ABDIMAS

Art Therapy-Based Expression Painting Training to Strengthen the Character of Street Children in Semarang City

Mujiyono, Eko Haryanto, Adi Kuntoro, Eko Nusantoro

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: mujiyonosenirupa@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Street children are accustomed to living on the streets, in terminals, and in public places, often experiencing emotional stress. Their personalities become harsh, rough, and less sensitive. The solution offered is art therapy -based expression painting training as a way to channel hidden dreams and psychological burdens. The activity targets 15 street children at the Indonesian Gold Foundation Shelter in Semarang. Implementers include lecturers with visual arts expertise and counselors to ensure a more comprehensive and thorough training and mentoring. The program includes material presentations and creative practice in three face-to-face sessions, each lasting 5–6 hours. The expression painting approach uses a cycle-based art therapy that integrates cognitive, psychomotor, and affective aspects. The creative practice in each cycle uses art therapy stages including warm-up, recalling event, emotional expression and issues, restitution, and termination. The training results showed an increase in street children's creativity in painting. The first cycle was marked by hesitation and stiff expressions, while the second cycle demonstrated courage and diverse expressions through color and form. Participants were able to express their emotions in a painting and were able to appreciate it. This evidence confirms that the participants' creativity, sensitivity, and courage increased. The painting training has been able to reduce the psychological burden of trauma they experienced. The outputs include accredited articles, video highlights, local media news, and copyrights.

Keywords: street children, expression painting, cycle, art therapy, emotion

INTRODUCTION

Data from the Semarang City Government's Social Services Agency in 2024 reported that there were 204 street children aged 7-18 years. This number is likely to increase, considering that the Semarang City Government had not yet recorded them in 2025 (Zaradiva & Megawati, 2023) . They live in groups of fellow street children and rarely communicate with their families. Life on the streets is not a safe place because it is full of risks and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, psychologically, physically, and sexually, by friends or other adults.

This social environment has influenced the personality and character of street children, who are identified with being harsh, rough, and less sensitive to the new social environment. Their existence is often disregarded because they are considered useless marginalized individuals. They consistently feel a lack of attention, affection, and warmth, and are deprived of the right to play, have fun, and socialize. Psychologically, they feel unaccepted and threatened by society, which can lead to emotions such as fear, stress, sadness, depression, and frustration (Suryaningsih & Nur, 2020) .

Their mental and emotional burdens become increasingly heavy, often leading to more aggressive behavior and frequent negative emotions. The pent-up emotional burden, the accumulation of traumatic experiences, can negatively impact their mental health. Street children lack the creative space to express their burdens and emotions. They often vent their feelings through unaesthetic actions. Street children in Semarang City They rarely engage in artistic activities to actualize their ideas and emotions, leading them to frequently engage in vandalism or graffiti on walls. This situation indicates that street children need alternative, more positive and focused spaces to channel their

expressive energy healthily.

Similarly, the condition of street children in various shelters under the administrative guidance of the Semarang City Social Service is also highly vulnerable. Of these shelters, the street children at the Indonesian Gold Foundation shelter are among the most psychologically vulnerable. A systematic and targeted approach to problem-solving is needed. Therefore, a development program is needed that is not only practical but also addresses their psychological and emotional aspects. This psychological solution aligns with the spirit of the shelter, which exists to pay attention to and acknowledge the existence of street children in Semarang, so that they have greater sensitivity. A program providing adequate knowledge and skills is insufficient without being supported by psychological mental readiness.

One effective art activity for fostering and developing the character of street children is expressive painting. Painting is an alternative to other art activities that effectively helps channel emotions creatively. is an activity that children enjoy because they can play with color, lines, textures, shapes, and light and dark, suitable for use as a storytelling medium. This expressive approach to painting emphasizing the freedom of street children to express their emotions or feelings that have been suppressed for so long (Sumardjo, 2000) (Soedarso SP, 2006) Children's inner experiences will be explored more deeply to be expressed in limitless symbolic language according to their personal desires. Thus, expression painting functions not only as an artistic activity, but also as a means of creative therapy that can strengthen the mental resilience of street children.

Assisting street children to express colors, shapes, lines, and textures through specific symbolic expressions can at least calm their moods, calm their minds, and filter certain emotions to produce internalized ideas (Sumardjo, 2000) . Various negative emotions, such as sadness, depression, or other filtered traumatic experiences, will be expressed in imaginative symbolic language according to their imagination and abilities (Mujiyono et al., 2021) . They are expected not to be hampered by the limitations of their symbolic expression. All symbols are possible, both representative and non-representative. The main consideration is not the form of the symbol but the completeness of thoughts and emotions (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1967) . The embodiment of symbols focuses on being a means of catharsis as well as a means of communicating to others about the burdens they carry. Every expression, regardless of its form, must have beauty because of its personal characteristics and different from others (Eaton, 2010) .

Art therapy emphasizes channeling emotional burdens through enjoyable artistic activities (Maharani et al., 2024) . This activity is expected to be *a treatment* to make them feel happy, joyful, and avoid anxiety or discomfort (Febrieta, 2023) . This *art therapy* is expected to reduce the majority of emotional burdens, thereby increasing self-confidence, self-esteem, cognitive skills, and self-actualization.

Ultimately, this expressive painting training activity hopes to foster positive character *building in street children.* Through artistic experiences while creatively creating and sensitively appreciating artwork, it is hoped that children's personality will grow. Emotional and spiritual traits can develop in proportion to their physical and logical growth, enabling them to consistently control negative emotions such as aggression and other tendencies. Indirectly, the impact of creativity training can also support street children's talents as artists. They can sell their artwork to meet their economic needs while facing the challenges of a more dynamic life.

METHOD

Painting training uses an *art therapy-* based expression approach. Expression painting is a means of expressing ideas, desires, and emotions by freely choosing themes, shapes, and patterns. Emotions become the main inspiration for ideas (Baas et al., 2008) (Russ & Grossman-Mckee, 1990) . *Art therapy* is creating art as a means of catharsis to release painful and disturbing experiences in the hope of reducing stress and depression levels so that it can change the mood to be more positive. The stages consist of *warming up, recalling events, emotional expression and issues, restitution,* and *termination* (Maharani et al., 2024) (Febrieta, 2023) .

The implementation method is cycle-based. Each meeting is a cycle for reflection on strengths and weaknesses so that the next meeting or cycle can be more successful. Painting training is oriented towards appreciation so that participants are trained in empathizing, feeling, and intellectually appreciating the values of beauty in form and meaning. (Soedarso SP, 2006) . Individual mentoring to understand the personality tendencies and unique problems of each participant so that the

implementer can direct the ideal painting. This empowerment principle integrates cognitive (knowledge), psychomotor (skills), and affective (attitude) aspects to produce complete and comprehensive changes in each participant (Nafiati, 2021) (Ibda, 2015) (Smith, 1989) .

Based on the coordination of the implementer with the Head of the Social Rehabilitation Section for Children and the Elderly, the Social Rehabilitation Sector, the partner of the Indonesian Gold Foundation Shelter House, located at Jalan Sriwijaya No. 5, Semarang City, was determined. The target group consisted of 15 street children who were psychologically vulnerable due to traumatic experiences. The implementers consisted of lecturers with expertise in fine arts and counselors to ensure more comprehensive assistance. The training method included psychological counseling, demonstrations of painting techniques, as well as lectures and questions and answers. Psychological counseling served to stimulate emotions by exploring the causes of participants' life stress. Demonstrations provided technical understanding such as sketching, mixing and applying colors, and composition. Lectures and questions and answers were used to strengthen the understanding of the principles, characteristics, and character of paintings .

The program consists of three stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. The preparation stage includes coordination with partners, scheduling, and preparing painting materials and tools. The program takes place in three meetings: the first focuses on understanding the basics of painting, while the second and third meetings involve art therapy-based expressive painting training with a cyclical model that concludes with an appreciation of the work. Evaluation is carried out through the preparation of reports and outputs, which serve to systematically document the process and results, evaluate achievements, ensure program sustainability, and communicate the impact of the program to stakeholders, including the Social Services Agency, shelter managers, and the wider community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Schedule and Participants

Coordination of preparations was carried out through discussions between the Chief Executive, Dr. Mujiyono, S.Pd. M.Sn. and Samuel, Manager of the Indonesian Gold Foundation Shelter on Monday, July 7, 2025. This coordination began with a presentation of the urgency, goals, and benefits of art therapy-based painting training for street children. Discussions with partners resulted in the determination of the time and location, materials, methods, objectives, equipment, and accommodations for the painting training (see Table 1). These results served as a guideline for implementation, ensuring it ran effectively and smoothly according to plan.

Table 1. Implementation Schedule

No	Meeting	Time	O'clock	Material
1	Meeting 1	Saturday, July 19, 2025	09.00-15.00 WIB	Materials, tools, painting techniques
2	Meeting 2	Sunday, July 20, 2025	09.00-15.00 WIB	Psychological Counseling Practice Cycle 1 Practice Expression Painting Works
3	Meeting 3	Saturday, July 26, 2025	09.00-15.00 WIB	Psychological Counseling Practice Cycle 2 Practice Painting as an Expression of Appreciation

The selected participants numbered 15. The participants were street children aged 7-18. The youngest child was 7, while the oldest was 18. They were all elementary and junior high school graduates. They came from various areas of Semarang City (See Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Street Children Participants

No	Participants ID	Name	Origin	Education	Age	Gender
1	PT1	Peter	Mount Pati	Elementary School	10	Man
2	PT2	Daughter	Mijen	Elementary School	12	Woman
3	PT3	Dafina	Mijen	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	15	Woman
4	PT4	Septya	Tembalang	Elementary	12	Man

				School		
5	PT5	Alfos	Gombel	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	16	Man
6	PT6	Nova	Tembalang	Elementary School	12	Woman
7	PT7	Nugroho	Gombel	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	14	Man
8	PT8	Rifan	The barracks	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	12	Man
9	PT9	Vendri	Tembalang	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	14	Man
10	PT10	Netta	The barracks	Elementary School	10	Woman
11	PT11	Eben	Pamularsih	Elementary School	12	Man
12	PT12	Kiran	Pamularsih	Elementary School	7	Woman
13	PT13	Syifa	Pamularsih	Elementary School	11	Woman
14	PT14	Rafa	Gombel	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	13	Man
15	PT14	Budi	Gombel	Elementary School	18	Man

The First Meeting

The first meeting was held on Saturday, July 19, 2025, at the Shelter House. The room was well-lit, well-ventilated, and quite spacious. The event began with the attendance of 15 participants, opened by Samuel, who emphasized the importance of participants' seriousness in participating in the training. The material included an understanding of the meaning, function, characteristics, principles, and procedures of creating works through presentations, display of work samples, and exhibition catalogs. Participants were also introduced to the artistic and aesthetic value of painting. The atmosphere was enthusiastic due to the communicative delivery method, supported by LCD visual media and exhibition catalogs that facilitated understanding.

In delivering the material, the organizer emphasized that painting is a means of self-expression to express ideas, ideals, and emotions. Participants were encouraged to understand that painting is not about right or wrong, but rather about having the courage to scribble according to their feelings. Children who were not yet able to draw representative forms were directed to try abstract styles. This emphasis was aimed at reducing the fear of making mistakes, so that participants felt free to experiment. The material also included explanations of the functions of media, tools, and materials such as acrylic paint, brushes, palettes, and paper, including an introduction to primary colors and mixing to produce secondary colors. The organizer's answer to the children's question, "Can doodling be considered painting?" fostered their confidence. The fluid, interactive, and fun learning atmosphere successfully created a space for expression without burden. The first meeting provided knowledge and enthusiasm for creating expressive painting.

Implementation of Cycle 1

Warming-up (Sketch Making)

In the initial stage, participants were invited to prepare painting tools and create simple sketches spontaneously in a relaxed atmosphere. Some children immediately began scribbling, while others hesitated until finally encouraged after being encouraged that even a simple shape like a circle could be the beginning of a painting. This warm-up stage served as an icebreaker and a means of fostering initial courage to draw out ideas. The works that emerged were still light scribbles, broken lines, geometric shapes, and simple symbols, but this marked the children's openness to overcoming the fear of making mistakes and beginning to translate emotions into basic visuals.

***Recalling Events* (Understanding Events)**

In the second stage, participants were invited to recall everyday experiences and express them in sketches. This process of recalling events served as a medium for understanding the remembered experiences. The resulting works emphasized art's function as a bridge between memory and personal identity, symbolizing experiences in the form of figures, street scenes, or simple objects imbued with

emotional meaning. The visual style remained simple, but the use of dominant colors that corresponded to emotional nuances began to emerge, such as red for anger, blue for sadness, and yellow for happiness.

Emotional Expression and Issues (Releasing Emotions and Burdens)

The third stage was the most expressive moment, when participants were given complete freedom to use acrylic paint to mix colors and paint according to their feelings. The children freely expressed their emotions, some filling the painting surface with pitch black, while others smacked their brushes to create thick, layered strokes. This process demonstrated that painting served as a cathartic outlet, a place for them to release anger, sadness, joy, or fatigue through their choice of colors and brush strokes. The resulting works appeared free-flowing, from harsh, dark strokes to random splashes of bright color, marking the presence of raw emotional expression poured out directly without censorship.

Restitution (Resolving Burdens)

In the restitution stage, participants were instructed to "complete" the painting by adding unifying elements to make the work feel complete. Children began to add reflective touches, such as adding yellow light to the black circles or small flowers to the dark red area to balance the emotions. Some used wide brushes, others chose small brushes, while Peter (10 years old) expressed himself through an abstract style by pouring paint and then scribbling it with his fingers. This stage demonstrates that art functions as a healing medium, where children learn to reorganize wild emotions into something more structured, harmonious, and beautiful.

Figure 1. In cycle 1, Peter and Kiran express their emotional burdens and desires in a painting that combines hands and brushes with intense colors.

Termination (Closing)

In the closing stage, participants were invited to stop painting and reflect on their feelings through their respective works. The children expressed relief and joy at being able to channel their emotions through color and form, while the organizers expressed appreciation for their courage. Termination played a crucial role as a final reflection, affirming painting as a medium for emotional communication and a safe space for self-expression. The resulting works were highly personal, whether abstract with a predominance of certain colors, simple figurative works, or a combination of both. This stage marked the birth of a new awareness that painting is not just a skill, but a means of expression, self-pride, and authentic artistic value. *Strengths and Weaknesses of Cycle 1*

Cycle 1 successfully encouraged participants to express themselves boldly, from simple scribbles to a more varied use of color as a form of catharsis and personal symbolism. The appreciative interaction of the organizers also strengthened participants' motivation, enabling them to recognize that painting serves as a means of communication, relaxation, and self-reflection. However, this activity still had weaknesses, including uneven time management, limited individual mentoring, and works that were largely spontaneous scribbles with simple visual structures. The limited palette used collectively also hampered children's creative exploration.

Implementation of Cycle 2

Warming-up (Sketch Making)

Warm-up phase was more dynamic than the first cycle. The cheerful atmosphere helped build children's confidence in their imagination. Praise from the participants for a child's spontaneous idea of turning a zigzag line into a dragon provided positive reinforcement. This process marked a shift from spontaneous, free, directionless activity to meaningful visual exploration. The visible changes in the participants' work, from human figures and animals to personal symbols and decorative forms, demonstrated an increase in the quality of creativity. Warm-ups were no longer merely technical warm-ups, but rather an important tool for fostering awareness and practicing flexibility in thinking.

Recalling Events (Understanding Events)

Recalling stage of the event was more reflective because participants weren't simply invited to recall everyday experiences but were also directed to highlight moments that made them feel empowered or happy. The organizers' more in-depth questions successfully elicited pleasurable experiences and fostered awareness, turning them into sources of artistic inspiration. Participants' responses also revealed deep personal meaning, such as the joy of helping push a cart or eating with friends. This approach demonstrated that the creative process no longer relies solely on emotional memories but has shifted toward more conscious and constructive reflection.

Writing short words alongside sketches is an effective method for maintaining focus and connecting personal experiences with the visual form being designed. The resulting work demonstrates a more structured narrative. For example, ice cream is visualized with bright colors and simple line decorations as a symbol of past desires. *Recalling events* is not only a means of remembering, but also of integrating emotional expression with artistic planning. This stage has proven to improve the quality of participants' creative processes and demonstrates that painting can be a reflection that fosters optimism and appreciation for everyday life experiences.

Emotional Expression and Issues (Releasing Emotions and Burdens)

In cycle 2, the *emotional expression stage* became more focused because participants no longer simply expressed their emotions through random strokes, but were instead invited to choose colors that represented their feelings and combine them with other colors. This instruction encouraged children to be more conscious in making visual choices, while also practicing their ability to connect emotions with the language of color. A concrete example is seen when a child chose blue to convey calm, then added yellow as a symbol of joy in a painting of a mountain landscape. This change demonstrates a shift from mere spontaneous expression to a more conscious and planned visual exploration. The creative process that emerged was also more complex, because in addition to remaining expressive, participants began to combine various colors and try out various forms. This exploration not only channeled emotions but also developed basic technical skills, such as brush control and color mixing. The resulting work looked more varied with a more focused depiction of visual subjects compared to the first cycle. The *emotional expression stage* proved to be a means of catharsis while also honing technical skills.

Restitution (Resolving Burdens)

Restitution stage is a crucial moment as participants are invited to revisit their work by giving it a title and adding details to make it more "finished." This strategy leads to a final and complete reflection, such as when a child adds a small sun to their dark painting as a symbol of hope. The participants foster self-confidence while also guiding them toward a holistic narrative awareness. This creative process is characterized by efforts to refine the work's form and add symbols to fit the story, making it more complete. Restitution is achieved through evidence of the child's ability to artistically reflect and the growth of aesthetic awareness. Artwork is a creative process that can be completed with sincerity.

Figure 2. In cycle 2, the children are painting in restitution or to resolve emotional burdens. The work is oriented towards clear forms.

Termination (Closing)

In the Termination stage of the second cycle, the closing atmosphere was more lively and participatory compared to the first cycle. Participants were asked to stand in turns to display their paintings while stating the title and telling a short story behind the work. This moment created an appreciative space, where each work was valued as a unique and meaningful expression. One child loudly named his work "Matahari Malam" as a symbol of light amidst darkness, which was then met with applause from his friends and the organizer's appreciation, "That's amazing, you can convey a message through painting." This process resulted in a variety of creative titles while fostering participants' pride in their own work. Furthermore, this closing stage succeeded in strengthening self-confidence, honing visual communication skills, and instilling mutual respect among participants through art.

The appreciation activity focused on ensuring that street children's artwork was not merely viewed as visual artifacts, but also as honest expressions of their experiences, emotions, and identities. Each work was positioned as a unique representation worthy of appreciation, both in terms of ideas, courage of expression, and the simple techniques used. This appreciation process was carried out through discussion sessions, positive comments, and a mini-exhibition displaying their works arranged sequentially on chairs near the wall. The increase in appreciation was evident in the development of children's attitudes in assessing their own work and that of their peers. While initially they tended to be hesitant and shy, through guidance they began to dare to explain the meaning of the images, choose colors for personal reasons, and appreciate the work of others. This indicates a growth in self-confidence and social empathy.

Discussion

Implementation Contribution Based on Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

A comparison between the first and second cycles shows significant progress in both the process and outcomes of the activity. While initially, participants were hesitant and only dared to make random doodles, in the second cycle they were more active and confident, producing varied sketches of human figures, symbols, and decorative shapes. The visualized experiences were also more diverse, no longer limited to negative emotions, but expanding to include positive moments such as happiness with friends or experiences helping others. This indicates children's increasing awareness in connecting emotions with more reflective visual expressions.

Progress is also evident in the increasingly holistic and meaningful quality of the work. Participants are becoming more confident in mixing colors, creating more vibrant combinations, and adding details, titles, and personal meaning to their paintings. The creative process is no longer spontaneous and thoughtless, but rather evolves toward a more conscious process of ideas, where shapes and colors are chosen with purpose. This change has a direct impact on the children's self-confidence, as they become more confident in presenting their work to their peers with pride. With this development, the goal of the activity is increasingly being achieved: making painting both a creative outlet and an emotional therapy. Participants are not only facilitated to express themselves,

but also gain reflection skills, grow in self-confidence, and learn to appreciate art.

Table 3. Comparison of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of Expression Painting Practice

Stage	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Differences / Improvements
Warming-up (Initial Sketch)	Children are still unsure whether simple sketches consist of random lines, circles, or spontaneous scribbles. Many ask whether "scribbles" can be called paintings.	Children are more daring and creative. Sketches vary: human figures, animals, symbols, and even decorative elements. The instructor provides visual play (transforming lines into shapes).	There is an increase in courage, variety of forms, and flexibility of creative thinking.
Recalling Events (Understanding Events)	Children remember simple everyday events (being scolded, buying ice cream, etc.). Expression is still limited to spontaneous experiences.	Children are guided to recall positive/meaningful experiences (helping others, being with friends). Ideas are written down briefly and then visualized.	Visualized experiences are more reflective, narrative, and meaningful, not just spontaneous.
Emotional Expression and Issues (Releasing Emotions)	Children express their emotions with wild brushstrokes and single dominant colors (black and red). Some works are difficult to decipher.	Children are more conscious in choosing colors, trying to combine them (blue + yellow = cheerful). Strokes are still expressive but more controlled.	The use of color is more conscious, rich and meaningful, not just an outpouring of emotion.
Restitution (Resolving Burdens)	Children simply add a few elements without any awareness of composition. The results tend to be crude.	Children give titles, add details, refine the composition (e.g. add sun in the dark, flowers in the dark field).	The work is more structured, more complete, and has a clear symbolic meaning.
Termination (Closing)	Children are still shy about showing off their work. Some simply smile or remain silent when asked.	The children confidently presented their work, stated the title, and told stories. Their classmates applauded, creating an appreciative atmosphere.	Self-confidence increases, visual communication skills develop, appreciation grows

Figure 3. Differences in images between cycle 1 and cycle 2. The differences show an increase in the aesthetic quality produced because there is more sedimentation and better emotional appreciation.

Implementation Evaluation

This community service activity demonstrated that painting can be a creative outlet for street children. The transformation of participants' works, from simple scribbles to figures, visual narratives, and more conscious color combinations, demonstrated an increased courage to express themselves. This confirms that children's creativity grows through stimulation, guidance, and the courage to experiment, thus achieving the goal of painting as a medium for exploring ideas and imagination.

Besides being a creative medium, painting also serves as emotional therapy. Children can channel feelings of anger, anxiety, or sadness through lines and colors, and some participants even reported feeling a sense of relief after painting. This activity demonstrates painting's function as a cathartic medium that helps balance emotional states while providing a simple space to relieve psychological burdens. Another success is seen in the growth of self-confidence and pride in their work. Children who were initially reluctant to show their paintings eventually became brave enough to present their work, give it a title, and explain its meaning. This positive impact indicates the formation of identity, self-esteem, and awareness of the value of their artwork. However, limited media, support, and depth of emotional reflection pose obstacles, so optimal results can only be achieved through more

comprehensive facilitation, intensive support, and a more structured therapeutic approach in subsequent cycles.

Figure 4. Street children's artworks successfully created through art therapy. The works showcase a diversity of subject matter, themes, and patterns.

External

The output of this community service activity includes scientific articles, documentary videos, and copyrights as publication media, visual documentation and inspiration for art education practitioners. Scientific articles to disseminate information in scientific writing to the public so that the results of the activity can be understood, accepted, and widely utilized. A 2-5 minute documentary video has been uploaded on YouTube with the keyword UNNES Street Children Painting Community Service 2025. Copyright for the participants' paintings has been issued as proof of intellectual recognition of children's creative potential.

CONCLUSION

Expression painting activities have proven effective as a creative and therapeutic tool for street children. A comparison of cycles 1 and 2 shows significant improvements in expressive courage, sketch variation, color selection, and more meaningful compositions. The creative process evolved from spontaneous scribbles to reflective works with titles, symbols, and personal meanings. Positive impacts were also seen in growing self-confidence, presentation skills, and art appreciation. However, limited media and mentoring remain challenges that need to be addressed in the next cycle. Recommendations for further community service activities include strengthening more intensive personal mentoring, so that expressions can be more fully explored. Furthermore, works can be exhibited in mini-exhibitions to increase appreciation, self-confidence, and serve a therapeutic purpose.

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