

## SUPPLEMENT ARTICLE

# The Development of Romantic Relationships and Adaptations in the System of Peer Relationships

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**In this review, it is proposed that a systems approach to the study of the development of romantic relationships might enhance our understanding of the nature of social relationships, and the links between social relationships and individual psychosocial functioning. First, a selected literature review is provided on the normative development of romantic relationships during adolescence, antecedents of different romantic involvement pathways, and positive and negative qualities of these relationships. Second, the focus is placed on the how the development of romantic relationships occurs within existing systems of relationships including peer networks and close friendships. It is suggested that the development of romantic relationships may change the peer network and nature of relationships with friends and others, and particular types of transitions in social relationships will likely occur. The timing of these transitions and an understanding of the entire peer system as romantic relationships develop will likely improve our understanding of individual developmental processes such as identity formation and the development of externalizing and internalizing problems. Finally, it is proposed that adolescents are faced with a complicated task that includes developing romantic interests and relationships but managing their changing social networks. © Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2002**

## KEY WORDS:

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For most children, friendships are initially formed with peers of the same gender. During adolescence peer relationships become more intimate, and an increasing amount of leisure time is spent interacting with the peer group [1–3]. During middle adolescence the majority of young people form mixed-gender peer groups and close, dyadic relationships with romantic partners become increasingly important [4–7]. Young people report spending increasing amounts of their leisure time with their romantic partners or in cross-gender dyads as they mature [2,8–10].

These patterns have led theorists and researchers to suggest that the development of romantic relationships is a normative developmental task of adolescence [3,11–13]. Yet researchers have also suggested that adolescents begin dating and forming romantic relationships at a variety of ages. For example, Zimmer-Gembeck [14,15] reported that about 25% of adolescent females had their first dates at age  $\leq 13$  years, about 75% had dated by age 15 years, and 100% had their first date by age 18 years.

Research has also indicated that the negotiation of this task is accompanied by potential difficulties, especially for girls. For example, researchers studying dating aggression have found that female adolescents who had their first romantic relationships in

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early adolescence spent more time with romantic partners in early adolescence and who had more romantic partners during high school also experience more physical aggression, verbal aggression, and psychological maltreatment before the end of high school [16–18]. In fact, early and risky sexual involvement has been considered aspects of a syndrome of adolescent problem behavior, which includes delinquency as well as alcohol and drug use [19].

Dating more frequently, more experience with sexual activity, and low-quality romantic relationships in adolescence are also associated with lower future goals and negative affect in girls. Young females who were sexually active placed lower value on future academic achievement than those who were not sexually active [20] and Gargiulo et al. [21] reported that the importance of a career was negatively related to dating in females. Additionally, females who were sexually active were also more depressed and reported more stress [22].

Females who are engaged in problematic romantic relationships before or during high school may also be at particular risk for academic difficulties. Female high school students who reported they had experienced dating violence were more likely to be expelled or suspended from school, were less likely to enroll in college preparatory classes, had lower grade point averages, and were involved in fewer extracurricular activities, compared with girls who were not in violent relationships [17].

In sum, social networks expand and change from childhood through adolescence, but some adolescents begin to date and form romantic relationships earlier than others. In addition, there is mounting evidence that precocious sexual involvement and problems in romantic relationships during adolescence are associated with problems in other domains. Yet it is difficult to separate the development of romantic relationships from the system of relationships, especially relationships with peers. Taken together, it becomes important that researchers examine the impact of differential trajectories of dating and romantic involvement and quality on the entire system of relationships including interactions with peers, family members, and schools. For example, there has been little focus on whether adolescents with different levels of involvement in romantic relationships, and different qualities of these relationships in early, middle, or late adolescence, have different interactions with other peers and family and having differing peer social network structures. Most lacking is research that provides basic informa-

tion on whether and how the various aspects of the development of romantic relationships may impact previously existing peer relationships. Researchers have begun to identify problems associated with early dating and romantic involvement, especially early sexual behavior, but there remains little examination of how various aspects of the development of romantic relationships prompt changes in existing peer social networks and friendships and how all of these relationships in combination impact individual and social functioning. On the basis of this more systemic perspective on the development of romantic relationships, three major areas of research are needed.

First, research that will improve our understanding of the associations between emerging romantic relationships and changes in existing peer relationships should be conducted. Second, investigators should examine whether the age of onset of romantic relationships and different developmental pathways are associated with adolescents having different experiences managing and negotiating any resulting changes in their existing peer relationships. Third, researchers should investigate whether experiences managing changing peer social relationships as romantic relationships emerge and change might, in combination, have consequences for externalizing and internalizing disorders such as alcohol and drug use, depression, social anxiety, and loneliness.

In the coming sections, these future directions for research are developed after providing background on romantic relationships and friendships in adolescence. Initially, there is a brief review of the literature describing dating and romantic relationships during adolescence, summary of predictors of the developmental path of dating, and description of positive qualities and problems of romantic relationships during adolescence. Next, the important and positive functions of friends (usually of the same gender) during adolescence, the positive functions that friends may play during the emergence of romantic relationships, and how the emergence of romantic relationships might change existing friendships are summarized. Then some future directions that might extend the understanding of the development of romantic relationships within a social context at various ages, and how the timing and patterns of changes in peer social relationships might be linked to identity development and externalizing and internalizing disorders are discussed. Finally, reasons that early involvement in romantic relationships might not be optimum and the developmental task of establishing romantic relationships might be bet-

ter conceptualized as a task that includes maintaining friendships are discussed.

### *Romantic Relationships During Adolescence*

#### **Onset and Length of Romantic Relationships**

Dating appears to be a highly sought-after and normative behavior of adolescents living in Western industrialized cultures. Phinney et al. [23] reported that the average age of the first date was 15 years for nonblack females and 16 years for black females, and Wright [24] defined early daters as those dating before age 14 years. In contrast, other researchers [25] reported that most adolescents had gone steady before their 15th birthday. Yet about 30% of adolescent females report very little involvement with romantic partners during high school [15]. These varying statistics are partially a result of differing definitions and interpretations of terms such as dating, going steady, romantic involvement, and romantic relationships but may also illustrate that patterns of dating and romantic involvement differ across various contexts and may depend on many factors such as gender, race/ethnicity and school norms.

The romantic relationships of early and middle adolescents are fairly short in duration, but the average adolescent is involved in serial steady relationships [14,15,26,27]. For example, among 15-year-olds residing in Canada, romantic relationships continued an average of about 4 months [27], and in a study of adolescents residing in the northwestern United States, females reported an average of four partners before and/or during high school and an average length of a relationship was 8.6 months [14]. In summary, about 70% to 90% of males and females form steady romantic relationships by the time they are in their last year of high school, and most relationships are fairly short in duration [15,25,28].

#### **Influences on the Developmental Path of Dating Behavior**

There also seems to be variation in patterns of development of romantic relationships among adolescents that is influenced by individual and social factors. For example, female adolescents who date earlier also mature earlier, are more popular, and have more male friends. In addition, the level of dating and sexual behavior differ by gender and are influenced by the importance individuals place on dating (a combination of measures of the need to be

social, need to have a partner, and a need for companionship), involvement in mixed-gender peer groups, and the influence of the friendship group [5,11,21,23,27–32].

#### **Qualities of Romantic Relationships During Adolescence**

The majority of research on cross-gender relationships during adolescence within developmental psychology has focused on the normative development of these relationships and the positive qualities and benefits that these relationships can provide. However, studies of marital partners by psychologists, sociologists, public health experts, and others have illuminated high rates of negative interactions between romantic partners.

#### **Positive Qualities of Romantic Relationships**

Similar to the function of same-gender friendships, romantic relationships are sources of intimacy, companionship, and support [3,33,34]. However, some functions of romantic relationships are qualitatively different from those of same-gender friendships including the functions of sexual experience and courtship [7,33].

As adolescents grow older, the functions of dating and romantic relationships may begin to broaden or change. For example, adolescents in grade 6, grade 11, and college reported the functions of dating in their lives. Adolescents in grades 6 and 11 perceived dating as a means of recreation, intimacy, and status, but adolescents in college were less likely to date for status achievement and more likely to date for recreation, intimacy, companionship, and socialization [35]. Interviews have revealed that care and commitment in romantic relationships become more important as adolescents grow older but other aspects become less important (e.g., companionship) [36].

#### **Negative Interactions Between Romantic Partners**

The emergence of romantic relationships in adolescence can also involve experiences that are negative and distressing. Qualitative interview studies with diverse groups of adolescents [37–39] provide evidence that the transition to dating and the role restructuring that accompanies this transition can be distressing to young people. In addition, rejection and breakups are often repeatedly experienced as romantic relationships come and go during adoles-

cence. These experiences can challenge adolescents' coping skills and self-concepts. In fact, Monroe et al. [40] reported that a romantic breakup in adolescence can trigger the first onset of depressive disorder, and in a separate study, thinking about relationship disturbances was linked to depressed mood, especially among girls [41]. Other research provides evidence that some of this distress may be the result of conflicts that include physical aggression, psychological maltreatment, and/or verbal aggression between dating partners [42].

Some adolescents report that they experience a range of emotionally hurtful and physically aggressive behaviors in their dating relationships including being called names, slapped and pushed, or threatened with knives and guns [16,17,43]. In a review of research on violence between dating partners [42], the mean self-reported prevalence of physical dating violence among high school students was 22%; reported prevalence estimates have ranged from 10% to 40% [17].

Psychological maltreatment or verbal aggression between dating partners is also fairly common in the dating relationships of young people. Kasian and Painter [44] reported five forms of psychological abuse among unmarried college students including isolation and emotional control, self-esteem, jealousy, verbal abuse/intimidation, and emotional/physical withdrawal. Approximately 19% of undergraduate females were found to have two or more psychological maltreatment scores at least one standard deviation above the mean.

### Concurrent Positive Qualities and Problems in Romantic Relationships

Few researchers have simultaneously assessed both positive qualities of adolescent romantic relationships and negative interactions that can occur between romantic partners. These experiences may seem somewhat paradoxical, but they may not be in opposition. Young people have reported both high levels of positive qualities such as intimacy, companionship, and nurturance and negative qualities such as psychological maltreatment and physical aggression within the same relationships. For example, social support and conflict within romantic relationships have been reported as highly positively correlated ( $r = .48$ ) [29]. In addition, Raymond and Bruschi [45] reported late adolescent females' relationships with men as high or low in psychological abuse and high or low in kindness. They identified relationships that fit all four categories. Although the

majority of partners were reported to provide high amounts of kindness and little psychological abuse (43%), 27% of relationships were categorized as having low levels of kindness and high levels of abuse, and 16% of relationships were both high in kindness and abuse.

### *Friendships During Adolescence*

In general, the development of intimate close relationships with peers can play an important role in individuals' social development [46–48]. Youniss and Smollar [34] hypothesized that friendships with peers have specific socialization roles that are different from the roles of parents. Parents primarily influence young people's views of social reality and future plans, and relations with friends aid in the acquisition of social skills and may also provide the chance to establish independence or autonomy and demonstrate adultlike behaviors and roles [46,47,49,50].

Sullivan [51], Erikson [52], and Douvan and Adelson [4] proposed that close peer relationships, especially those with same-gender friends, were crucial to autonomy and identity formation because it is within these relationships that individuals learn how their opinions and decisions compare with those of their peers. These theorists believed that comparisons validate and enrich one's perceptions resulting in a stronger sense of self, and improved behavioral and emotional autonomy. Current theorists still agree that friendships and belonging to peer groups facilitate individuality and autonomy, and others [49,53] propose that close friendships facilitate the achievement of social and self-identities that support later healthy romantic relationships.

Although it has not been concluded that healthy social and emotional development cannot occur without close same-gender friendships, one's positive status and relations with peers during childhood and adolescence has been associated with later positive adult functioning [54–56]. Support from friends has also been found to be negatively related to depressed affect and has been found to be particularly beneficial to those individuals who have high family stress [57].

Conversely, a lack of peer companionship has been associated with serious social and emotional difficulties, and low-quality relationships, particularly relationships marked by rejection, aggression, or maltreatment, can also be quite harmful [47,56,58,59]. Specifically, not having any friends or

being rejected by peers is related to adjustment difficulties including early school dropout, delinquent behavior, and psychological disorder [47,54,56,60].

### *A Systems Approach to Understanding the Development of Romantic Relationships*

Recent progress in social developmental theory has recognized the multiple social systems that interact and mutually influence individual psychosocial development. These theories are broad and extend to our understanding of many social systems such as the family, peers, neighborhoods, and culture [61]. Yet some theorists have paid particular attention to the implications of a systems approach for the study of development of intimate relationships and peer networks during adolescence [6,49,62,63]. For example, researchers have examined the changes in existing peer relationships that occur as romantic relationships emerge and develop. In most cases, change has been operationalized as change in the amount of time spent with friends, change in observed companions, and change in positive and other qualities of social interactions. For example, after interviewing adolescents, Aneshensel and Gore [38] reported that young people begin to curtail the amount of leisure time they spend with friends to accommodate developing romantic relationships and Montemayor and van Komen [64] observed that peer group size outside the school setting decreased between age 13 years and 19 years from an average of three members to two members and became more heterosexual.

On the basis of data from a longitudinal study of almost 10,000 randomly selected high school students in Scotland, Hendry et al. [8] reported that females, compared with males, and individuals in lower socioeconomic status groups, compared with other groups, spent more time with boyfriends or girlfriends earlier in the life course. However, the general trend was for time with same-gender friends to decline beginning in middle adolescence with a corresponding increase in the amount of time spent with boyfriends or girlfriends. Young women were the most likely to sacrifice time spent with close female friends for boyfriends. Females who spent a lot of time with boyfriends were less involved with their best female friends. Zimmer-Gembeck [15] reported that about one-half of adolescent females rapidly increased time with romantic partners and decreased time with best female friends during high school, and another one-fourth spent almost equal

amounts of time with romantic partners and best female friends but also spent less time with friends than other females throughout high school. The remaining one-fourth of females spent very little time with romantic partners throughout high school.

In a cross-sectional study of adolescents in grades 7 to 12, Laursen and Williams [9] reported that, among adolescents with romantic partners, interaction with friends in a typical day substantially declined with age. On average, males spent the most time with romantic partners, but females spent similar amounts of time with romantic partners and friends. In addition, romantic partners seem to move up in the hierarchy of relationships. Relationships with mothers were chosen as the closest among adolescents in grade 9, friends were closest in grades 10 and 11, and romantic partners were most often chosen as the closest among adolescents in grade 12.

It is possible that the task of developing romantic relationships and reducing time with close friends could result in conflict between friends and leave some adolescents feeling abandoned [4,37,64,65]. For example, Douvan and Adelson [4] reported that this occurred between female friends as they began to form cross-gender relationships. They found that girls who were becoming involved in romantic relationships were having more conflicts with their friends over feelings of competition, jealousy, and disloyalty. Shulman [66] described three main reasons that friendships between adolescents were terminated: a conflict, a mistrust, or personal changes such as intrusion of a third person like a boyfriend or girlfriend.

In summary, young people have been found to change their levels of involvement with friends as romantic partners become increasingly important. These changes even reduced levels of involvement with close same-gender friends; these changes may be distressing to some adolescents. On average, changes began to occur during middle adolescence and became most visible by about grade 12.

### *Future Directions*

#### **A Systems Approach to the Study of the Development of Romantic Relationships**

Future research should continue to focus on how the development of romantic relationships changes existing social relationships among adolescents including the quantity of close friends and structure of peer groups, and the nature and quality of interactions with close friends. This should include an emphasis

on whether the establishment of romantic relationships changes the way adolescents perceive the nature of their same-gender friendships. For example, it will be important to determine whether the same relationship characteristics influence adolescents' perceptions of same-gender friendships as intimate or close before and after the development of romantic relationships. Does the initiation and development of romantic relationships begin to change adolescents' understanding of intimacy and nurturance in other relationships? After romantic relationships develop, are friendships based less on companionship and time spent together, and more on some other markers of close relationships such as being available to provide support in times of need? In particular, future investigations should focus on not only how the development of romantic relationships changes the types and nature of interactions with friends but also how romantic relationships of differing quality may impact existing relationships with friends and peer networks in different ways, and, together, may impact psychosocial functioning. Additionally, although a systems approach to the study of the development of romantic relationships is emphasized by focusing on romantic relationships as embedded within a system of peer relationships, it is recognized that adolescents also exist within family and other systems that cannot be ignored when studying the development of romantic relationships.

### **The Relatedness Orientation Transition**

In the future, a particular emphasis should be placed on determining whether adolescents who initiate their first romantic relationships at different times in the life course (e.g., early, average, or later) experience different challenges in their changing social networks. There should be at least two goals of this research. First, it will be important to determine whether the sheer amount of change in friendships and romantic partners is greater for some adolescents than for others. Second, to date there has been little research on the developmental course of romantic relationships and whether or how they come to take precedence over friendships. I call this change in precedence the relatedness orientation transition (RT) [15]. Future research should investigate the emotional experiences of adolescents while they are negotiating the development of romantic relationships and determine whether adolescents experience this change in precedence and whether this change is recognized and perceived as challenging.

It will be important to understand both the average adolescent's experience of the RT and the variety of experiences. For instance, the RT may be more difficult for those who initiate romantic relationships earlier or later than most of their close peers (e.g., more emotional distressing or marked by more unstable and less intimate friendships). Additionally, the RT may be gradual for some adolescents and abrupt for others, and adolescents may have developed a variety of strategies to accomplish the developmental task of romantic relationships and manage the RT.

Part of the experiences of the RT that should be a significant part of further research includes documenting the variety of negotiation strategies adolescents use to modify and reorganize their peer relationships as they become involved with romantic partners. It will be important to investigate what these strategies may be and how individuals may use different strategies. For example, some adolescents may have found particular methods for integrating romantic partners into their existing social networks that provide them a greater variety of positive relationships. Such strategies might include promoting friendships between their partner and their friends or attempting to persuade their friends to date their partners' friends. Other adolescents might not have found strategies that allow them to maintain the same level of interaction and involvement with their friends while developing romantic relationships. One goal of understanding the variety of strategies that are used to negotiate the developmental task of romantic relationships should be to determine whether there are benefits or risks associated with certain strategies. Knowing the benefits and risks will help us provide suggestions that might assist adolescents as they approach and manage this task.

### *Peer Relationships and Individual Psychosocial Development*

The development of romantic relationships and associated changes or difficulties that occur in existing social relationships may have important consequences for adolescent development and functioning including the exploration and commitment process of identity formation, depression, loneliness, and problem behaviors.

### **Identity Formation**

Sullivan [51] believed that same-gender friendships were particularly crucial to the development of iden-

tity formation because friendships provide encounters with differences that enrich one's perceptions and sense of self. Others suggest that ending these friendships prematurely or initiating romantic relationships too early may limit individual development. For example, Samet and Kelly [67] discussed how emotional involvement in romantic relationships before emotional maturity may serve to create a premature crystallization of identity, "hindering an actualization of one's full potential with a variety of people" (p. 244).

In fact, maintaining friendships may be especially crucial for the identity development of females. For example, Hartup [47] proposed that the equal balance of power in peer relationships provides practice in sharing opinions relatively freely and making independent decisions. Hence, peers are assumed to have similar power. However, boys reported that they experience an increase in relative power in romantic relationships as they age, but girls reported a decrease [68]. This may reflect other gender differences in experiences within these relationships. For example, there is evidence that females, compared with males, may not experience the same opportunities for identity exploration within romantic relationships. In a study of late adolescent females' identity exploration, the level of intimacy in romantic relationships and identity exploration were not associated, but level of intimacy with female friends was positively associated with identity exploration [69]. In sum, the greatest opportunity for identity exploration may not be within romantic relationships for females but may be promoted within close friendships with other females. Early involvement in steady relationships, especially if those relationships reduce their involvement with female friends, could affect females' future personal and social development.

### Problems in Psychosocial Functioning

Focusing on girls, Douvan and Adelson [4] wrote that "once a girl begins to date, her interests change and she finds little to share with girlfriends who have not yet entered the dating phase" (p. 215). Being out of sync with the majority of peers, as may occur in those with early or late initiation of romantic relationships, may leave adolescents feeling they do not have much in common with their friends. For example, Zimmer-Gembeck [14] found that most females (73%) who experienced the RT along with the majority of their female peers had at least one stable best female friend throughout high school, yet those who experienced the RT early or late were less

likely to have had any stable best female friends (63% and 52%, respectively).

In general, changing friendship groups may result in the reduced possibility of having close confidants and companions of the same age and gender. It is possible that little or very high levels of involvement with romantic partners accompanied by exceptional changes in friendships, including loss of these friendships, may put adolescents at risk for a range of difficulties such as depression, loneliness, and problem behaviors. There is some evidence that this may occur, including evidence that having support from friends is important for emotional functioning, and that the early initiation of romantic relationships is associated with difficulties. Support from friends has been found to be negatively related to depressed affect during the adolescent years [57]. Wright [24] reported that individuals who began dating early (before age 14 years) were also more likely to use alcohol and drugs and participate in delinquent behavior. Others have also found that early and more frequent dating were associated with more alcohol and drug use [70], and individuals who began dating late (16 years or after) had more suicidal thoughts [24]. Yet no research has investigated whether these psychosocial difficulties are associated with changing friendship groups and whether the combination of romantic involvement and changes in friendships place adolescents at particular risk for externalizing and internalizing behaviors. However, there is some evidence that females who date early engage in problem behavior because they date older males and become associated with an older (presumably new) peer group [50].

A future research goal will be to determine whether patterns of involvement with romantic partners, changing aspects of friendships, and emotional experiences accompanying the RT might improve our ability to predict concurrent and later individual and social functioning. In particular, future research should examine the entire peer system during the development of romantic relationships and investigate whether early initiation and serial involvement in romantic relationships accompanied by significant changes in existing peer relationships is associated with earlier and increased use of alcohol and drugs, delinquency, depression, loneliness, and other difficulties.

### Conclusion

Overall, the initiation and development of romantic relationships usually takes place in a context of

existing peer relationships and close friendships. Because friendships serve so many important and positive functions during adolescence [6,33,71,72], it is likely that changes in close friendships that occur in conjunction with, and may result from, the development of romantic relationships may impact the nature and opportunities for adolescents' intimacy and support from individuals in their social networks and ultimately effect their social and self development. Therefore, the strategies that adolescents use to manage and maintain their existing close peer relationships as they initiate romantic relationships may also have important consequences for their future psychosocial development. In fact, maintaining close friendships may be most important for females because evidence suggests that changes in the peer social world during adolescence would be expected to have the greatest impact [7,33,46,48,64,67,73-77].

Maintaining close friendships also might help young adolescents negotiate the task of the development of romantic relationships. Some researchers have suggested that early friendships are a context in which adolescents learn about and practice intimacy, reciprocity, nurturance, conflict resolution, and power [4,51,71]. In other words, qualities of early friendships may serve as a rough template that guide their expectations of future relationships and the qualities they search for in romantic relationships. Additionally, friends may provide concrete help with the specifics of the task of romantic relationships, such as advice on selection of a partner, feedback about the choice, support during conflict and break-ups, and encouragement of dissolution of unhealthy relationships.

Overall, females, and probably all adolescents, may be at a disadvantage if they are on the fast track toward serious involvement in committed relationships before they have had a chance to develop sufficient emotional maturity and senses of their own identities within same-gender friendships and they do not have the continued assistance of friends as they develop romantic relationships. In fact, early exclusive romantic relationships may limit the chances of experiencing and negotiating through a greater diversity of possible relationships. This may reduce the chance to develop broader understandings of the social world, fully develop independent and stable sense of selves, and be emotionally and behaviorally autonomous young adults. As a whole, it seems that promoting and maintaining close friendships both before and during the development of romantic relationships may be particularly impor-

tant for optimizing adolescent social and self-development and may be especially important for girls. As a result, more research is needed to understand how females as well as males manage their close peer relationships as they undertake the developmental task of romantic relationships. In the future, it may then be possible to link these processes to subsequent social and self development.

When conceptualized in this way, the developmental task facing adolescents may not be best characterized only in terms of the development of romantic relationships. Instead, the developmental task may be to find a way to become involved with romantic partners and at the same time maintain and value close friendships. If so, then this task involves a complex negotiation, which may result in different patterns of involvement with friends and romantic partners, and may change over time and with increasing involvement with partners. Future research is needed to understand these changes and the variety of strategies adolescents use to accomplish this task as well as to understand the ways to accomplish this task that optimize identity development; minimize internalizing and externalizing disorders; and promote a variety of positive, supportive, and beneficial social relationships that are maintained during and after adolescence.

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