



The Paraprofessional

I was told I got the job, and I knew I would be supporting a student named Helena. But before school started, I hadn't met her and I wasn't really sure what I would be doing day in and day out. I thought it might be a good idea to have some information or training about what the job of paraprofessional really entailed.

—Maria (paraprofessional)

I cannot do all the good that the world needs. But the world needs all the good that I can do.

—Jana Stanfield

Like Maria, some paraprofessionals are hired each year with limited training or knowledge about how to support students with disabilities. Alternatively, other paraprofessionals enter the field with teaching degrees or the equivalent in experience. This book is meant to support any person in this role with any amount of knowledge or training and to provide essential knowledge and guidance about the following topics:

1. What it means to be a paraprofessional
2. Basic information about inclusive education
3. Information about special education
4. How to work within a team
5. How to think about the students you support
6. How to provide academic supports
7. Strategies to provide social supports
8. How to provide behavioral supports
9. How to build student independence
10. How to take care of yourself while doing this incredibly important work

Throughout this book, we will provide you with numerous resources and strategies to support your work, and we encourage you to actively engage in the following tasks, which will be indicated by a corresponding icon:



REFLECTIONS



ACTIVITIES



QUICK QUIZ



TO-DO LIST



DEFINITIONS



FAQS



LEGAL INFORMATION



STRATEGIES

- Reflection
- Quick Quiz learning tests
- Activities
- To-Do lists

To further your understanding of the concepts discussed throughout this book, you will also see important information indicated by the following icons:

- Definitions
- Legal information
- FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)
- Strategies

This book was designed to better prepare and guide you through the incredible daily work of supporting students with disabilities in authentic and positive ways. To begin, let's walk together into a kindergarten classroom and meet a student named Helena.

Helena arrives in her kindergarten classroom. Helena's friend Sam greets her. Both students talk excitedly for a little bit about their weekend as they proceed to the folder bucket. Maria, Helena's paraprofessional, helps remove Helena's take-home folder from her backpack and then puts the folder into the bucket. Maria then helps Helena remove her jacket, boots, and mittens. Sam races ahead to his table, and Helena follows close behind, driving her motorized wheelchair to her table. Maria follows and sits down next to them.

Helena is a creative, bright little girl who is supported by a paraprofessional. Because Helena has cerebral palsy, she needs someone to assist her with several tasks throughout the school day. Maria helps to position Helena on the floor for circle time, helps her use her computer to answer questions in class, writes down her ideas for stories and assignments, and facilitates social interactions with the other children in her class. The nature of Helena's physical disability requires regular and ongoing adult support from Maria to ensure meaningful access and authentic inclusion in her kindergarten class.

This chapter will familiarize you with the job of an inspired paraprofessional. We will first provide a definition of the title *paraprofessional* and then briefly outline the history of paraprofessionals in the classroom. The rest of this chapter discusses other foundational information for effective paraprofessional supports, including the many roles of paraprofessionals, the powerful benefits of paraprofessionals, the different types of settings in which paraprofessionals work, the most common tasks for paraprofessionals, and some commonly asked questions.

What Does Paraprofessional Mean?

Before we provide the formal definition of paraprofessional, we think it is pertinent to share that the prefix *para* means *next to* or *alongside*. *Paraeducator* therefore means someone who works *alongside* educators. This *alongside* position is a respected and critical role in many professions. For example, in restaurants, sous-chefs help to prepare dishes by washing, cutting, and chopping food for chefs to put together in their final masterpieces. In medicine, physician assistants support doctors in providing medical care to patients. In law, paralegals perform essential tasks, such as filing briefs and drafting documents, to support the work of lawyers. In education, you, the paraprofessional, support

the work of teachers to effectively educate students.

In classrooms, paraprofessionals are analogous to each of these professions in certain ways, working with direction from both general and special educators. Although their role is not to plan or design classroom instruction, paraprofessionals make important contributions to classroom instruction when they can effectively implement important tasks—tasks for which paraprofessionals are specifically trained. Paraprofessionals are often gateways to information and creative ideas about how students with disabilities might access and respond to supports across environments. In short, paraprofessionals are critical partners who help keep classrooms running efficiently and effectively (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007).



How the Law Defines *Paraprofessional*

The job title *paraprofessional* is described in Section 14B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (PL 108-446; IDEA 2004):

Paraprofessionals . . . who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations, or written policy . . . are to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services . . . to children with disabilities. (20 U.S.C. § 1412)

In other words, paraprofessionals are hired to support special education services for children with disabilities. You should be trained and supervised by experienced general and special educators; your training should begin before you start to work in the schools, and it should continue throughout your career. Many school systems use this book as part of your training.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) defines *paraprofessional* as someone who

is employed in a preschool, elementary school, or secondary school under the supervision of a certified or licensed teacher, including individuals employed in language instruction, educational programs, special education, or migrant education (20 U.S.C. § 119).

According to NCLB, all paraprofessionals should have:

- A. completed at least 2 years of study at an institution of higher education;
- B. obtained an associate (or higher) degree; and
- C. met a rigorous standard of quality and can demonstrate through a formal academic assessment
 - a. knowledge of, and the ability to assist in instruction, reading, writing, and mathematics; or
 - b. knowledge of, and the ability to assist in instructing reading readiness, writing readiness, and mathematics readiness, as appropriate. (20 U.S.C. § 6319 [c])

Now that we have listed the legal definition of *paraprofessional* and the legal qualifications for doing the job, let's discuss what this means in practical terms. What might your title be? What might your students want from you? What will you actually be doing?

My Title Is *Teaching Assistant*. Is That the Same Thing?

You might not be called a *paraprofessional*; instead, you might be called a *teaching assistant* or some other term. Just as the job has evolved, the title *paraprofessional* has changed over time and still varies from district to district. The terms *aide*, *assistant*, *paraeducator*, *education technician*, *one-to-one*, *teacher*



aide, program assistant, clerical assistant, instructional assistant, and teaching assistant are commonly used to describe the role of paraprofessionals. Although this title varies, many times, the job responsibilities are similar but distinguishable by the number of students that the person supports or the tasks they are assigned. A *one-to-one assistant* tends to support a single student, a *teaching assistant* usually supports more students, a *clerical assistant* tends to do more work with the materials for instruction, and a *program assistant* typically supports an entire classroom.

What Does a Paraprofessional Do?

Paraprofessionals engage in many different daily responsibilities. Those job tasks vary from school to school. Generally, if you work in a school, the types of responsibilities you can expect fall under the categories of *instructional tasks, behavioral support tasks, clerical tasks, supervision tasks, planning or preparation, and personal care tasks* (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). Table 1.1 describes each type of task and provides an example. These are examples of tasks that you could be assigned, but you may be assigned additional tasks not included here.

Table 1.1. Typical responsibilities of paraprofessionals

Type of task	Examples of tasks
Instructional tasks	Reviewing vocabulary with a student Reteaching a math method Prereading a book with a student Running a center at center time Helping a small group during a science lab
Behavioral support tasks	Providing positive reinforcement Addressing sensory needs Following a behavior plan Helping a student calm down
Clerical tasks	Making copies Creating modifications planned by educators Enlarging materials (increasing font size)
Supervision tasks	Supervising students on the playground, on the bus, or in the cafeteria
Planning or preparation tasks	Making a math or vocabulary game Creating a communication board Preparing or labeling materials
Personal care tasks	Helping students dress after physical education Providing support while students put on or take off outdoor clothing Assisting students in brushing hair or teeth Helping students use the restroom



REFLECTIONS

Take a moment to consider the tasks and roles you currently do on a daily basis. Do they align with the roles and tasks in Table 1.1? If not, what roles and tasks in the figure might you want to incorporate into your daily work? Take a moment and write them down. Might those additional roles and tasks require collaboration with colleagues? Teamwork is critical to student and professional success, so in Chapter 4 we will discuss how you can approach and collaborate with your general and special educators to discuss and clarify your roles and tasks.

Job tasks also depend on the type of support you are assigned to give. You may provide one-to-one instruction and small-group instruction. You might be responsible for student observation and data collection with regard to academic support or behavioral support. You may also supervise students on the playground, at lunch, or on the bus, helping to support student behavior control, or take on more clerical tasks to support teaching and learning, such as typing, recording grades, and photocopying (French, 1998).

Another Type of Job Description: What Your Students Want You to Know

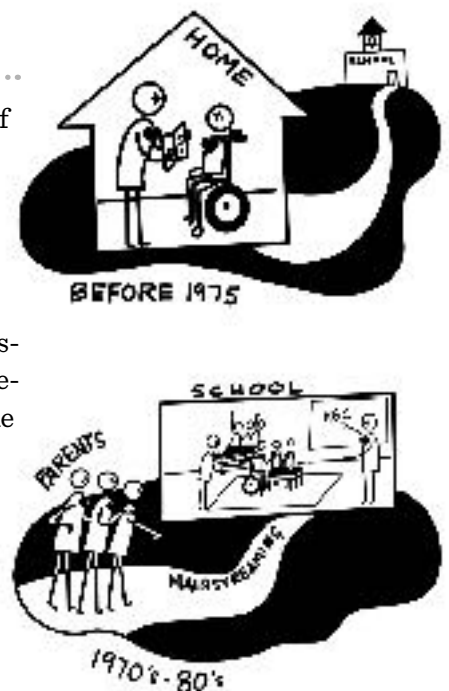
Legal definitions, job titles, and practical job descriptions are incredibly useful. But we think one of the most important job descriptions comes directly from your students.

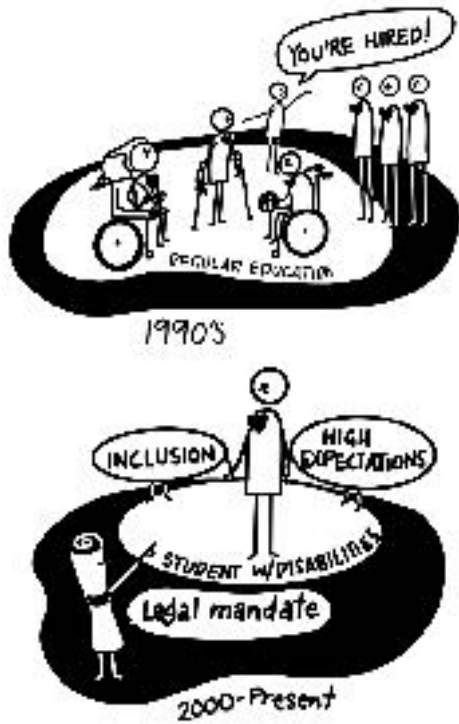
Listen to me. Learn from me. Watch me. Hear me. Ask me questions. Support my belonging. Be there, but give me space. Expect that I will learn. Facilitate friendships. Let me fail sometimes. Encourage independence. Love me. Always speak kindly. Ask, "What do you need?" Be safe. Handle me with care. Be respectful. Be gentle. Be trustworthy. Remember, I am a person first. If I am loud, be quiet. Encourage interdependence. If I am sad, wipe my tears. Help me connect to others. Assume friendship is possible. Celebrate my diversity. Allow us to create together, laugh together, and have fun together. Assume competence always. Attribute the best possible motive consistent with the facts. Spark curiosity. Do not control. When I am happy, step back. Allow choice. Relax. Be a learner yourself. Ask, "How can I best help you?" Share positive stories with my parents or caregivers. Set me up to be successful. When I have difficulties, kindly redirect me to get me on track. Breathe. Speak softly. Encourage softly. Redirect softly. Follow my lead. Lead by loving. Watch me thrive. Include me always.

The History of Paraprofessionals

The history of inclusive education has had a large impact on the employment of paraprofessionals (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019). It has only been since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) that students with disabilities have had a legally protected right to attend public school. Before this time, students with disabilities were educated mainly in the home, in segregated settings, or in institutions. It was believed that students with disabilities could not learn as much as students without disabilities and that they did not need certified teachers to support them; therefore, before 1975, students with disabilities were typically supported by people in paraprofessional roles (Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, & Ziegler, 1999).

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, a strong parent-driven movement began, advocating to educate children with disabilities in general education settings alongside peers, friends, and neighbors without disabilities. At this time, the Regular Education Initiative began (Will, 1986), and parents began to learn about the idea of *mainstreaming* or what we now call *inclusion*. The role of





paraprofessionals accordingly shifted as students with disabilities began participating in general education classrooms. At this time, paraprofessionals began to provide greater academic and behavioral support.

By the 1990s, a wider array of students with more significant disabilities was included in classrooms across all grade levels in school, and there was a large boom in the hiring of paraprofessionals. From 2000 to the present, inclusive education and high expectations for students with disabilities has become a greater legal mandate. Two precedent setting court cases, *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017) and *L.H. v. Hamilton County* (2018), have recently interpreted IDEA to 1) clearly prefer the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and 2) provide students with access to high expectations through appropriate supports and services.

Therefore, the use of paraprofessionals to support students in inclusive settings has increased steadily (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As students with many more significant disabilities are being included in general education settings, paraprofessionals are more critical than ever.

From Caregiver to Learning Facilitator

Paraprofessionals in the United States number about 1,380,300, and that number is increasing (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). This increase is attributable to many factors. The number has increased primarily because many more students with more significant disabilities and complex support needs (e.g., autism spectrum disorder [ASD] and cognitive disabilities) are included in general education classrooms. In addition, there has been a slow increase in the number of students who are being identified as having disabilities. Many educators view the support of a paraprofessional as key for an inclusive classroom. In other words, students are included in general education settings *because* they are accompanied by paraprofessionals.

Moreover, the role of paraprofessionals has become much more complex as it has moved from caregiver to facilitator of learning. In the past, students with disabilities were educated separately in rooms for only children with disabilities, and the supports they received were more related to personal care and keeping students occupied. Educational goals for students with significant disabilities were essentially limited to life skills and job-related tasks. For example, common activities for such students—regardless of age—were to learn to cook, practice dressing, or use appropriate table manners. As a result, the role of paraprofessionals was mainly caregiving.

Now, educators in the field have learned that students with disabilities are just as capable of learning as their general education counterparts, and federal laws mandate that educators hold all students to high expectations to make progress on general education content and curriculum. Consequently, the goals many students now have in their individualized education programs (IEPs) closely resemble those of their same-age peers. Paraprofessionals are now responsible for helping to educate students using materials appropriate to their grade levels and for helping to facilitate complex social networks and friendships. Because of these new roles, paraprofessionals have become integral members of teaching teams with increasingly challenging new responsibilities.

The Role of Paraprofessionals Today

Currently, paraprofessionals have varied responsibilities. Your role is likely determined by the classroom context and the unique needs of the students you support. The role of a paraprofessional in a kindergarten classroom is quite different from a paraprofessional who works in a high school classroom. In general, however, these responsibilities include supporting students socially, academically, physically, and behaviorally.

Social Support

Social support includes helping students make and maintain friendships with other students. For example, a paraprofessional might assist a student in communicating with a peer, in selecting a partner for group work, or in finding a friend to play with at recess time.

Academic Support

Academic support involves helping students as they attend to academic content and learn new material. For example, you might be responsible for helping a student prepare for a test, outline a chapter, or put together an insect collection. Any academic task that students do in school may require paraprofessional support, and it is all based on the needs of the individual student.

Physical Support

Some children also require physical support. For example, a child using a wheelchair may need help when eating, dressing, or transferring from a seated to a standing position. Because of the nature of their physical disability, some students require more physical support than others.

Behavioral Support

Another common responsibility involves providing behavioral supports. An example of this type of support is giving a child a fidget toy or other sensory item so that the student can pay attention during a read-aloud story or lecture. You may also provide positive reinforcement at key times or help a student take movement breaks throughout the day so that they are better able to stay on task during seated instructional time.

The student's IEP will be a framework for the amount and type of support you provide. The team of teachers you work with should also help you identify your roles within the classroom and school day. Generally speaking, your role will be to reinforce and reteach skills, help support behavior regulation, and, possibly, provide personal care or mobility support. Because each student is unique, your job will differ according to the needs of the students you support.



QUICK QUIZ

What roles did paraprofessionals have historically? Compare those roles to today.

Classroom Settings

Providing social, physical, academic, and behavioral supports to students will be the core of your daily work. But where you provide these supports will vary depending on your district and school, your role, and the students you support. You may work for the majority of the day in a single setting, or you may find yourself working across settings.

Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive classrooms are generally places in which students with and without disabilities are educated together. Other terms you might hear are *general education classroom*, *co-taught classroom*, *third-grade classroom*, *regular classroom*, or *typical classroom*. A more outdated term for an inclusive classroom is a *mainstreamed classroom*. More information about inclusion can be found in Chapter 2.

Non-Inclusive Classrooms

Although this book focuses on supporting students in inclusive classrooms, you might find yourself in different types of classrooms. The following descriptions describe other types of settings that are not considered inclusive.

Resource Rooms

A resource room is a place in which students are generally supposed to spend a short amount of time working on a specific skill or subject before returning to the general education classroom. The instruction in these classrooms is typically delivered in a small group with one educator teaching a small group of students or with one teacher working directly with one student.

Self-Contained Classrooms

A self-contained classroom is designed for the instruction of only students with disabilities. The purpose of this kind of classroom was initially to group students who had similar learning needs. However, these types of classrooms are very controversial because students in self-contained classrooms interact on a very limited basis—if at all—with students who do not have disabilities.

Self-Contained or Alternative School

A self-contained or alternative school is a place where students with similar learning, behavior, or social needs are provided instruction for the duration of the school day. These schools are often highly controversial because students in self-contained or alternative schools spend their entire day without contact with peers who do not have disabilities.

Community-Based Classrooms

Some paraprofessionals work in community-based classrooms. If you work in a community-based classroom you are likely to work in a high school setting. The idea behind community-based instruction is that some students require instruction to prepare them for life in the community, so the curriculum typically includes working on career and independent living skills. Therefore, some students receive their instruction in the community. Some types of community-based locations include job sites, recreational facilities, grocery stores, or other settings within the community.

Benefits of Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals offer crucial support that is helpful to both teachers and students. They can expand learning opportunities by giving students repeated

practice with skills or concepts. They also provide students with more individualized instruction and even facilitate positive interactions with peers throughout the day. The presence of a paraprofessional allows teachers to have more planning time and the ability to support more students individually. Students with disabilities can be more carefully monitored, supported, and generally involved in instruction to a greater extent when a paraprofessional is present in the classroom.

Paraprofessionals also come to this work with richly varied backgrounds, skills, and talents. Some paraprofessionals have business backgrounds and some are multilingual. Other paraprofessionals are artists and musicians, athletes, or coach sports teams. Many paraprofessionals also serve as licensed specialists in a different field, and still others may have earned their license(s) in a different country. Other paraprofessionals are retired teachers, whereas some are currently in school to earn a teaching certificate. Over the years we have met thousands of paraprofessionals with incredible talents and experiences that can benefit the students and teachers they support. We want you to recognize and celebrate all of the unique knowledge, background, and experience you bring to this work. Having this understanding of your unique strengths can then determine how your various skills, talents, and experiences can serve students and teachers best in the classroom.

.....
 We want you to recognize
 and celebrate all of
 the unique knowledge,
 background, and experience
 you bring to this work.



REFLECTIONS

- How would you describe your role as a paraprofessional?
 What unique skills/talents and background do you bring to this work?
 How can these skills, talents, and backgrounds support students and teachers?

Commonly Asked Questions About the Role of Paraprofessionals

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Q. To whom do I report?

- A. Typically, a paraprofessional reports to the special education teacher to whom they are assigned. After that, a building principal or director of special education would be next in the chain of command. However, you will also work closely with general education teachers and related services providers (e.g., occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language teachers), and they may provide guidance as well.

Q. How can I obtain a copy of my job description?

- A. You can typically find this online. If not, request a copy of your job description by talking to someone in human resources or by asking the director of special education. Most districts will provide you a written job description if you do not already have one.

Q. Am I allowed to lead a small-group discussion?

- A. Yes, you can lead a small-group discussion or review material with students



FAQs

under the direction of a certified teacher. You are not typically allowed to introduce new material, but you can reinforce material taught previously by a certified teacher.

Q. Can I teach an entire class by myself?

A. A paraprofessional generally does not teach an entire class new material, but you could be responsible for reading a book aloud to the class or supporting the work of the entire class under the direction and supervision of a certified teacher.

Q. Who is ultimately responsible for the education of the student I am supporting?

A. The special education teacher and general education teacher assigned to the student are responsible. The term *case manager* or *service coordinator* is sometimes used to refer to the special education teacher assigned to the student.

Q. Should I work from written plans?

A. Yes, you should work from written plans. If you don't have written plans, you can request them from the special education teacher with whom you are working. It is important to note that the plans provided will not account for every minute of the day; instead, they typically consist of a schedule and tasks for periods of the day.

Conclusion

Understanding your roles and responsibilities is essential in order to do your job effectively. This chapter discussed the importance of the job of a paraprofessional, surveyed the history of paraprofessionals, discussed the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals today, and provided answers to some commonly asked questions. Because paraprofessionals most often support students who receive special education services in a variety of inclusive settings, the next chapter is designed to give you background about inclusive education.



TO-DO LIST

To Do

After reading this chapter . . .

- Complete the reflection activities in the chapter.
- Review the list of common paraprofessional tasks (Table 1.1). Highlight those tasks that you commonly engage in. In a different color, highlight the ones that you would like to learn more about.
- Write down all of your specific questions about this chapter. Share your questions with your team.
- Celebrate (e.g., take a walk, get a cup of coffee, dance in your living room) the fact that you've begun this book and are committing to new learning about your important work.

What does a great paraprofessional need to know and do? You'll find real-world answers from two experts in the second edition of this bestselling guidebook. Passionate inclusion advocates Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod bring you a supremely practical guide to surviving and thriving as an integral part of your school's inclusive team. You'll get immediately applicable strategies for mastering every facet of your complex role: collaborating with other team members, selecting accommodations and modifications, facilitating peer connections, fading your support, and much more. And you'll find a treasure trove of tools—including activities, learning checks, reproducible templates, FAQs, and short to-do lists—to help you reflect on your practice and strengthen your daily work.

An essential, hands-on guide for new and seasoned paraprofessionals—and a must-have for the educators and other professionals who support them—this empowering book takes the guesswork out of this critical classroom role so you can help students with disabilities reach their full potential.

WHAT'S NEW:

- New chapter on Respectful Support for Developing Student Independence
- More on key topics such as collaboration, presuming competence, and supporting social and academic success for students with diverse abilities
- New and updated research, practices, digital tools, resources, examples, quiz questions, and reflection activities throughout the book
- Package of online materials, including printable activities, helpful resources, and reflection pages



ABOUT THE AUTHORS: **Julie Causton, Ph.D.**, is founder and chief executive officer of Inclusive Schooling. She is a former Professor in the Inclusive and Special Education Program in the Department of Teaching and Leadership at Syracuse University. **Kate MacLeod, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at the University of Maine at Farmington and founder and consultant at Inclusive Schooling. Julie and Kate are friends and co-authors and work together to create wildly inclusive and socially just schools.

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“Whether you are a paraprofessional looking for ways to support students, collaborate, and communicate with team members; a teacher who is seeking ideas for educating and supporting the paraprofessionals on your team; or an administrator needing guidance on how to supervise programs or grow an inclusive school, this book will provide answers, ideas, and many, many ‘ah-ha!’ moments.”

—Paula Kluth, Ph.D.,
Author of “You’re Going to Love This Kid!”

“Paraprofessionals are some of the unsung heroes of inclusive education... This book provides a wealth of practical tips and tools and will be immediately useful for paraprofessionals and the teachers who supervise them.”

—Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Ph.D.,
Inclusive Education Consultant

“Its accessible style, focus on inclusive contexts, and practical applications should make it a go-to resource for collaborative teams.”

—Michael F. Giangreco, Ph.D.,
University of Vermont,
Center on Disability & Community Inclusion

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