risk Factors

- IAN data showed some traits associated w/being bullied were:
  - Clumsiness
  - Poor hygiene
  - Rigid rule keeping (enforcing adults' rules when other children would not)
  - Continuing to talk about a favorite topic even when others are bored or annoyed
  - Frequent meltdowns
  - Inflexibility or rigidity



# Risk Factors

- Chances of being a victim, bully, or bully-victim increased when a child
  - Had a high level of autistic traits (social-comm, RRBIs)
  - Had ‘comorbid’ conditions (e.g. ADHD, anxiety)
- Chances of being bullied ‘in the past month’ increased when a child
  - Had an Asperger’s diagnosis (vs. autism or PDD-NOS diagnosis)
  - Attended a public school or a school with a general education population
  - Was in a full inclusion classroom

# Risk Factors

- In the IAN study:
  - Children frequently bullied were more likely to present with internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety)
  - Those who bullied more likely to have emotional regulation issues (including CD, ODD)
  - Bully-victims had both
  - Frequency of bullying behaviors was associated with the level of psychological impairment/issues.

# Risk Factors: Bully-victim

- Children with 'chronic behavioral, emotional, or developmental' problems were 3 times more likely to become a bully-victim than other children.  
(Van Cleave & Davis, 2006)
- Children with ASD + ADHD were 4 times more likely to bully than typical children.  
(Montes & Halterman, 2007)
- Bullying associated with behavioral problems in study of 120 children with ASD in a special school; victimization only associated with peer problems.  
(Fink, Olthof, Goossens, van der Meijden, & Begeer, 2018)

# Why would kids with ASD become 'bully-victims'?

- Many prone to meltdowns, aggressive behaviors → adding to perception of them as bullies

(Montes & Halterman, 2007)

- Limited social insight – child may
  - Engage in behavior he doesn't understand others view as bullying
  - See bullying when it's not there  
(may also *not* see it when it *is*)

(Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010)

- Brutal honesty of ASD might be viewed as bullying: “You’re fat.”



# Why would kids with ASD become 'bully-victims'?

- Other children may provoke meltdowns on purpose.
- The provoker may escape punishment while child with ASD gets sent home, suspended, punished.
- IAN study: 52% of parents reported this had happened to their child with ASD



# Quotes from Parents

- "My son doesn't realize he is bullying. He is trying to get other kids to pay attention to him so he does it by grabbing their ball away from them or getting 'in their face' when they say to stop."
- "He has very set rules of behavior that he expects all to follow. He doesn't see how his reaction to perceived slights or rule-breaking is sometimes bullying."

# A word about the numbers...

- Many studies based their numbers on parent-reported bullying.
- Probably **underestimates** the problem since parents don't always know.
- In one recent study of 35 youth with ASD preparing for college:
  - **51%** reported they'd been recent victims of bullying
  - Only **31%** of parents independently reported the same  
(van Schalkwyk, Smith, Silverman, & Volkmar, 2018)

# Consequences and Coping

- In the short term...
- A study based on the IAN bullying data found all types of victimization associated with a child or teen not enjoying, not feeling safe, and not feeling like they belong at school.



# Consequences and Coping

- A small study (n=10) based on interviews with teens with ASD found:
  - Impacts included:
    - Losing self-confidence
    - School refusal or decision to home school
    - Fear, emotional upset, reversion to being more introverted, lack of trust
  - Had a clear understanding of what acts defined bullying
  - 6 reported bullying but felt it wasn't adequately dealt with

# Consequences and Coping

- Evidence suggests students with ASD do understand what bullying looks like
  - An Australian study of 490 TD and 89 students with ASD (ages 11-16) found those with ASD **best** at recognizing bullying in presented vignettes.
  - Understood both regular and cyberbullying.

# Consequences of Bullying

- In the long term...
- Bullying often has long lasting consequences for the victim, including:
  - Loneliness, low self-esteem
  - Increased risk for depression
  - Increased risk for anxiety
  - Diminished socioeconomic status into adulthood
  - Does NOT “toughen you up”

# Consequences and Coping

- Among 482 U.S. TD college students surveyed, past bullying was associated with greater levels of
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Post-traumatic stress



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# Important to note:

- Humans are social animals, with capacity for great connection, love, and sacrifice...



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# Important to note:

- ...But also with a pecking order in which we vie for status, as individuals and in groups, within a larger social context



# Important to note:

- **Bullying is an inherently social act.** Theories about it are social-psychological or sociological:
  - Social Capital Theory
  - Dominance Theory
  - Theory of Humiliation
  - Organizational Culture Theory



# Important to note:

- Meanwhile, children with ASD tend to be socially blind, naïve, and socially isolated → perfect victims.
- How do we reduce their vulnerability to bullying?

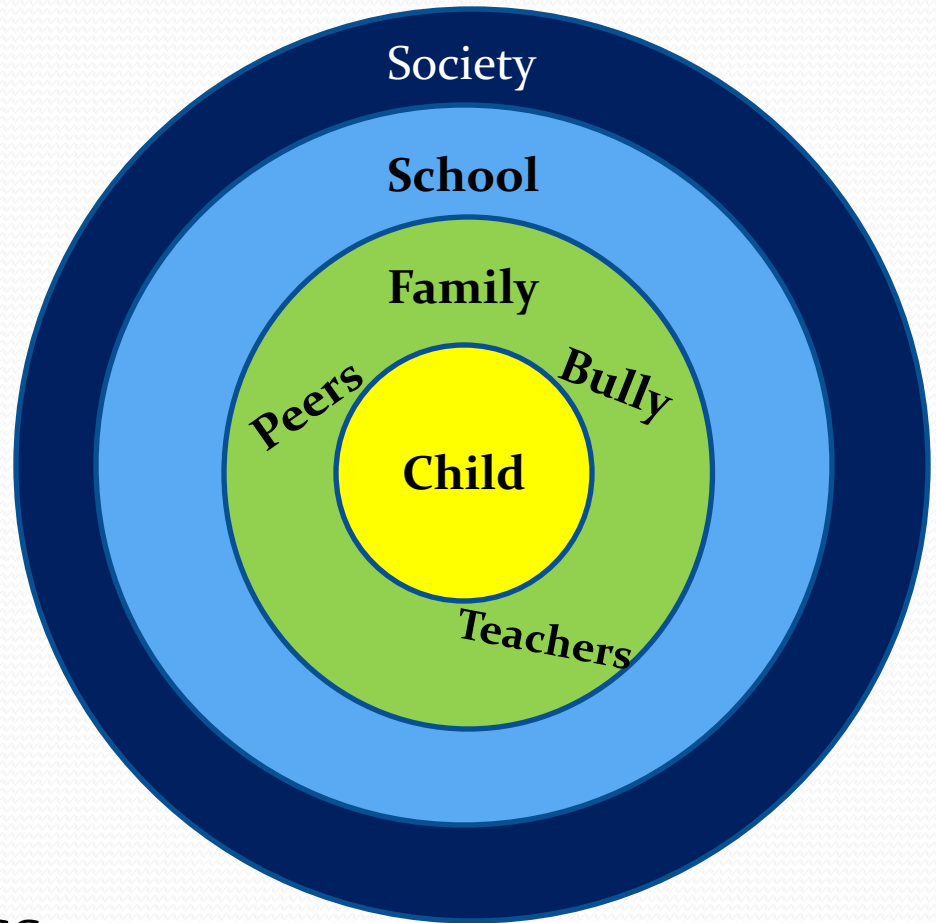


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# Multiple points for intervention

- The target
- The bully
- Families
- Peers
- School personnel
- Institutional climate (e.g. school, workplace)
- Society: degree of tolerance/inclusiveness



# How “bully-proof” child with ASD?

- Target core challenges of ASD (conversational ability, social skills) and co-occurring conditions (ADHD)  
(Sterzing, Shattuck, Narendorf, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012)
- Involve parents  
(Heinrichs, 2003)
  - Coordinate/communicate with school personnel
  - For example: address hygiene, stains on shirt
- BUT do not blame the victim!  
(Orpinas & Horne, 2006)

# What else can parents do?

- Per Bully project Parent Toolkit...
  - Talk with and support the child
  - Contact the teacher...and then go up the line: principal, superintendent, school board
  - Know the bullying policy for the school/district
  - Know the state law or policy, if any
- If all else fails – you can go to the U.S. Office for Civil Rights

# What else can parents do?

- If hopeless where you are...may need a new context and fresh start
- New class or school?
  - “Special ed” class or school
  - Non-Public School (NPS)
  - Private School
  - Home school



# The Bully

- This will vary depending on whether bully is
  - Aggressive
  - Relational
  - A bully-victim
- Both school counseling and family interventions have been recommended.

# Typical Children/Teens at School

- Increase empathy and social skills of TD students
- Increase social integration – protective peer groups

(Sterzing, Shattuck, Narendorf, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012)



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# Typical Children/Teens at School

- A study of special needs children attending regular-education schools in The Netherlands showed that:
  - Peers were more likely to recognize the imbalance of power and **intervene** when a classmate with Down syndrome or a physical impairment was targeted by bullies
  - More likely to **reject** students with behavior problems stemming from autism and/or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- **Suggests educating school community about ASD is critical.**



# Teachers/Staff at School

- Training is crucial: how to recognize/intervene in bullying
- Recent study of 70 SLPs found:  
(Ofe, Plumb, Plexico, & Haak, 2016)
  - 85% viewed bullying of children with ASD as “serious” or “somewhat of a” problem.
  - All agreed they should intervene in bullying of students with ASD, but not all felt comfortable doing so
  - 78% were in a district with an anti-bullying campaign, but only 20% were in a district where an anti-bullying campaign focused on children with special needs.



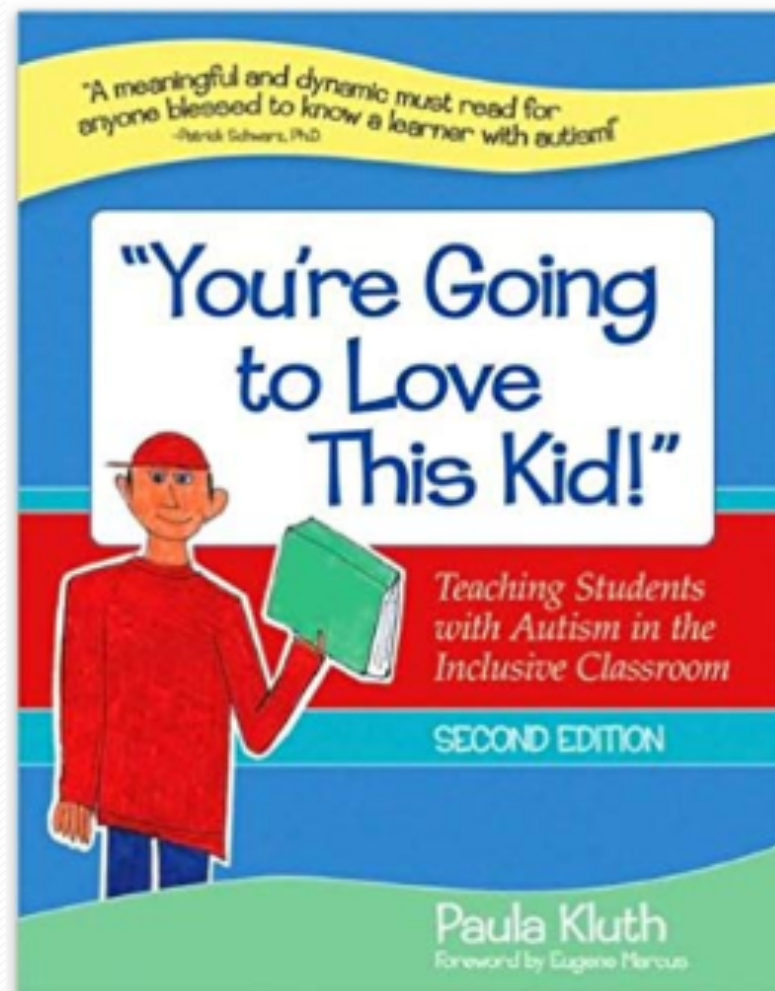
# Teachers/Staff at School

- Increase supervision in high risk areas  
(Heinrichs, 2003)
- Have ongoing teacher discussions about what they are seeing  
(Heinrichs, 2003)
- Per Berger (2006), need to evaluate in-depth...

“Since perception is crucial, an identical shove, insult, or brush-off can be inconsequential or devastating; bullies, victims, peers, and adults do not agree” (p. 103).

# School Climate/Culture

- Per Kluth (2010), “inclusion” done right includes concepts like:
  - Committed leadership
  - Democratic classrooms that value each student
  - Reflective Educators
  - Supportive School Culture



# Inclusion and Bullying

- But inclusion is not always done right
  - Data show risk of bullying increases when children with ASD in gen ed or public school setting.
  - Use that data to support your argument, critique practices



# School Anti-bullying Programs

- Schools once took a “hands-off” approach...but
  - A number of studies have shown a link between being bullied, or bullying, and increased risk for suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts in middle- or high-schoolers.

(Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kim & Leventhal, 2008)

- Evaluation of school shootings showed many perpetrators had felt bullied or harassed...

(Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002)



# School Anti-bullying Programs

- Now some schools have bullying policies and procedures – but the problem is...
  - They aren't always followed
  - Few are ever evaluated to show if they have a positive effect

***“It's his word against theirs”***

***“Boys will be boys”***

(Berger, 2007)

# School Anti-bullying Programs

- In a review of 21 anti-bullying programs (Hall, 2017):
  - Mixed results – some studies find bullying decreases, others don't.
  - When bullying programs focused on LGBTQ issues, those students reported “less harassment and more frequent and effective intervention by school personnel (p. 45).”
- **Would the same be true for students with disabilities/ASD?**

# Society at large

- General philosophy of celebration of diversity of all kinds will likely benefit children with ASD
- Current college students – grew up with kids on the spectrum and many seem very open and accepting



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# An Encouraging Trend

- Studies have shown that bullying may be decreasing over time, so policy/cultural shifts can make a difference.
  - Renshaw, Hammons, & Roberson (2016) – in United States, 2 different approaches suggest “bullying involvement is decreasing over time” (p. 400).
  - Chester et al. (2015) – study showed “decreasing trends in occasional and chronic victimization between 2001-2 and 2009-10...in a third” of 33 participating countries – including the U.S.



# Resources

- National Autism Society (NAS) video on bullying and ASD: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tB4JooxkC4>
- Bully Project Tools and Resources: [http://www.thebullyproject.com/tools\\_and\\_resources](http://www.thebullyproject.com/tools_and_resources)

Tools for Parents	Special Needs Toolkit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parent Action Toolkit</li><li>• 10 Tips for Parents</li><li>• Prevention and Intervention Tips</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sample letter to school</li><li>• Policy Database (state laws)</li><li>• Bullying and your child's IEP</li><li>• How to talk to kids about disability</li></ul>

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