

# Children's Yoga in School for Bullying Prevention

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*“Jivatam Jyotiretu Vidyam,”* “True education (self-knowledge) enlightens human life,” according to Shrii Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar the founder of the international Neohumanist Education System and the Ananda Marga Schools.

## Abstract

There is a growing concern throughout America regarding the increase in childhood stress, bullying, and violence. Living in Colorado, we are haunted by the incident at Columbine High School when two students felt the need to take revenge and take action in a violent manner. Children today are being raised in a world where it is easy to obtain weapons. Violence and bullying continue to escalate according to statistics. Each school district in Colorado is required to have a bullying prevention policy and program. It would appear that the current anti-bullying education is ineffective. A yoga therapist who is the Boulder County SAVE (Stop America's Violence Everywhere) representative recently created a program in order to test a theory: teaching yoga in school could effectively decrease bullying. This paper will discuss a classically based yoga program incorporated within an upper elementary school system in Boulder, CO. The curriculum was presented for six sessions during the academic school day for 101, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2004 and repeated for 108 students in 2005. The children learned yoga philosophy, practiced yoga postures, learned breathing and concentration techniques, as well as, traditional conflict resolution strategies and dialogues. The author collaborated with a Harvard statistician to evaluate the influence of these teachings on managing violence and bullying. The program has proven to be successful and effective. A comprehensive yoga program can greatly reduce violence and bullying. The results of this intervention acknowledge yoga as an effective method for increasing anger management skills and decreasing physical outbursts of violence for upper elementary school age children.

## Introduction

According to the American Medical Association, studies show that there has been an increase in violence and bullying in American schools.<sup>1</sup> What creates these behavior patterns in children at school? This question was a source of contemplation for me. I felt an obligation to help this struggling population. Therefore, I created and implemented a yoga program to prove the hypothesis that: teaching a comprehensive yoga curriculum to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls can decrease bullying and improve anger management in school. The program was specifically designed to diminish both physical violence and verbal aggression, as well as, to increase the students' ability to control their own anger.

First, I looked at the exact definition of bullying and how it affects children. Bullying can be defined as a behavior which is repeated by a person or group of people for the purposes of

trying to belittle or harm someone who is weaker, more vulnerable or different in nature. The behavior can be direct such as hitting, name-calling, malicious teasing, threatening, intimidating, stealing or damaging belongings. The bullying can also be indirect such as spreading rumors, excluding or influencing others to reject someone.<sup>2</sup> Although definitions may vary, there is often one concept in common: bullying is a subtype of aggression.<sup>3</sup>

Surveys have reported that upper elementary and middle school age children are more likely to be bullies or to be bullied. Bullying increases throughout the elementary years and peaks in middle school.<sup>4</sup> A survey of 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in 14 schools throughout Massachusetts reported that almost one half of the students had been bullied at some point and the abuse lasted six months or longer.<sup>5</sup> According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average child by the end of elementary school (approximately age 11) will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts on television and in the media.<sup>6</sup> This affects how children perceive the world around them.

Developmentally, during the early adolescent years, the role of the peer group changes. Children look towards their peers to discuss problems and seek advice to help gain autonomy from their parents. Social status becomes increasingly important at this age. Issues such as popularity, acceptance and a need to “fit in” are the focus during the early adolescent years.<sup>7</sup> For boys at this age, toughness and aggressiveness become important status considerations, whereas appearance is the main social status for girls.<sup>8</sup> Direct aggressive bullying is more prevalent for boys while indirect verbal bullying is what girls experience most often. No matter the type of behavior, the common reasons for bullying are always the same: “to be popular” or “to get your own way.”<sup>9</sup>

Just like the victims, bullies usually have very low self esteem. Bullying becomes a way to deal with their own problems. Those who are the bullies tend to get in trouble more frequently, and generally do poorly in school. As bullies become adults, they are four times more likely than non-bullies to commit crimes.<sup>10</sup>

As for those who were the targets for bullies, researchers report that “years later, long after the bullying has stopped, adults who were bullied as teens have higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem than other adults.”<sup>11</sup>

Although this is not a new problem, the concern is escalating. There is a great need to step in and take action against this anti-social behavior in children, since the effects of bullying are not only during the school years but are long lasting for both sides, influencing adults.

Our youth need help in order to cope effectively in today’s fast-paced, hectic world. Living within a generation of constant stimulation dulls children’s natural senses. Their physical bodies are becoming stiff and armored similar to adults, while their nervous systems are continually over-functioning.<sup>12</sup> This can lead to kids losing their divine loving nature. My mission is to guide children to merge into their divine self, despite all the obstacles of life.

The program I created is entitled YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT & FOCUSED. The target audience is upper elementary and middle school age children between the ages of 9 and 14 (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade.) This group is more receptive to guidance, has less peer pressure, has a higher percentage of bullying than older teens and are on the verge of developing high risk behaviors. Jean Piaget, child development psychologist, states that children between the ages of 7-11 are able to understand abstract concepts and function accordingly during this phase of “Concrete Operations.” While youth between the ages of 11-15 have begun to function as an adult during this time referred to as “Formal Operations,” and are expected to understand conceptual reasoning.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, I chose to create a program for a preadolescent population, in order to teach the abstract concept of a peaceful approach toward life.

The program’s objective is to convey a philosophical and scientific, nondenominational yoga program to school age children as a lifestyle choice in order to decrease bullying and aggressive behavior. The curriculum is designed to inspire a positive, peaceful, physically strong, and self-confident attitude with a system of how to communicate in a relaxed way. The concepts are yoga philosophy: kindness, compassion, communication and forgiveness; combined with yoga science: moving energy with a high level of body and breath awareness. Ultimately, the goal is to empower children to manage their own feelings and feel safe within themselves and their surroundings to give them a greater capacity for success in and out of school.

According to County Treasurer, Bob Hullinghorst, violence is the most *costly* preventable disease in Boulder County, Colorado. Early intervention holds the most promise for reducing violence. It is mandatory for all school districts in Colorado to have a violence prevention and anti-bullying unit during the school year.<sup>14</sup> Typically bullying intervention programs are offered in the fall when the students begin the new school year and often revisited in the spring for follow-up and review. It appears that the current system is not working, since violence, aggression and bullying in schools continues on an upward trend.<sup>15</sup>

One of my teachers, Swami Rama, has stated “Once compassion comes in, the desire to retaliate goes.”<sup>16</sup> I decided to come to the aid of this population the only way I know how: through the teachings of classical yoga.

The teachings of classical yoga as described by Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, is a useful guideline for reducing bullying. Children educated in this method of yoga are taught self respect, stress management and compassion towards oneself and towards others. It provides a system to help cope with and control aggressive behavior. In the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras, II 29, Patanjali describes the eight components of yoga leading towards peace. These components are the *yamas* (self control for social harmony), the *niyamas* (personal discipline), *asana* (physical postures), *pranayama* (regulation of the breath), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *dharana* (contemplation), *dhyana* (meditation), *samadi* (absorbed into spirit-bliss). In Yoga Sutra II 30, the *yamas* are discussed. They consist of five principals which are

considered the “great universal vows” to be extended to all beings in nature: (*ahimsa*) non-violence, (*satya*) truthfulness, (*asteya*) not stealing, (*brahmacharya*) behavior that respects the divine as omnipresent, and (*aparigraha*) freedom from greed.<sup>17</sup> The first universal vow *ahimsa* (non-violence) is the basis of the school program I created to decrease violence and bullying.

## Methodology

I taught for two successive years, October 2004 and 2005, in Boulder, Colorado, during national SAVE week--an acronym designated by the American Medical Association which refers to Stop America's Violence Everywhere. The curriculum was presented during the academic school day for 101, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2004 and repeated for 108 students in 2005, with a sex ratio approximately equal. Children ages 9 – 11 ranging from middle to upper middle-class status were instructed for six 45-minute sessions which totaled four and one half hours of yoga training per year.

The 45-minute yoga class was added into the daily academic curriculum, every other day, for a two-week period. Each day was crucial since the students only had six sessions:

- Day one, Monday, the children were introduced to the concept of *ahimsa*: non-violence to self and toward others. After a discussion regarding this ethical standard, a 20 minute *asana* practice followed introducing gentle joint freeing movements and *surya namaskar* (salutation to the sun).<sup>18</sup> The class ended with a brief transition of rest before returning to their classrooms.
- Day two, Wednesday, they were visually stimulated with props, imagery and games to represent the three types of breathing (chest, abdominal and inter-costal) and their effects on one's mood and energy. After that a ten minute *asana* session was followed by a long relaxation in *makarasana* (crocodile pose, a position lying prone) which consisted of one-to-one breathing practice (*sama vritti ujaye* breath) using numbers and phrases.
- Day three, Friday, the entire session focused on conflict resolution strategies with role-playing scenarios composed of subject matter volunteered by the children, i.e., real life bullying situations they had encountered. Homework for the weekend was given directing the students to teach a family member anything they had learned during the three yoga classes.

- Day four, Monday, a third of the class time was devoted to an open discussion about their homework: what the students chose to teach and to whom. The remaining time was an *asana* session introducing classical *asanas* such as *virabhadrasana 2* (warrior 2), *utthita trikonasana* (extended triangle pose), *vrikshasana* (tree pose), etc... ending with systematic relaxation in *savasana* (corpse pose), and a review of the concentration and breathing practices.
- Day five, Wednesday, a 30-minute session combining *vinyasa* (flowing postures) and classical *asanas* was taught followed by enhanced concentration and breathing practices with the children on the floor in the relaxation pose of their choice.
- Day six, Friday, a review of all material was covered with active participation by the students, followed by more role-playing. Questions and closure finished the class format.

I wrote a booklet for children entitled YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT & FOCUSED.

The booklet was written between the first and second years of the program. It was used as a reference during the 2005 presentation of the material covered during the classes. The objective of using this booklet was so that the children had another visual tool to use while discussing breathing, body awareness and yoga postures. In a generation where visual stimulation is a status quo, I felt a need to have a guide book for each student to utilize. The booklet also allowed the teachers and parents to have a tangible medium to view at school and at home.

## Measures

The children were given pre- and post-surveys both years to determine their levels of self-esteem, anger, aggression, violent behavior, as well as, their emotional state of mind, before and after the program. Dr. Grace Wyshak, a Harvard professor of biostatistics, designed scientifically reliable questions which were used in the survey. The students were asked questions regarding their perception of themselves, whether they felt as if they got enough attention, the amount of friends they have at school, whether they fidget a lot, have frequent headaches, if they have trouble sleeping, if they have feelings of anger, their ability to control anger, if they have been bullied at school, if they bully others, whether they have ever hit anyone, or if they have ever been hit, how well they handle their stress, how well they handle their anger, and what strategies the children use to handle disagreements. (see Appendix for the original questionnaire). All of these points were addressed within the surveys both pre- and post-yoga. The post-yoga questionnaires directed the students to report if using the practice of yoga changed their interactions and experiences at school or after school during the two week training period. In order to assess the efficacy of yoga as an intervention technique, the questions allowed for a specific profile of each child's outbursts of anger towards schoolmates, bullying of others, perception of being victimized and understanding of anger management.

The participants were given the first questionnaire the day before the program began. Each year the teachers informed the students that the questions related only to the time frame

between the beginning of the current school year, approximately the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of August and when the yoga program began, the second week of October. These surveys were given to the children with a number written in the upper right corner. At that time, the students were instructed to write down this “special” number on a separate piece of paper and place it in their desks for later reference. The teachers explained to the participants that this questionnaire would not affect their grades in any way, nor would the information be used against them. It was strictly anonymous, and they were to be as honest as possible when answering the questions. When the post-questionnaires were handed out the students were coached to label the papers with their “special” numbers. The same questions were presented as in the pre-surveys, but the students were to answer them regarding their experiences after the six yoga sessions. (see Appendix for the original questionnaire)

## Results

The SAS 9.13 software package<sup>19</sup> was used to perform statistical analysis of the results. Chi-square

tests were used to test the significance of changes in the responses in pre- and post- surveys. The questions reported in Table 1 were the first seven asked within the 35-question survey. The yes or no answers to these questions were the most significant results obtained. The findings are presented in Table 1 below. Although the answers to the remaining questions showed a trend in overall improvement in regard to fidgeting, headaches, self-esteem and ability to sleep, the results were not statistically significant.

Both years show a decrease in aggressive behavior after yoga and an increase in anger management.

Table 1: Responses pre- and post- yoga intervention. Years 2004 and 2005.

Question value	2004					2005				
	Pre-	Post-	% Yes		P-value	Pre-	Post-	% Yes		P-value
			u	Chi-sq				u	Chi-sq	
	%	%	%			%	%	%		
1) Do you have trouble controlling your anger? <0.05	14.14	5.95	8.19	6.75	<0.01	17.59	8.82	8.77	4.88	
2) Do you ever feel angry for no reason? <0.02	23.23	7.92	15.31	7.53	<0.01	27.62	10.78	16.84	5.63	
3) Do you ever feel as if your friends are angry at you? <0.01	59.60	10.89	48.71	5.04	<0.05	50.48	21.00	29.48	12.31	
4) Have you ever hit anyone at school? <0.02	20.20	5.20	15.0	25.24	<0.0001	15.75	0.97	14.78	6.42	
5) Have you ever hit anyone at home? <0.0001	45.45	12.24	33.21	9.57	<0.05	44.76	13.86	30.90	15.19	
6) Has anyone ever hit you at school? <0.0001	38.54	16.32	22.22	10.00	<0.002	46.23	22.33	23.90	17.25	

7) Do you ever feel kids in school bully you? 27.84 16.16 11.68 5.43 <0.02 28.97 15.84 13.13 16.84  
<0.0001

There was an 8.19% decrease (P-value = <0.01) in 2004, and an 8.77% (P-value = <0.05) in 2005, in response to question #1, regarding having trouble controlling anger (see Table 1). In 2004, 15.31% reported a drop (P-value <0.01) in feeling angry for no reason, whereas in 2005, 16.84% (P-value <0.02) answered positively to question #2. The answers to question #3, feeling friends' anger, there was a 48.71% drop (P-value = <0.05) in 2004, and a 29.48% decrease

(P-value = <0.01) in 2005. In response to Question # 4, hitting others at school, the 2004 results showed 15% decrease (P-value = <0.0001) and in 2005, a 14.78% drop. There was a 33.21% decline (P-value = <0.05) in 2004, in hitting at home, and a 30.9% (P-value = <0.0001) in 2005. Question #6 refers to being hit at school, the students reported a 22.22% decrease (P-value = <0.002) in 2004, and a 23.90% drop (P-value = <0.0001) in 2005. The students responded to question #7, being bullied in school, with a decline of 11.68% (P-value = <0.02) in 2004, and 13.13% (P-value = <0.0001) in 2005.

## Qualitative Reports

Each time the session ended I asked the teachers to observe the children for the remainder of the day and report if the class dynamics changed after the yoga class. There were two main teachers who reported to me in regard to this assignment. A comment from teacher one was "The children are so much calmer after the yoga classes." Teacher two reported, "The atmosphere in the room after yoga is more peaceful." Later in the first week teacher one informed me, "The students seem to be less fidgety and more focused on the daily work." Teacher two reported, "My students sit still and listen to me after yoga days." The process continued to improve towards the end of the two week period when teacher one admitted, that the children had "Fewer negative interactions" and teacher two remarked, "They seem to be working out some of their differences more effectively!" An interview with each teacher after the last class went as such: Teacher one, "I have personally benefited from the six sessions of yoga and so have my students. Their focus is so much better and I really think they are kinder and more patient with each other."<sup>20</sup> Teacher two remarked, "I've noticed my students can calm themselves a lot more which makes learning better. It's given me great ideas on how to help them not only to work out their problems with the breathing and the quietness, but also, how to help them focus and learn better and to listen to the person they really are, instead of trying to keep up with the fast paced world."<sup>21</sup>

The best report came from the principal. He had not been prompted to observe the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' behavior as were the teachers. The principal was asked if he had noticed any change during the two weeks while yoga was being presented at his school. He spontaneously stated, "I feel that it has made a difference in our school community and climate with our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. In the fact that there have been less incidences of behavior (problems) outside at recess. It's brought a different type of atmosphere to our school. She is teaching some wonderful skills: problem solving and bully proofing, talking about self esteem and how students feel and feel about themselves and how they can continue to be proactive and be successful both academically and socially in our school. Hopefully, we can continue with the yoga program here."<sup>22</sup>

The most endearing words came directly from the students in their comments written to me: "This really helps my breathing and now I am a lot calmer." "That yoga class was super fun! My favorite part was the Salutation to the Sun. I also liked the funny skits we did. My favorite one was when the bully, bullied the littler kid on the bus. Hope you come again." "Thank you for teaching me yoga. It was really fun. My favorite exercise was the breathing practice 1,2,3,4,5 and the cobra. I hope you will come again to our school."<sup>23</sup>

The smiles, hugs, enthusiastic participation combined with sincere thanks from the students, teachers, parents, and principal also prove the positive effect yoga had on these elementary students. Due to the results and reputation of this study, teachers of other grade levels within the same school have invited me into their classrooms for yoga education. Several parents have contacted me about their child's interest in enrolling into yoga classes within the community.

## **Discussion**

Other anti-bullying intervention programs in Boulder, CO. are based primarily on conflict-resolution strategies alone.<sup>24</sup> The positive effects of the program, YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT AND FOCUSED, are due to the variety of methods in which the information is conveyed to the students. Children learn in different ways: some absorb subject matter audibly, others visually, and others interactively. This anti-bullying program addresses all of these learning styles.

By teaching the science and philosophy of yoga combined with conflict resolution strategies, this project accomplished rudimentary instruction of the fundamental principles of the mind and body and how they influence our actions. Directing the students to look at the waves of thoughts that come up during or after school, explained how physical actions are manifested. Learning relaxation practices to assist the discovery of the body and its ability to armor itself or yield under confrontation was comprehended by the students. Using body awareness techniques, *asanas*, exercise and movement, the program allowed for a comfortable and controlled body. Instructing the children about the physiology of breathing and yogic concentration practices calmed their nervous systems. Role playing scenarios assisted in the



clarification of conflict resolution strategies and skills. The program presented along with the booklet YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT & FOCUSED helped to calm the children and gave them insight about coping with stress.

When children are exposed to yoga for only 4½ hours by a knowledgeable and experienced teacher, a consistent decrease in violent and aggression occurs in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children. Unexpected benefits the children reported were less headaches, less fidgeting, and an overall improved ability

to sleep. Each year the children reported the same results: a decrease in aggressive behavior and an increase in the ability to control anger which supports my original hypothesis.

The results obtained in this study confirm that classical yoga which addresses the body, mind and spirit is an elegant tool for implementing behavioral changes when administered correctly to upper elementary age children. The hypothesis has been proven that teaching yoga in the school system is effective and successful in its mission to decrease bullying. Fekkes et al, have shown that their anti-bullying program which was applied for two successive years was effective, but without continuous implementation it lost its effectiveness.<sup>25</sup> A longer commitment to yoga training within a school curriculum will undoubtedly positively and profoundly affect the consistent problem of violence and aggression in school age children, and thus decrease the amount of daily bullying.

Future plans are to introduce this program into other elementary and middle schools each year during national nonviolence time, i.e., SAVE week. This year the dates are October 8-12, 2007. Dee Marie is now offering a training program for both yoga teachers and school teachers to allow this information to be shared worldwide. If you are interested in supporting this project, becoming involved or learning more please contact (303) 530-3860 or [energysourceinc@yahoo.com](mailto:energysourceinc@yahoo.com).

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## **Endnotes**

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## Appendix

**AHIMSA Questionnaire 1** Date \_\_\_\_\_ Number \_\_\_\_\_

Boy \_\_\_\_\_ Girl \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Age years \_\_\_\_\_ Months \_\_\_\_\_

**(Check which apply)**

Do you have trouble controlling your anger ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever feel angry for no reason ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever feel as if your friends are angry at you ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever hit anyone at school ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, did you use your hand \_\_\_\_\_ a rock \_\_\_\_\_ a stick \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_  
If other, what did you use \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever hit anyone at home ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, what did you use \_\_\_\_\_

Has anyone ever hit you at school ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, who hit you ? School mate \_\_\_\_\_ Friend \_\_\_\_\_  
How did you feel ? Sad \_\_\_\_\_ Mad \_\_\_\_\_ Other (what?) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever feel kids in school bully you ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever bully others ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel that you get enough attention from:  
Your teacher ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
Your friends ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
Your parents ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel well liked ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a lot of friends at school ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a lot of friends in your neighborhood ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you fidget a lot ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you get headaches a lot ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know how to relax ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have trouble going to sleep at night ? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**(Use numbers 1 – 4 to indicate what you would do)**

When playing a game, if there is a disagreement how do you handle it ?  
Quit \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about it \_\_\_\_\_ Get mad \_\_\_\_\_  
Push, hit or wrestle \_\_\_\_\_

If you disagree with a friend about something, how do you handle it ?  
Walk away \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about it \_\_\_\_\_ Get mad \_\_\_\_\_  
Push, hit or wrestle \_\_\_\_\_

If you disagree with a schoolmate, how do you handle it ?  
Walk away \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about it \_\_\_\_\_ Get mad \_\_\_\_\_  
Push, hit or wrestle \_\_\_\_\_

If you disagree with a family member how do you handle it ?  
Walk away \_\_\_\_\_ Talk about it \_\_\_\_\_ Get mad \_\_\_\_\_  
Push, hit or wrestle \_\_\_\_\_

**(Answer these next questions with either: excellent - good - fair – poor)**

How do you feel about yourself ? \_\_\_\_\_

How well can you concentrate on school subjects ? \_\_\_\_\_

How well can you resist when other kids do things in school that can get you in trouble ? \_\_\_\_\_

How well can you handle yourself when other kids make fun of you ?  
\_\_\_\_\_

How well can you express your opinions when other classmates disagree with you ? \_\_\_\_\_

How well can you stand up for yourself when you feel you are being treated unfairly ? \_\_\_\_\_

How well can you express yourself to someone when they are asking you to do something you don't agree with ? \_\_\_\_\_

If there is anything else you want to tell us about yourself, please write:

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