

## **PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF QUALITY IN CHILD CARE PROGRAMME AT THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA EDUCARE CHILD CARE CENTRE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to obtain an understanding of parents' perception of quality in child care programme at the International Islamic University Malaysia EDUCARE child care centre. Besides, it also aimed to better understand the needs of young children through the eyes of the parents. Open ended interviews questions were adopted to gather information concerning teachers' experiences and concerns regarding child care programme. Preliminary findings revealed that parents' perception of quality revolves around the effectiveness of administration and management with the children, staff as well as the parents, staff training, staff commitment, and the teaching and learning materials. This suggests the importance of the efficient management in policy development and service improvement. The parents also stressed on the additional domains of quality that they consider important, such as systematic activities and safety.

*Keywords: Conception, Quality, Child Care Centre, Child Care Programme*

### **INTRODUCTION**

To begin our understanding on the child care quality services in the present time, we must first relate it to the women participation in the workforce. Due to the rapid economic growth for the last twenty years, many opportunities have opened up for the Malaysian women in education as well as the employment. That scenario had contributed to more women entering the labor market. It was reported that the proportion of working women rose from 38.9% in 1970 to 62.9% in 1990 (Government of Malaysia. n.d, Sixth Malaysian Plan: 1991–1995, 415). Most of the jobs are urban based in which there is no relative or grandparents' assistance in looking after the children. Thus a greater proportion of working parents have to leave their children behind either at home with poorly educated domestic maids, Indonesian maids, their elders, the nannies or in childcare.

The above phenomenon has led to working parents becoming distant from their beloved children, while they strive at the work place for the betterment of life. The working parents are left with no choice except to send their children to child care centre for more than nine hours per day regardless of quality of learning that young children experience in the environment. Infants and toddlers in more hours of child care, regardless of its quality will be experiencing less sensitive mothering and less positively engagement with their mothers compared to those who are not (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 1999a). The time spent by the children in the child care centre is ultimately more than with their own parents. Due to that phenomenon too, childcare centres are seen to be the alternative and expanded greatly. Dahlberg et al., (2006) said that in many parts of the world, the set-up of the early childhood institutions was the result of the increasing demand for non-parental care, education for young children, social intervention and local infrastructure.

Therefore, the increase in the labor market of women in Malaysia could in turn be traced to high demand for childcare centre.

As a result of high demand from parents, there is increased involvement of the private sector in providing childcare programmes, particularly in terms of bringing “imported” models and materials. In addition, there is a tendency for many in the private sector to provide ‘commercialised’ programmes which are appealing to parents but which may not be sound in terms of child development principles. Increasing numbers of children ages 2 months to three years old being placed in childcare centres is the scenario that needs to be given serious thought. It is also being said that:

“As early childhood rises on the agenda of private and public issues, more and more voices are to be heard in more and more settings talking about early childhood education and care. Yet despite the growing volume and diversity of these voices, most seem to talk the same language of early childhood. Not only is it often literally the same language, as English becomes ever more dominant in the worlds of business, culture, science, technology and research, but it shares the same vocabulary: promoting development; ensuring readiness to learn and readiness for school; enhancing school performance; early intervention for children deemed to be in need, at risk or otherwise disadvantaged; developmentally appropriate practice and desirable outcomes; models and programmes; plans and cost effectiveness; regulation, standards; and most pervasive of all, the language of quality (Dahlberg et al., 2006, p. 1).

Therefore, quality child care is a crucial factor in balancing the participation of parents in the workforce and for child development. It is also important in the context of lifelong learning where child care centre is seen as a basic to a child’s education.

The quality of early care and education services is absolutely critical in providing a **beginning or foundation for life-long learning for young children**. The neuroscience research provides new evidence that the early years of development set the foundation for the skills and competencies that will influence learning abilities, behaviour and health throughout life (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Thus, there has been growing evidence that high quality early childhood care and education programme produce positive outcomes for children by affecting their developing skills such as social, cognitive, and language skills (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The other finding showed that the children in the centres with some or all of the guidelines (such as child-staff ratio, group size, and teacher training and education) had better language comprehension and school readiness and fewer behavioral problems for children age 2 and 3 than the children who were in centres that did not meet the guidelines.

Early childhood development studies and research in Malaysia scenario are new in which many areas are yet to be explored. In the Vision 2020, the commitment to the promotion of the importance of early childhood education has been made up and yet the result is far from what it is supposed to achieve. In the case of Malaysia, there have been several researches (Nureeyah 2004; Norizan 2008) which discussed the issues in early childhood education in particular to the kindergarten or preschool issues.

With regards to the above facts, the relationship between quality of child care and outcomes for children is of increasing interest to many people or the major stakeholders in early childhood education and care which include parents, teachers, researchers, and policymakers. Besides, the connotation of quality and early childhood care and education has been widely discussed and it is still being one of the subjects for the research to transpire. Therefore, the importance of early childhood care and education with regards to quality and the child care programme have been seen as more reliable and valid as many issues being supported by the studies done. Nonetheless very limited study has been done on parents’

understanding as well as an evaluation on the programme structure of early childhood programmes quality in particular child care quality programmes in Malaysia. Sadly, this is happening not only in Malaysia but also in the West. Kagan and Cohen (1997) recognizes how:

“Early care and education-unlike education for older children – has never been considered an entitlement. Periodic investments by federal state, and local governments and by business, coupled with marginal commitments to quality, have resulted in programmes that are often poorly staffed, poorly housed, and poorly run” (p.x).

Thus, in guiding young children’s learning and development, this study is worthy to be conducted as the substantial of the previous studies mentioned. The inspiration for the research should take into consideration of the “Malaysianisation” concept in general or the Muslim concept in specific for developing the benchmark of quality childcare programme.

## **CHILD CARE CENTRE AND DAY CARE CENTRE**

In Malaysia, child care centre and day care centre can be used interchangeably as the two terms are relatively synonymous in addressing the issue of children services in Malaysia. The focus of this study will be on child care centre services yet the two terms will be defined to enable the readers to make differentiation and connection between the two. As childcare centre accommodates children below four years of age, this type of services is more vulnerable and vital for early development. The vulnerability lies in the quality of services for the longer hours spent at the centre, the incoherent qualification of teachers, the irregularity of programme, the flexibility of procedures and other related obstacles from different angles.

The definition of Child Care Centre as described in the Child Care Centre Act 1984 (act 308), incorporating all amendments up to 1 January 2006 says:

“...5. There shall be two categories of childcare centres as follows:

- (a) *home based child care centre which is a child care centre which receives less than ten children into the home of the person registered under section 7;*
- (b) *institutions based child care centre which is a child care centre which receives ten or more children.*

The day care centre according to the Care Centres Act 1993 (Act 506) and Regulation under section 2, incorporating all amendments up to 1 June 2006 can be defined as:

*“ .... care includes protection, supervision, rehabilitation and training”,*

*“ .... care centre means a residential care centre and a day care centre within the meaning of the act”,*

*“ .... day care centre means subject to section 3, any premises at which four or more persons are received for care for a continuous period exceeding three hours between the hours of sunrise and sunset in a day, and for at least three days in a week, whether for reward or otherwise; but in the case of premises operated or managed by a natural person, a person who is a relative of that person shall not be reckoned in determining the number of persons received at the premises for the purposes of this definition”,*

*“ .... residential care centre means, subject to section 3, any premises at which four or more persons are received for care as residents therein, whether for reward or otherwise; but in the case of premises operated or managed by a natural person, a person who is a relative of that person shall not be reckoned in determining the number of persons received at the premises for the purposes of this definition”,*

## Statement of Problem

Despite the mushrooming childcare centres throughout the country due to high demand of childcare centre, the synchronization or the benchmarking on the childcare centres programme structure is seen to be difficult or even invisible. They exist by so many different names and that put us into limbo in knowing whether they can be reliable or not. Given this situation, it is a high time for us to put the synchronization in child care services in Malaysia. However, the quality itself is rather vague even to early childhood experts.

However, identifying the benchmarking as well as synchronization regardless of the civilization, cultural, nations and religion in defining quality childcare is not a simple thing to do. Supporting to that, idea of quality childcare can be more elaborated even in a complex way of understanding it.

“I challenge the global distribution of any one single framework of quality. Such a framework might inevitably lead to a world of uniformity, a standardized recipe for the quality of childhood. There are many potential criteria for quality which are closely linked to belief about goals and functions...These beliefs are in turn shapes by perspectives on childhood, by cultural patterns and personal values (Woodhead, 1996: 17, 37).

As an international buzz word, ‘quality’ does not only refer to child care services but in everything particularly services and products. As Woodhead (1996) notes,

“Identifying basic standards is too often a euphemism for adopting the quality indicators that preoccupy programme managers in materially affluent, industrialized, urban societies (notably building standards, staff qualifications and ratios and material resources). These indicators originate from circumstances of economic affluence, professionalized employment patterns, combined with materialistic and technological values (p.48).”

Children who experienced higher quality child care centres had shown better performance in their cognitive skills such as in math and language abilities as well as their and social skills (Peisner *et al.*, 1999). Thus, knowing the positive outcomes of quality childcare, this study is intended to elicit and describe the parents’ conceptions of quality child care. At the beginning of the childcare establishment, it was meant to meet the needs of working mothers or adults while they engaged in the fields. Even nowadays, we still can hear that the reason behind the support of childcare is mainly on the easiness to the parents and to the employers in gaining the best productivity in workplace. The issue of quality is not in the agenda at all and as long as there is a space or services provided, it is all that matters. Therefore, this is also another problem that relate to the misconception or no conception of quality childcare programme in this context.

Some suggestion given to enable us to see and measure the quality child care programmes will be on the philosophy or the programme where children’s individual differences is at their priority and provide developmentally appropriate experiences to children (Bredenkamp, 1987). Unfortunately, that is not easy to say in only just looking at the booklet or brochure of the centre. The curriculum or the contents of the programme are in the hands of the operators or the owners of the childcare centres. Some are just intended to sell or franchise their programme or the quick and fast reading programme that currently is in demand. Measuring and achieving quality are not as easy as it sounds.

Due to that situation, selecting and choosing the best and quality programmes for their children become headache and chaotic, thus, parents tend to end up with the programme that seems interesting, convenient and affordable to them (Kagan & Cohen, 1997). As many of low-income parents tend to send their kids to the cost-valued childcare centre rather than focus on the quality itself because they couldn't afford to pay the prices. Whereas individual institutions will be emphasizing on certain common grounds that they called it as 'frameworks of normalization' In that claim, many terms and issues will be brought forward such as curriculum guidelines, rules and regulations for the centre, systems of inspection and so on (Dahlberg et al's, (2006).

The conception of quality in child care particularly for parents need to be given a priority. The benchmarking or synchronization to define a quality childcare programme from Malaysian parents' perspectives will then be drawn up. All that can be a starting point in meeting the balance to the existing programmes in the context of research based and people in the fields. The discussions about the quality of early childhood programmes often confuse the programme elements which turn to influence quality with quality itself (Layzer, et al's 1993). That was because their conceptions of a quality childcare are not in congruence with each other. All these are the footing of all grievances that distort the development of young children.

The increase of women in the labor force has led to the booming of childcare centre. It is to achieve the balance between earning for the family and at the same time obtain the proper care and education that it should be. With that argument, more information is needed on the quality of childcare programme structure in Malaysia in order to understand the internal perspectives of quality and childcare programme structure. From that point, an inclusive definition or what Malaysian parents mean by quality childcare can be derived. We can then focus our concern on the level of quality child care. We do not want to jump the gun not knowing what is really meant by quality and yet talking about implementing high quality childcare in our community.

As mentioned earlier, many researchers have highlighted that the quality of early care and education services is absolutely critical in providing a beginning or foundation for life-long learning for young children. Nonetheless very limited study has been done on parents' understanding as well as an evaluation on the programme structure of early childhood programmes quality in Malaysia. As a result, a synchronization of programme structure for the curriculum is far from reaching the aims to give proper care and education to our children. It is hoped that in applying a qualitative way of getting to the participants' conceptions of quality childcare programme means to them, the result will be more transparent.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to elicit and describe parents' conception of quality in childcare programme at IIUM EDUCARE Child Care Centre in Gombak, Selangor, in Malaysia.

## **Research Questions**

The study aims at answering the following main questions:

1. What are the conceptions of parents on quality in child care programmes?
2. What should be the roles of parents to ensure quality childcare?



## **Significance of the Study**

With the growing concern and attention to children's care and attention during the early years especially below four years of age, it is hoped that this study will give an insight to enrich children's total development and the Malaysian Early childhood programme as a whole. The people who are involved directly in the establishment and also the running of the childcare centre are the people to approach to know and understand what their conceptions are with regards to quality childcare in Malaysia. The result will also benefit and guide the policy maker as well as the practitioners in the field to be more aware of young children's needs and support good outcomes for children. It is also to ensure that the children have the opportunity to participate in quality early childhood education.

This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the quality childcare in Malaysia. It will also add on to the literature of early childhood care and education in Malaysia particularly in defining the quality childcare or factors constitute quality childcare. The inputs from the people involved directly or indirectly in the field will give a clearer picture on the current situation of the programme and the quality standard of early childhood care and education in Malaysia. Based on the inputs gather will then give an understanding of what quality childcare programmes are. For instance, the early childhood professionals can wisely reason out their judgments in selecting the instruments for their studies when the quality of childcare programmes is concerned. Thus, the practitioners such as teachers, parents and administrators will also discover what are the benchmarks or common grounds or guidelines for the programme to be called as quality. Those benchmarks can be applied or implemented by the practitioners in their programme. With those mentioned benchmarking things, the professionals and experts can conduct the studies with concern to quality childcare for the betterment of children.

## **The Site of Research**

The setting for this research is the IIUM EDUCARE Child Care Centre, Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia. It is a unit under the supervision of Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia. The IIUM EDUCARE Child care centre programme stresses on all aspects of development including the cognitive and intellectual development thus facilitating children total development. The children are learning primarily through play activities such as water play, sand play, role play, free play and so on. Apart from that, there are also other activities such as storytelling, songs, games, reading aloud, and language development. There are about 30 teachers at IIUM EDUCARE Child Care Centre and four of them were chosen for this study. The teachers selected are the permanent staffs of the centre, who have at least worked in the centre for about two years. They are three teachers or care takers whereby one of the respondents is the supervisor in EDUCARE itself. The reason for choosing her is because her duty is mainly in the childcare section where she is responsible for supervising the teachers with small children.

## **Methodology**

This study uses phenomenography, a qualitative research methodology, within the interpretivist paradigm, that investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something (Bowden, J.A. 2000).

The participants' recruitment began by contacting the selected teachers in childcare centres mentioned earlier. The permission was granted and the appointment was set up by the supervisor of the centres after explaining about the study. The researcher then directly distributed invitations to participate in the study through the childcare centre supervisor. Participants were invited to participate in an interview and focus group discussion at a time convenient to them. During the study one participant cannot proceed to the second phase of the study due to the maternity leave. Open ended interviews questions are designed to gather information concerning teachers' conceptions of quality childcare programme at their own premises. It is also aimed to obtain their reflection on their role in the aspect of child

development by focusing on the experiences and concerns regarding childcare programme. The interviews were then followed with a focus group discussion. To begin the focus group session, the researcher invited the participants to brainstorm a list of attributes they identify when thinking of quality childcare. Each subject then generated ten most important characteristics when identifying quality childcare guided by the questions asked. The group members were then grouped together to discuss similarities and differences between their lists. Once the data have been collected, the researcher then progresses to examine the interview transcripts for possible emerging themes. Prior, all the interviews were tape recorded with approximately fifty to sixty minutes spent for each session. Then, it was followed by the transcribing process in order to grasp the accurate understanding of what was being said by the teachers interviewed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interview and focus group data revealed four primary themes: (a) organization and structures, (b) programme or curriculum, (c) environment, and (d) safety. This conceptualization is simple to define, however, it is complicated to state which is less or more important among the components or themes for a quality child care centre. Therefore, it is easier to position that each theme of the diagram is definable and separate yet also interrelated and interdependent. The themes from teachers' conceptions on quality child care can be conceptualized from diagram 1.

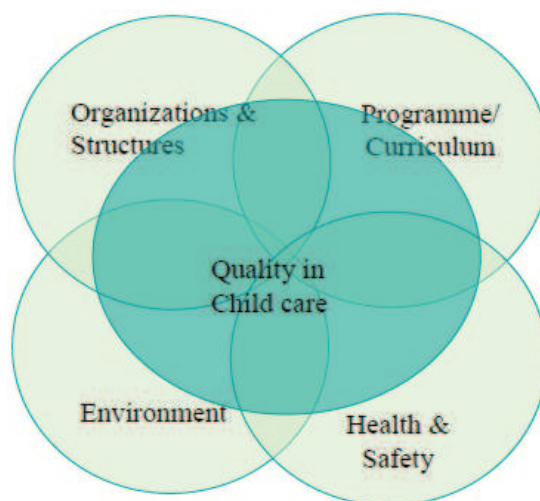


Diagram 1  
Quality Child Care: Parents' Conceptions

### Organizations and Structures

The structure of a child care centre is similar to the frame of a house. It includes the legal structure, written policies and procedures, the physical environment and the philosophical structure of the programme (Jorde-Bloom 1991). The teachers in this study emphasize on the organization and structures in initiating the programmes for the staff, parents and children. They said that the management will need to play their role in developing and upgrading the programme of the centre especially the principal or the director has the authority to bring changes to her or his centre. However, the principal or the director and the other management team of child care centre cannot work in isolation but must be part of a coordinated, systemic efforts to create and support the mentioned infrastructure that will contribute to quality early childhood education (Gallagher & Clifford 2000). The importance of having a capable, competent and efficient director or principal was also highlighted which also touched on the organization and structures of the centre. According to one of the teachers, the problems in the centre can be dealt with easily by that type of leadership. The regular and constant two-way

communication that occurs between staff and the director in the formal and informal meetings are seen to be a bridge for an effective relationship. Having and maintaining such occurrence will give the teachers the opportunity to express their feelings on the centre's matters or even their simple personal problems. The informal meetings such as the centre gatherings, celebrating big festivals allow both sides to be closer to each other by breaking the barriers of not knowing. Once the relationship can be build up, the communication will become more relax and open in addressing any issues related to the teachers, children, parents and so on. The director will have the chance to know the staff personally and the importance thing is to be acquainted with the grudges that the staff feel without other people telling it but from the staff themselves. With the fact that the director is the right person to clarify most of the policies and procedures, the staff will get the first class service. The processes of the child care centre's organization and the supporting structures in it definitely have an impact on quality child care thus to the children's total development.

### **Environment: (a) Teachers' Attitude**

The teachers highlighted on the training with regards to their job improvement on early childhood education. This component is very much associated with the commitment, creativity, love and passion with children. The passion and commitment that resulted from positive attitude will help them to become excellent staff. Staff qualifications and training alone will not help a person to be a good child care provider as she or he will not be able to link out the commitment, love and passion to the children. One teacher said:

“What I want to see in a quality child care is a commitment by the staff such as staff creativity in solving problems that they face while taking care of the children while crying and so forth. And a quality child care should not have the equipment that is not safe and the staff who cannot cooperate and give commitment”

Arnett (1989) reported that childcare providers who have qualifications in early childhood were more knowledgeable than those did not. Staffs with continuous and relevant training will react better to the situation, prepare more appropriate learning experience, communicate with confidence and handle all kinds of situations with better judgment. They are being trained to do so and equipped with the knowledge on children's need in the training. The attitude will then play an important role in changing the concept of being with children means to get wet, dirty or active most of the times. The most important aspect or positive attitude in quality child care is the loving and caring relationship between the child and the teacher or care provider.

### **Environment: (b) Parents-Teachers' Partnership**

In response to the question asked about quality childcare respondents also indicated suggestions to establish partnership with parents. The teachers themselves agree that such relationship is very important to children and that will add to the quality of a child care centre. However, the teachers indicated that some difficulties arose in trying to work with parents such as lack of time was a significant barrier in doing that, especially when communication centred on informal contacts at the arrival time and at the end of each day. They also expressed that the illumination to the parents concerning certain issues such as contagious diseases was less successful because their attitudes who take this lightly as one of the teachers said:

“Okay. Its's good that EDUCARE gives the session with her ... involving parents and staff but it is disappointed because the parents who turned up after being invited. Praise be to Allah, ... only twenty people from five hundred people. Emm.... It's very obvious from parents' commitment with regards to this contagious diseases' illumination was quite less. From my opinion, the EDUCARE side had given ...such as informed the parents earlier but the parents' commitment themselves...maybe busy, have no time to



attend. Take this thing lightly because if they know the contagious diseases are dangerous...they will be in trouble of sending their children whenever their children got infected by chicken pox or so on... they still want to send right? That's my view.

They further said that the management should initiate and allow for this kind of relationship by encouraging the parents to become involved. The activities such as meetings, gatherings, discussions, report day, events and so on can be done. With regards to the diagram and the four primary themes that are conceptualized by the researcher, parents as well as others such as teachers, communications and equipment are fall in the theme of environment.

### **Environment: (c) Internal Communications**

Internal communications among the staff in the child care centres also regarded as important for quality child care. The staff or the teachers indicated that teamwork, understanding and friendship are very important to them. Good communication and happy environment will make the teachers perform efficiently.

### **Health and Safety**

Along with the efficient management or organization of a child care centre, teachers also consider other aspect which is safety of the children. It should be the main priority when quality of childcare is concerned. A safe and clean environment will be one of the goals and objectives as the children are easily get infected by the viruses from the environment. The proper food preparation and handling are to be taken care off by not neglecting the basic food nutritious for the children to grow healthily. Besides that, the safety part will ensure all the equipment used are specially made for them such as the round edge.

### **Programme and Curriculum**

The programme and curriculum are important components for children to develop physically, mentally and socially. A very few child care centres are equipped with a developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum framework to be followed in which teaching and learning process are designed to incorporate play activities and also children's growth and development. Age appropriate learning environment is also parts of the programme and the curriculum were also mentioned by the teachers when describing quality child care elements. They are:

“To me, the quality in child care...is such as apparatus that we prepare according to the development of children that we take care off. It is like the age of an infant.”

“Aaa.... To me, the child care centre programme, a quality child care centre... it must have... the scheduled programme such as time table for the staff, children, err... mm... how it handles, time table from the syllabus. Emm.... the syllabus is from the infants to the age of two, three and above right? The example is from the education aspect such as language, cognitive, physical and so on such as emotional. Then in terms of staff... in terms of staff, the staff have to follow work schedule, follow regulations.

As usual when people talk about environment, they always refer to the physical apparatus whereby, learning environment can also include many other things such as the teachers themselves and the peers. In this study the teachers were referring only to the physical age appropriate learning environment inside and outside the centre. Physical age appropriate learning environment is the concept that concentrates on the importance of the physical abilities of the children. The environment is children friendly environment where all apparatus is specially designed or being tailored made for the purpose of their physical needs that intentionally will affect their emotions.

## CONCLUSION

In short, the findings revealed that their conceptions of quality revolve around the effectiveness of administration and management with the children, staff as well as the parents, staff training, staff commitment, and the teaching and learning materials. This suggests the importance of the efficient management in policy development and service improvement. The teachers also stressed on the additional domains of quality that they consider important, such as systematic activities and safety.

From the study it is also found out that quality childcare programme encompasses many things. With the increasing demand for child care services, the people involved in this area will have more opportunity to provide and enhance the elements of quality in child care compared to old days. Apart from that the need for more thorough coordination and regulation of child care services need to be improvised and upgraded. The higher authority should provide grants for the establishment and operation of child care institution in which the eligibility for funding are to be controlled under stringent standards and procedures. In a nutshell, further research is needed to study comprehensively on the aspects mentioned by the teachers. Besides, the perspectives from other than teachers such as parents, policy makers and administrators and even the children themselves in Malaysian scenario are not yet studied. It can be done based on qualitative and quantitative method of study on the child care quality. Thus developing their conceptions on quality childcare will help many people in finding the similarities or common understanding of what constitute quality child care. The management of the centre either they are private or government, need to be well versed in their job which means that they need to have a very good planning in terms of short terms and also long terms planning. Besides, the capability of handling the challenges, problems and critical situations will determine the process of managing and ensuring the quality child care programme.

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