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Young-Male-Specific Approaches to the Prevention of Violence

Centre for the Prevention of Youth Crime (ed.)



Arbeitsstelle Kinder- und
Jugendkriminalitätsprävention

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Preliminary Note

“Violence”, as numerous studies and practitioner reports attest, is still engaged in primarily by young males. But this finding has yet to be taken up on any significant scale in the prevention of criminality, at least as reflected in theory. While it is true that in violence prevention in particular the primary target has been and still remains the young males group, and that programmes are not infrequently designed to address this group exclusively, there is an almost complete dearth of young-male-specific theory.

This may well be in part the result – an unintended result, it must be conceded – of the immense theoretical output from gender research. The debates over “hegemonic masculinity”, “doing masculinity”, “engendered structure” and the “gender regime”, framed as they have been in sophisticated theoretical constructs by contributors ranging from Pierre Bourdieu by way of Niklas Luhmann to the now seemingly boundless ocean of writings on the category of gender, together with further extensions taking in the diversity debate, cannot be said to have produced a readily usable general theoretical framework.

Relevant German-language research also includes a number of anthologies pitched at a semi-theoretical level and describing, on the one hand, the life-situations of young males from various perspectives, and, on the other hand, educational approaches to work with young males – including, in some cases, explicit reference to the issue of violence. Violence prevention is presented in these essays generally in exemplary form, e.g. as an individual approach tried, or as an illustrative account of a particular area of practice. Of the concepts and strategies presented in these studies, many have the character of a model – which in fact not infrequently tends to impede their adoption as standard practice.

An area that, in comparison, receives too little attention is everyday educational practice. On the basis that model-type concepts can and should provide intellectual stimulus, whereas ultimately young-male-specific approaches to violence prevention need to become a matter of course in the everyday educational practice of the institutions and action programmes, the Centre for the Prevention of Youth Crime has sought to focus attention on routine educational practice while at the same time trying to achieve an overview of the past developments and current status of theory and practice in pre-school and school education, youth employment, sport, and *Jugendberufshilfe* (support service for youth in transition from school to work).

To this end, the Centre commissioned five expert reports aimed at describing the current status of young-male-specific violence prevention in the five fields of action named¹.

Our underlying assumptions were:

- There is a largely undisputed and criminologically demonstrable correlation, as indicated above, between violent behaviour and masculinity;
- In current standard educational practice, young-male-specific (gender-aware) programmes aimed at violence prevention still play no more than a marginal role;
- Violence-prevention programmes have not hitherto sufficiently addressed the different life-situations and problem-situations of young males;
- Gender-specific violence-prevention programmes permit easier access to young males and a better working relationship with them; so there should be further development of programmes of this type.

All the research teams were asked to address the following questions:

- Are there specific violence-prevention programmes for young males? If so, how are they structured, what are their theoretical premisses, and in what way does their theory relate to standard practice?
- In the programmes, what role is played by physicality?
- What images of the young male or of masculinity are invoked by the young-male-specific approaches, and what are their a priori theoretical assumptions?
- Is there a gender-specific approach to work with parents?
- Are opportunities afforded for individual reflection on male and female gender roles and role-model representation, and are such opportunities institutionalised?
- What role is played by the various ethnic backgrounds?
- In what way is the issue of social environment addressed?

Teams were also requested to furnish short accounts of experience in other European countries, where possible.

The findings from the five research programmes are summarised below in the form of propositions. The research undertaken focused primarily on the professional youth workers and their activity, and this determined the way in which the propositions are framed – at the expense of the equally important perspective foregrounding the young males themselves. It will therefore be important to accord the young males themselves greater prominence at a future stage. The propositions set out below are thus only an initial step aimed at

¹ The expert reports, which are in German, can be downloaded from www.dji.de/jugendkriminalitaet

stimulating discussion in professional circles, and will need to be followed by others.

Conclusions from the Research: 18 Propositions

The expert reports all view masculinity as socially based (gender in the social sense, not sex in the biological sense). Gender, especially in educational contexts, is not a naturally ordained, so to speak “pre-social”, permanent attribute, but a social category for purposes of action and organisation, and a resource, and is transmitted habitually through cultural and social behaviour patterns. Gender in this sense is accessible to reflective introspection and – in principle at least – capable of modification through interaction with others.

The expert reports also concur in pointing out that there is no single masculine or young-male lived-in world, but many, and that some of them are additionally subject to specific processes of change. Cultural, religious and socio-economic factors are also involved here, as are access and lack of access to education, membership of a particular “scene”, types of media consumption, etc. Those working with young males will be confronted with a wide range of individually differing life-situations. Given these realities, talk of “what it is to be a young male” is an abstraction that inevitably begs the question of who in particular is meant. It accordingly has to be borne in mind that when reference is made below to “work with young males”, “young-male-specific approaches” and the like, this always means appropriately particularised approaches to such work.

Lastly, the expert reports are unanimous that effective violence prevention, if it is to bring adequate educational measures and the development of other, less violent, forms of behaviour within the bounds of possibility, has to begin by achieving empathetic insight into the gender-specific, biographical and situational significance of those forms of young-male behaviour that are characterised by anyone, no matter whom, as violence. In other words, it has to be borne in mind that much of what the public at large, professional youth workers, adults and other young people regard as (problem) violence will have an entirely different significance in the eyes of the young people actually engaging in it.

In view of the above, any kind of violence-preventive practice will need to have answers for the following questions, at least:

- What does the violent behaviour mean for the young males in the given context?

- What constitutes the attraction of violence for young males in this situation?
- Why do they use violence to solve their problems?
- What are they avoiding when they use violence?
- What can they not say out loud or freely admit?

Detailed examination of these questions and of the causes of violent behaviour by young males casts doubt on the assumption that violence can be simply eliminated. And the expert reports state that the distinction made between “good” aggression and “bad” violence, which is helpful in work with young males, is often left too fuzzy when the topic is discussed. Young people – on this point too the experts agree – will always seek forms of expression that enable them to live out their existing aggressive impulses. The need is for these impulses to be managed in a civilised and socially acceptable manner.

1 Lack of qualified, reflective practice specific to young males

Publications on violence prevention are now almost too numerous for overview, and very heterogeneous in terms of merit. Even on the issue of the prevention of young male violence specifically, publications and proposals are relatively abundant. The need is thus not primarily for information and theory; rather, what is clearly lacking in all the fields of action researched is relevant, generally accepted, qualified, reflective practice.

2 Insufficient regard paid to the life-situations and problem-situations of young males

In contrast to the host of gender-oriented projects for girls and young women that have been developed over the years, it is impossible to cite any parallel process of development, in any form, of approaches specific to young males. Even in *Jugendberufshilfe* (support service for youth in transition from school to work), where young men have always been over-represented in the programmes – the content and work types being primarily of interest to males – their specific life-situations receive scant attention.

3 Violence-related work as opposed to an ill-defined concept of violence prevention

The experts point out that in practical youth work the term “violence prevention” is often used in a diffuse, almost inflationary manner and, in particular, with heavy moral overtones, as a term covering anything and everything. There is thus a danger that almost any initiative launched in even the vaguest association with “violence” will automatically purport to be violence prevention. Consequently, some of the expert reports spoke of “violence-related work” in a narrower sense, meaning working methods that tackle actual specific acts of violence and/or address those constellations in which recognisable (while not universally attributed) propensities to violence or situations conducive to violence are present. Approaches of this kind openly address the needs and wants of young males, but also their resources. However, this perspective is not shared by all authors and is not universal in practical work. For example, other expert reports contend that reflective work with young males has inherent violence-preventive and integrative components even if it is not violence-related.

4 Focus point: Physical and verbal forms of youth violence

In all fields of action there is open discussion of physical and verbal forms of youth violence. Less openly discussed are forms of violence used against young males by adults in their capacity as nursery and kindergarten staff, parents, teachers or professional youth worker. These include the marginalisation imposed on young males by lack of traineeships or by limitations on leisure pursuits. Auto-aggressive (introverted) forms of violence among young males, e.g. high-risk behaviour, medication abuse, alcohol and drug consumption and eating disorders, become subjects of discussion only incidentally.

5 Traditional models of masculinity prove unrealisable

The experts are at one in seeing violence as indicating the sense of helplessness that is brought about in young males when unable to feel masculine or when feeling insignificant. In this state of helplessness, many have recourse to traditional patterns, with a tendency to express themselves by putting on an act, part and parcel of which are self-portrayal as a macho, power-conscious young

male and a disposition to violence. In this way they can present themselves as strong and manly. This young male behaviour may be encountered in all fields of action: from the kindergarten, where boys conform to media role models, right through to the *Jugendberufshilfe* (support service for youth in transition from school to work) stage, where the view still prevails that a proper man has a job – even when in reality this has long since ceased to be true. In this situation the fundamental dilemma confronting the lads is that they are unable to realise these traditional masculine images, yet have no alternatives at their disposal that for them make sense. There are no “little heroes”, nor are there jobs for all. The frictions that arise in this way in connection with “being a young male” now constitute an increasingly acute and still largely unsolved problem in such areas as the *Jugendberufshilfe*. Many youth-work experts consider that an alternative is likely to be found by fostering openness to such contexts and relationships in the young males’ lived-in world as will benefit their personal development and social involvement. In this context, gender-aware work with young males must aim to break down the traditional male fixation on wage-earning – but exactly how that is to be done in practice remains for the time being a planning debate rather than a reality.

6 Supplementary programmes as opposed to integration into standard practice

Violence-preventive programmes specific to young males are often one-off projects or short, seminar-style educative programmes of from one to a maximum of three days’ duration. In many cases these additional programmes supplementing the standard provision make sense, as they can alert the participants to possible new ways forward. Supplementary programmes can become questionable; however, if they in effect actually replace the confrontation process involved in everyday practice, i.e. are not an integral component of everyday practice. Yet this seems to be precisely what does often occur in reality. The expert reports indicate that work with young males is often an extra task, somehow detached from routine practice and not infrequently seen either as a dispensable aspect of the work or as an additional challenge threatening to overstretch the standard provision. Under these conditions, any linkage between standard programmes and additional courses tends to result from chance rather than from design.

However, the expert reports also concur in not rejecting short programmes out of hand. Where integrated into longer-term planning, they can be effective. Experience shows that short-duration forms of violence prevention in the sense of generally non-specific “methods” are implemented most frequently in work with boys of up to about fifteen years old. Where the subjects are older,

what happens is not so much prevention as intervention. From the field of youth social work, whose province this properly is, there is almost no reporting of ideas and experience relevant to the problem of appropriate responses to the violence of older youths or of how such violence can be appropriately defined and studied.

7 Lack of institution-related theory and of acceptance

Institution-related theory of young-male-specific violence prevention is very thin on the ground. Across all the fields of action, there is almost no evidence of the formation of constructive conflict cultures or of the development of alternative images of masculinity as part of the local institutional culture and as an aspect of the local organisation's own development. Some initial steps in this direction are most likely to be found in fairly long-term projects aligned with the social environment. Only a very few isolated cases can be found of projects that involve the entire structure of the organisation or, as the case may be, of the project itself. But these are left to fend for themselves, and are usually the result of chance combinations of circumstances. Exceptions, in the positive sense, are to be found among some of the educational providers. Thus, for instance, at the *„Alte Molkerei Frille“*², the educational philosophy employed has been based for many years past on the insights of gender-aware pedagogy, and reflective work with young males is an integral part of the thinking. Such cases aside, the rule remains that reflective work with young males is reliant on individuals and that their personal commitment also determines the success and the scope of the initiative undertaken. From the area of sport, for instance, the message is that the highs and lows of young-male-specific work are linked principally to the workload of a single worker. And as that workload is essentially determined by others and only minimally at the discretion of the colleague in question personally, any middle- or long-term planning is extraordinarily difficult. Cooperation with others, the formation of networks – necessary though this is deemed to be – and development of the organisation's fitness for purpose cannot in these circumstances proceed on a planned basis.

All fields of action alike have only very few specifically qualified staff and almost no earmarked funding or dedicated premises. A more “open-minded” attitude to the subject of gender on the part of the parent organisations and the funding bodies would, in the view of the experts, constitute a major and necessary foundation for sustainable provision of young-male-specific programmes not merely of violence prevention but more widely also. The gap between that

² „Alte Molkerei Frille“ is an educational facility in North Rhine-Westphalia

vision and reality is well illustrated by the call made in one expert report for work with young males to be established officially as a top-down initiative, as in the case of “gender mainstreaming”. Attainment of these gender-conscious objectives is only feasible, the report goes on to argue, if it is also desired, programmed and implemented at the top level of policy-making.

8 Work with young males in training and extended education

A further reason why support from the parent organisations and the funding bodies is of special importance is that hitherto the training of youth workers has paid much too little attention to work with young males, so that many professionals are unfamiliar with this field. Also, young-male-specific programmes are often offered and delivered by volunteers. This applies particularly to sport, with supervisors and trainers usually being selected on the basis of their qualifications in sports training rather than for their abilities in the area of reflective social work with young males. There being no guidelines for gender-specific work in this context, it follows that gender-specific work remains a private matter.

Much the same applies to the field of extended education. While there are now numerous programmes providing continued professional development in relation to the theme of violence-prevention, which have been developed in a context of sustained public interest in the “schools and violence debate” and largely address school-related concerns, the programmes and projects now available are concerned almost exclusively with youth violence in general; children and young people are thought of almost exclusively in terms of age-groups; beyond this, almost no significant differentiation has been attempted. The gender difference is rarely taken into account and almost never competently integrated into practice – and where the rare exceptions occur, it will be, surprisingly in the context, with reference primarily to girls. It may be noted in passing that this potentially encourages the gender-stereotyping of young males.

9 Young-male-oriented networks

Young-male-oriented networks, unlike their female-oriented counterparts, are still in an initial phase of development. A number of networks do now exist, but at varying stages of development in the different fields of action. Networks require resources and scope for development and growth. One comment from

the area of sport calls for gender-oriented refinement of existing networks in preference to indefinitely continued creation of new networks.

10 Physicality

Given that violent behaviour by young males includes physical violence far more often than not, the issue of physicality is not one that can be easily disregarded in the context of violence-preventive work with young males. Physicality is thus still more central to this field than to other fields of educational practice. Concern with physicality takes various forms including a mix of games, exercises in contact and communication, and creative elements. Programmes delivering educational content by way of sport and adventure often prove more attractive to young males than those based largely on verbal approaches. In such contexts, moreover, the single-sex composition of the group is accepted by the male juveniles as “normal”. And yet it remains necessary to repeat here that in professional social education discourse and – even today – quite commonly in professional practice, physicality and all that goes with it remains confined to a subordinate role. It is as if the professional social workers, and to a still greater extent the authors contributing to the relevant professional journals, textbooks and handbooks feel slightly embarrassed at touching on this topic area with its lingering whiff of sweat.

11 Negative definition of the target group in work with young males

The expert reports point out the always present danger that violence-preventive work with young males will tend to stigmatise the males of this age-group in general whenever the distinction made between young females and young males cites violent behaviour as a principal criterion without at the same time clearly signalling the differences that exist within the male group. Generalised ascriptions of violence to “the young males” are regarded as a form of sexism. In this context it is seen as a “risk” attaching to work with young males that it will be deemed merely remedial – unlike work with young females, which is considered to be an extension of competence. Work with young males will be rated negatively for as long as its target groups continue to be defined negatively, for instance as disadvantaged, as “not really men”, or as generally violent. There have been repeated calls for this interpretative habit to be broken; it is time for the focus to shift to the strengths rather than the weaknesses of the male sex: time to do something for the young males.

Then again, the impression that work with young males is primarily appropriate for “problem youths”, for “difficult cases”, tends to marginalise all “normal” young males. In this way, work with young males becomes something that (from the perspective of those targeted) is regarded as decidedly “not cool” for young males in general, addressing primarily problem situations and thus losing any potential attractiveness. Ultimately this path leads to either a reinforcement of conventional role ascriptions for young males and men, or a narrowing-in on these stereotypes exclusively. Such ascriptions are commonplace throughout practice: almost everywhere there are assertiveness courses for girls (sic!) and, correspondingly, violence-prevention programmes (sometimes in the guise of conflict analysis) for the young males.

12 Exclusion from working with young males

In institutions and other youth facilities, violence soon becomes a criterion for exclusion. Staff are frightened of violent behaviour, female personnel much more so than males. Staff have not been prepared by their education and training to cope with the problems involved. Violent young males are accordingly soon excluded from residential institutions and from the youth services’ programmes (institutional code of conduct), and it is left to other individuals or institutions to take them on. Favourable circumstances may permit violence prevention to be “bought in“ from external providers. However, such cooperation can only serve as an interim measure; it would be a major step forward if the existing in-house potential for successful coping with violence could be developed, so that over time institutional staff would acquire their own professional competence in this specialised field.

13 Taking critical stock of one’s own gender role

The experts repeatedly emphasise that the male youth workers are in their own persons a key instrument in work to help young males. They have great value as masculine role models, because direct face-to-face contact is the only feasible way to convey an appreciation of masculine identity and authenticity to the young males concerned. However, masculinity on its own is not a sufficient qualification, and nor are special methods or activity skills relating to this group. What are needed are special sensitivities in matters of gender and the capacity for analytical reflection on traditional masculinity and its ways. Furthermore, and this is stressed again and again, the male worker working with young males must be prepared to take frank and critical stock of his own mas-

culine role. While the importance of men as role models is emphasised, there are areas of activity (e.g. kindergarten, after-school club, primary school) in which the overwhelming majority of the workers are female and men are the exceptions. The expert report concerned with the kindergarten sector insists that work specifically addressing boys must be possible and be further extended in the areas in which mainly women are employed. Women too are capable of reflective work involving young males, provided that they can reflect on their own role and analyse it critically. That of course does not imply that reflection on how one perceives one's own role, and the acquisition of relevant competences by the professionals concerned, can be an adequate substitute for the presence of an appropriate institutional culture tending to promote alternative masculinity stereotypes (cf. Proposition 7).

14 The demands facing different categories of male and female youth workers

Professional youth workers engaged in or preparing for work with young males can be categorised by function. First, there are specific sectors that primarily employ women (kindergartens, after-school clubs, primary schools). While a long-term aim is to increase the proportion of men employed as kindergarten staff or primary teachers – in this respect the European benchmark is set by the Scandinavian countries – there is scope meantime, pending the achievement of such aims, for gender-oriented work to bring about qualitative improvement. In female-dominated work, there is a need for the women to develop new stances in dealing with “violent” behaviour encountered in young boys. Second, youth work professionals differ substantially as to their qualifications. While gender-oriented work, in out-of-school youth work in particular, has gained ground in recent years, and while reflective work involving young males has now established a degree of tradition among some social educationalists, it still plays only a fairly marginal role in, for example, schools and vocational training. In out-of-school youth work, finally, and here particularly in sports activities with their particular appeal to boys, there is a further challenge to be faced: the involvement of large numbers of volunteers. They have not been trained for gender-oriented work and accordingly receive no support for such work from the institutions. They are given very considerable responsibility without the corresponding degree of assistance. This applies with particular force to voluntary workers with ethnic background: the demands facing them are many and various, including delivery of integration along with gender awareness along with violence prevention. In this area there is a major need for continued professional education and for support.

15 Work with young males, violence prevention, and schools

Within the ground covered by the expert reports, the schools represent the largest and least readily definable field of action. Obligatory school attendance means that all young males can be reached through them, which is true of no other institution. Violence prevention, conflict resolution and similar initiatives are found in many shapes and forms, organised, for instance, as study groups and one-week projects, or incorporated in the school's wider curriculum. But these various efforts are seldom reflective in terms of gender, and the exceptions mainly target girls as a category (e.g. assertiveness courses for girls). Programmes and concepts evolved specifically for young males owe their existence almost entirely to the commitment of individual male and female teachers and do not form part of the official curriculum.

16 Young people with ethnic backgrounds

Young-male-specific work and violence prevention targeting young immigrants are still inchoate, even though the proportion of children and young people with ethnic backgrounds is high and rising in all the fields of action. Attention is often focused primarily on violence; the underlying factors such as biographical and cultural disruptions and fragile masculine identities are neglected in comparison. Similarly, the multitudinous life- and problem-situations of immigrants find only isolated responses in terms of specialised programmes.

However, it has to be borne in mind that apart from a fundamental lack of relevant programmes – with a few concrete exceptions, e.g. an anti-violence training course for young Turkish males – there is a widespread deficit in the time and the funding resources needed for the essential preparatory work that would enable development of precisely targeted, systematic educational provision for these young people.

There have been real successes involving youth workers who have an ethnic background themselves, are familiar with the cultures of origin, and speak the relevant languages, as such workers understand the male youths' problems better. They find it easier to establish relationships of trust with the young people. With the advantage of their own personal background and knowledge, they have a different way of responding to the young males' images of masculinity, to their life-situation between the cultures, and to the fact that these young males are not initially prepared to contemplate alternative images of masculinity. It is in fact often more important at this stage to make the young males stronger, to stabilise them and to support them in their decision-making,

than to unsettle them by introducing new and incomprehensible images of masculinity. The workers concerned – generally male, occasionally female – will face severe demands in terms of commitment, time, the capacity for empathy, stamina, and – above all – knowledge of the gender roles and their cultural context, of the received patterns of upbringing, and of the family history experienced, especially as concerns the fathers. Yet volunteers, in particular, cannot remotely be expected to match up to this very demanding profile of requirements. As German-origin personnel have insufficient knowledge of the cultures of origin of these young males, there have been calls in *Jugendberufshilfe* (support service for youth in transition from school to work) publications for study and documentation of masculinity images relating to employment and to violence within those cultures that are represented in the *Jugendberufshilfe* in Germany. It is also considered important that there should be more continuing education programmes designed to enhance the intercultural competences of professional youth workers.

17 Work with parents

While there have been some theoretical studies on gender-specific work with parents, such work is rare in practice. Work with parents is a standard task in the fields of action based on kindergarten, primary school and after-school club. At these ages, children can still be greatly influenced by their parents; however, parent evenings to which the institution could make a point of inviting the fathers, e.g. for discussion of their important role-model function vis-à-vis boys, and considered by all to be desirable, are virtually never provided. Parental work involving immigrants is handicapped by linguistic and cultural communication difficulties, with problems arising over the relaying of information and observance of rules and agreements. Views on upbringing differ significantly (e.g. in issues such as gender role observance, eating customs, and the concept of honour). In such areas, work involving parents needs to find new ways forward. However, here and there a start has already been made, especially in the kindergarten sector. This work should be encouraged, and evaluated for what it can yield in terms of transferable experience.

Institutions such as the kindergarten or school take too little account of the expectations of parents (including fathers) with ethnic background, given that such expectations may open up new possibilities of access. Thus, for example, repatriate parents regard kindergarten educators as authorities on the education of children, yet this advantage is quickly dissipated in practice for the simple reason that the educators are unaware of it and so do not know how to exploit it. Gender-specific education, rather surprisingly, has hitherto failed to concern itself with the role played by the elder brothers who for traditional and reli-

gious reasons have to look after their younger siblings and accordingly in many ways bear too great a burden in the circumstances that the new living environment imposes.

18 The European dimension

In European debate, discussion of issues relating to work with young males in combination with issues of violence prevention is largely confined to the relevant professionals. Otherwise these issues are raised at organisational level and in open-access working environments; in the actual fields of action, the same problems have to be contended with as in Germany. Although there is something approaching a consensus among professionals with regard to the future development of young-male-specific initiatives, including violence-preventive initiatives, very little along these lines is to be found in practice. Even if in sport, for example, or in out-of-school youth work, Austria or Switzerland is found to be returning results similar to those from Germany, the advances made remain generally insufficient. There is much scope here for future action.

19 Interim conclusions

On an initial review of the research findings, it emerges clearly that while the link between violent behaviour and masculinity has been identified, development of violence-preventive measures specifically targeting young males has to date been hesitant. On the positive side, however, promising efforts and initiatives are under way both in continuing professional education and on the theoretical front. If these new approaches are to be more widely adopted in future, communication with practitioners on the ground will need to be more efficient and more persuasive than hitherto. A difficulty here is the fundamental requirement, for qualified work with young males, that every professional concerned should reflect critically on his or her own gender role. It is important, accordingly, that the challenges imposed by work with young males should not be left for the professional workers to shoulder unaided. Organisations and institutions too must be developed. This should include e.g. institutional support for and promotion of the development of alternative images of masculinity or the establishing of constructive cultures of conflict. As noted above, work with young males differs from work with young females in that stigma is involved: hence the importance of putting effort into development and persuasion in the public arena and in professional exchanges of views. This will make it possible in future for qualified, reflective approaches to be implemented much more widely.

The 18 propositions and the expert reports on which they are based are a contribution towards the realisation of this aim.

Notes

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