

HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Trauma is an emotional response to a distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms the individual's ability to cope. Trauma is subjective – a traumatic experience for one person may not be traumatic for another, but that does not mean it is any less real for the person who is traumatized.

People of all ages experience trauma, but it has a particularly long-lasting impact on children as their brains are still rapidly developing. Often, children and adolescents don't have the necessary coping skills to manage the impact of stressful events on their own or the language to explain their feelings (or even what happened).

WHAT DOES TRAUMA LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

There's no one way for children and teens to respond to trauma, but here are some signs to look out for:

- Excessive anger or irritability
- Unusual startle reactions
- Significantly increased or reduced appetite
- Exhaustion
- Aggression (physical or verbal)
- Regular tardiness/absence from class
- Perfectionist or controlling behavior
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Low self-confidence
- Hoarding (snacks, school supplies)
- Risky behavior (substance use, sex)
- Panic attacks
- Extreme self-reliance or hyper-independence
- Running away
- Defiance
- Alienation from peers (self-isolation or inability to relate/make friends)

It's important to keep in mind that trauma responses can vary by culture, race, gender, geographic location, and other factors – and students have all had different traumatic experiences over the last year. Many students and families may have dealt with vaccine anxiety, but likely not as intensely as Black Americans who thought back to the Tuskegee Study. In terms of trauma response behaviors, girls are more likely to turn inward and get quiet or retreat from social settings, while boys are more likely to get outwardly irritable or disrupt class. All behavior is a form of communication – if a student's actions or demeanor are disruptive or strike you as "off," think about it from a trauma lens and consider what they might be trying to express as needs or wants.

Social-emotional Development: Experiencing trauma, especially at a young age, disrupts young people's ability to relate to others and manage emotions. Without healthy coping skills, this often leads to poor in-class behavior, which can reduce learning time and increase rates of suspension and expulsion.

Academic Performance: Trauma can undermine many skills that are crucial for learning, including development of language and communication skills, the ability to organize and remember new information, and reading comprehension. Students coping with trauma may experience intrusive thoughts or flashbacks that prevent them from paying attention in class, studying, or focusing during timed assignments. School-related trauma (like bullying or unfair punishment) often leads to school avoidance, leaving the most vulnerable students behind academically. Trauma also negatively impacts young people's sense of self, making it difficult for those students to feel motivated, proud, and engaged in their learning.

If you notice these symptoms in a child or teen, you may want to consider or encourage a mental health screening. A screening is a free, anonymous, and confidential way to see if a person is showing signs of a mental health condition. Screening tools for young people and parents are available at MHAScreening.org. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results.

TYPES OF TRAUMA

It can be helpful to think about "big 'T' Trauma" and "little 't' trauma." Big 'T' Trauma is what most people think of when it comes to traumatic events – things like physical abuse or the sudden death of a parent. Little 't' trauma refers to events that may not be as obviously traumatic but can still be too much for a child's brain to process – things like parents fighting a lot at home or struggling to connect with peers.

Here are some issues that students may be struggling with this school year:

COVID-19:

The fear, uncertainty, and general upheaval that the pandemic caused has been (and continues to be) traumatic for many. Many youth are dealing with significant grief – over 1.5 million children have lost a primary or secondary caregiver due to COVID-19.¹ Rates of substance use² and family violence/abuse³ have increased during the pandemic, and even just heightened anger and arguing in the home can be traumatic.

RACIAL INJUSTICE:

In the U.S., Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students are vulnerable to racial trauma due to living in a system of white supremacy. Race-based discrimination and violence have been prominent in media coverage, which can be triggering and retraumatizing for students with marginalized identities.

SCHOOL FEARS:

The start of a new school year is often particularly challenging for students who have faced bullying or exclusion among their peers. A number of students may be dealing with severe separation anxiety after having spent more time at home recently, or if they saw less of their parent(s) during the pandemic due to essential work and fear that happening again.

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¹Hillis, S.D., Unwin, H.J.T., et al. (2021). Global minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and deaths of caregivers: a modelling study. *The Lancet*, 398(10298), 391-402.

²Abramson, A. (2021). Substance use during the pandemic. *Monitor on Psychology*, 52(2). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/03/substance-use-pandemic>

³Usher, K., Jones, C.B., et al. (2021). COVID-19 and family violence: Is this a perfect storm? *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 30(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12876>

SAFETY AT SCHOOL: PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL

Going back to school may come with some extra nerves this year, especially since the last two school years haven't been normal. You'll likely be back to full-time, in-person school again, and it may feel a little weird or scary. To have a successful school year, it's important that you feel safe in your school and classroom.

WHY SAFETY MATTERS

If you are worried or afraid it can be hard to think about anything else. When you feel safe, you are able to explore and try new things, which makes learning possible. You spend most of your time at school and deserve to feel safe in that space.

HOW TO MAKE SURE YOU FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL

BE PREPARED.

Sometimes the best way to feel safe is to prepare yourself for how to handle situations that scare you if they were to happen, rather than worrying about them. Talk to your parents or teachers so you can be clear about what the rules about masks are, what your school will do if there is a COVID-19 outbreak, and what to do in case of emergency situations. It can also be helpful to figure out who your friends in class are if you need to turn to someone.

IDENTIFY ADULTS YOU TRUST.

Feeling safe doesn't just mean that you won't get hurt; it means having people you trust that can support you. Think about an adult at school who knows you and can be your ally if you feel threatened—it could be a teacher, coach, guidance counselor, or even a cafeteria worker. This may be especially important for students of color or LGBTQ+ youth who may be searching for someone who can understand their experiences when other peers can't.

TELL SOMEONE ABOUT YOUR WORRIES.

It's hard to keep all of your emotions and worries inside and can often lead to more difficulty processing the situations that stress you out. Talking to someone can help you understand that you're not alone and find ways to feel better. Sometimes just saying words out loud to a friend about what is worrying you can be all the relief you need. Other times it may be necessary to talk to a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult about what's bothering you. If talking seems too hard, you can write a letter or an email.

KEEP A GROUNDING ITEM.

Grounding is a way of keeping your mind in the here and now and is a great way to help you feel safe and in control when your anxieties are spiraling. There are many ways to ground yourself, like breathing exercises or going for a walk. A grounding item is a physical object and can be a great way to help you feel grounded without leaving the classroom or distracting others. Some examples are a smooth rock you keep in your pocket, a fidget toy, a photo of a loved one or pet, or anything to hold onto that soothes you. Tell your teacher about your grounding object so they don't think it's a toy or distraction and take it away.

If you still feel overwhelmed, unsafe, and as though your fear affects how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the Youth Screen at mhadallas.org/help to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out the next steps.

SAFETY STRESSORS

After being home and doing school virtually for so long, here are some common things that you may be concerned about when physically returning to school:

COVID-19: The rules about when and where you need to wear a mask are different depending on where you live, and it can be confusing. Your school may or may not require masks to be worn, and with not everyone being able to get a vaccine, you might have concerns about getting sick, bringing sickness home from school, or going virtual again.

BULLYING: One of the benefits of learning virtually was that you didn't have to see bullies in person, so you may be worried about getting picked on again now that you're back in a classroom.

GETTING INTO TROUBLE: Being back in school probably means being on a stricter schedule than you got used to while doing virtual school, so it might be hard to sit still for hours at a time or to keep your behavior under control. Your teachers may also get stressed as everyone gets used to being back in school and they may seem less patient or meaner than you remember. You may feel like only certain people get disciplined for misbehaving, or some get punished worse than others. If you are one of the people who seems to be in trouble more often or faces harsher discipline than others who do the same thing, it can be scary.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE: When no one was at school, there was no fighting in the halls and you stopped hearing about shootings or other acts of violence. Now that school is back in session, the possibility of violence has returned. Even though it seemed like you heard a lot about acts of violence at school before COVID, they aren't as common as you think despite the amount of media attention they get. Talk to your teachers about procedures if you need to be reminded about what to do to stay safe.

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS AT HOME

The start of a new school year can be an exciting yet uncertain time for the whole family. Due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, many kids are facing mental health challenges right now. In fact, 82% of 11-17-year-olds who took a screen at mhascreening.org from March 2020-July 2021 were showing signs of a mental health condition.

If you are concerned about your child or teen's ability to readjust to in-person school and have a good year, there are things you can do at home to set them up for success and support them during this transition. Not only is the home environment the most significant factor affecting academic achievement, family member interactions help provide social and intellectual development and improve child confidence.¹

Even if your child or teen seems to be doing well, they were impacted in some way by the events of the last year and a half. All school-age youth experienced some degree of:

- Uncertainty
- Fear
- Loss of normalcy or disruption of routine
- Reduced peer interaction or loneliness
- Lack of structure
- Grief or loss

TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH

Children and teens pick up on anxiety and tension in adults around them. Be open about your own feelings and lead by example in how you deal with them by modeling healthy behaviors and coping skills.

REEVALUATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS AND ANTICIPATE CHALLENGES

Children and teens may act differently in school than they have before because of the adjustments they had to make last year to adapt to virtual learning. Anticipate some disorganization, forgetfulness, and anxiety. They may also have higher levels of irritability and frustration than you're used to. Patience and compassion are key.

WORK AS A TEAM WITH THE SCHOOL

Teachers and parents/caregivers should work together for the best outcomes, especially since students may act differently at home and in the classroom. Be familiar with options for supports available through your child's school to help accommodate them if they are struggling emotionally or academically. You are your child's best advocate!

ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION AND EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY

Trust is important. Your child needs to know they can come to you and that you'll really listen when they do. Be curious and ask questions about your child's day, what they learned, how they felt, etc. – especially since adolescents usually aren't the most forthcoming. For those who are dealing with lots of fear and anxiety, they may require frequent comforting and reassurance to feel safe.

KNOW WHEN YOUR CHILD'S STRUGGLES MAY BE A SIGN OF SOMETHING BIGGER

Common signs of mental health conditions in youth include problems with concentration and memory, changes in appetite, feeling sad or hopeless, loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, excessive worry, irritability, changes in sleep patterns, and/or angry outbursts. Check out our fact sheet, [Know the Signs: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens](#), for more information.

A Parent Screen is available at [MHAScreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to help you determine if your child or teen may be having emotional, attentional, or behavioral difficulties. These results can be used to start a conversation with your family doctor or a school mental health professional.

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¹Khan, F.N., Begum, M., Imad, M. (2019). Relationship between Students' Home Environment and their Academic Achievement at Secondary School Level. *Pakistan Journal of Distance and Online Learning*, 5(2), 223-234. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1266643.pdf>

HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Going back to school after the summer often comes with some anxiety and stress, but this year students will likely need a lot more support, reassurance, and comforting before they'll be able to learn. Most children are dealing with some level of trauma after the uncertainty of the past two school years – trauma can occur after anything bad happens that makes the individual feel unsafe or scared. Even families who haven't faced the loss of loved ones, financial stress, or trouble at home have had their sense of safety and security disrupted. This has an especially strong impact on children, as their brains are still developing.

You can help young people move forward despite trauma – use your classroom to create situations in which they have choices, control, and feel empowered.

PRIORITIZE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

Trauma is really tough on the brain – it's likely that students won't feel like their normal selves. The mind and body have to feel safe to reverse the impact of trauma and feel "normal" again – students can't effectively learn without those basic needs met first. Children often don't have the coping skills needed to handle trauma on their own, so creating this safe environment is crucial to their healing, and thus classroom behavior and learning potential.

Ways you can do this:

- *Be open about your own feelings.* If you're having a bad day, ask if they ever have days when it seems like nothing goes right. Ask for their patience on your off days – it shows them that when one of us is down, the rest can help out and make things easier. It can also encourage them to tell you upfront if they're having a difficult day so you can be prepared to support them.
- *Model empathy and active listening.* Many times, kids just need to feel heard and seen. Don't dismiss their concerns or tell them not to worry – take what they share with you seriously and thank them for being open with you.

BUILD A STRONG CLASSROOM COMMUNITY.

For students coming in with trauma and anxiety, giving them some control is one of the best things you can do to help them feel more at ease. Many children have gone through similar experiences but felt alone in it, especially given the isolation that came with COVID-19. It's important to help them rebuild social connections and support – peer relationships are crucial for social development. Feeling like part of a classroom team makes school a much more positive environment and holds children accountable to someone other than authority figures.

Ways you can do this:

- *Create a classroom contract together.* Set expectations, rules, and consequences as a group. Discuss what good students, good classmates, and good teachers look like – make sure they know their voices are heard and valued.
- *Be proactive in addressing bullying and disrespectful behavior.* Do this kindly and compassionately, but it's important for kids who may be a victim of bullying to know that you'll be on their side. Part of feeling safe in the classroom is feeling safe in that environment as a whole, not just with the teacher.

FOCUS ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OVER PUNISHMENT

Many kids feel unheard or like their opinions and desires don't matter, especially after or during a traumatic experience. This often manifests as attention-seeking behaviors. If they get attention - even negative attention - through acting out, they'll likely continue those behaviors. Positive reinforcement is not only more compassionate – it also increases confidence and motivation, both of which are negatively impacted by trauma.

Ways you can do this:

- *Praise appropriate classroom behavior.* Highlighting student role models can motivate and inspire other students. It switches the narrative from "don't do anything wrong" to "let's see how great you can do."
- *Create opportunities for students to show off their strengths to teachers, peers, and themselves.* If a student finishes an independent assignment and didn't have further instructions and starts drawing at their desk without interrupting anyone, don't call out that it's math time – instead, praise their quiet transition and art skills. If you need to redirect them, frame it positively: "I didn't think anyone would finish so quickly! I'd like us to stay focused on math during this time – could you pull out your workbook?"



WORK WITH THE FAMILY.

You only know so much about your student's home life, especially at the start of a new year. Inviting their family to be a part of the team can help you better understand and support the student with whatever challenges may come up throughout the year. It's helpful to be aware of what your students' families have gone through over the last year and a half (if they're open to sharing) and what resources they have available at home. By making yourself a resource to the parents, they are more likely to be engaged in their child's education, which helps both the student and the teacher.

Ways you can do this:

- *Reach out proactively with positive feedback.* Most families only hear from school when there is negative information to share, like that their child got in trouble or was hurt. Sharing that their child was especially helpful to a student in need or that you were impressed by their book report establishes that you really care about their student.
- *Give families your contact information.* Decide your own boundaries here – maybe you're fine with them having your cell phone number, or maybe you'd rather keep it to email. Tell them when, how, and for what reasons they can or should reach out to you.

INCREASE YOUR TRAUMA COMPETENCY

Integrating trauma-informed classroom strategies is beneficial to all students, and small changes can make a big difference in student well-being and success.

Ways you can do this:

- *Know your student population.* Different communities experience different types of trauma – know the demographics of your class and educate yourself on what issues different students may face. Understand the cultural differences that show up in coping with trauma and mental health challenges.
- *Connect with local organizations doing on-the-ground work.* There are some things that you can't provide directly to your students and families, but other organizations can – like financial resources or low-cost, healthy food. Know how these issues intersect with youth mental health and student performance and help provide your families with solutions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

WE Teachers, in collaboration with MHA, has developed a free module to give teachers the materials, resources and activities to support your students in identifying and dealing with trauma. You'll learn about what trauma is and how it exists within students and/or the classroom, explore how to identify trauma within a student and discover the importance and benefits of developing a trauma-informed classroom.

Visit teachershub.we.org/courses/we-teachers-introductory-module-trauma-informed-classroom for more information.

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WHEN HOME LIFE IS HARD: UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

Child abuse is when someone caring for a child intentionally hurts them physically or emotionally. It can be hard to recognize this abuse – it's natural to trust that the people who are supposed to care for you wouldn't hurt you. But your feelings are important, and if you feel scared or unsafe at home, you might be experiencing some form of abuse.

AM I BEING ABUSED?

Experiencing abuse is scary and confusing, especially when it's coming from someone who is supposed to take care of you. Even if you know you are being hurt, you may have thoughts like: *I know they love me. I don't want to get them in trouble. What if it's not on purpose? What if I did something wrong? What if they told me not to tell anyone?* No matter what, abuse is never your fault, and you deserve to feel safe around the people in your life.

It's also important to know that something considered abuse in one culture may not be considered abuse in another. This doesn't mean that the actions don't hurt you – as the one experiencing the situation, you are the only person who can decide if you are hurt. But sometimes, what looks like intentional abuse or neglect may be a cultural misunderstanding or a traditional practice. In cases like this, education and support can help families change their behavior.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I'M BEING ABUSED?

The safest thing you can do if you're being hurt (or are scared you will be hurt) by someone in your life is to talk to an adult. You have a few options on who to go to:

An adult you know and trust. You can tell a family member, teacher, coach, friend's parent, neighbor, or any other adult in your life who you feel safe around about what you are experiencing.

Some of these adults may be mandated reporters – people who are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect. These adults are really important in keeping kids safe, but you might not be ready for someone to intervene yet. Mandated reporters vary by state but often include teachers, school staff, and other adults who work with children.

The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD). You can call (or text or chat) this hotline 24/7 to reach a professional crisis counselor. They will listen to you, help you decide what to do, and can connect you with support services. All calls, texts, and chats are confidential.

The police. If you are in immediate and serious danger, you should call 911. They will respond and intervene immediately.

WHAT IF I'M NOT READY TO TALK YET?

That's okay. Sometimes kids feel guilty speaking up, like they are betraying their parents or caregivers, or are scared about what will end up happening to them. It takes a lot of courage to talk about abuse, and it's okay if you aren't prepared for that yet. Focus on keeping yourself safe in the meantime: find a safe space in your home or at a friend's house, limit interaction by having headphones on or focusing on a book, and have a plan in case you ever need to get out of the house immediately.

You deserve to feel safe and loved. When you are ready, know that telling someone is the safest and bravest thing you can do, and there are a lot of adults who care about you and will help keep you safe.

TYPES OF ABUSE

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Any intentional physical harm to a child is physical abuse, including hitting, burning, biting, or any action that injures the child.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is involved in sexual acts with an adult or older child. These acts do not need to involve physical contact to be considered abuse. No adult should touch or talk about your body (or theirs, or anyone else's) in a way that makes you uncomfortable.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Words can hurt. When a parent or caregiver talks to or treats you in a way that makes you feel bad about yourself, that's emotional abuse. It can be hard to recognize but includes things like name-calling, insulting, threatening violence, and withholding love and support.

NEGLECT

Sometimes, the people who are supposed to take care of you don't meet your needs. This may not be intentional – the adults in your life might care about you very much but be struggling financially or with their own mental health, making it difficult to provide for you. Even if they are doing their best, it is their responsibility to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and supervision to maintain your health and well-being.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

Some adults treat their child(ren) well but are abusive to other adults at home. You can be impacted by abuse even if it isn't happening to you. Witnessing abuse, especially involving someone you love, or just being in a home where you know (or suspect) that abuse is happening can weigh on your mental health.

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WORKSHEET: FEELING SAFE

Experiencing a traumatic event of any kind can leave you feeling unsafe or unstable. Finding ways to focus on safety and building a sense of control over aspects of life can help you feel more grounded. When we lack safety, we may feel anxious, overwhelmed, or depressed. Use this worksheet to think through how you can increase feelings of security in life.

BUILDING AWARENESS

Are there other situations in life that make you feel out of control?

(Example: having an unexpected conversation or visit, getting into an argument, having to do something you didn't want to do)

What are some of the thoughts that go through your mind that increase negative feelings or experiences?

(Example: I don't know what to do, everything is going to go wrong)

What are some of the physical experiences in your body that increase negative experiences?

(Example: my heart races, I get a stomach ache, I sweat)

BUILDING SAFE COPING

What are some positive words you can say to yourself to feel better?

What are some things that have helped you feel safe in the past? This can be an action you've taken to reduce negative physical reactions or an object that feels safe. (Example: holding a stuffed animal, reading your favorite book, listening to calming music)

Think of a place where you have felt safe in the past. Take a moment to close your eyes, take a few slow deep breaths, and visualize the place. Think through the details. What do you see, hear, smell, feel, or even taste?

Who in your life can you talk to when you feel unsafe or unstable?

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TALKING ABOUT HARD TOPICS: GUIDE TO PREPARING TO SHARE

When we have to have a conversation about hard topics, it's important to plan ahead so you aren't caught off guard which can set us back. Use the following sheet to plan through what it would be like to share your experiences with someone you want to disclose information to.

PLANNING THE CONVERSATION

1. Who do you want to share with?

2. What specific information do you want to share?

3. Use the back of this page or additional sheets to write out a script or an outline of a script of what you might share. If you're not sure where to start, use the document at mhanational.org/talking-adolescents-and-teens-time-talk as a guide.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

1. What do you think will happen when you share? What is the best response you could receive?

2. What is the worst thing that could happen? What would they say to you or how would they react that would make you feel much worse?

3. What do you need from this person to feel better? It is important that the below answer is focused on specific, clear, or concrete actions that will help you feel better. (Example: I need you to listen, I need you to call me once a week, I need you to help me talk to mom and dad.) Add this answer to your script in #3 in the first section of this page.

4. What are you going to do if the person you're sharing with does not respond in the best way?
(Example: talk to your friend, write in your journal, take a walk.)

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

To have the conversation it's best to **use the script** you developed from question #3 in "planning the conversation" and make sure you remember to **ask for what you need** (from question #3 from "managing expectations"). Use your responses from "managing expectations" to prepare for potential challenges or issues that could arise during the conversation. Remember that #4 from "managing expectations" is an action you can take regardless of the outcome of the conversation.



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STRESS OR FEAR AFFECTING YOU EVERY DAY? OVERWHELMED? UNABLE TO COPE?

YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING
THE FIRST SIGNS OF A MENTAL
HEALTH CONDITION, LIKE
DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY.

TAKE THE YOUTH SCREEN AT
[MHADALLAS.ORG/HELP](https://mhadallas.org/help) TO SEE
IF YOU MAY BE AT RISK.

ONCE YOU GET THE RESULTS,
MHA WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH
MORE INFORMATION AND HELP
YOU TO FIGURE OUT
NEXT STEPS..

IN CRISIS? Trained crisis counselors are available
24/7 by texting "MHA" to 741-741 or calling
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LIFE DURING COVID HAS MADE IT HARD TO FEEL SAFE.

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