



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Promoting high-quality practice

Introduction

Providing high-quality services that make a positive difference for children and families is the *raison d'être* of social work. Children and parents who have used social work services, or have been involved in child protection, tell us they want good relationships with their social workers and for their social worker to be trustworthy, respectful and empathetic (Cossar et al, 2011; Smithson, 2015).

The intervention and skills domain for the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) in England expects social workers to 'build productive working relationships and communicate effectively' (BASW). Munro's (2010, 2011a, 2011b) influential review of child protection argued that, too often, child protection organisations give undue emphasis to complying with risk-regulating procedures to the detriment of 'developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children and families' (2011b, p6). This continues to be a concern for the profession.

Practice supervisors are in a pivotal position to enable social workers to acquire and develop this expertise. Promoting high-quality practice is a core component of the knowledge and skills statements (KSS) for child and family practice supervisors (Department for Education 2018a). This knowledge briefing examines the role of the practice supervisor in helping to provide a framework for direct practice skills and supporting staff to integrate this into their practice.

The briefing comprises five sections:

policy, practice and research perspectives on high-quality direct practice

using individual and group supervision to enhance direct practice

direct observation of live practice

feedback from children and families

using practice supervisor feedback to improve practice skills.

This briefing aims to support practice supervisors to:

integrate professional and research knowledge about direct social work skills into their supervision practice	conduct direct observations of practice ethically and effectively
help social workers use feedback from children and families to improve their direct social work skills	engage in reflective dialogue and feedback with social workers.

A case study is integrated into the briefing. At the beginning of each section you are invited to reflect on some questions relating to material in the case study. After reading each section you can revisit your original responses to these questions and reflect on any learning. There are further reflective questions about your own practice at the end of each section.

Policy, practice and research on high-quality direct practice

Case study questions

Please read the case study part one (below), then consider your response to the following questions:

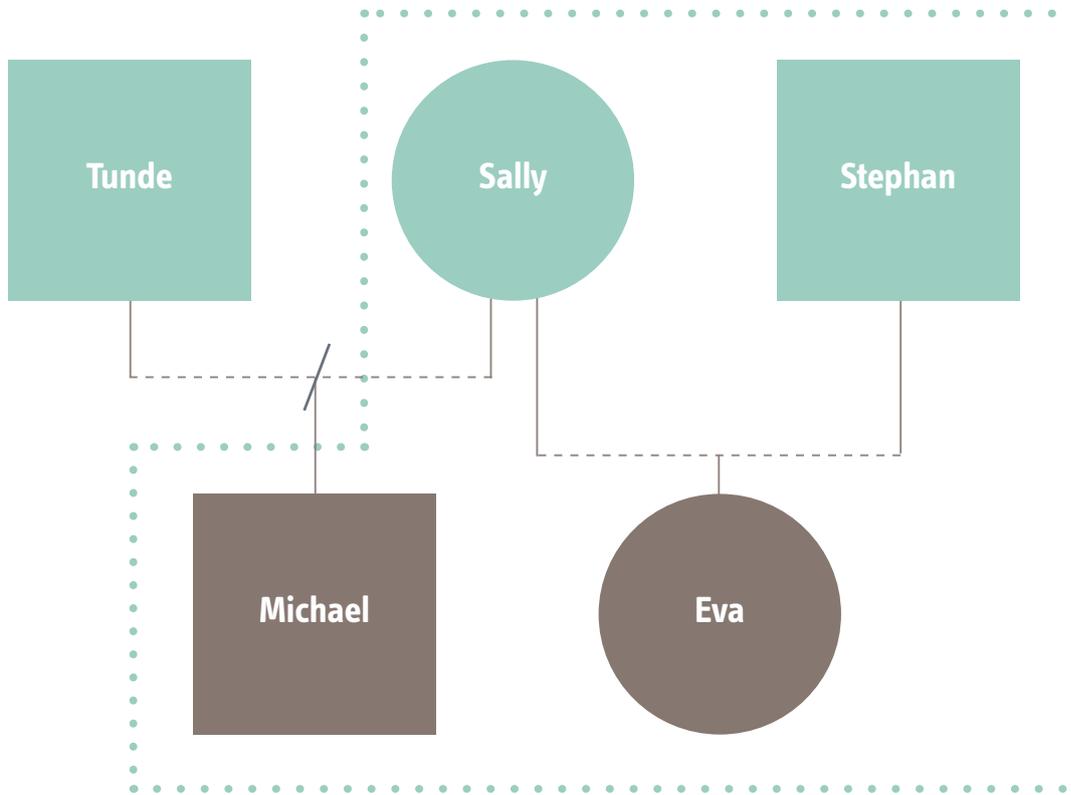
1. What research and practice knowledge does Angela need in order to work effectively with this family?
2. What communication skills would she need to use to build a relationship with the family members that enables effective direct work?
3. What diversity and equality issues does she need to be aware of?

Case study

Robert has been a practice supervisor for a year in an assessment team for the medium sized seaside town of 'Sandmouth'. After qualifying and working as a social worker in a metropolitan area for several years, Robert returned to his hometown.

He is supervising a social worker, Angela, who joined his team a couple of months ago from a different part of the county. Prior to qualification, Angela had experience of working for a domestic violence project. She has passed her assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), though her previous supervisor suggested that she still needed further support to develop confidence in statutory children and family social work. Angela seems a bit anxious during her conversation with Robert about the 'D' family.

'D' family genogram



Sally has fairly recently moved to Sandmouth. Her son, Michael, aged 13, is of mixed heritage. His father, Tunde, is Black African and Sally is White British. Her new partner, Stephan, is from Estonia. Eva, their baby, is four months old.

The health visitor has referred the family because she is worried that Sally may be experiencing postnatal depression. She has never met Stephan and Sally seems reluctant to talk about him or involve him in contact with services. The health visitor wonders whether there could be an element of coercive control in their relationship.

The team has also received a referral from Michael's secondary school concerning his absences from school, his 'angry verbal outbursts' and the 'suspected drug dealers' he has been seen with.

What does research tell us about policy, practice and research on high-quality direct practice?

The knowledge and skills statements (KSS) produced by the Department for Education (2018b) identify what child and family practitioners need to know and be able to do.

Direct work that combines empathy and authoritativeness and promotes participation is acknowledged to be the ‘bedrock’ of high-quality social work with children and families. The KSS highlight the need for social workers to employ skilled, sensitive and evidence-informed communication strategies, even when faced with hostility and resistance.

Children’s social care organisations and their partners have initiated a range of programmes to take forward the recommendations of the Munro review, embed the PCF, and integrate the KSS into social work practice.

Many organisations have introduced specific practice frameworks - for example, relationship-based, systemic or restorative practice - to inform the direct practice skills of their staff. These practice frameworks integrate different interventions and skills such as motivational interviewing, solution-focused practice and strengths-based approaches, and many incorporate particular practice models such as Signs of Safety or family group conferences.

These diverse frameworks and models share an aspiration to encourage purposeful and authoritative direct practice, enhance practitioners’ emotional resilience and intelligence, and develop professional curiosity and reflexivity.

Learning from research studies which observe practice with children and families

Over the past decade, a growing body of research has sought to examine the behaviours and qualities that social workers bring to their face-to-face interactions with children and families, noting a previous dearth of such ‘close up studies’ (Ferguson, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018; Winter et al, 2016; Lynch et al, 2019; Forrester et al, 2019).

Ferguson’s research aimed to capture the texture of everyday face-to-face practice, evoking its ‘atmospheres, smells and moods’ (2016b), and to understand what enables practitioners to have meaningful conversations with children and families, as well as the barriers to this.

Making the mental and physical transition from an office environment to emotionally-demanding home visits (which frequently involve working with angry and resistant family members and negotiating access into and through the home) was a challenge for some. Factors which were significant in instances where children appeared to become ‘invisible’ to the social worker (2016a).

Organisational and managerial demands to complete assessments to tight time scales sometimes inhibited the time and attention that social workers were able to spend in direct work (2016b, 2018). Although these organisational factors were highly significant, workers’ communication skills with families and their comfort with getting close to children - what he calls their ‘relational styles’ - also matter.

Winter et al (2016) observed social workers’ direct work with children and interviewed them about their experiences of it. Social workers connected with children through play and the skillful interweaving of safe topics with more challenging ones. They used toys, craft activities and drawing, as well as more specialist tools to ‘build rapport’ and ‘make meaning’ with children, though not all social workers routinely used such materials.

Social workers understood that direct work with children was an essential element of their work but reported that doing it in practice could be challenging. Structural factors including work overload and poor working environments, such as having to ‘hot-desk’, reduced the time and mental energy available for direct work. Social workers also highlighted organisational factors, for instance how initial assessment and long term teams were organised, that hindered good practice. Worker preference and confidence in communicating with children were also important in influencing their capacity to undertake these ‘nuanced and intricate’ (p1442) encounters.

Lynch et al (2019) argue that, although empathy is frequently considered a core skill, there is little empirical research into what skilled empathetic practice looks and sounds like in children and family social work. Their research analysed how social workers communicated empathy in audio recordings of social workers working with parents in child protection settings. Overall, they found fairly low levels of empathy. Social workers demonstrating high levels of empathy

used more open questions and reflective statements, showed curiosity about parents' difficult experiences, demonstrated understanding of what parents had told them, and made space for the expression of emotions.

Forrester et al (2019) undertook a quantitative study with parents and carers in 127 families that examined the relationship between outcomes for children and families and worker skills. This study provides promising evidence that worker skills may make a positive difference for some families. The study rated seven communication skills, four drawn from motivational interviewing and three specifically relating to social work, which were grouped into three categories:

relationship building (collaboration, autonomy, empathy)	good authority (purposefulness, clarity about concerns, focus on child)	evocation (elicitation and enhancement of intrinsic motivation to change).
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The study found that relationship-building skills predicted self-reported parental engagement but good authority and evocation were more strongly associated with positive outcomes. These effects increased when social workers visited more often.

Taking account of diversity and equality issues on practice

How diversity and equality issues impact on direct work is also crucial. For instance, Taylor et al (2014) found that despite wishing to be child-centered, some social workers expressed anxieties about communicating with children with disabilities, which suggests a learning and development need in this area. Bernard and Harris (2019), in their analysis of serious case reviews (SCRs) draw our attention to the importance of social workers exploring the cultural, religious and social-economic contexts in which the children they are working with live.

Learning points

Many children's social care organisations have introduced practice frameworks to support the development of the direct practice skills of their staff.

Social workers employ a range of skills, strategies and tools to negotiate access to, and have meaningful conversations and interactions with, children and families.

There is some promising research evidence that social worker skills in relationship-building and good authority can make a positive difference for children and families.

Taking account of equality and diversity issues is crucial.

Response to the case study

On the basis of the summary of research you have just read, look back on your original responses to questions one to three and consider if you would now make any changes or additions.

Reflective questions for practice supervisors

How do I keep my knowledge and skills for direct practice up to date?

How do I articulate evidence-informed standards for direct practice to my supervisees?

Using individual and group supervision to enhance high-quality direct practice

Case study questions

4. How could Robert use individual or group supervision to support Angela to plan what she needs to do next and how she will do this?
5. How could Robert ascertain the quality of Angela's direct practice and support the development of her confidence and capability?

The previous section examined features of high-quality direct practice. This section focuses on how practice supervisors can use supervision to promote this in their team.

The research studies described in the last section highlight the challenges and opportunities for social workers in undertaking direct work, as well as the range of skills and qualities needed to do it well. Individual and group supervision provides a space for practice supervisors to gain a picture of their supervisees' self-reported skills and their understanding of the evidence underpinning direct practice.

Practice supervisors can help social workers to evaluate the implications of this research for their work with the individual children and families allocated to them. And to think about what they plan to do and, crucially, how they will do it.

How can supervision influence the quality of practice with children and families?

Although much has been claimed about the centrality of supervision for good practice (see, for instance, Munro 2011b), the research evidence is relatively weak. Carpenter et al's systematic review (2013) found that there had been no high-quality research on the relationship between supervision, quality of practice and outcomes for children and families.

Recent research has taken up the challenges posed by this knowledge gap. In order to build the research agenda in this area, Wilkins, Forrester and Grant (2017) observed supervision sessions in one London borough. They concluded that detailed discussions on the dynamic nature of risks to children and the emotional components of practice were missing in many of these observed sessions. Wilkins and Antonopoulou (2018) asked 315 social workers from the UK what was helpful about supervision. Most participants considered it was primarily useful for 'management oversight and accountability'. However, participants whose supervision was more frequent and / or also had group supervision were more likely to report that supervision was also helpful in activities such as 'decision-making, emotional support, analysis and reflection'.

Wilkins, Lynch and Antonopoulou (2018) created a multi methods study designed to examine whether a 'golden thread' between what happens in supervision, the skills employed by the social worker and outcomes for families could be found. Group supervision sessions regarding a particular family were observed, audio-recorded and coded for 'analysis and critical thinking',

'clarity about risk or need', 'collaboration' (between the supervisor and social workers), 'focus on the child and family' and 'support for practice'. This was followed by an observation of the social worker's subsequent visit and interviews with family members. Social worker visits were coded using the same framework as in Forester et al's study (2019) described above.

The researchers (p500) found that 'where supervision was practice focused, there was a positive association with more skilful social work practice, particularly good authority (purposefulness, clarity about risk, and child focus)'. The researchers (p501) describe practice-focused supervision as supervision that addresses the following questions:

1. What is the social worker going to do next?
2. Why is the social worker going to do these things?
3. How is the social worker going to do those things?

These questions provide a useful framework for practice supervisors to structure and integrate into their supervision practice.

A recent study (Bostock et al, 2019) into the relationship between systemic supervision and practice skills echoes these findings. Systemic supervision employs systemic thinking in analysing and reflecting on the family system and the place of the social worker, supervisor and wider organisations and communities within that system. It recognises that different parts of the whole system may mirror each other through parallel processes. This study found an association between systemically-informed group supervision and the quality of practice skills, including relationship-building and use of good authority, which were observed in subsequent social worker visits to the families that had been discussed. The presence of a systemically-trained clinician in the supervision group enhanced this effect. The study concluded that that high-quality supervision has the potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of direct practice.

Learning points

Regular group and individual supervision can provide a space for social workers to reflect on and 'rehearse' direct practice.

Although the evidence base for supervision is relatively weak there is a growing body of research that has elicited social workers' views on supervision and analysed supervisory practices.

Some promising evidence is emerging that practice-focused and systemic supervision is associated with improved direct practice skills and positive outcomes for children and families.

Response to the case study

On the basis of the summary of research you have just read, look back on your original responses to questions four and five and consider if you would now make any changes or additions.

Reflective questions

Do I give sufficient priority to making time for individual and group supervision?

Do I know enough about how to facilitate group supervision? (If you would like to find out more about group supervision methods, you may find it useful to access the learning tools 'Bells that ring systemic model of group supervision' and 'Intervision a peer led model of group supervision' on the 'Talking about practice in supervision' section of this website.)

How far am I integrating elements of practice-focused and systemic supervision into my supervisory practice?

Direct observation of live practice

Case study part two questions

6. Why might a direct observation be helpful at this stage of the supervisory relationship?

7. What might it focus on?

8. What would Robert and Angela need to think about when setting up the direct observation?

Case study part two

It was agreed that Robert would observe Angela's second meeting with the family to better understand her strengths and areas for development in relation to her direct practice skills. He also plans to seek feedback from the family about their experience of working with Angela.

Direct observation enables practice supervisors to gather first-hand evidence about social workers' direct practice. It provides a platform to engage in reflective dialogue with the social worker about their existing skills and their continuing professional development.

Observation of students' practice is a requirement of social work qualification training in England and is incorporated into the ASYE. An increasing number of local authorities are building direct observation into their supervision guidance and standards.

Most literature about direct observation relates to practice education (Ruch and Holmes 2015). Although there are commonalities between direct observation of students and qualified practitioners, assessment standards will relate to different levels of the PCF.

Davys and Beddoe (2016) propose a model designed specifically for qualified practitioners, which they call 'live observation'. They describe a continuum of formality depending on the purpose of the observation, the methods used and the position of the observer.

Self-observation of recorded practice by social workers and spontaneous observations by peers are at the most informal end, whereas planned observations undertaken with the purpose of gauging whether or not social workers are complying with required standards are at the most formal.

Observation processes

The following comments apply to observations undertaken by practice supervisors. The situation chosen for observation will depend on its purpose.

Sometimes the observation is designed to provide evidence for appraisal, a judgment about the level a social worker has reached or a summative assessment for an educational programme. At times observations may be part of a process where there are performance management issues. In these situations the criteria for assessing the observation will be informed by nationally and locally agreed standards as set out by the employer or educational programme. Some observations are more exclusively developmental.

Observations can also be useful if the social worker is feeling 'stuck' or working with a particularly complex or challenging situation. For these types of observations, the criteria used may be more flexible. Regardless of how far the assessment criteria are pre-determined or not, clarity about the goals of the observation, the criteria by which it will be evaluated, and how the observed situation could provide opportunities to demonstrate these, is essential. You can find tools to support you in preparing for and undertaking practice observations in the 'Developing a culture of excellent social work practice' section of the website.

Observations, particularly when they are at the more formal end of the spectrum and the stakes are high, can be anxiety-provoking for social workers (Davys and Beddoe, 2016, Ruch 2015). The observation

situation can be a visible manifestation of the organisational hierarchy. In these circumstances it is important for practice supervisors to acknowledge social workers' feelings about the observation, explain clearly why it is taking place, and stress that direct observations can support individual practitioners and the whole organisation to learn and improve practice for the benefit of children and their families.

Even when reassured that it is the social worker, not them, who is being observed, family members also may experience observations as stressful. Explaining the purposes and process of the observation and giving time to explore any fears or fantasies that families may have is important in gaining informed consent.

Consideration should also be given as to whether or not, and at what age, children should be asked to give consent. Other power dynamics between the family, social worker and supervisor relating to their respective social locations such as class, gender, race, disability etc. are also important issues to consider.

Learning points

Direct observation is increasingly being recognised as a tool to raise standards of direct practice at all levels of a social worker's career not just in the early stages.

Assessment criteria need to be negotiated and clear and can draw from national and local standards or relevant research tools and methodologies.

Even where there is a summative purpose to the observation there should also be a development focus.

Equalities, diversity, consent and power are important considerations in setting up direct observations.

Response to the case study

On the basis of the summary of research you have just read, look back on your original responses to questions six to eight and consider if you would now make any changes or additions.

Reflective questions

What would children and families in my team say about their experience of direct observation?

How could I use direct observation to further enhance practice quality in my team?

Feedback from children and families

Case study questions

9. In what ways could Robert seek feedback from the family?

10. What aspects of Angela's practice could be developed through such feedback?

11. How could Robert encourage Angela to routinely gather feedback from children and families?

Mellon (2017) argues that learning from parents' experiences is vital to improve practice. The reliability and validity of information, and hence the possible learning derived from direct observations, is enhanced by triangulating it with children and family feedback (Ruch 2015).

McGhee and Hunter (2010) assert that, although there is a substantial body of research evidence about parents' experiences and responses to child protection, there is less research about how best to gain feedback in everyday practice.

Organisations and social work teams may have established methods for consulting with people who use their services, though it is important to continuously develop and evaluate their effectiveness. Direct observations also provide an opportunity to seek feedback from children and families about how they have experienced direct work, in order to support the social worker's skills development.

Much of the literature about feedback from people who use services is drawn from the practice education field. Pearl et al (2018) found that 90% of feedback from users of services in their study was positive. Although positive feedback can enhance students' confidence, they found that critically constructive feedback was more valuable for learning.

Giving this type of feedback is a skill, they argue, that children and families can be enabled to learn. Applying the findings of their study to obtaining feedback about qualified practitioners suggests that practice supervisors need to consider how to:

- > support children and families to understand the purposes of feedback, in particular its role in improving direct practice skills
- > develop effective methods of gaining critically constructive feedback
- > create the best conditions to enable practitioners to learn from and make use of feedback from children and families.

Although geared towards adults who use mental health services, Allen et al's (2016) guide to gathering and using feedback provides much learning that can be transferred.

They describe how they developed a research-informed, accessible and tailored questionnaire, which could be adapted for use by children and families. They also give detailed advice about how to gather feedback through initiating collaborative conversations between social workers and people using services.

The challenge for social workers and the organisations they work in is to embed this into their practice and use the feedback to improve services.

Learning points

Feedback from children and families is an important tool to enhance practice quality.

In addition to established consultation channels, direct observation also provides a useful vehicle to obtain feedback from the family, for example by the practice supervisor having a conversation with the family after the observation.

Children and families may need to be supported to understand the purposes of feedback and to provide constructively critical feedback.

Response to the case study

On the basis of the summary of research you have just read, look back on your original responses to questions nine to eleven and consider if you would now make any changes or additions?

Reflective questions

What methods and processes are used to gather feedback from children and families in my organisation and team? What could I do to improve this?

How can I promote a culture of learning and development using this feedback?

Using practice supervisor feedback to improve practice skills

Case study part two questions

12. How could Robert open a dialogue with Angela to help her reflect on how she interacted with Michael?

13. How could Robert explore the impact of Angela's professional and life experience on her response to this family, in particular whether or not these experiences may influence her feelings about the observation process and her capacity to engage in a dialogue with him about his observations?

14. What could Robert do to help Angela engage more effectively with Michael and other adolescents in the future?

15. How could Robert reflect on how his own social location and professional and life experiences might impact on observation and feedback processes?

Case study part three

Robert is talking with Angela about what he saw during the direct observation. He was impressed by the way she was able to ask open questions and make reflective statements about Sally's relationship with and feelings towards Stephan.

Sally was positive about her interaction with Angela and described her as being 'understanding'. However, Robert thinks that her work with Michael was less effective. He noticed that Angela had started her interaction with Michael by asking him what he thought his mother was feeling about how he was behaving at school.

It seemed to Robert that she had a rather accusatory tone. Michael answered Angela's subsequent questions in monosyllables and after a short time left the room. At the end of the visit he was unwilling to give feedback to Robert.

Boud and Malloy (2013) propose a model of feedback that they call ‘sustainable feedback’, which is a ‘process used by learners to facilitate their own learning’ (p10).

Here, learners are actively invited to reflect on and make judgements about their own performance and are supported to build their capacity to make sustained use of the feedback to improve their work.

Davy's and Beddoe make a similar point (2016, p7) in their description of live observation as a ‘collaborative process’ in which the arrangements for feedback from the practice supervisor are clear and timely, and the criteria explicit and negotiated.

They emphasise the need for feedback to be embedded in a collaborative dialogue incorporating reciprocity and curiosity; feedback is not just a one-way process with the observer ‘telling’ the practitioner how well - or not - they have done. In this process both the practice supervisor and the practitioner share their insights, their ‘wonderings’ and their own learning. Both parties jointly identify how the observation will impact on their future practice and work together.

The field of practice education again provides the principal source of research about feedback in social work. Tourgiantakis et al (2019) identify feedback as a core educational process in supervision and practice education, which can support practitioners to integrate theory and practice, enhance self-awareness and enable skills development.

They identify the following evidence-informed guidelines for providing feedback in social work. Feedback should be:

- > based on observation data
- > timely and specific
- > balance positive and critical comments
- > facilitate self-critique.

Heron et al’s research (2015) found that students believed that their emotional response to feedback sometimes inhibited them from making the best use of it. Students reported that the quality of their relationship with the person giving feedback, how far they perceived them to be credible, and the feedback giver’s willingness to be honest were all important factors in whether or not students thought feedback had been useful to them.

Learning points

Feedback has the potential to promote skills development for direct work.

Feedback should be located within a reflective dialogue where both parties have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned from the process.

Feedback is most effective within a credible, honest and trusting relationship.

Response to the case study

On the basis of the summary of research you have just read, look back on your original responses to questions twelve to fifteen and consider if you would now make any changes or additions.

Reflective questions

How can I enhance my supervisees' capacity to evaluate their own practice skills?

What can I do to create the conditions for supervisees to make best use of feedback to continually develop their practice skills?

In conclusion, the key messages this knowledge briefing has highlighted are:

Over the past decade a significant body of policy, practice and research knowledge about what constitutes good direct practice has been developed.

Practice-focused supervision that addresses what social workers should do and, crucially, why and how they should do it is best placed to support high-quality direct practice.

Direct observation, practiced ethically and effectively, is useful for enabling practitioners' learning and development.

Feedback from children and families is a valuable, and underused, tool to enhance direct practice.

Feedback from practice supervisors is most valuable when it is situated within a reflective dialogue in the context of a perceived positive relationship.

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