

COMMUNICATING SENSITIVELY WITH CHILDREN

This document is intended for the use of social workers, Child Welfare officers, Probation officers, Child Welfare Committee Members, and all those working directly with children in Child Care Institutions. This is not an exhaustive document on working with children sensitively but is to be used as illustrative.

INTRODUCTION

"It's important to make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" – Barack Obama.

A child starts communicating with the world from the moment they are born. A child's first cry is a message that '*I* am here'. Although the child doesn't learn to talk so soon or develop vocabulary, the child constantly communicates their needs, discomforts, and pleasures. Communication is key to the development of an individual and a child's development is based on the interaction with the adults around them.

This document is based on the observations of Prerana's counselor while working with children and caregivers in Child Care Institutions (CCI) in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Children in CCIs perceive a caregiver to be a loving and empathizing adult. They are likely to have experienced unhealthy relationships and trauma in the past. They see a caregiver as a presence who helps them live in a safe place and understands their needs. Thus, a caregiver does not only provide for their necessities but also helps them develop a perception of themselves, and the world around them. However, while being responsible for this, caregivers often tend to commit some unintentional fallacies in communicating with the child.

The document has been created to help the caregivers understand how they can sensitively communicate with children by being mindful of the child's needs and emotions. Its main objectives are listed as follows -

- It will walk the reader through various communication strategies that can be used in the field.
- It may also provide insights into the thought processes of children and the way they perceive the world around them.
- It will help the reader understand the role that emotions play in a child's life and how unconditional positive regard can help in fulfilling the child's emotional needs.

THE VOCABULARY OF EMOTIONS

Sensitive communication with a child requires the inclusion of the vocabulary of emotions. There are many emotions that human beings experience throughout their lives. It is very important to teach and empower children to use words to express their emotions.

Children are likely to identify only a few emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger. However, they lack the vocabulary to express other emotions such as shame, guilt, disgust, hurt, fear, jealousy, envy, irritation, discomfort, unease, worry, nervousness, etc. These emotions play a significant role in our lives, however, if the child is not aware of these emotions, they will be unable to discuss them. The caregiver needs to help the child develop this vocabulary. They can talk to the child using this vocabulary.

If a child says that his/her friend is no more their friend and has made new friends, we can address this by stating that 'you seem to be hurt that your friend is ignoring you'.

If the child says that 'I stay away or get out of my house when my parents fight with each other' we can rephrase it by saying 'I hear you feel scared to see your parents angry and so you decide to leave the house when they fight'



It is often observed that children do not respond when confronted with their mistakes. Caregivers often lose patience with a child who is quiet when asked, 'Why did you do it?' 'Are you here to learn to steal/fight/abuse?' Here the child is likely to feel ashamed of his/her actions. While working in such a situation, it helps to put their feelings into words. We could say 'your silence indicates that you are embarrassed/ashamed of your behavior. If I were in your place, I too would have felt embarrassed /ashamed'. We can also state the feeling of shame by saying, 'I am embarrassed that I reacted inappropriately in the situation'

If a child complains (in anger) about another child's inappropriate actions like taking off their pants, touching others inappropriately or has witnessed some sexual activity, we could reply by saying, ' It must be an annoying/disgusting, to experience such a thing' or help them use their own feelings by probing, 'It was unacceptable, could you tell me what you felt other than anger?' Children are likely to say, 'Chee!', 'Ganda!', 'Eee!' We can help the child put a name to the feeling by saying, 'You mean to say it was annoying/disgusting/uncomfortable'.

DISREGARDING THE CHILD'S EMOTIONS

Somethings affect children more than adults because adults have adapted to certain challenges of life with age. It is important to remember that children may feel overwhelmed in certain situations which may not seem so to an adult. When faced with such situations, it is recommended to empathize with the child and avoid disregarding their emotions.

When a child is crying and sad for not being able to meet their family/go out with friends, instead of saying, 'Why are you crying?; 'Didn't you just meet them a few days back? stop crying', 'Crying is not going to help' you can use a statement like, 'I understand you are upset, it must be hard for you.'



Laughing, smiling, smirking, or saying '*I will look into it later*' while the child is expressing their concerns should be to be avoided. Such reactions portray that the caregiver finds the concerns expressed by the child to be trivial and unimportant. It may also affect the child's self-esteem to a great extent, as the child may hesitate to express their needs.

Children value promises, and they believe in the promises made by adults. Caregivers may make promises to the child about simple things – 'I will get back to you about your holiday' or 'I will provide you the stationery you requested in the evening'. It is possible to forget about such promises or commitments made to the child. Besides, culturally we believe that adults are not answerable to children and that if a child gets any perks from us as caregivers, they should accept it as a favor and not ask for more. These preconceived notions create a feeling of anger towards the child when they come to the caregiver follow-up on the promise we made – 'Why is this so urgent for you?'. 'Can't it wait for a day or two? – statements such as these not only dishearten the child but create a distorted perception towards commitment. If the adult has failed to deliver on the promise, then efforts should be put into making the child before even reasoning with the child. 'I am sorry that I forgot the promise, I understand it is important for you'; 'I had a busy day, and it completely slipped out of my mind, I am sorry, let me see what I can do', such statements are reassuring to the child without making them feel unimportant.

Children are taught rules to follow them in their daily lives. However, it is observed that they often rote learn a written set of rules but are unable to follow them. For example, when a child is asked to recall a rule after having a physical fight with another child, he says "Marna nahi hai, Gali Nahi dena hai, Ulta Nahi bolna hai, chidhana nahi nahi.. (I am not supposed to hit, abuse, tease..)" This reflects that the child has only memorized the rules but does not act on them.

This can be dealt with by introducing the rules in different forms such as stories, songs, puppet shows, etc. Focusing on the purpose of the rules helps them understand the logic behind the rule. It also helps if the words are modified on a timely basis. For example, from *"no hitting"* to *"it hurts when you hit"* to *"I don't want to harm someone"* can help develop intent in a child.

KEEPING PREJUDICES ASIDE

While working with children and adolescents, one comes across many different decisionmaking strategies and problem-solving ideas. It is likely to differ from the caregiver's ways of handling a situation. It is important to keep in mind that the caregiver is empowering the child to deal with their problems on their own instead of imbibing their strategies. We must develop a sense of agency among children. We must allow children to lead their learning.

'You should have left if you thought it was not safe to be around these people'; 'You should have informed me, before dealing it by yourself'; 'You should say no when someone offers you to smoke' - in such suggestions, we try to only direct the child towards a particular situation, without giving them a chance to think it through. Instead, if we say things like -'Did you feel stuck in an unsafe situation?' 'What made you stay in the situation which was dangerous for you?'; 'Things like smoking are novel experiences, however, do you remember when we talked about how it is addictive and what it does to your body? '- it helps them think about their problem situation better and also helps us know of their understanding of the situation.

When the child makes a choice that is considered risky, it is important to discuss the sequence of thoughts and efforts that they have put to make that choice. If done otherwise (telling them what is risky and what isn't) only helps them consider their present choice to be 'wrong' and doesn't empower them to put the same efforts of decision-making for their other problems. To understand this let's look at a few examples.

• A 9-year-old boy from a night care center befriends an unknown man in the garden while playing. He also chooses to go out with him for an ice cream treat which the person offered. Instead of saying 'Why did you go out with an unknown person?' or scaring the boy by saying 'What if he would have kidnapped you?', help the child think of the things he thought before speaking to this person. 'What were you thinking when you met this person?'; 'What do you think this uncle wanted in a garden?'; 'Did you find it odd that this unknown uncle wanted to be your friend and was extra nice to take you for an ice cream treat?'

A 13-year-old boy verbally abuses and has a physical fight with his (peer in the Children's Home)classmate. In such a situation avoid giving direct advice like 'Do not hit anyone again' or 'You are not supposed to abuse or hit anyone'. Help the child brainstorm of the things he could do, like, 'Was it the best way to deal with the situation?'; 'Did you intend to hurt your friend /boy/classmate by doing these things'; 'Were you happier when you removed your anger on your friend/boy /classmate? Sometimes children feel that hitting and hurling abuse is the best way to deal with the situation, and they are likely to say, 'I wanted to hurt him/her'. At such times it helps if the caregiver directs the child to perceive the situation with empathy and logic by saying, 'Think of yourself in your friends/boy/classmate's place, would you like it if someone treated you that way?'; 'I understand you felt hurt/angry/frustrated, can you now think of another way to release your anger or frustration?'; 'I understand that you wanted to teach him/her a lesson, do you think your hitting and abusing helped him/her understand that he/she was wrong?'

- A 15-year-old lies about her whereabouts. It helps to understand what made her lie instead of getting furious at her. ' *I know that you lied, but were you not comfortable telling me what were you up to?'; 'Did you think you were doing something wrong that you lied?'*
- A 7-year-old girl steals her partner's pencil box. Help her think of the aftereffects of stealing, Don't label the child as a 'thief'.' 'How will you feel when your partner comes to know that you stole her pencil box?'; 'Are you proud of what you did?' Talk to her about why it's wrong to take things that don't belong to you. Help the child avoid situations where s/he feels the need to lie. For example, if you ask the child if s/he stole the color box, s/he might feel tempted to lie. To avoid this situation you could just say, 'I see we have one less color box. Let's try and find it '.

In such situations, it is important to keep in mind that the child's action differs from the child as a person. It becomes tricky to distinguish the action from the person but two things can help practice this.

1. Express concern or disapproval of the behavior while accepting the child unconditionally

2 Express love and respect to the child, no matter what they behave in an instance. Consistent positive acceptance and respect can help the child introspect on their actions and may lead to certain significant transformations.

LEARNING THROUGH OBSERVATION

Children are considered to be vicarious learners, i.e. they learn through observation. Therefore, how the adult responds to a stressful situation is observed and imitated. Hence it is important to be mindful of how one reacts to a stressful situation in the presence of a child.

It is helpful to let the child know that you are under stress and are not able to come up with a solution. This helps the child to not only understand that stress is a normal phenomenon experienced by people but also that even adults find it hard to deal with some issues at times. Although talking to a child about stress could be tricky, we need to communicate it to them in age-appropriate language.

Displacing our anger towards children comes very naturally as children are easy targets and they often do not retaliate. For example, when our boss yells at us we displace our anger at children who might be just be playing loudly. Children in such situations feel targeted and also learn to react with other weaker targets likewise. It's important to model calmness in front of children. They are watching what you say and do all the time

When you have had a long and hard day at work, and the child insists on spending time and talking. You can communicate this to an adolescent by saying 'I know that you want to spend time with me. However, I believe I won't be able to give my energy and complete attention to you at this moment since I have had a long day. Can we do this tomorrow, after I clear my mind a little?'. However, with a younger child, you can say something like, 'I would love to play with you, however, can we do it tomorrow as I have had a tough day and need to rest it out today.' With a child above 12 years who says she wants to talk to just when you are about to leave for home after a day's work, you can also say 'I am a bit tired and I have to reach home by 6 pm to take my son to a doctor if it is not an emergency can we talk tomorrow?'

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CHILDREN OBSERVE DISSONANCE

When adults don't follow certain values that are taught to children, they tend to feel confused. For example, when an adult lies in the presence of a child or when adults break a promise or a commitment it poses a question to the child's understanding of values.

When such a situation occurs, the adult needs to sit and talk to the child about such dissonances. For example, talk about the purpose of the lying and the intention behind it and talk about how you could have misjudged a situation to promise something unrealistic.

Adults often talk disrespectfully about others whom they do not like, when a child notices this, they often start to become disrespectful to others for which they are reprimanded. If the child has heard you speak ill of another person (which needs to be avoided as much as possible), you can sit with the child and talk about why you reacted in such away. This conversation should not influence the child's perspective about the person.

If the child hears you speaking ill of a co-worker, you can always use statements like, 'In my observation, I have noticed..,'; 'My experience with them is...' It is important to always end the discussion by an apology for your words/behavior and make it clear that your experiences are going to be different from those of the child.

We often ask children not to yell when they get angry but we do the same when we get angry. It is always best to avoid confrontation when angry, but, if such a situation does take place, you need to make sure you admit to the child that you lost control over yourself.

Explanations are often given when there is a need to justify one's actions. When we don't follow certain values, it is always important to apologize without an explanation, as it gives a message to the child that even they could break certain values and have a reason for it.

LABELING A CHILD AS GOOD OR BAD

There is no such thing as a bad or a good person, rather there are bad or good choices that the person makes. It applies to children as well. When a child makes a mistake, refrain from labeling the child as 'bad' but also refrain from idealizing a child's behavior as 'good'.

Caregivers need to instill the importance of choices in the child and help them understand the appropriate and inappropriate choices that they make. It has been observed that when a child is labeled as 'bad', they start devaluing oneself, leading to lower self-esteem. This is likely to cause a feeling of frustration towards oneself. On the other hand, when a child is idealized by labels such as 'good child' or 'best' it creates a feeling of superiority and the child is likely to devalue others. Help the child understand that they do not define them and that the choices can be modified or rectified.

When a child has a history of oppositional behaviors like abusing, hitting, stealing, etc, instead of perceiving the child as a 'bad child' or a 'problem child' we as caregivers need to explore their reasons behind such actions. When we perceive them as bad, our actions towards them become biased. We are likely to express our disdain indirectly, which would possibly worsen the child's behavior.



We give positive reinforcement to children who behave well or achieve something. While giving such reinforcements, we need to keep in mind that such reinforcement need not be continuous. When the child receives such praise in partial schedules and his or her behavior is recognized socially (in important meetings), the child feels appreciated and is likely to be grounded.

When we work with adolescents trying to make career choices, the child will likely switch from one stream to another even after a long procedure of admission. It could get immensely frustrating for the caregivers to empathize with the child, thus creating a negative bias towards the child. However, when we look at the other side, it is a problem of decision making and commitment. When allowed to discuss their limitations, they are likely to come up with a favorable choice and less likely to feel judged.

It is easy to tag a child as good, smart, bad, mischievous but difficult to examine their choices. For example, when a child shows a drawing, we often quickly react by saying, 'oh wow! Such a nice drawing, very good', though it is well-meaning to say that to a child, it is important for a child to know what is good about the drawing. We can always take a minute to observe it and praise the child's thought behind the drawing, like, 'I like the way you have used the different colors, makes the picture look bright'; 'I see you have used your observation of nature, with those intricate detailing of strokes'. These statements merely don't label their work as good but also helps them understand their strengths.

When there are a lot of complaints about the child from school, telling the child that they are bad doesn't help the child in improving their behavior. While talking to a child in such situations you can discuss the choices that the child made in each situation, 'What made you react rudely with your teacher?' 'Does having fun include harming school property?'; 'When you are teasing someone at school for fun, do you think they would find it to be funny as well?'; 'By defying the rules, what kind of picture you want to portray of yourself?'

These questions may occur to be offensive for the child as our tone, body language is being interpreted by the child (making it important for us to be mindful of how we are conveying the message) but they help the child think and don't put them in any category.

ACADEMICS

Understanding the importance of schooling and education is a process, and not all children understand it the way an adult does. It takes time for a child to evolve the understanding of education. Children are likely to take exams as a challenge or competition. However, when you notice the child is unable to perform adequately in academics, the chances of the child having a problem is higher than the seeming lack of interest. These issues could be learning disabilities, attention problems, trauma, anxiety, depression, bullying, abuse, bereavement, etc. It is therefore important to look beyond the child appearing to be 'lazy', 'mischievous', 'uninterested' etc.

THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE CHILD

Like adults, children are conscious of how they look. They notice others' appearances and try to imitate adults. Adolescent girls might try applying to makeup and dress up. Instead of stopping them from doing such things, or saying 'Tujhe suit Nahi Karta' (this does not look good on you)', it is helpful to teach them about grooming themselves. Likewise, if the child is unkempt and doesn't follow basic hygiene practices, refrain from using statements like 'he/she is always dirty and doesn't take a bath' or 'don't stay like a pig' instead say 'I am concerned that if you don't take a bath regularly, you could develop some skin problems' or 'If you don't take a bath regularly, you will smell and your friends might end up making unpleasant statements about you which could hurt you'. Statements like these make them feel cared for and are likely to bring about changes in their habits.

The culture in South Asia also equates fairness to beauty, and children learn this at a very early stage of life. When we come across children with thoughts like 'I am dark therefore I don't look good'; 'Everyone calls me Kala (dark), I must be ugly'. Caregivers must help them understand that skin color is a natural biological trait that does not determine beauty., We must help them be comfortable with their bodies and NOT laugh at such comments. 'Your skin color is a part of your body like your arms, legs, etc It is not supposed to define you.' 'You have beautiful features which look better because of your skin tone'.

When children come with skin infections, it is helpful to tell them things like, 'These scars must be hurting, let's try to listen to the doctors and make it better' instead of blaming them for their hygiene practices.

WORKING WITH CHILDREN EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

Trauma is an emotional response to an extremely negative event that is experienced directly (abuse, violence, natural calamities, war, tragic accidents, losses, pandemics, terrorism, etc) or even indirectly (witnessing the news of such events). The stress related to these events can be overwhelming and can exceed one's ability to cope with them.

The symptoms include sleep disturbances (recurring dreams related to traumatic events, insomnia), flashbacks (feeling like the event is recurring), low mood (feeling of guilt, shame, inability to experience positive emotions), anxiety (panic-like symptoms, hypervigilance), physiological symptoms (pain which is not medically diagnosed), irritability or anger outbursts (self-harm or self-destructive behaviors), cognitive dysfunction (inability to concentrate, lack of problem-solving and decision-making skills). In extreme cases, trauma can also lead to paranoia.

- Working with children who have undergone trauma can be stressful for the caregiver as well. When interacting with a child who has been recently exposed to trauma, it helps to express your true emotion to the child about the trauma but at the same time being composed while expressing your emotions. This helps them to identify their feelings. Caregivers are likely to experience vicarious trauma and therefore it becomes crucial for them to seek emotional support through counseling or psychotherapy intermittently.
- When the child is talking about the experiences related to trauma, avoid interrogatory questions like 'why were you there'; 'what happened after..?'; 'why didn't you..' basically all 'why's and what happened' need to be eliminated. The child may not be chronologically correct while ventilating and may talk with the flow of thoughts. Here a child may not want to speak chronologically because certain events may have impacted the child more than the others. If there are any questions related to the case, the caregiver can rectify it in brief after the child has completed talking.
- Help the child understand how a person reacts to stress. Children are likely to experience a range of emotions and experiences post-trauma Feeling of shock, denial, anger, irritation, guilt, depression, confusion, anxiety, regressive behavior, and physiological symptoms.

Awareness of these stress reactions helps them to feel less distressed about their situation. It has been observed that in cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) the child is more responsive to treatment and therapy if the child is aware of their symptoms.

• Redirect the child to stress-relieving activities such as relaxation techniques, breathing techniques, mindfulness activities, reading, painting, music, dance, exercising, etc. Avoid forcing them to do these activities. Instead give them an exposure to the kind of things they could do, i.e. take them to the place where such recreational activities are taking

- place, if they want to sit and only observe, let them. If they want to step out of the room, let them. Make sure that the materials are readily available for them to be used at any time they like.
- Children with a history of trauma have difficulty in adjusting even in favorable environments. Due to the trauma, they are unable to trust others, find it hard to empathize with others' feelings, and are impulsive in many situations. These are often the overt behaviors observed by a caregiver, however, it is important to understand that these behaviors are a result of the trauma. Children themselves might be unaware of these behaviors to be a result of the trauma.
- It is a misconceived notion that a child is trying to seek attention by throwing tantrums or acting aggressively. The child with a history of trauma feels safer when given company. It is a sign that the child has developed trust in the caregiver and finds the caregiver approachable if in distress.

GENDER SENSITIVITY

Gender is a social and human-made construct, that assigns individuals various identities like male, female, transgender, etc. The process of assigning gender to an individual and reinforcing it is called gendering. Gendering is driven by patriarchy, a social system where men hold greater power in society and dominate over control of resources and ideologies. As soon as a child is born, the adults in the family begin the process of the gendering of the child. They assign a gender to them based on their biological sex. They differentiate between male children and female children by clothes, names, accessories, and toys, etc. Gradually, the demarcation moves towards roles and responsibilities. Through gendering, is a reinforcement of patriarchal ideals and thought processes and the risk of developing a sexist and a discriminatory attitude in them through our communication. It is thus important that as caregivers we are not sexist to the children or others in our communication. Our ideas of discrimination can be internalized by the child to feel inferior (usually in case of a girl) or superior (usually in case of a boy).

Gender also plays a role in how and how much we communicate with others. It can make children feel that they can exhibit certain traits, emotions, and behavior only based on their gender. For example, our culture is accepting of women and girls crying to express their feelings. However, boys are encouraged to not cry or show emotion. Expressing emotion is seen as weak and hence guided by patriarchal ideas, it is deemed to be a feminine trait. Not expressing one's emotion is seen as a sign of strength and hence similarly, it is associated with masculinity. If these ideas of masculinity and femininity are internalized by caregivers, they also manifest in our communication with the child. It is also possible that the child has already internalized such ideas and their communication is influenced by them.



However, we must encourage them to let go of these ideas as they are a social construct. Statements like "Don't cry like a girl "You look like a boy/girl", "Boy's don't cry" "Don't act like a boy/girl", "Girls don't do this..." "Boys don't behave like this..." are not gender-sensitive and can be harmful to their understanding of the self and the opposite sex. Being gendersensitive is an important aspect of communication. It includes being sensitive to the emotions of the child regardless of their gender, being accepting of their gender identity and gender expression, and not being judgemental of the same. It also means ensuring that the caregiver's statements are not discriminatory to them or the opposite sex. Additionally, when communicating with children it is also helpful to keep in mind how we are describing them. Girls are often described as 'pretty, cute, beautiful, caring' and boys as 'smart, strong, intelligent' etc. These indicate that girls are valued over their physicalattributes and emotional expression and boys are valued for their intellect and strength. If weuse such words when describing children, there is a possibility that we will also seethemselves similarly. They might also feel ashamed or 'deviant' if they do not fit the ideasthat have been shared with them. How we communicate with a child plays a role in how theysee themselves and others.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Consider the following situations occurring at work, respond to the situation in which you find the most appropriate.

A 13-year-old girl insists on meeting her mother and talking to her every day from the Children's home. If her wants are not fulfilled, she becomes cranky and stops eating food. You say

- "You are living in a children's home and there are rules which we follow"
- "Crying and giving up on food is not going to help to get your mother to the CCI"
- "It must be hard for you to be away from your mother, I see you miss her terribly. But if you don't take care of yourself do you think your mother will feel happy?"

A 16-year-old boy, who was extremely aggressive has started being calm and cooperative. To compliment him, you say

- "You have started acting like a good boy, keep it up"
- "I noticed the other day when things were not working out for you, you showed an immense amount of patience and dealt with the situation calmly"
- "Remember I had told you that you would be able to improve your behavior if you tried"

You have a heated argument over the phone with a vendor, you raise your voice and bang the phone on his/her face. A child from the CCI witnesses this exchange. You say.

- "I am sorry I lost my cool and you had to witness this. I feel embarrassed"
- "You should not listen when adults are talking, move out of the room"
- "The vendor was rude, I had to show him that I will not bare such ill behavior, sorry you witnessed me losing my cool"

A 15-year-old girl knows that her friend has been talking to an unknown person over social media. When discussing this with her, you say

- "Why didn't you tell me that she was doing this, you know the rules"
- "Do you think your friend was safe when she was connecting with unknown people?"
- "You are not allowed to keep secrets here, you could make mistakes and then regret life"

A 12-year-old is struggling with studies, is not completing homework, sleeps in class, and avoids going to school. While speaking to the child, you say

- "Can you tell me your schooling experience this year"
- "If you continue like this, you will fail and all your classmates will be ahead of you"
- "No more bunking school, while I understand studying gets boring at times, try studying at least for an hour every day"

Sensitive communication helps the child develop positive self-esteem and also promotes responsibility. When they inculcate these means of communication, they are better able to deal with the world around them. Hand-holding the child through this process, helps them develop trust, and provides hope for the future. Caregivers play a crucial role in the child's development. When we see ourselves as mentors and not providers, we are better able to develop a healthy environment for the child.

To summarise, effective communication with children involves 6 crucial characteristics;

- Authenticity
- Active Listening
- Articulating
- Non-Judgemental Attitude
- Mentoring
- Sensitivity

P.S. We are sure that most of you must be doing such data gathering and analyzing exercises at your end too. If you are, please do share the same with us. We shall be more than happy to share it on our website

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