

The Other Three Months



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For high school students and teachers alike, summer represents a highly anticipated reprieve from the rigors of classes, homework, testing, and assessment. Although the classroom doors might close in May or June, an array of potentially rich and varied learning opportunities for youth with and without disabilities continue throughout the summer months. Indeed, summer represents an opportune time to further students' transition-related goals within community contexts and provide youth with meaningful opportunities to gain the skills, experiences, and connections that can better prepare them for life after high school.

Summer work experiences are advantageous because, unlike work experiences offered during the school year, they do not compete with students' access to the general curriculum, study time, or extracurricular involvement (Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2007). Additionally, the availability of job opportunities in many communities increases dramatically during the summer, and youth typically have greater flexibility to work more hours and varied schedules. For youth with severe disabilities, engaging in meaningful work or other community activities throughout the summer could reduce some of the substantial vocational, social, and functional skill regression that can occur during a 3-month hiatus

Connecting Transition-Age Youth With Disabilities to Meaningful Summer Experiences

from school and can provide an accumulated total of 1 to 2 years of additional time to further develop their employment, self-determination, social, and recreational skills before they exit school services as late as age 22. For high school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, summer jobs can engage them in productive, positive experiences and provide an alternative to delinquent activities (Hughes et al., 2004). Indeed, the experiences youth accrue through summer work and community activities can make lasting contributions to adolescent development and enhance successful future transitions (see box, “The Important Contributions of Early Work Experiences to Youth Outcomes”).

A Missed Opportunity

Unfortunately, one of the most promising windows for addressing employment and other transition-related skill development occurs at the very time when needed connections, services, and supports often are most noticeably absent (Trainor, Carter, Owens, & Swedeen, 2008). Most teachers have 9-month contracts, leaving few (if any) staff available to provide direct support to youth, make needed connections, and troubleshoot potential problems. The absence of school-provided transportation during the summer can further limit the types of jobs that some

youth can consider. Even when extended school year (ESY) services are offered, typically they focus on academic remediation, related services, or other campus-based instruction, rather than addressing career development and related experiences. Lastly, few community agencies and programs intentionally focus on meeting the support needs of youth who have not yet exited school services.

For too many youth with disabilities, these barriers result in an important missed opportunity. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 indicated that only 31.6% of youth with intellectual disabilities, 18.6% of youth with multiple disabilities, and 10.9% of youth with autism were reported to have worked at any point during the summer (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003). Moreover, Carter, Ditchman, et al. (in press) found that only 16% of youth with severe intellectual disabilities held paid, nonsheltered jobs during the summer months. These findings contrast sharply with data suggesting that more than half of youth without disabilities typically report holding summer jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Although employment certainly is not the only valuable summer experience youth might pursue, the generally limited community involvement that youth with

The Important Contributions of Early Work Experiences to Youth Outcomes

For youth with disabilities, obtaining meaningful work experiences during high school is an important predictor of favorable postschool employment outcomes (e.g., Baer et al., 2003; Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985). In other words, youth who take part in school-sponsored work experiences, enroll in vocational classes, and hold after-school or summer jobs can be significantly more likely to obtain work after completing high school. Such early work experiences—if well designed and appropriately supported—can make many important contributions to positive adolescent development. The experiences of finding and maintaining a job, for example, can enhance students’ autonomy and self-determination; influence their vocational identity; shape their career aspirations; help them develop important workplace values, skills, and knowledge; and promote collateral skill development, such as interpersonal, money, and personal management skills (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003). More specifically, hands-on, direct work experiences during the summer months—whether paid or unpaid—can help youth build their resumes, make connections with local employers, raise expectations for future employment, and potentially carry over into the school year or extend beyond high school. Yet, substantial numbers of youth with disabilities leave high school without these early work experiences. In general, such opportunities appear to be particularly limited for youth with disabilities who are younger, female, or part of a racial or ethnic minority; live in poverty; or live in rural areas. It is not surprising that the pendulum now is shifting back toward calls for schools to better integrate rigorous academic experiences with relevant, authentic learning opportunities.

disabilities encounter during the school year appears to continue during the summer months (Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Wagner et al.).

Making Summer Part of the Conversation

Project Summer—a three-year development project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences—focused on identifying effective, practical strategies for connecting youth with significant disabilities to summer work and community experiences that might help them explore their interests and strengths, build important skills, and further long-term goals. Researchers worked with staff, community members, and youth at more than 30 high schools throughout a midwestern state to develop and pilot a set of promising strategies that schools, families, and communities can use to connect youth to meaningful summer experiences. Despite broad agreement about the valuable contributions summer work and community experiences can make to the quality and relevance of youth's overall transition education (Trainor et al., 2008), it was found that intentional planning for the summer occurred infrequently or was addressed very informally (Carter, Ditchman, et al., in press). For example, less than one quarter of teachers reported having discussions with their students with disabilities about the upcoming summer. Instead, most transition efforts focused on planning for life *after* high school or programming provided *during* the school year. Moreover, little guidance and few tools are available to special educators and other planning team members interested in addressing the summer months.

Practical Steps for Connecting Youth to Meaningful Summer Experiences

Unless intentional planning for summer activities happens, the necessary connections and opportunities that youth with disabilities depend upon are unlikely to materialize. The project team developed and piloted a straightforward summer planning process that educators, parents, youth, and other

stakeholders could incorporate into broader transition education and planning. The Summer Activities Planning Tool—which contains a structured set of questions and considerations—is displayed in Figure 1. The remainder of this article discusses the value of inten-

tional planning, some important issues to consider when identifying potential summer opportunities, and practical steps that teams can take to ensure that youth are engaged in meaningful ways. It illustrates these various elements with lessons learned from the numerous teachers, youth, and other school and community members from seven of the high schools participating in the project.

The Importance of Intentional Planning

Most forms of person-centered planning focus on developing a long-term vision for a student (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005). Translating this vision into a set of concrete goals with specific steps, however, can be more challenging. Likewise, school teams sometimes struggle to connect the long-term goals students have for life after high school—entering a specific profession, participating in the community, living independently, attending college—into a meaningful high school program with specific foundational activities and courses built into the individualized education program (IEP). Focusing planning efforts on the summer months has the advantage of directly connecting the long-range big picture to a concrete time frame with clear start and end dates. (See box, “Perspectives of Special Educators on Intentional Planning for Summer.”)

Necessary Voices: Who Might Be Part of the Conversation?

For intentional planning to lead to actual summer experiences, key people can be invited to contribute to the conversation (see section 1 of the Summer Activities Planning Tool). For some

youth, these conversations can be embedded within a formal IEP or transition planning meeting. For others, conversations can take place more informally over time through a series of discussions with the youth and their parents (Hughes et al., 2004).

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Youth

As with other aspects of transition planning, involve youth in making decisions about their own lives, including the summer months (Test et al., 2004). Students are in the best position to provide information about their personal interests and goals. Even teachers and parents who know a student very well often hold different expectations—as well as different perspectives on their strengths and needs—than those of the youth (Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, in press; Martin, Woods, Sylvester, & Gardner, 2005). When youth play integral—and even leading—roles in the planning process, it can provide additional opportunities for them to gain and practice important self-determination skills (e.g., goal setting, decision making, self-evaluation). Lastly, involving youth in brainstorming and planning can expand job possibilities and even bring forth some that might not have been considered. Although a student is not always able to reliably communicate choices and preferences, having him or her at the meeting provides increased opportunities to gather feedback—perhaps by stopping frequently to ask yes or no questions. Some teams might use picture symbols, magazine pictures, or digital photos to support youth who have limited communication skills in making choices and identifying preferences.

Family Members

Family members—including parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family—also can make important contributions to the planning process (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Every teacher

Perspectives of Special Educators on Intentional Planning for Summer

High school special education teachers and case managers who worked with students on summer planning spoke to the following benefits of the planning process.

- *It provides an early start.* When summer planning begins several months in advance, school staff, parents, and youth have more lead time to identify specific opportunities in the community. By beginning planning in early spring, one school was able to assemble one-paragraph “bios” (describing the student’s interests, skills, anticipated availability) of students seeking summer jobs. These bios were shared with the local chamber of commerce and its members, resulting in jobs for three students.
- *It brings together multiple perspectives.* Discussing what motivates the student most, as well as logistical issues—such as the family’s summer schedules—is important to successful planning. One mother shared that her son was not an early riser, so the teacher narrowed the search to jobs offering afternoon and evening hours. In another community, a planning meeting revealed that the student would be gone on family trips and camps most of the summer, so this teacher focused instead on lining up a job for the following fall.
- *It engages youth in the process.* Planning focused on activities and experiences that motivated and interested students, increasing their buy-in and likelihood for success. Students who had lost jobs in the past because of behavioral challenges experienced success when the team focused planning on opportunities that were of greater interest and relevance.
- *It focuses on tangible outcomes.* Students and families understood the value in planning related to an upcoming block of time (i.e., June 15 to August 30), as opposed to long-term planning that seemed more abstract and distant.
- *It is future focused.* During planning, teachers could demonstrate that using short-term, intermediate steps with supports can contribute—and are sometimes necessary—to reaching long-term goals. Many youth found and families realized that even small experiences (e.g., volunteer jobs, jobs that offer only a few hours per week, entry-level positions not directly connected to career paths) could help students gain experiences and make connections that could lead to meaningful and sustained work in the future. For example, one father was frustrated when he learned his son’s job at a bank offered only 4 hours per week. When he saw how quickly his son’s confidence, independence, and skills rose, however, his perspective changed. Simultaneously, as the student experienced increased success on the job, the employer—who had not hired students with disabilities in the past—was willing to consider increased hours and continuation of the job in the fall.

participating in the project identified family involvement as among the most influential factors determining whether youth obtained and kept summer jobs. Families provide many types of support. They can underscore the value and importance of work. They can make sure the youth gets up in time for work, provide transportation, and arrange family schedules to make work a priority. Families also can provide important information to schools about summer schedules, tips to improve the

likelihood of a student’s success on the job, and important personal connections to potential employment opportunities. One mother mentioned during the planning process that her neighbor—a dentist—had offered to hire her daughter. As the parents arranged the work experience, the teacher coordinated instruction to address important requisite skills identified by the dentist (e.g., greeting clients). At another student’s planning meeting, a parent shared that wages were less important

than finding an experience that would bolster her child’s interest in mechanics. Rather than focusing on part-time jobs and hourly wages, the teacher looked for internships and other unpaid experiences that more closely aligned with the youth’s aspirations in this area.

Teachers

Involving a special educator, case manager, or other teacher who knows the student well is important for several reasons. Teachers can support students by asking questions in advance and by collecting information about students’ interests and motivations well before a formal IEP or other planning meeting. For some youth in this project, a formal meeting never occurred. Instead, the teacher took notes during periodic conversations with the student over several weeks and was able to provide insight that allowed another transition teacher and the student to begin working together. Teachers also can set up experiences in advance that can provide valuable information and direction for summer planning. For example, several teachers connected youth with “job shadows” (typically, a program for high school students to learn what it is like to be in a specific profession) or arranged visits to potential places of employment before the planning meeting to give students concrete experiences and ideas from which to draw when discussing their interests.

Community Members

Although most teams in this project did not invite additional participants to planning meetings, other community members—such as representatives from recreation programs, congregations, adult service organizations, and other groups—can be valuable contributors. Such participants can help teams think beyond the usual sets of opportunities and programs in which students with disabilities most often participate. When a student shared her strong interest in child care, for example, a neighbor attending the planning session offered to hire the student to work for her in-home day care for the summer. The neighbor simply had not

Figure 1. Summer Activities Planning Tool

Summer Activities Planning Tool

Student: _____ School: _____
 Date: _____ Location: _____ Led by: _____

1. Who was part of this meeting/conversation?

	Student	
		(student must be present)
		(role/relation to student)
		(role/relation to student)
		(role/relation to student)

2. What are some of the student’s long-term, “big picture” goals for life after high school?
Example Guiding Questions: What are you really good at? What do you like to do? What kind of job would you like after high school?

3. What are the student’s short-term goals for the spring semester and upcoming summer in the area of work and other community activities?
 Here are some questions you might ask to help the student identify his or her goals:

- What types of jobs have you had in the past? Are you working right now? Did you work last summer?
- What types of summer experiences could help you meet your goals for after high school?
- What would be your top three places to work this summer? What other types of jobs sound interesting to you? What do you like to do in your spare time?
- What types of jobs or activities do you definitely *not* want to do?
- What is most important to you in a summer job (e.g., pay, type/appeal of job, location)?
- What is available in our community that might be a good fit with your interests?
- What type of help will you need in the next few months to connect you with a summer job? (e.g., applications, phone calls, finding openings, practice interviews).
- Are there other people—personal friends, relatives, neighbors, friends of your family—who might help connect you with a job opportunity?

4. List these short-term goals and needed supports.

Short-term/ Summer goals	What are some possible places in our community that might provide opportunities?	Who do we already know—or need to seek out—who might be able to help?	What supports or resources are needed to make this happen?	Who will take responsibility for following up on this?
1.				
2.				
3.				

Consider some of the following questions when thinking about the supports and resources the student might need:

- Will the student need direct help or support on the job? If so, who could provide that support?
- Will the student need someone to check in with him periodically during the summer?
- Are there transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, family concerns, or other logistical considerations to be addressed?
- Are there skills the student should learn to better prepare him before a job starts?
- What roles will the student, family, teachers, and/or business representatives play in connecting to this job?

known about the student's interest. Some teachers invited potential employers, with permission from the youth and the family, when the student's interests potentially matched the employer's labor needs. When employers attended planning meetings, teachers indicated that meeting the youth helped allay employers' reservations about hiring a youth with disabilities. Also, employers' input on what they most needed in new employees helped create targeted sup-

[E]mployers' input on what they most needed in new employees helped create targeted supports that potentially increased a youth's success on the job.

ports that potentially increased a youth's success on the job.

Planning Process: Linking Summer to the Big Picture

After it is determined who might contribute to the planning process, attention can turn to identifying students' longer-term, "big-picture" goals for their lives (see section 2 of the Planning Tool). A comprehensive approach to transition education focuses on providing youth with the skills, services, supports, experiences, and connections they need to realize their goals for life after high school. Summer experiences can further these long-term goals. Sometimes, these contributions are fairly obvious, such as when youth gain early work or other resume-building experiences in an area of future career interests. Other times they are more indirect, such as when youth participate in work or community experiences that equip them with broader skills, attitudes, and routines that can promote later success in college or on the job (e.g., interpersonal skills, responsibility, teamwork, time management, problem solving, leadership, self-determination). Of course, some youth simply want to "do something fun" (e.g., spending time with friends, vacationing, playing video games) regardless of whether these activities advance their future goals. The typical teen interest in "just hanging out" during

the summer is one reason that focusing on students' leisure pursuits and interests outside of school can be especially useful in identifying work experiences that youth will enjoy.

The next step involves identifying the student's summer goals (see section 3 of the planning tool). For youth and their families, this is often easier than long-range planning because summer is a set period of time and in the immediate future. The Summer Activities Planning Tool includes a

series of prompting questions designed to connect long-term planning to short-term goals. Although these questions are written in anticipation that the student would be the first and primary respondent, other team members can contribute their insights and ideas.

- What types of jobs have you had in the past? Are you working right now? Did you work last summer?
- What types of summer experiences could help you meet your goals for after high school?
- What would be your top three places to work this summer? What other types of jobs sound interesting to you? What do you like to do in your spare time?
- What types of jobs or activities do you definitely *not* want to do?
- What is most important to you in a summer job (e.g., pay, type/appeal of job, location)?
- What is available in our community that might be a good fit with your interests?
- What type of help will you need in the next few months to connect you with a summer job (e.g., applications, phone calls, finding openings, practice interviews)?
- Are there other people—personal friends, relatives, neighbors, friends

of your family—who might help connect you with a job opportunity?

These probing questions are designed to address important, broader issues such as youth's motivation to seek employment or participate in community activities that fit their interests. The questions also help identify people already connected to members of the planning team who might offer a job, make a connection, or provide needed support. Lastly, asking youth and other planning team members these questions helps identify resources likely to increase students' success.

Thinking Outside of the Usual Box

Too often, youth are plugged into existing jobs or programs that schools and adult systems routinely have used because of the prevailing assumption that nothing else exists in a community or because students with significant disabilities always have been slotted into a particular place or program. Focusing first on students' interests and only then moving on to possible places in the community challenges teams to consider a wider range of options and possibilities, as well as to tap into their existing networks and affiliations (see section 4 of the planning tool). Teachers might ask questions listed in this section to link student interests to summer possibilities.

- What are some possible places in our community that might provide opportunities?
- Who do we already know—or need to seek out—who might be able to help?

One teacher, for example, helped find a clerical job in a bank for a student who identified attending technical college and gaining more independence as long-term goals. Following a discussion with the parents and the youth, the teacher tapped into her personal networks and asked her nephew, who worked at the bank, to act as a "point person" to answer any questions the student might have. Another teacher drew upon her personal relationship with the local parks director to set up

an interview and support a student to work at a local canoe and boat rental operation. One team used the student's own connection, encouraging the youth to contact a local summer day camp he participated in during elementary and middle school to apply as a "counselor-in-training" intern. Strategically tapping into students', families', and other team members' existing relationships and connections can be especially effective in smaller communities where people are more likely to know each other.

Identifying Needed Supports and Resources

After opportunities and potential contact people have been identified, teams can identify any additional supports or resources that youth can use to find and maintain summer jobs or other community activities (see section 4 of the Planning Tool). For example, youth might need transportation, job coaching, or occasional check-ins. School teams used the series of questions listed in this section to identify additional considerations needed to successfully support students at work.

- Will the student need direct help or support on the job? If so, who could provide that support?
- Will the student need someone to check in with him periodically during the summer?
- Are there transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, family concerns, or other logistical considerations to be addressed?
- Are there skills the student should learn to better prepare him before a job starts?
- What roles will the student, family, teachers, and/or business representatives play in connecting to this job?

If such questions are not raised before the end of the school year, summer possibilities are likely to evaporate quickly. To address transportation issues, for example, one teacher worked with a student for several weeks before the start of summer to practice safely walking the five blocks

from the store his mother owned to his new job at a local organic market. At another high school, a teacher worked with the district to include summer transportation in the IEPs of students who had found summer jobs. Schools should not be the only source of supports for youth. Several schools approached the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) early in the spring semester about providing needed transportation to and from job sites. The planning process so clearly linked the job to students' long-term goals, that the team was better positioned to successfully request DVR funding. Other teachers drew upon the natural supports and connections of families, who took the lead in providing or arranging transportation and occasional check-ins, either at the job site or with the employer.

Transforming Plans Into Next Steps

Too often, special educators or case managers are solely responsible for every aspect of a student's education and transition. The final step of this intentional planning process involves designating responsibilities for each team member, including—and especially—the youth (see section 4 of the Planning Tool). Youth can be responsible for finding job openings, setting up interviews, preparing resumes, inquiring about potential jobs, or any number of other tasks. Providing opportunities for the student to choose responsibilities and take action is another venue for practicing self-determination skills (Benitez, Lattimore, & Wehmeyer, 2005). Likewise, family members also can provide moral and logistical support, such as arranging summer transportation, talking through challenges at work, ensuring that the student has any needed equipment or clothing for the job, offering encouragement, or contacting potential job connections. In some of the planning teams, school responsibility crossed departments and staff. In one district, the special education director set up school credit for summer work experiences for youth with disabilities. That policy was an incentive to employers who had never

hired a youth with a disability. These employers were not expected to initially provide a wage to students because the students earned school credit. At another school, students' summer plans were shared with their classroom teachers, who then incorporated employment activities and experiences (e.g., resume writing, mock interviews) into coursework before students applied for jobs. In some cases, summer planning efforts even led to better use of community resources that previously had gone untapped. One small city had an existing low-cost taxi service for people with disabilities, but it was rarely used by youth from the high schools. During the planning process, a teacher shared this resource with families and encouraged them to set up taxi rides before summer jobs actually began so that the students and families could familiarize themselves with the process.

Lessons Learned

Through the project's work piloting intentional, person-centered summer planning across seven communities of differing sizes, school policies, and local employment opportunities, several lessons emerged that could be useful when developing any personalized planning initiative. We found that these lessons applied to all areas of planning, whether focusing on increasing summer engagement or some other area of importance in the lives of youth (e.g., after-school jobs, community volunteering, preparation for college).

Timing Is Critical

Planning is most beneficial when it begins a few months in advance of employment, to allow enough time to collect important information from all players involved (e.g., youth, family, school, community); investigate possible employment and other community opportunities; set up preparatory experiences for youth; and connect youth to actual experiences. Connecting youth to employment early in the spring allows time to familiarize students with their jobs, establish co-worker supports, address unexpected problems, and enable students to become more

independent. Youth with disabilities who work during the spring semester are significantly more likely than their peers who do not have such work experiences to work during the summer months—highlighting the importance of making connections to community jobs early, before the school year ends (Carter, Ditchman, et al., in press).

Planning Need Not Only Happen at a Meeting

Although all of the participants in this project used the Summer Activities Planning Tool, teams used a variety of different strategies for gathering input from everyone involved. Large team meetings are challenging to schedule, therefore most teachers first talked with students informally. Often they did not schedule a formal meeting, but had a series of informal conversations over time in which they asked probing questions about long- and short-term goals. Next, they often talked with parents to get additional information as well as to discuss plans and ideas. Lastly, they might connect with a potential employer or other people suggested by the student or family. Other teams connected as a group for a more formal meeting, or had a smaller meeting and then assigned different team members to gather additional information or connections as a next step.

Relationships Matter—and Can Make All the Difference

Teachers who partnered with school administrators, DVR, employers, chamber of commerce staff, transportation services, and other community groups reported the most success and satisfaction with intentional summer planning. Teachers who effectively “did it all by themselves” and experienced little or no teaming with community partners were less satisfied with the planning process and the resulting summer experiences of their students.

School Policies Have an Impact

Teachers who had administrative and school-policy support made more connections and were more satisfied with the outcomes of the planning process.

Some examples of school policy changes or supports included providing community-based ESY support through the IEP, school credit for summer work, summer transportation to working students, and 12-month contracts that enable transition teachers to provide formal support to students participating in summer employment and

[Y]outh’s opportunities to be actively engaged in employment and community should not be limited because no one did the important work of encouraging and supporting early planning efforts.

other activities. These types of up-front commitments from districts can result in increased employment and success on the job, and lead to a fading of supports by the end of the summer and into the school year.

Foster High Expectations for Students

The work-related and other summer expectations that teachers and others hold for students with disabilities influence the opportunities, instruction, and services youth receive during the school year, as well as determine the extent to which needed connections and supports can be put in place to aid summer experiences. Yet, some teachers might hold deficit-oriented perspectives regarding the employability of youth with disabilities (Trainor et al., 2008). Teachers’ expectations for youth appear to be a positive predictor of summer-employment outcomes for youth with significant disabilities (Carter, Ditchman, et al., in press).

Final Thoughts

Summer provides valuable but often untapped opportunities for youth to explore or deepen their interests, preferences, and strengths; accrue valuable work-related skills and experiences; and establish connections to their communities. At the same time, it is clear that summer opportunities do not happen automatically for many youth with disabilities. One avenue through which schools, families, employers, agencies, and youth themselves might collective-

ly expand the summer employment and community engagement opportunities for youth is by engaging in intentional, youth-centered, team approaches to planning. Some youth certainly will choose to spend much of the summer hanging out with friends or spending time at home. Nevertheless, youth’s opportunities to be actively engaged in

employment and community should not be limited because no one did the important work of encouraging and supporting early planning efforts to help youth realize their preferred goals. Well in advance of the last day of the school year, consider asking students, “What are you doing this summer?”

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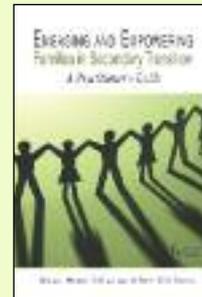
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