

Let's Talk Learning Disabilities

EPISODE 32

Welcome to Let's Talk Learning Disabilities with Laurie Peterson and Abbey Weinstein. Laurie & Abbey spend their days talking about dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, & ADHD they talk to parents of struggling students and adults who have had a lifetime of academic challenges. They want to share those stories, along with their own insights with you. So, *let's talk learning disabilities*.

Laurie: Hey, everybody. Welcome to let's talk, learning disabilities. This is Laurie,

Abbey: and this is Abbey

Laurie: and we are super excited today. We have a really wonderful guest. Her name is Kendra Wagner, and she is going to talk to us a little bit today about dysgraphia. Um, we have actually done a podcast on dysgraphia last season and, um, it was just kind of Abbey and I getting our general information about what we know about dysgraphia, but today we have a specialist and so I'm very excited to share more information about dysgraphia, get some more specific information about what it is and who helps and how you help and really what can help individuals that have dysgraphia be successful.

Abbey: or even just writing challenges right in general

Laurie: right, because, you know, schools now are requiring so much more writing. And even though we aren't maybe necessarily as adults doing a ton of handwriting, we are required to do a lot of written expression. And so that can also be difficult for many individuals. So, so Kendra, you're a learning specialist, correct?

Kendra: Right.

Laurie: So, first of all, welcome. Thank you for being here today.

Abbey: Thank you.

Laurie: We very much appreciate it. So tell us a little bit about what you do as a learning specialist.

Kendra: So I'm in Seattle and I work one-on-one with kids of all ages and a learning specialist. Is somebody a little different from a tutor because tutor implies that you're helping them with school. And we get more into the underpinnings and what's underneath there difficulty. And I usually work on a level of outside of school tasks, but I do say, so tell me what's going on in school and maybe I can help you with an assignment, but that's not my big focus. It's more about getting underneath the learning disability or challenge. Cause not all the kids I see have learning disabilities, but most of them do.

Laurie: Right. You're not there just to help with homework, you're there to help figure out why homework is hard and help get those skills so that they can work independently. What ages do you typically work?

Kendra: Who ends up coming to me is parents with kids between about third, third grade to eighth grade, because with reading, we start really noticing it ramps up in third grade and sometimes parents don't notice or teachers don't notice until then that there's something going on. And with writing, it's more about fourth grade where they're starting to write 5 paragraph essays, and tests, and the steaks become higher with writing.

Abbey: So when we talk about dysgraphia, we've talked about it previously and just gave our definitions in our own words. How do you define dysgraphia in your own words? How could you explain it to our listeners and to a parent or a young adult that has been diagnosed with dysgraphia or suspects they have dysgraphia.

Kendra: Well now, historically it just meant any trouble with the formation of letters, but it's really morphed over time inside of the international dyslexia association to mean any difficulty with writing, whether it is the fine motor and penmanship and execution of on a page with a pen or a pencil,

and anything related to getting your ideas on the page which includes keyboarding also.

Laurie: Oh, really?

Abbey: So getting it from your brain into the written format, getting your thoughts into writing, what other, whatever modalities.

Kendra: Um, what I see in neuropsych reports over the years, because I've been doing this for decades, Is, they are more commonly putting a dysgraphia diagnosis on perhaps an eighth grader that just has so much trouble organizing their thoughts.

Laurie: Oh, interesting, ok.

Kendra: So in the beginning it looks like trouble with the formation and the mechanics of writing. Okay, and so tell us kind of how you help students who struggle, let's start first because obviously there's a lot of aspects of this. How do you help students who are struggling with just the letter formations. Is it just drill and practice of writing?

Kendra: So, yes and no. A lot of parents go straight to a workbook. There's nothing wrong with that. But often what is research-based is kids need something very multi-sensory, you know, drawing very large letters, not the small workbook size and on shaving cream, you've heard of this either in sand or a tray of salt, or, um, even just sandpaper so that they can feel themselves executing. In remote learning. I have them just write on a digital whiteboard, very large, and they'll say, but my teacher says to make my letter smaller. I'm like, I know, but you want to create some muscle memory first before we try to get it "grade level."

Abbey: So practicing on lined notebook paper is not the best way to practice for someone who struggles with the physical aspects of forming their letters?

Kendra: Yeah, not in the beginning of addressing it. True. This is what a good special ed teacher or an occupational therapist would do also, start large.

Laurie: That makes sense though, it really does.

Abbey: Mmhmm, with the multisensory aspects.

Laurie: What about with cursive writing? Do you ever introduce that as a, I've heard that that can sometimes be helpful.

Kendra: Yes, that is used in quite a lot of the schools that are just for dyslexic kids.

Laurie: Oh, really?

Kendra: They only do cursive and a lot of them are Slingerland based, which is a name of a program for dysgraphic kids and they, um, do a lot of large and on the board, or they have very large white boards that are on their desk. So they practice there and then they work smaller. And there's a lot of dictation. So where you are dictating a real word or a pretend word, or just a set of sounds, right? The letter that makes the sound or there's dictation of the sentence level. It's just a lot of that incorporated into the day, but a good program also does just some practice making straight lines quickly making little curves quickly. So it's not always about an actual letter of the alphabet.

Laurie: It's a little bit more about like motor control, controlling the pencil. That makes sense. Do they, I had heard that, I can't remember who told us this, that with the cursive, a lot of it is just helping them connect to the sounds and that the flow of cursive tends to be a lot easier than the start stop of print. Is that kind of what you have found?

Kendra: Yes, mmhmm.

Laurie: That makes sense.

Kendra: There's less lifting your pencil off the paper.

Laurie: So then once you've done the letter formations and work, you know, kind of gone big and worked your way small, then the next step would be more, just kind of organizing ideas?

Kendra: Yeah, that's a big leap. Um, well, and then I'm not even talking about spelling. That would be another podcast. But there is some integration of working on spelling as you're working on handwriting and the next step after getting some mastery of being able to write most of the letters in different combinations, words or the alphabet. So there's some standard about that. Like you can write the alphabet with all lowercase, in under one minute. That's about a first or second grade. Then you're ready to be inside of a journal or a page or a poem, something that is a creative expression of in many kindergarten or first or second grade classrooms.

Laurie: So I know spelling, we could talk about spelling all day long, but I am really curious cause we, we see a lot of kids that struggle with spelling, especially in the context of their writing. Um, because they don't recognize when they've misspelled a word. So they might spell a word in the letters are right, but they're in the wrong order. So do you, I mean, I know, and I know this, we could talk about this all day long, but do you have some strategies that you use to help students with spelling, either in isolation or within the context of the writing? I'm just curious as to, cause we have a lot of kids that do that.

Kendra: Yes, you have to do in and out of context, a lot of classrooms, they only do it in context, you know, like here's a story I want you to write. And then later we'll talk about your spelling, but we really need to teach them, um, patterned based spelling so that you're working on consonant clusters or you know, ending sounds “zaa” verses “saa”. And then you have to really stick with that concept for a while before you move on to a harder pattern. So I go by the Orton-Gillingham scope and sequence of a hands-on spelling tips that I have. That's another conversation. No really, there's a good program called All About Spelling. Very parent-friendly and basically teaches with tiles. So you're moving the tiles. That's a little less overwhelming because the kid isn't being asked to also execute a letter. Their spelling with tiles, then they write it.

Abbey: It makes sense. Starting with the concrete and going to the more abstract.

Kendra: And then they can quickly change if it doesn't look right. You know, whereas the erasing is sometimes frustrating for certain individuals.

Abbey: So what a lot of people, a lot of young adults and even younger students in elementary, upper elementary grades or middle school grades, or even high school, they say that they don't have to do a lot of writing so it's not important for them to have good handwriting or writing skills they're on the computer there's uses of technology that help them. What would you say though that why it's important to have good writing and what facets of our life are impacted by dysgraphia or difficulties with writing?

Kendra: Yes, I think, um, more and more forms are even online, but there's like you walk into a doctor's office, you have to fill out a form and if they can't read what you just wrote, that can be very embarrassing. And also the way that, um, companies work, you might find a place where you're passing around a document and putting little things in the margin. There's short writing that is required in a lot of careers. It isn't lengthy, when you're going into lengthy, then you are keyboarding, true. But I do tell joke with my students that they want to learn to write love letters, because the ninth graders want to do that.

Abbey: And fill out a job application even, right?

Kendra: Right! That's very important that the reader of that isn't working so hard to read it.

Laurie: Well, I do feel like there's something to be said for the process of. Sitting down to write something. I feel like there's a different skill set or a different process you go through versus typing. You know, whether that just be just because of the motor planning that you have to use. But I do think there are some pathways in some, some things that get strengthened by sitting down to physically write something versus...

Kendra: Yes, Virginia Berninger has done so much work on that. She's at the University of Washington here in Seattle. She makes a distinction between the mechanical dysgraphia and then she calls it OWL, oral written language disability, and thing is just written expression disability. And she says

there is a difference, and she's done the research on this between the quality of writing that comes from putting pen to paper versus typing.

Laurie: That's so cool. I mean, I think that's important information to have too, because I do think that those people that can sit down and handwrite something tend to be better writers.

Kendra: Yes.

Abbey: Yes. But then on the flip side, I'm curious, I always think that. If a student struggles tremendously with the physical aspect of handwriting, with forming the letters and working on their spacing and using the line and the margins and it stifles their written expression or their expression of their thoughts. I always feel like recommending putting them on the computer, taking away the physical aspect of handwriting..

Kendra: Yes, that's really a, panacea for a lot of kids like, oh, phew. I can do keyboarding.

Laurie: Do you find that kids that have dysgraphia struggled to learn how to keyboard sometimes?

Kendra: Yes. But more often, no. They do still get frustrated with, how do I organize all these thoughts? Especially a lot of ADD kids, I would say, okay, what's happening right now. My kid is in front of me. Are you, do you have too many ideas in your head or not? More often they have too many. Sometimes they haven't done. They don't know how to reign those in. And so there's a lot of executive function involved in writing whether you have a disability or not. You have to also, I talk to kids about this seesaw back and forth. I call it a teeter-totter and they're, like what's a seesaw? That's from the fifties. Um, you have to teeter-totter back and forth between the big picture of this is what my teacher wanted and we're doing this research project and it's all about this and the, oh yeah. Each paragraph has to have a topic sentence. So there's this micro level. And then the macro and you're back and forth constantly. I tell them things like, you know, every movie actually was a script first and had to get written and they're like, oh wow. You know, so there's lots of joking that I do with them about, I can't quite picture what you just wrote. So if we were going to try to make this tiny little section,

it's four sentences even into just a little short movie scene, they're short. I couldn't picture it. Because it's so vague, you know? What'd you do on your holiday? I went here and I did this and I did this and so make it like a little movie scene. That's called, Show, Don't Tell, I work a lot on that.

Laurie: That's a great strategy, I love that.

Abbey: Yeah. I love that.

Laurie: Cause we do a lot of that. We tell parents a lot of that with reading comprehension, playing a movie in your head.

Kendra: Yes. It's like backwards visualizing. You're getting the reader to visualize what you just wrote.

Laurie: Okay.

Abbey: We oftentimes recommend the use of blank, graphic organizers to help them organize all those thoughts they have in their head so that they can get it down onto paper, more fluently, more efficiently. But would you say that there are individuals with dysgraphia that don't struggle with written expression with the content and the organization of their ideas?

Kendra: So yes, there is some research on that. So they get through this difficulty in say first grade and they have some good intervention, the mechanical part. And then later when they've gotten good penmanship, whether it be, um, print or cursive, and then they learn to keyboard, they're good to go. Yeah, there are some kids like that. Mostly though it keeps being a challenge and a lot of these students are good readers and good at math, but then writing is just very difficult.

Laurie: Do you see the dysgraphia though? Impacting math and being able, especially as the calculations get longer and, and numbers have to line up?

Kendra: Yes. And then the requirement of a lot of the standards that you're showing your work in math.

Laurie: Those are the kids that usually are really good at doing it in their head.

Kendra: Yes. Often a lot of twice exceptional kids, like they have an engineering brain, but then they want so badly for writing to be like math and have all these algorithms. So I say things like, well, let's think of about three ways that we can start this essay. No, I only want one. Right. And then my more creative struggle with writing. You're like, oh, okay. Let's think of three ways.

Laurie: Right. That's awesome.

Abbey: So it does impact math. Are there any other subjects that you see dysgraphia impacting?

Kendra: Well, the content areas. Yeah. Science and history. I see that because you often have to make a presentation. Some little project they did in science, for example, or research and history. And often they're a little less overwhelmed by the concept of a slide presentation than an essay, but still for them to decide, oh, how am I gonna get all this in my bullets? Get the main idea without filling up the whole slide, it's not enough.

Abbey: We're not enough, right.

Laurie: I think about like having to label the maps and like your geography class and writing those little bitty places, or like, if you're doing a lab and you're having to label all the parts of the cell and those little spaces that they give those kids to write these big, long words, I think our dysgraphic kids look at that. And they're like, nope not doing that.

Kendra: Right, and there's quite a lot of teachers who require post-it notes when you're reading.

Laurie: Yes. I've seen that.

Kendra: Or even inside of a handout that was for history. So when you're required to put a post-it note and ask a question, or have an inference or

make a connection, and that is sometimes, um, it doesn't capture what they know because they're trying to do it short and trying to do it small. And they don't like writing small to fit it onto the post-it note.

Laurie: Do you, do you help parents, um, in requesting the most appropriate accommodations for their, for their students, either under 504 or through special ed, you make recommendations to them?

Kendra: Oh yes.

Laurie: What are some of the things that you typically recommend as far as accommodations go while they're working? You know, obviously the goal is always for them to work their way right out of those. But while you all are working, what do you typically recommend?

Kendra: Well, the graphic organizers, um, sometimes that's written into an IEP or a 504 but I say to have them have at the ready, a choice of them. So the older students get to pick their own. That's one revision I make, instead of just having one or two, they have 10, and also having some low pressure coaching. We call it little pressure because outside of a grade, you know, you're not going to get graded on a conversation I'm having with you. Being able to have in real time, a moment with the teacher writing for them with not nobody knowing that. Tell me real quick, what you want to write and then star there.

Laurie: Letting them dictate it.

Kendra: It's great when there's a pair of professionals that can do that.

Laurie: Right. That would be awesome.

Kendra: Right? They call it the availability of a scribe.

Abbey: That's, yeah, that is a good idea. And even when they have to bubble on bubble in on a scan Tron or a bubble sheet, like an answer document on a test, I could see that a lot of individuals with dysgraphia, having a hard time working with that very tiny little bubble and filling it in appropriately and not going too big that you run into the next answer choice. So those are some

instances, I think a scribe would be helpful as well to allow the student to write on the test and have someone else bubble in their answer document.

Kendra: There are so many 504s that all they say is that they are allowed more time on assignments. But I say they need more time to think it through. So they need time out loud with the teacher to talk about what they're going to write about instead of just, give them more time.

Abbey: More time to procrastinate and put it off for another day. Right. It's hard to get started on the writing tasks for a lot of individuals with dysgraphia, just coming up with the ideas and getting started on an over, what seems to be a very overwhelming task.

Kendra: Especially when you get into the older grades in high school, where there's these long projects. But then the 504/IEP language is all about having, I call them micro deadlines because the teacher might break it up into three parts, but kids need really tiny ones like, oh, I'm going to finish my three main ideas up from the notes that I took by Thursday. Like that's enough instead of like finish all your notes by next Thursday. I feel like just a whole lot of writing to them.

Laurie: We need to remember that, micro deadlines, that's good. Do you work with many older students and college students on, on the writing process?

Kendra: Yes. There's great tutoring that goes on at the college campuses now, you know, that's changed over the years. But they also need help with, again, just the, help! This is due.

Laurie: Where do I start?

Abbey: Right! There are writing centers available. I know several college campuses have writing centers where you can go not only to get help on doing the research that the pre-steps to writing, but also helping you execute your writing and having someone there to help with editing and revising and drafting and redrafting. So there's, there are some great resources out there for students with learning disabilities in college.

Kendra: And yet even with high school and college students, I try to work on non academic, we're working on something that isn't going to "get turned in." Right? I really work a great deal at the sentence level because your average classroom teacher doesn't have time to do that. Like, tell me about what you did on Saturday and only two sentences using a "how" and a "where" and a "why."

Abbey: That's a good strategy!

Kendra: I do a lot with the 5 Ws. At the fourth grade level, it would sound more like, tell me about your soccer match and give me a "when" and a "who."

Laurie: Do you find that they struggle with that to answer those questions? Or do you feel like that helps guide them and makes it a lot easier?

Kendra: It helps them at, especially after we've done some practice in just searching in like their favorite book that they're reading or little pieces of "when" and "where" and "why" and "how."

Laurie: Um, I have a quick question too. I meant to ask you about handwriting and I apologize, I'm going to take a few steps back, but I do want to ask you, so I had someone tell me and I've, I, it may have been an occupational therapist. I don't really remember the source, but it's always kind of stuck with me. And I feel like I may have shared this with some parents and I hope...I may have passed on some wrong information, but for students that form their letters from the bottom up. Is that something that once they get to first grade, is that something that can be changed and does it need to be changed?

Kendra: You know, "Handwriting Without Tears" does a good description of why this is important because kids want to start from the bottom because then they know that it will be sitting on there. Cause you know, the teacher says they need to sit on the line. They need to sit on the line. Okay. I know what I'll do. I'll start at the bottom. But if you have them write lots of single lines on a page and you start from top to bottom, it's faster and they're straighter. They do that. If they go back and forth, start from the bottom from the top, start from the bottom.

Abbey: It takes longer. That makes sense.

Laurie: So, so in theory, it would to encourage a student to, to practice that and to try to switch it. It's really about speed and neatness.

Kendra: Yeah, because it's a little lighter grip when you're starting more letters from the top to start from the bottom, you have to tighten your grip a little bit more.

Laurie: That's so interesting. Do you have any other really quick, do you have any like, um, pencil grips that you tend to really...?

Abbey: That's what I was just gonna ask about pencil grippers. How do you feel about pencil grippers?

Laurie: We're on the same page here.

Kendra: There's so many now, and a lot of them don't require that you're writing, um, that are look more like this.

Laurie: So it kind of put the pencil between your first and second finger and hold it with your thumb. That's interesting.

Kendra: But the claw is the best.

Laurie & Abbey: Okay.

Kendra: Which there is a little, um, dome around each of those three fingers. It can't like migrate over like they want to with triangle that you stick on the pencil. Claws really helped those kids that tend to want to put their thumb over. You can't once you get those, you can't.

Laurie: Okay. There's a place for each thing for your thumb and your finger, right. That slide in there. That is smart.

Abbey: So when parents, if they want to try experimenting with different writing aids or pencil grippers, you would recommend using the claw grasp gripper?

Kendra: Yes

Abbey: Okay. Cause I know even on Amazon, if you search pencil grippers, they've got a ton of different choices. And I usually tell parents to let the child pick out a few. They'll buy into it a little bit more if they've had a choice in the matter and then to experiment with them because some they're going to all feel different in their hand, but I'm glad to know that you recommend the claw one. And I think that that's going to be, it does make sense. It puts their fingers in the perfectly right position, the thumb, the pointer finger, and the middle finger.

Kendra: And there is that warmup that I learned from OTs that you do with the chopstick. Can you just go up and down? Very challenging for dysgraphic kids.

Laurie: So gripping the pencil and sliding it to the top and then sliding your hand to the bottom.

Kendra: Yep. So you're getting the correct pencil grip, then you just turn it horizontal and then go slide up and down using only those three fingers.

Laurie: Scooching it up and down. That's pretty cool. I bet that is really hard.

Kendra: Then you get all five fingers in and they're just flow. Cause they're not used to that triple grip.

Laurie: I love that. We might do a video of that and we might maybe we'll do a video and link it so parents can really see that.

Abbey: That's great. Demonstrate that.

Laurie: And demonstrate that because I do think I was actually going to ask you are any, are there any ways to really strengthen those muscles? I feel like that is absolutely a way they could strengthen those muscles.

Kendra: And it reinforces that you can't hold on too tight either. They can't move anywhere.

Abbey: Yeah, for those students. We see a lot of students with dysgraphia that right, with very heavy pressure and fatigue, it fatigues their hand. They're shaking their hand. They're having to take a lot more breaks in the middle of their writing. And their writing is so dark and heavy that the page starts to roll up and you can feel their writing through the page. So what, what would be a strategy that could help with that heavy pressure, writing with the heavy pressure?

Kendra: I move away from letters and have them practice a little wave across the page, or, you know, circles like a person E okay. They are forced to lighten up, because then they can't do it very fast.

Laurie: Like a race almost.

Abbey: Right.

Kendra: You want just like reading, you want a fluency to it. So your grip is light and your speed is pretty fast, and the fluency part is that the letters are readable.

Laurie: Does the starting big to sometimes help with that pressure? Because they've got...

Kendra: Yeah it does.

Laurie: So cool.

Abbey: That is cool. That's great to know.

Laurie: Okay. So I'm gonna put you on the spot and I'm going to see, I'm going to give you ask for three of your favorite writing resources that maybe we could share with parents. So you, I know you mentioned the one, the spelling one, and I have to, can you tell me the name of that again, All About Spelling. We'll include a link for that. So, but I'm going to have three more.

Kendra: Reading Without Tears.

Laurie: That's one of our favorites. So give me three of your favorites outside of those. If you have 3.

Kendra: At what grade?

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Abbey: Let's start with elementary school

Laurie: Lower elementary.

Kendra: I would say that, uh, Diana King as three sets, but there's one that starts at elementary. It's just called writing skills.

Laurie: Okay, awesome.

Kendra: She's the dyslexia expert or she was she's passed. And then as we go up the grade.

Laurie: Okay. Favorite?

Kendra: Well, writing revolution is the most recent one that I really liked and paired with that is also a, it's not really a program. It's just a framework, which is, um, step up to writing. That's every single grade level.

Abbey: Okay. That's great to know.

Laurie: I'm glad we're recording this cause.

Abbey: And those are resources?

Kendra: It's more like here's a lot of tips of how to help kids with writing. It's not like, oh, there's lesson one, lesson, two. It's a little like writing revolution also.

Abbey: Step up to writing. And those are resources that are available to parents that they can use at home and work with their child at home, or have their student work on different strategies?

Kendra: Yes, those are parent-friendly and teacher friendly, both.

Abbey: Oh, great. Good to know. And are they free resources? Do you know? Or did you have to purchase them online?

Kendra: Step Up to Writing has some free resources but you do have to buy it as a program.

Abbey: Okay. That is awesome.

Laurie: Very helpful.

Abbey: Or they can also see someone like you, a learning specialist that specializes in dysgraphia and you see students not only face to face. Am I correct? You also do virtual?

Kendra: Yes

Abbey: Okay.

Laurie: And so if a parent wanted to reach out to you with questions about their child and were interested in having you work with them, what's the best way for them to reach you?

Kendra: I would say email.

Laurie: Okay. And, um, oh yeah. Well, definitely on the show notes, we'll have her email. And then, um, do you have you have a website? Correct?

Kendra: Right. readingwritingthinking.net

Laurie: Okay. We'll include that, which I love that name by the way.

Kendra: And I do enjoy working with parents who, they want to help their child and they want to be the primary adult. So then I'm coaching the parent in how to work with their child.

Abbey: That's great.

Laurie: Great.

Abbey: Wow. A lot of parents need that. They don't even know where to begin to help their child at home with writing assignments and homework assignments. And, and I like the idea of having ways to work on writing at home that are not just homework, that don't seem like they're just school-based or homework based activities. Cause kids tend to shut down when they think it's more homework or more schoolwork.

Laurie: Okay. So your website is readingwritingthinking.net, correct?

Kendra: Yes.

Laurie: I love that. I think that's a great, very, very clever.

Abbey: Yes.

Laurie: Um, well, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to day. Some of this. I think this has been awesome. Definitely, definitely what, exactly what we needed. Just some really great tips for writing. Um, and. Some general knowledge and awareness of dysgraphia and the struggles that are typical for students and adults that have dysgraphia. So, um, we appreciate you being here. Thank you so much.

Abbey: Thank you, Kendra.

Laurie: We will have all of the resources from today in the show notes. If you guys have any questions, if you have some suggestions on future episodes. Please don't hesitate to email us at letstalklearningdisabilities@gmail.com for now you guys have a great day. Thanks so much for joining us!

Abbey: Thank you. Bye-bye.

Thank you so much for joining us today. In our show notes you can find information about today's talk, as well as links to the resources and other episodes. If you have questions about today's talk, have ideas for future episodes or just want to stay connected, you can contact us through Diagnostic Learning Services on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. So, Let's Keep Talking Learning Disabilities. This podcast is sponsored by E Diagnostic Learning. You can find more information at www.ediagnosticlearning.com.

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