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The influence of paired reading on the relationship between the parent and the child with a reading disability

A B S T R A C T The quality of parent-child relationships plays an essential role in the socio-emotional development of children. It often happens that problems, like reading disabilities, impede parent-child relationships. This article attends to the problems that may occur in these relationships. The interaction between parents and their children is investigated within the context of paired reading, to ascertain whether paired reading influences these relationships. The conclusion is that parents perform a key role in the application of paired reading: If parents adhere closely to the guidelines of the technique, the relationship between the parents and the child with a reading disability will improve.

Key words: Paired reading, reading disabilities, parent-child relationship, socio-emotional development

Background

Healthy parent-child relationships are characterised by trust (Erikson, 1963:92), physical contact and love (Howe, Brandon, Hinings & Schofield, 1999:20), emotional support (Jernberg, 1999:xxii), sensitivity and communication (Gray, 1999:xxviii; LaFreniere, 2000:143), acceptance (Sansón & Rothbart, 1995:28), support and guidance (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997:249) and discipline (Gray, 1999:xix). However, due to different reasons, it may happen that parents do not provide healthy environments for the socio-emotional development of their children. In the case of learners with a reading disability, parents may have had very high expectations for their children, which are not met by the child and the parents cannot come to grips with the disability (Kriegler, 1990:333; Van Niekerk, 1991:30-31). This disappointment may influence the parent-child relationship negatively and also impede the emotional, cognitive, social and academic development of the child.

When learners have reading difficulties parents have greater responsibility to support them at home after school. Unfortunately parents do not always know how to assist their children and as

a result may feel anxious and powerless to support them. Too difficult reading passages, criticism and unrealistic expectations of parents may discourage their children (Donald *et al.*, 1997:249). These negative experiences may diminish their self-confidence and contribute to low self-concepts. It is important to assist parents in supporting their children with reading difficulties.

Paired reading is a successful method to support learners with a reading disability. Berelowitz and Dawes (1992:367-371) and Murad and Topping (2000:153-157) are used as sources in the discussion of the nature of paired reading. Parents and their children are trained in the technique by means of a video and they are motivated to commit themselves to the programme. It is a structured programme in which they sit and read together for short periods of time every day. Parents and children decide together on a time and place for the reading session. Parents are assisted by a person who monitors the process. Although the plural form is used in the discussion, the paired reading technique is taking place between a parent and his/her child.

Different stages are identified in the technique and will now be discussed.

Stage 1: Parents and children read together aloud from books chosen by children. If children have difficulty reading a word, parents provide the word after five seconds and then they continue to read.

Stage 2: Parents and children read together. Children use a nonverbal sign to indicate that they want to read on their own. When the sign is given parents keep quiet. When the children have a problem reading a word, parents wait five seconds and then say the word. Children repeat the word and they read together again until children give the sign to indicate willingness to read on their own.

Stage 3: In the third stage children attempt to read alone. Children read aloud, while parents follow the story with silent reading. When children make a mistake, parents say the correct word. Children repeat the word and continue to read aloud.

Stage 4: Parents and children sit together but both do silent reading. When children experience difficulty reading a word, they indicate the word to parents who provide the correct word.

Stage 5: Children read on their own independent from parents and discuss the content of the book with their parents afterwards.

The technique entails that parents support their children in the reading process by reading aloud with them. Emphasis is put on a relaxed conversation about the text and positive feedback on the child's attempts. The learner must experience the reading session in a positive way (Murad & Topping, 2000:152). The progress is discussed on a weekly basis (for six weeks) with the person who monitors the process and supports and encourages the parents and their children.

A literature study indicates that there are specific aspects of paired reading that could influence parent-child relationships in a positive way. The question arises whether paired reading will have a positive effect on the parent-child relationship due to the following positive aspects of the programme:

- Parents are compelled to spend more quality time with their children.
- Healthy physical contact between parents and their children is enhanced.

- Parents are encouraged to give positive reinforcement to their children and not to concentrate on their mistakes and inabilities.
- Parents are setting more realistic challenges to their children.

Paired reading as technique to enhance reading ability has been applied in many countries by parents and children. Parents are trained in this technique as paired reading is a structured programme with guidelines regarding time, place and duration of the reading sessions. The technique also puts emphasis on the guidance, support and motivation of parents as important role players in the process. Research studies on the use of paired reading indicate progress in learners' reading ability as well as a positive change in their attitude towards reading.

A literature study indicates that there are specific aspects of paired reading that could influence parent-child relationships in a positive way as they are similar to moments in positive parent-child relationships. This awareness gives rise to the question: *What is the influence of paired reading on the relationship between parents and learners with a reading difficulty?*

This investigation primary aims at *determining the influence of paired reading on parent-child relationships and more specifically at determining aspects in paired reading that may influence these relationships*. The researchers promote a holistic view of people, which implies that a person can be influenced emotionally, intellectually as well as socially by the application of the paired reading technique. The researchers do not only want to determine if parent-child relationships improve by paired reading, but wish to identify the specific aspects of the programme that have an effect on these relationships. Secondary, the research aims to *investigate the possibility that parents can generalise specific aspects from paired reading and apply them in their day-to-day encounter with their children*.

Research design

Since the researchers hope to obtain an in-depth understanding of the influence of paired reading on relationships between parents and learners with reading difficulty, it was decided to conduct this investigation qualitatively. An inductive way of reasoning is followed to study the phenomenon of paired reading, within the context of the relation between parents and learners with a reading disability, to acquire insight into patterns of interaction and to develop new concepts (Neuman, 1997:41).

The phenomenon and participants are investigated in their natural environment and as suggested by Schurink (1998:24) the researchers endeavoured to eliminate or reduce all factors that could contribute to an unnatural situation which would influence the participants' responses. Both parents and children received specific training on the technique of paired reading and afterwards applied the programme at home. In accordance with the view of Bryman and Burgess (1999:207), no pretest was administered to prevent parents becoming aware of weaknesses in their relationship with their children. It is assumed that awareness of the limitations in their relation with their children would lead parents to work purposefully on their relationship and thus, the unadulterated effect of paired reading on the relationship would be influenced.

Focus group interviews with the participating parents and children and the completion of questionnaires by the parents were used for the collection of data. Group dynamics work synergically to elicit information (Carey, 1994:224) and participants have more confidence to

express their feelings honestly in a support group of peers than in individual interviews (Folch-Lyon & Frost, 1981:445). The researchers were actively involved in the research and conducted the focus group interviews after the completion of the programme with the participating parents and learners. The researchers acted as instruments to describe the phenomenon and the interpretation of the participants according to their interaction with the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:108). The research aimed at acquiring insight into the unique interaction patterns and experiences that develop between parents and the children by enquiring into their views, attitudes and experiences (Silverman, 1997:113).

The researchers took cognisance of Neuman's (1997:89) statement that: "Scientific research is not an activity of isolated hermits who ignore others' findings. Rather, it is a collective effort of many researchers who share their results with one another and who pursue knowledge as a community." Thus, the researchers as facilitators of the focus group interviews also studied the literature, defined the concept to be studied clearly before the start of the interviews and identified critical questions which were used in the interview guide, regarding the essence of the research. This interview guide was used by the researchers during the interview as the basis for open questions. The researchers took a non-directive stance, encouraged participation and clarified uncertainties during the interview.

The following were the main questions set during the focus group interviewing:

- What is your experience of the influence of paired reading on your relationship with your child?
- If paired reading has an influence on your relationship with your child, what specific aspects of the technique have had an influence on your relationship?

Parents individually completed a brief questionnaire containing eighteen open-ended questions to support the findings of the focus group interview. The questions were based on the theory as discussed in various literature resources and focussed on aspects that could influence the parent-child relationship.

Three questions focused on the parents' view of the paired reading process: the influence of the programme on the learner, on the parent-child relationship in general, and what aspects of the programme had an effect on the relationship. Fourteen questions were set to determine the specific influence of the paired reading programme on the following aspects which were identified in the literature: time spent afterwards with children; physical contact between parents and children; positive encouragement of the children by their parents; communication between parents and children; better understanding of the children's needs by parents; the children's experience of paired reading; knowledge of the children's reading ability; knowledge of elements of parent-child's relationships; enhancing risk taking; the children's reaction to the time used for reading; enhancement of the children's ability to make decisions; influence of the paired reading programme on the daily routine at home; importance of training in the technique and influence of the programme on the parent's attitude towards these learners.

In the last instance a question was set to determine to what extent parents feel that they will be able to apply the knowledge that they gained in this intervention in other situations.

A purposive selection was done to engage participants who have experience of paired reading and would be able to provide a variety of perspectives regarding the phenomenon (Miles &

Huberman, 1994:28). A school for learners with special educational needs was purposefully selected due to the availability of suitable participants and their willingness to participate (Merriam, 1998:183). The school is inter alia, attended by learners with a reading disability and they are subjected to a paired reading programme as presented by the remedial department of the school. Seven parents and their children (varying from Gr 2 to 5 – age 7 to 11 years), who had recently completed a paired reading programme were selected for the research and were willing to participate in the research. Afrikaans as well as English speaking parents participated.

Appropriate techniques, as suggested by Strydom (1998:26) were applied to ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative findings: (1) Triangulation of methods was used. Data collection methods involved focus groups as well as a questionnaire. (2) The focus group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. (3) Uncertainties were clarified during the focus group interviews. (4) Sampling decisions were made carefully. (5) Both researchers analysed the raw data individually to reach consensus about themes and categories and to check the consistency of each other's analysis. (6) The researchers remained objective and did not participate and reveal personal views in the focus group interviews. (7) No pre-test was administered to prevent parents becoming aware of possible weaknesses in their relationship with their children. This ensured reliability of the research results.

The following ethical measures were taken to ensure the rights and privacy of the participants: (1) Permission was gained from the headmaster of the school as well as the participating parents to conduct the research. (2) Parents were informed about the research and the role of the researchers and were free to decide themselves on participation or not (Strydom, 1998:26). (3) Confidentiality regarding identity and personal information of the participants was guaranteed (Bryman & Burgess, 1999:53). (4) Privacy of the participants was respected and they could withdraw whenever they wanted to (Neumann, 1997:446; Strydom, 1998:26). (5) The sources used in the literature study were acknowledged and feedback was given to participants at a meeting arranged for that purpose, as sign of appreciation for their willingness to participate. (6) A final report with all essential information was written accurately, objectively and unambiguously (Strydom, 1998:33).

The focus group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were used as basis for the processing of data. The process is intuitive and the researchers used different thinking strategies. The inductive approach of Marshall and Rossman (1995:114-118) was used as a guideline in the analysis of data in this investigation. This approach entails the organising of data, generating of themes, categories and patterns, testing of developing hypothesis, search of alternative explanations, and the presentation of the data. The emerging information was interpreted and explained to construct meaning to answer the research question (Creswell, 1998:153).

Discussion of research findings

Four themes emerged from the raw data: the influence of paired reading on parent-child relationships, the specific aspects of the paired reading technique which influence the relation between the parents and their child, evaluation of parent-child relationships after completing the paired reading programme and the application of skills developed during the paired reading technique. A discussion of the themes follows.

Theme 1 The influence of paired reading on parent-child relationships

Category 1 Positive experience. The parents as well as the learners agreed that the influence of the paired reading technique on parent-child relationships is positive. The following are remarks taken from the focus group interviews: "We've built a good relationship, ... it definitely had a positive influence on our relationship", and "Yes, we both enjoyed the time together ... It helps me to spend more time with my mom ...". According to the literature the technique of paired reading has been applied in Mitchell's Plain (South Africa), Ohio (America) and in Brazil and these studies also show that the technique improved the emotional bond between parents and their children (Rasinski & Frederiks, 1991:515).

Category 2 The parents are the main actors in the paired reading technique. A common characteristic of all participants was that they felt that they have satisfactory parent-child relationships "... with regard to our relationship, we had a fairly strong relationship". Levy (2000:7) stresses the importance that it is the parents' responsibility to build a positive parent-child relationship. They should know their children's strong and weak characteristics and should address their problem areas. Parents should address their children's reading problem by sacrificing time and making an effort to support their children.

The emotional stability of parents has an important influence on the socio-emotional development of the child. Moreover, the child will rather imitate the parents' behaviour than listening to their advice (Lafreniere, 2000:144; Scott Peck, 1985:90). It required self-discipline from the parents to apply the technique five times a week and to enter the session with a calm attitude: "It is difficult to read every night, but you have to discipline yourself, because if you let him down and he loses interest, it will have serious repercussions ... some nights I'm too stressed, then we won't do it because the child picks it up if you're not relaxed".

Parents are important role players in the paired reading process. Thus, in the case of an inability on behalf of the parents to apply the technique accurately, the technique will fail to enhance parent-child relationships.

Theme 2 The specific aspects of the paired reading technique which influence the relation between the parents and their child

Category 1 Structured programme. The literature as well as raw data from the focus group interviewing indicates that parents are often uncertain about how to support their children with reading. Parents indicated that the training they received was very important: "It made me feel safe because I knew exactly what to do and if I needed help I could ask the monitor ... it shows the parent how to help the child and because the parent has knowledge the child is not scared to try or ask for help". Parents felt safe because they knew what to expect and therefore could support their children with confidence. Levy (2000:71) stated that it is the responsibility of parents to gain knowledge about strategies for child rearing so that they do not set unrealistic standards. Realistic goals for achievement enhance a healthy socio-emotional development.

Learners were also trained and thus possessed knowledge about the application of the technique which created safe boundaries for them. According to Rosemond (1992:30), the provision of guidelines are important for developing creativity and self-confidence. The stated guidelines decrease the possibility of conflict because both parents and children know what to expect from

the situation: "... he knew that we had to read five times a week and that I'm not the bad guy, but the programme requires it ..." and "... she sometimes reminds me that she needs not spell out the word, but that I could say it to her."

Category 2 Physical togetherness. According to Jernberg (1999:xxii) acceptance of other is manifested in physical togetherness and contact. Levy (2000:100) indicates the importance of eye contact, physical contact, smiling and conversation as factors that enhance healthy parent-child relationships. Participants in this research indicate that they enjoyed the physical contact and togetherness during the reading sessions: "... it was nice to sit together". "It was fun and he nearly sat on top of me ...". It seems as if the physical contact enhances mutual acceptance. The children feel safe and trust the parents to support them when they need help (Howe et al., 1999:21).

The fact that parents are physically available during the reading session enabled them to support the learner during the reading process. Smaller children prefer that parents read aloud with them: "I need my mom to copy what I say because I'm not very good at describing words ...", while older learners prefer their parents only to model a word that they could not read: "... If I can't pronounce a word my mom will say the word and I must say it after her". Bowlby (1989:36) contends that support is one of the characteristics of strong parent-child relationships. Donald *et al.* (1997:249) advocate that parents can support their children if they accept their children's level of development.

Category 3 Positive reinforcement. According to the guidelines for paired reading, parents should help learners to read a word if they experience difficulty with reading it. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged and praised for reading well. Parents should not correct mistakes made by the learner, force them to sound out the word or reprimand them. This kind of venturesome attitude enhances the learner's willingness to try to read. As one learner says: "I don't like it with my dad because he says I must break up the word, but my mom says the word to me". A mother reflects: "... she was no longer afraid to try ...". According to LaFreniere (2000:142) a child will be willing to explore when he or she feels safe in the situation.

The positive reinforcement during the paired reading process results in improvement of self-confidence: "... she developed self-confidence, previously she refused to read ...". The learners are now willing to try more difficult passages, believe in themselves and have a better chance to succeed and enjoy reading: "... he began to like the reading" and "... it was something we both looked forward to ...".

Category 4 Pleasant experience. Meier (1992:4) states that parents show interest in their children by being physically and emotionally involved with them. During the paired reading sessions parents have to be disciplined to give up some time for the child. The following remarks illustrate the result of spending this kind of quality time with the child: "... you must discipline yourself and spend time together every night. It works well, he looks forward to it ..." and "... it was a special time for us, I kind of liked it very much".

Category 5 Child selects own story books. Children select the book they wish to read in the session – a suggestion which boosts their self-confidence and empowers them. One learner says; "... it was fun to get different books, the ones that I like ...". Meier (1992:26) stresses that parents must accept their children's potential and not put excessive pressure on the learners to choose

more difficult books. The following quotation illustrates this very well: "If I took out a book with a lot of pictures, my mother would say next time I must take out a book with more words. I didn't like that because I like to look at the pictures".

By choosing their own books learners show something of their personality, which is, according to Thompson (1999:61), an important dimension of individuality. Parents must be sensitive to their children's unique temperaments and individuality and show respect for them (Sanson & Rothbart, 1995:27): "... my dad says I can take out what I want. I like difficult books like virus breakouts ...".

Category 6 Mutual decision making. Paired reading is a structured programme, stating that the learner must not be forced to read and that a quiet, tranquil place should be selected for the activity where parents and children will not be disturbed. Parents and children have to communicate about the time and place of the activity: "... the first time I said in my mom's room and my dad said it is too noisy. So I said my room and my dad said it is too comfortable and then we decided on my brother's room ... we normally do it after supper when we're not so hungry. We decide together on the time ...". Gray (1999:xxviii) contends that parents should listen to their children in such a way that they will know their unique needs and enhance their children to share their thoughts with them. Paired reading creates the opportunity to communicate: "... communication was more open ...".

Parents and children also have to decide about the duration of the reading session, which may be five to ten minutes per day. It seems as if learners very seldom read less than ten minutes, and that parents challenged their children to read for a longer time. One learner remarked: "I read for about twenty minutes, I would read for about fifteen minutes and then I would stop ...", and "... let's do one page more, but if I said no we would stop ...".

Theme 3 Evaluation of parent-child relations after completing the paired reading programme

Category 1 Parental mistakes due to anxiety of parents. Parents of learners with a reading difficulty often experience emotional bereavement. While some parents reach acceptance, others feel anxious and frustrated (Kriegler, 1990:333). During the focus group interview parents discussed how they became aware of mistakes that they are making in the upbringing of their children. One mother said: "... the paired reading taught me quite a few things about myself and my relationship with my child...". They realised that their anxiety is a pitfall for the socio-emotional development of their children (Levy, 2000:49) and that they need to attend to the anxiety: "I realised that I'm too impatient and that I didn't give my child the time that he deserved ...".

Parents should take care not to become impatient when they often have to repeat the same word: "I know I'm impatient but I learned enough patience to be able to help him ... you assume that they would retain a word after you said it the first time". Sometimes parents perceive that their children are not attending or are lazy and when children become aware of this perception it causes anxiety and impedes their self-confidence. Arnold (1985:60) contends that children tend to achieve according to the expectations of their parents. If the parent's attitude is one of expecting that the child will make mistakes, due to the reading problems, the child will most probably make more mistakes (Van Niekerk, 1991:92). The parents also need to bear the following in mind: "... but then you must remember that they have a learning disability and problems with memory ...".

Some parents tend to correct the learner when making mistakes: "I found it quite difficult not to stop him and to correct every word, that would ruin the whole object (sic! aim) of the reading". Pretorius (1990:247) warns that excessive correcting of the learners' mistakes impedes daring and self-confidence. Parents should rather give positive reinforcement by remarks about success.

Parents also experience difficulty with the pace that the learner adopts: "... it taught me to slow down and to work at his pace ..." and they need to take learners' unique personality and temperament in account when challenging them. According to Van Niekerk (1991:92) children will experience feelings of failure, helplessness and rejection if parents expect too much from them: "... if my dad reads too fast I struggle ...". Parents need to adapt to learners' reading speed to encourage them.

To support learners parents must make a conscious effort to stay calm and not pressurise their children: "... you realise that you are so tensed up because your child struggles with reading and you have previously put so much pressure on the child that he can't read and the fun aspect goes out of it ...". Parents realise the reality of their children's reading problem and the necessity to accept and adapt to it (Levy, 2000:48).

Category 2 Insights of the parents after applying the paired reading technique. Parents gain the insight that they should allow their children to make mistakes: "You must be able to give your child the freedom to make mistakes". If learners are not continually subjected to negative feedback, they develop a higher level of risktaking and develop problem solving strategies.

Jernberg (1999:xxii) indicates that parents who are actively involved with their children realise their unique personalities and needs. Paired reading enables the parents to form a more realistic picture of their children's reading ability. The fact that children have reading problems, sometimes has an effect on the parents' expectations of their children: "I have learnt not to underestimate his abilities. As soon as he could read and master things he went beyond my expectations ...".

Due to the reading problems of their children, some parents are uncertain of their children's abilities and do not know what to expect, but the paired reading sessions contribute to their understanding: "... you see more possibilities in your child ...". Donald *et al.* (1997:248) contend that parents of learners with reading problems are stressed about their children's future and potential to find employment.

What is very important is that parents are less worried about their children, due to the insights they gain through the paired reading sessions: "... you tend to worry less because now you can see that this child is not totally incompetent but can indeed go somewhere ...". Parents feel more positive about their children because there is an improvement in risk taking, self-confidence and reading ability: "I was proud of him in knowing he could do it, I was more encouraged ...". One of the parents says: "I could give more praise ..." and that improved parent-child relationships.

Theme 4 Application of skills developed during the paired reading technique

Category 1 Skills mastered by parents. Parents suggest that more emphasis must be given to the emotional aspects of the paired reading technique with special focus on mistakes in the upbringing of children. Parents did not have enough background knowledge about education and thus could not identify the specific aspects in the paired reading technique that contribute to healthy parent-child relationships. In spite of this, they recognised the value of *positive feedback*, *practice of patience* and support of their children in other activities.

Regarding *positive reinforcement* one parent says: "I certainly encourage him more often. I rather use positive feedback now, you get better results from the child ...". Gray (1999:63) stresses the importance of positive feedback with the following quotation: "Children need lots of positive reinforcement through acknowledgement of their successes and forgiveness for their mistakes".

Most parents realise the value of *patience* in that children become anxious when they are impatient: "... he seems to freeze if I get impatient and angry ...". Children are trying to satisfy their parents (Donald *et al.*, 1997:249) and will become anxious and make mistakes if they fail to meet the expectations of their parents (Van Niekerk, 1991:92). According to Van der Boom (1994:1459) parents should learn to be more *patient and sensitive*, in order to recognise anxiety in their children.

From their interaction with their children during the paired reading sessions, parents became aware of their children's need to be supported: "I learned that he needs support with many aspects ...". Parents can also support their children in other activities by physical involvement and by obtaining information to support them to reach the level of performance expected for their age.

All the learners who participated in the research improved in reading. This improvement contributes to a decrease of anxiety in the parents. Parents are encouraged by the improvement and are more willing to help their children to overcome other problems as well: "I learned that results are possible and improvement motivates me to tackle a next problem ...". Donald *et al.* (1997:248) state that if parents are less anxious and more motivated they can be of better support to their children to overcome problems and develop their strengths.

Category 2 Skills mastered by learners. Children gain skills during the paired reading sessions that are useful in other situations as well. They start to set goals, manage time, their reading abilities improved and they can transfer these abilities to other situations. The paired reading technique requires that parents and children read at least five to ten minutes per day. Some of the learners read more than that and some even read over weekends and during the holidays.

One of the parents mentioned her child has started to divide his homework into shorter tasks, with periods of rest in between. Previously he tried to do everything at once and lost concentration in the process. "I think it is something that he learned in paired reading", she says.

The improvement of reading ability has an influence on self-confidence and learners start to read without the parents' support: "... his interest in Meccano has grown once he could read the instructions by himself ...". Learners also apply their new skills to other situations and there is an improvement in their school work in general.

Conclusion

The interaction between parents and children was researched within the context of paired reading, to ascertain what aspects of paired reading influence the relationship between parents and learners with reading problems. From a literature study on aspects contributing to a healthy parent-child relationship as well as the process and value of paired reading, it is clear that there is a possibility that paired reading can influence parent-child relationships positively.

Participants experienced the paired reading programme as a positive experience which enhances parent-child relationships. They also indicate that parents play an important role in the process of paired reading. The aspects which contribute to a healthy relationship are the structure of the programme, the physical presence of parents, positive reinforcement from parents, better self-confidence and quality time spent with each other. In the self-assessment parents indicated that they realised that they had made some mistakes in the upbringing of their children, like being impatient, continuously correcting mistakes, and pressurising the children. Parents became aware of the emotional needs of their children and could provide for them.

The final conclusion of this research is that parents perform a key role in the application of paired reading. In the cases where parents adhere accurately to the guidelines of the technique, parents gained insight into the relationship and the relationship between parents and their children with reading disabilities improved. Both parents and children enjoyed the physical togetherness of the paired reading sessions.

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