



# Mentors That Matter

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Paying It Forward

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When I talk with educators and other adults in communities across the United States, I often ask them to think back to a teacher, coach, mentor or adult other than their parents who left a significant, positive mark in their lives. (Take a moment and reflect on your own memories.)

Almost without exception, these adults tell powerful stories of people who shaped their lives and careers. Some remember adults who pulled them through tough times. Some recall adults who recognized the potential in them when they didn't see it in themselves. Some remember adults who went the extra mile when they needed it most.

As we celebrate National Mentoring Month, we have an opportunity to remember (and thank) those people who were mentors for us—even if they didn't know it. We are also invited to think about the ways we “pay it forward” by mentoring young people in our classrooms, hallways, sports fields, neighborhoods and other places we spend time.

We're sometimes reluctant to think of ourselves as mentors. It can sound so formal and ominous. And, yes, some young people need adults to make the formal commitment for an intensive, one-to-one mentoring relationship. However, all young people benefit from connecting with supportive, trustworthy adults who offer guidance, support and encouragement. These relationships can form through natural connections in communities, schools, and extended family and friendship networks.

Each of us can mentor, whether it's through a formal program or as part of our everyday lives. This month's Renaissance Kit theme provides research, tools and ideas for how you can be more intentional as a mentor—and to inspire and encourage others to do the same.

—Kent Pekel, Ed.D.  
President and CEO, Search Institute



Sometimes we think of mentors narrowly as those who sign up through a formal program to spend time with a young person. In addition to these “formal” mentors, informal or everyday mentors can be any trustworthy adult who offers support, guidance and encouragement to help young people overcome challenges and become their best selves.

## What Do Mentors Do That Matter?

What specific actions can adults take in their relationships with young people that help students learn, grow, and thrive? Search Institute's newest research identifies five essential actions that lay the foundation for a powerful mentoring relationship:

- 1. Express Care**  
Students value relationships with adults who show they genuinely like them and want the best for them. These relationships help young people know they really matter.
- 2. Challenge Growth**  
Students value relationships with adults who insist that they do their best to learn, grow and improve.
- 3. Provide Support**  
Students value relationships with adults who offer tangible, appropriate feedback and guidance in completing tasks and achieving goals—without taking over and doing it for them.
- 4. Share Power**  
Students value relationships with adults in which they feel their voices are heard and they share in making decisions that affect them. This helps students develop self-confidence and self-direction.
- 5. Expand Possibility**  
Students value trustworthy adults who help them broaden their horizons and connect them to opportunities for learning, growth and discovery.

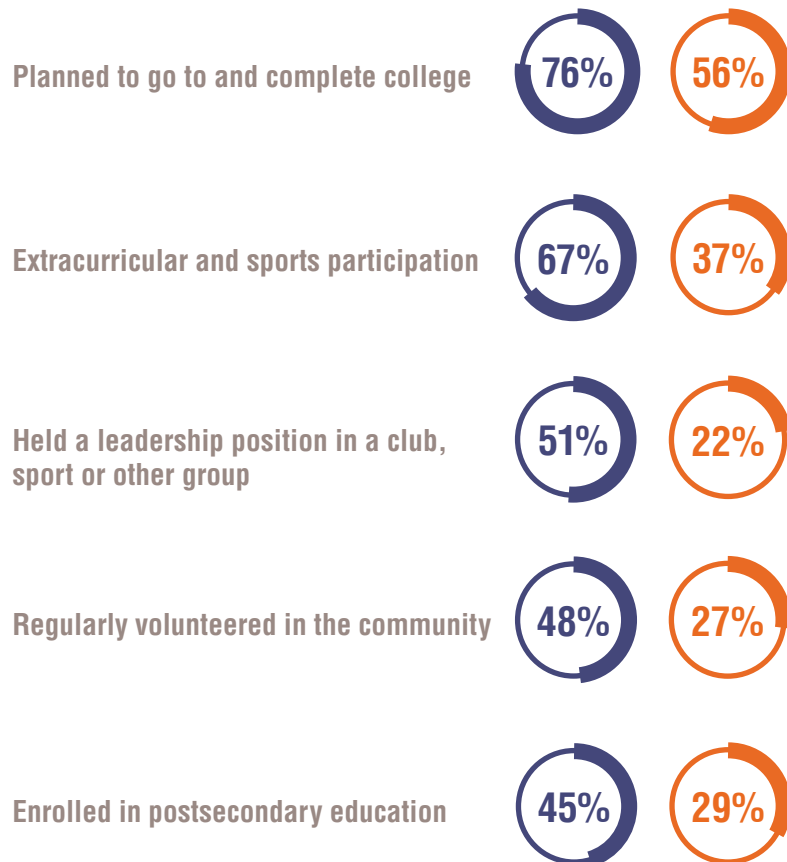
See the “25 Ideas” section for specific suggestions on taking these actions in meaningful ways.

## The Value of Mentors for Youth Facing Risks

About one-third of young people—nearly 16 million—grow up without a non-parent adult in their lives who offers guidance, support and encouragement.

Not having such a mentor is particularly likely for the estimated 9 million young people who grew up dealing with high risks, such as those who are disengaged from school and work, are homeless or have incarcerated parents. Among youth facing these greater risks, those who had a mentor were more likely to have had positive outcomes, including the following, based on interviews with 1,109 young adults (ages 18 to 21):

- At-Risk Youth Who Had Mentor
- At-Risk Youth Who Did Not Have Mentor



## What Relationships with Trustworthy Adults Offer

Besides their parents, kids need to have strong relationships with other trustworthy and caring adults. Relationships with other adults help young people:

- Expand their ideas about who they might be in the future
- See themselves through someone else's eyes, which helps them form a sense of themselves that is distinct from their parents
- Receive adult guidance and support that they may not be open to from their parents

## The Value of Mentors for Young People

Young people who have positive non-parents in their lives (“natural mentors”) are more likely to:

- Be more engaged in school
- Complete high school and go to college
- Be more satisfied in life
- Be more engaged in school
- Engage in good health behaviors
- Engage in fewer high-risk behaviors, including drug use and violence

## The Value of Informal Mentoring in School

When students experience naturally occurring mentoring relationships (informal mentoring) with school staff, they are more likely to report positive thoughts about their schools and their fellow students. They are also less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, including violence and use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, according to a study of 3,320 students from 65 high schools in eight states.

### The Power of Relationships: Overcoming Challenges

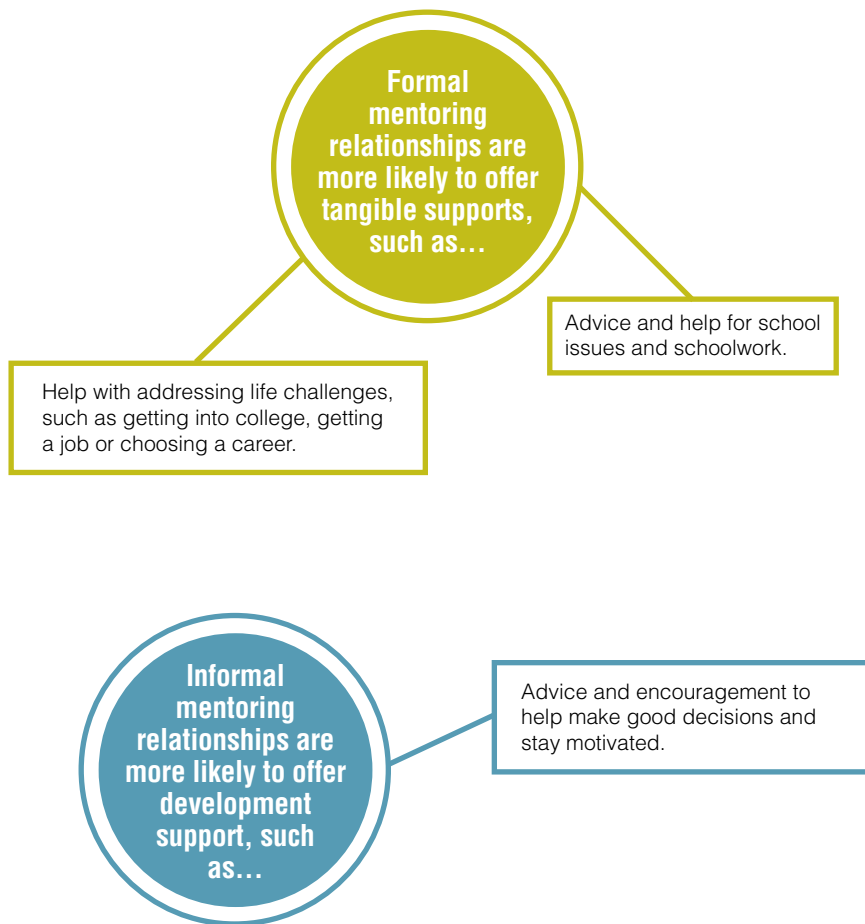
“Whether the burdens come from the hardships of poverty, the challenges of parental substance abuse or serious mental illness, the stresses of war, the threats of recurrent violence or chronic neglect, or a combination of factors, the single most common finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult.”

— National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015)

## Formal and Informal Mentoring: Complementary Benefits

Some mentoring relationships are formal. They are established through programs that recruit and train adults to be mentors, and match them with a mentee. Other mentoring relationships are naturally occurring or informal. Adults take time to be intentional in spending time with, looking out for and guiding young people who matter to them in their extended family, neighborhood, circle of friends or other places they spend time.

When young adults look back at their experiences with mentors, they recall experiencing different and complementary benefits from formal and informal mentoring relationships.



## What About Parents?

Sometimes people think of mentoring as being a substitute or replacement for parents. However, researchers find that a mentoring relationship beyond the family can strengthen relationships between students and their parents. In fact, youth with mentors are more likely to report satisfying relationships with their parents than those who don't have mentors.

Researchers believe these findings reflect young people's simultaneous need for both autonomy and adult guidance. In addition, youth can learn from their relationship with their mentor how to cultivate a more mature relationship with an adult.

## Students Mentoring Students

Older students can be great mentors and friends for younger students (such as seniors mentoring freshmen). When this happens, it helps both the older and the younger student:

Older Student (mentor)	Younger Student (mentee)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stronger connections to school</li><li>• Greater self-esteem</li><li>• Increased empathy and moral reasoning</li><li>• Stronger communication and conflict resolution skills</li><li>• Enhanced relationships with parents</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A stronger sense of connectedness to school</li><li>• Deeper peer relationships</li><li>• Increased self-competency and self efficacy</li><li>• Improved grades and academic achievement</li><li>• Prosocial attitudes and behaviors</li></ul>

For example, a rigorous study of a program that links high school seniors with freshmen found that it had a significant impact on whether male students graduated from high school within four years (81% who had a mentor graduated in four years, versus 63% in the comparison group).

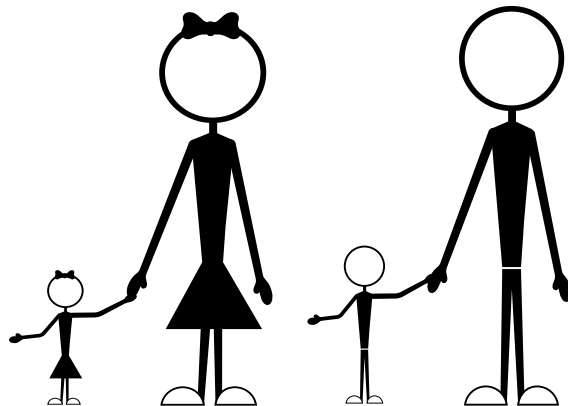
## 25 IDEAS FOR BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Sometimes people say they can't be mentors because they don't know what to do. Here are ideas you can use to build positive relationships that will have a lasting impact in students' lives—without crossing appropriate professional boundaries. The ideas build on Search Institute's research on essential actions that deepen relationships and help students become their best selves.

### Express Care

Students value relationships with adults who show they genuinely like them and want the best for them. These relationships help young people know they really matter.

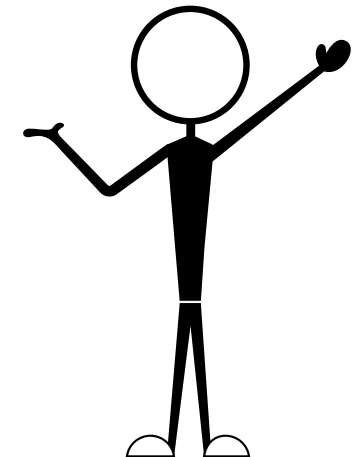
- **Pay attention.** Focus attention on a student when he or she is talking about things that are important. Put down the notes and put away the smartphone.
- **Follow the young person's interests.** When adults willingly participate in activities or conversations chosen by the young person, not only will the young person be more engaged, but the adult can also see and experience what really matters to the young person. This builds a stronger connection.
- **Make time for lightness.** Yes, there are important things to get done. But making room for laughter, humor, fun and positive feelings creates warmth and connections with students.
- **Listen to understand.** Make an effort to understand the student's point of view when he or she shares ideas or opinions. Rather than immediately dismissing an idea, ask questions to learn more about the thinking behind the idea. (Remember that adolescents sometimes need to "try on" ideas as they sort out what they really think or believe.)
- **Check in on a challenge.** When you learn about a challenge a student is facing in life, check in later to see how things are going—before the student brings it up the next time. Make it clear to the student that you have been thinking about the issue since your first conversation.



### Challenge Growth

Students value relationships with adults who insist that they do their best to learn, grow and improve.

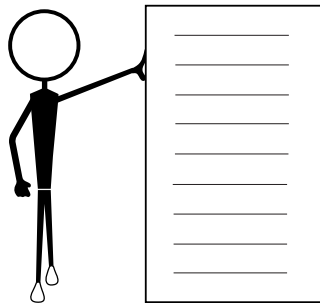
- **Highlight future goals.** Talk with students about their future possibilities, particularly the things they look forward to or dream about. This future orientation can motivate young people to keep moving forward when they encounter obstacles or distractions.
- **Expand thinking.** Help young people develop their own ideas by asking challenging questions, providing alternate explanations and encouraging openness to different opinions. This verbal give-and-take enhances reasoning and empathy.
- **Listen when you give feedback.** When you need to give a student critical feedback, take a moment to listen to the student's point of view and how he or she is feeling about the situation. It may not change the consequences, but it will communicate that you understand and care about how the student feels, even if you believe that he or she needs to make different choices in the future.
- **Convey high expectations.** When you offer feedback, be honest about the issues (it builds trust), make it specific (which shows you paid attention) and make it clear what students need to do to improve. Just as important, emphasize that you believe they can meet your high expectations. Then when students act on your feedback, acknowledge the improvement.
- **Help students work through failures.** The ways adults respond to failures can either help or hurt motivation and self-confidence. Emphasize that failure and mistakes are part of learning, rather than evidence that they are incapable. Praise them for their hard work, whether they succeed or fail.



## Provide Support

Students value relationships with adults who offer tangible, appropriate feedback and guidance in completing tasks and achieving goals—without taking over and doing it for them.

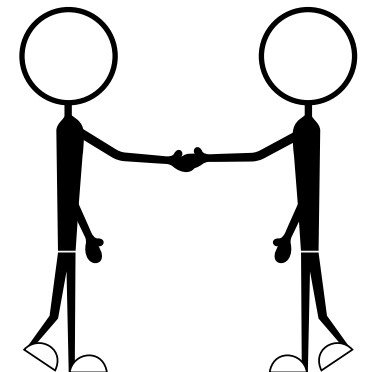
- **Offer practical help.** Young people value and grow relationships where they know the person will help them in tangible ways, with appropriate limits, depending on the nature of the relationship. This might include providing information they need, helping to solve a practical problem, buying them supplies or a meal, helping out when they are sick, lending them something they need or helping them with a task they need to complete. This kind of support has the most impact when it's done in a way that's emotionally warm and supportive.
- **Be a coach.** Help young people learn new things by showing or teaching them directly. Then step back and let them show what they have learned—while providing feedback on their progress. Use the steps coaches use:
  - 1) I do it, you watch.
  - 2) We do it together.
  - 3) You do it, I watch.
- **Break it down.** Sometimes young people (and adults) get overwhelmed with major tasks or problems. Break down bigger problems, challenges or tasks into more manageable pieces. Then the young person can develop a plan to accomplish one step at a time—with your encouragement, feedback, and problem-solving help along the way.
- **Reinforce asking for help.** Show the child how to ask for help when he or she needs it.
- **Shift levels of support.** Provide more support when young people are struggling and less when they are succeeding or making progress. Pull back as young people improve so they gain more control and confidence. Doing too much for them takes away their opportunity to grow. In each case, keeping a warm and positive attitude boosts motivation, whereas becoming irritated or critical of the young person's performance or abilities can shut it down.



## Share Power

Students value relationships with adults in which they feel their voice is heard and they share in making decisions that affect them. This helps students develop self-confidence and self-direction.

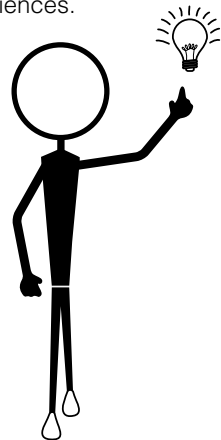
- **Let young people take the lead.** Be intentional about standing aside to let young people initiate their activities, with support and coaching from adults where needed. This can be particularly effective when the task at hand is something that is really important to them or something that, ultimately, they have to do on their own.
- **Suggest more than you mandate.** When we tell students what they “must” or “should” do, we hold onto the power and responsibility, which decreases enthusiasm and a sense of autonomy. When we offer suggestions and choices (“you might try this approach”), students often become more enthusiastic about the task at hand—and they recognize your respect for them.
- **Make decisions together.** Whenever you can, make choices together, rather than just deciding on your own or turning the responsibility for deciding over to the young person. In the process, they learn how to articulate what's important to them, they practice decision-making skills, they learn to work with others, and in the end, they develop self-confidence and their own sense of responsibility.
- **Learn from them—and show it.** Young people have a lot to teach adults—whether it's about youth culture, technology, a subject they're mastering in school, or an activity or talent they are cultivating, such as music, art or sports. As you discover things that really interest you, let the young person know. For example, if a young person introduces you to a new artist you enjoy, let them know you've added that artist to a “favorites” playlist.
- **Work through conflicts respectfully.** Some conflicts are inevitable. Use them as opportunities to understand each other's perspectives, rather than as opportunities to assert your authority without explanation or just because “I'm the grown-up.” Be open to changing your opinions based on what you learn from the young person.



## Expand Possibility

Students value trustworthy adults who help them broaden their horizons and connect them to opportunities for learning, growth and discovery.

- **Check in with parents.** Sometimes parents may feel like you're introducing their child to ideas, people or places that conflict with their values, priorities or interests. Respect their beliefs while also articulating your motives and goals. For example, you might say that you're introducing them to people with different ideas not so they will adopt those ideas, but so that they get better at articulating what they believe as they learn there are different ways of thinking about an issue. Work together to adjust so that everyone is comfortable.
- **Follow signs of curiosity.** When young people seem curious about or interested in something, follow their lead. Ask questions, such as "what strikes you about this?" Think together about ways to learn more about people, places or ideas that the young person may be eager to learn more about. If the curiosity grows, continue the pursuit, connecting them with people and places that might help them cultivate that interest. If the curiosity fades, move on to other things. (A sign of an active mind is that you're curious about or interested in many more things than you can actively pursue.)
- **Inspire young people to see future possibilities.** As you learn about a young person's interests, talents, hopes and dreams, float ideas about education, activities or careers they might explore as they grow up. Instead of saying, "You should be a dentist," try something like, "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a dentist? What do you think you might enjoy about that?"
- **Introduce new ideas and experiences.** Young people shape who they are and who they are becoming by trying out different ideas and experiences. Find ways to expose young people to other people, belief systems, places, cultures, vocations, and opportunities that may not have even occurred to them. Start with low-risk and low-commitment introductions. For example, you might begin by watching a good movie about an important political or social movement, then talk together about how it compares to the young person's own beliefs or experiences.
- **Broaden the web of relationships.** As young people develop interests or questions about the world around them, connect them to other people you know and trust who share those interests or who can help the young person develop those interests. This could include introducing them to an alumnus of a college they're interested in, a musician who plays an instrument they love, or a community leader who can engage them in an interesting volunteer or service activity. (Coordinate these connections with parents so they are supportive too.)



Highlight the power of relationships with trusted adults by honoring the adults who are already making a difference in students' lives. Start by having students think of the adults who matter to them. Have them complete the worksheet, "Mentoring: Paying It Forward" as a way to prime their thinking. Then choose a way of celebrating these everyday mentors who make a difference for the students in your school community.

## A Letter to an Adult Who Matters

When students have identified an adult who has made a difference for them, have them write a thank-you letter to this adult, expressing the specific things this adult has done that the student appreciates. Encourage students to mail or deliver the letter to this adult during January (National Mentoring Month).

## Starfish Bookmarks with Pins

Have a private or public "ceremony" to thank adult mentors and have the student give the adult the bookmark, but keep one pin for him- or herself. The pin is a reminder of their connection and the story on the bookmark reminds the adult that they have a significant role in the development of each student. These are available for purchase through the [jostensrenaissance.com](http://jostensrenaissance.com) online store.

## Everyday Mentor Wall of Fame

Collect pictures from students of adults other than their parents who are important in their lives. Along with the picture, ask students to include a sentence description of what that adult has done that has been important. Display the pictures underneath a banner for an "Everyday Mentor Hall of Fame" in a hallway, the cafeteria or another place where many members of the school community will see them.

## Social Media "Thank You" for Everyday Mentors

Collect the names of these adults along with a short sentence about what students value about these adults. Encourage students to use this information to create simple social media messages for Twitter or Facebook, such as "Thank you, Mr. Martinez, for teaching Manny how to fix my bike. You're an everyday mentor." Throughout the month, highlight the variety of people who are everyday mentors as well as the different ways they connect with and support young people.

### Bulletin Board: Who Has Your Back?

To celebrate National Mentoring Month in January, create (or have students create) a bulletin board for the room listing all the people who can be everyday mentors. Consider putting a mirror in the middle and showing the names around it. Possible questions: Who can offer support, guidance and encouragement for others? Who has been a mentor for you? For whom might you be a mentor? Suggested mentors (in addition to various family members) include:

- Teacher
- Coach
- Administrator
- Neighbor
- Janitor
- Librarian
- Social worker
- Counselor
- Pastor, rabbi or imam
- Foster parent
- Faith community member
- Tutor
- Health aide
- Club sponsor
- Bus driver
- Teammate

Who else would you add?

### Critical Thinking: Why Mentoring Matters

Suggested topics for conversations, writing exercises or essays:

- Why do you think we have a National Mentoring Month?
- Do you have a formal mentor? If so, how does he or she help you?
- Some mentors are informal. Can you think of someone besides your parent who listens to you, gives you advice, challenges you, encourages you or asks how you are doing? Describe that person and your most recent conversation.
- Think of someone who looks up to you for encouragement and coaching. You are a role model for that person. Are you a good role model?
- There are many different ways to be a mentor. You could play catch with a younger neighbor, volunteer at an elementary school or Sunday school, or help others with reading. What are three other ways you could mentor someone?
- If there were several people you could mentor, and you felt like you only had the time and energy to mentor one, how would you choose between them? Describe your thought process and priorities.
- Ask your parents about someone who mentored them. What questions would you need to ask in order to write a paragraph about that person? What would be important to know?
- Accepting mentoring isn't easy, because it means you have to be coachable — humble enough to admit that you don't know everything and you're not always right, and able to listen. Are you ready to be mentored?

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

If your school does not have an ongoing relationship with a local mentoring program, you can find potential partners through MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership ([www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)). This national network can connect you to local programs in your community. For ideas and activities about building and keeping a strong relationship with your teenager, visit Search Institute's website, [ParentFurther.com](http://ParentFurther.com), which focuses on strengthening family relationships.

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##### INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

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#### STUDENT WORKSHEET: MENTORING: PAYING IT FORWARD

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