

An Aboriginal Perspective on Supporting Children & Families with Special Needs

Workshop Highlights

By Rona Sterling-Collins

Our Journey with Wyatt

Presented by:

Rona Sterling-Collins

Mother of a 22 year old Son
(Wyatt) with Autism

And a 28 year Old Daughter
(Janessa); and 7 month old
Grand Daughter 😊

My husband and I have been
married for over 30 years
(Don)

Owner of Rona Sterling
Consulting (First Nations
Consulting Business)

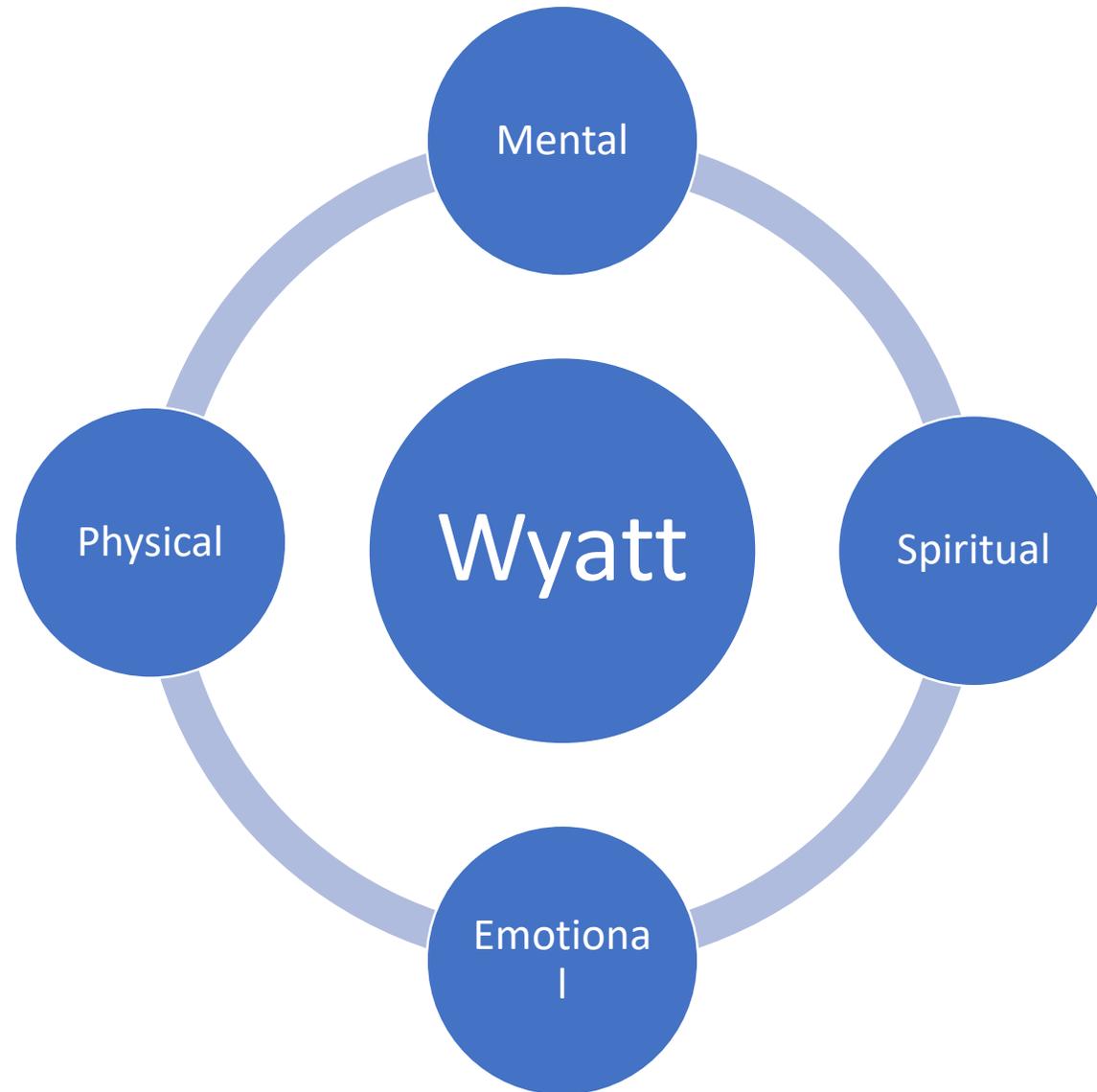
Master's Degree in Social Work

We are from the Nlha'7kapmx
Nation

We reside on the small reserve
known as 'Joeyaska' just
outside of Merritt, BC, which
has been in our family for 7
generations;

We live among family and
extended family.

WHOLISTIC FRAMEWORK



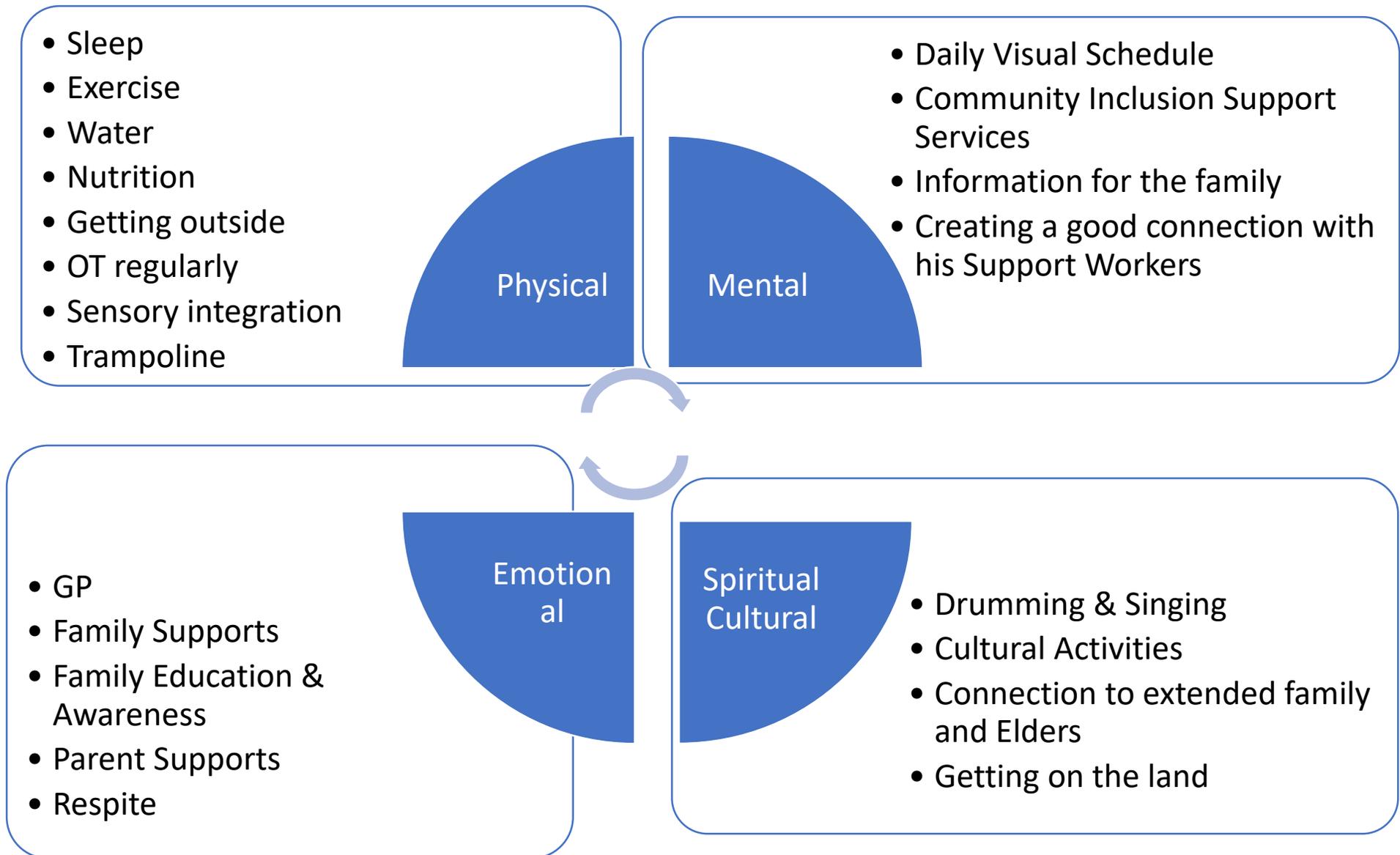
Our Journey With Wyatt

- Highlight the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual challenges and successes
- Current Issues and Challenges that we face

Current Goals

- Physical – Recreational (bowling, swimming, hiking, biking)
- Social
- Cultural & Community
- Employment Experience
- Community Inclusion
- Literacy and Math Skills
- Occupational Therapy (twice per month)
- His Art Work

Self Regulation



Wyatt's Gift

- Despite the challenges that Wyatt faces on a daily basis, he is generally a happy guy.
- He continues to show gains and improvements.
- This past year, his art work has evolved with the help of an Art Teacher.
- Since he started painting in 2017 he has held 3 of his own art shows and participated in another 2 community art shows.

Discussion Questions

Open dialogue; no right or wrong answers.

Questions:

1. What are the challenges and issues for Aboriginal children and families with special needs in your community?
2. What ideas and recommendations do you have to address these challenges?

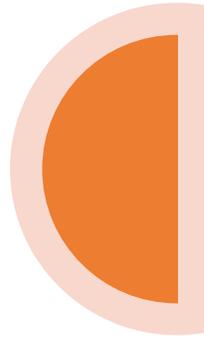
Community Consultations & Gathering Data

Overview to research work in the Nlaka'pamux Nation with Aboriginal families.

Colonialism & Transformation

- Colonialism has impacted our governance, social systems, laws and families.
- The damage done through residential schools, government policies such as the Indian Act and the child welfare system has diminished our ability to care for our children and provide the necessary supports to our families.
- Together, we must face the legacy of colonialism and on-going challenges within our communities and look to ways we can decolonize systems of care and supports that are not meeting the needs of our children and families.
- We live in a time of transformation and our hope moving forward is the recognition that our greatest strength in creating the changes necessary come from our traditions, language, land, and laws and our relationships with each other and our world.
- ****Note: the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nations – terms are used interchangeably**

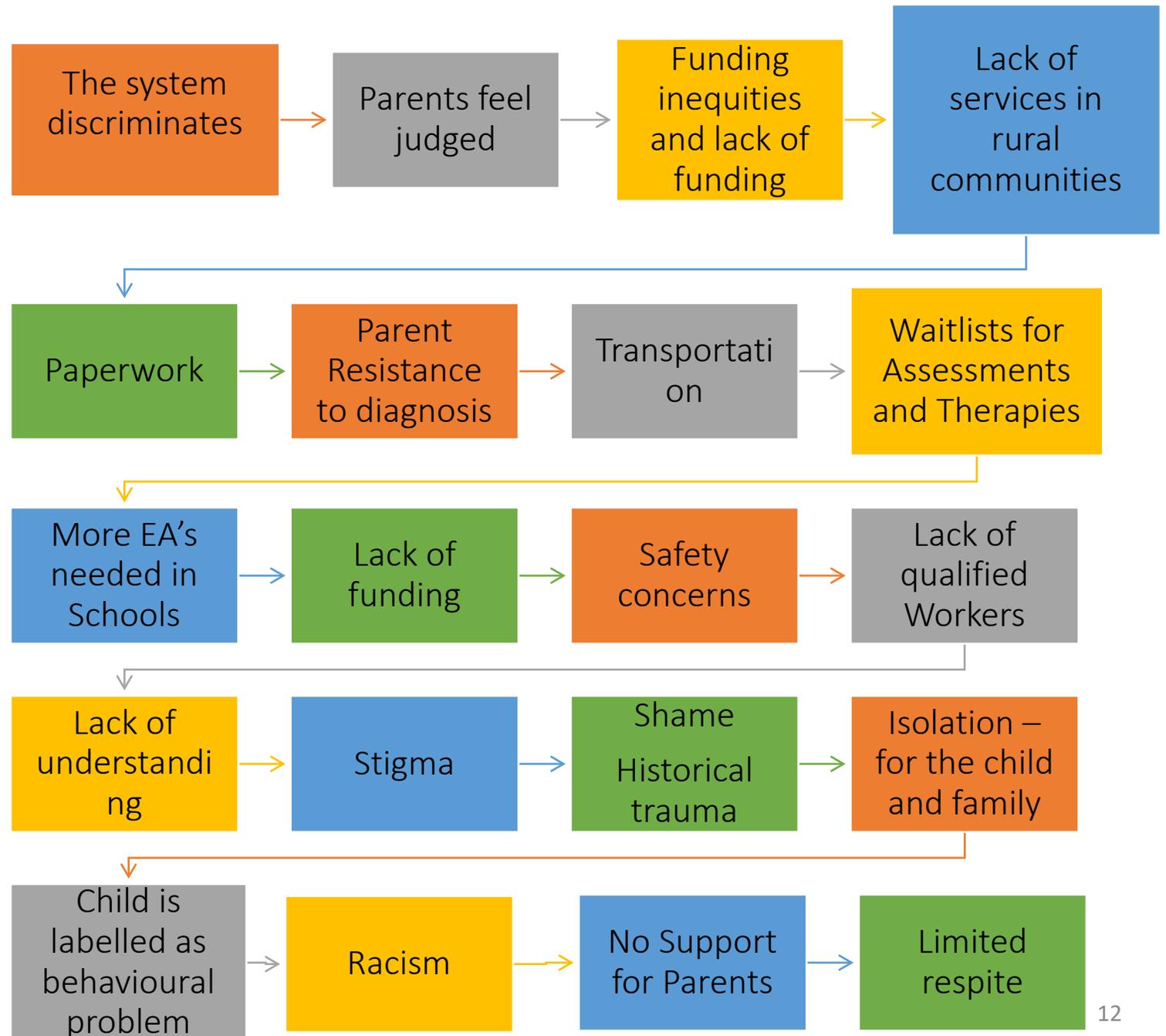
Hopes & Dreams



Child

Supports regardless of where they live
Holistic Services that are individualized
Acceptance
Social supports
Happy, Healthy, Safe
Stress Management for Caregivers
Family Support as a Whole
Good quality of life
Opportunities
Independence
Inclusion
No financial issues – needs are met
Trained caregivers in the community
Understanding – by Service Providers and Community
Friendships and personal relationships
Employment and recreation
Pursuits of College, University, Trades
A voice in their care plan
More awareness, education
To find their strengths and talents
For things to get easier

Barriers & Inequalities



Challenges for Aboriginal Communities

Findings from Comprehensive Needs Assessment:

- The first thing to keep in mind is the historical trauma that First Nations people, families and communities have gone through with colonization and residential schools.
- Our communities are still healing and recovering from these impacts.
- There are structural, economic, title & rights and social challenges that communities are still dealing with.

Challenges for Aboriginal Communities

- Little or no services for special needs;
- Lack of information and awareness of what is available for special needs and how to access it;
- Restricted eligibility criteria for services;
- Lack of transportation for many families;
- Family lifestyles can sometimes be an issue;
- Community capacity building is needed;
- Limited special needs training available for early childhood education programs;

Challenges for Aboriginal Communities:

- Little or no access to specialists and therapists;
- Lack of supports for families, extended family, and service providers (stress and burn out);
- Lack of respite available;
- Many school-age children not receiving services;
- Lack of adequate funding for services;
- Some communities have limited access to internet and telephones;

Challenges for Aboriginal Communities:

- Parents are uncertain about accessing services, or are intimidated by the paperwork and the assessment process;
- Support and inclusion of siblings and extended family is needed;
- There is a need for outreach programming: bring the service to the child and family;
- Services are often not culturally-relevant or inclusive of culture and language;

Challenges for Aboriginal Communities:

- Funding needs to be sustainable;
- There needs to be better coordination of services;
- Training for Aboriginal Workers is needed;
- Many children do not have assessments and cannot receive services – need flexible policies so services can be offered sooner.

(Source: 2007. Community Needs Assessment – Nzen'man Child & Family Development Centre Society and Sterling Consulting).

Supporting Aboriginal Children & Families

1. Support and encourage parents to get a diagnosis to access services and resources.
 - there are historical issues (in general) around First Nations kids being labelled as special needs and put into segregated classrooms
 - there is historic mistrust by many families
 - Families need to know there is a benefit to getting an assessment AND that they are in control of who they want to share their information with
 - Families need to know how to go about getting a diagnosis

(Source: 2009. A Holistic Approach to Supporting Children with Special Needs by R. Sterling-Collins in *Wicihitowin – Aboriginal Social Work in Canada*. Eds. Sinclair, Hart and Bruyere. Fernwood Publishing).

Recommendations

2. Act as a sounding board for parents. Attend appointments with them. Recognize the stress that parents are under.
3. Support the extended family. Arrange for a family circle and other support systems the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others may require. Bring in an Elder or Cultural Advisor to support the family.

Recommendations

4. Assist the family in accessing services and resources.
5. Assist the family in developing a wholistic plan for the child and family: consider the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects and needs.
6. Support the family in celebrating the progress of their child.

Recommendations

7. Assist the family in accessing financial resources for services.
8. Assist the family in maintaining a record.
9. Remember there is stress on siblings.
10. Assist the parents to seek respite.
11. Gather information for the family.
12. Arrange for transportation for the family.

Recommendations

13. Arrange networking meetings among service providers to 'wrap' services around the entire family, not just the child.
14. Link the family: parent groups, on-line services, resources, books, lending library, etc.
15. Support the home environment: the home may need to be altered or structured, depending on the needs of the child.

Recommendations

16. Assist the family in developing self care plans.
17. Encourage parents to utilize cultural and traditional systems and incorporate culturally relevant programming.

Recommendations

18. Building community capacity:

- General education and awareness workshops and information
- Training
- Mentoring Staff
- Funding / resources for more services
- Building relationships with service providers and community leaders

19. Educate yourself about colonization, reconciliation and cultural safety. This awareness will better equip you to support Aboriginal families.

Supports Needed



Children & Families

- Transportation
- Service Providers who will travel to community
- Trained Workers
- Autism Specific Services
- One Stop Centre for Services
- Awareness and Education
- Understanding of child's behaviour
- More activities
- Family Support, Education, Respite
- Assessments in community
- Acknowledgement and support for parents and the barriers they face
- Advocacy
- Health Navigators in the community
- Hiring and Training Local Workers

Community Supports



Complementary Approach

- A complementary approach that integrates the work of the professionals, the specialists, the therapists, the family, community, cultural and traditional systems and the school will support a wholistic plan for children and families based on their unique needs.
- This essentially wraps services around the child and the family.
- Closing Comments & Final Questions

Kwukwscemxw - Thank you!

Acknowledgements:
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