



ATHLETES' PERCEPTION OF PARENTAL SUPPORT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SPORTS ACCOMPLISHMENTS – A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of family environmental factors on student athletes featuring different levels of sports accomplishment: 1) a low level – no significant achievements ($N = 46$), 2) a medium level – significant achievements at a regional level ($N = 86$) and 3) a high level – significant achievements at national and/or international level ($N = 33$). **Methods.** The participants were administered a demographic survey and the Athletes' Family Environment Questionnaire (AFEQ). **Results.** One-way ANOVA found that the high achievers' families differ from the medium- and low-level achievers in five (out of nine) of the studied family environment factors: children as an important value in family life, sport as an important value in family life, parents' involvement in their child's sports career, the overall genetic-environmental conditioning of their child's talent and passion for sports, as well as parents living through their child's involvement in sports. **Conclusions.** Such factors as parents' involvement in their child's sports career and parents living through their child's involvement in sports are especially interesting for researchers. On one hand, these factors can be beneficial (providing instrumental support, spectatorship), but on the other hand, they can have adverse effects such as a child quitting sports, experiencing burnout or have a higher risk of injury. From a practical perspective, the family environment may be the most accessible as well as the most important of the socio-environmental dimensions of young athletes.

Key words: sports achievements, athletes' family characteristics, parents' support in sports, family influence

Introduction

Undoubtedly, parents' influence on a child's involvement in sports and physical activity is significant [1, 2]. As the demands of youth sports participation have become more complex and competitive, so has the role of a parent become more difficult [3]. It is usually parents who provide the first opportunity for their child to take up a sport. They also have significant influence on a child's decision on continuing or quitting a sport at some later point in time [4, 5]. In the last few years, researchers' interest on the influence of parenting styles on a variety of psychological factors linked to youth participation in sports has significantly increased. One of the most frequently analyzed issues has been parents involvement in youth sports activity, i.e., its intensity, forms and outcomes [5, 6]. On one hand, parental help seems to be very important (e.g., bringing their child to a training session, supporting them during competition, motivating them when discouraged, providing them with feedback or sharing a child's success and progress in sports), but, on the other hand, parents' actions at times may hinder a young athlete's development and adaptation to sports [4]. This is not only connected with parents' inappropriate, rude or aggressive behavior such as shouting, insulting or criticizing others during a game or even engaging in violent behavior. Such actions hamper both the good spirit and mutual understanding found in sport and may result in a child quitting sports [3, 7]. However, other more subtle behaviors by parents, often

read by others as parental dedication, readiness to help or their committed involvement, can be perceived by a young athlete as overwhelming and controlling [7, 8].

Numerous studies revealed that parents and their children have incongruent views about what is considered supportive behavior and coercion or exerting undue pressure [7, 9]. Kanters et al. [7], who conducted research on 180 young hockey players (9–11 years old) and their parents, arrived at a number of interesting conclusions. There was no significant difference between mothers and fathers in terms of their declared support or the pressure they exert on their children. However, the study showed that parents and their children perceived these behaviors very differently. The level of parental pressure was considered by children to be higher than by the parents themselves. The support that the parents felt that they gave to their children, and how that support was reciprocated by their children, was found to be better evaluated by parents.

Besides themes such as *school* and *injury*, *athletes' parents* have also been considered by one study as a talent inhibitor [10]. However, another study found that parents and coaches are perceived by athletes as the most important individuals during their athletic career, with many examples having been provided that the parents of athletes are supportive and react realistically and positively to their child's sports career [2]. The effectiveness of the support that parents provide largely depends on whether it meets the age and needs of an athlete [11]. In a study on Israeli athletes, it was found that parents of

sports-gifted children featured higher expectations of their child's performance and offered more encouragement for their participation in sports than parents of a control group of non-athletic children [9].

Family involvement in youth sports has also different meanings depending on the type of sport. Parents are more engaged when their child plays individual sports or when they are at the early specialization stage in their sport [2, 12]. Initial analysis from a pilot study (an unpublished report using questionnaires assessing the participation of young professional athletes' parents from the Department of Psychology at The University School of Physical Education, Kraków, 2005) also showed that the type of parental support and the level of involvement was connected to the type of sport their child played (individual vs. team). Parents of young gymnasts or figure skaters perceived their child's sports as more time- and financially-demanding in comparison to parents of volleyball players. There were also differences found in parents' expectations, volleyball players' parents declared no special expectations in terms of their child's sports success.

Besides providing instrumental support, parents also play an important role as role models, especially if they have sports-related experience or their interest in sports is seen in action, e.g., they have a sports-related job or do sports, even recreationally [13]. A study pointed that parents emphasize their commitment more by daily behaviors and activities than by verbal communication [10]. These aspects include self-discipline and the productive use of one's time; a child's success in sports could be then directly attributed to their parents [10].

Various studies have found that the families of famous swimmers and tennis players are characterized by greater interest in sports, achievement orientation, appreciation of success and perseverance, and that such families can be described as "child-oriented families" [2, 12, 14]. The atmosphere at home, the appreciation of achievements and parental role modeling influence not only a child's achievements in sports but also in other aspects of daily life. The outcomes of such positive influence can be observed not just at child's present-day stage of development, but also later on in adulthood [15].

In order to support young athletes to grow and develop as well as to effectively protect them against undesirable events, it seems crucial to more closely analyze how the family environment influences a child and their involvement in sports. This requires not only analysis of available research data, but also the creation of new studies in order to allow us to understand these psychological mechanisms better within culture-specific contexts.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the factors of family environment on athletes who represented three different levels of sports accomplishment. The study also attempted to verify whether family environment factors correlate with such variables as the type of sport played (individual vs. team) and if, and how,

past family sports achievements played a role on sports achievement. As such, the following research questions were posed:

1. Do athletes who differ in terms of sports achievement also differ in terms of family environment factors?
2. Do athletes of team sports differ from those who play individual sports in terms of the qualities and dimensions of their family environment?
3. Do athletes who come from families featuring past sports achievements differ from athletes in a family with no sports achievement in terms of the considered family environment factors?

Material and methods

A total of 165 athletes (110 males, 55 females) between 18–23 years of age ($M = 19.4$; $SD = 0.92$) participated in the study, which was retrospective in character. All participants were PE students involved in competitive sports. Sixty-nine individuals (42%) played individual sports, while 96 (58%) played team sports. The study participants represented three different levels of sports achievements:

- 1) low level (LA): no significant achievements ($N = 46$, 32 males, 14 females),
- 2) medium level (MA): achievements at a regional level ($N = 86$, 59 males, 27 females),
- 3) high level (HA): achievements at a national and/or international level ($N = 33$, 19 males, 14 females).

Sports achievement was calculated based on the participants' outcomes: low level – no significant sports success or wins; medium level – being a member of a regional team and/or being a medalist in a regional competition; high level – being a member of national team and/or being a medalist in an international competition. The difference between the groups regarding the proportions of males and females was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.546$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.461$).

The questionnaire the students were asked to complete consisted of two parts, a demographic survey and the Athletes' Family Environment Questionnaire (AFEQ). The demographic survey consisted of questions on such issues as age, gender, practiced sports discipline, sports achievements, plans and goals in sports, parents' job and parents' sports involvement and achievements. The AFEQ was adapted by this author from the Musicians' Family Environment Questionnaire (MFEQ), prepared by Manturzevska, Leraczyk and Sikorska-Grygiel and based on a model of musicians' family environment [16]. The theoretical basis for the questionnaire and its measurement tools were based on previous findings analyzing gifted individuals and their career and life development (see: Heller et al. [17]). Previous studies have confirmed that successful individuals share numerous similarities in their upbringing and habits no matter what walk of life [15]. Interviews and analyses of the bio-

ographies of successful athletes have also corroborated that such a notion can be applied to a sports context [2, 10, 17–19].

The AFEQ questionnaire was created so as to be statistically valid. It consisted of 83 items concerning family and sports. Participants had to specify their agreement or disagreement with each statement by ranking them (from “1” – completely disagree to “5” – completely agree). Eleven of the statements possessed reversed scores. Altogether, the 83 items formed nine scales that analyzed the following family environment factors:

- I. Socio-economic status (four items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.700) rating facets such as: *My family lives very economically and it is still difficult to survive from month to month* (reversed item); *My parents' jobs have a high level of social prestige*.
- II. Good relationships in the family (fourteen items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.889) rating facets such as: *I like spending time with my family; I often rebel against my family and I don't want to be like them* (reversed item).
- III. Children as an important value in family life (seven items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.676) rating facets such as: *My parents were always interested in my friendships; No matter how hard they worked, they always had time for me; My parents show great interest in my sports achievements*.
- IV. Sport as an important value in family life (nine items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.853) rating facets such as: *My parents like doing sports in their spare time; Everything in my family is connected with sports*.
- V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career (fifteen items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.884) rating facets such as: *My parents were always strongly affected by my successes and failures in sports; My parents were present in practice sessions during the first years of my training*.
- VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports (eleven items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.805) rating facets such as: *Passion for sports was passed on from generation to generation in my family; My grandparents were also skilled in sports*.
- VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievement (eleven items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.678) ratings facets such as: *Work is very important for my parents; Some members of my family have achieved a great deal in their professions*.
- VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities (six items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.765) rating facets such as: *Nothing motivates me more than my parents' praise; My parents encouraged me to study in a creative and an original way*.
- IX. Parents living through their child (six items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.614) rating facets such as: *My parents motivate me to work as they want me to achieve more than them; If my parents were growing up today, they would probably be athletes*.

Higher Cronbach's alpha factors were obtained from the AFEQ than the MFEQ for factors IV, V, VIII. The X factor from the MFEQ was excluded (measuring traditionalism in the family value system) due to a low Cronbach's alpha value (0.566). Analysis of the previously conducted pilot study and a literature review allowed the formation of the following hypotheses: Athletes who represent different level of achievements will differ in terms of their family environment. A higher level of sports achievement would correspond to an individual having higher scores in scales: “III. Children as an important value in family life”, “IV. Sport as an important value in family life”, “V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career”, “VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of sports talent and passion in sports” and “VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements”.

Team sports athletes will differ from athletes playing individual sports in terms of the qualities and dimensions of their family environments, where individual sports athletes ought to score significantly higher in scales measuring “I. Socio-economic status” and “V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career”.

Athletes from families with past sports achievements, compared to athletes with families with no past sports achievements, might score higher in the following family environment factors: “IV. Sport as an important value in family life”, “V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career”, “VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of sports talent and passion for sport” and “VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements”.

Results

Table 1 presents the family environment factors obtained from the athletes of all three different levels of sports achievement. One-way ANOVA found that the families of high achievers differ from medium- and low-level achievers in five (out of nine) scales, being: “III. Children as an important value in family life”, “IV. Sport as an important value in family life”, “V. Parent involvement in their child's sports career”, “VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports” and “IX. Parents living through their child”.

The Scheffé's method was applied post-hoc to determine which differences in the groups were related to one another.

Despite the fact that no statistically significant differences were found between the subgroups in scale “III. Children as an important value in family life”, the following tendencies ($0.1 > p > 0.05$) were noted: Group 1 (LA) differed from Group 2 (MA) ($p = 0.0642$) and Group 3 (HA) ($p = 0.0598$). No significant difference (or tendency) was noted between the groups that had achievements, i.e., Group 2 (MA) and Group 3 (HA) ($p = 0.8555$).

Table 1. Family environment factors of athletes with different achievements levels

Family environment factors	Level of achievement						ANOVA (dfB = 2; dfW = 162)	
	1. Low (LA) N = 46		2. Medium (MA) N = 86		3. High (HA) N = 33		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
I. Socio-economic status	13.39	2.68	12.66	2.84	12.30	2.55	1.72	0.1823
II. Good relationships in the family	51.22	8.21	53.59	8.75	53.76	8.24	1.35	0.2624
III. Children as an important value in family life	23.35	4.34	24.97	3.57	25.39	3.26	3.72	0.0263
IV. Sport as an important value in family life	22.91	7.03	23.65	6.44	26.82	5.88	3.85	0.0233
V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career	40.13	10.05	44.41	8.94	49.45	8.56	9.93	0.0001
VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports	29.78	6.61	29.94	7.47	33.61	8.23	3.34	0.0380
VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements	38.33	4.38	37.53	4.89	38.24	4.96	0.52	0.5949
VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities	19.17	3.96	19.77	3.35	20.00	3.71	0.60	0.5479
IX. Parents living through their child	7.65	2.41	8.02	2.32	9.82	2.27	9.34	0.0001

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; bold font – denotes statistically significant results at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 2. Family environment factors of athletes in individual or team sports

Family environment factors	Sports discipline				t-test for the equality of means (df = 163)	
	individual N = 69		team sports N = 96		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
I. Socio-economic status	13.30	2.30	12.42	2.99	2.04	0.0431
II. Good relationships in the family	53.45	8.95	52.61	8.23	0.619	0.5365
III. Children as an important value in family life	25.17	3.07	24.19	4.23	1.77	0.0843
IV. Sport as an important value in family life	25.12	7.21	23.33	6.09	1.72	0.0880
V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career	45.81	10.78	43.08	8.67	1.77	0.0849
VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports	32.39	7.77	29.36	7.09	2.60	0.0102
VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements	38.41	4.59	37.53	4.86	1.17	0.2449
VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities	20.28	3.85	19.20	3.34	1.92	0.0571
IX. Parents living through their child	8.74	2.60	7.95	2.29	2.07	0.0404

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; bold font – denotes statistically significant results at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 3. Family environment factors of athletes from families in terms of past sports achievements

Family environment factors	Past sports achievements in family				Mann-Whitney test	
	no (N = 118)		yes (N = 47)		Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
I. Socio-economic status	12.61	2.82	13.23	2.54	-0.889	0.3742
II. Good relationships in the family	52.97	8.00	52.96	9.79	-0.448	0.6541
III. Children as an important value in family life	24.32	3.68	25.30	4.07	-1.345	0.1788
IV. Sport as an important value in family life	22.77	6.08	27.36	6.84	-3.894	0.0001
V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career	42.76	9.12	47.89	10.13	-3.134	0.0017
VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports	28.05	6.31	37.11	6.32	-7.01	0.0000
VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements	37.13	4.38	39.83	5.13	-3.09	0.0020
VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities	19.25	3.48	20.64	3.71	-2.323	0.0202
IX. Parents living through their child	7.84	2.24	9.38	2.63	-3.37	0.0007

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; bold font – denotes statistically significant results at $\alpha = 0.05$

As far as scale "IV. Sport as an important value in family life" is concerned, individuals from Group 3 (HA) scored higher than the other participants in Group 1 (LA) ($p = 0.0338$) and Group 2 (MA) (difference $p = 0.0623$). A similar situation was found in scale "VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports" with Group 3 (HA) and Group 1 (LA) (tendency $p = 0.0803$) and Group 3 (HA) and Group 2 (MA) (tendency $p = 0.0568$), and in the scale measuring "IX. Parents living through their child" in Group 3 (HA) and Group 1 (LA) ($p = 0.0004$), and Group 3 (HA) and Group 2 (MA) ($p = 0.0012$).

In scale "V. Parent involvement in their child's sports career", differences between all three groups were statistically significant. Individuals from Group 1 (LA) scored significantly lower than the other participants in Group 2 (MA) ($p = 0.0414$) and Group 3 (HA) ($p = 0.0001$). In addition, individuals from Group 2 (MA) scored lower than the participants in Group 3 (HA) ($p = 0.0295$).

Table 2 contains the results of each of the family environment factors analyzed in terms of the participants involvement an individual or team sport. Significant differences were noted in three scales: I, VI, IX. In the case of "VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities", the results were close to being statistically significant. Athletes playing individual sports obtained higher mean values in the "I. Socio-economic status", "VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports" and "IX. Parents living through their child" scales.

Table 3 contains the results on the mean differences for the analyzed family environment factors depending on the presence or lack of past family sports achievements. The Mann-Whitney non-parametric U test was applied due to large differences within the group.

Six scales showed significant differences. Athletes, who came from families with past sports achievements scored higher in family environment factors such as: "IV. Sport as an important value in family life", "V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career", "VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports", "VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements", "VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities" and "IX. Parents living through their child".

In the questionnaire, the participants were also asked to indicate their sports goals. Based on the results, three categories were defined: those with no clear goals ($N = 27$, 16.36% of the participants), those who had a qualitative goal (e.g., *improve my skills*) ($N = 82$, 49.7%) and those who had an achievement goal (e.g., *win more medals, improve my record or rank*, etc.) ($N = 56$, 33.94%). Further analysis did not reveal any significant differences of the family environment factors among the three groups of athletes depending on which type of goals they would like to achieve.

Demographic data found that at least one of the participants' parents was professionally involved in sports (as a teacher, coach or manager) in eleven participants, or 6.7% of the total sample. The Mann-Whitney non-parametric U test revealed differences in terms of the family environment factors between this group and other athletes. Participants whose parents were connected to sports scored higher in all of the scales. Eight scales were found to be statistically significant, where only the differences in the family environment factor "II. Good relationships in the family" was not statistically significant. Due to the small number of participants within this subgroup, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

The research hypotheses were verified by the results of this study. The first hypothesis concerned the differences of the family environment factors among the three groups of athletes by different levels of sports achievement. It was expected that individuals with higher sports achievements would score higher in the following scales: "III. Children as an important value in family life", "IV. Sport as an important value in family life", "V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career", "VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports" and "VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements". The hypothesis was confirmed in four out of five of the above-mentioned scales (III, IV, V, VI). No significant difference was noted in scale VII. However, a significant difference was distinguished in factor "IX. Parents living through their child".

The findings obtained from this study found that parents' involvement was correlated with their child's level of sports achievements. Parent participation was connected to the fact that their child's needs and development was important for them. Furthermore, such participation was also connected to their own interests and experiences. These elements have been suggested to create a favorable motivational atmosphere [20, 21]. The results also revealed that the family environment factors unrelated to sports did not differentiate the groups according to their sports level. This can be explained by one of the Rules of Influence, the so-called "expert rule", where individuals are easily influenced by a person who is considered an expert in a given area, in this context, sports. It may also be that a good relationship, support and attitude towards children is essential at each phase of sports development, and they relate more to the motivation to do sports rather than to their achievement level.

However, the fact that the highest score in factor "IX. Parents living through their child" was obtained by the highest achievers may raise some concerns. This

correlation can stem from strong parental pressure, or even coercion, to do sports. This can lead to some undesirable and adverse effects. The most harmful effects may result, due to their permanence and far-reaching consequences, in having the child quitting sports altogether [4, 22, 7], suffering from burnout [23] or suffering an increased risk of injury [24].

The second hypothesis concerned the differences in family environment factors among athletes in individual and team sports. It was expected that athletes playing individual sports would score higher in scales "I. Socio-economic status" and "V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career". The hypothesis was only partly confirmed. Individual sports athletes appraised their parents' socio-economic status significantly higher than those playing team sports. However, this aspect was found not to correlate with their achievement level (see Tab. 1). Although the result of scale "V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career" was higher, as initially expected, it was not statistically significant. However, the results in factor "IV. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports" and "IX. Parents living through their child" were more significant. It should be noted that football was the most common sport played among the teams sports; it is a very popular, easily accessible and logistically simple sport. As one study found, a high family socio-economic level is not essential in order to play football at the highest level, which can be confirmed by the great variability found in elite soccer players [25]. On the other hand, these family factors cannot be completely ignored, as they are considered very important when developing support models for team-sports athletes, and special attention should be given to parents' role when an athlete advances from their junior to senior phase of their sports career [26].

Another aspect considered in other studies was that individual sports are more time-intensive than team sports in each sports development phase [12]. This, in turn, places greater demands on the parents of young athletes (in terms of financial support, required equipment and transport). In order to meet these demands, parents often must sacrifice their time and needs (vacations, their own spare time, other obligations). Therefore, in order to quell any doubts and justify their actions, parents might rationalize their child's involvement in sports as a kind of investment that could provide a return in the future. This is connected to scale "IX. Parents living through their child", by having parents support their child's endeavors in sports either as a form of pursuing their own interests (related to a particular sport) or an opportunity to compensate for their own failed or unfulfilled ambitions (in terms of achievement or the need for being recognized [27]). In individual sports, a parent is provided a better opportunity to fulfill this subconscious need. When a child celebrates their

own individual accomplishments, parents may attach themselves directly to each success (*We won; We did great in the last game*). Such an emotional attachment is rarer in the case of success achieved by an entire team. Parents have fewer opportunities to interact with a coach and fewer possibilities to present themselves as having a direct influence.

The third hypothesis concerned the differences in family environment factors among athletes who came from families with past sports achievements and those who did not. It was expected that athletes whose families featured past sports achievements would score higher in the family environment factors of "IV. Sport as an important value in family life", "V. Parents' involvement in their child's sports career", "VI. Genetic-environmental conditioning of talent and passion in sports" and "VII. Genetic-environmental conditioning of professional achievements".

This hypothesis was confirmed in all of the suggested factors. There were significant differences noted in two scales, "VIII. Parents' pedagogical abilities" and "IX. Parents living through their child". This can be explained by the fact that parents who had past sports achievements experienced more pleasure and felt more competent to engage in their child's sports endeavors. However, a parent's need of living through their child's involvement in sports, together with a strong achievement orientation and a lack of care about their child's development and needs could lead to parents putting too much pressure on their children, and in fact hinder a young athlete's development [28].

Conclusions

- The higher achievement level, the higher score the participants attained in the scale measuring the factor "Children as an important value in family life" (an aspect in the so-called "child-oriented family").
- Compared to low achievers, high achievers perceived their parents as more involved in their own participation in sports and in sports in general. Here, parents showed their active and passive interests.
- The parents of high achievers, who featured some past sports involvement or accomplishment, seemed to be more motivated to support their child's sports career.
- Strong parental motivation can be connected to a parent's need of living through their child's involvement in sports.
- Parents' need of living through their child was found to be more frequent in young athletes playing individual sports.
- Such factors as parents' involvement in their child's sports career and parents living through

their child's involvement in sports are especially interesting for researchers. On one hand, these factors can be beneficial (providing instrumental support, spectatorship), but on the other hand, they can have adverse effects such as a child quitting sports, suffering from burnout or at a higher risk of injury.

- From the perspective of a parent, it is difficult to recognize the subtle and thin line between supporting and pressuring a child.
- As coaches are “task leaders” and parents serve to provide “socio-emotional leadership”, it could be worthwhile to increase coach-parent cooperation and develop open communication [29].
- From a practical perspective, the family environment may be the most accessible as well as the most important of the socio-environmental dimensions of young athletes [30].

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