

TIPS FOR PARENT MEETINGS

Mannerheim League for Child Welfare
ASK-project
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1 Introduction

This material is a report on the parent activities implemented by the ASK project 2002 as a part of the youth and addiction prevention work at the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. The project searched for new alternatives and standpoints to support healthy growth of the youth. The project aimed at increasing the cooperation and shared responsibility of the adults that influence youth welfare. The key element that helped with strengthening the link between school and home and dealing with intoxicant related issues was the usage of participatory methods. As essential part of parent meetings at school the methods ease parents to get to know each other and to create cooperation with school.

From the beginning of the project it was clear not to construct new structures but to utilize the existing working cultures and collaborating networks. The natural function arena was the parent evening in school.

In Finnish school system the home room teacher invites the parents of a class to meet each other a couple of times during a school year. The aims of these meetings are to inform the parents about the school work and their children's doings. In many schools the teachers organize events, discussions, lectures and other activities for the parents. Drug prevention is an important topic in these activities, but mainly it is handled in theory based lectures. The ASK-project aimed at introducing the participatory methods as a tool how to deal with the substance abuse theme in the parent evenings.

In the planning state of the ASK -project the Mannerheim League collected data of the parent activities in 150 upper level schools in Finland by a survey. The most of the schools organized only 2-3 parent meetings during a school year and they wished for more resources for organizing the meetings. Especially schools wanted materials and trainings for carrying through the parent meetings and different kind of ideas and tips to be adapted in the implementation of the meetings.

The ASK -project's tips for activities were mainly targeted to the activities of parents of 7th-9th grades' pupils but the tips may be utilized in other activities also like in the peer activities of local associations of Mannerheim League, events or discussion evenings.

1.1 What is ASK project?

ASK was an addiction prevention project that aimed at preventing youth intoxicant use and supporting the growth of healthy self-confidence. ASK-project ran from December 2001 to March 2003 and presented partnership between three organizations. The organisation responsible was Mannerheim League for Child Welfare in Finland and the partner organisations were Acciones Integradas de Desarrollo in Spain and PROTASI in Greece, all committing to participatory methods in prevention work. The project developed working models to adjust in youth work, school and voluntary work. The project was funded by the European Commission.

The aims of the project and the target group

The main goal of the ASK project was to prevent the youth substance dependence and abuse. The target group of the project consisted of young people aged 12-20 and the strategic target group were adults in the youth's near surroundings: parents, teachers, peer counsellors, youth workers, authorities and actors of Mannerheim League's local associations.

The goal tended to be obtained through following actions and partial aims:

- to activate the young to participate in the project as executors and seekers for solutions
- to teach the young social skills and problem-solving skills
- to strengthen the self-confidence of youth
- to activate the school, parents and authorities to cooperate more closely
- to support and develop parental skills and encourage parents to form a network or peer-group
- to offer new working-models for teachers, school nurses, youth-workers and other adults working with children or young people

The functions of the ASK-project

The project developed two youth training models. The main idea in the youth trainings was to apply participatory methods in training programmes and to activate the young to influence their living environment and near community.

Apart from the procedures concerned directly with the young, it's essential in the prevention work to activate the parents and other adults working with the young. Aiming at increasing of cooperation between home and school, the ASK-project designed training for teachers to help them to organize parent meetings in a more participatory way. The goal of the methodology was to ease participants to

get to know each other and to cooperate, and in that way, create conditions that support the healthy growth of youth.

The project has internet -pages www.ask-project.org and the training models are also available in pdf-format in Mannerheim League's internet-pages www.mll.fi.

1.2 The idea of the parent activities in the ASK-project

The planning of the parent activities in the project was based on the practical need for action. This was proved by recent research: the cooperation of the adults that have effect on the youth social surroundings, influences the youth welfare and by that way also prevents the intoxicant abuse among the young. By developing the parent activities, the project looked for tips and ideas to promote the interaction between the parents and school personnel (especially teachers) and the mutual cooperation of the parents. So the project aimed to enforce those factors that protect the healthy living of the young.

The holistic promotion of the youth welfare prevents most effectively the youth from intoxicant abuse. In the long run the holistic prevention of arising problems of the young in their living and social surroundings also diminish the risk of the intoxicant abuse. According to researchers the protective factors that reinforce the healthy ways of living are for instance good communication and social skills, safe home environment and a strong social net. By increasing the parents' skills to raise their kids and by supporting the forming of the networks, it's possible to further the realization of protective factors in the lives of children and youth. The objective of the parent activities is also to point out shared responsibility: the adults are responsible for all the young, not only for their own children.

In prevention work it's important to approach a young person and his social surroundings as a whole. Many different actors and factors affect youth's growth and personal development. The most important persons that influence the young are parents, teachers, friends, peer groups, other young and the idols and archetypes created by and presented in media. The behavioural models and information of these influences are often mutually contradictory.

The point of departure of protective factors is that every young person has caring adults around him: they support, take care and inform the young. These adults don't necessarily run across each other, because they often have a certain place in teenager's life: every adult acts only in his own area and doesn't necessarily have any kind of a picture what happens in neighbouring fields.

The problems that the youth encounter in their lives arise often in one of the sectors of the young's life but they reflect also in other areas and cause more problems. If a teenager has problems at home they may affect his management at school or behaviour with friends. A young person may not react to the problems in that particular area that caused the problem. For example the increased use of intoxicants during free time is a symptom of the problem, not the original problem itself.

The prevention of the problems of the young becomes easier when the adults that are present in a young person's life know each other, it. If there has been interaction between adults before any problems arisen, it's more natural to a parent to contact teachers or youth workers when some signs of the change in

the young's behaviour are notable. The intervention happens in an early phase: for this reason the cooperation and making acquaintances between parents, teachers and other youth educators is beneficial already before the onset of a drug related problem.

The parent meetings at schools are a natural chance to get to know each other and to create networks. It's more likely that parents participate in a meeting which is organized by the school than they would gather together if the convenor was some other actor. From the standpoint of creating the cooperation between teachers and parents, the project saw as pivotal moments those parent meetings in which most of the parents most likely participate. These meetings are the first parent meetings of the school year in 1st, 3rd and 7th grade.

The parent meetings are the kind of occasions that offer an opportunity to invite also other actors related with the youth living surroundings. Teachers can ask persons that work with the young daily or weekly (like couch of a sport club or youth worker) to participate in the meeting. Also the professionals (school curator, social worker, police, nurse), that the young encounter more rarely but that are essential in the problem-solving situations, can take part in the meetings.

The ASK-project aimed at improving the facilities of the school personnel to increase the networking between school and parents. Making acquaintances was seen vitally important. The atmosphere of the meetings was another aspect that the project wanted to improve: the meeting should be a positive experience for all the participants.

2 Background information of the parent meetings

2.1 Teachers' opinions on parent meetings

In the planning state of the project in spring 2001 Mannerheim League accomplished a survey on the parent activities in 150 secondary schools in throughout Finland. Circa 100 schools responded on the inquiry. According to the results of the survey, only 2-3 parent meetings are organized during a school year: in 95 % of the schools have less than three parent meetings in a year. Besides that the parent meetings are often organized so that the parents of the whole grade are all present at once. This means that tens or even hundreds of parents are invited. Apart from the meetings personal discussions between teachers and parents are organized in the most of the schools. Parents are also invited in school celebrations.

The most common contents of the meetings are simply to meet each other and to inform parents about subject choices possible for their children. Personal discussions between teacher and parent are common too. Apart from that the issue of the meeting can also be a current theme like the youth substance use, common rules, questions and issues concerning education, evaluation or curriculum of the teaching, further studies, bullying, passing from a grade to another and school routines.

From the other occasions organized for the parents the celebrations are the most common. Also discussion occasions, information meetings and different kind of campaigns are in favour. Furthermore parents take part in excursions and camps organised by school. In some schools there are actions days, lectures and other activities that support parenthood. These events are programmed together with the parent association or other local associations.

One third of the surveyed schools hoped support for organizing the parent meetings. They wished for opening speakers from outside of the school, data for discussion themes and material that helps to organize the meeting. Apart from that schools hoped to get more economical support, guidance in organizing the educational issues for each age class, counselling in planning the three-year body for parent meetings and more information of visions of family sociology.

The biggest problems in the cooperation between the school and parents were the passive participation of the parents in the school activities and especially the absence of those parents whose children are most troubled at school. Also the parents' indifference toward the school was regarded as a problem. Anyway it's

important to remember that the lack of cooperation is not only up to parents but neither the teachers themselves aren't always willing or motivated to organize shared actions.

2.2 What parents wish for the meetings?

Hannele Laine and Teija Viitala studied in their thesis the opinions of parents in relation to parent meetings at school. Nine of ten parents had discussed on educational issues with school at least once during the school year. The most common topics of discussions were the behaviour of the child and supervising of it.

Parents wanted to get information about the management of their child at school, how the child acts, adapts and copes in the group, which are the modes of actions of the school and what kind of activities school organizes. The cooperation with school was seen appropriate when teacher and parents together supported the child.

Parents experienced the lack of time and unmotivated attitude of the teacher as problems in cooperation. The inexperience, lack of acquaintance and turnover of teachers complicated cooperation. In upper comprehensive school the home room teacher doesn't teach all the students of his class so he isn't always able to answer to a parent's questions.

Parents were also asked what the cooperation between school and home should be in practice. Parents wanted essentially personal discussions, different information and discussion meetings. One third of them hoped more mutual actions and campaigns. Only 5 % of answerers wished for more school festivities.

2.3 How to combine the expectations and wishes of parents and school?

It's obvious that time and resources of a home room teacher aren't always sufficient to organize several parent meetings during a school year. Compounding the resources inside the school and looking for the outside school partners bring more actors to organize activities. Successful cooperation enhances everyone's motivation.

According to schools' views the cooperation in parent activities is at its best open interaction in which every participant has courage to present opinions and visions. Teachers wished for practical, realistic and honest meetings. The cooperation must be continuous and natural, not related to the time. In many inquiry forms it was reminded that the point of departure for actions must always

be the pupil. Also parent had same kind of ideas: they wished for personal discussions, cooperation and interaction with school.

The acquaintance with parents and teacher or within parents themselves rests in a superficial level if it's based on few meetings in which there are tens of parents there. Apart from the problem of the group size, the issues concern often some concrete matters like subject choices or educational issues and there is no room for getting to know each other and chatting.

ASK-project doesn't aim at replacing the traditional parent meetings at schools. It wants to bring a new chance next to old one: single class meetings in which the main purpose is to get the parents to know each other.

2.4 How to get the majority of the parents to participate in the meetings?

All parents don't want to participate in the same way or intensity to school activities and not all are interested in similar activities. Parents are different and they have various standpoints from which they take part in school's activities. There is something similar also in parents' reactions toward parent meeting and these attitudes can be classified.

In his dissertation, Markus Torkkeli has studied how fathers take the cooperation with the school and he has identified six different attitudes:

Fathers

- want to participate in cooperation
- want to have background influence
- want to meet other parents
- see the cooperation as part of mother's responsibility
- see the cooperation as part of teacher's responsibility
- try to avoid the cooperation

Generalizing the study to refer to all the parents, it can be said that one part of the parents sees the school attendance of their child as a matter of the teacher and so they try to avoid cooperation. The other part of the parents wants to support their child from backgrounds, but they don't want to stand out. However some of the parents are willing to participate actively. Also the eagerness to meet other parents activates them to take part.

According to Torkkeli (2001, 114 &148) fathers would most likely to participate in easy-going, relaxed and pleasant meetings in which the parents had an opportunity to get to know each other. Personal discussions are essential according to fathers: "Personal discussions should be linked as part of the relaxed parent meetings because that is the best possible way to contribute to get information concerning one's own child and that's the point of the meetings: to share information."

As far as school has to offer many kinds of activities to parents, it's likely that parents participate in some of the activities even if not all the parents would take part in all the occasions. As an alternative to traditional meeting in the class room, some of the schools have organized a change for parents to participate in game tournaments, excursions and other activities together with the pupils or in an adult group.

A parent has to have a reason for coming to the meeting. When planning the parent meeting it is helpful to think about motives that parents have for participation.

For example a parent

- wants to know how his/her child is doing at school
- wants to see his/her child to perform in a school play or choir
- wants to get to know the other parents
- wants to get to know the teacher
- wants to participate but not to present himself/herself
- wants to influence and make his/her opinions known
- wants to show his/her child that he/she is interested in child's school attendance
- participates because of the sense of duty: "You just have to go there..."

For different parent types it's forth to organize varying activities especially if the goal is to tempt those parents that usually don't come to the meetings, to be present.

2.5 How to activate parents to participate?

It's commonly known that only those parents who don't have problems at home participate in parent meetings. Often people also complain about the fact that only the same talkative and courageous parents have the voice in the meetings and more shy persons don't get any opportunity to present their opinions.

This material tries to bring up some ideas how to enable the participation of most of the parents in cooperation with school and how to increase their involvement in discussions.

The first meeting is crucial. If a parent considers the first meeting unprofitable, he/she most probably won't participate in any further meetings. So the atmosphere of the meeting and motivation of parents is essential.

In discussion meetings the atmosphere is often quite formal and only few parents are courageous enough to open their mouths. Conversation flows easier in a familiar company. The goal of the first parent meeting in the autumn is to get the parents to know each other. By that way the cooperation later on is easier and more fun.

Mannerheim League utilizes participatory methods in peer student trainings: active participation of the young is more effective when they take part also in the planning of activities. This same idea can be used when working with parents.

2.6 How to find more time and resources for activities?

Often mentioned problem in organizing the parent meetings are the limited resources of the school. Extra resources have been offered by parent associations, for example. There was a parent association in 59 % of the schools that answered to the survey of MLL. Other means to facilitate the workload of home room teachers in regard to cooperation between home and school is cooperation with different associations, police and municipality or pair work of teachers that helps to share responsibility. The teachers saw that there should be chosen one teacher that would be responsible for cooperation and this coordinator should get repayment of his work.

One way to get help and actors to organize the meetings and activities for parents is to found a registered parent association. Helsingin Kakkosnorssin Tuki ry is an example of functioning parent association.

In one of the Helsinki's upper secondary schools (Helsingin II Normaalkoulu) there has been active parent association Kakkosnorssin Tuki ry (KNT) since 1969. The association consists of nearly 900 parents of upper secondary and high school students, teachers and school personnel. KNT aims at awakening of the spirit of cooperation between home and school. The activities of KNT are among the other things parent meetings, professional lectures and school fairs.

From every class two parents are chosen as contact-parents during the first parent meeting in the autumn. These contact-parents participate in the activities and meetings of KNT and mediate information to other parents. KNT encourages parents to found class committees and to act together. The information of the association is managed through school magazine and letters.

In the beginning of the school year the members of the KNT take part in a starting seminar in which new contact-parents get information about the activities of the association. The members also plan the year calendar of the activities. The parents themselves decide the issues handled during the year.

One important aspect of the functioning of the KNT is that it's distinct from the school's ordinary work and week-day education. Even if KNT is part of school's formal functioning, its activities are not in school's responsibility and it doesn't cause any extra work for teachers. The motto of the association is that it only organizes something fun: the school board is for difficulties.

The finances of the KNT are funded by voluntary support fees. In the beginning of the school year the parents are informed about KNT activities and functioning and they also get a payment form. The fact that the payment is voluntary is emphasized in the meeting. Most of the parents pay the fee. Support fees cover

expenditures of activities and the repayment of the teacher that works as secretary of the association. Financial manager of the association is together chosen professional, usually a parent that works with the financial issues.

A good aspect of the association is the wideness of its activities: it covers all the classes. Apart from that the association assures the regularity of activities and meetings. The activities offer parents a real opportunity to participate and be involved with school activities.

3 The function of the ASK -project

The goal of the ASK was to increase the cooperation between adult educators of the young and especially between school personnel and parents. Secondary goal was to increase the cooperation between schools and local associations of Mannerheim League. The activities were based on the experiences and work that had been done in Mannerheim League before for example during One Hour for Child -campaign.

From the beginning it was clear that project won't create any new structures of action models but instead of that it tries to benefit from the already existing culture of action and relations of cooperation. The parent meetings at school formed a natural field to run the activities.

In the starting point of the ASK-project the project workers tried to find a local association and a school that would be interested in developing and piloting the model together. The short duration, 15 months, of the project set restrains for this kind of a working model. Because the work in the local association is done by volunteers, the project couldn't oblige them in anyway. Also the schools had already made their timetable for the year. The development of the parent training model would have taken at least six months, thus the piloting of the trainings would have happened after the project had ended. This is why the project focused on training teachers and school personnel. The activities would start in schools and continue on the local level in the future.

The project aimed at both increasing the facilities of school personnel to organize parent meetings and initiating them into participatory working methods. Two groups were trained:

- Lower secondary school's welfare officers
- 7th grade's home room teachers

The content of the training was following:

- introduction of ASK -project
- the basics of prevention work
- introduction of the idea of parent meeting -model
- participation
- cooperative methods
- tips for parent meeting activities
- planning of activities

The possibilities of school officers to apply the model of active parent meetings in practice aren't too good in all of the schools. The role of the school officer is to lecture or inform the parents of a current issue related to school routines. These kind of informative parent meetings are often organized for all the parents at the same time, when there is no time or chance to utilize participatory methods.

A home room teacher has better opportunities to adjust methods into practice in parent meetings. Still the resources of a teacher are limited. ASK trained 11 teachers and eight of them were unfamiliar with participatory methods. Also concrete tips and proposals for exercises were seen useful by the teachers.

4 Tips for parent meetings

4.1 Getting to know each other

I AM... AND I LIKE...

The first person says his name and something that he likes about, or something that describes him, favourite food, animal etc. The next one repeats this and adds his name and liking. Linking the name with something concrete helps people to remember it.

GET TO KNOW ME!

The group sits in a circle. The trainer gives a small object, e.g. a toy or a key chain, to go around from hand to hand, until he says "stop". The person holding the object then tells his name and something about himself, e.g. his hobby or about his family. The topic is given by the trainer in advance. The game continues until everyone has told about them.

THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

The trainer separates the group in two smaller ones, both of which consist of the same number of persons. These small groups form two concentric circles (each group a circle), in such a way that everybody in the inside circle faces someone from the external circle. Then the trainer gives a topic for discussion which lasts for a while (e.g. a minute). Then he gives a signal (e.g. clapping) to stop. The inside circle stays stable while the external circle makes a step so that everybody faces a new person from the inside circle. Then the trainer gives another topic for discussion. The procedure takes place until everybody from the external circle has talked to everybody from the inside circle.

SMILE

The participants sit in the circle. Some of them starts to smile, "wipes out" the smile from his face by his hand and points at someone else in the circle. This person receives the smile and starts smiling. Then he throws the smile to a next person. The others are not aloud to smile or laugh. The one who laughs is out of the game.

MY EXPECTATIONS

In the first meeting is good to go through the expectations of the participants: what they wish for parent meetings? It's important that everyone's hopes will be heard. If there are more than 30 parents in the meeting, the group can be divided into two subgroups. The groups form two circles. The teacher gives a little object to bypass in the circle. The person who has the object has the word to say his hopes and expectations. Then he passes the object to the next person.

MAP OF OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

Step 1

Every parent gets a piece of paper and some pens to draw map of their living area (village, suburb or town). The right scale isn't important. Instead of that the map should demonstrate those places where parents usually spend their time (home, workplace, hobbies, school etc.). These places can be remembered better if they first list all the places they have been during the past two weeks.

Step 2

When the maps are finished, the group can compare them and discuss how different people see the same place differently. If the same exercise has been done also with the pupils, the comparison of the maps of adults and the young's can be very informative: the exercise gives adults information about how young people see their surroundings.

4.2 Intoxicant-related exercises

Talking about drugs, alcohol and other intoxicants is difficult. The use of alcohol and especially the use of drugs evoke strong feelings within parents. Many of them may feel the subject very distressing, scary or accusing, and this is also one reason for not to take part in the meeting. Many parents also assume that the subject isn't current in their family. On the other hand, many parents want to get more drug related information.

This material doesn't handle the facts about drugs or about their effects or user groups. That kind of information is easily available for example in internet.

Drugs as the topic of the parent meeting are such a subject that divides opinions very strongly. The parents may have contradictory ideas whether the substances belong to the world of the young. According to law all the intoxicants - tobacco, alcohol and drugs - are forbidden for the young under 18. So it's easy to be against the substance use of the minors by right of the law. Anyway a part of the parents buy alcohol to their kids or tolerate in some extent the young's use of alcohol. Parent meetings are the forum to affect those parents' attitudes before the issue becomes current. In the meetings the opinions and experiences can be shared together and the groups of parents have a possibility to establish common rules.

The ASK-project deals with the intoxicant prevention topic by using activating exercises and subgroup discussions. To make these methods fruitful, the participants have to know each other and there should be a familiar and safe atmosphere in the group. It's better to deal with the subject in general level. That helps to avoid blaming and doesn't evoke feelings so easily. The local situation of substance use is useful to handle: it makes the topic more concrete and it's easier to think how the personal actions have effect on the situation.

A good method for working in the meetings is to divide the group into subgroups of five persons. In this way every member of the subgroup has own role:

- Arranger who provides all the things needed for working
- Timekeeper who looks after the time used for exercise
- Secretary who writes down the thoughts
- Chairman who is responsible for equal rights and working methods among the members of the group
- Reporter who presents the results of the group work to the whole group.

It's better first to deal the roles and after that give the instructions for the group work. The roles can be changed after every exercise.

The exercises of this material don't require any special knowledge about intoxicants - the willingness and readiness to discuss about the subject on general level is enough. The instructor of the exercises can prepare for the meeting by reflecting on his own ideas and opinions about intoxicants and prevention work. There is no right or wrong answers to questions, arguments and exercises. The most fruitful discussions develop when different opinions have the possibility to become expressed.

IMAGINE YOUR FUTURE

Alcohol and drug-related issues can be observed first on the personal level. This exercise is meant to be done independently and there is no need to discuss about it with the others.

Imagine your life after 5 or 10 years. What kind of things have you achieved? Where do you live? Do you study or work? What kind of family you have? Do you have close friends, how do you spend time with them? Write down your thoughts.

Now, imagine yourself into a situation in which you use intoxicants (at least tobacco and alcohol, maybe some drugs) heavily. Which of the things that you listed before you still have in your life? Have you had to give up something? Has something replaced lost items?

DISCUSSION OF INTOXICANTS

The participants are divided in groups of 5 persons. The subgroups are given a paper in which there is written several claims concerning intoxicants.

It's possible to use drugs in a controlled and moderated way.

You may be hooked from the very first try of drugs.

Alcohol is more dangerous than cannabis.

Experimenting of intoxicants is part of the youth.

Best place to try alcohol is at the dinner table at home.

If you smoke you experiment drugs easier.

There is 10-15 minutes for discussion. After this participants write down the opinions and reactions that a claim caused. Every subgroup introduces their claim and the main points of the discussion related to it. If the participants are not willing to present the results to the whole group, the papers can be gathered and attached on the walls of the class room so everyone has the possibility to have a look at them.

IS THERE ANY ALTERNATIVES TO INTOXICANT ABUSE?

Why people use intoxicants if they are so dangerous for one's health? Parents can speculate this question in the subgroups and the secretary of the group can write the reasons and thoughts on a flap sheet. When the groups have finished their speculations the flaps can be hanged on the walls. At the same time as the reasons for drug use are gone through, it's useful to think about alternatives to them. For example it's often said that intoxicants help with relaxation. What other means there is to get relaxed? If the alcohol gives a runaway to escape problems, what kind of things would help to find a solution?

ROLE PLAY

If there is a safe and familiar atmosphere in the group, the exercises can also be little role plays. Two or three persons are actors depending on the play. The theme of the play could be for example "Mom, could you buy me a bottle of wine?" So a teenager asks for alcohol from his mother. The actors have a moment to plan the situation and the course of the play. The performance will be discussed afterwards: is there any other ways to solve the situation? What kind of alternative endings there are? The actors perform the same play but with a different ending. Also this time the play will be discussed. This exercise helps parents to see situations from the youth point of view.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

This exercise helps to open the discussion. The participants have a possibility to ask questions anonymously. They are given pieces of paper to write down their questions, claims or worries related to intoxicant issues. The teacher gathers the pieces of papers together and then returns the papers to parents in different order. Now everyone answers to the questions and claims that are written in their paper. In the end the whole group can discuss together about the questions and claims and whether they awake any new thoughts or visions.

REFUSING

There are many factors that affect refusing of intoxicants. Some of these factors are for example knowledge of their disadvantages, self-knowledge and self-respect that enhance the ability to refuse in an oppressing situation. The factors that influence refusal may be used in the parent meetings as discussion openers.

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