



Integrating Language Into Early Childhood Education

NCELA Teaching Practice Brief

Effective instructional practices, examples, and practice shifts
for early childhood education teachers



This is the second publication in a series of briefs that are designed to highlight promising practices for educators and other staff who support English learners (ELs) and their families with English language acquisition and the maintenance of native languages.

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Introduction

This practice brief draws upon recent evidence-based instructional recommendations regarding dual language learners (DLL) and English learners (ELs).¹ The research-based recommendations provided in this brief will support educators in their efforts to ensure that young DLL/EL children receive high-quality educational experiences that take into account their unique learning needs, honor their assets, and set them on a strong trajectory for academic success. Further, the recommendations offer suggestions for supporting children to maintain a positive sense of self, interact meaningfully with their peers, and develop a sense of personal efficacy.

Based on current research findings, the *Promising Futures* report recommends key educator practices for children ages 3 to 7 who are DLLs/ELs. Four key educator practices are featured:

1. Embrace an assets orientation that capitalizes on children’s home languages, cultures, knowledge, and experiences and promotes meaningful partnerships with families and communities.
2. Provide children with opportunities to maintain and develop their home languages while also developing English.
3. Engage children routinely in interactive book reading experiences with complex texts that promote content knowledge, oral language, academic language, and emergent literacy development.
4. Teach foundational literacy skills explicitly, monitor progress frequently, and provide additional support to children who need it, based on assessment results.

For each recommended practice, we

- describe it and reference the research evidence;
- illustrate the practice in action; and
- offer additional resources.

¹ The recommendations in this brief are drawn from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017 report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures (Promising Futures)*.

1. Embrace an assets orientation that capitalizes on children’s home languages, cultures, knowledge, and experiences and promotes meaningful partnerships with families and communities.

Description of the Practice

The beginning of preschool through the end of first grade (roughly ages 3 to 7) is a critical time for young children to begin developing content knowledge, language and literacy, and social and emotional learning skills. These developing competencies not only enhance children’s learning experiences in their earliest years of schooling but also provide the foundation for more advanced learning as they progress through the grades. The early years of schooling provide an opportunity for teachers to nurture a young child’s natural curiosity and eagerness to learn. During these years, it is imperative for educators to cultivate supportive classroom relationships and promote a child’s positive identity formation; each child brings a diverse set of assets to the classroom that are to be recognized as valuable in their own right, honored by all, and leveraged for school learning.

For children who are DLLs/ELs, these early grades also represent a time of adapting, many for the first time, to new cultural, academic, and linguistic demands. It is important for educators to recognize that young DLL/EL children will learn the school-related content knowledge and skills expected of all students; in many cases, they will do so in a new or relatively new language—English—and also in ways that may be different from those in their homes, communities, and cultures.

An assets-oriented framework that is based on research is critically important for cultivating DLL/EL children’s academic achievement and positive identity formation (Espinosa, 2010; Goldenberg, 2013). A research-based, assets-oriented framework takes into account, for example, that children of Mexican immigrants are typically highly socially competent and mentally healthy, resilient and adaptive to change based on family migration experiences. They are also typically collaborative and oriented to learning in peer group settings, and from families with strong beliefs in the value of educational success (Gándara, 2016). Focusing on these assets, rather than on what DLL/EL children are perceived to lack, can lead to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.

Assets-oriented practices include using books and other instructional materials that reflect the homes, communities, and cultures of DLL/EL children; welcoming family members into the classroom to sing songs, read books, or engage in culturally relevant oral storytelling in children’s home languages; learning about the arts in students’ home cultures and creating art that is culturally based; creating books in the child’s home language and about the child’s home community; and providing opportunities for students to use their home language freely in learning tasks.

In addition to honoring and sustaining students’ home languages and cultures in the classroom, research indicates that drawing on students’ home language, knowledge, and cultural assets supports their literacy development in English. Examples (see the highlight below) include

previewing and reviewing new concepts in a child’s home language, previewing and reviewing a new story to be read in English in a child’s home language, making connections between words or phrases in a child’s home language to those in English, and connecting new concepts in English with a child’s prior knowledge or experiences in the home and community (Saunders and Goldenberg, 1999).

Parents and families are their children’s first teachers, and children benefit from family-school partnerships that view families as assets in DLL/EL children’s education. Meaningful partnerships can include home visiting programs, where teachers visit children’s homes and learn about their families, cultures, and home experiences. Partnerships can also include schools regularly and frequently inviting parents and families into the school to engage in culturally relevant, school-related activities, such as family science, arts, or math nights.

Practice in Action

The following example was highlighted in the recent National Academies synthesis (2018) and is set in an early childhood program for DLLs.

The Early Authors Program (Bernhard et al., 2006) was an innovative effort in Miami-Dade County, Florida, to provide bilingual literacy experiences for parents and young preschool-age DLLs. The program engaged parents and children in joint literacy activities: writing and illustrating dual language stories about themselves—identity texts—that were based on family history, events in the children’s lives, and topics in which the children were interested. More than 1,000 children from 32 early childhood centers participated, and they represented 800 low-income families, mostly Hispanic/Latinx, African American, or Caribbean/Haitian. Over the course of the 12-month intervention, more than 3,000 dual language books were produced.

The evaluation of the intervention was based on assessments of the children’s preschool language and learning skills in their dominant language, as well as observations of the children’s engagement in literacy activities. The findings were encouraging. After participating in the program, DLL children showed significant growth in language expression and comprehension. They also experienced improvements in literacy engagement and self-esteem.

(Adapted from *Promising Futures*, Box 5-4, p. 195)

Tools and Resources

This website features guidance, resources, and 20 three-minute videos ([The Young Dual Language Learner](#)) for creating an assets-oriented, warm, and supportive learning environment for DLL/EL children in preschool. It offers online streaming, a [presenter’s guide](#), and questions & reflections: [Teaching at the Beginning: Serving Preschool Educators and Low-income Families](#)

These Teaching Channel videos provide ideas for nurturing a classroom learning community in kindergarten and first grade that cultivates an assets orientation, honors students’ cultural and linguistic diversity, and partners meaningfully with parents toward common academic and social-emotional learning goals: [Star Student of the Day](#) and [D.E.A.R. Reading—Family Style](#).

This document from the United States Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, offers guidance to assist state educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), outlying areas, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), schools, and community-based organizations to support quality early learning experiences:

[Expanding Opportunities to Support our Youngest Learners](#).

This set of free resources from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, which includes [Partnering with Families of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners](#), offers strategies for educators to strengthen relationships with families by focusing on families' strengths, building on a shared commitment to the child's well-being and success: [Building Partnerships with Families Series](#)

2. Provide children with opportunities to maintain and develop their home languages while they are also developing English.

Description of the Practice

DLL/EL children benefit from a dual focus on the systematic development of English and ongoing support to maintain and develop their home language. Research shows that, over time, DLL/EL children who participate in dual language/multilingual programs that provide instruction in the home language along with English often attain the same or higher levels of academic achievement and proficiency in English—especially in domains related to academic literacy and oral language development—compared to students in all-English programs (August and Shanahan, 2006; Faulkner-Bond et al., 2012; Lindholm-Leary and Borsato, 2006; Méndez et al., 2015; Umansky and Reardon, 2014).

Because maintenance and development of strong language skills in a child’s first language have been shown to facilitate their development of English, developing high levels of proficiency in English is one compelling reason to promote multilingual programs for DLL/EL children. Another reason is because multilingualism has social, cultural, linguistic, and cognitive advantages that may be valuable in later development (Saiz and Zoido, 2005), not to mention the economic benefits of being able to communicate proficiently in multiple languages.

Language revitalization programs that include culture-based education, where DLLs/ELs have an opportunity to reclaim the language of their communities and deepen their knowledge of their cultural heritage, play an important role in broader multilingual education efforts. For most American Indian/Native Alaskan groups, for example, language is a key to cultural identity, and efforts to revitalize the heritage language by teaching it to young tribal members are important to sustaining and strengthening tribal culture. For children living on tribal lands whose languages are in danger of extinction, language revitalization is a matter of extreme urgency.

Regardless of the program model, all DLL/EL children benefit from learning environments where they are encouraged to use their home language to learn and communicate with others and where they are nurtured to leverage and develop all of their languages. Educators who do not work in a dual language program can still promote multilingual development in tangible ways, including intentionally incorporating the languages and cultures of each student in the class whenever possible and promoting the use of the home language in classroom activities.

Practice in Action

The following recommended instructional practices offer tangible approaches that teachers in both monolingual and dual language programs can adopt to support DLL/EL children’s home language maintenance and English language development. In addition, in dual language programs, the recommendations support children’s continuing home language development in advancing biliteracy proficiency. Teachers might work together to determine which of the recommended practices they will adopt first and then add additional ones over time.

- Teachers meet with parents early in the school year to learn about the child and family, especially early language experiences and cultural experiences.

- School leaders and teachers recruit parents, family members, and community members to volunteer in the classroom so children have opportunities to hear and use their home language and so their families and community members are seen as valued partners in the school community.
- Teachers, parents, and community members work together to create culturally and linguistically infused curriculums, including culture-based instructional approaches and visuals, charts, and books that represent the languages, cultures, communities, and cultural practices of children in the classroom.
- Teachers post labels of words (e.g., color words, numbers, names of objects) in each child’s home language and introduce other key words and phrases in children’s home languages during learning activities, with help from families or community volunteers.
- School administrators, librarians, and teachers work together to ensure that each classroom is well-stocked with books that accurately represent each child’s cultures and communities and that are written in each child’s home language.
- School librarians provide a range of culturally relevant books and books in children’s home languages so parents and families can use them at home for shared book reading experiences.
- Teachers invite parents and family members to read culturally relevant books to children in their home language during the school day so children see their cultural assets reflected in the school curriculum and so families feel a greater sense of connection to the school community through the validation of their cultures.
- Teachers, librarians, and instructional coaches provide opportunities for professional learning to parents and families to learn new techniques to support reading/listening comprehension, vocabulary development, and emergent literacy in the home language.
- Teachers make time for frequent individual and small-group language learning experiences in the home language.
- Teachers explicitly use cognates in the home language and English to make connections between the two languages.
- Teachers, with support from specialists (e.g., English language development teachers), assess what children know and can do in their home language and in English at the beginning of the school year and routinely assess each child’s growing language and conceptual knowledge and skills in both languages to understand growth over time.

(Adapted from Espinosa and Magruder [2015] in *Promising Futures*, Box 5-5, p. 197 and Box 9-2, p. 346)

Tools and Resources

In these Teaching Channel videos, preschool teachers discuss how they promote the development of both English and children’s home languages: [Building Language Through Thematic Teaching](#) and [Dual Language Learners: Developing Literacy](#)

This New America resource can be used by educators in both dual language and monolingual English programs. It offers ideas to support students to “translanguage” in the classroom, or use

both of their languages to communicate what they know and can do, which provides a comfortable space for children to navigate across all of their languages: [Bringing Translanguaging into Dual Language Education Programs](#)

This free digital resource from the Center for Applied Linguistics is designed for educators, researchers, policymakers, and all who are interested in effective dual language education. It can be used by school and district teams who are just beginning to establish a dual language program or for established dual language programs engaging in continuous improvement: [Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education – Third Edition](#)

3. Engage children in interactive book reading experiences with complex texts that promote content knowledge, oral language, academic language, and emergent literacy development.

Description of the Practice

The case for quality interactions with complex narrative and informational texts in the early years of schooling has been well established over the past several decades and reinforced in recent years (Brydon, 2010; Castro, 2014; Collins, 2010; Davison et al., 2011; Silverman et al., 2013; University of Chicago, 2010). The call to incorporate complex texts in early childhood education is reflected in current state academic and language learning standards. However, traditionally, the curriculum in the early grades has focused primarily on teaching students the basics of reading and writing (for example, phonological awareness, concepts of print, phonics and word knowledge, spelling). Developing foundational literacy skills early is critically important, but research indicates that young children also benefit from knowing the meanings of words they are reading or hearing (vocabulary knowledge), think deeply and critically about what they are reading (reading comprehension), and write with the organization, development, substance, and style appropriate to the task and the audience’s expectations (writing proficiency).

Complex texts are different from simple texts, such as those children use to learn to decode, in a few key ways. First, complex texts are generally more cognitively challenging and engaging than simple texts and therefore offer opportunities for critical thinking and extended discussions through multiple readings. Second, important conceptual knowledge is embedded in complex texts, knowledge that children need to develop in order to be academically successful. Third, complex texts expose children to text-based (often termed “academic”) language, including sophisticated and content-rich vocabulary², complex grammatical structures and syntax, and language that is unique to the discipline (for example, the use of figurative language in stories or scientific terms in science informational texts). Such attributes of complex texts and the exposure to the type of language, conceptual knowledge, and ideas that only books can afford highlight the value of reading high quality complex texts to children in the early years of schooling.

Because young children are typically not decoding independently, quality interactions with complex texts occur through interactive teacher read-alouds. Teachers who want to ensure their young DLL/EL children can interact meaningfully with complex texts can consider being strategic about planning and providing support in language use and comprehension. This support begins with text selection. Children’s trade books are chosen on the basis of their content- and language-rich quality, their appeal to young children, their cultural relevance, and their alignment with learning goals and content standards. The complex texts that teachers read aloud need to be engaging enough to sustain children’s interest over multiple encounters as teachers pose increasingly complex literal and inferential comprehension questions to support meaning-making and delve deeply into the texts’ key concepts or themes.

² Educators may be familiar with different terms for what is often termed “academic” vocabulary, or the vocabulary found in complex texts. These terms include general academic (or tier II) vocabulary (e.g., *encounter*, *marvelously*) that is more sophisticated than the words typically used in everyday interactions and domain-specific (or tier III) vocabulary that is content-rich (e.g., *metamorphosis*, *desegregation*).

While reading, teachers pause at strategic places to prompt students to discuss text-dependent questions and to explain specific language in the text, such as new conceptual terms, sophisticated vocabulary, or unfamiliar phrasing. Teachers use dialogic reading techniques and peer-to-peer discussion routines (e.g., turn and talk, think-pair-share) to develop children’s listening comprehension, ability to talk about the text, and conceptual knowledge. During such interactive book reading, teachers listen carefully to what the children say and evaluate their responses in order to provide strategic scaffolding. This could look like prompting children to expand on their responses, recasting what children say in order to reinforce their ideas, or asking follow up questions to clarify thinking. Such interactions are essential for teachers to include during interactive read-alouds; they support children to develop critical comprehension, oral language, and literacy skills, along with important content knowledge, so they can engage meaningfully in grade level learning and have a strong foundation as they advance through the grades (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015).

A critical feature of interactive read-alouds is the opportunity children have to talk with peers—in pairs or small groups—about higher-order text-dependent questions. This type of discussion is essential as it provides an opportunity for children to engage in critical thinking, stretch themselves to higher levels of language proficiency, and generate peer feedback to refine thinking and language. Frequent and purposeful discussion is also supportive of positive social interactions in the classroom and for cultivating children’s academic identity.

In addition, during these read-alouds, teachers can draw students’ attention to the language that is in complex texts. For example, teachers may help children to notice how the text is organized or what type of language the author used and what effect it has on the reader. They carefully select a specified number of vocabulary words and longer stretches of language (e.g., figurative language, idiomatic expressions) and pause to explain them during the read-alouds to support children’s comprehension of the text while reading. To build children’s receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, they teach some of these words explicitly after the children have been exposed to them and develop deeper knowledge over time by prompting children to use the words in speaking and writing/composing.

Children also need opportunities to develop their expertise in writing authentic texts and to exert their agency as writers. Following teacher read-alouds, children may write/compose to express their thoughts about a text-dependent comprehension question, or they may write their own version of the text that was read (e.g., a story, a science description). Complex texts provide mentorship for writing and models of conceptual ideas, text organization, and language that children can adopt as they craft their own original texts.

Practice in Action

An intentional approach to interactive teacher read-alouds and vocabulary instruction can improve young DLLs/ELs’ language and literacy skills and content knowledge. The following example—an intervention in kindergarten in the content area of science (Spycher, 2009)—illustrates an approach that pre-kindergarten–first-grade (PK-1) teachers can take to enhance their interactive read aloud and vocabulary instruction routines.

Over the course of the five-week intervention, the teacher read 10 different complex texts (six informational texts and four narrative texts) that were part of the teacher’s regular inquiry-based science curriculum (a unit about insects). The teacher read each text aloud multiple times using dialogic reading techniques, and students engaged in think-pair-share routines during the read-alouds to discuss different text-dependent questions with peers. The teacher’s regular read-aloud routine was enhanced by an explicit focus on 20 general academic vocabulary words (e.g., examine, describe, similar) and domain-specific vocabulary words (e.g., larva, metamorphosis) from the texts. These words were deemed useful for students to learn in depth so they would be able to discuss and write about the science concepts that were part of the unit’s learning goals, as well as concepts in subsequent units of study.

The vocabulary lessons followed teacher read-alouds and science lessons where students first encountered the words in context. The teacher taught the science lesson and read the text twice—once in the context of the science lesson, and once (usually the next day) directly before the vocabulary lesson was taught. The vocabulary lessons followed a consistent format:

1. Say the word, write the word, have students repeat it chorally, clap the number of syllables together with the children, and briefly situate the word in its original context to remind them where they heard it.
2. Provide a student-friendly definition (an easy to understand explanation in children’s language). Have the students echo the definition chorally.
3. Explain the meaning of the word more fully in the context of the original text.
4. Provide examples of the word used in other child-relevant contexts (include pictures, graphic organizers, movement, and other scaffolds).
5. Support students to provide their own sentences with (a) questions suggesting contexts and (b) sentence frames for structured think-pair-share so that all students have an opportunity to use the word meaningfully.
6. Ask short-answer questions to hone understanding and to play with the words. Repeat the word chorally to remind students which word they just learned.

Results indicated that the children in the intervention group grew more than those in the control group in terms of their receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge and their science conceptual understanding. In addition, the teacher reported noticing the children using the vocabulary words taught in subsequent learning activities and being able to engage more deeply in discussions about related science concepts over time.

Tools and Resources

These practice guides from the What Works Clearinghouse provide evidence-based recommendations that address reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and content area instruction. Each recommendation includes extensive examples of activities that can be used to support students as they build the language and literacy skills needed to be successful in school: [Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School](#), [Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#), and [Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers](#).

This Teaching Channel video features a preschool teacher engaging her DLL/EL children in an interactive read-aloud with a complex literary text in ways that support their comprehension, vocabulary development, and love of reading: [Interactive Read-Aloud](#).

This free online article from Reading Rockets provides guidance for planning repeated interactive read-alouds that provide opportunities for children to enjoy and discuss the ideas in complex literary texts, extend their conceptual thinking, and develop their vocabulary knowledge: [Repeated Interactive Read Alouds in Preschool and Kindergarten \(McGee & Schickedanz, 2007\)](#).

In this blog post from the National Association for Collaborative Conversations, a first grade teacher and two university researchers describe a collaborative project in which they set out to facilitate meaningful, student-led discussions about literature and share several strategies they incorporated to support meaningful peer-to-peer, text-based discussions: [Speaking and Listening in the Primary Grades](#).

4. Teach foundational literacy skills explicitly, monitor progress frequently, and provide additional support to children who need it, based on assessments results.

Description of the Practice

Foundational literacy skills—print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and oral reading fluency—are necessary components of a robust and comprehensive early education program for all children. These skills are not an end in themselves. Rather, when young children master foundational literacy skills in a timely manner, as indicated by grade-level state standards, they are on a strong trajectory to be proficient readers and writers of a variety of texts, in a range of content areas, as they progress through the grades. Attention to these skills is critical for all children. For DLL/EL children, there are additional considerations that influence the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Children who are DLLs/ELs may be learning foundational literacy skills in their home language, in English, or in both languages. Typically, in dual-language programs, young DLL/EL children learn foundational literacy skills first in their home language and then in English, though sometimes they will learn these skills in both languages simultaneously. Foundational literacy skills in the home language provide a scaffold for developing those same skills in their second language, and the same skills, such as the skill of recognizing the sounds that letters make in an alphabetic language (e.g., Spanish), often transfer to English (Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993).

When learning in a program that is predominantly in English, the general pattern for developing foundational literacy skills found with English-proficient students appears to be the same for DLLs/ELs (Shanahan and Beck, 2006). Further, research indicates that explicit instruction in key aspects of English foundational literacy skills—phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, oral reading fluency, and vocabulary—is beneficial for DLLs/ELs. It is helpful to teach children to hear the individual English sounds or phonemes within words (phonemic awareness); to use the letters and spelling patterns within words to decode the words' pronunciations (phonics and word recognition); and to read text aloud with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression (oral reading fluency).

Because DLLs/ELs in English-dominant programs are developing their English language proficiency while they are acquiring foundational literacy skills in English, there are important considerations to keep in mind regarding foundational literacy skills instruction. These considerations include an understanding of similarities and differences between children's home languages and English and their foundational reading skills in the home language. These understandings can support efficient and effective foundational reading skills in English. For example, if DLL/EL children whose home language is Spanish already have acquired phonemic awareness in their home language, they do not need to relearn this skill in English. However, they may benefit from teachers drawing their attention to sounds that occur in English that do not occur in Spanish when learning to decode in English. Also, it is important to ensure that children know the meanings of the words they are decoding in English.

Even when learning to decode, it is important to focus DLL/EL children’s attention on the primary goal of reading, which is to make meaning. Given the uneven developmental nature of second language development and reading development, additional attention to evaluating DLL/EL children’s foundational reading skills in English will lead to more accurate instructional decision making and, thus, more efficient and effective instruction.

Practice in Action

Assessment is a key factor for providing effective foundational literacy skills instruction that meet students’ needs. Baker et al. (2014) and Gersten et al. (2007) suggest a comprehensive foundational literacy skills assessment system with consistent procedures for assessing children and training for educators to administer assessments. Schools and districts that adopt such an assessment system provide professional learning and ongoing support to teachers to embrace the following practices:

- Administer screening assessments to DLLs/ELs at the beginning of the school year to establish their current proficiency and identify any potential reading difficulties.
- Collect progress monitoring data at least three times a year to gauge growth and determine specific additional instructional approaches that may be needed for individual students.
- Use data from screening and progress monitoring assessments to plan differentiated instruction and provide tailored additional support to accelerate progress.
- Use multiple types of foundational literacy skills assessments to have a comprehensive picture of student learning needs. For grades PK–1, the types of assessments used include those that assess phonological awareness, familiarity with the alphabet and alphabetic principle, ability to read single words, and knowledge of basic phonics rules. For children in the first grade, additional assessments include those that measure reading connected texts accurately and fluently.
- Engage in formative assessment practices, including observing students closely each day while they read, talk, and write in order to make adjustments to lessons and instructional approaches.
- Examine students’ writing samples over time (e.g., weekly or monthly) in order to determine student growth over time, challenges individual students or groups of students are experiencing, and areas for instructional improvement.

(Adapted from guidance in *Promising Futures* chapters 8 and 10)

Tools and Resources

This practice guide by the Institute of Education Sciences—What Works Clearinghouse provides four recommendations for teaching foundational reading skills to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade, including those that pertain to foundational literacy skills. Each recommendation includes implementation steps and solutions for common obstacles and provides supporting evidence: [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#).

In this online article from WETA's ¡Colorín colorado! webpage, Karen Ford and Rebecca Palacios share some ways that early Spanish and English literacy instruction are similar and different, explain the order in which reading skills are typically taught in Spanish, and suggest activities in the classroom and at home that complement instruction: [Early Literacy Instruction in Spanish: Teaching the Beginning Reader.](#)

This online Reading Rockets article by Beth Antunez shows how teachers can support DLLs/ELs who speak Spanish to develop foundational literacy skills in English and Spanish, along with considerations that are specific to DLL/EL children: [English Language Learners and the Five Essential Components of Reading Instruction.](#)

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