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## The Patriarchy Gives Way to Irish Mothers

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## The Patriarchy Gives Way to Irish Mothers

### Abstract

**Overview:** In Ireland, both the patriarchy and the strong mothers seem to be timeless, but they exist in a delicate balance to one another. The Irish mothers who presented as a strong constant have always been capable of overtaking the patriarchy, yet the patriarchy has been a burden on Irish mothers for much of the nation's history. The beautiful irony is that this patriarchy, a society where men are granted an inequitable amount of control, is slowly falling victim to the persistent Irish mothers, as fathers continue to fail their children and leave mothers with no choice but to take the lead. Irish mothers are slowly dominating the patriarchy that has treated them as second class citizens for centuries. Though Ireland is historically a patriarchy, uninvolved fathers, as seen in *The Guard* and *The Snapper* are forcing Irish mothers to take back control; this control is the foundation of a matriarchal society.

**Author's reflection:** My name is Cora Hawn, and I am an Inclusive Childhood Education major with a concentration in Psychology at St. John Fisher. I am also involved in the honors program here at Fisher. While I admittedly had very little knowledge of Irish society going into my 1299, *Watching Ireland*, I have always had a passion for psychology and sociology. The role that gender plays in societal standards and the blind adherence to societal norms fascinates me, so seeing the strong Irish women that were portrayed in the films of this course was refreshing and exciting. Ireland is known to be a Catholic, and therefore patriarchal, society, but these films painted a different picture of Irish gender roles than I was expecting. I saw families run by the mothers and a notable lack of paternal involvement in their children's lives. I saw the mothers of Ireland taking the power that the fathers of their children were unknowingly relinquishing both in and out of the home.

In writing this paper I found it difficult to hold back the naive idealism that I was tempted to insert throughout. As a woman myself in a universally patriarchal world I needed to draw the line between evidence of a power shift and my own wishful thinking. The first several attempts to write seemed to be infested with opinion and lack the proper evidence to support it. No matter how often I tried, I could not remove my own feminism from my writing, so I decided to lean into it while finding and inserting research based evidence. When I did this I wrote the whole paper in a few hours because it was natural and seemed like writing in a journal more than anything else. I had always been taught that opinions had no place in research based writing like this, that it was meant to be a clinical, dry presentation of findings, but in writing this I discovered how untrue that is. My opinion was my voice, and writing is not meant to be a presentation of facts, but an expression of the author's voice. It is a form of communication and one's unique thoughts must be conveyed in their writing as well as the facts that have been gathered.

The Patriarchy Gives Way to Irish Mothers

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**Introduction:**

Some things seem so perfect and certain that one assumes that they have always been and always will be. In Ireland, this perceived timelessness is a shared trait of the patriarchy and of mothers, but they exist in a delicate balance to one another. The Irish mothers who presented as a strong constant have always been capable of overtaking the patriarchy, yet the patriarchy has been a burden on Irish mothers for much of the nation's history. The beautiful irony is that this patriarchy, a society where men are granted an inequitable amount of control, is slowly falling victim to the persistent Irish mothers, as fathers continue to fail their children and leave mothers with no choice but to take the lead. Irish mothers are slowly dominating the patriarchy that has treated them as second class citizens for centuries. Though Ireland is historically a patriarchy, uninvolved fathers, as seen in *The Guard* and *The Snapper* are forcing Irish mothers to take back control; this control is the foundation of a matriarchal society.

**Ireland as a Patriarchy:**

The identity and worth of Irish men is tied to their ability to provide for their families as breadwinners. Though the increase in working women over the last century makes this seem like an archaic view, it continues to be a staple of patriarchal societies, as working and providing comes with a significant amount of power and control. One study of young Irish farmers found that their masculine identity is built on concepts such as breadwinning and self-reliance, and a man's pride is rooted in his ability to provide for his family (Laoire, 2005, p.4). When a man financially supports his family, he is able to say that he, and he alone, has provided what is necessary, giving significant value to survival rather than compassion or care. Men are providing for their families in a tangible way, so when laid out on paper, it seems that men, rather than their female partners, are providing for the majority of the family's needs. This is an

easy and common justification for the father being the head of the family, and therefore having control over major familial decisions, which quickly establishes and perpetuates a patriarchal society.

It would seem that as women join the workforce this attitude toward providing would come to an end, but these views have held firm. For both men and women in Irish families, men are viewed as breadwinners and only breadwinners, and their primary responsibility is outside the home (McKeown, n.d., p. 9). Women however are seen as mothers, wives, daughters, and in many cases financial providers. This has allowed men to believe and preach that they are fulfilling their entire responsibility to their family by going to work and providing food and shelter, which is only a fraction of their partners responsibility. The ease at which they fulfill their duty to the family in comparison to their partners' struggle can easily be twisted to justify a man's control over the home, as well as society as a whole. To this day, women are not seen as capable of participating in politics or other high pressure careers, in part because of their perceived struggle to manage their multitude of duties. In comparison to the way men handle things, it seems that they are less capable, which is perpetuated and used to continually suppress women and keep men in power. Men's lack of familial responsibility has been used to justify their position as head of the home, which is at the core of the patriarchy.

In contrast, women's worth is tied to their ability to care for the family and the home, even when they are working. While men were working to provide financially, women stayed at home to care for their home, their husband, and their children. In the nineteenth century, a woman was seen as a homemaker, and their sensitivity had many, in Ireland and other Western cultures, argue that the home rather than politics and public spheres was their natural environment (Luddy, 2016, p.473). When paired with their higher responsibility and workload,

this view of women is often used to perpetuate male control over the world outside the home. If women were too sensitive to be involved with the outside world and were needed in the home, it only made sense that men were in control. This also meant that the men made the money, which would allow them to have another layer of control over their wives who depended on their spouse's paycheck to survive. Even in homes where women controlled the finances, they were not allowed to work, so their financial security was dependent entirely on their husbands. The myth of women's sensitivity allowed men to take on more control and forced women to rely on their husbands more heavily.

In the modern day, even with an increase of women in the workforce, they are still seen as homemakers before they are seen as employees. There is societal expectation that mothers will put their family before their career as "mothers – even full-time working mothers – desire recognition of a robust maternal identity both in the domestic domain and the wider community" (Ralph, 2016). In other words, a mother's identity as a parent and homemaker is prioritized over their responsibilities in the workforce. This idea has less to do with biology than it does with societal expectation, as a good mother is one who cares, and a good father is one who provides. As a result, women are often forced to choose between their familial obligations and their obligations at work, and there is no good answer. If a woman chooses to work rather than care for her children full time she is a bad mom, but if she cares for her children full time she is not doing her part to support the family. Men on the other hand have no such choice to make, they can fulfill their entire responsibility to their family by going to work and bringing home a paycheck. This incongruent view on parental responsibilities is used to justify a fathers control, as a mother is put in a position where she is destined to fail. When compared to a fathers societal success it is only logical that fathers remain the head of the family.

These stereotypical views of gender in the family are displayed in *The Guard*. During one of their first interactions, Sergeant Gerry Boyle asks Agent Wendell if he has children, so Wendell begins to proudly describe his two sons, and reaches for a picture of them. Boyle cuts him off and says “I don't want to see it. Babies all look the same. The only time a baby doesn't look like every other baby is when it's a really ugly baby. So unless you're about to show me a photo of a really ugly baby then I don't want to see it.” Boyle clearly feels that babies are not of interest to him, and seems shocked that Wendell is so involved in his children's lives. He believes that things like parading around and admiring pictures of their children is something that women do, and he has no understanding of warm fatherhood. In other words, he is shocked by the concept that Wendell is not only excited to talk about his children's lives, but wants others to share in his excitement. This shock indicates a cultural norm that men are not the ones who care for and boast about their children, leaving it to their mothers. This norm was likely perpetuated by the clear involvement of Boyle's mother throughout the film, and a notable absence of a father. In the eyes of Sergeant Gerry Boyle, the home and the family, especially the children, are the women's domain.

This patriarchal view of gendered parenting negatively impacts both mothers and fathers. The overall societal view of parenting is not perpetuated by individual parents, many of whom would love to see fathers more involved in their children's lives, but by society as a whole. It creates an impossible scenario “for fathers to be involved with children yet also be reliable economic providers; for mothers to be intensive carers yet also support greater father involvement in childcare” (Ralph, 2016). Families are trapped in this cycle where they cannot encourage the involvement of the father because they need to fulfill their societal roles. A father's societal role of worker and economic provider and his desire to be involved in the daily

care of his children cannot possibly be fulfilled at the same time. Likewise, a mother cannot encourage a father's involvement without neglecting her societal role as the primary caregiver of her family. Patriarchal views of family put both parents in a position where their familial responsibilities compete with their societal standards, and societal standards often win because they are based in tradition. Though the parents may want the father to be more involved, the tradition of their societal duties will seem like the natural and more logical solution because it is likely what they were raised with.

Patriarchal views of parenting also prevent fathers who want or need to be more involved in their children's lives from doing so. One of the prime examples of this is that lone fathers are not given access to the same social circles and employment opportunities, because it is assumed that there is a mother to care for the children (McKeown, n.d., p. 6). Some may argue that the presence of single fathers is evidence against a patriarchy, but the way that they are ostracized implies the exact opposite. These fathers are either forced to neglect their children's needs to provide, or live in poverty while attempting to meet their children's needs. When a father is seen as a breadwinner and a mother a caregiver, parents who cannot fill these roles for whatever reason are going to have no choice but to neglect some of their duties. Providing and caregiving are both important tasks, it is impossible to choose which a child should go without, but lone fathers are presented with this choice because it is assumed that caregiving is fulfilled by someone else. Though the patriarchy has negatively impacted women throughout societies, it has also put fathers in a difficult position.

The frustration that comes with wanting to be involved, but being unable to is seen with Sharon's father Dessie throughout *The Snapper*. When talking to Sharon about her plans for birthing the baby, Dessie says "[n]owadays, the husband are there, with the wives, you know. I

think that's much better. Cause they're able to hold our hands and help them and encourage them, and see their child being born.” Though he is describing an improvement, there is a note of sadness to this quote about his inability to be there when his wife was giving birth to his own children. Though he likely wouldn't have been prevented from being in the room as his wife gave birth, it was far from the norm at the time, so he stayed in the waiting room with the rest of the soon to be fathers. This assumption that the father would be absent meant that mothers were left to be solely responsible for their children in the first moments of life, setting the patriarchal pattern going forward, but it also ostracized the father. From the moment that the child is born, they are the secondary parent, whether they want to be or not, which prevents them from taking a more active role in their child's life in the future. Not to mention the future regret that comes with not seeing the birth of one's child, and the abandonment that the mother will feel in the moment of giving birth alone. Men benefit from the patriarchy's lowered expectations of them, but as *The Snapper* shows, they also have some unintended consequences.

### **Uninvolved Fathers:**

The societal view that fathers are the lesser parent has created a society where mothers are certain and fathers are uninvolved. One of the most easily seen examples of this is in the roles of parents in their children's education. Though fathers are beginning to involve themselves in their children's education, they are still less involved than the mothers, as a mother's involvement in their child's education is assumed and societally expected (McBride, Dyer, Liu, Brown & Hong, 2009). Both parents' involvement in the children's education is important, but it is primarily expected from mothers. The father sees the mother caring for their child's education, so they often remain uninvolved in this area of their children's lives. This lack of involvement pushes the mother further into the belief that the father is less capable of

watching over their child's education. Furthermore, it is found that "fathers may be playing an "additive" role when their children are struggling academically and they become engaged in their children's schooling" (McBride, Dyer, Liu, Brown & Hong, 2009). Father's step into their child's education only when absolutely necessary because their children need more help than the mother is able to provide. This reveals the contradictory nature of a patriarchal view, as fathers are not able to assist their children in their education, but are also qualified to step in when the mother's assistance is not enough. The father's involvement, or lack thereof, is justified with his inability, but both parties seem to agree that he is more capable than the mother when the child is struggling.

Unfortunately, this uninvolved fatherhood is a common phenomenon in Ireland, which can manifest in multiple ways depending on the circumstance. The most common and traditional version of uninvolved fatherhood occurs when the father simply is not there. This often occurs when the two parents are separated, and the father chooses, for whatever reason, not to be involved in the child's life. An example of this is seen in a study of Irish children with fathers outside of the home, where less than a third of them interacted with their fathers at least once a month (Nixon, Greene, Hogan, 2012). For many unmarried parents, uninvolved fatherhood is assumed, as maternal custody is most common and often comes with a lack of regular paternal contact. As the secondary parent, many fathers feel that they are not responsible for the care of their children. It logically follows that when they are not living in the same home they will not have regular interactions with their children.

*The Guard* presents a good example of a father that simply isn't there, as Gerry Boyle does not mention a father in his life at all, despite his clear influence of his mother. His strong bond with his mother seems indicative of a unified struggle, likely caused by the lack of a second

parent in the home. Boyles' sees his mother on a regular basis leading up to her death, and they cope with dark humor. Even sitting in the chapel following her last confession, Boyle and his mother joke about her sex life, comparing her attitude toward death to the attitude she had in an orgy in her past. They seem to use dark humor to cope with hard things, but Boyle uses this dark humor throughout the film even when separate from his mother. This indicates a trauma, and paired with the notable absence of a father and the constant supportive presence of his mother indicates that he was raised by a single mother. It was them against the world, and their unity seems to be what got them through. While this is a common and more noticeable form of uninvolved fatherhood, it is not the only one.

The lesser known presentation of uninvolved fathers is a father who is present in the home, but leaves the majority of care tasks to his partner. This can be seen in families where the mother is working, but it is more common in families where the father is the sole breadwinner. When studying residential fathers, where the father was the sole financial provider, only 13 of the 41 fathers were involved in the daily routines of their children (Ralph, 2016). In other words, many fathers who are present, and even active in their children's lives, are not involved in the care of their children. This lack of involvement is a product of their patriarchal view of their role as a father. For men who are the sole breadwinners of their home, it seems only natural that his wife would care for their children, as he has already fulfilled his role by going to work. Though an unequal distribution of care tasks is logical in a situation where only one parent works, completely passing off the care of the children creates an uneven distribution of labor. Being solely responsible for the health and safety of one's children at all times is a far greater task than a regular 40 hour work week, so giving one task to each partner is hardly fair. However, this is

the case in many Irish families, as fathers go to work and expect all other familial tasks to be fulfilled by his wife.

This is the case in *The Snapper*, Sharon's father loves his children, and clearly works hard to provide for them, but he does not know much about how to care for them. Though the research that he does about Sharon's pregnancy is clear involvement in his daughter's life, it is also evidence of the lack of prior involvement with his own children. After having several children of his own, he is relatively clueless about birth and the first few months of life, where true care tasks are much more common than novel, fun activities that he is often involved with. When Sharon tells her parents about the pregnancy, Dessie says "you're only nineteen", to which Sharon corrects him and tells him that she is twenty. This seems insignificant, but most mothers are well aware of their children's ages, even in moments of stress, and Dessie quickly forgets the age of his daughter. He is there, involved in this important conversation, but this slip up indicates an absence and ignorance regarding Sharon's everyday life. This version of uninvolved fatherhood is less noticeable because the father is there, but he is still not actively involved in caring for his children.

Regardless of presentation, uninvolved fathers can have a negative impact on their children. Children need both a male and female role models to grow and develop properly, so the involvement of a father, or lack thereof, can change the course of their lives. Father's involvement is associated with physical development in infants and social emotional development, like coping and independence, in older children (Kahn, et al, 2017). The involvement of a father in early childhood allows the basis of a successful life to form, both physically and social-emotionally. For example, when fathers' involvement in caregiving was encouraged, their sons are more social and nurturing, and display less aggressive behavior

(Endendijk et. al, 2016). Logically, this also means that the lack of paternal involvement increases aggression and decreases young boys' social skills. This is seen in *The Guard*, where Boyle is not nurturing or caring of most people, especially other men. He is closed off, and responds with anger and violence, he is not nurturing or social in the slightest, and even in seemingly gentle interactions with other women he is often cold and crass. In *The Snapper*, this can be seen in Sharon's brother's response to hearing rumors about who got her pregnant. His first reaction is to go after the man who he believes got her pregnant with physical violence, rather than being nurturing and caring for his sister who is experiencing the trauma of both the pregnancy and the rumors. The differing presentations in these films may have colored the specific effects of uninvolved fatherhood, but both created aggressive sons.

Beyond all of the personal effects on a child, uninvolved fathers also impact family structure. Micheal Dogherty is an author for the National Review in New York, who used his platform to describe life with a single mother, with an absent Irish father, and how she lost her entire identity as a person when she realized her son would be leaving soon (Dougherty, 2019). Dougherty's mother was perpetually there while raising her son and she ensured that he was cared for even without his father; her presence was just as certain as his father's absence. When he grew up and began to drift away, his mother lost her entire identity. Her work and her actions had always been a function of raising her son, so she did not know what to do now that he could care for himself. Dougherty's father was not there, he had gone back to Ireland when he was a young child, so his mother became an unmovable force who could fulfill both of the parental roles for her child. The patriarchal views were done away with in favor of doing whatever needed to be done for her child, she was entirely a mother. In this home the patriarchy gave way,

her child's father wasn't there, so Dougherty's mother became the head of the family, she became a matriarch.

### **Matriarchal Families of Ireland:**

Irish mothers have a huge impact, that is often not felt until they are gone. Many children of Irish mothers do not recognize the impact that their mother had on their daily life until she is no longer around to have it. However, mothers are shown to have a far greater impact on their children's futures than their fathers. For example, in Irish working class families, the grandmother's use of physical punishment was found to have stronger correlations with a parent using physical punishment than that of the grandfather (Murphy-Cowan, Stinger, 1999). Though the effects of physical punishment on children can be debated, it is telling that the mother's use of it was more impactful than the father's. This implies that for the Irish working class children are more likely to mirror their mother's parenting style than that of their father. The end result is a parenting method that is passed down in the women of the family, as mothers raise their daughters the way their mothers raised them. On the other hand, fathers are not passing on nearly as much of their parenting, as they raise their son's how their mothers raised them, but their son's mother is what will affect how they raise their children. Women are in complete control of the familial legacy throughout the generations, and control is at the core of a matriarchy.

The legacy that an Irish mother leaves is often not recognized until after her death, but it impacts both their immediate family and the future generations. This legacy is summed up well in LeSage Cockburn, an author who wrote about her experience with an Irish mother saying, "I have learned too late the lessons and legacy of my wild Irish mother. Have I learned too late that though she and I need words for recognition, there are those to whom the heart has no tongues

and their hearts are true and good--like my daughter's?" (LeSage Cockburn, 1997). Irish mothers are perpetually there, their presence goes unnoticed, but their absence is noticeable. A key piece of this legacy is that these Irish mothers sacrifice their own wants and needs for their children. Their need for recognition is outweighed by the need to protect and care for their children. This makes the Irish matriarchy difficult to recognize, as they do not present the loud, overpowering control of the patriarchy. Instead, Irish mothers present a silent, stoic leadership that leaves a legacy of love, self sacrifice, and strength rather than pain and oppression. Cockburn was the daughter of a strong, loving Irish woman, and she became a strong, loving Irish woman, and she is going to raise a strong, loving Irish woman, and that is the foundation of a matriarchy.

Accompanying this foundation, a lack of paternal involvement has forced Irish mothers to compensate by taking over as head of the family. Mothers are taking on the responsibilities of the children, often with no support, in a system designed to have two parents in a home. If the parents are still together, this can be frustrating, but for families where parents are not married, this can come with several additional consequences. Single mothers, "[i]n addition to the everyday care of children, mothers had the extra burden of dealing with issues such as sick children and resettling elsewhere, as well as managing problems arising from the fallout of separation" (Crosse, Miller, 2019, p. 10). Especially if a mother becomes single after a separation, she faces a new set of responsibilities over and above those of mothers with a partner, as they also hold the burden of financial responsibility for their children. Regardless of the parent's relationship, the children of uninvolved fathers look to their mothers to help them deal with the emotional harm of their father not wanting to be involved in their lives. The mothers are not only responsible for all care activities, often in addition to a career, they also need to help their children heal from the damage their fathers are causing.

*The Guard* presents a great example of a mother compensating as Boyle's mother is overly caring and involved in her child's life in an attempt to compensate for his previous traumas. When he goes to visit his mother at the nursing home, she is seen staring off into the distance, seeming somber and even depressed while her son is inside speaking with her caretaker. However, as soon as she notices Boyle, she puts a smile on and begins to talk to him about a book that was in her lap, but she had not been reading. Even in her final weeks, Boyle's mother was attempting to protect him from the continued trauma of seeing her in pain. It is clear that Boyle has already gone through some kind of trauma from not having a father in his life, so his mother feels the need to protect him from further pain and grief. She does this again later in the movie when she takes her own life to prevent a drawn out hospital stay where Boyle may be forced to make difficult decisions. Boyle's mother is presented as strong and protective even as she dies, shielding her son from further trauma and ensuring that her death is as easy on him as possible. This selfless protection is common among single mothers who want to ensure that they minimize the trauma that is added on to their father's absence.

That being said, the dominance of a mother does not stop in homes where fathers are completely uninvolved. Many fathers who are involved with their children to some degree still leave the majority of childcare to the mother. Fathers are more likely to be the fun parents in their involvement, which leaves the mother to take on duties that the children do not see the importance of, like keeping them clean and remembering doctor's appointments (Ralph 2016). It is clear that doctors' appointments and bathing are more important than novel fun experiences, but many fathers are only involved in these experiences. This leaves the mother alone to deal with caregiving but does not allow the children, and therefore society, to see her importance. Another example of this is seen in parents' involvement in education, where mothers are

consistently involved, but fathers involve themselves only when children are struggling (McBride, Dyer, Liu, Brown & Hong, 2009). From the child's perspective it looks like their father did all of the hard work to save the day. They do not see or understand the involvement of their mother because they do not know anything else. It seems that Irish mothers often go unappreciated for the role that they play in their children's lives despite doing the majority of the caregiving work that keeps them safe and healthy.

Mothers have control of the family's legacy, their care, and their emotional wellbeing. With familial control being almost entirely conceded to the mother, the only stronghold for the patriarchy would be in the workforce and breadwinning, but women have become increasingly likely to work outside the home in the past several decades. One 2006 study of 8570 9-year-old children found that 54% of their mothers worked outside the home with an average of 27 hours a week (Ralph, 2016). While this is a far smaller percentage with fewer hours than fathers working, it is far higher than the nearly nonexistent job market for women in even the early twentieth century. Women are taking on a progressively larger share of the labor, leaving men less and less space for control as they are no longer the sole breadwinners. Rather than choosing between their work or their family, these mothers have adapted to be able to care for both, often by sacrificing themselves. They are no longer in a position where they are destined to fail as they have learned to be amazing mothers who care for their children while simultaneously building a career. When compared to the fathers who often sacrifice family time for their careers it now seems that mothers are the more capable parent. With their status of breadwinner gone, the patriarchy is surviving on tradition alone.

Single mothers are the strongest display of a matriarchy in practice. For many divorced couples, the father is not financially providing at all, despite mandates from the Irish

government. In a study of 15 divorced mothers who had primary guardianship of their children, only 2 of them received their mandated child maintenance checks regularly and on time, and ten of them received nothing from the fathers at all (Crosse, Miller, 2019). This leaves the mother to be the sole provider for themselves and their children, taking away any financial control that the father would otherwise have. These single mothers are also the only ones to provide support and care for their children, who live in their home and are with them the majority of the time. For single mothers, it is not simply a matter of uneven labor distribution, there is no distribution at all. The entire weight of raising their children rests with the mother, who cares and provides for them with no assistance. They have complete control over every aspect of the family. They have a matriarchal family, and matriarchal family thriving in the present far out ways the tradition that the patriarchy is surviving on.

**Conclusion:**

All of this being said, the mothers of Ireland are slowly overtaking the patriarchal society that has suppressed them for centuries. The work is far from over, as many societal and legal standards still favor the control of fathers, but mothers have laid the foundation to restore the Irish matriarchy. They are not doing this alone, the patriarchy has created an unsustainable system in which men are to lead a family without being a part of it. Irish fathers are expected to provide financially, an important task, and be the head of the family while the mothers care for the children and the home, often while working themselves. When it is laid out that simply, it is difficult to understand why Irish men have been allowed to hold such power for the majority of history, but this is not unique to Ireland. Throughout the world, women are seen as second class citizens, despite being the most integral part of most western societies. This is not to say that fathers are not important, or that all fathers are incapable and uninvolved, but that mothers

certainly should not be answering to them. The great men of history became great only because there was a woman at home to care for them, and modern Irish men would do well to remember that.

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