"Play is enjoying time with your friends"

A small-scale research project into the play experiences of younger and older children

LUDICOLOGY

advice, research and training for all concerned with children's play

Contents

Introduction

All children have a right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. The convention applies to everyone under the age of 18. Upholding children's right to play and ensuring all children have access to sufficient opportunities for play, therefore requires adults to pay attention to the play experiences and preferences of a wide range of different aged children. This includes those in their teenage years whose opportunities for play are often overlooked.

This small-scale research project was commissioned to inform a local authority's strategic approach to supporting children's play. The aim of the project was to actively involve different ages of children and their parents in analysing local conditions for play within two case study communities. In doing so the research provides insights into the actual lived experiences of younger and older children i.e. what's actually happening for them 'on the ground'. This information can then be used to develop evidence-based and targeted interventions at both a neighbourhood and local authority level.

The County where the research took place might best be described as semi-rural. It has a large number of rural and small urban settlements but also incorporates eight larger towns. The focus of this study was on two of those towns, each with a population of between eight to ten thousand people.

Methodology

From the outset the focus for this research was on children's subjective satisfaction with their lived experiences of play. Such an approach recognises the unique contexts in which children experience their childhoods and avoids adult assumptions about the realities of children's day-to-day lives. Previous research (Barclay and Tawil, 2015) has demonstrated that children have some level of awareness of what is enough both in terms of the quantity and quality of their opportunities for play and can provide in depth insights about their local communities and suggestions for how these might be improved.

The two schools involved in this research were identified by the commissioning organisations. They included a primary school in a large town in the south of the county, within which most of the younger children involved in the research lived. The other school was a secondary in another town 10 miles further north but the older children involved in the research here lived in communities across the county. In the primary school 15 children aged 6 to 11 were involved across five workshops with the majority of children attending all the sessions. In the secondary a total of 21 children aged 11 to 15 were involved across three workshops but attendance was more varied. In addition, a focus group was facilitated for parents of the primary school aged children. This allowed the opinions and experiences

of the children to be compared with those of their parents. A similar focus group was set up for the parents of the secondary school children but unfortunately none attended.

The socio-cultural and physical characteristics of local communities can be quite varied and children's opportunities for play are likely to depend on the particular conditions that prevail in the community in which they live. Ideally the schools might have been located in the same community, allowing fairer comparisons to be made between the experiences of different aged children as they moved from primary to secondary school. Despite this there were clear differences between different ages of children that are likely to have been the case even if they lived in the same communities because they were primarily associated with parental permission and the level of freedom they are granted.

The workshops were facilitated using a mosaic approach that incorporated a variety of mapping techniques, including brainstorming, timetabling, satellite maps and diagrams. Children were also required to talk about their experiences and write down their ideas. The younger children were also taken out of school, enabling them to show the researchers one of the places where they played and to talk about what makes a good or bad place for playing. Each workshop lasted approximately one hour and consent was gained from parents for all the children involved in the research.

The research methods were originally designed to work with children in years 5 and 6 (those aged 9 to 11). When used with younger children (in years 2 and 3) they didn't always elicit as much information, often because the majority of the children's play experiences still centred on their immediate home environments. The mapping techniques were also adapted for the older children in secondary school in recognition of the much wider area in which they were allowed to travel independently of parents. However, the same questions were asked of all children.

Presenting the Findings

Previous research has identified that children's opportunities for play are dependent on a broad range of temporal, spatial and psychological factors (Barclay and Tawil, 2015). These three themes have therefore been used to present the findings from the data analysis. However, it is important to recognise that all three themes are mutually dependant i.e. issues primarily associated with one theme can affect and be affected by issues associated with another. Furthermore, as illustrated in the headings below, psychological factors have an overriding affect on children's access to time and space for play.

Throughout the report the experiences of different aged children are compared and contrasted to both explain the opportunities available to different aged children and explore

how these change with age. The report also uses examples of children's responses and brief vignettes to illustrate some of the key issues.

Psychological - Perceptions of Play

The ways in which people think and talk about play can influence the way in which play is supported (or not). When tasked with describing or defining play to an alien who had no idea what it was, children answered the question in a number of ways. Firstly, they identified the object nature of play, then they identified things that are not play and finally they identified the sensorial, interactive and relational nature of play. The following insights serve as examples of the range of their contributions and can help adults to think about what play is from a child's perspective. All too often children's and adult's understanding of play differ demonstrably; understanding children's views on play can help adults to align their views, and as a result their provision of opportunities for play, more effectively.

What play is (object issues): play is standing up on a see saw, play is hide and seek, play is bull dog, stuck in the mud, playing games, playing tag, being energetic, play is makeup.

What play is not (object issues): work is not play, play is not when you are told what to do, play is not binge watching tv, play is not sport, play is not Facetime, social media, play is not playing on a gaming console sitting on your backside, play is not going on your phone, play is not school.

What play is (sensorial / interactive / relational): play is enjoying time with friends, play is free will, play is having a laugh, being with friends and hanging out, play is having your choice, play is golden time, play is banter and taking the mick out of your mates, play is communication and entertainment, play is going to the cinema with friends, play is going to the shops with your mates, play is enjoying other people's company, messing about, exciting, having fun, not being alone.

What play is not (sensorial / interactive / relational): play is not when you can't hang out with your friends, play is not boring, play is not sitting alone at home, playing is not being alone, play is not being bullied or bullying, play is not chilling on your own, play is not being serious, play is not being silent.

The object acts of playing alone tell us little about the nature of play, that is until they are juxtaposed against that which is not play. What can be inferred from this juxtaposition is that where an experience is subject to external controls children do not consider it playing and where an activity is characterised by passivity, inactivity and solitary behaviour it is not playing; neither does solitary engagement with social media or computer gaming conform

to children's definition of play. Perhaps more illuminating in respect of children's views on play are their contributions based around the sensorial, interactive and relational aspects of play. This would chime with the discourse that recognises play as an approach to action, a behavioural disposition towards activity and play as process as opposed to a product (Brunner *et al*, 1976).

The relational and interactive act of being with friends changes the dimensions of the activity from 'not play' to 'play' as in the following examples: being taken shopping by parents isn't play, whilst "going the shops with yer mates" is; watching TV on your own isn't play, but "watching TV together with your mates" is play. In the same way whilst children most regularly considered work as not play there were examples across the school curriculum where children reported a more playful experience of work. There were also examples of organised clubs outside of school that children could distinguish as not play, playful or play. In this respect it was often the disposition of adults that contributed to the different ways children experienced their activity in these times and spaces.

The disposition of adults responsible for the activities children are engaged with influenced their experiences as in the following examples: organised sports sessions when highly regulated by the coach were described as 'not play', however the same children could identify examples of organised sport sessions where the coach took a less regulating and more playful approach allowing moments of play to develop naturally as part of the ebb and flow of sessions. Whilst children were still aware of the nuanced differences between play and not play (and as such wouldn't describe the session in the latter example as a play session), they valued the playfulness of the reduced regulation that the organised session had. This brings a sharp focus on the sensitivity of the adult's disposition to children's playfulness. Adults can be playful and children will respond to that positively. Indeed, whether an activity is perceived to be playful or not in cases where adults are involved seems to be more about the subjectivity of the interrelationship between adults and children, than it is about the object act of any activity.

Whilst that which is not intended to be play provision can be experienced playfully given the playful disposition of the adults in charge, the opposite can also be true. Examples were provided by children and parents of organised 'play provision' (after school clubs) and play times in school, that should have been experienced by the children as play, yet children often only referred to these experiences as playful at best and often felt they weren't play or playful at all. Again, the subjective disposition of the adults in charge and the ways they relate to children seems to affect the children's experience to such an extent that irrespective of the object activities on offer they will not be experienced as play if the adults in charge are not subjectively aligned with the children's playful disposition.

Finally, the parents involved in this research readily recognised the importance and value of playing both in terms of its intrinsic benefits ("having fun", "being a kid", "having a laugh") as well as its instrumental benefits ("learning from mistakes", "learning social norms", "how to interact", "how to negotiate", "be responsible and keep yourself safe", "falling out and making friends again"). They also talked about being encouraged by the games children make up in the school yard, recognising that their children were still capable of playing and creating "daft games".

These parents were acutely aware of their children's experiences of services and views on play, recognising that their children's experiences were heavily regulated by adults and that those adults could have a demonstrable effect on the children's experience of activities. Again, parents and children alike valued these structured recreational activities and clubs of various kinds. However, (similar to the children) parents did not view these as play experiences and these parents were concerned about their children's lack of opportunities to play. The parents recognised that when adults mediate activities the opportunity for children to benefit from the physical and psychological bumps and bruises, negotiations, compromises, adventures and challenges experienced as a result of playing out with friends are lost to their children and evidenced a deep concern about that loss.

The parents also talked about having to use childcare due to work commitments but felt that whilst this provision should be supportive of their children's play it often wasn't. They identified too many rules, children not being allowed to play in the way they want and provision aimed at younger children not being appropriate for older ones. As a consequence, they reported that their children didn't want to attend this provision.

One particular year six boy lived in a fairly isolated location outside of town and reported accessing eight different sports sessions outside of school. He talked about having made friends with other children attending these sessions but was also acutely aware of how the different attitudes of adults facilitating these sessions affected his opportunities to play. The boy's mother was quite open about the fact that as parents they were using organised activities to compensate their child for the lack of opportunities to socially interact with his peers outside of school but also recognised that these activities were not compensation for the benefits of being able to play out with friends unsupervised. The mum also thought that her son would now be playing out more regularly if they still lived where they used to. There they had easy access to a number of parks and other "patches of grass", the area was also more 'cycle friendly' so they spent more time outdoors as a family and had more "incidental meet ups with other families". In this example the issue is not so much the child's age as the proximity of public open space and the ease of access to friends. Where access to friends is a problem, children become dependant on extra-curricula activities as times and places to build friendships outside of school.

Temporal/Psychological - Time for Play

Using timetables to explore how children's time is divided up in a typical week, the children were introduced to a traffic light system where the different colours represented whether a particular period of time could be perceived as play, playful or not play. The children identified green as a time for play where they could freely choose what they do, how and why they do it and who they do it with. Drawing on the work of Marketta Kytta (2003) these can be referred to as times when children experience a 'field of free action'. Amber was then allocated to activities that the children welcomed but which were regulated by adults (or a 'field of promoted action') and red was used for activities that are compulsory and rarely have anything to do with play or provide little if any free choice ('constrained fields of action'). Responses from some of the primary school aged children illustrate their understanding of the 'fields of action' model:

The primary school children suggested that time could still be perceived as play (green) when adults were around ("like when parents take you to the park") but again it depended on the disposition of the adults. They also recognised that adults could be trained to better respond to children's play and that this would in turn positively affect children's perceptions of time spent with these adults. 'Golden time' (often provided as a reward for hard work) in school at the end of the week was recognised as being amber because whilst the children have some choice it is still limited by adults.

The majority of children aged 7 to 11 involved in this research study were engaged in adult structured recreational activities outside of school at least five days a week, and in several cases were accessing more than one organised activity per day. Parents also confirmed that their children were spending a large proportion of their time outside of school in organised recreational activities, usually sports sessions.

Out of the 15 children aged 8 to 12 years old (those in year groups 4 to 7), the vast majority reported spending the majority of their time during term-time in regulated or constrained action, and as a consequence half of those who participated in the research reported not having enough time for play (free action) during term-time. In contrast, all but one child from the same cohort reported experiencing mostly free time (free action) during the school holidays. Children from this cohort reported very little use of social media but some use of computer games. Interestingly, play times in school were more often colour coded amber rather than green in recognition that they are also heavily regulated by adults.

For the 13 to 15 year olds, the majority reported spending most of their time in term-time in regulated action but none of them reported spending the majority of their time in constrained action. Whilst more time is available for play outside of school for these older children, as noted below, they are rarely using that time for play during the week day

evenings; rather it is being used for Facetime, social media, playing on phones and computer games.

By year 7, adult structured activities appear less of a feature of the weekly time-table, and by year 9 were almost completely absent. Children in years 7 and 8 recorded some time playing out with friends throughout the week and this time may have replaced time previously spent in organised activities. However, by year 9 hanging or playing out with friends becomes a much rarer event particularly during the week, with friends usually only getting together outside of school at weekends.

Children from this secondary school cohort reported significant increases in the amount of social media, phone use (perhaps gaming, watching Youtube) and use of FaceTime, so much so that this appears on timetables most days of the week for most children and in some cases appears to be the only thing that is done outside of school. This raises concerns as it accounts for much of their free time but does not answer their own definition of play.

Spatial/Psychological - Permission for Playing Out

The younger children had clearly defined boundaries and were able to identify specific streets in terms of where they were allowed to go on their own or with friends. Being with friends often increased how far they were allowed from home. As a consequence, those without easy access to other children were at a disadvantage. This was especially true for children who lived further away from the school some of whom reported having no one to play with. However, for others, siblings and neighbours provided important play mates.

The majority of places where younger children identified playing were in close proximity and easily walkable distance from where they lived. Younger children were able to identify a range of places where they played different sorts of things but these were focussed on spaces immediately accessible outside their homes, often including the residential streets where they live. Where children had easy access to more natural green space this was readily recognised as being good for playing in. This was particularly true for children who lived on the edge of housing estates near to a belt of green space that ran around the estate.

Where traffic on residential roads was particularly low, for example in crescents or cul-de-sacs, children reported being able to play out on their street. However, the distance they could travel unaccompanied was still very small. In reality the majority of the suburban area was inaccessible to these children unless accompanied by adults. This is primarily due to concerns associated with traffic.

Because these children have very limited permissible ranging distances, potential places for play have to be in very close proximity to where they live for children to actually be able to use them. Beyond these boundaries children are usually reliant on parents to take them to designated places for play. For example, the recreational ground in the centre of the town where the majority of the younger children live is well used and well liked but it is a destination that children are more often than not reliant on their parents to access.

There was one particularly positive example of an area at the edge of a large suburban estate where the layout of roads and access to space for play meant that the design of the neighbourhood appeared to be providing for the play needs of a range of ages, at least for those between 6 and 10 years old. For a six-year-old girl a designated play area within her cul-de-sac meant that she was already allowed to play out close to home. For another 8-year-old living close by, the quiet streets meant she was allowed to play in the park and ride her scooter down the hill around the corner. Another 10-year-old living further up the road was allowed to roam further still, meaning she could call for friends, access the designated play area and play in the woods behind. In these situations, the suburbs become good places to experience early childhood because there are likely to be other children out and about to play with.

The scale of the maps required by older children is much larger than that which is necessary to identify the majority of places where younger children play because the distance they can travel independently from home is much greater. However, the maps of children in Years 7 and 8 were more similar to those from the primary school in terms of identifying particular places where they talked about playing in their local neighbourhoods. This fits with the concept of the 'play years' being from around 8 to 12 years old. Towards the end of this period and into the teenage years, children's immediate neighbourhoods and the suburban environment (that may have suited younger children) become boring and children begin to seek out other opportunities further away from home (Ward, 1978).

Parental permission still appeared to be an influencing factor for those in year 8, with the amount and speed of traffic still causing significant concerns, but by year 9 most of the children were allowed to roam across their communities and travel to other areas of the county and sometimes beyond. By year 10 they reported travelling with friends as far as other towns in neighbouring counties but were still dependant on parents to go to larger cities that were further afield. In these situations the children are old enough and have sufficient independence to operate within the predominantly adult orientated public realm.

The age of children clearly (and unsurprisingly) has a major influence over the freedom they are granted by their parents. Once children are deemed capable enough to negotiate the risks associated with the public realm they are allowed a much greater degree of

independence. However, where the perceived risks are high it is likely that children will be more restricted for longer despite being of an age where in other contexts they would have been allowed out to play.

The parents involved in this research recognised that if the environment where they lived felt safer their children were actually old enough and responsible enough to look after themselves. They also talked about wanting their children to be able to make mistakes but importantly not mistakes that might cost them their lives. Ultimately, they suggested it was easier to coordinate 'play dates' via social media than to allow their children out to play, which, despite being seen as important, is not considered to be worth the perceived risk of harm. As a consequence, the majority of the primary school children are heavily reliant on parents to arrange their time for playing with friends and/or pay for them to attend and transport them to organised activities. For many parents of younger children allowing them to play out is not an easy option.

> "you know letting your kids out to play is a risk, risks that they need to take to learn to manage them but when the first one they encounter is the likelihood of death it's a bit off putting."

The layout of housing, in particular the proximity and number of public open spaces, together with the amount and speed of traffic has a major influence on whether younger children are likely to be allowed out to play. Proximity and ease of access to friends will also determine whether parents feel able to enable their children to test their emergent skills and competencies rather than just the fact that their children have expressed them.

Spatial - Places to Play

Despite their increasing independence, secondary school children reported much lower levels of satisfaction with their opportunities for play compared to the primary school aged children. When asked to rate how good their opportunities for play were, none of the older children reported them as great and only one as good. The majority (75%) reported that they were just "OK but needs to be made better".

The primary school aged children reported higher levels of satisfaction and tended to be more positive about their opportunities despite describing experiences that would rarely be recognised as being sufficient in terms of childhood play opportunities. For example, the majority reported being allowed to play out and playing out most days or a few days each week but (as described above) through further exploration of their experiences it became clear that the distance they are allowed to roam is highly constrained.

In contrast, all of the older children reported having enough time for play and being allowed out to play but only 40% reported playing out most days or a few days each week, which again suggests they are choosing not to play out for some other reasons. Furthermore, only 30% of the secondary school children reported satisfaction with the quality of spaces / provision they can play in compared to all but one of the primary school children. The older children also reported lower levels of satisfaction with the attitudes of other adults and perceptions of safety when out playing.

For those children who are of an age where they are still disposed to playing in such a way that makes use of any environment through exploratory and pretend narratives, access to other children may be all that is required for a good enough experience of play. In contrast as children get older, become more self-aware and less disposed to playing in pretend ways, the object opportunities offered by the environment may matter more. However, the secondary school children identified very few places that they thought were good for playing or met their play needs. Parents of the younger children also identified a lack of youth provision where children could be "left to their own devices".

In the secondary school there were two children who reported never feeling safe when out playing and both these individuals also talked about spending the majority of their time outside of school using computer games and phones for their entertainment. In these instances the children seemed to be reliant on electronic devices within the home to stave off the boredom associated with not wanting to play out.

Making the Difference

The final activity children were given required them to identify all of the assets that currently support their play (the factors that help), then the people who influence their opportunities for play and any issues that constrain their access to time and space for play. They were then asked to think of ways in which these constraints could be removed or reduced and finally (if money was available) how their opportunities for play could be made really great. The responses from different aged children are revealing in terms of the issues they prioritise in respect of their opportunities for play.

The younger children, those in primary school and up to year seven, focussed largely on issues associated with the permission they were granted by parents and other care givers (for example teachers) as well as access to their friends. When identifying what was good about their opportunities for play they referred to having freedom of choice, time free from adult imposed constraints and time spent with friends, as well as access to recreational facilities. When identifying barriers, they focussed on the attitudes or actions of care givers restricting where they were allowed to go or what they were allowed to do, lack of access to

friends and hazards associated with the physical environment. As a consequence, potential improvements were associated with having more permission for play, changing the way adults think about play and ways in which the confidence of parents could be improved. They also identified a need to improve the quality of the general environment and the role of the Local Authority in maintaining places for play. However, only when asked what would make their opportunities for play really great did they identify improvements in terms of the amount and opportunities offered by designated play provision and other recreational facilities.

Children in year eight placed a focus on designated play spaces including parks, sports pitches and fields as well as other informal places for playing e.g. the local shops and an area of garages. However, they were much less concerned with parental permission and more about the availability of provision and the attitudes and actions of other people (not care givers). A big issue for this group was feeling like they didn't have a voice and that their needs or opinions were not being given significant attention. As a consequence, one of the improvements they identified was for representatives from the Local Authority to come into school and speak to them directly. This group also identified the need for play provision that better suited their interests and community-based youth clubs.

A couple of children in year 8 lived in a village outside of the town where they went to school. They talked about an area of garages with adjoining green space which was being used as a place for children to meet up, hang out and play football. They referred to this as an historical place for play that had apparently be used by previous generations of children. However according to the children this space was now due to be redeveloped for housing but these children had not been involved in the development of these plans despite the garages representing an important asset to them in respect of their space for play.

Children in year 9 focussed much less on play provision and more on other places they go with friends in and around town (e.g. shops and fast food outlets) as well as their use of TV, computers, phones, films and the internet. This group (who were all girls) had significant concerns associated with "bullies" and didn't feel like adults (in particular teachers) did anything of significance to address this problem. It may well be that this fear of other people is contributing to children in this age group staying in more than they are going out. However, these children were also the only group to identify homework as a significant constraint on their time for play. In terms of making their opportunities for play much better they talked about access to WiFi, improvements to parks and dedicated youth club provision for girls and boys.

Conclusions

The primary school aged children reported higher levels of satisfaction and tended to be more positive about their opportunities despite describing experiences that would rarely be recognised as being sufficient in terms of childhood play opportunities.

The secondary school cohort reported lower levels of satisfaction with play experiences with the majority reporting that their opportunities were just "OK but needs to be made better". Less than half this cohort reported playing out regularly in the week and only a minority reported satisfaction with the quality of the spaces available for play. The majority of older children also reported lower levels of satisfaction with the attitudes of other adults and perceptions of safety when out playing.

Younger children's dependence on parents to facilitate opportunities for them results in engagement in formal adult mediated activities which often lack the very important interrelation subjectivities children experience in play. The vast majority of the primary school cohort reported spending the majority of their time during term-time in regulated or constrained action, and as a consequence half of those who participated reported not having enough time for play (free action) during term-time.

Adult structured activities became less evident by year seven and almost completely absent by year nine. Children in years seven and eight reported some increase in independent mobility and as such had increased access to local friends and spaces for play, but also identified that the available places for play rarely met their needs.

The 13 to 15 year olds spend much of their spare time in regulated action but less in constrained action. However, they are not using their available time for play during weekdays, reporting mostly keeping in contact with friends via social media and engaging in solitary media experiences.

Parents of the younger children recognised that when adults mediate activities, the opportunity for children to benefit from the physical and psychological bumps and bruises, negotiations, compromises, adventures and challenges experienced as a result of playing out with friends are lost to their children and evidenced a deep concern about that loss.

Parents also recognised that they may be overcompensating children for the lack of opportunities to play by ensuring they access a range of other social activities outside of school but, given the perceived risks they associated with playing out, saw this as the only viable option.

Parents observed that childcare provision should be supportive of their children's play but often wasn't, with too many unnecessary rules meaning that children weren't allowed to play in the way they want. As a consequence, they reported that their children didn't want to attend the provision available.

Play times in school were more often colour coded amber rather than green in recognition that they are also heavily regulated by adults. Golden time in school at the end of the week was recognised as being amber because children's choice was still limited by adults. Children proposed that adults should be provided with training to help them better understand and respond to children's play, and that this could improve their time for playing.

Being with friends makes time more playable, makes anything more enjoyable, improves perceptions of safety and increases parental permission. Proximity to other children is therefore key, with children who live further out of town in more isolated locations increasingly dependent on parents to facilitate meet ups with friends.

If younger children can access the provision available, they report enjoying it but all too often it is not in close enough proximity to be accessible within their very limited permissible range.

Teenagers can access a much wider area but the provision they can access they don't enjoy and so are dissatisfied with the range of opportunities available. Only when they get to an age where they can act as young adults are they able to access the affordances of the largely adult orientated public realm.

The layout of housing, in particular the proximity and number of public open spaces, together with the amount and speed of traffic has a major influence on whether younger children are likely to be allowed out to play. Geography therefore has an equally mediating and regulating effect as the disposition of adults towards children's play does.

Where traffic on residential roads was particularly low, for example in crescents or cul-de-sacs, younger children reported being able to play out on their street. However, the distance they could travel unaccompanied was still very small.

Where children had easy access to more natural green space this was readily recognised as being good for playing in. This was particularly true for children who lived on the edge of housing estates near to a belt of green space that ran around the estate.

Because these children have very limited permissible ranging distances, potential places for play have to be in very close proximity to where they live for children to actually be able to use them.

Parental concerns associated with traffic mean that the majority of the suburban area is inaccessible to younger children unless accompanied by adults.

The parents involved in this research recognised that if the environment where they lived felt safer their children were actually old enough and responsible enough to look after themselves.

Potential improvements identified by the younger cohort were associated with having more permission for play, changing the way adults think about play and ways in which the confidence of parents could be improved. They also identified a need to improve the quality of the general environment and the role of the Local Authority in maintaining places for play.

Potential improvements identified by the older cohort were to be found in improved youth provision across the county and in play spaces that actually met their needs. Of significance they felt their needs or opinions were not being given significant attention. They felt it would be helpful if representatives from the Local Authority come into school and speak to them directly.

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