

# **How Do We Build Self-Esteem in Girls Before They Age Out of Foster Care?**

**Gardenia Burks  
Benedictine University, Springfield**

*With a myriad of speculations on how self-esteem may be formed in girls journeying through and exiting the foster care system no research claims an absolute time when self-esteem is formed. There are inferences to multiple causes playing pivotal roles in identifying how girls view themselves and their worth laying the groundwork for self-esteem, not only as children, but as they move towards adulthood. Because phenomenological studies seek the human experience as described by the participants, studies framed around this research method may present more accurate information as opposed to literature written by those never being part of foster care.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The topic of mentoring to build self-esteem is the focus for this research, in selecting this topic it was necessary to combine several other areas of study to pull the subject of mentoring young girls in foster care into a meaningful and explainable paper. The search for literature focusing on mentoring girls from an early age and its affect on their self-esteem was not an easy quest. While there are individual studies regarding mentoring, self-esteem, the effects of parental involvement on the outcome of girls, as well as the difference in development and self-esteem in girls and boys, none targeted the prolonged effect of consistent mentoring from an early age. The studies described in this paper include a myriad of speculations of how self-esteem may possibly be formed and effected in these girls as they journey through and exit the foster care system, and presents the question, ‘how can mentoring be helpful at each stage’? While no research claims an absolute point in time when self-esteem is formed, there are inferences as to multiple causes that play pivotal roles in identifying how secure these girls are with themselves and their worth, which in turn lays the groundwork for their self-esteem, not only as children, but as they move into adolescence and adulthood. A mentor may close the gap of positive adult involvement and guidance which may be missing or not present in their lives. After careful review of the studies presented in the literature the current hypothesis is phenomenological studies would provide more sound and accurate data on how and when to mentor girls before they leave foster care by better preparing them to enter adulthood with the same skills and confidence level as girls not exposed to foster care.

## **OVERVIEW**

In the United States there was an estimated 423,773 children in foster care on September 30, 2009, of which 47 percent were female. Approximately 276,266 children exited foster care during Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, (Gateway Child Welfare, 2011). Exiting foster care may imply the child has reunified with their family, emancipated or “aged out” (child is no longer the responsibility of the foster care system).

Current literature reveals that girls transition from foster care into society as young adults with little to no self-esteem, despite the programs foster care has in place to prepare them for life beyond the system. Some studies point to biological parents and families taking a more active and participatory role in their lives as well as foster parents being more involved in day to day activities essential in making a difference in reunification, and possibly limiting their stay in foster care, (Alpert & Britner, 2009).

Others believe girls develop differently than boys and therefore are in need of different motivators to build their self-esteem (Nelson, 1996). The critical time for development of girls starts in early childhood when they are separating from their female caregivers (Powell, 2004). Girl's build and hold on to relationships in a differently than boys, therefore attention should be placed on how girls are taught to separate and move forward once a relationship comes to an end (Chodorow, 1978). Girls as early as age four begin to internalize problems as a result of socialization (Keenan & Shaw, 1997). The Keenan & Shaw study also suggests that at age 5 girls show lower rates of externalizing problems. With the classroom as a peer group, children form a network of interpersonal ties and develop social status among their friends.

A mentor at this stage in the life of a young girl in foster care may prove to be a beneficial source of support. Because phenomenological studies seek the human experience as described by the participants themselves, studies framed around this research method may present more accurate and sound information as opposed to literature that is written based on assumptions from individuals who write about but were never part of foster care.

## **STUDY REVIEWS**

Early socialization of empathy for girls may lead to the development of higher rates of internalizing disorders in adolescence (Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Barrett, 1991). They also proposed that for girls exposed to the extreme chronic distress of others, empathic feelings may develop into feelings of responsibility and guilt. Girls, over internalize others problems as their own. Throughout girls' development, individual achievement has not been tied to their self-concept. Instead, they have been socialized to guide themselves by understanding how their behavior affects others (Gilligan, 1982). Children learn skills during preschool that assist with expressing and managing how to respond to situations where emotions are involved, (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008),(Saarni, 1997).

Girls in this population could very well benefit from having a mentor to teach them how to appreciate their uniqueness as individuals. Each girl is an individual with her own unique personality, abilities and emotionally scars. Many circumstances play a role in building of self-esteem, yet most articles choose to showcase one or two possible contributors. Studies from the 1990's discuss the self-esteem of girls in foster care and a few factors that may be the basis for the negative reports surrounding their self-esteem, but offer little if any solutions. The earlier articles spoke about John Bowlby's attachment theory and the role the theory played in a child's development. Newer research and studies focus on development factors and parental involvement necessary in better preparing girls to live on their own after foster care and the need of mentors as they are transitioning into young adulthood, as a way to establish their self-esteem. More research will need to be conducted that looks at the constructs of self-esteem with young girls in foster care to determine how and when mentoring would be most effective within this population.

Girls in foster care enter adulthood with more preconceived labels and expectations than non fostered girls and are reported to not only have low self-esteem, but also a high rate of un-wed pregnancies, drug problems, homelessness, along with encountering difficulty locating employment, unlikely to pursue a higher education and other negative characteristics (Ahrens, DuBois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, & Lozano, 2011). Separate literature speaks to different aspects of how the formulation of self-esteem affects girls and boys differently, with girls' self-esteem being affected at an earlier age than boys (Powell, 2004). Some reports state that girls' on average are 1 full year ahead of boys, in terms of physical, social and emotional development by the time they are school age.

Although the first epidemiological studies of early childhood was conducted in the mid 1970's, there is still no literature that suggests any one possible solution to how this set of girls may be guided and

supported down pathways to improve their chances of exiting the system with a clearer set of directions and a vision of how to navigate through foster care and transition positively into adulthood. The purpose of this paper is to establish what factors may attribute to the self-esteem of girls as they go through foster care, and will mentoring from an early age affect their self-esteem and better prepare them for exiting the foster care system? This is also an attempt to pull together studies from different disciplines that provide a more intimate look into how and when girls in foster care may be better served with a consistent adult mentor in her life. If future literature that reflects a more positive outcome of these girls is to occur, a more diligent effort needs to be placed on a collaboration of several disciplines working together with a clear focus and understanding or perception that girls are developmentally and emotionally different and as part of foster care there may be an even more complicated set of variables taking place. Pairing these studies with phenomenological research could very well answer questions that will affect a large number of young girls in foster care.

### **Accounting for Self-Esteem and Mentors**

A conversation with an individual who journeyed through the California foster care system from age eleven through the age of eight-teen, and a second conversation with a former foster parent in New York, described how mentoring this group of girls from as early an age as possible might have an overall effect as the girls navigate from childhood, pre-teen and teen years and into young adulthood. While neither are writers or scholars, foster care was an intricate part of their lives. To ignore their input discounts what they experienced from a firsthand account. Both individuals shared similar opinions, reflections and conclusions regarding why girls in foster care are exiting the system with low self-esteem and negative expectations for themselves. While each provided her perception through a different set of lens, the variance in age range, race and geographic locations became apparent that their differences were actually similarities which resulted in the desire to further explore the context of our conversations. Combining their insight with existing literature made it easier to focus on addressing conceivable causes for low self-esteem in this group of girls. Both conversations led to girls in foster care not only desiring but deserving to be treated with dignity, respect, and having consistent positive influences from adults in their lives. There have been implications that the self-esteem of girls in foster care may be enhanced by a stronger emotional investment on the part of the biological and foster parents. A clear understanding of where and how the child fits in the family structure also has an impact on how the girls view themselves not only as children, but as they move through the many developmental stages that occur from childhood to adulthood (Chodorow, 1978).

Interestingly, reports show 25% to 40% of adolescent girls have experienced depressed moods as compared to 20-35% of boys (Marcotte, Fortin, Potvin, & Papillon, 2002). The depressive disorders have been documented in girls as young as ten. The physical changes that occur during this time to any girls' body may also lead to a negative body image. According to one study (Allgood-Merten, Lewisohn, & Hops, 1990) body image and self-esteem are the two most important gender differences in depressive feelings, and Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus,(1994) considered the multiple transitions occurring with a girls body during adolescence and pre-adolescence combined with the uncertainties surrounding entering high school during adolescence as another contributor to periods of depression. Girls experiencing rejection and neglect exhibit anxiety, depression and withdrawal (Downey, Feldman, Khuri, & Friedman, 1994). With girls being labeled as emotional, these signs can be missed by parents and caregivers as normal behavior. Younger children are susceptible to negative images about their bodies, (Collins, 1991). Collins found that girls as young as 6 years of age showed a discrepancy between their own body type and their ideal body type, with the ideal type being thinner than their own. As children age they report more negative body image (O'Dea & Abraham, 1999).

Studies in the US show that girls are more likely to have the negative body image more so than boys. Would a mentoring relationship assist in building a strong self-esteem in this population of girls, if mentoring begins as girls begin to socialize, or enter a daily school routine, as suggested in the two conversations? Socialization is described as the process by which an individual learns to behave in a manner consistent with societal standards (Grusec & Lytton, 1988).

Research was conducted to determine if girls change more than boys as it relates to identities and behaviors (Lee, 2005). Using survey responses from 320 students in a summer program, Lee concluded that the female students were more communally oriented, that girls self-esteem is linked to parental support and involvement, girls are quicker than boys to take on new relationships, were more self-conscious in social situations and more sensitive to the opinions and reactions of others. They were also more actively averse to nonconforming behavior. While there was no indication if any of the participating girls were in foster care, the report did suggest a change of relationships have a more stressful effect on girls in general. If girls are indeed apt to become more emotionally connected and involved in relationships, the stress and disruptions of placement changes during foster care may have an effect on their sense of belonging to and being accepted by a group (family), in turn effecting their self-esteem (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Fomby & Cherlin, (2007) refer to an “instability hypothesis” when children are affected by the multiple disruptions in their family structure. Girls in foster care are likely to be exposed to multiple disruptions, some more often and at earlier ages than others. This too could affect the formation of their opinions of self.

In reality some girls in foster care do not have access to or relationships with their biological families or a constant and positive adult figure present in their lives. These two factors could very well make a difference in how girls view themselves and their abilities not only as children and adolescents, but carry the feelings over into how they form relationships in their adult lives as well (Chodorow, 1978).

Previous studies have expressed different variables that affect ones self-esteem but none have produced an absolute remedy stating how any one or two combinations are the perfect solutions needed to build this characteristic in girls, specifically those in foster care. Self-esteem refers to self-worth, self-respect or how one regards or feels about oneself. Self-concept refers to perception about identity and achievements (Powell, 2004). If girls in foster care have access to an adult mentor while in care this may allow an opportunity to build their self-esteem while learning to also build trusting relationships before transitioning into mainstream society as adults.

This is not a proclamation that the problem of self-esteem will ever be “solved”, but by linking and connecting the areas of so many studies with a solid mentoring model throughout the foster care journey it is conceivable that a different approach may reach a greater number of girls, resulting in a change in perception of their post foster care outcome, and possibly generate updated literature reviews of a more positive transition into adulthood. Conducting phenomenological studies would help address this issue.

### **Participatory Inquiry**

A participatory inquiry study was reviewed which focused on how a child's attachment to her caregiver affords emotional support and a secure base which enhances self-esteem (Fernandez, 2007). It described, the more placements children have, the lower their peer self-esteem. The study goes on to include a small portion of a twelve year old girl's interview relating to her many placement changes. The girl reported “ It's like we're second hand kids; unless that's how all kids feel who are my age” , (Fernandez, 2007). Surprisingly, this same quote was used in an episode of a 1960's TV series, “*My Three Sons*”, forty years earlier and yet foster children are still looked upon as second hand. When individuals who sincerely care about the future of girls aging out of foster care and those who were formerly in care are included in implementing programs maybe more attention will be placed on qualities or issues affecting not only their outcome, but their emotional well being while in care. As former foster children enter the real world, they are making known what they felt was missing or what could have made a difference in their lives, as they traveled through the system. More phenomenological studies and input from their point of view may change the direction of literature regarding the outcome of this population of children in general. Who can better tell you what is needed than someone who has experienced the phenomena first hand?

### **Additional Study Reviews**

Not knowing at what specific point in time self-esteem begins to emerge has become evident in the studies, but a more factual dilemma is in determining when, and where to begin focusing attention on

these girls to ensure they are exiting foster care with a sense of self-esteem. Studies were reviewed that suggest building girls self-esteem should start when they are young, which supports the two conversations spoken of earlier. Both women believe mentoring or a committed and positive adult should be introduced to girls as early as age five, as this is when girls are going to kindergarten, and socializing on a daily basis. This was also supported by several studies presented in this paper. Each woman also stated that having a dependable adult to turn to throughout their childhood would provide a sense of security and support for these vulnerable girls. Based on their experience, providing a secure and dependable adult in their lives at an early age would lay the foundation for their self-esteem. The studies presented in this paper suggest these ladies and their insights may be correct, the earlier and more consistent, the more likely these girls will exit foster care with a strong sense of self with the ability to externalize rather than internalize emotions and situations.

Most theorists are in agreement that attachment relationships are important and coupled with the fact that foster children are moved around quite a bit may affect those relationships and in turn affect the girl's ability to build effective relationships (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994).

The attachment theory claims children develop affectional ties to caregivers, a secure base which attributes to their "internal working model" which serves as a guide to other relationships, (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby stated for a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive provides a strong and pervasive feeling of security and encourages one to value and continue the relationship. This relationship is important for preparing girls to interact and participate in future relationships throughout their lives.

Several literary studies following Bowlby have also provided an analysis of how attachment and lack of parental involvement may affect children in foster care. Dr. Malerstein proposes after age seven attachment theory's predictions of social functions are unpredictable, and that is when Cognitive-Motivational Structure Theory (CMS) begins. CMS, differs from attachment theory in that it looks at when during ones development the sense of self is formed (Malerstein, 2005). The literature of Dr. Malerstein also believes between the ages of eight and eleven is a critical period when the formation of CMS patterns within the child's development carries over into adulthood. This is more support that suggests a mentoring relationship early on may make a difference in a foster girl's adult outcome.

Before John Bowlby wrote about attachment theory and Dr. Malerstein about CMS, Sigmund Freud, in 1894 discussed in his final theory of anxiety "The Neuro-psychoses of Defense, the piecemeal manner in which separation anxiety, mourning and defense were being reviewed, even though they were all related. This suggests information has been available for some time that bridges anxiety with mourning and defensive attitudes or behaviors. He further writes "missing someone who is loved and longed for is the key to an understanding of anxiety" (Freud). Freud himself dealt with the question, "Does defense precede anxiety or anxiety defense? If the response to separation is pain and mourning, how can it also be anxiety?", which leads to the question, could the thought of self-esteem fit into Freud's inverse recognition that the end result of other factors affecting the lives of girls in foster care push self-esteem to the forefront and make that quality the more ubiquitous issue? It may be plausible that the individuals are in a perpetual state of mourning for their families, like a young child is for its caregiver and are unknowingly holding on to the anxiety of not being embraced by that biological family which then presents anxiety in other areas of their lives, resulting in a combination of all of these areas revealing themselves as lack of self-esteem by those looking on from the outside.

There are qualitative studies suggesting more involvement is needed from parents in programs and services that support reunification between them and their children as it may contribute more to the overall well being of the children. However, one study provided information in regards to the parent's perception and interpretation of their treatment from caseworkers. Parents of forty six children in foster care revealed that they feel a sense of state power over them, the threat of having their children permanently removed pervades the foster care process for the parents (Alpert & Britner, 2009). Many parents felt the caseworkers were yielding power over them and began to feign cooperation, even though they wanted to be more involved with their children. They expressed a feeling of being underserved and overlooked by child protection services and were sometimes fearful of caseworkers and their power. If

parents are to be involved, steps should be taken to ensure they are comfortable in working with the caseworkers that are assigned to their cases without fear of the case-workers power over them or the future with their children.

Getting parents involved in activities outside of the home, in activities that allows the child to showcase her talents while interacting with other girls their ages may help build confidence and social skills. Leisure time, interests and activities that the youth finds of value may offer opportunities that help them find a more positive way through life in foster care (Gilligan, 1999). Achievement and performance, without pressure, in areas of interest to the child can be key ways of building self-esteem, (Gilligan, 1999). Gilligan goes on to say “sensitive mentoring by concerned adults can foster self-esteem, strengthen mental health and open new social relationships beyond the care system”. The mentor may provide valuable opportunities in this area. Involvement in activities of interest serve to prepare youth with life after care and allows the child to rehearse, observe and discuss problem solving skills and strategies. “Positive leisure time interest and hobbies are significant” (Gilligan, 1999).

There are little, if any arguments in regards to self-esteem being at its lowest during adolescence, for both boys and girls (Powell, 2004). Stanrock,(2001) cites a study suggesting that resolving conflicts during adolescence helps individuals become who they will be, unique individuals progressing further into higher developmental stages. For teens to become independent their self concept and self-esteem have to be strong to overcome adolescent conflicts. As referenced before, the critical time for development of girls start early in childhood when they are trying to form their own personalities at the same time as they are learning to separate from the adult female caretaker in their lives. The conflict is understanding how to remain close or connected to the caretaker while forming their individuation. The process is not as complex for boys because the gender of the primary caretaker is usually different , which makes the separation from the caregiver easier (Powell, 2004). According to Fomby & Cherlin, (2007) girls in foster care are likely to be exposed to multiple disruptions, connecting with an adult female and then having to separate may be conflicting for young girls. According to Chodorow (1978), the process of becoming an individual from age three and older is more conflicting and complex for girls than boys. She also believes that generally girls have a harder time with separating, as a basic sense of self for females is through connection to the world, while for boys it is to separate from the world. Nelson (1996) states that girls have a need to develop relational competence, and express a delicate balance between girls need for connection and boundary, and how it may effect their self-esteem. Girls, per Nelson need a different style of interaction. That interaction could be an ongoing mentoring relationship.

## **MENTORING PROGRAMS**

There are no shortage of articles surrounding the topic of mentoring and researchers giving their definition of mentoring. Mentoring is used to refer to the encouragement and support of the young person in care’s talents, interests and leisure activities by a committed adult (Gilligan, 1999). In order to maximize the mentoring relationship the mentor should be aware of the girl’s expectations as well as assigning her responsibilities to the relationship. Giving the girls a responsibility will allow them to have some control over the relationship, something many of them may have never experienced. Studies show former foster girls stating their need for help was the highest as teens when they transitioned from one foster setting to another and when exiting from foster care (Fernandez, 2007). The individuals spoke of what they specifically needed from the adult mentors in their lives because they were able to verbalize their feelings. Girls who have yet to reach the teen years are not quite as eloquent in their delivery but may also benefit from a secure attachment relationship with a committed mentor as well. Most mentoring studies focus on adolescence and are somewhat surprised when the individual chooses not to continue the relationship. If trusting mentoring relationships were built and nurtured when these girls are younger, by the time they are ready to transition into adulthood mentoring would have a more positive meaning. One study, (Ahrens, DuBois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, & Lozano, 2011) suggested in a conclusion statement that action research systematically explores the feasibility and impact of mentoring and has the potential to significantly advance the efforts to improve the outcome for this group of individuals.

According to DuBois, et al., the increase in the quantity of mentoring has outpaced the quality of mentoring. Programs tend to be more successful when there is more intense training for mentors, structured activities, high expectations for frequent contact, greater support for parents and monitoring of overall program implementation. (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008) indicated that youths who have at least one positive and significant naturally occurring mentoring relationship tend to fare better in their transition into adulthood.

Mentoring programs like Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) has resulted in many positive and socially important effects on the lives of its participants. There are reports from young people who often attribute their success to having an adult in their lives that paid attention and provided support to them (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Mentoring programs such as the one through BBBS facilitates long lasting adult/youth relationships that make a difference. BBBS does not target specific problems. Their goal is to provide youth with an adult friend, which provides the framework through which the mentor can support and aid the youth (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). According to the BBBS study, girls are far more likely to be matched with mentors than boys and are also more likely to retain longer relationships with the mentors.

While the actual impact of mentoring may not show up for immediately, it is also important to note that not all matches will have the length and intensity to be effective for youth (Pedersen, Woolum, Gagne, & Coleman, 2009).

Research on mentoring has moved to specific questions relating to how, under what conditions and what the outcome is, as opposed to whether mentoring works (Nakklua & Harris, 2005). The idea is to better understand how to form quality mentoring relationships.

Having a successful relationship may carry over to other relationships by helping the youth trust others, express anger more productively and generally be able to relate more effectively (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

Mentoring is the willingness to take risks with intimacy which is a major factor in assessing and forecasting mentee involvement in mentor relationships (Kalsbfeisch & Davies, 1993). Having a trusting adult mentor to confide in would allow these girls to talk through situations and feelings and teach them early on how to handle negative comments about issues and situations for which they have no control. As discussed earlier the sooner these girls can handle conflict and move on the sooner they will develop a sense of self and their own self worth (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

Although leadership and self-esteem are different, it is important to look at a survey conducted by The Girl Scouts (Girls Scouts of America, 2008). They surveyed over 4000 girls ages 14-17 and provided the following four viewpoints of what girls feel is needed to assist them in becoming confident [leaders]. Some would separate leadership abilities from self-esteem, but in foster girls and the age group surveyed, the two are closely linked. The four points below were the end results of what the girls believed they needed in order to become leaders, and surprisingly the same points made by the two women formerly affiliated with foster care spoken about earlier:

- The greatest single barrier to leadership is their self-perception; they lack self-confidence in their own skills and leadership competencies.
- Providing supportive environments in which they can acquire leadership experience is essential.
- A successful leadership program must address their need for emotional safety, *and* desire for social and personal development.
- Girls report that environments in which they can develop leadership skills are scarce. They want more leadership opportunities offered at younger ages.

The aim of this paper is to review how the many facets that make up mentoring may positively affect the self-esteem of young girls as they journey through foster care and move through the developmental stages leading up to the pre-teen and teen years and the continual effect it may have on a successful transition from foster care into young adulthood. If mentoring can be adapted to have the potential to increase a young person's chances in life, the question becomes "Can we afford not to try it?" remains paramount (Bennets, 2003).

## SUMMARY

Realistically, this is not a situation where there will be a resolution, but instead where an overall improvement may be accomplished. Because each girl is an individual, there will remain variable reasons to what can be done to ensure girls coming through the system has as many opportunities and resources available to address their self-confidence and self-esteem issues. This paper suggests mentoring early and consistently in the lives of girls in care may increase their chances of a high level of self-esteem as they journey through and exit the system. The hope is, if girls are provided consistent adult involvement during early childhood and throughout their stay in care, their chances of transitioning into adulthood with a strong sense of self will be increased. Mentoring will allow them to learn how to build trusting relationships and understand how to settle disagreements effectively and most of all understand their worth as an individual. Women tend to learn as much from men as they do women in job functions. However, women and girls do tend to have a stronger sense of accomplishment when another female extends a compliment or suggests approval.

Real world outcome of girls transitioning in to adulthood drove my research. In doing so, new organizational realities were uncovered. The many studies that are going on in search of the effects of mentoring, parental involvement, attachment relations, girl's development, etc. are the results of a fascination on what can be done to better prepare this population of girls as they transition into adulthood. Up to this point most studies have focused on adolescent and pre-adolescent girls, but maybe a closer view of mentoring younger girls may indicate an implementation of programs that target them may be necessary to see a trend of a high level of self-esteem in girls leaving foster care.

Given the fact that there are numerous speculations as to why the negative literature continues, those not directly involved or interested in this area may very well accept a theory or well written literature covering the subject without question. Some, however; after interfacing with girls from this background may encounter individuals who do not fit into the negative stereotyped category. Through this interaction hopefully curiosity will set in and new research will begin. The research should include the effect ones culture has on self-esteem. Does low self-esteem in one culture equate to low self-esteem in another? Would mentoring really be necessary if this is the case, or would another type of intervention be more productive in reversing the negative literature into a more thought provoking and interesting read?

There are several qualitative studies surrounding former foster girls and their mentoring experiences, their feedback and input on its effects, after they have left state care. Because no phenomenological studies were located, the initial hypothesis stands, phenomenological studies are needed to provide more sound and accurate data on how and when to mentor girls before they leave foster care by better preparing them to enter adulthood with the same skills and confidence level as girls not exposed to foster care.

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