



FUNDAÇÃO
Maria Cecília
Souto Vidigal



**ADVANCES
IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD
IN BRAZIL
OVER THE PAST
FIVE YEARS**

ADVANCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD IN BRAZIL

In the last five years, the cause has gained momentum and fostered the creation of public policies

There is no shortage of facts, scientific data, and figures to prove that from birth to 6 years of age, human beings are at the peak of their ability to learn and develop. That's when the brain is shaped based on its experiences and the environment in which it is inserted. That means that if we improve children's living conditions, guaranteeing quality health, affection, nutrition, safety, and education, we significantly increase their chances for a better future.

These discoveries began to be made in the 1970s when scholars began to look more closely at newborns, and they have been intensifying in recent years. Society's understanding of the importance of early childhood for human development has increased because of these discoveries. It became clear that the care received in childhood is crucial for the child's future and, consequently, the country's future.

Given that context, the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, which started its activities 55 years ago, initially focusing on fostering research in hematology, decided to concentrate its activities on early childhood. That shift happened in 2007. "When we came across information and scientific studies that proved the importance of early childhood, we had to join the cause. Early childhood crashed into us like a truck," says Dario Guarita Neto, who has been serving as Chairman of the Foundation's Board of Trustees since 2015.



Raquel Espirito Santo



In recent years, the whole world has advanced a lot in the study of the topic, including Brazil, where today there are about 20 million children up to 6 years old, according to data from the 2018 Census, carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). One of the major gains that we recorded was creating the Early Childhood Legal Framework, which in 2021 completes five years. It came to be after a wide-ranging discussion among several member organizations of the National **Early Childhood Network** (Rede Nacional da Primeira Infância, RNPI). The Bill was led by representatives who had taken the executive leadership course offered by the Núcleo Ciência Pela Infância, a coalition of which the Foundation is a part of, in partnership with Harvard University.

As soon as it came into force in 2016, the Early Childhood Legal Framework changed the landscape, affecting changes on the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) and the Code of Criminal Procedure. "The Legal Framework moved the engines of the nation and society's and changed the national agenda when it comes to the Statute of Children and Adolescents and public policies," says Pedro Hartung, lawyer and coordinator of Instituto Alana's Prioridade Absoluta Program.

The impact of the Executive Leadership Course

Number of participants	
2016	44
2017	66
2018	68
2019	64

Participants' field of work

Academia	6%
Executive (government)	48%
Judiciary	2%
Legislative	10%
Private Sector	7%
Civil Society	25%
Press	2%

For Vital Didonet, professor and legislative advisor at the National Early Childhood Network (RNPI), who actively participated in creating the Early Childhood Legal Framework, the document was important to recognize children as people in their full human dignity, having the right to be treated as citizens. "The Legal Framework brought more than just commitment. It made the government's obligation to early childhood explicit, giving guidelines on how to fulfill it", he said.

In the wake of the Early Childhood Legal Framework, several topics that orbited early childhood gained more attention. Education was one of the main ones. Children need stimulation to develop, and it has been concluded that schools have a fundamental role in their development and upbringing. In recent years, significant steps have been taken to ensure education for all children. One of them is the National Education Plan, enacted in 2014 with 20 education improvement goals to be achieved by 2024. One of the goals stipulates that the government must guarantee a daycare center for at least 50% of chil-

Some of the achievements of the Early Childhood Legal Framework

- The right to every mother in custody to exchange her provisional detention for house arrest to take care of her child at home.
- 20-day paternity leave and six-month maternity leave for employees of "citizen companies" (a Brazilian IRS program that grants tax benefits to companies that offer employees an extension on maternity leave and paternity leave).
- Reorganization of the public space to meet the needs of children to play safely.



Requel Espírito Santo

dren aged 0 to 3 years and a place in the classroom for 100% of students aged 4 to 6 years. This percentage has not yet been reached, but what has been seen in the last five years has been an evolution in terms of access.

According to the most recent school census, the percentage of children in daycare centers rose from 32% in 2016 to 37% in 2019. In preschool, the increase goes from 91% to 94% in the same period. “We haven’t reached the goal yet, but the advances have been significant. What we see over time is that the percentages kept increasing,” said Beatriz Abuchaim, manager of Applied Knowledge at the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation.

However, inequalities in access are still significant and need to be tackled. Putting current figures through an X-ray, it’s clear that the most impoverished children have less access. According to figures from the 2016-2017 National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), among the richer, 55% of children attend daycare and preschool. However, among the poorest, that percentage reaches only 26%.

In addition to access, we are also advancing in quality. The creation of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) in 2017 contributed to that. When the BNCC was presented, several national documents provided pedagogical indications, quality parameters, and guidelines for schools, but it also managed to detail what the student’s development and learning objectives should be each school year. In addition, it brought a curriculum model that is very innovative and is in line with other international curricula of the highest quality. Instead of looking at the subjects, it works through fields of experience, starting from the idea that small children learn by experiencing situations that make sense to them.

The Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation had active participation in the implementation of the BNCC in three Brazilian municipalities:

São Paulo (SP), Sobral (CE), and Boa Vista (RR). In all of them, there was a concern to customize the actions for the local reality. "Instead of bringing ready-made solutions, we chose to create together with local actors, as we believe that this is what will foster the continuity of actions, so they become a State policy," said Beatriz Abuchaim.

Thus, the new curriculum for Early Childhood Education was implemented in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima. The process took about two years and included various actors from the field of education in the city, from caregivers of daycare centers to teachers, pedagogical coordinators, managers, and even children. With the Center for Excellence and Innovation in Educational Policies (CEIPE), of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation helped develop the curriculum, train the city's trainers, and implement the new methodology in schools and daycares. Everything was done with the active participation of professionals to ensure total adaptation to the local culture. "The implementation of the new curriculum in Boa Vista was a project in which the Foundation managed to act with an integrated policy, coordinating government's participation with all the other parties involved," said Eduardo Marino, director of Applied Knowledge at the Marcia Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation.

Given that child development does not happen only at school but also at home, the program in Boa Vista directed part of its attention towards parenting, working to strengthen the Família que Acolhe municipal program, in which 8,000 children were assisted in their homes.

The Família que Acolhe Program is an initiative that brings families closer to ensuring access to health, education, and social development in an integrated manner. It is a localized version of the Criança Feliz Program, which is national and focused on families receiving Bolsa Família. It is aimed at pregnant women and children from 0 to 6 years old. The objective is to strengthen the bond between parents and caregivers for the better development of children. At each visit,

families are instructed about child care to strengthen family bonds and the importance of stimulating child development. The impacts of the actions are being evaluated in a partnership between the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, the Itaú Social Foundation, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEl), and the Brazilian Ministry of Citizenship. "The partnership with Boa Vista strengthened what was already desired by the Foundation, which was to structure an evidence-based public policy and be able to bring science to help the municipality," said Marina Fragata Chicaro, manager of Applied Knowledge at the Maria Foundation Cecilia Souto Vidigal.

Other initiatives were also carried out in states and municipalities, such as the São Paulo pela Primeiríssima Infância program (SPPI), which has been developed since 2016 and has mobilized 41 cities in the State to promote the integral development of children, from birth to 3 years; offered capacity-building of services focuses on pregnant women and children in this age group; mobilized society; and promoted planning focused on the importance of the first years of life. The numbers show positive results.

Concerning health, the visibility of early childhood brought child development to the agenda of primary care actions in the municipalities. The National Policy for Comprehensive Child Health Care (Política Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde da Criança/PNAISC) was approved, and it is an international benchmark. The Caderneta da Criança (children's health booklet) was revised. The Ministry of Health sought to incorporate integral development and monitor child development milestones in different stages of care.

Part of the merit of the achievements has to do with disseminating information about the importance of this stage of life. Since it embraced the cause, the Foundation understood that it was necessary to promote knowledge to guarantee the mobilization of society. The

first major campaign on the subject was the documentary *The Beginning of Life*, developed in partnership with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Alana Institute, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Directed by Estela Renner and produced by Maria Farinha Filmes, the documentary was a great success and became a reference for the topic. It managed to shed light on the importance of early childhood in Brazil and around the world. It was dubbed in seven languages and subtitled in 23, had more than 2,500 prints in regional, national, and international media outlets, and was adopted as a tool of UNICEF's global early childhood campaign in partnership with the World Bank. The film also yielded the creation of support materials, specially created for classes C and D. In total, 72 content pills on specific topics were created. It was a major milestone that stimulated new actions to publicize the topic further.

To mobilize private leaders, in 2017, the Foundation supported the travel of two great international personalities to Brazil: **the Nobel Prize in Economics (2000) James Heckman**, who shared the challenges of early childhood in Brazil and the need to invest in this stage of life to change the country; and the former president of the United States, **Barack Obama**, who attended the Global Citizen event, bringing together more than a thousand participants, including authorities, public figures, journalists, business managers, and the press. At that time, President Obama also spoke about the importance of investments in the first years of life. Both events were widely covered by the press and helped to give more visibility to the cause.

In 2018, the Foundation entered into a partnership with Editora Globo, which, through its *Época Negócios* magazine, annually publishes the "The 150 Best Companies to Work For" list, which is prepared by Great Place to Work Brazil (GPTW). The initiative's objective was to reward companies in a special category that highlighted good practices in early childhood care. In 2019, six companies were award-



Raoni Maddalena

ed. In 2020, the ranking of the *Best Companies in Early Childhood Care* was composed of five large companies.

The effort to generate knowledge also included the creation of courses for training journalists. In 2017, in partnership with Columbia University and Porticus Latin America, the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation financed the participation of Brazilian journalists in three annual early childhood *workshops* hosted by the university. For a week, four Brazilian journalists from large media vehicles studied the topic with renowned experts. The goal was to raise awareness and enable the press to increase the coverage and quality of articles on early childhood development. “It was an important action to broaden the view on the topic. News coverage of early childhood is no longer focused solely on health, vaccination, child development, and breastfeeding. We were featured on the pages of economics and politics and the cover of business magazines,” said Ana Carolina Vidal Guedes, communication manager at Fundação Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal.

To diversify coverage and expand its reach, the Foundation and Porticus Latin America also supported the Journalism and Territory course – training on early childhood issues for local journalists and communicators – promoted by ÉNois, a laboratory that works to boost diversity and representativeness in journalism. The course totaled 30 hours of training, divided into ten meetings, with 114 mapped media outlets (from 14 states) and 80 trained community journalists (out of 340 who registered for it). Journalists from impoverished communities from São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and all states in the North and Northeast regions participated in the training. In the end, 24 reports were produced in different formats (*blog posts, videos, podcasts, printed zine, and audio for WhatsApp*) on topics such as lack of space for leisure and sport, education for children with disabilities during the pandemic, the mental health of mothers, immigrant children, envi-

ronmental racism and the impact on early childhood, informal employment of young people in the pandemic, and right to play. “All of these actions are fundamental. If we don’t look at this cause and invest now, we will pay the price of inaction; and how much will that cost down the road?” said Miriam Pragita, executive director of Andi Comunicação e Direitos and executive secretary of RNPI.

In addition to the press, early childhood also gained more attention from politicians. That was achieved thanks to the work of many entities that, during the 2018 presidential election and the last municipal elections, sought to mobilize candidates on the agenda of early childhood; insert the topic in government plans, and provide tools for public leaders to include quality proposals for early childhood in their work plans.

To achieve the objective of raising the candidates’ awareness on the topic, in 2018, the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation supported the action of the National Early Childhood Network (RNPI) to launch a campaign to convene the candidates running for president and candidates to state governments to sign a commitment to the early childhood. In all, six presidential candidates and 61 state government candidates signed the document - and of the 27 governors-elect, 11 signed the letter of commitment.

The event “Primeira Infância na Agenda Eleitoral: desafios e perspectivas de soluções” (“Early Childhood on the Electoral Agenda: challenges and prospects for solutions”) was held for the 2020 municipal elections and in partnership with the Center for Public Leadership (CLP) and support from the Mixed Parliamentary Front for Early Childhood and the National Early Childhood Network (RNPI), with the participation of several party political foundations. A letter was prepared with nine recommendations regarding the main municipal policies aligned with early childhood to inform the pre-candidates.



Lalo de Almeida

And our actions did not stop there. The Foundation also launched a platform called **Primeira Infância Primeiro** and provided indicators that assess early childhood situation in each municipality in the country. Those indicators are divided into five elements – health, nutrition, safety and protection, parenting, and early childhood education – according to a methodology known as **Nurturing Care**, established by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank, in addition to demographic data.

Besides the elections, the cause of early childhood has also gained more representation at all levels. Maranhão was the first Brazilian State to have a State plan for early childhood. And others are beginning to discuss the topic, such as Espírito Santo, São Paulo, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. In addition, many municipalities are beginning to develop long-term plans, covering much of the child's rights. "I consider this to be a great expression of the advancement of early childhood in Brazil," said Didonet.

"All these advances for early childhood, in the last five years, were only possible because we have partners who also believe in the transformative power of coalitions. It's only together and joining efforts that we can contribute to early childhood care gaining more and more space in all sectors. And to go even further, we have the challenge of strengthening this network and attracting new partners and leaders so that early childhood is prioritized and it is possible to have a systemic change in our country," said Mariana Luz, CEO of the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation. If it's up to the Foundation's wish and work, we are definitely going down that path!

The challenges of the pandemic

It is too early to talk about the consequences that COVID-19 will have on children around the world. After a year of pandemic, even with all the efforts of teachers to be in contact with children and family during the closing of schools, losses will be inevitable.

The only certainty is that we will see an increase in educational inequalities because children from the most vulnerable households had fewer conditions and less opportunity to develop during the pandemic. Concerned with what is to come, the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation has carried out many studies and research since the beginning of the pandemic. The goal is to understand the consequences and look for solutions now so that the damage to the education and development of children is kept to a minimum.

At the same time, the Foundation also adapted several of its works to try to reduce the consequences of social distancing, including materials [with tips for playing with children](#), a [guide for returning to preschool activities in early childhood education](#), and a study on [the cost of reopening for municipalities, with a smart spreadsheet to calculate spending on alcohol gel and other protective items for a safe return](#). The absence from school brought challenges to children and their families in different aspects and at all socioeconomic levels. On the other hand, it also brought the valuation of early childhood education, either by consolidating its role as a right of families or concerning society's awareness of its relevant contribution to the development of children.

In the field of parenting, it was essential, more so now

than ever before, to encourage positive practices and the strengthening of the bond in such an adverse context for families, with all the insecurities brought by the crisis amid the pandemic and with the children at home, demanding greater attention from their caregivers. Home visits, for example, were adapted to the remote model, ensuring that the initiative's participants continued to be assisted during the pandemic, with guidance and encouragement for interaction between adults and children.

This role was also played by Nenê do Zap, a character who sends information and conversation tips in a didactic, playful, and fun way, assisting parents and caregivers in stimulating and interacting with children up to 6 years old. Created and developed in 2019 and launched in March 2020, Nenê's bot on

WhatsApp ended the year with 23,000 registrations and 9,000 active users. The character was created to share general content about early childhood. Still, because of the pandemic, the strategy of conversation with the public was redesigned to include information about the coronavirus to support parents and caregivers of young children.

The books ["Vamos conversar sobre coronavírus?"](#) and ["E agora?" \("Shall we talk about coronavirus?"\)](#) and ["Now what?"](#) were also [launched to meet the same objective](#). Both contained questions and answers about the coronavirus and were created in partnership with UNESCO Brazil. Almost one million copies were distributed in nine municipalities and with the help of partnerships with Ultragaz, United Way, and Iprede.

"THE FOUNDATION IS PERPETUATING ITSELF."



Heading the Board of Trustees of the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation for six years now and about to pass the baton to his successor, **Dario Ferreira Guarita Neto** is proud of the remarkable evolution that early childhood achieved in Brazil in the last decade, especially in the last five years. But he points out that there is still much to be done to guarantee the full development of the 20 million children aged 0 to 6 years in Brazil.

In this interview, in addition to taking stock of his management, he says that his greatest concern is the search for an indicator capable of evaluating the advances of child development in the country, "similar to IDEB [Basic Education Development Index], but for early childhood," he explained.

What gave you the most satisfaction in all these years heading the Foundation?

So many things! The first, by far, is the understanding that we are moving forward, creating on top of what had already been solidly developed in the last 50 years, but in a more proprietary way of what our generation represents in the last 15 years. We evolved on top of that legacy.

The second is that we have consolidated a management and governance system that is characteristic of the Foundation, which offers the necessary conditions for the institution to move forward. On top of what had already been accomplished, we

created a model that is increasingly independent of an individual or a family. The Foundation is perpetuating itself.

The third is that we have managed to align the focus on the four pillars of action: early childhood education, parenting, assessment, and communication. With that defined and within such a robust management and governance structure, we will increasingly achieve real results and impacts in the evolution of our cause.

Another essential point was that over time, we have improved the use of our budget. Last year was the first year that we managed to invest the entire budget. Spending money is easy; investing correctly is very difficult. Therefore, there were many times when we were unable to invest everything we had planned. Some actions do not depend only on the Foundation; they depend on public actions or initiatives on which we do not have as much governance. Over the years, we have appropriated techniques to invest the entire budget. And we reached the efficiency rate of 15%, which means that we spent 15% of our annual financial resources on expenses related to the new structure, and the rest went to our "end" actions, to our cause. The lower this percentage, the better. It means that a larger share of the budget goes to our cause.

Investment in the cause

More than BRL 90 million were invested by the Foundation directly in initiatives for the cause of early childhood (in millions of Brazilian Reals)



TOTAL
94.6 millions

Taking stock of your management, what do you highlight as most important for this success?

Focused recognition is a crucial ingredient for success. Choosing what you are not going to do is just as important, or more, than choosing what you are going to do. And this is a perpetual search of ours. I believe that in recent years we have managed to take very relevant steps in refining this focus.

What paths did the Foundation decide not to take?

Before early childhood, we chose broader paths of action such as the environment and education until we came across the topic of early childhood and embraced it for believing in its supreme importance.

Daniela Toviansky



WE'RE NOT ALONE
149 partners,

including organizations, universities, city halls, and state and federal governments, were at our side during that time, implementing initiatives to care for children up to 6 years old and their families

We started operating 17 projects in different city halls. Years later, we concluded that this was not the best way to use our human and financial resources. We should get out of the operation as much as possible and look for partners to operate.

The "no" decision was based on the "yes." We decided on the four pillars with which we would most quickly have an impact with our resources.

Comparing scenarios, what change in the five years would you highlight?

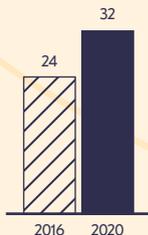
The Foundation started with the primary objective of communicating. When we empowered and understood the

importance of early childhood, the only thing that motivated us was that everyone knew that early childhood is of utmost importance. It is gratifying to realize that this topic has entered the Brazilian agenda and to see our participation in it. We are still at the tip of the iceberg, but we see the last five years as a significant communication cycle, given the results we have today in public and private sectors with early childhood. Without communicating the importance of development at this stage of life, we would not have this agenda so absorbed by civil society. That is a great legacy. Now, communication starts to come together with other needs, such as evaluation and instrumentalize caregivers – mothers, fathers, families, and other caregivers. That is what will help to move the pointer of early childhood.

PRESS
+5,500 articles

have been published in the last five years mentioning the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, with an annual average of 1,100 articles

The team increased by 33%
(number of employees)



What has been your goal over the years?

My biggest goal is to see the cause of early childhood advancing.

IBGE data from 2018 show that 1 in 3 children in Brazil lives in poverty or extreme poverty. Evidence shows us that vulnerability directly impacts child development. But, unfortunately, we do not have the tools to state how these children, or the other two-thirds of the 20 million Brazilian children from 0 to 6 years old, are doing. We need an indicator of child development and, above all, its status in three, five, and ten years in each municipality in Brazil.

We need to have that number. That number will bring information about the Brazilian scenario and point out what still needs to be done and where we are going, based on the implementation of structural policies for early childhood. It is a fundamental matter: leaving an asset or a liability for the next generations. Society needs to have access to this type of indicator to internalize it in the same way it did with IDEB [Basic Education Development Index]. It is a direct relationship; even the IDEB will be better or worse, depending on the performance of the early childhood indicator.

How difficult is it to have this indicator?

Measuring it is super complex; there is no consensus. We are still studying and testing. How do you assess a child at 4 years old to know if they have developed correctly? But we need that measure, that assessment. It is not information about a child, but about a room, a school, a municipality, the state, the country. It's understanding how the group is developing with what is being offered. If we don't have that information, we won't know where

we are; whether it's good or bad. We need the information to get the way forward right. Think of a ten-year target. That's 2030. But, to get there, it is necessary to correct the direction of the projects month by month or quarter by quarter.

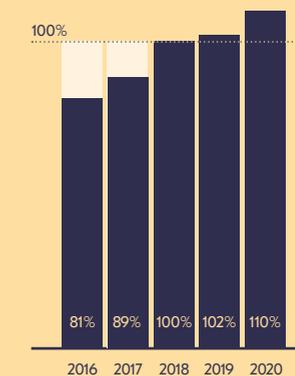
The search for indicators that can reflect what kind of impact we are causing is fundamental. We are a systemic change organization, and it is usually challenging to measure how much the Foundation has contributed to the change. That is why our focus is always on improving child development in Brazil. If that moves backward, it means our job was done poorly. If it advances, our work was probably successful on some scale.

Over these years, an ecosystem has been created of many entities and sectors that look at early childhood. Did this make a difference in the work of the Foundation?

The space that early childhood occupied on the agenda of the public and private sectors was an outstanding achievement. That is the result of the Foundation's actions and many others. Early childhood is on companies' agenda, and it is in organizations, in the **Best Companies to Work for**, and in government programs. And it is being demanded by society. That is an achievement that needs to be celebrated.

Annual goals

The Foundation's performance concerning the goals foreseen for each year has only increased (average achievement)





V INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT

The event was created in 2011 and brings together experts from the leading universities, non-governmental organizations, and public institutions from Brazil and abroad. Three editions have been held in the last five years, with about **1,000 face-to-face participants** and more than **6,000 people watching online**, either via streaming or satellite symposia throughout Brazil.

Since last year we have been living in a pandemic, with schools closed. What's your take on it? What will be the consequences of it on early childhood?

Some educators say that it will take more than a decade to recover what we have lost. We had an enormous level of toxic stress entering homes. We do not yet have concrete data on the impacts, but we are doing important research that should bring information about this by the end of the year.

What we know so far is that inequality will be accentuated in the education sector. A study by economist Naercio Menezes Filho found a drop in the number of

households with a father and mother in the third quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. We fear from this scenario that important achievements will be compromised, such as possibly, the fall in infant mortality and poverty reduction.

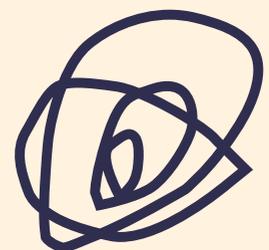
On the other hand, every shadow has its light. We gave two awards to identify innovations in the time of COVID-19. We discovered interesting practices from home visiting women, in the field of parenting, and by teachers in early childhood education. We are translating these practices so that they can be incorporated into public policies.

Reoni Macdalená



What advice do you leave for your successor?

The most important thing is to be the owner of your leadership style, respecting the legacy in its entirety. There is nothing more important for an organization that intends to be perpetual than exponential growth on top of what has already been done because if we start from scratch with each mandate, we will walk sideways. At the same time, only recognizing the legacy is addictive to the organization. This power, this new light, and the management style of a new Chairperson of the Board are very beneficial for us to do more and more for early childhood in Brazil.



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