

What's a Parent to Do?:
A Case Study of Socializing Talk by Parents to Siblings
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Abstract

Socialization and parental guidance are frequently offered to children through comments on their behavior and on their sibling relationships. There is research support for the fact that parents' socializing verbalizations toward older and younger siblings impact the sibling relationship directly. Children's perceptions of socializing talk directed at their sibling, about the sibling relationship, may have indirect effects. In this case study, coding discordant socializing talk is recommended as a useful technique for measuring variations in parental talk to older siblings compared to target children. In fact, older siblings in two families from a European American rural working-class community received more discordant socializing talk than the target children.

What's a Parent to Do?: A Case Study of Socializing Talk by Parents to Siblings

Families with children contain, at minimum, three subsystems of communicative interactions: parent to parent, parent to child, and sibling to sibling (Cicirelli, 1976). The management of siblings within a family structure has received growing attention in the past decade (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008; Widmer & Weiss, 2000). For instance, there is research supporting the fact that parents' socializing verbalizations toward older and younger siblings impact the sibling relationship directly (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). The purpose of the current study is to consider the effects of external pressures on the family such as when the parent's relationship with one child needs to be constrained by objectives not associated with other children as so often happens in parent-teacher conferences, visits to the doctor, or observations made by researchers. The specific goal of this study is to introduce a technique for measuring parent-child interaction, namely, coding for discordant clauses, and then to describe what discordant talk consists of and to examine its regularity in an everyday context. In this study, there will be a close look at the discordant talk directed to siblings together or individually (e.g., "I don't think you both can sit in there" or "Hey [Older Sib], stop that!"). Prior research has examined ways siblings have related to each other through observation of task performance, self-report of social interaction, and observable family structure.

Klein, Feldman, and Zarur (2002) found that older siblings often contribute cognitively to the development of their younger siblings through problem-solving tasks where two siblings work together. The sibling relationship during problem solving tasks was rooted in socially guiding and mediating the behaviors of the younger sibling through the task at hand. When older siblings employed effective teaching strategies, the skill mastery for their younger siblings was more successful. An increase in the use of one such teaching strategy by older siblings, mediation, was

shown by the authors to be important in focusing task performance in younger siblings. Mediation consisted of attention-focusing, amplifying of positive affect, fostering a sense of competence, regulating the learning process, as well as providing negative feedback, such as “mocking, teasing, belittling, or name-calling” and using “good-humored criticisms (Klein et al., 2002, p. 326).” As a result of mediation, younger siblings experienced an increase in both positive affect and sense of friendship. The younger siblings also benefitted from their older siblings’ optimistic predictions about their potential performances on problem-solving tasks.

Whiteman and Christiansen (2008) reported that the social adjustment and experience of younger siblings can be guided by older siblings. In fact, younger siblings interviewed during early adolescence viewed their older siblings as contributors to their socialization regarding behavior, skill acquisition, and experiences in childhood and adolescence. Widmer and Weiss (2000) found that positive self-images reported by older siblings were significantly associated with higher scores of social adjustment for younger siblings. Even negative feedback provided by older siblings to younger children, such as mocking and teasing along with good-humored criticisms utilized by older siblings, resulted in an increased level of positive affect, friendship, and older siblings’ predictions of performance of younger siblings on tasks (Klein et al., 2002). On the other hand, Martin, Anderson, Burant, and Weber (1997) found that verbal aggression between siblings was found to be detrimental to the positive development of the sibling relationship. Participants’ verbal aggressiveness and perceived verbal aggressiveness were negatively correlated with satisfaction and trust between siblings. Additionally, Piotrowski (1997) found that siblings frequently enforce both conventional and moral rules set by parents upon each other, which leads to negatively skewed relationships.

In addition to the sibling-sibling interaction system, the parent-child system also plays an important role in the development of sibling relationships. Volling and Elins (1998) found during parent interviews that parents were likely to discipline older siblings more than younger siblings. Parents seemed to find it normal to treat older siblings with higher expectations of behavior and maturity. However, in terms of impact, older siblings who were preschool-aged themselves were reported to exhibit higher levels of internalizing rather than externalizing behavior. Jones and Adamson (1987) compared the language used by mothers of young children in dyadic situations between mother and child and in triadic situations between mother and two children. During the triadic situation, mothers spoke less to their younger children as compared to the dyadic situation. As a result, later-born infants tended to use increased social regulative speech compared to first-born infants.

Socialization and parental guidance are frequently offered to children through comments on their own behavior as well as on their sibling relationship. Whiteman and Christiansen (2008) found that the sibling relationship is directly affected by parents' socializing verbalizations, and that how children perceive parent's socializing talk directed to their sibling can have indirect effects. Pressures come to play differentially on family systems, particularly when adults from outside the family unit ask the parents to constrain the relationship in specific ways with just one child. A naturalistic observation in which a researcher enters the home of a child, for the purpose of collecting observational data, may direct the family toward privileging the talk of one child over another. Siblings offer each other socialization and peer guidance (Klein et al., 2002).

In the study at hand, we wish to define discordant verbalizations and describe their relative use by parents in addressing their older and younger children when the younger child's language development is under observation by a researcher. This situation constitutes a type of natural

experiment where one child is the focus of observation to the exclusion of the older child. What is a parent to do? Differential treatment in the discordant socializing verbalizations that parents direct toward older and younger siblings could be a cause for concern in respect to the behavioral development of all their children.

For the purpose of this study, discordant socializing verbalizations are specifically framed as ways of saying to the child, “No, what you are doing or saying right now should change.” Parents have a wide variety of speech acts available to them for sending these messages (Hymes, 1974). For example, they may issue *orders* to do something, “Sit up in your high chair now.” They may *prohibit* or tell the child not to do something, “Stop fussing with that dog.” They may *criticize* the child, “I told you to get away from that dog.” They may *deny or contradict* what the child indicates, “No, we’re not going on the road.” They may make *promises* to forestall a problem, “After a while, we’ll go for a walk.” Sometimes they *warn or threaten* their children, “You better tell your brother to get off of your bed. He’ll break it.” Sometimes they issue *protests*, “I can’t pull your zipper up!” Frequently, they *urge* their children toward a better choice, “Howie/ Hey, mister.” In a different, much larger sample of family talk from a rural African American community that was coded according to 16 inductively derived categories of discordant speech acts, one-third of all family member utterances consisted of these ways of saying no (Sperry, Sperry, & Hamil, 2008). The limited sample of family talk coded for this introductory examination of differential treatment of siblings resulted in examples of nearly all of these same categories.

In this study, there is a focus on the interaction system of parents to children, with analyses of the types and frequency of discordant talk between parents and their older child versus the younger child. The videotapes were originally made for the purpose of investigating

the younger child's language development. In this study, as a result, the research focus on differential treatment of siblings uses naturally occurring differences in types and frequency of discordance. Discordant talk directed at the younger child is recorded regardless of whether the older sibling is present. Discordant talk directed at the older sibling was only recorded when the older sibling was present in the target child's observation.

Comparing the discordant verbalizations parents make toward older and younger siblings can provide a vital framework in understanding methods of parents' management of all their children, particularly when a researcher asks for one relationship to be privileged. Gaining a better understanding of parents' discordant talk toward their older and younger children could lead to new understandings of family dynamics. The impact of the differential use of discordant talk could be particularly important in the behavioral development of the children of a family.

The qualitative research questions addressing the examination of parents' discordant talk toward older and younger siblings will permit an in-depth description of identified types. The following research questions were utilized in the analysis of the data found in this qualitative study:

1. What constitutes discordant talk for families with two closely spaced preschool-aged siblings?
2. How does parents' discordant socializing talk compare between older and younger siblings when in a home environment?
3. How does a researcher, entering the family's home environment, impact the discordant socializing talk parents direct toward their older and younger children?

Home-based video observations, followed by transcription and coding, are used to answer these questions in the study. There are expectations for differences in parents' discordant

verbalizations toward their younger and older children. The privileged relationship between the parent and the younger child in the family is expected to have a noticeable impact upon the older sibling. It is expected that the results will identify how the researcher's presence impacted the results. The older sibling may use attention-seeking behavior that may increase parents' discordant verbalizations directed toward them. This attention-seeking behavior may act as a limitation and strength in the observation of the parents and children within the naturalistic environment. Examples of similar situations may take place at the doctor's office, a teacher's conference, or a department store.

Method

Participants

This case study uses a set of existing data that were collected for the purpose of observing language development in normal children in a rural European-American community in the Midwest. Two target children from working-class families, whose fathers worked as factory operators and whose mothers were housewives, were the participants in this description. Each child had an opposite-sex sibling who was 2 to 3 years older. Krissie's brother, Howie, was 23 months older than she and Evan's sister, Edie, was 36 months older than he. Families were observed when the target (younger) child was 24, 28, and 36 months old. Five of the 14 families in the original study, with children 18 to 24 months at the start of data collection, had older siblings. Only two of the five had older siblings within three years of age of the target child. Siblings who were more than three years older were assumed to be old enough to be more susceptible to the effect of the researcher. For the purposes of this natural experiment, data concerning the target child were collected when his or her older sibling both was present or absent from the observation. The discrepancies caused by older sibling absences were accounted

for in the data analysis. Rate calculations in the data analysis were adjusted by changing denominators to reflect accurately the number of hours that the older sibling was present.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Procedures

The videotaped participant-observational methodology facilitated the capture of the total language environment of the child during the naturalistic observation. Informed consent was completed before the collection of the videotaped home observation data. The home-based video observations were completed by a research assistant. Field notes were not collected during the home-based video observations. Transcripts of the video observations were prepared after the completion of the videotaped visits. A total of three half-hour transcripts per child were prepared and coded, which were used to observe parents' interactions and socializing verbalizations with their children in home environments. Observers spoke to children, other family members, and visitors when solicited. Normally, observers did not initiate conversation. In this study, there is a focus on parent-child speech between parents and either the target child or the older sibling, in the presence of the other sibling. Home-based video observations were previously transcribed, including a rich inclusion of quotations, actions, and setting information by research assistants supervised by Sperry.

The discordant clause types were coded using *Ethnograph 6.0, Qualis Research Software*. With the coding software, a systematic format was available to capture the discordant speech act in its fully transcribed context. Coding was performed for discordance type, speech function, and identity of speaker (adult or youth). One expectation was that there would be differences in the frequency and type of discordant verbalizations expressed by parents toward their older and younger children.

Results

Previous work in a rural African American community provided an inductively derived set of 16 categories of discordant socializing speech acts that were aimed at changing the course of the child's current direction of behavior or talk (Sperry et al., 2008). The most frequently used categories with 2-year-olds in that data set were orders, prohibitions, urges, criticisms, and repeated requests (Sperry, Hamil, & Sperry, 2010). If the child moved to pick a flower, the adult might say, "Don't pick off the pretty one," which was coded as a prohibition. If the child was quietly watching TV and not talking, the adult might say, "Come now and talk for the camera," which would be coded as both an urge and an order. In this study, urges were commonly paired with orders in parents' socializing talk to their children. Fifteen of the 16 categories of discordant talk identified in the African American community occurred in the rural European American families considered here.

In the Indiana data set, the target child was observed over six half-hour segments irrespective of the presence of the older sibling. Thus, there are only four half-hour segments of each target child's older sibling which were analyzed. Summary data analysis shows that older siblings and target children together received an average of 42 discordant utterances every hour from parents. In other words, parents directed one discordant verbalization toward older siblings and target children, in the two families, every 1.43 minutes. In answer to the first research question, examples of the categories from the Indiana families are:

- Order – Mom: "Edie, *bring those [maracas] in from outside/*" (Edie, 5 yrs)
- Urge – Friend of Edie's: "*Evan/ Evan, com'ere/ Com'ere, Evan/*" (Evan, 36 mos)
- Prohibition – Mom: "*Don't fight/ Don't fight/*" (Krissie, 28 mos)
- Criticism – Mom: "*You don't need to be around her [the dog]/*" (Edie, 5 yrs)

- Warning – Dad: “*Be careful to not slip on that old rug!*” (Howie, 4 yrs, 3 mos)
- Repeated Request – Mom: “*Where ya goin’?! Goin’ somewhere?!*” (Evan, 28 mos)
- Denial/Contradiction – Mom: “*You’re gonna sit in your chair!*” Krissie: “*uh un!*”
Mom: “*Mm hmm!*” (Krissie, 24 mos)
- Threat – Mom: “*I’m gonna get your lip (playfully)*” (Evan, 24 mos)
- Provocation – Two older girls are helping with the taping session. One leans in and kisses the target child. Girl: “*Mm, I got me some sugar!*” (Markus, 40 mos)
- Interruption – Krissie and Howie are watching TV and commenting on the pizza commercial when Dad enters the room, “*Guys, I need your sign/ Pete’s birthday card/ Fa-father’s day card/ (shows card) Put your name on there, Krissie!*” (Krissie and Howie, 28 mos and 4 yrs, 3 mos)
- Correction – Dad: “*Use your fork to get it [the breakfast burrito] up! There you go!*” (Howie, 3 yrs, 11 mos)
- Promise – Mom: “*No, honey/ We’re not gonna be out that long/ When we go in, I’ll do some wash, in the garage!*” (Edie, 5 yrs)
- Protest – Edie: “*I wanna give my bike a wash now!*” Mom: “*You can’t/ Your bike’s at Gramma’s, remember?!*” Edie: (whining) “*Today!*” Mom: (begins pulling wagon with Evan in it) “*Well, I can’t pull both of you!*” (Evan, 24 mos)
- Sarcasm – Howie to Dad: (finding a toy in the bag of burritos) “*Hey, you got me the thing!*” Dad: “*Yeah, I got ya the thing!*” (Howie, 3 yrs, 11 mos)
- Third-Party Criticism – Mom to Krissie: “*What? Howie breaks what?*” (Krissie, 28 mos)

- Shame – Mom to Evan: “No, we’re not going on the road right now/” (Evan cries)
Mom: “*That’s enough/*” (Evan, 24 mos)

The second research question asks about differential treatment by parents. On average, older siblings received more discordant verbalizations (48 per hour) than target children (29 per hour). However, many of the identified discordant clauses were directed similarly across the siblings, the two families, and at the different intervals in time. Orders were the most frequent type of discordance for both older siblings and target children. Criticisms, urges, and prohibitions occurred in the top five types for both older siblings and target children. The target child in both families received more denials/contradictions than the older sibling. The older siblings received more than twice as many sarcasms, protests, urges, and corrections than the target children. All categories of discordance -- except for promises, denial/contradictions, shames, and third-person criticisms -- were more frequently directed toward older siblings than target children by parents. Shames and third-person criticisms occurred very rarely in parents’ discordant talk.

Insert Table 2 About Here

With respect to the third research question, a speech function analysis showed that older siblings received a higher rate of imperatives (i.e., commands such as “Sit up to the table and put your feet on the floor”), a higher rate of declaratives (i.e., “I told you to stop bothering that dog”), and a higher rate of interjections (i.e., Hey there, honey) than did younger children. By contrast, younger children were asked questions at a higher rate (i.e., “What ya doin?”). This finding was likely an artifact of the original purpose of the data collection which was to “keep the target child talking.” The results of this analysis may confirm the fact that parents did appear

to hold differential expectations for their children in the situation of being observed by a researcher.

Insert Table 3 About Here

In search of triangulation, a final analysis was undertaken to bring a broader view of parent-child discordance, other than the view made possible by the type analysis of discordant verbalizations. We looked for topical episodes that included negatively charged moments between parents and their children (namely, when children began to cry or expressed considerable frustration) and then examined how parents managed the tension. In the six half-hour observations under study here, there were a total of 11 episodes where the target child fretted or cried or where the older sibling protested in frustration as a result of parental discordant interaction. Of the 11 episodes, eight of them occurred in Krissie and Howie's family, seven of the eight occurring at the 24- and 28-month taping sessions when Howie was present. Howie was not in attendance during the 36-month observation. The remaining three episodes occurred during Evan's 24-month observation. His older sister, Edie, was present during all three taping sessions.

Edie was five years old during Evan's taping sessions, and she only protested twice to her mother. First, she complained about a broken promise about washing her bike; second, she questioned why Mom was telling her to leave the dog alone. Edie did not belabor her protests and Mom did not respond strongly in either situation. Evan, at 24 months, expressed unhappiness at not getting his way about a wagon ride. In this instance, his mother prohibited his crying, shamed him, and then brought him a bottle of milk and promised him a walk later. Later in the half hour, he and Edie were playing in the dirt outside by the fence and he enjoyed playing in the mud before fussing that his shoes were dirty. Mom chose not to make an issue of

Evan's muddiness except to say mildly that Kitty (the cat Evan was about to pick up) "...doesn't want to see you 'cause Kitty likes to stay clean." There were no episodes of discordant parent-child interaction in either the 28-month or 36-month transcripts of Evan's family, a fact that seems particularly striking given the amount of discordance in other familial contexts.

By contrast, Howie was just four years old during Krissie's taping sessions, and he was considerably more argumentative. In this manner, it is possible that Howie was imitating the style which Krissie's father often modeled around them. Krissie's mother usually attempted to stop unwanted behavior with direct prohibitions. In contrast to this approach, Krissie's father often engaged with both children in elaborate "teachable moments." For example, in Krissie's 36-month observation, her father provoked the single discordant episode by bringing up Krissie's past transgression when she wrote on the wall with a crayon.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

As a result of situations such as the above episode, Howie or his father initiated all seven discordant parent-child episodes in the first two observations. Yet in many ways, these discordant episodes seemed designed to ensure positive behavior in the future. Both Krissie and Howie are learning to respond to their father in a way which both acknowledges his efforts to teach and ensures their success in getting what they want.

Discussion

The richness of the depictions of discordant speech examined in this study make discordance a promising method for investigating systems of communicative interaction used to regulate the socio-emotional climate of the home. The intrusiveness of the observation situation was frequently felt but managed graciously by the families. Our data set is small but the types of discordant speech acts in the rural European American community mirrored the types of

discordance that appeared in a rural African American community (Sperry et al., 2010). Further, the episode analysis indicated that parents seemed consistent in their responses to their children. Overall, analysis of these transcripts demonstrated that discordant speech is directed toward either or both of the siblings by parents and it illustrates a phenomenon not previously reported in the literature for working-class European American families. The management of two siblings may not always be easy, which is illustrated through the occurrence of verbalized discordant speech. However, the fact that parents are relatively even-handed in the variety of the discordant speech acts that they use in socializing talk to both older siblings and target children offers a positive image of the family dynamic and functions.

There were differences in parents' discordant talk between older siblings and target children with older siblings receiving a higher rate of discordance. Older siblings were also hearing more than twice as many sarcastic comments, protests, urges, and corrections. The target children, by comparison, only heard more denials/contradictions. Older siblings heard more imperatives, declaratives, and interjections compared to their younger siblings who were being asked more questions. The higher rate of discordance, verified by a larger number of discordant clauses directed per hour toward the older sibling along with the higher number of episodes initiated by actions of the older sibling, especially in Krissie's family, supports the finding of Volling and Elins (1998) who reported parents as being more likely to discipline their older versus their younger children. Jones and Adamson (1987) found that there are consequences to this reality with younger children, who learn to use a higher rate of social regulative speech. The episode analysis performed here, however, reveals parents who tried to remain fairly even-handed with both children even under the circumstance of being asked to privilege the relationship with the younger child.

Limitations and Future Research

The small sample size used in this case study is not able to be generalized to all populations, which introduces a threat to external validity. The demographics of the participants used within the study also add a threat to the external validity given that both families were European American and working class which does not represent the American population as a whole. The study was not entirely naturalistic because the researcher had contact with the family, and the results may have been impacted by the researcher's presence. In particular, because the target child was the focus of the observation, and because the parents were asked by the researcher to try to keep the target child talking, it is expected that the number of discordant speech acts directed to the target child may be different during these observations than during a normal time at home. Finally, in this study, only the home situation was sampled, which presents another threat to external validity.

Threats to internal validity cannot be completely characterized at this time. Inter-coder reliability was not calculated due to the small set of transcripts. Both researchers coded and reached agreement on all of the coding. Sperry, Sperry, and Hamil (2008) introduced the characterizations of discordant verbalizations. There have been no other empirical studies outside of Sperry, Hamil, and Sperry (2008) and Sperry et al. (2010) that have used the same characterizations of discordant verbalizations. We are using a constructivist paradigm to develop a theory about the uses of discordant family interaction in the process of the ongoing data collection and analysis.

The notion of future study on sibling relationships and family structure is reliant on the completion of this systematic manner of defining discordant verbalizations directed by parents toward older and younger siblings. The development of a relationship between younger and older

siblings may be impacted by discordant speech directed by parents (Klein et al., 2002; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). The types of verbal aggression exchanged between siblings may be influenced by differences in the discordant verbalizations parents direct toward their older and younger children (Martin et al., 1997; Piotrowski, 1997).

In general, much more work on each of the different systems of communicative interaction in families and their outcomes is needed, which is the same need identified a generation ago by Cicirelli (1978). The method of using discordant speech events as a technique for measuring family communication holds considerable promise for moving forward on this need. Parenting techniques may be examined and found through questionnaires in correlation to differential discordant verbalizations toward older and younger siblings. The field requires an analysis of the types and characterizations of discordant speech expressed by parents. If parents express discordant speech differently toward their older children in comparison to younger children, a thorough explanation and identification process is necessary for future studies in other similar areas. Our case study examining home-based video observations on families begins to introduce the field to a clear, conceptual process of defining the comparative discordant verbalizations directed toward older and younger children by parents, in the presence of younger siblings, especially when a researcher asks for one relationship to be privileged.

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Table 1

Participants

Child	Age of Sample (in months)		
Evan	24	28	36
Edie	60	--	72
Krissie	24	28	36
Howie	47	51	--

Table 2

Rate of Discordant Clauses Received by Older and Target Children

Discordance Codes	Rates (per hour)	
	Older Child	Target Child
Urge	12.5	4
Order	10	6.67
Prohibition	5.5	4.67
Criticism	7	4
Denial/Contradiction	0	1.33
Repeated Request	3	2.33
Correction	1.5	0.67
Sarcasm	2.5	0.33
Interruption	0.5	0.33
Threat	1.5	1.33
Warning	1.5	1
Promise	1	1
Protest	1.5	0.33
Shame	0	0.33
Third Person Criticism	0	1

Table 3

Speech Function Analysis

	Examples	Rate per Hour	
		Older Children	Target Children
Declaratives	“I told you to stop”	12.5	7
Imperatives	“Sit up to the table”	18	9.67
Interjections	“Hey there, buddy”	12.5	6.67
Questions	“What ya doin?”	5	6

<p>Figure 1: <i>Example of Discordant Episode</i> <i>Directed by Father Toward Target</i> <i>Child</i></p> <p>Krissie (36 months) and Dad</p> <p>K: (gets down, drops toy, walks around table and picks up Blue's Clues notebook toy) oh yeah/ I forgot/ I don't have no crayons/ showing D the notebook)</p> <p>D: Nah, you like to write on the walls/</p> <p>K: I don't, no/</p> <p>D: Bologna/</p> <p>K: I don't do it anymore/</p> <p>D: You don't do it anymore?</p> <p>K: no/</p> <p>D: Well, if I get you a crayon, will you not write on the walls?</p> <p>K: (climbing on other chair) no no/</p> <p>D: You better quit jumpin' around/ You're gonna "Jack be nimble and jump on your stick"/ (gets up to get crayon)</p> <p>K: get me a crayon/ (all in sing-song voice) get me a crayon/ get me a crayon/ get me a crayon/ get me a crayon/ get me a crayon/ (walks over to D)</p>	<p>D: Well/ (looking for crayon in the cabinet) Hmm/ Where'd she take those at?/ Well, we need to clean this out/ (talking about the cabinet) It is terrible/ (walks over to look in another cabinet) Do you know where mom take the crayons (to K) Hmm?/</p> <p>K: I don't know/</p> <p>D: You don't know? You sure? (looks in another cabinet) Ooooooh!/ What'd you want? Green?</p> <p>K: yeah/ green, green, green/</p> <p>D: (hands crayon to K)</p> <p>K: that. that's green/</p> <p>D: That's green/ Now, if you write on the wall I get to smack your butt right?/ (putting the rest of the crayons away)</p> <p>K: (opens notebook and starts drawing in it)</p> <p>D: Huh?/ Hmm, hmm, hmm/ (sits back down in chair) Now/ (getting back to his work) Hmmm/ (to himself)</p> <p>K: (playing with Blue's Clues notebook and crayon)</p> <p>End of episode</p>
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