A Good Place to Raise a Family?
Comparing parents', service-providers', and media perspectives of the inner and outer suburban areas of Melbourne

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Abstract: In Australia, the suburbs have historically been the favoured place to raise children. However this is being challenged both by social change and government policy encouraging inner-urban renewal. We examined how inner-urban areas compare with more traditional suburban locations as places to raise a family. Recognising that there are many influences on perceptions of place, we included the opinions of parents, service-providers and the media in the two locations.

Research focused on two municipalities in Melbourne, one located >25km and the other <10km from the CBD. Themes were obtained and compared from in-depth interviews with parents, service-providers and analysis of municipality-specific and state-wide newspaper articles.

Service provision was the only theme common at all levels of analysis. For all other themes, differences occurred between perspectives of service-providers, media and parents, as well as between the two residential locations. These in-depth snapshots on the challenges and rewards of raising children in different urban locations can help inform government in planning healthy neighbourhoods that better serve the needs of contemporary Australian families.

Introduction

In order to curb urban sprawl in many Australian cities, recent policy has placed a strong emphasis on inner-urban consolidation and in-fill housing development. Much of this has been aimed at empty-nesters, singles or young couples without children (Fincher, 2007). Yet increasing numbers of families with children are choosing to live in inner-city areas. Between the 2001 and 2011 Australian censuses, the percentage of children residing in suburbs adjacent to, and including, the central area of Melbourne (an Australian State capital city), has steadily increased (ABS 2001, 2006, 2011). In some suburbs, the percentage of children is now higher than the Victorian and Australian averages.

Historically families have favoured raising children in suburbia in Australia (Short, 1978). There is thus little research on raising children in inner-city locations. Whitzman and Mizrachi's (2012) work with primary school-aged children and their parents in high-rise apartments, provides some insights into children's independent travel mobility in inner-city Melbourne. In research exploring whether various inner-suburbs of Newcastle were appropriate for children, Mee (2012) found mixed results however; few parents were interviewed as part of this study. Comparative studies are very limited and have produced conflicting findings. Brownlee (1993) showed families from outer-Melbourne suburbs felt more supported by their neighbours with child-related activities than those from inner-Melbourne, whereas a recent pilot study found less support amongst outer-suburban than inner-suburban parents (Andrews et al., 2012).

The aim of the current study was to help fill this knowledge gap by comparing perspectives on raising children in inner-suburbs with the traditionally more family-orientated outer-suburbs. Recognising that the reputation of suburbs as places to raise a family will be based on the perceptions of both outsiders and insiders, this study included the opinions of parents, service-providers and the media in the two locations. Specifically this study addressed the following research questions:

What are the similarities and differences between perceptions of inner and outer Melbourne municipalities as places to raise a family?
What are the similarities and differences between parents, service-providers and the media perspectives in these two locations?

Methods

As the aim of this research was to compare perspectives on place, a qualitative methods were utilised. Specifically, a qualitative descriptive approach was selected (Sandelowski, 2000), underpinned by ecological theory which espouses that raising children is likely to be influenced by a series of interconnecting domains involving parents' individual characteristics, social networks, employment and neighbourhood contextual features (Luster & Okagaki, 2008).

Study location

The research focused on in two municipalities in Melbourne, one located >25km and the other <10km from the CBD. These municipalities were selected as they have the highest proportion of children under five years for either an inner or outer-Melbourne municipality (ABS, 2011). Parents of preschool-aged children were selected as previous studies have shown this age-group of children is highly dependent on their parents to mediate their relationship with place (Witten et al., 2009). The authors have decided not to name the municipalities or any identifying features to avoid any stigma being attached to either of the communities; they will be referred to in this paper as the outer and inner-urban municipality respectively.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Deakin University Human Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the research (approval number: HEAG-H 97_2011).

Interviews

The study took a stratified purposive approach to recruitment of parents. To be eligible, parents were required to have at least one preschool-age child and have lived in their municipality for at least 12 months. In each of the two municipalities, parents were recruited from one relatively established, and one newer suburb (in the case of the inner-area parents were specifically recruited from new urban in-fill developments in one suburb). Recruitment was via fliers displayed in, or distributed to, users of the community services for families with young children including; maternal and child health services, mothers' groups, playgroups, childcare centres, community centres and preschools. Where requested, a researcher (SR) was invited to visit a group and explain the project.

Parents were interviewed on a range of topics relating to raising children in their municipality as part of a larger project. For this study, the focus was on parents' experiences of raising their children in their municipality. Interviews were audio-recorded and took approximately one hour. Ten participants were interviewed in each municipality; all were women. In both municipalities there were similar spreads of education attainment and mortgage repayments. All parents had access to a car when they were caring for their children. Further details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Parent characteristics

Characteristic	Inner-municipality	Outer-municipality
Age (years)	32 – 42	27 - 42
Marital status	Partnered (n=8) Single (n=2)	Partnered (n=10)
Number of children	1 – 2	1 - 3
Working arrangement	Home full time (n=4) Employed part-time (n=6)	Home full time (n=4) Employed part-time (n=6)
Highest qualification completed	Apprenticeship (n=1) Certificate level (n=2) University degree (n=7)	Year 12 (n=1) Certificate level (n=4) University degree (n=5)
Outlay on mortgage payments (fraction of household income)	$1/4$ or less (n=3) $1/4$ - $1/3$ (n=3) $1/3$ or more (n=4)	$1/4$ or less (n=2) $1/4$ - $1/3$ (n=4) $1/3$ or more (n=4)
Location	Established suburb (n=6) Newer suburb (n=4)	Established suburb (n=5) Newer suburb (n=5)

Ten service-providers (five in each municipality) were also interviewed. All were female, Council employees, with a mix of those living inside or outside the municipality. They were selected for interview by their senior managers on the basis of having a good understanding of the issues for preschool-aged children and their parents. Their work covered the delivery of preschools, maternal and child health and childcare in each of the two municipalities. All had undertaken post-secondary

school education. Service-providers were interviewed about their professional perspectives on their municipality as a place to raise children.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, read thoroughly to check the accuracy of the transcription as well as to remove all identifying material and assign pseudonyms to participants. A thematic approach was taken to the analysis of interview data involving data coding and the grouping of these codes into themes (Creswell, 2009). At each stage of the analysis process validation discussions were held between the two researchers responsible for the interview analysis (SR & FJA) to ensure drift in the definition of codes or themes did not occur (Creswell 2009).

Media analysis

Newspaper articles were accessed over a period of 12 months using the Factiva database. Four newspaper archives were searched: the main local newspaper for each municipality and the two metropolitan daily papers. The search strategy used combined a range of terms pertaining to young families and raising a family, and terms specific to each of the two municipalities and their constituent suburbs:

> (Housing OR Homes OR housing development OR new homes OR land release OR infrastructure OR families OR young families OR density OR shortage OR shortages OR kinder OR pre-school OR childcare OR childcare places OR children OR raise a family OR raising a family OR waiting list) AND
> (list of suburbs) N.B. Suburbs were only included when searching metropolitan dailies

The initial search retrieved a total of 785 articles for the outer area and 891 for the inner area. These articles were then read and compared to a criteria list to evaluate whether the articles should be included in the analysis (Table 2.).

Table 2. Inclusion & exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria

Must EXPLICITLY include reference to:
     Housing, homes, residential property or living at home[+]; and
     Families which include children; and
     Area specific location[^]
	Does not meet the minimum inclusion criteria; or
	 is a community notice/ advertisement; or
	 is a commercial notice/ advertisement; or
	 is generalised to the state as a whole; or
	 is only financial summary; or
	 is an obituary; or
	 is a duplicate article (so that each article only counts once)

AND at least one of:
     Children under 5 years old; or
     Services which would be relevant for young families and children under 5[*]; or
     Public or social housing, with implications for families and children under 5[#]; or
     Buying a home, with implications for families and children under 5[%]; or
     Specific discussion of 'raising' a family	

+ i.e. *living* in the area rather than being a visitor, tourist or commuting in for work.
^ i.e. is NOT a state-wide issue/discussion; specific to suburb or city.
* e.g. kinder, child care, playgrounds, GPs etc.
# i.e. NOT new arrivals/asylum seekers etc. without young children.
% i.e. might include buying a first home but NOT buying retirement home, or investment properties.

Using these criteria, three researchers (FJA, RK, SBG) each separately coded a random sample of newspaper articles to check consistency in interpreting the criteria and to review the appropriateness of the criteria. Discrepancies in coding were resolved by discussing the differences in interpretation and revising criteria to be clearer and more directive. Minor changes were also made to make sure that relevant stories were not excluded by over-prescriptive exclusion criteria.

After one researcher classified the whole set of articles retrieved from Factiva (RK), there was a second round of checking. Using a random sample from both the provisionally included and excluded articles, three researchers (FJA, RK, SB) each separately coded the articles with 88% inter-rater

reliability. Discrepancies were localised to one specific criterion, services relevant to families with children under 5 years old, and this criterion was further clarified and articles re-coded appropriately. Following this, 34 articles were included in the final analysis (13 from the outer and 21 from the inner-municipality).

Articles included in the analysis were entered into Leximancer (a text analytic software programme). Leximancer derives themes from the text through a process of 'discovery', analysing texts on the basis of the frequency of words and terms, proximity of phrases and 'sentiment' (or whether terms are typically positive or negative). To account for the editorial style of newspaper articles, the threshold for Leximancer to recognise a block of text was reduced to one sentence and the 'phrase separation' was turned off so that there did not need to be chunks of text between recognised phrases; the 'boilerplate' cut off was also turned off to ensure that no regular phrases were excluded; the 'bi-gram sensitivity' was increased to four words, to capture common combinations of words such as "young families" up to four words in length; and the 'classification concept' threshold was set to 4, which weights the analysis in favour of finding a concept within a block of text. The themes size was set to 25%, that is of all the concepts identified in the analysis, a quarter were visible as themes in the analysis display.

Leximancer is an appropriate analysis program for a media analysis project because it uses neutral readings of the words and phrases in the text, based on commonly understood meanings. This leads to 'discovery' of the kinds of ideas being communicated by the newspaper articles, rather than the interpretation of any individual reader. Subsequently, the findings reflect what is likely to be typically 'taken away' by the population as a whole, recognising of course that individual readers may have additional views or ideas that will bias their reading.

Development of key themes across the datasets
Following the individual collection of themes from parents, service-providers and the media, the themes were examined for consistency and inclusion in the final analysis. A theme was included in the final analysis if it emerged from at least two sources in a municipality e.g. service-provider and parents. This final step of the analysis resulted in four themes emerging from the data; service provision, transport, public open space and social connectedness. Exemplary quotes were then identified from the service-provider and parent interviews along with the media stories for each of these themes. The following abbreviations are used M = media, SP = service-provider, P = parent.

Findings

Service provision
Service deficits were of equal concern in the two municipalities. Population growth putting pressure on services for families was a theme common in both locations from the media, service-providers and parents. For example:

> 'The sad fact is that many families have to wait far too long for even basic services and in some cases the very reasons they buy homes in new estates don't actually eventuate.' (M – outer)

> 'More young families are becoming attracted to the area due to the proximity to the CBD and this is increasing demand for early childhood services. At the same time, there is an expectation these services are available because this municipality is an established LGA.' (SP – inner)

One specific area of service provision that was equally difficult to access for parents in both municipalities was general practitioners (GPs):

> 'I think GPs can be hard to access… We do have a regular GP and we are all on the list but we can't often get in on the day… We've gone down to emergency for less urgent things because we haven't been able to get into a GP. Like with three kids and waiting in emergency for two hours is just ludicrous. So I do think we need to get some GPs to set up shop or do something to attract GPs.' (P – inner)

However, there were also differences between the two municipalities with regards to specific services. Access to playgroups and other support services were generally more problematic in the outer than inner-municipality. One parent explained:

'In terms of services, is there is an issue of over-crowding... there's too many wanting to do things... You know rhyme time at the library here is massive. There can be a hundred or more. I'm not kidding. Whereas when we go to my sister-in-laws up in Queensland and went to a local library up there, there was less than ten in the room and my daughter blossomed because she could get to interact with other kids.' (P – outer)

Another key area of divergence was childcare. Whilst parents in the outer municipality were generally satisfied with the supply of child care places, limited childcare places was a problem in the inner-municipality, a fact recognised by service-providers and parents alike:

'The changing demographics is placing more demand on formal childcare services as there are less extended families available for the care of children.' (SP – inner)

'I put Tate down for childcare the week he was born and he started 11 months later. So had I wanted to go back to work earlier I could not have because there was no child care.' (P - inner)

Another difference was with regards to schools. Parents in the outer-suburbs were generally satisfied with the provision of schools however; those in the inner-municipality held concerns about the limited options for secondary schools in the area:

'It's like the elephant in the room, you can't really touch on families and how they are being provided for in the area without talking about schools. Because we've got a beautiful range of primary schools and then absolutely nothing at secondary level.' (P - inner)

Transport

In contrast to service-provision, transport was a theme that differed significantly between the two municipalities. Overall parents in the outer-municipality were highly car-dependent whereas those in the inner-municipality often chose not to use their cars to get around with their children.

In the outer-municipality, service-providers and the media focussed on limited public transport as a reason for car dependency. For example one service-provider said:

'The public transport network is not wide enough in the area; as a result there is more social isolation and traffic.' (SP - outer)

Outer-suburban parents explained this differently however; with all talking about how they preferred to use a car to get around with their children rather than public transport even when it was available. One parent explained:

'We normally drive everywhere... I don't like public transport... once I got a car, I thought if I don't have to use it [public transport] I'm not going to.' (P – outer)

However, parents' experiences did align with service-providers about the design of estates being a cause of traffic congestion:

'They didn't plan for good access to good roads... because if I want to travel out of my estate there is only one lane. So all these roads for this estate, they all go into this same road. In the morning if you travel before 8 o'clock and in the evening after 4 o'clock the roads are packed with cars. (P – outer)

Most parents in the outer-municipality did not walk around their neighbourhoods with the children. This was highlighted by service-providers who were concerned about the low levels of physical activity and motor-skills amongst preschool-aged children.

'Poor motor development skills are becoming increasingly apparent. Most kinder children don't know how to pedal a trike.' (SP – outer)

In contrast, in the inner-municipality, service-providers reported excellent levels of physical activity amongst preschool-aged children and this aligned with parents' experiences.

'To shops and to parks, we walk to most places... I actually prefer to walk than get in the car.' (P – inner)

Service-providers also suggested that parents might choose to live in the municipality because of its walk-ability a view that was supported by parents:

> 'Compared to outer suburbia where things are just more spread part, we chose the inner-city because things were more condensed, things were more local and you could walk places. So being able to walk to where you wanted to go was really important.' (P – inner)

In addition, many of the inner-suburban parents reported being regular users of public transport with their children. Interestingly there were no stories in the media about the walk-ability of the inner-municipality or the variety of transport options available, however the media did pick up on a significant area of concern to parents in the inner-municipality, namely air pollution.

> 'I didn't realise by moving to this municipality I would be giving up the right to expect what other Melburnians take for granted; clean air and a healthy environment.' (M – inner)

This was in part due to the volume of trucks using local streets. One parent explained:

> 'Yeah, so the trucks and the dust is probably my biggest complaint… I know my husband's said at times that it worries him our son growing up here with all the dust and everything like that and you do find that you get more coughs and things like that. It worries him a bit because you know it could lead to asthma or that kind of thing when you are growing up in an area like this.' (P - inner)

Parents additionally raised the associated road safety issues:

> 'I can't imagine a point in time where I would feel comfortable with my daughter heading out on her bike alone, in terms of the trucks.' (P - inner)

Public open space
In both municipalities, parents were satisfied with the provision of public open space such as playgrounds, reserves and recreation areas. For example one parent from the outer-municipality said:

> 'There's lots of play areas in my suburb. There's a playground sort of I think every kilometre or something which is good.' (P – outer)

However, this was not picked up by service-providers or in the media in the outer-municipality where a number of stories reported insufficient public open space or public open space still under development.

> 'They are seeking a better life for their families: clean air, open spaces and things for the kids to do. But they are getting shafted. These parents want their kids to grow up among other children their own age, to ride their bikes around the streets, and to be able to play safely in the local park'. (M – outer)

Service-providers and parents did collectively identify however, that public open spaces were under-utilised with parents reporting their children had all the necessary facilities to play in the home environment. As a result of this, there were concerns about children's opportunities for socialising with one service-provider saying:

> 'Home environments are too isolating for children. Screen time is increasing and they are then demanding screen time whilst at preschool.' (SP – outer)

In contrast, parents from the inner-municipality reported being highly dependent upon public open space and using it on a daily basis because of their limited private space. One parent said:

> 'People in the outer-suburbs like my friend has her backyards set up… with a cubby house, trampoline and the whole full park set. Her kids don't go out as often as mine do, because we don't have those facilities. So it is much more important for us to have that local stuff available.' (P - inner)

As a result of this, local parks and playgrounds were places that encouraged social connectedness amongst parents and children. For example one parent said:

'The park comes to foster that sense of community. It's a big meeting place. Whether we organise to meet someone there, you know [we've got] small houses, so it's a wonderful place when you've got kids. So it might be organised or it might be just informal connections.' (P - inner)

Interestingly, neither service-providers nor the media commented on the importance of public open space to parents raising children in the inner-city or the potential benefits this space provided for fostering social connectedness.

Social connectedness

Social connectedness was a theme that differed significantly between the two municipalities. In the outer-municipality there appeared to be a degree of social isolation amongst families. One service-provider related this to the design of many of the housing estates:

'The design of some estates is just not conducive to walking or neighbourhood cohesiveness.' (SP – outer)

This was also supported by parents in this study. For example one parent said of her neighbours:

'You just don't really run into them. Everybody sort of drives their car into their garage and shuts the garage door and you know, you don't really spend any time out in the street talking to people.' (P – outer)

She went on to explain how her isolation flowed on to her child:

'I don't know any of the kids in the street to let my son play with any of them.' (P – outer)

The affects of social isolation on children was also picked up by the media in the outer municipality:

'A health crisis has hit Melbourne's new housing estates, as isolation and poor basic services make it hard to care for children, a damning report has found.' (M – outer)

In contrast, the inner-municipality was described as an area where strong levels of social connectedness existed. Most parents described knowing at least one neighbour well, with many also describing how their neighbours supported them in raising their children. One parent said:

'Well I know everyone, and we've had a few street parties, so that's helped and yeah like we catch up with the neighbours next door once a week and the others more informal… and as the kids get older, hoping to do school drop offs and share things like that… it's like sharing responsibilities is a really nice thing to be able to do. (Parent – inner)

This was often related to housing being in close proximity or the fact that many parents walked around their suburb.

'It promotes a sense of community you know that chat over the fence, you know how are you and a bit of a talk. You don't feel isolated at all.' (P - inner)

'Just seeing them out on the street and saying hello. I guess the old fashioned way!' (P – inner)

Despite this, non-parental descriptions of social connectedness in the inner municipality were limited, with just one story in the media that highlighted how gentrification had increased opportunities for social connectedness:

'Now it's a thriving boutique shopping and cafe strip. All of the cafes have outdoor areas that are chockers with children and young families. Mums and dads are having a chardy while the kids play next to them. It's just magnificent -- fully alive and revived.' (M – inner)

Discussion

This research demonstrates some key differences but also some similarities between descriptions of raising children in an inner and outer-municipality of Melbourne. In addition, it demonstrates some variation in the ways these communities are described by service-providers, the media and parents. Although this was a small study, carried out at one point of time, with a particular group of parents and service-providers and may not be generalisable to other municipalities in Melbourne or Australia, the findings are very similar to those from a previous pilot study of parents in two other Melbourne municipalities (Andrews et al., 2012). The triangulation in data collection from three sources in the current study provides further strength to the analysis resulting in an in-depth snapshot of raising children in inner and outer-Melbourne.

Similarities and differences between the municipalities
Whilst much has been written about service deficits for families in outer growth corridors of Australian cities (Gilley, 1994, Kilmartin, 2006, Marston et al., 2003, Andrews & Swerissen, 2006, Williams et al., 2009, Andrews, 2010), the current study showed that this was of equal concern amongst parents, service-providers and the media in an inner-municipality. Difficulty in accessing key services for children, such as GPs and childcare, aligns with the recent increase in families choosing to raise children in inner-municipalities (ABS, 2001, 2006, 2011). Concerns about the provision of secondary schools are of particular note, given that all the parents interviewed had preschool-aged children. This suggests that not only are parents choosing to live in inner areas when children are young, but they also have a long-term commitment to these areas as places to raise children. This not only challenges earlier life-cycle models of residential location preference (Short, 1978), it also raises the need to support these inner-city families with appropriate services for children.

With regard to the theme of transport, some of the observations in this study are clearly related to infrastructure differences between the two municipalities. In the outer-municipality, limited public transport and the car-centred design of housing estates all contributed to traffic congestion and a car-dependent lifestyle in line with previous literature (Newman & Kenworthy, 1999, Luk, 2003, Williams et al., 2009, Andrews, 2010). Equally compelling however, were the apparent social differences in car use between the two municipalities. This aligns with research on the social construction of transport usage (Baslington, 2008) and needs to be recognised in any policy development to reduce car-dependency. Transport issues were also associated with quite different health concerns in the two communities. In line with previous studies, limited physical activity was an issue in the outer-municipality (Veitch et al., 2008), whereas heavy traffic was a concern in the inner-municipality (Mee, 2010). These differences also need to be acknowledged in future policy development.

Another area of difference between the two municipalities was the way in which public open space was used. Our findings differ somewhat from the work of Veitch et al. (2008), who studied an older cohort of children and found that variations in use of public open space between inner and outer-suburbs was related to accessibility. In the current study, playgrounds and parks were a core component of raising preschool-aged children in the inner-municipality, primarily because of limited private space. Regular use of these facilities had the additional benefit of encouraging socialising amongst families. The significance of public open space for children living in the inner-city has been described previously (Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2012). Our findings complement this and identify that this is not only limited to children in high-rise inner-city housing. In the outer-municipality where private space was more abundant, parents and service-providers recognised that playgrounds were not well utilised. Consequently, outer-suburban service-providers held concerns about children's isolation because of being restricted to the home environment. This is supported by research demonstrating the importance of playgrounds for young children's socialisation (Mitchell et al. 2006, De Visscher & Bouverne-de Bie, 2008).

Most striking, was the difference in family's social connectedness in the two municipalities. In line with existing literature the design of houses and car-dependency in the outer-municipality appeared to limit social connectedness (Richards, 1990, Gilley, 1994, Williams et al., 2009, Andrews, 2010). This was recognised by service-providers and in the media where links between social connectedness and poor health outcomes were described. In contrast, in the inner-municipality, social connectedness was high amongst the parents interviewed, in part due to proximity and walk-ability. However, this also related to the expectation that parents would help each out, even in relatively new in-fill developments. Given the growing evidence linking neighbourhood social connectedness and health (reviewed generally in Kelly et al., 2012 and specifically for parents in Moore & Fry, 2011), the reasons for the differences between the municipalities warrants further exploration. Research that examines the relative

contributions of contextual and family-specific factors could be useful in helping inform policy to improve social connectedness in the outer-suburban municipality.

Similarities and differences between sources

With the exception of service provision, where parents', service-providers', and media perceptions were fairly consistent, across the three other themes; transport, public open space and social connectedness there were differences in perceptions. Overall, service-provider and media perceptions tended to be less positive, which aligns with previous research comparing third party and residents' views of neighbourhoods (Kilmartin, 1996, Permentier et al., 2008, Whitley & Prince, 2005). Kilmartin argues that service-providers may form more negative perceptions than parents because of contact with a wider range of families or by having an exaggerated view of health-related issues. Focussing on lay perspectives, Permentier et al., suggest that residents may be more positive than non-residents because they have chosen to live in their community or have psychologically adapted to negative features. Furthermore, Whitley and Princes' work in inner-London revealed an anti-urban discourse amongst third-party observers. In the current study, in most cases there was not overt negativity from non-residents but, more a failure to recognise or report on positive aspects identified by parents. This was particularly the case in the inner-municipality with regards to the media, perhaps reflecting a limited recognition of the inner-suburbs as a setting for raising children in Australia.

Conclusions

Comparing the views of parents, service-providers and the media on 'a good place to raise a family' identified a number of themes that may be of use in planning more liveable suburbs for young families. Parents faced similar challenges around service-provision, but more place-specific challenges relating to transport, use of public open space and social connectedness Overall there is a need to better recognise that contemporary families are choosing to raise children in a variety of residential locations and that these locations bring with them similar and unique challenges.

Acknowledgements

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