

**Child to Parent Abuse  
(Including Inter-Generational  
Domestic Abuse)**

**A Resource for Professionals**

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## Statistic

*it is estimated that*

**3 - 10 % of families  
experience serious child-to-parent abuse**

Source: Gallagher, 2008

Source: Respect Young People's Services Toolkit, 2010

## Statistic

*it is estimated that*

**boys are two or three times more likely to  
be violent to parents than girls, but  
aggression from girls is increasing**

Source: Gallagher, 2008

Cottrell, 2003

## Statistic

**The most common victim is the mother  
(over 75%)**

Source: Gallagher, 2008

## Statistic

**It can occur in any family, regardless of  
socio-economic class or ethnic background**

Source: Cottrell, 2003

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*"My Child doesn't seem to realise that as an over 18 year old, he is an adult and I don't have to do his washing and cooking for him. I tried to put boundaries in place for him while he was growing up and didn't use physical punishment, but he never grew up"*

(Comment from parent whose adult child is abusing her physically, emotionally and financially)

*"When parents use 'gentle' attempts, such as reasoning, to encourage their aggressive teenager to stop the abuse, they're often ignored or treated with contempt. However, if the parent reacts more aggressively, even using force, a vicious circle of mutual retaliation often evolves"*

(Observation from practitioner)

Whilst every care has been taken in the compilation of this information, the North East Hampshire Domestic Abuse Forum will not be held responsible for any loss, damage or inconvenience caused as a result of any inaccuracy or error within these pages.

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# Introduction

This booklet has been compiled in order to help practitioners who are working with the increasing numbers of parents and grandparents who are being abused or controlled by their children whether aged under or over 18.

Having a child who is abusing or controlling you is a very difficult situation to be in. Parents will often have feelings of blame, shame and /or despair, which makes it hard to speak out about what is happening and to seek support and help.

It is important to recognise that with most children and young people, there will be reasons as to why they are being abusive, and that the reasons for the abusive behaviour will be different in nearly every situation. They will need to be supported to access the help they need to understand why they feel that acting as they do is the only way they can feel 'heard'. It is also important to recognise that the safety of other children and adults in the household is of paramount importance.

The reasons for over 18's being abusive and controlling towards parents and other family members are also complex but can sometimes be linked to alcohol abuse, drug misuse, debt or gambling worries, or mental health issues. These reasons however should never be seen as an excuse for abusive or controlling behaviour. Where the victim is a vulnerable adult, additional help and support may be available through Adult Services.

This booklet is a culmination of the work and efforts of members of the North East Hampshire Domestic Abuse Forum, together with expert input from local and national support groups for victims of domestic and child to parent abuse.

We would like the information contained within this booklet to be used as widely as possible and so, whilst we would appreciate the source being quoted when using the information, there are no restrictions around photocopying or copyright. It is intended that this booklet will be a 'living' document and we welcome feedback in order to update and improve on the information contained within.

For further copies of this booklet, together with of the North East Hampshire Domestic Abuse Forum or Practitioners' subgroup, please contact:  
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# What is Child-to-Parent Abuse?

Child-to-Parent Abuse is “any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over a parent” (*National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2003*). As stated in the introduction, in the case of children and young people, this abuse can sometimes be the way in which they try to communicate an emotion or need - for example, when they don't feel 'heard'.

The abuse can be from under or over 18 year olds and can occur in any family. It is not associated with socio-economic class, ethnic background or sexual orientation.

Some examples of abuse and control are:

**Physical Abuse** includes hitting; punching; slapping; pushing; kicking; spitting; hair pulling; throwing objects; even use of a weapon, such as a knife or gun. It is the most visible form of abuse.

Figures released by Family Lives (previously Parentline Plus) show that in 2008, on average, they received three calls a day from parents suffering verbal or physical abuse.

**Emotional / Psychological Abuse** includes name-calling; criticising & put-downs; a calculated refusal to do as asked in order to exert control over the parent (for example, constantly refusing to go to bed on time, coming home late, refusing to help clean up or threatening to, or actually, not attending school or college); drug/alcohol abuse in the home; intimidation/creating fear; emotional blackmail; running away or threatening to run away from home; and / or threatening to hurt or kill a parent or themselves.

Although behaviours such as yelling occur at some point in many families, they can be considered as abuse when they become persistent. Abuse often begins verbally and escalates to other forms. *(Cottrell, 2001)*

**Financial Abuse** includes stealing or taking things without permission, stealing money/ credit cards/ phones/computers and using them to buy goods/services, damaging the home or possessions of the parent, demanding things the parent cannot afford.

# What is 'Normal'?

Many parents and experts recognise **some** of the above behaviours as 'normal' for a teenager, but when it becomes extreme or frequent, when the parent feels that they are being controlled, or that they dread their son or daughter coming home, this may be considered abusive.

*"All teens need opportunities to be independent, push boundaries and even hurl some hormone-induced verbal abuse at you at times. They're entering a new phase in their life - searching for a new identity and trying to reject the old one, whilst wrestling with rebellious hormones they can't control."*

*"Some door-slamming and arguing is therefore totally understandable - and even healthy. "It is normal for young people to challenge you more - their friends start to exert a greater influence and they just can't go along with everything parents want."*

*Dr Sandi Mann, Psychologist, University of Central Lancashire  
(quoted on Parentline Plus website)*

## Case Scenario

Chrissie\* is 43 and lives in fear of her 14 year old daughter Suzy's\* explosive temper and aggressive behaviour.

*"When I hear the door slam as she arrives home from school, my heart pounds. I separated from her Dad - who had a drink problem and was abusive- but Suzy seems to have taken over his role as an aggressor in the house. She blames me for everything in her life - the break-up, a bad day at school, a quarrel with her boyfriend, even what I've made for tea.*

*"One minute we can be sitting down watching television, the next she flies out of her seat, switches off the telly and launches into a torrent of abuse. She calls me names like 'cow' or 'bitch', she's trashed the house several times and has even hit me and her younger brother and sister. I try to talk to her and have attempted to persuade her to attend counselling sessions but she refuses point blank to come. When she's calm, she's a loving, lovely girl. But I am always treading on eggshells, frightened of her and at my wits' end. It's like living with an abusive partner - I just don't know what to do next..."*

*\*names have been changed  
(taken from [www.gotateenager.org.uk](http://www.gotateenager.org.uk))*

# Causes

Many people believe that child-to-parent abuse is the result of 'bad' parenting, for example, neglect or the young person having suffered direct abuse. However, there are also many situations where the abuse seems to 'have come out of no-where' and there is no obvious 'cause'.

There is no definitive answer to what causes children, young people or adult children to react in an abusive or controlling manner, but below is a list of possible contributing factors - any combination of which could be playing a part in the behaviour displayed.

Being aware of these common issues may help practitioners determine which, if any, may be contributing factors and, therefore, which solutions are most likely to be appropriate to help the family.

## Young person's own development/behaviour

### Development

- ❖ Emotional turmoil caused by hormone imbalance can lead to young people feeling over-sensitive and frustrated or angry. They often feel they are being unfairly treated at home, are not listened to/ taken seriously and are unsupported. The way in which young people deal with being upset can range from self-destructive behaviours such as drinking or joyriding, through to self-harming and arguing with parents
- ❖ Some young people haven't learnt other (non-violent) ways to solve problems / deal with stress / control or manage feelings, especially angry ones
- ❖ If the young person and/ or their parent(s) have mental health issues, this may lead to increased family conflict, resulting in the young person feeling frightened
- ❖ A disability that may affect forms of communication

### Behaviour

- ❖ Drugs and / or alcohol abuse by the young person or their parent(s)
- ❖ A young person who hasn't had to face consequences following unacceptable behaviour will see no reason to stop or change their behaviour



# **family**

## **Breakdown of family unit**

- ❖ Feelings of anger, emotion or confusion over family break-up can lead to less support from extended family members
- ❖ Poor/non-existent relationship with absent parent

## **Past or current domestic abuse in the family**

Children and young people can be isolated through their experiences of domestic abuse so that they:

- ❖ Are afraid of retribution
- ❖ Have people they feel they should protect
- ❖ Have developed coping mechanisms that enable them to move to 'denial' very swiftly
- ❖ Have low self esteem (feel they aren't worthy of a different lifestyle) and / or emotional literacy
- ❖ Have developed an emotional literacy that is very 'street wise' enabling them to function to a high level in groups where anti-social behaviour is the norm
- ❖ Have developed advanced distraction techniques to divert the practitioner from the painful and difficult task of seeking further information to enable better support. It's not that the young person doesn't want the support, it's that they don't know how to handle the fear of 'looking back' at painful historic events

## **Parenting**

- ❖ Neglect
- ❖ Child suffering abuse themselves
- ❖ No adequate role models
- ❖ Lack of boundaries/parental permissiveness/inconsistent punishment rather than the use of punishment itself
- ❖ Over-indulgence of young person by parent(s)
- ❖ The child / young person sees angry outbursts or violence as normal because it's what they've seen at home between parents, or what has happened to them. They may not have learnt that being angry and being violent are two different things
- ❖ The child / young person may see their parent (usually mother) as weak & powerless, or that it is OK to treat people as such. They may also have parent(s) unable to clearly vocalise their requests and expectations

## **Disability (including mental health and substance misuse)**

- ❖ Disability within the family may cause a change in 'family roles', such as a child taking on a parent's caring role, that may result in feelings of resentment and anger from the child / young person and powerlessness from the parent

## **Debt & unemployment**

- ❖ Stress
- ❖ Poverty, including lack of access to the wider community

## **Peers**

### **Peer influences**

- ❖ Being bullied
- ❖ Falling in with 'wrong crowd' or gang, where aggression is part of the culture and they have to prove themselves
- ❖ Exposure to unhelpful behaviour within another family, which is then modelled to an abusive effect within their own home

## **Society**

### **Society itself**

- ❖ "We are getting angrier as a nation – and if adults are getting angrier, it follows that our teenagers will follow by our example"  
*(Dr Sandi Mann, Senior Lecturer in Occupational Psychology, University of Central Lancashire)*
- ❖ Others believe, as evidenced by the plethora of articles on the Internet, in newspapers and other forms of media, that as a society we are not teaching our children respect - both towards other people and towards property

### **Environment**

- ❖ Being exposed to external influences may distort a child or young person's view of acceptable behaviour and raise the threshold for levels of acceptability, for example, in respect of crime in the community or home, anti-social behaviour and general levels of aggression

## **Media**

- ❖ Violence on TV, film, video games and in music lyrics and its effect on the behaviour of young people has long been debated, with studies producing evidence both for and against this idea
- ❖ Characters in soaps etc are often aggressively 'out for what they can get for themselves', giving the impression that it is OK/normal to behave that way
- ❖ Young people are rarely reported in the media in a good light – instead common role models are youths armed with knives and part of a gang

## **Rights**

- ❖ Young people know they have 'rights' and so learn to expect and demand certain things 'by right'. When they feel their 'rights' are not met, they can react with anger and aggression

# Effects

**Parents** in these situations, aside from any fear they may experience, frequently feel they have no one to turn to. Feelings of shame and failure are common – you can't be much of a parent if you can't control your own child.

As a result, many won't even tell family or friends. And because it is not much talked about, even in the media, they are unaware of where they can go for professional help, even if they could bring themselves to admit to someone else that it is happening.

Life can seem like continually walking on eggshells, leading to a growing sense of resentment, increased stress and even depression.

Other emotions include isolation, disempowerment, a complete loss of confidence and guilt, especially if they have retaliated or defended themselves.

Finally, parents often end up not liking their child and finding it increasingly difficult to love them. This in turn leads to more guilt and shame.

**Children / young people** who are committing the abuse, also feel ashamed and guilty. If there has been other domestic violence in the home they often feel convinced they are bad or 'like their abusive parent'. They can feel hopeless and alienated by their behaviour.

Occasionally some may temporarily enjoy the sense of power their behaviour gives them, but most feel scared and guilty after the event.

**Other family members** will also be suffering. Life in such a household can be 'miserable', and younger siblings may start to copy the older sibling's behaviour. Some may also be direct victims of the abuse along with the parent.

# Tips & Suggestions

## for Working with families

An important first step towards parent(s) regaining control of the situation they find themselves in is to **'name' and acknowledge the problem**. (In some cases the parent(s) will need someone else to 'name' the problem for them).

Usually this acknowledgement by the parent and / or the child will need to be followed by **speaking to someone who understands and /or a counsellor**. Occasionally it may be necessary for the parent to distance themselves from their child for a while and to make it clear that they will be seeking help and support for themselves, even if the young person refuses to participate in any counselling or other support made available to them. (In some cases, the young person will then attend the sessions in order to maintain some sort of control). An abusive or controlling adult 'child' will also need to take time to question their own self worth and pinpoint the realities of their anger.

It is normal for the parent to experience a variety of emotions, including relief, anger, depression and even a sense of failure and loss. It is therefore important that practitioners **avoid any suggestion of blaming the parent(s)** and instead work to support them in regaining a 'gently, non-violent leadership role in their families'. Try to identify the needs of the parent as well as those of the child / young person / adult 'child', in order to minimise the chances of the parent feeling criticised or judged - then work with the parent(s) to help build their sense of self-worth and strengthen their ability to cope with the situation.

Often parents report that they are sent from one agency to another in an effort to find or 'treat' the cause of the abuse. Try to avoid this happening unless necessary and contact agencies you think may be able to help to discuss the situation with them either on a general basis, or with more detail if you have consent to share information. This will **ensure referrals are appropriate**.

**The Tulip Group** is a voluntary organisation that was set up to provide help and support to parents who were experiencing violence or abuse from their child or children. Their aim is to provide ongoing support to victims to encourage a less violent environment within the family home and to encourage self-development.

Whilst the group is not able to offer telephone support directly to victims at this time, they have compiled the following list of **'Top Ten Tips'** based on their own personal experiences and those of the many people who have contacted them as a result of experiencing child to parent abuse.

# Top Ten Tips (Tulip Group)

- 1) Help the parent to identify the problem  
(The role of the professional is to help the parent and young person work out what might be causing the behaviour – an external cause outside the home making them worry, or a cause within the home - and to learn to recognise the warning signs)
- 2) Prioritise resolving the issues
- 3) Ensure a thorough assessment is completed to identify any underlying issues for example mental health
- 4) Ensure all family members are referred to appropriate services - for example, Education / Social Welfare - whilst trying to avoid them being sent from one agency to another
- 5) Ensure parent(s) is offered a list of services and resources available for them to contact should this be required
- 6) Follow Safeguarding Procedures for your agency  
(The Hampshire Safeguarding policy is at <http://4lscb.proceduresonline.com/hampshire/index.html> )
- 7) Encourage parent(s) to identify possible strategies to use, for example positive parenting and rewarding good behaviour  
(Try to see if there is a pattern to the abusive behaviour occurring and, if there is, encourage the parent, whenever possible, to head it off or walk away from the situation before it escalates, and let things calm down)
- 8) Refer the parent(s) to a support group or parenting course, as appropriate
- 9) Review / evaluate, as required, to ensure family is moving forward
- 10) Use the MARAC\* process to share good practice and identify resources to support the family

\* The MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) enables local practitioners to discuss high-risk cases of domestic abuse and put in place measures to keep the victim and any children safe. Your local MARAC Co-ordinator can be contacted through Hampshire Constabulary on 101

## **Where To Start**

- ❖ Be prepared to admit the abuse, so you can talk about and start to deal with it.  
*"Coping with a potentially violent child is very challenging and no parent should expect to have to do this alone" (Parenline Plus)*
- ❖ Remember to consider that there may be an underlying issue, which is making your child unhappy, and act aggressively. If you think this may be the case, seek medical advice.
- ❖ Understand that the situation may get worse before it gets better. Your child is acting abusively for a reason and it will take time and patience to address the reasons and behaviour displayed.
- ❖ Remember that being cheeky or disobedient is normal behaviour in children and that teenagers in particular will naturally try to challenge you more. This shows a natural desire to assert their independence and this behaviour / comments shouldn't be taken personally. Try to keep communicating and use the 'broken record' techniques of just repeating what you expect from them in terms of acceptable behaviour.

## **What To Do During Incidents**

- ❖ It is important to feel and act in a confident way when you talk to your teenager. Make it clear you are in control and will not accept their aggressive behaviour.
- ❖ Refuse to discuss anything of importance while the child is being abusive. They may be trying to get attention, and learning that violent behaviour brings attention is not a good idea. Walk away and discuss what has happened later.
- ❖ Do not retaliate – verbally or physically.  
*"Aggression breeds aggression" Set an example (Family Lives)*
- ❖ Refrain from using physical punishment on a child who is already violent – it can make them even more confrontational and see you as hypocritical. Instead list a set of consequences and take away what they like most for example a video game or watching a favourite TV programme. Follow through on the consequences you have agreed.
- ❖ Suggest you both talk to someone who may be able to help – counselling, parenting classes etc. This is especially important if you are scared of your child. Explain that is not them that you dislike but what they are doing/their behaviour. If an incident is getting out of hand, call the police (dial 999).
- ❖ If the violence gets worse, try to set out clear guidelines about what is acceptable behaviour – talk it through together. If the behaviour does not improve, talk to your doctor or Children's Services (Tel: 0300 5551384). In extreme circumstances, the child or young person may need to be removed from the home for a short period of time, or occasionally even permanently.

## **Prevention**

- ❖ Make your child feel that they can talk to you whatever the problem. If/when they do talk to you, don't interrupt or judge; don't react angrily or blame them. Try to show that you understand their feelings. Talk to them rather than at them. Let them put their point of view across – what they think is fair and unfair in the household.
- ❖ If they don't feel they can talk to you, suggest they talk to someone they trust or to a professional.
- ❖ Pick your battles carefully – trying to control too many aspects of your child's life as they grow older inevitably leads to more defiance in some children. Pick one or two behaviours you want to change – explain why (they may see it as you trying to stop them having fun; you see it as a matter of their safety – you are doing this because you care for and love them) and negotiate with them how this can be achieved.
- ❖ Be consistent with parenting strategies. It is easy to shy away from restricting the child for fear of violence, but be the parent and make sure the child knows you are in control.
- ❖ Take a firm stand against violence, risk-taking and anti-social behaviour. Create strong boundaries.

- ❖ Spend time with them as often as possible doing something you both enjoy (ask them what they would like to do) e.g. grab a bite to eat at a favourite restaurant, watch a TV programme together, play sport/games together or sit down and have a normal discussion about life in general. Stay interested in their interests, but without smothering them.
- ❖ Tell your child that you love them. Show them that you care for and respect them. Praise their accomplishments. Show how proud you are of them and what they have achieved so far.
- ❖ Give your child the confidence in themselves to make good choices – to know their alcohol limits, be strong enough to resist peer pressure to join aggressive /violent gangs.
- ❖ Encourage participation in sports or other extra-curricular activities as these may help raise their self-confidence



### **Get Help from Others**

It is often useful to gain the support of others to deal with the abuse in a non-violent way, as young people will often act more respectfully in front of other people.

Talk to their school/college to see if aggressive behaviour is going on there too. They may be able to offer counselling / advice.

If a child sees violence at home, they may grow up believing this is normal. They need to learn that no form of abuse is acceptable. Talk about the issues. Seek help to deal with any other abuse that is going on in the home.

Try to find out if they are drinking alcohol, taking drugs or feeling under pressure to act in the same way as their friends.

Stay in touch with people who are a part of the young person's life, for example, parents of the young person's friends, teachers, doctors, counsellors, probation workers etc

### **Get Help for Yourself**

If you ask for help and don't appear to be getting it, keep asking. (See list of agencies, helplines, websites that can help).

Work on your own confidence/self-esteem. Avoid self-pressure as this can make you feel helpless, lonely, even angry. Remember being a parent is one the hardest jobs in the world. Try to find your own way of feeling good about yourself as a parent.

Give yourself some time for you – feeling stressed and run-down will not help you deal with your child's aggressive behaviour. It also makes confrontations more likely.

### **Useful Websites**

Got a Teenager: [www.gotateenager.org.uk](http://www.gotateenager.org.uk)

- Click on "Risky Behaviours" on lefthand side

BBC - Health: Teenagers

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/physical\\_health/child\\_development/tween\\_teen\\_index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/physical_health/child_development/tween_teen_index.shtml)

Children's Violence to Parents (Eddie Gallagher)

<http://web.aanet.com.au/eddiegallagher/violence%20to%20parents.html>

Young Minds: [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Young Carers: [www.youngcarers.com](http://www.youngcarers.com)

eHow Family: [www.ehow.co.uk/ehow-family/](http://www.ehow.co.uk/ehow-family/)

For information about local groups for parents and for young people, see the following websites:-

North East Hampshire Domestic Violence Forum

[www.nehantsdvvf.co.uk](http://www.nehantsdvvf.co.uk) or [www.safermh.co.uk](http://www.safermh.co.uk)

Hampshire Domestic Abuse Forum

[www.hants.gov.uk/socialcareandhealth/adultsocialcare/domesticabuse](http://www.hants.gov.uk/socialcareandhealth/adultsocialcare/domesticabuse)

### **Local Support**

The Integrated Domestic Abuse Service for Hampshire (IDASH) provide support for victims and survivors of domestic abuse through community based floating support and outreach support; Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors; support services for children and families; crisis based accommodation (refuge); move on and resettlement services and; personal support networks and group work.

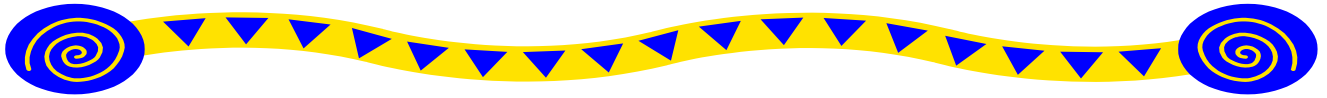
24 hour Telephone line: 0330 0165 112

### **Telephone support**

Family Lives (formerly Parentline Plus) provide help and support in all aspects of family life and can be contacted 24 hours a day, seven days a week on their freephone number 0800 800 2222.

As well as telephone support, there is a wealth of information available on their website [www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk) together with details about contacting the service by email, Live Webchat or Textphone.





## Parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Handy Hints

### Listening

Listening can be hard work!

Look at the list below...

How do you measure up as a “good listener”?

- ❖ Focus on the speaker, give them your full attention
- ❖ Look at the speaker - make sure your **face** says you are listening
- ❖ Wait until they have finished before saying anything – give them enough time – sometimes it is very difficult to talk about something
- ❖ Give helpful nods, smiles, appropriate expressions of understanding (oh., I see., mmm..) while they are talking
- ❖ Make eye contact, but be careful not to stare
- ❖ Use a helpful, supportive tone of voice
- ❖ Only offer advice or suggestions if asked
- ❖ Try to reflect back speaker’s feelings in relation to what has happened, this will help them to know you are really listening
- ❖ Try to *understand* rather than judge what they are saying



Give time – try to stop what you are doing and listen.



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[http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents-and-carers/guides-for-parents/listening-to-children/listening-to-children-pdf\\_wdf90723.PDF](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents-and-carers/guides-for-parents/listening-to-children/listening-to-children-pdf_wdf90723.PDF)

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The Silent Suffering of Parent Abuse: When Children Abuse Parents  
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Break4Change – Addressing Child-to-Parent Violence  
<http://break4change.blogspot.com/2009/04/why-break4change-blog.html>

Parent Abuse Research Network  
[www.york.ac.uk/law/research/parn/index.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/law/research/parn/index.htm)

Parenting UK - national membership organisation for those working with parents  
[www.parentinguk.org](http://www.parentinguk.org)

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<http://www.respect.uk.net/pages/young-peoples-services.html>

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