

# Hear Their Cries

## Religious Responses to Child Abuse



*Study guide  
for  
discussion leaders*

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## Recommendations for the Use of this Video Program

1. This program is intended for training sessions for clergy and lay leaders on recognizing and responding to child abuse.
2. Arrange for a skilled facilitator to conduct the program. It is helpful to involve a community specialist on child abuse in planning and implementing training sessions.
3. Be certain that trainers or discussion leaders are thoroughly familiar with the contents of this study guide prior to presentation of the program.
4. Be aware that this topic may trigger memories and elicit strong emotions from participants who are survivors of child abuse. Be sure that you have on hand resources to refer them to, and consider how you can create a safe atmosphere for discussion.
5. Order sufficient copies of the take-home brochure for viewers. It can be ordered in bulk or camera-ready copy can be purchased from FaithTrust Institute, toll-free 1 (877) 860-2255 (USA only) or (206) 634-1903.

# Hear Their Cries

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## Religious Responses to Child Abuse

Study guide by Ann Downer, M.S.

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# Introduction

All congregations have their share of human problems. And more people go to their minister, priest or rabbi for assistance with problems than to any other type of helping professional. This makes it essential that religious leaders be knowledgeable about child abuse and courageous in their approach to addressing the problem.

This study guide contains supportive information and discussion questions for the video, *Hear Their Cries: Religious Responses to Child Abuse*. The program is intended for use in training sessions for clergy and lay leaders on recognizing and responding to child abuse. The goal of the video and study guide is to raise awareness among clergy and lay leaders of the vulnerability of children and the need to intervene at times on their behalf.

Since the tenets of many faiths mandate the protection of children and others who cannot protect themselves, this program is intended for use in all denominations. The vocabulary in the video and study guide was selected to reflect a diversity of denominations. The phrases “clergy and lay leaders” and “religious leaders” are used throughout the materials to refer to those who act as representatives of the church or synagogue in any capacity: priest, deacon, minister, pastoral counselor, rabbi, parochial minister, pastoral associate, lay ministers or religious professionals such as those involved with youth and in religious education.

## Using the Video and Study Guide in a Training Session

The issue of child abuse is emotionally charged. A training session on the abuse of children should include enough time to address the scope and definition of the problem and the emotional impact of child abuse, including the fears and anxieties most people feel when becoming involved in a report of possible abuse.

It is helpful to involve a community specialist on child abuse in planning and implementing training sessions. Religious communities must reach out for knowledge and support on this topic to sexual assault and children’s protective services agencies. Working with a child abuse professional to plan and facilitate the training is an excellent method for achieving this goal. Inviting a children’s protective services trainer or prevention educator also introduces members of your group to essential community resource people. It may also increase the likelihood that people will call children’s protective services for advice or intervention when they need to do so.

A minimum of a half-day of training is recommended and could include many of the topics listed below. If you wish to locate more extensive resource material on planning and implementing a half or full-day training session, refer to the

curriculum guide, *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers* (Marie M. Fortune. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991) for examples. This book is available through FaithTrust Institute at 1-877-860-2255. The major topics to include in a half-day session include:

- Introductions, initial discussion, review of existing policy, if applicable
- Definitions of child abuse, scope of the problem
- Discussion of sources of power, discrepancies in power between adults and children, and the vulnerability of children to adults
- Video: *Hear Their Cries: Religious Responses to Child Abuse*
- Discussion using questions from study guide
- Guest speaker on reporting procedures or presentation by a specialist/co-facilitator from children's protective services agency
- Case history with discussion of identification and reporting
- Final discussion on policy, ways to increase sense of safety within church or synagogue for congregants to speak out or disclose abuse, and improving prevention efforts

A 4-8 hour session allows participants the time necessary to explore the complex issues surrounding exploitation of children. Participants in a half or full-day session on child abuse should, as a result of attending the training session, be able to:

- Define at least four types of child abuse
- Identify several possible indicators of each type of abuse
- Discuss the emotional and physical impact of abuse on child development
- Consider their own emotional response, including degree of personal resistance, to the need to report possible child abuse
- Describe the process of making a report of suspected abuse
- Give a rationale for reporting suspected abuse
- Understand the difference between reuniting and restoring a family
- Describe the policy of their own church or synagogue in relation to reporting suspected child abuse cases
- Recommend development of a rational policy for responding to possible cases of child abuse and neglect

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# Summary of Important Content

## What are child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust (even though he/she may not care for the child on a daily basis) which is not accidental and which harms or threatens to harm a child's physical or mental health or a child's welfare. Child neglect refers to an act of omission, specifically the failure of a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust to provide for the child's basic needs and proper level of care with respect to food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, medical attention or supervision.

There are four basic types of child abuse:

### 1. Physical Abuse

Physical abuse occurs when an adult injures a child and it is not an accident. It includes assault with an implement and other actions, such as shaking, slapping, burning, kicking, scalding or strangling, which lead to possible injury of a child.

### 2. Neglect

Neglect is any maltreatment or negligence that harms a child's health, welfare or safety.

**Physical neglect** includes abandonment, refusal to seek, allow or provide treatment for illness or impairment, inadequate supervision, disregard of health hazards in the home, and inadequate nutrition, clothing or hygiene when services are available.

**Emotional neglect** includes ignoring a child's need for contact, affirmation and stimulation or providing inadequate emotional nurturance.

**Educational neglect** involves knowingly permitting chronic truancy, keeping a child home from school repeatedly without cause, or failing to enroll a child in school.

### 3. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse deeply affects a child's self-esteem by submitting him/her to verbal assault or emotional cruelty. It can include close confinement, such as being shut in a closet, inadequate nurturance, extreme discipline, knowingly permitting such behavior as drug/alcohol abuse, or refusal to allow medical care for a diagnosed emotional problem. A cruel or inhumane act is defined as emotional abuse regardless of observable injury.

### 4. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse involves sexual contact between a child or teenager and an adult or significantly older, more powerful person. Children are not developmentally

capable of understanding or resisting sexual contact and may be psychologically and socially dependent upon the offender. In addition to sexual contact, abuse can include other exploitive behaviors such as inappropriate verbal stimulation of a child or teenager, taking or showing sexually explicit photographs of or to a child or teenager, or exposing a child or teenager to pornography or adult sexual activity.

## How widespread are child abuse and neglect?

There are more than two million reported cases of physical abuse or neglect in the United States each year (National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect), a ratio of 30 children out of every 1,000. The National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse in the United States indicates that approximately 2,000 children per year die of child abuse and/or neglect. Canadian authorities estimate that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in Canada parallels that of the United States.

It is estimated that at least one in three girls (Russell, 1984) and one in seven boys (Finkelhor, 1985) are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of 18. In the vast majority of cases, sexual abusers are known to their victims. More than half of sexual abuse occurs within the family. Offenders come from all economic, ethnic, racial, and educational backgrounds and religious traditions. They may be respected members of the community, church or synagogue.

Counseling programs in religious communities confirm that cases of child abuse among their clients and the numbers of cases where the offender is known to the victim conform closely to those reflected in national research. ***Religious leaders, both lay and clergy, who make it known that they are aware of the nature and extent of child abuse are more readily approached by victims, other family members, and, at times, even the perpetrators of child abuse.***

## What are some possible indicators of child abuse or neglect?

Possible indicators of abuse are listed below, but do not necessarily constitute proof that a child is being abused. They should serve as warning signs to look further, ask questions or seek assistance in determining whether or not a child needs help. Trust your instincts if you think a family or individual is in trouble. ***Clergy and other ministers are in a key position in relation to families to sense when something is wrong.***

The best source of information is not necessarily what a child tells you, but what he or she shows you directly or indirectly. Stay alert and responsive to children's physical appearance and behavior since they will rarely report that they are being abused. Instead, they frequently develop coping mechanisms and behaviors which bring them to the attention of others.

### **Possible indicators of physical abuse:**

- Hostile, aggressive behavior toward others; i.e., bullying
- Self-destructive and destructive behavior
- Fractures, lacerations, bruises that cannot be explained or explanations which are improbable given a child's developmental stage
- Burns, facial injuries, pattern of bruising or bruises in different stages of discoloration, indicating repeated trauma over time

### **Possible indicators of neglect:**

- Failure to thrive
- Inappropriate dress for weather
- Chronic hunger, tiredness or lethargy
- Dirty, unkempt, strong body odors
- Unattended medical conditions
- Depression, passivity

### **Possible indicators of emotional abuse:**

- Speech disorders or eating disorders
- Poor physical development or failure to thrive
- Lack of self-esteem
- Hyperactive/disruptive behavior
- Withdrawn
- Seeks approval to an extreme, unable to be autonomous
- Hostile, verbally abusive

### **Possible indicators of sexual abuse:**

- Sexualized behavior or precocious knowledge of explicit sexual behavior, pseudo-maturity
- Running away, promiscuous behavior
- Alcohol or drug abuse, other self-destructive behavior, e.g., eating disorders
- Hostile, aggressive or fearful, withdrawn and secretive
- Bruising, tearing or lesions around genital area
- Sexually transmitted diseases, discharge from vagina/penis
- Painful urination, defecation
- Complaint of lower abdominal pain
- Children who sexually abuse other children

## What should be done if child abuse is suspected?

The goals of any effective response to suspected abuse are:

- To protect the child from further abuse;
- To stop the offender's abuse; and
- To heal the victim's brokenness and, if possible, restore the family or, if not possible, to mourn the loss of family relationships.

Anyone *may* report suspected child abuse and will not be liable for an unfounded report if it is made in good faith. In every state and province, persons in helping professions—teachers, doctors, counselors, police officers, social workers, health professionals—are legally mandated to report a suspicion of child abuse or neglect to child abuse authorities. In some states in the U.S., ordained ministers, priests, and rabbis are exempt from this statutory requirement; people serving in a pastoral role, however, are strongly encouraged to report suspected child abuse regardless of statutory requirements. In Canada, most provinces require clergy to report. In fact, some denominations require their clergy to report regardless of civil mandates.

Learn the specifics of the law by calling the state or provincial attorney general's office. Call the child protective agency in your state or province to report suspected abuse or to discuss concerns regarding the welfare of a child or teenager. You can report to this agency by telephone, in writing, or in person as soon as you suspect child abuse. If doubt exists, resolve doubt in favor of the child by making a report. Religious leaders need not have detailed evidence of abuse to report and should not attempt to gather evidence. The child protective agency will investigate and determine the level of risk to the child.

Clergy and other religious leaders should familiarize themselves with the child protection office in their community. Ask about the agency's approach to reports of suspected child abuse. Consider them a professional ally and resource. Invite them to a discussion or training with local ministerial groups.

## What if information that causes a suspicion of child abuse is received in confidence?

It is generally expected that personal matters divulged to clergy are held in confidence, but a moral obligation to report exists when there is the possibility of harm to a child. A statement related to the limitations of confidentiality can be offered at the beginning of a counseling session in order to inform individuals about the role of clergy in such situations. Information can usually be held in confidence unless it leads one to believe that someone is being hurt or abused, is in danger of injury, or the offender presents a risk to other children. In some traditions, the sanctity of the confessional must be maintained, but there are pastoral resources that can be brought to bear to protect a child or teenager.

Reporting may result in effective intervention for the abuser in addition to helping the victim. The behavior of offenders escalates over time if it is not stopped. Abusers need psychological treatment along with spiritual guidance. Repentance, conversion, prayer and spiritual counsel can help the abuser, but outside intervention must also occur in order to hold the perpetrator accountable for his/her actions.

### **What can you do to make your religious institution a safe place for members to seek and find help?**

The leadership of churches and synagogues can confront the problem of child abuse in several ways. One of the most important is to speak openly about the existence of abuse by preaching about exploitation and violence. Religious leaders can also work with community-based child abuse specialists to make all members of the church or synagogue aware of community resources for responding to child abuse and neglect. Religious institutions could also offer prevention education programs for children in Sunday and Sabbath schools, develop a foster home recruitment program sponsored by the church or synagogue, provide parenting classes, support groups and respite care for parents under pressure, support groups for survivors of abuse, and/or operate “latch-key” programs for children.

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# Before You Show the Video

Before showing the video, use the following checklist to determine whether you are prepared to begin the session.

- Watch the video at least once
- If showing the video to a large group, arrange for two TV monitors
- Familiarize yourself with the study guide content and adapt discussion questions as needed
- Research community resources for responding to possible child abuse and neglect (children's protective services, hotlines, crisis centers, treatment programs)
- Distribute information on resources to members of your study group by creating a handout or writing the information on a chalkboard or easel
- Gather copies of existing policies or procedures of your church or synagogue related to reporting suspected cases of child abuse
- Order adequate copies of the take-home brochure for the group or purchase camera-ready copy and print sufficient copies
- Be aware that this topic may trigger memories and elicit strong emotions from participants who are survivors of child abuse
- Be aware that this topic may elicit strong emotions of denial or resistance from some participants
- Be prepared to respond to such occurrences and consider how you can create a safe atmosphere for discussion during the session
- Ask guest speakers from children's protective services, treatment programs or other resource organizations to attend the training session and make presentations

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## After Showing the Video

Leave the lights out for the duration of the tape (through the credits). This will allow some members of the audience extra time to compose themselves if they were upset by the content.

Do not schedule a break immediately following the video. Start de-briefing slowly. Allow spontaneous comments to emerge before posing questions of your own. Ask general questions about feelings and reactions to the video first. Lead gradually to a deeper analysis of the issues. The discussion questions are written with this graduation in mind.

Several general guidelines for facilitating discussion are listed below. You may wish to add others from your own experience of working with groups.

- Guide discussion toward the common issues among people, regardless of denomination or belief system
- Avoid posing closed questions such as those that must be answered “yes” or “no”
- Whenever possible, allow other members of the group to respond to comments or questions rather than dominating the discussion with your ideas and responses
- Recognize that there are many emotionally charged issues that may come up in group discussion and encourage group members to listen without interrupting each other
- Recognize that some people learn from listening and should not be pressed to express themselves before the entire group
- If you are uncertain about a non-participating member’s desire to speak, gently ask if he or she has anything to add or a desire to speak
- If someone is angry about an issue brought forward in the program, be sure that you understand the point he or she is trying to make; hostility is often intensified when a discussion leader demonstrates incomplete understanding of a question or comment by a member of the group
- If a member discloses a history of child abuse during the discussion period, reassure him or her of your support (“I appreciate your willingness to share this experience.”), help protect his or her privacy (“Maybe we can discuss this more during the break?”), offer resources for support, and assist with reporting as appropriate
- Leave adequate time for the discussion period following the video; don’t introduce a subject or an idea without sufficient time to explore it and reach some resolution on the topic; it is often better to skip an exercise or topic altogether if inadequate time to process the discussion is available

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## Discussion Questions

The following specific questions may help to guide the discussion. They develop gradually from general to specific questions about the role of clergy and lay leaders of the synagogue or church in recognizing and responding to child abuse and neglect.



***“Child abuse in any form is horrendous, but child abuse baptized in the Christian faith is a mockery of God.”***

Rev. Patricia Hunter  
American Baptist Churches, USA

1. How did you feel listening to the victims of child abuse speaking out in this program? Why do you think it’s been so difficult for us to address this problem in our communities?
2. In what ways, if any, does the content of this program support your own views or the beliefs and values with which you were raised? Has your thinking on the subject of the treatment of children changed much over the years? Did your religious training affect your opinions on this subject? If so, in what ways?
3. Four types of child abuse were discussed in the video. What are they? *[physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse]* What do these types of child abuse have in common? *[effect on feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, misuse of power against a vulnerable being, secrecy surrounding behavior, difficulty of disclosure, element of emotional abuse found in all types of child abuse]*

***“We don’t own children.”***

Peter W. Shafer  
First Free Methodist Church, Seattle, Washington

***“Now I know that my father used to hit us because we were little.”***  
“John”

4. Name some potential sources of a difference in power between two individuals. *[age, size, gender, role, comfort in the dominant culture, perceived social status, the ability to reward or punish another, financial dependence]*

5. Why is a child or teenager unable to offer meaningful consent? *[a difference in power exists; meaningful consent implies that there is no element of fear or coercion influencing a person's choice; it requires a context of choice, mutuality and equality; these factors cannot be present when there is an imbalance of power between two people arising out of role or age differences]*
6. What symptoms are we likely to observe if we allow ourselves to consider that child abuse can really happen? *[maybe no specific behaviors or other indicators, possibly factors related to a child's appearance, hygiene or behavior, possibly instinctive concerns about the apparent functioning of an individual or family; see pages 9 to 10 for possible indicators of abuse]*
7. Why would a child who was physically or sexually abused act inappropriately with other children by hitting, taunting, or using them sexually? What could be happening to them when you see young people abuse others or themselves? *[many abused children act out anger, frustration and sexual confusion by victimizing other children or trying to hurt themselves; inappropriate, angry and destructive behavior often characterize the behavior of a child in trouble]*

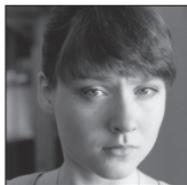


8. In the dramatization of disclosure in the video, Megan approaches Rev. Stockdale in a circuitous and subtle manner. She finally says, "I'm kinda in some trouble." What other comments or behavior might lead us to believe a child is seeking to gain our attention in an attempt to disclose child abuse?

9. Rev. Stockdale responded in a careful and supportive way. Do you remember what he said and what meaning it might have had for Megan? *[He said, "I can see this is very difficult..." and "Yes, I do believe you. This kind of thing has happened before to other girls."]*
10. Remembering that it is not the role of clergy to **investigate** suspected child abuse, what might one say when encouraging a child to disclose? How much information is needed in order to report suspected abuse? When do you refer a suspected case of child abuse to the child protective specialists? *[when "reasonable cause to believe" is established; it is not the role of clergy or lay leaders to investigate or substantiate suspected abuse; a report made in good faith based upon "reasonable cause to believe" is an ethical and legally sanctioned response to suspected abuse]*
11. Some questions may need to be asked when responding to disclosure of abuse in order to determine "reasonable cause to believe". What did Rev. Stockdale say to encourage Megan to talk? *["Is there anything in particular going on you want to talk about?" and "I can see this is very difficult, but can you say what kinds of things (he did)?" and "Do you mean he makes you do sexual things?"]*

***“He would listen to you. He would.”***

“Megan”



12. Why did Rev. Stockdale insist on calling children’s protective services rather than talking directly to Megan’s father? *[it is not his role to investigate; the family needs help that he can only partially provide]*

***“Clergy would be wise to develop healthy relationships with their local child protection office ... Making a report is good for all people involved and especially, I think, for the offender.”***

Mitchell Whitman, Therapist

13. What are reasons that clergy and other ministers might be unwilling to report suspected child abuse? How do people use “reasonable cause to believe” as an excuse not to report suspected abuse? Would building relationships with child protective workers in the community make it easier to communicate concerns about a family or child? How?



***“I think our priest was the one person...my father might have listened (to).”***

“Elena”

14. What are all the reasons you can think of that clergy and other ministers would be willing to report suspected child abuse? What does the phrase “in good faith” mean to you?

***“As pastors we need to be humble and admit that we don’t have all the resources and all the answers for such a multifaceted problem as child sexual abuse.”***

Pastor Steve Balvanz

Silver Beach Community Church  
Bellingham, Washington

15. Rev. Patricia Hunter has said, “Secrecy is the absolute promise never to share information. Confidentiality means I’ll hold information in trust and share it only in the interest of the person involved.” What does this say to you? How can we reconcile the confidentiality of our ministerial relationships and the moral obligation to protect people from harm?

16. In what ways have you heard people justify their own aggressive behavior toward children using scripture? *[list common examples]* How can we respond to such assertions? *[discuss specific replies to each]*

***“We certainly don’t want to see any other children suffer because of our pride.”***

Pastor Steve Balvanz  
Silver Beach Community Church  
Bellingham, Washington

17. What does the concept of justice imply to you? How can the religious institution contribute to providing the justice necessary for a survivor of abuse to experience healing and forgiveness? *[telling the truth about abuse, giving it a name, acknowledging that violations occur, offering compassion, protecting the vulnerable, holding the abuser accountable]*
18. What is the difference between reuniting a family and restoring a family following acknowledgement of child abuse? *[Restoration of a family may be possible without reuniting a family. Even if there is acknowledgment and repentance by the offender and the victim experiences justice that leads to restoration, the family may still choose not to be physically reunited. Or, if there is no repentance by the offender and thus no potential to restore that relationship, the victim may still have the opportunity to restore relationships with other family members.]*
19. Can you imagine a situation when reuniting the family is not an appropriate goal of disclosure, reporting and intervention? *[if the breach of trust between parent and child is too deep, if the abuser continues to deny that abuse occurred, if the risk of abuse continues]*
20. The non-offending parent, often the mother, may be blamed by others or by herself for “allowing” the abuse to occur. What help might the non-offending parent need after disclosure and reporting? *[she may need help from community-based resource agencies such as crisis counseling, in addition to spiritual guidance and support]*

***“...I remember sitting in Sunday school and hearing about ‘God the Father’ and getting really scared all over again ... because I realized that my father and God were alike ... that they could do whatever they wanted to me whenever they wanted and no one could stop them.”***

“John”

21. What are some examples of language that could increase or decrease an individual's sense of safety in church or synagogue? *[inclusive language might include the use of "our Creator" to replace the use of "our Father", etc.]*
22. What are the implications of retaining exclusive language and imagery in our places of worship?

***"Forgiveness is a process. Sometimes it takes a lifetime."***

Sr. Fran Ferder  
Therapy and Renewal Associates  
Seattle, Washington

23. How might you respond to the question, "Why did God let this happen?"
24. What does Rabbi Mirel mean when he says, "Without a change in behavior, forgiveness is not possible"?



***"... that tells me we've failed in making God's house ... a place where people feel safe enough to seek help."***

Rabbi James Mirel  
Temple B'nai Torah,  
Mercer Island, Washington

25. How do we assure that we do not fail our congregations in respect to protection of the vulnerable? What policy exists? What does it include? *[policies should address screening procedures for clergy and volunteers who work with youth, provisions for assuring that abusers, even those who attend treatment, do not work alone with young people again, training for church or synagogue leadership and the congregation on this issue, prevention efforts, clear reporting procedures and guidelines, etc.]*
26. If no policy exists, how might we begin to address the need for policy?
27. In what ways can the religious community help to eradicate abuse and its effects? *[offer prevention education programs in Sunday and Sabbath schools, develop a foster home recruitment program, provide parenting classes and support groups for parents under pressure, offer support groups for survivors of abuse, preach about child abuse]*



***"I prayed about this many times and I know God was listening ...I wish that I could say the same for my church."***

"Elena"

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# Resources

## Organizations

### ***Childhelp USA***

15757 N. 78th Street  
Scottsdale, AZ 85260  
[www.childhelpusa.org](http://www.childhelpusa.org)

### ***Toronto Child Abuse Center***

890 Yonge Street, 11th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4W 3P4  
(416) 515-1100  
[www.tcac.on.ca](http://www.tcac.on.ca)

### ***National Center for Missing and Exploited Children***

699 Prince Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 274-3900  
1-800-843-5678  
[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

### ***National Sexual Violence Resource Center***

123 North Enola Drive  
Enola, PA 17025  
877-739-3895  
[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

### ***Prevent Child Abuse America***

500 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 200  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
(312) 663-3520  
(800) CHILDREN  
[www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)

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