

Family Literacy Packs: Engaging Teachers, Families, and Young Children in Quality Activities to Promote Partnerships for Learning

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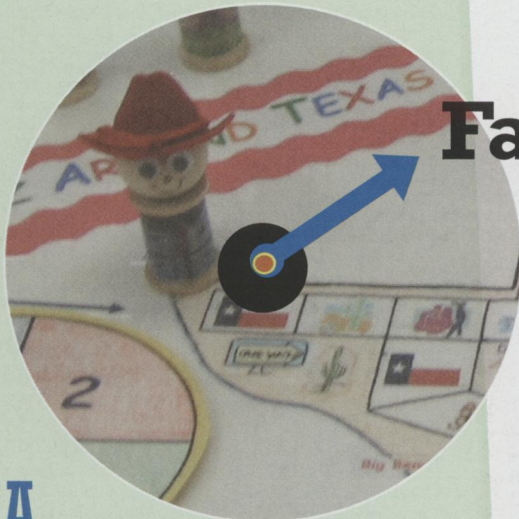
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Family Literacy Packs

Engaging Teachers, Families, and Young Children in Quality Activities to Promote Partnerships for Learning

Barbara G. Hammack, Martha M. Foote, Stephen Garretson, and Josh Thompson

A young child in any classroom is first and foremost a child of his or her own home. Young children benefit when their teachers and families engage, connect, and are involved with each other in ways that help them learn, grow, and feel secure (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003). "Students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development" (Epstein & Sanders 2006, 87). This shows how important it is to break through whatever barriers and roadblocks exist between teachers and families (Uludag 2008). It is important for teachers to engage families in ways that develop a positive link between home and school.

Using family literacy packs can create such a link. Originally designed for K–grade 2, the packs have been successfully adapted for young children of all ages. Early childhood teachers send children home with these packs, which include literacy materials and activities that children and families work on together. As families work with their children, the literacy materials and activities highlight young children's knowledge and learning. This helps families understand their children's literacy skills development. The packs also include a logbook so

that families and teachers can record their observations, which facilitates ongoing communication, encourages parental involvement, and promotes teacher-family partnerships.

National PTA standards for family engagement

Through decades of observing how schools, families, and communities interact, researchers and organizations have proposed models and standards for family engagement. These provide frameworks for ways teachers can partner with families to promote children's learning. The six types of parental engagement designed by Epstein and others (Epstein 1995,

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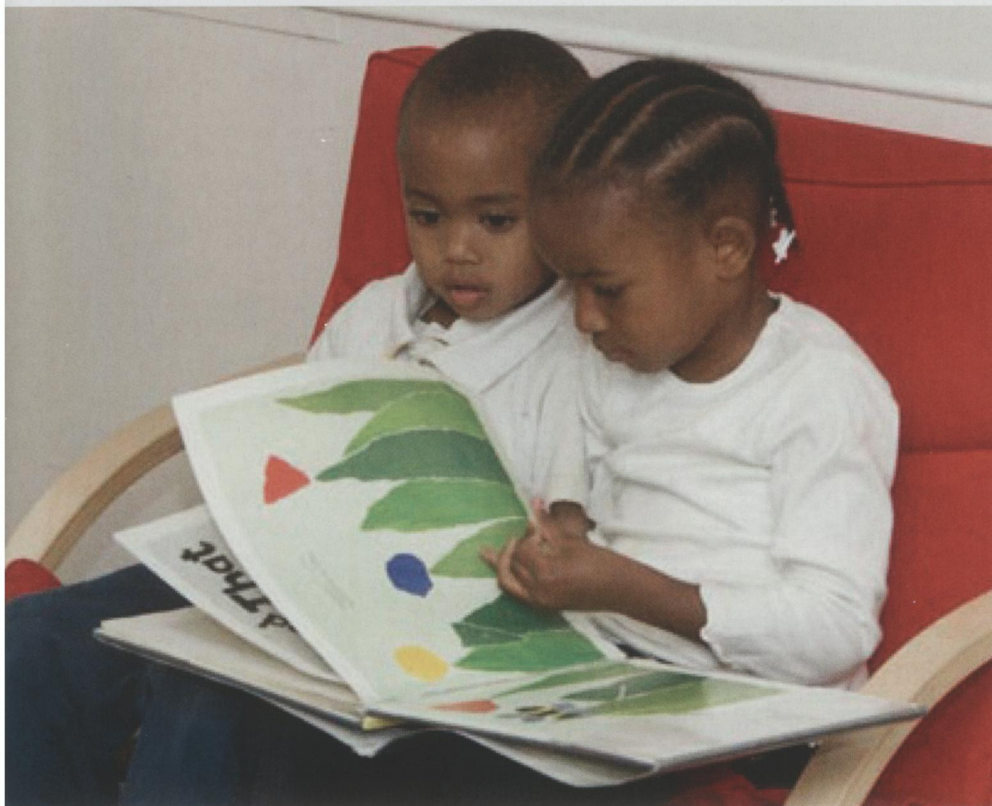
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It is important for teachers to engage families in ways that develop a positive link between home and school.



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2011; Epstein et al. 2008) suggest ways of connecting families with schools and classrooms. Many schools have found Epstein's model useful in promoting parent-friendly practices.

The National PTA (National Parent Teacher Association) used Epstein's model for crafting its first round of standards for school and family engagement (1997). Through heightened awareness of the variety and scope of parental engagement approaches, the National PTA developed these standards, which encouraged schools to create cultures that prioritize working closely with families. However, in 2002, Henderson and Mapp increased awareness about the value of learning that occurs *in the home*. Building on Epstein and additional insight from Henderson and Mapp, the National PTA revised its standards in 2008: "When developed in 1997, the standards were called the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. With a shift in focus from what schools should do to involve parents to what parents, schools, and communities can do together to support student success,

the updated standards were renamed the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships" (National PTA 2008, 5).

Teachers have an important responsibility to educate children within the context of the family. To accomplish this task, teachers must engage families in a variety of activities. It is important for teachers to meet families where they are and not expect them to adapt to the school environment. Teachers need to view families as capable and respect their cultural values (Graue & Brown 2003).

Teachers can use family literacy packs to help meet the National PTA's standards, helping engage families in appropriate ways. These packs can improve communication between schools and families, assist with children's learning at home, and help families understand how to use various activities with their children. In our busy world, providing families with the types of activities included in the literacy packs can be critical to children's success and strengthen the relationships between schools and families (Dever & Burts 2002).

Standards for Family-School Collaboration

The PTA's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships promote collaboration by encouraging the formation of a committee comprised of all stakeholders—schools, families, and community members. The committee then designs programs, tapping into various available resources, with the ultimate goal of helping children be successful. The standards set up a reciprocal process, opening doors of communication among all stakeholders:

1. Welcoming all families into the school community—

Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

2. Communicating effectively—

Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.

3. Supporting student success—

Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

4. Speaking up for every child—

Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

5. Sharing power—

Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.

6. Collaborating with community—

Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation. (National PTA 2009, 6)

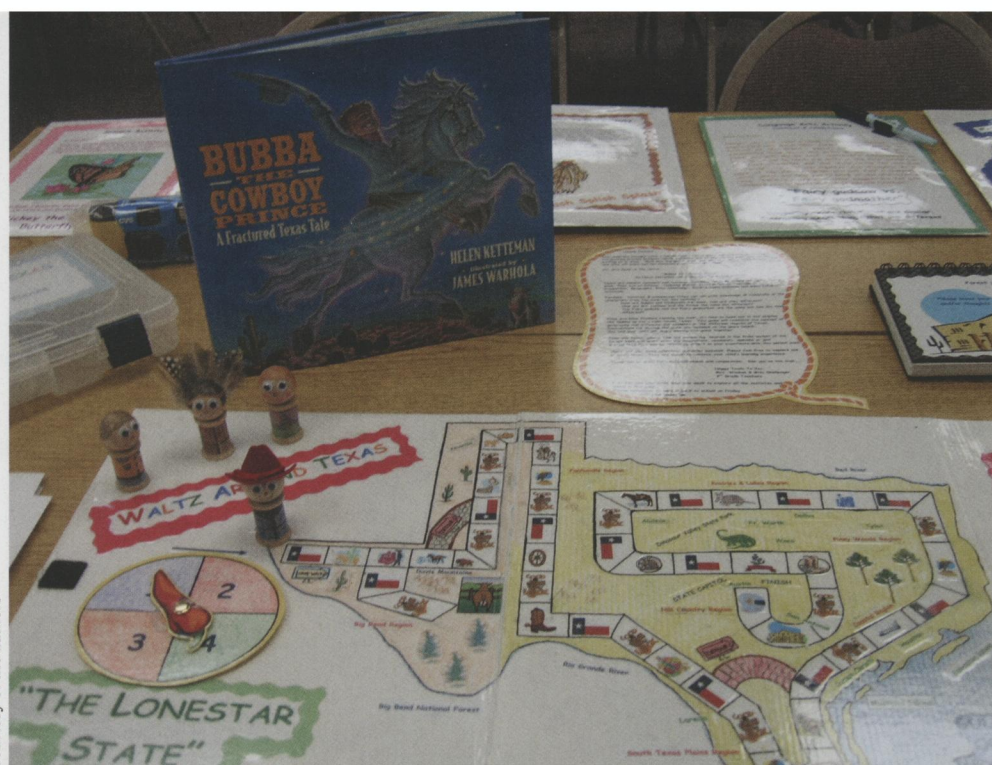
A strategy for family engagement and more

Teachers develop family literacy packs by creating a set of materials that help highlight and promote young children's literacy development. Typically, teachers in the primary grades design the packs, which include resources that support children's emergent literacy skills at home and educate families about various ways to engage children. Families read a children's book together with the child and work on the activities that teachers include in the pack. The materials can help families learn how to get their children interested in the story and help their children build reading comprehension.

In studies using similar techniques, researchers report that children were eager to take the materials home and parents were reminded about the importance of reading at home (Dever & Burts 2002). Rodríguez and colleagues (2008) propose that teachers have a role in promoting family stories as a means for cultivating children's literacy skills. Family stories include the retelling, over and over again, of funny or special incidents that happened to family members, as well as stories of fiction, such as favorite bedtime stories, passed down from one generation to the next. Literacy packs promote family stories by encouraging discussions between families and children centered around literature and stories.

Families read a children's book together with the child and work on the activities that teachers include in the pack.

Courtesy of the authors



Literacy pack created around *Bubba the Cowboy Prince: A Fractured Texas Tale*, by Helen Kettelman and James Warhola.

Typically, literacy packs are sent home midway through or near the end of a classroom unit. It takes about one month to rotate a literacy pack through the typical number of families in a classroom, so teachers will need to create nine or 10 packs, each related to a single book, during the year.

Teachers organize each family literacy pack to address specific learning goals, such as an understanding of word families, rhyming, or other components of literacy development. A family literacy pack usually includes the following items:

- A letter of instruction explaining how to use the pack, which serves as a checklist for the pack's contents.
- A children's book relating to the designated learning objectives.
- A teacher-constructed board game that relates to the book and the learning objectives.
- A logbook that family members use to record what they did with their child. The logbook stays in the pack so other families can read and add their comments. The logbook is not an evaluation tool for children's progress but a way families can share their experiences with the activities.

- A description of at least five learning experiences that extend the learning beyond the immediate objectives and into open-ended discovery activities.
- A written evaluation of the family literacy pack to help families apply criteria to analyze its usefulness.
- A suitable backpack or container with handles to transport the contents home and back to school. (The backpack should be lightweight so children can carry it easily.)

Since the use of the packs continues throughout the school year, and because the strategy may be unfamiliar to children and families, teachers can present the packs during the open house program for a new school year. Teachers can introduce the packs and review with the families how they can use them to support children's learning. Emphasize how families and children can do the activities together. It is important for children to understand how to play the board game—which they learn in the classroom as an extension of classroom activities—and be able to explain the instructions to families.

The purpose of a journal, or family log, is for families to write about their experiences using the literacy pack.

The family log provides feedback to the teacher and other families on the value of the literacy pack. The family log is also a good communication tool for the teacher and each child's family. The journal—a small- to medium-size spiral notebook—travels with the pack for the next family to read and add their individual comments.

How to create a family literacy pack

Teachers may find the following guidelines helpful when creating family literacy packs.

Identify the specific age-appropriate learning objectives for the literacy pack

The learning objectives may include specific literacy knowledge (such as concepts about print) or skills (hearing rhyming sounds), as well as content (subject area) knowledge. Teach-

ers may list learning goals children are working on now (or will be soon) and cover several content areas—some of which might be revisited every year to accomplish a spiraling curriculum effect. When children revisit a topic or text repeatedly over the years, the later experiences build on the earlier learning, creating context for deeper, richer, robust consideration of a concept.

Using high-interest children's literature can help young children make meaningful connections across various subject areas. For example, *Tops and Bottoms*, by Janet Stevens, provides a wealth of opportunities for enhancing learning in many areas of the early childhood curriculum. Teachers can build children's knowledge of social studies, language and literacy, math, and science using this story in which a poor hare outsmarts a rich, but lazy, bear through a bargain to keep either the tops or the bottoms of the vegetables grown in their shared garden (Cutler et al. 2003).

The journal—a small- to medium-size spiral notebook—travels with the pack for the next family to read and add their individual comments.

Select an age-appropriate book

School and community librarians, as well as your fellow teachers, are excellent sources for finding age-appropriate children's literature. The Family Involvement Network of Educators (2012), part of the Harvard Family Research Project, features a Storybook Corner with children's books about families engaging in schools and in learning together (www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/family-involvement-storybook-project-completed-project/storybook-corner). Find texts you like—your interest in a book is contagious.

Look for books published in other languages to support dual language learners. Packs might include translations of classics, like *Oso pardo, oso pardo, ¿qué ves ahí?* (*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*), by Bill Martin Jr, for families learning Spanish, or original Spanish texts like *Con cariño, Amalia* (*Love, Amalia*), by Alma Flor Ada.

Create the board game

To find ideas for creating games to use with the main idea for a literacy pack, teachers can review curriculum, visit libraries, attend workshops, ask other teachers, and build on the students' imaginations. Cutler and colleagues (2003) provide details on constructing math games that incorporate high-quality children's literature.



Literacy pack based on *Maybe You Should Fly a Jet! Maybe You Should Be a Vet!*, by Theodore LeSieg.

Courtesy of the authors



Courtesy of the authors

Going to Market, the board game built around *To Market, To Market*, by Anne Miranda.

Board games similar to Candyland or Monopoly are good universal examples. It is important for teachers to design games that fit easily into the pack. Use sturdy materials for the board. The board should include appropriate graphics, such as a vegetable garden background or context if using *Tops and Bottoms*, and be colorful and laminated. The pieces used in the game must be designed to support the theme of the game. For instance, in making a game for *The Napping House*, by Audrey Wood, the pieces would likely include the snoring granny, the dreaming child, the dozing dog, the snoozing cat, the slumbering mouse, and the wakeful flea. Include all pieces needed to play the game and ensure that the game and all the pieces are easily transportable. While playing *Going to Market*, children learn about healthy food choices as well as consequences for making poor choices. Children try to be the first to the market's checkout stand. They must overcome obstacles of poor eating habits and are rewarded by healthy eating habits. Two to six people can play this game.

Write a "Dear Family" letter

Explain in a letter the topic and objectives of the literacy pack and give written instructions for using it, along with a list of the contents. The letter should also include directions for playing the board game, a list of at least five additional related activities that the child and family can do together, instructions for using the family log, and a due date for when the literacy pack should be returned. Print the "Dear Family" letter on colored paper with attractive, attention-getting graphics. Laminate the letter, as it will travel to each child's home. Place the letter on top or just inside the front cover of the book, so the family members can't miss it.

The benefits of family literacy packs

Educating teachers in the development and use of family literacy packs has the potential to create ongoing links between home and school. The impact of parental involvement in

showing growth in student learning as well as improving behavior is well documented (Neuman 1996; Epstein 2011; Flouri & Buchanan 2004). Educators often view parental involvement as the family being directly involved just at school. Families do not always know how to extend learning at home and many times are caught between helping their child understand homework and stepping on the toes of the teacher who they believe wants homework done in a particular way. Family literacy packs are an interactive form of homework that involves a two-way communication with the family. The packs provide families with the knowledge they need to promote their children's learning in more authentic ways than formal parental training at the school.

Because the family reads the instructions to the activities and then responds in the journal about how it went with their child, teachers have an opportunity to truly understand the family's reactions, feedback, and reflections. Teachers can glean much insight from these written responses and learn about the family's views and understanding about their child's learning. The often repeated conversation between parent and child about "what happened in school" can also move to more specific conversations about the familiar areas of learning developed through the family literacy pack activities.

At the beginning of this article, we state that young children's involve-

Family literacy packs are an interactive form of homework that involves a two-way communication with the family.

ment with their families and teachers is one of the most important factors in creating a learning environment. Family literacy packs provide one type of involvement, as called for in the National PTA standards (National Parent Teacher Association 2009). The development and use of family literacy packs promote family interaction and can showcase young children's knowledge and learning to the family and to teachers. The packs also help build a partnership between parents and schools that allows for continued family learning and facilitates ongoing communication between parents and teachers about young children's academic progress. Finally, the family literacy packs hone relationships that promote and encourage parental involvement beyond the traditional homework routine (Kohn 2006). For example, using activities with multiple objectives across the curriculum demonstrates for families the truly

integrative nature of early childhood curriculum. "Integrating mathematics and literacy creates an interweaving of curriculum rather than a compartmentalizing of academic subjects" (Cutler et al. 2003, 22).

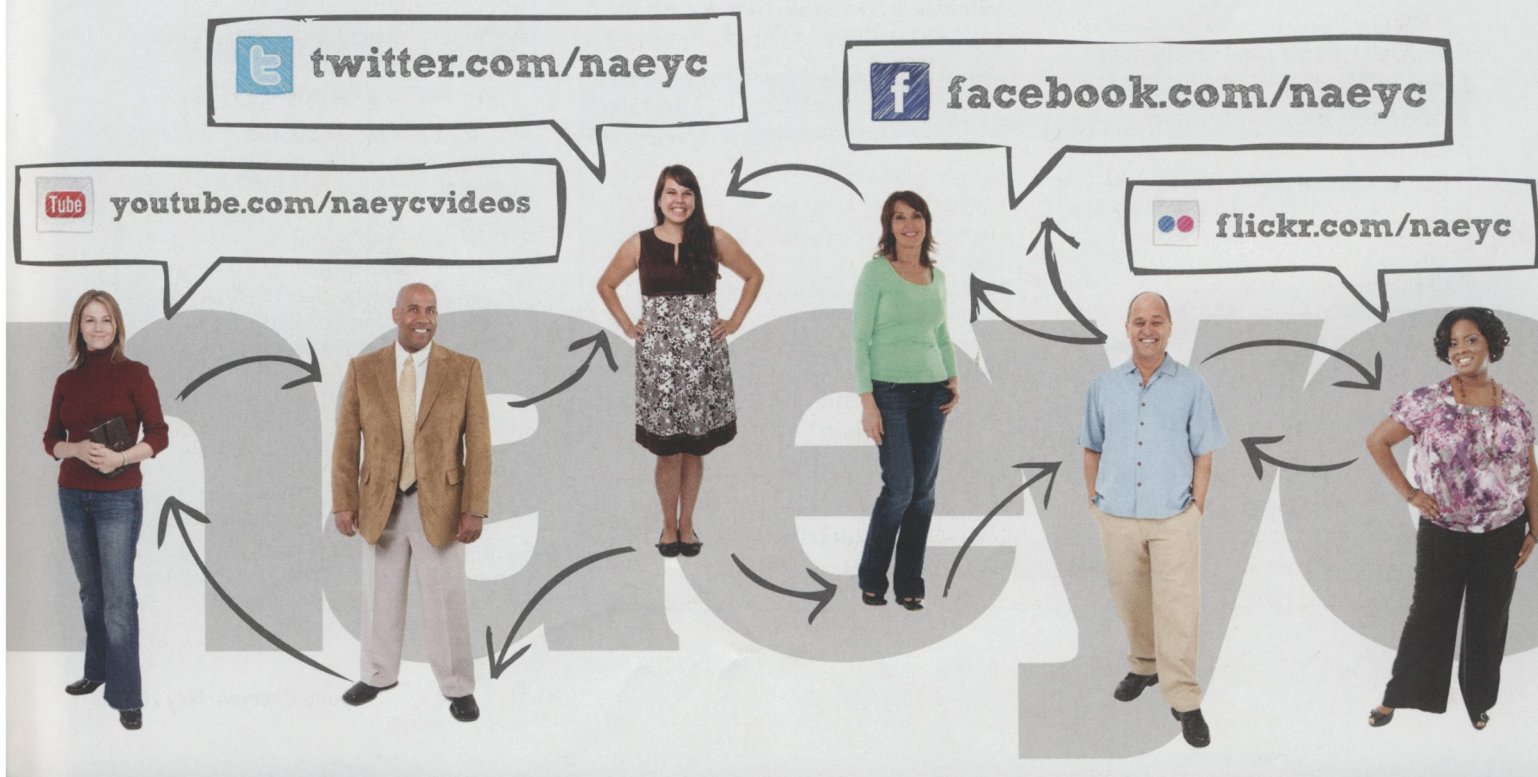
Why is this activity important to teacher educators?

Studies show that many early care and education teachers did not learn how to work with families from various social and cultural backgrounds in their teacher education programs (Ada & Campoy 2003). While steps are being taken to close this knowledge gap, students still report that learning about the importance of family involvement is a low priority in their teacher education (Epstein 2011). When teacher education courses include information and discussions about young children's families—especially those

from different cultural and social backgrounds—and provide specific activities, such as family literacy packs, that can be used to support connections between school and home, new teachers are better prepared to engage families in meaningful interactions. Many times, teachers have to leave personal beliefs and biases at the door to understand and include the changing family in today's society (Hedges & Gibbs 2005). The university has a unique responsibility to educate preservice teachers on the importance of tolerance as well as the task of educating students about cultures different from their own. Teaching preservice teachers to design family literacy packs bolsters this effort for the university. Our students leave us and enter diverse classrooms with a concrete reminder that families often welcome a teacher's efforts to cooperate and collaborate with them in the education of the child at home.

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Feedback from Teachers, Families, and Children

Teachers who have used family literacy packs in their schools report an increase in parental involvement with their students. One first-year teacher stated, "At first getting the packs together was time consuming, and I wondered if it was really worth it. However, after seeing how excited the children were to take the packs home, I knew I had found a winner."

Teachers are not the only ones who see the benefits of completing family literacy packs. Through the journaling process, parents report the benefits of using the packs. One parent said, "It was a break from the usual homework sent home. The directions explained what was to be done, and we could all play as a family. For once we were excited about homework."

Children provide some of the most compelling reasons for using family literacy packs. The teacher of one 6-year-old shared how the child rarely brought anything back from home once it was sent. Although hesitant about sending the pack home with him, the teacher saw the child's excitement grow as he waited his turn: "Each day he would ask me when it would be his turn. I had never seen him so excited about anything we had done before. I think hearing about the activities from the other children as they shared their experiences in class really got him excited about the pack."

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Suggested Children's Books for Family Literacy Packs

- Ada, A.F., & G.M. Zubizarreta. 2012. *Con cariño, Amalia*. New York: Atheneum.
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