

5 Children's experience of their parents' divorce¹

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A substantial body of research has developed over recent years exploring the impact of parental divorce on the growing number of children whose families break up (see Rodgers and Pryor 1998; Haskey 1996, 1997). At the same time however, not only in the sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1997; Qvortrup 1994; Butler 1996) but also in various areas of welfare practice (e.g. Butler 1999) the critical role played by children in fundamental social processes, including family dissolution and re-formation, has been (re)discovered and acknowledged. An increasing sense of children's agency (i.e. their capacity to act positively in matters that concern them), as well as their capacity to bring new perspectives on familiar problems, has brought forth an exciting research agenda exploring children's lived experience. Increasingly, this experience is reported upon and understood from children's own points of view and challenges the narrow focus that had previously been maintained on the consequences that the actions of adults have on children's lives.

The study reported here (Douglas *et al.* 2000; Butler *et al.* 2000) was funded by the ESRC as part of the 'Children 5-16' research programme. It is illustrative not only of children's active involvement in the process of their parents' divorce but also represents a contribution towards understanding divorce and family breakup from the point of view of those with good reason to know what this implies for children, namely children themselves.

The study sample comprised families drawn at random from the population of divorce cases (315 cases/families) heard in six courts across south Wales and the south west of England. Together these six courts gave a mix of city, town and country, increasing the likelihood of our sample being not only random but also representative. Each case involved at least one child aged between eight and 14 years. Analysis of data from court records indicates that the 70 families who finally took part in the study were representative of the initial random court sample across key variables (e.g. child's age, gender and relationship to the divorcing adults). On average children took part within 15 months (standard deviation (SD) = 2 months) of the divorce being granted (i.e. decree nisi being granted). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from each child and the parent with whom the child lived (resident parent). This allowed triangulation both in terms of the type (qualitative and quantitative) and the source

(child and parent) of data. (See Douglas *et al.* 2000 for a fuller description of the sampling procedure and method.)

Our final sample consisted of 104 children and young people (51 girls and 53 boys) who were, on average, 11 and a half years old (SD = 26 months) when they took part in the study. Through content analysis of their interview transcripts, several broad, overlapping themes were identified: 'finding out'; 'telling others'; 'change'; 'coping and support'; 'parent-child relationships'; and 'parents' new relationships'. Using data gathered under some of these headings, in this chapter we illustrate what it is like for children to live through parental separation and divorce. In doing this, we will demonstrate not only how children revealed themselves as active participants in the process of their parents' divorce, but as articulate, thoughtful individuals able to think reflectively and constructively about their personal experience and its implications for others.

Understanding the process

The children in our study typically experienced family breakdown and the consequent disruption to their everyday lives as a form of crisis. This is not to suggest that their responses were pathological. For we, like Rapoport, simply define crisis as 'an upset in a steady state' (Rapoport 1970: 276). This steady state has also been referred to as homeostasis or psychological equilibrium and the crisis as a turning point, where 'the individual's coping resources have been surpassed and a new approach has to be developed' (Thompson 2000: 79). The attempt to regain a new sense of balance in their lives is a defining characteristic of most children's reactions to the fact that their family was breaking up.

The immediate consequences of children 'finding out' that their parents were divorcing typically included an acute sense of shock, disbelief and emotional distress. Even where children had become aware of difficulties in their parents' relationship through direct observation of arguments or even domestic violence, the effect of a parent leaving was immediate and profound. Where children had been told that their parents were going to divorce, and most (70.9 per cent, 73 out of 103 respondents) said they were told, they were given little information. Additionally, less than half of the children (43.1 per cent, 44 out of 102 respondents) were given any explanation of what divorce would mean for them.

In this sense, few children had been actively 'prepared' by their parents for the separation, even where parents themselves had planned the process. Libby, aged 13, described the feelings experienced by a number of children that divorce was regarded by parents as essentially an adult matter:

It was like, 'Oh well, it's not really your problem, you don't have to go through all the divorce things', but no one seemed to realise I was sort of *there*. They were all concerned with what they were doing.

(Libby, aged 13)

It should be remembered that for family members, divorce was a new, uncharted and emotionally charged experience. One effect of this, reported frequently by both children and their resident parents, was that they were unsure what to say or how to say it. Parents said that they did not know what was happening themselves, so did not know what to tell their children. Children, in their turn, felt that they did not know how to ask for information that they felt they needed.

Another stumbling block to communication, again reported by both children and parents, was a reluctance to talk about the divorce. This reluctance was borne out of an expressed need to protect the other person. Children and parents each wanted to spare the other's feelings and save them from additional distress and upset.

I didn't feel like, I mean, you know it's a bit depressing to ask somebody who is getting divorced about divorce, you know!

(Shaun, aged 12)

What parents perhaps did not appreciate was that in trying to protect their children, they ran the risk of compounding the child's confusion and uncertainty about the future. Most children felt information was vital in helping them understand, cope with and adapt to the crisis of family breakup and most children reported that they would have preferred almost any dialogue at all to the uncertainty experienced through a lack of information and explanation.

Oliver: I thought it was all fine, except for the fact that they were all shouting at each other down the phone and stuff like that and knowing that Roger [father] wouldn't let me know things, hide it all from me. I could see what was going on but he just wouldn't tell me.

Interviewer: What sort of things did you want to know?

Oliver: Enough to keep me not confused. You know, it would be all this rowing and stuff and what it would be like, 'What?! What's this about now?' And he wouldn't explain anything to me ... you know when is this going to be ended, and stuff like that.

(Oliver, aged 13)

Although children wanted to be informed about and involved in what was happening in their families, they drew a clear distinction between the formal and the emotional, the legal and the personal. Where most children (92.8 per cent, 90 out of 97 respondents) felt they had a right to be told about their parents' intention to divorce, less than half reported either that they would have wanted more information on legal aspects (49.5 per cent, 50 out of 101 respondents) or that knowing more about the legal process would have helped them cope (45.5 per cent, 45 out of 99 respondents). Children felt that knowing about legal proceedings was unlikely to help them deal with the all-important personal, emotional and practical tasks their parents' divorce had created:

I don't think I would have liked to know more [about the legal process] but I wouldn't have really minded if I didn't know anything about it ... It's more the emotional side – how other people feel about it.

(Nick, aged 12)

These findings may relate to the fact that only five (4.8 per cent) of the children interviewed were themselves the subject of legal proceedings. The legal aspects of divorce were not directly relevant to the vast majority of children. Not surprisingly, the children's understanding of the legal process was poor. In the absence of information from parents, what most children knew about divorce was gathered from friends or gleaned from television or cinema. Unfortunately, media portrayals were a source of inaccurate, often Americanized, information.

I wasn't told, but Dad said something about they were going to court ... I thought they were gonna get, like ... arrested.

(Stephen, aged ten)

I've seen it on *EastEnders*. I've worked it out from there! I know it from there and I know it from other TV series.

(Josie, aged 12)

The lack of any parental 'explanation' left children largely unable to account for their parents' divorce in anything but superficial, 'symptomatic' terms. Overall, children expressed a strong desire to be kept informed and to be involved. The value in this of helping them obtain some cognitive control over the crisis and restore a sense of 'normality' and balance in their lives was a characteristic feature of children's accounts.

Coping and support networks

Children showed a considerable capacity to seek out and use appropriate and available help using both their own resources and the aid of other people. For many, a key strategy was to talk to someone either to gain reassurance or advice or to be listened to. Indeed less than a third (28.3 per cent, 28 out of 99 respondents) said they had told no one at all about their parents' divorce. Children differentiated the kinds of help they wanted and chose their confidants accordingly.

I think that talking is one of the best ways that helps. You can get over it if you've got some rabbits or any kind of pet. Just talk to them, they might not be able to speak but it's very good.

(Michael, aged ten)

Parents perhaps seemed the most obvious providers of information, advice and emotional support, but, as we have implied, not all children found this to be the

case. Some children explained this was because their parents did not understand what it was like for the children, others that their parents had 'moved on' and did not want to be reminded of the past.

'My mum, because she was upset, she didn't really talk to me much ... she was always upset and I couldn't really say to her, 'I'm upset, I need a really good chat with you'.

(Louise, aged 12)

Children did not readily consider siblings as a source of support. They explained, for example, that siblings were too involved in the crisis themselves; were experiencing the divorce differently; were too young to provide the support and understanding needed; or simply that they did not get on that well enough to be of support to each other. Of the 97 children with siblings, less than a third (32 per cent, 31 children) said they had talked to their brother or sister; of those who had, only 20 said it had helped.

It probably would've helped if I could talk to Jane [sister], but we're always fighting, so it wouldn't work.

(Ted, aged ten)

Many children reported that grandparents were a particularly valued source of time, attention and reassurance. Grandparents' homes often provided 'safe' or 'neutral' territory where children could take refuge from what was happening at home.

My nan ... because she'd let me speak my mind and she'd let me say what I'd have to say.

(Robin, aged 11)

For most children, though, friends were their key source of support. Of the 90 children who said they had a best friend, nearly three-quarters of them (72.2 per cent, 65 children) said they had talked to this person; nearly all of them (56 children) found it helpful. Close friends were chosen as confidants not only because they could be trusted but also because they were more likely to understand, more likely to 'speak the same language'. Friends whose parents had separated were particularly valued as a source of information as well as understanding.

I told my best friend Joe because his parents are divorced and he sort of like, knew what I was talking about, he was sort of helping me a bit.

(Ted, aged ten)

Children's need to confide in someone was almost always tempered by their desire to retain a substantial degree of control over exactly who found out

and when. Our findings show that telling someone about the divorce and wanting to 'keep it secret' are not mutually exclusive. Whilst most children reported that they had told someone, nearly two-thirds (63.0 per cent, 63 out of 100 respondents) said they kept it secret from at least some people.

I just told my closest friends ... didn't want *everybody* to find out. I just wanted a few people to know.

(Nick, aged 12)

Children's faith in their chosen confidant was founded on an expectation that neither their trust nor their privacy would be compromised. Their wish to manage and control the way in which the world at large came to know about their changed circumstances was built around concerns about being thought 'different', being teased or being made the subject of 'gossip'. In a few cases, these fears were realized.

Well, I've kept it a secret from my worst friend 'cos he'll probably tease me and all that. I told one of my friends and he called me 'Dad-less'.

(Jonny, aged ten)

As well as talking, children recognized the value of activity and distraction as ways of coping. For many, taking part in sports and playing with friends not only helped them maintain some semblance of a normal life, they also provided a safe and effective outlet for emotions.

I make myself happy, I go out to my friends, have a laugh, go down the park and sometimes I watch a video – a funny video. I watch that to cheer myself up.

(Jonny, aged ten)

I suppose I started watching *Star Trek* round that time, you know, kind of sci-fi fantasy. I suppose it's something to escape to.

(Robert, aged 13)

Whilst, at some point during the crisis, most children found crying a useful strategy, many were aware that this often had to be done in private.

Rosie: Sometimes I get really upset and I cry in my room because I think everything's gone. It's all gone away, I haven't got anything.

Interviewer: Is there any particular times when you feel like that?

Rosie: Sometimes it just happens. It normally happens when I come up and go into my bedroom.

Interviewer: Do you tell Mummy if you feel like that?

Rosie: No, I just quickly wash my face and come downstairs and act happy. Then I forget about it and then I'm normal.

(Rosie, aged ten)

A number of children reported how quiet reflection, sometimes writing down their thoughts, helped them think through what was happening to them and put matters into perspective. This more contemplative strategy gave children some cognitive control over events and, for some, provided the opportunity to reframe their experiences in a more positive light.

'Well, I just thought that I'm really lucky like, I still get to see my dad and my mum. Not like just stuck with the one, and that John's [step-dad] a nice person, that he's not someone who's totally strict and nasty.'

(Robert, aged 13)

As well as seeking support from others, children also reported being a source of emotional and practical support for their parents. This latter often took the form of greater participation in household chores. Emotional support usually took the form of reassurance, especially for the resident parent, and the age of the child was no predictor of the creativeness or genuineness of their efforts.

'I try to talk to my mother, like if she gets upset, I tell her like, 'Yeah, well, let's just get it sorted out' and things like that and she sort of perks up a bit, and then I just make her laugh about it. And say, 'Just you think how it's gonna be' if things got better, like if we were going to be millionaires, win the lottery and things like that. And I goes, 'What would you do with a million pounds?' She went, 'I'd go and buy a villa in Minorca'. We used to go [child laughs], 'Yeah, in your dreams' and we used to laugh about it, and things like that and she sort of perks up a bit and so yeah, we do help each other through it.'

(Claire, aged ten)

Evaluating change

Children largely viewed change brought about by the divorce in terms of loss and most (79.9 per cent, 79 out of 99 respondents) realised the separation would bring about changes in their lives. Particularly in the early stages, few children had any clear ideas about what would change, so could only speculate about the possibilities of moving house, changing school, losing contact with friends or the effects on their family's finances.

I knew then that we'd probably have to move house ... because Dad had left we wouldn't be able to afford to keep the house on our own, so I knew we'd probably have to move house, which would be quite a big change. I was hoping we'd still be able to stay in the area because all my friends are here and everything. That's all I really thought about really. I didn't really think there'd be anything else.

(Julie, aged 12)

Children expressed the belief that stability and continuity in at least some of their circumstances helped them cope with other, more inevitable changes, such as one parent living elsewhere. Not surprisingly, it was this change and the 'empty space' it created, that the majority of children felt most acutely.

I thought, oh! It's gonna all change, we might have to move ... I thought my father's going to be living miles away, I'll never be able to see him again, my mother will be upset all the time.

(Daniel, aged 14)

It's very hard at first because you just don't want them to split up. You'll be very sad at the beginning because of not having your dad around, but then it'll just come automatically that your dad lives somewhere else and life will just be normal.

(Emy, aged ten)

Almost all children reported a change in the quality of their relationship with parents. Those relationships which had previously been positively regarded by children, most easily survived the crisis. Previously poor child-parent relationships were subsequently characterized by higher levels of negative effect, unresolved conflict and less satisfactory relationships between the parents themselves. Children who experienced poor child-parent relationships frequently expressed anger, often directed at the 'blameworthy' or absent parent.

Interviewer: You said in the beginning you became more angry, more aggressive. Do you think that was a result of your dad going?

Nick: Yeah, 'cos before I used to be like ... like, I always used to be friendly and stuff but if someone like shouts stuff about me ... like I lose my temper with them.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Nick: Cos I'm like taking my anger out on people I shouldn't rather than my dad. I should be taking all my anger out on him.

(Nick, aged 12)

In a few cases children attributed their anger to the absent parent's failure to keep promises. In the following example, in particular, the child felt his father had broken his promise when he left his mother to live with someone else.

What I'd really like to say is, 'Well, Dad, why did you break a promise?' He basically lied to me, in that sense. He said he'd keep a promise that you'll stay here with Mum and you'll never leave her. And he said, 'No, I didn't', and I said, 'You did, it's all part of marriage you mustn't leave them'. And he *promised* that he'll never leave her. So basically he's trying to keep a secret from me. Because I've never lied to him before, so why should he

lie to me? ... Why couldn't he just say, 'No', [to the new partner] ... You could've just kept a promise and not broken it, because you broke a promise to my mum, and I'm not going to let you know any of my secrets because you might break it. You broke the promise ...'

(Joe, aged eight)

Overall, despite children's anxieties, most found that the changes set in train by their parents' separation were not as bad as they had anticipated; indeed, some found there were benefits including their own deepening awareness and understanding of themselves and of other people and, quite often, improved relationships with parents.

Well, he's more happier and more cheerful and so I think they're better now 'cos they got a divorce. They both say that they're glad now because they're still friends now and they're getting along better and it's peaceful, more happy because they're not arguing.

(Sioned, aged 12)

I see them [parents] as completely different people now ... I don't know how they see themselves or each other. Because I've spent time with them separately I've got to know how *they* are, sort of by themselves ... Now I know them individually.

(Helen, aged 15)

One major change children (and their parents) faced was the strong possibility that parents would form new relationships. For the children whose parents had not yet done so, the prospect was generally favourable: although they might have reservations (and many did), they said they would be pleased to see their parents happy and settled. Where one parent was already in a new relationship, typically children felt it was only fair that their other parent should find someone new too.

I cannot stand it when Mum's with somebody and Dad's not being with somebody.

(Sophie, aged 15)

However, new partners presented difficulties for many parents. Parents seemed to find it difficult to know how to introduce their children to their new partners, or even to tell their children that they had new partners. Several children recounted how new relationships which initially had been kept secret were suddenly and clumsily revealed.

Mum didn't tell me that they were going out with each other at first. But what upset me a bit was that she didn't tell me ... Mum was going out and she said she was going out [with boyfriend] but she said she was just

going out with him like a friend. Just a friend. I watched them go, walk up the road, and then I saw them kiss when they thought they were out of range of the house.

(Libby, aged 13)

With Dad, it was just one day we were going into town and he said, 'Oh, you know your mother's met someone? ... and I can find someone else ... well, I have.' And he said, 'We're going to meet them in town now, and then we're going to go swimming later,' or something like that. And you're sort of, 'OK', and you're all sort of in one go, meeting them and going into town.

(Rhiannon, aged 14)

In these situations (as in many others) children preferred their parents to be open with them. They wanted to be given the opportunity and the time to get used to the idea of their parent's new partner, as well as to the new partner him/herself. Once acquainted with new partners, children typically were reluctant to view them as a substitute or as alternative parents and resented their attempts to 'act' like parents, especially in matters of discipline.

Mum started in this dating agency thing, she got a boyfriend, and he tried to be a dad to me ... He tried to get me to do more things, like acting like a dad to me and I didn't like it. I told my mum that, I don't like him ... he moved in here and tried to change everything.

(Molly, aged 13)

Perhaps inevitably, children often felt a new partner resulted in their parent having less time, and indeed love, available for them.

Sometimes when I see Heather [dad's new partner] ... I feel upset because I feel, sometimes I think to myself, Heather doesn't belong here. My mum should be in her place ... but I don't tell my dad, sometimes I think my daddy likes Heather more than me.

(Rosie, aged ten)

Where parents remarried, children saw the wedding itself as a key moment. Children were not always invited to the wedding and this caused hurt, even amongst children who would have refused the invitation anyway.

My dad got married. He got married without telling us. He didn't tell us for four months. So I was really upset about it. I said, 'Why didn't you tell me when you got married?' Then Trish [step-mum] bustling in, she said, 'Well, we weren't talking at the time, there was no point telling you' ... Well, I wouldn't have gone, but I just felt like saying it. She said, 'Well, there was no point, was there, you wouldn't have wanted to come.'

(Cathy, aged 13)

For the most part, children did not think that their parents' divorce had influenced their view on whether they themselves would marry or not. Having lived through their parents' divorce had made a number of children more wary, but equally they felt the experience would stand them in good stead and help them avoid the mistakes they had seen their parents make.

It's actually given me more *things not to do* ... like to discuss more with my wife, when I'm married and that, so it's actually helped me, I think. [emphasis added]

(Daniel, aged 14)

Negotiating arrangements

Finally we will consider children's active involvement in managing post-divorce changes. Most children expressed the view that it was only right and fair that they should be involved in decisions, particularly questions about whom they should live with (56.9 per cent, 58 out of 102 respondents) and staying in touch with their non-resident parent (86.3 per cent, 88 out of 102 respondents), since these question very directly affected them.

It would have been, well ... not nice, but a *good* thing to be *asked*. Because if they'd asked my parents I know my dad would be saying, 'They've got to live with me,' and my mum would be saying, 'They've got to live with me.' So ... I knew if I was *asked* I'd say my mum. Still, I'd feel that I said it and they didn't *make* me live with one of them.

(Louise, aged 12)

Children appreciated that decisions over residence were more constrained by practical consideration (e.g. parents day-to-day availability to provide childcare) than decisions over contact:

I think Mum probably decided [about residence] ... 'cos, well, Dad had a sort of early job 'til a late job and Mum was part time so it sort of fitted in with school and stuff.

(Rhiannon, aged 14)

Regardless of children's views, though, it is important to note that only a minority of children reported that they were consulted over the crucial decisions of their residence (43.7 per cent, 45 out of 103 respondents) and contact (41.7 per cent, 43 out of 103 respondents).

Interviewer: Who decided where you were going to live?

Joe: Mum did, even though it was meant to be us. She just decided that we were going to live here ... so we had to stay here ... it was already decided that we had to live here.

(Joe, aged eight)

Children clearly understood that they could not unilaterally make decisions about residence and contact, indeed few wanted to carry that burden on their own, but most appreciated being asked.

I was glad I was asked, 'cos I thought, yeah, I've got an opinion.

(Daniel, aged 14)

Yeah, 'cos really it wouldn't be fair if they were forced to go and live with the parent they didn't want to live with.

(Nick, aged 12)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, children who reported that they had some involvement in their residence or contact arrangements also reported higher degrees of satisfaction with the arrangements subsequently made.

Contact, more than residence, was subject to a degree of continuing negotiation between parents and children. In a very real sense, contact, in both its practical and emotional senses, had to be 'learned'. Children described the practical difficulties of having 'two homes' and the tiresomeness of constantly packing and repacking bags; they commented on the lack of space at their non-resident parent's (often temporary) new home; they spoke of the difficulties in spending time with parents' new partners, either because they simply didn't get on with them or because they felt that they might be seen to be betraying the parent with whom they usually lived; they talked of how it was often difficult to find things to do that suited their brothers or sisters (with whom otherwise they might not spend a great deal of time) and how sometimes they would have appreciated seeing their parent on their own. On a practical level, children demonstrated their growing capacity to manage their 'time-maps' in ways and to a degree that children from 'intact' families seldom have to and they did so in situations that were sometimes highly charged emotionally and in which they had to develop a capacity to weigh and balance a number of competing demands.

Overall, children's descriptions of their feelings about contact with their non-resident parent highlighted the emotional 'highs' and 'lows' that they experienced as a result of spending part of their lives with one parent and part with the other. While many of the children looked forward to and enjoyed contact with their non-resident parent they often, at the same time, missed their resident parent and other elements of normal home life. Likewise, when at home with their resident parent, they missed their non-resident parent and looked forward to their next contact.

Interviewer: How do you feel if you're about to move from one home to the next home?

Maggie: If I'm in one I miss the other 'cos then if I'm at the other I'll miss the other one. I miss both of them really. When I'm here ... whether I'm here or I'm over at my mum's.

(Maggie, aged ten)

Whilst children were concerned that contact arrangements should be 'fair' to all parties, they were particularly concerned that they should remain flexible. Given what we have noted already about the importance of friends and children's desire for continuity and 'normality', it was important to children that the 'rest of their lives' were also factored into contact arrangements.

I wouldn't like to see [Dad] every half-term because like, for a week I can stay over at friends' houses and see my friends a lot and friends are important to me and I couldn't see him every other weekend because I wouldn't see my friends then. I don't know, I would like it to be more, but it really couldn't.

(Damian, aged 13)

Conclusion

Our research clearly demonstrated that children are involved in the process of their parents' divorce in that they experience the events probably on much the same emotional terms as the adults. Their initial reaction is one of disequilibrium and emotional upset. This is followed by a period of adjustment in which new domestic arrangements have to be negotiated and learned in an atmosphere that can remain emotionally turbulent for some time. The children in our study demonstrated a resilience and coping capacity which certainly might surprise parents and possibly many professionals. Overall, children wanted to be told what was going on, they needed an ongoing supply of information to help them understand, cope and adapt. They wanted to be involved in the important decisions that were made about them during this life-altering time. Being left out of discussions not only tended to increase their anxiety and upset, it also hampered their attempts to reach a new sense of balance or normality in their lives. Regaining cognitive control of events was central to most children's attempts to reach a new 'steady state'.

Children also showed how they acquired new skills in managing the time-maps of their altered lives, in maintaining a compassionate interest in what was happening to their parents, and in most cases, reaching a settled understanding of what had happened to them. All this is to point up that children do not experience their parents' divorce passively: they are involved, creative and resourceful participants.

Children are the best witnesses to their own experience and we, as adults, have as much to gain from our involvement with them as they have from their involvement with us. As one young person put it:

Interviewer: Is there anything that could be done, that would help you? By other people? Or ... ?

Child: Probably, if more people understood what it was like to go through divorce, and if they knew what it was like to experience how bad it was.

Interviewer: What sort of people would need to know?

Child: Probably more children would need to know. More adults would have to understand children's feelings, others have to understand what children feel. Not what *they* feel, but what the children feel about it.

Interviewer: Do you think any adults do understand what children feel?

Child: Some of them do, but a lot think, well, they have feelings, but they don't care that much about it, because they're only kids, they don't like, care but a lot of children do suffer from it and they just don't know what to do. They're like me! They don't know what to do [laughs].

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