

Unschooling Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

As the number of families choosing to homeschool continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to study different ways in which families choose to homeschool their children.

Unschooling is a variety of homeschooling where children learn through everyday life experiences and through their own intrinsic motivations. The percentage of homeschoolers who consider themselves unschoolers can be estimated at approximately 20%, and that number continues to grow at a steady rate as unschooling increases in popularity (Blanding, 2018). As the population of homeschoolers increases, the number of parents who choose to unschool their children with disabilities has also risen. Many find unschooling to be an ideal educational alternative because of its self-directed, self-paced approach. Within this study, fifty parents completed a survey regarding their experiences unschooling a child or multiple children with disabilities. Overall, most parents saw unschooling as a healing environment that provides a more personalized learning environment for students with disabilities as compared to school. However, the unschooling parents in this study did report significant time/career sacrifices, as well as a need for more respite. Also reported was a need for more unschooling friendly practitioners and service providers, a more inclusive unschooling community, and increased normalization and legitimization of unschooling as a choice through further research.

Keywords: unschooling, homeschooling, special education, disability, self-directed learning

Introduction

The number of families choosing to homeschool has grown tremendously in the past decade. In 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that approximately 1.7 million students were homeschooled in the United States (McQuiggan, Megra, & Grady, 2017) and that number has doubled in the past year due to the COVID-19 crisis (Gallup, 2020). As the number of homeschooling families in the United States and abroad grows, there becomes increased variety in the ways in which families choose to homeschool their children.

Unschooling is a variation of homeschooling where, instead of following a set curriculum, children learn through everyday life experiences. These experiences are of their choosing and tend to match their strengths, interests, and personal learning styles (Wheatley, 2009). Unschooling is not “school at home.” In unschooling, there are no assignments, no set curriculum, and no structured assessments. Within an unschooling environment, parents do not directly teach or provide direct instruction. Instead, they provide an environmental context that supports their child or teen’s learning and development (Gray & Riley, 2013). Unschoolers are usually registered by their school districts as homeschoolers. Then, the parent/parents who are homeschooling allow the child to lead their own learning experience (Gray, 2017). The percentage of homeschoolers who consider themselves unschoolers can be estimated at approximately 20%, and that number continues to grow at a steady rate as unschooling increases in popularity (Blanding, 2018).

While religious motivation was previously the number one reason why parents decided to homeschool their children in the United States, this is no longer the case anymore. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the top two stated motivations for homeschooling within the U.S. included concern regarding the child’s school environment and

dissatisfaction with the quality of academic instruction at school. Approximately twelve percent of the population chose homeschooling because of their children's disabilities, including physical or mental health needs (McQuiggan, Megra, & Grady, 2017), and a majority of these individuals tend to choose an unschooling philosophy (Michaud, 2019). Under federal law, local school districts are required to provide free evaluation to students who are homeschooled.

However, the ability to get services or receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or similar plan for a homeschooled student with special needs varies from state to state (Friend, 2013) and from country to country. Michaud (2019) discusses her experience in homeschooling, and then unschooling a child with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and a Learning Disability in her article "Healing Through Unschooling." Michaud states that when unschooling, "I was no longer riddled with anxiety and the need to control him and started genuinely enjoying his company.... Our relationship was stronger and more loving. And he started learning to do many things on his own (including reading without teaching)" (p. 11).

Not much has been written within academic literature about unschooling students with disabilities; albeit for a new dissertation by Dean (2022), who briefly mentions unschooling within their exploration of how homeschool families with children and/or teens with disabilities mediate learning experiences. Additionally, there have been many personal accounts of parents unschooling students with disabilities that can be found online and within published books and articles. However, this is the first peer reviewed study of its kind to examine the experiences of unschooling parents of children/teens with disabilities.

Methodology

Participants and Survey Form

Within this study, a survey was created for parents who had chosen unschooling for their child or children with disabilities and had unschooled for at least 2 years. Fifty parents met this criteria, gave appropriate informed consent online, and completed the study, which was housed on the digital site Survey Monkey. The fifteen-question survey first asked about demographic information and then proceeded with questions relating to the classification of the child or children's disability; whether the child/child(ren) had ever gone to school, and what parents saw as the benefits and challenges of the unschooling environment. No compensation was given for participation in the study. The survey and associated details were reviewed by the City University of New York (CUNY) - Hunter College Institutional Review Board. The author received a Professional Staff Congress -City University of New York (PSC – CUNY) grant to cover expenses related to the study.

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher analyzed the survey responses qualitatively using a grounded theory approach. This approach was chosen because very little is known about unschooling students with disabilities. Grounded theory itself is an iterative process that starts with generation of survey data and then proceeds to initial coding and category identification. There is an intermediate coding process that focuses on selecting core categories, and then an advanced process that creates the storyline or initial theory. Throughout this study, coding was used to organize survey responses (Tie, Burks, and Francis, 2019). First, a reading of responses and sketching of key terms was completed. Then, categories of responses were organized based on those terms. A second and third reading of surveys was done, and final categories and coding was completed.

Results

Demographic information

Fifty parents participated in the study, with children aged 5-21. The majority of parents reported their ethnicity to be White. There were four Biracial, two Asian, two Indian, one Black, one Hispanic, and one Native American/Indigenous participant. Five participants did not report ethnicity. This was an international study, and included participants from the United States (23); Australia (8); the United Kingdom (7); Canada, Malaysia, Russia, South Africa, Finland, and the Netherlands. The participants' level of education ranged from high school to doctoral level, with most participants reporting bachelor's degrees (24) and 20 reporting master's degrees. The majority of parents reported being married or partnered; with three specifically stating they were single parents.

Diagnosis

Five out of 50 participants noted that their child/teen did not have a formal diagnosis; although two participants reported awaiting diagnosis. Most individuals who responded to the study reported that their child/teen had autism, with two participants noting that their child/teen had non-verbal autism. Eight individuals reported their child/teen had ADHD, six reported a diagnosis of intellectual disability or Down's Syndrome. Six participants reported that their child/teen had been diagnosed with a specific learning disability (dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia). Four participants noted their child/teen had a diagnosis of Physical Disability, while five participants noted another type of disability (including deafness and TBI). Most (42 participants) noted that their child(ren)/teen(s) did not have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or similar documentation; one participant indicated that their child/teen had a 504 Plan (a plan given in the United States so that the child with an IEP has access to accommodations and/or related services). One participant noted that an IEP was in progress.

Style of Unschooling and Previous School Experience

Twenty-six participants stated that their child did not attend school prior to unschooling. Twenty-four participants reported that their child did attend school prior to unschooling. For those who reported their child attending school, 17 participants reported their child attending either Kindergarten, first grade, or second grade (with most reporting leaving school at 2nd grade). Four participants reported leaving school in 4th or 5th grade, while three reported leaving school in middle or high school.

In 2013, Gray and Riley categorized three main styles of unschooling. Radical unschooling occurs when students are given extensive freedom, with minimal guidance from parents or other adults. Unschooling is when adults may play a limited yet deliberate role in motivating or guiding learning. Relaxed homeschoolers may have specific educational goals to work towards, and may or may not use some curriculum to achieve those goals. Within this study, 33 participants identified themselves as unschoolers, with one stating that their child attends a self-directed learning center some of the time. Twelve participants defined themselves as relaxed homeschoolers; and eight defined themselves as radical unschoolers, giving their child(ren) ultimate autonomy and freedom.

The Switch from School to Unschooling

Of the twenty-four participants who switched from school to unschooling, several reasons were given, the most prevalent of which were mental health/anxiety reasons and issues relating to school culture. Specifically in terms of mental health, most parents found unschooling to be a healing environment as compared to school for students who struggled with either school refusal or anxiousness within the classroom environment. Parents who mentioned school culture as a reason for switching from school to unschooling discussed the school's inability to make proper

accommodations for the students' disability, specific experiences that parents had with the school's special education department; or pressure to medicate a child with a special education classification. School trauma was mentioned in five instances, specifics of which were vague. Other issues that parents mentioned as part of their decision to switch from school to unschooling included behavioral issues at school, bullying at school, too much busywork in school, and issues focused on COVID/mask wearing policies. Also mentioned were family wishes for greater freedom of schedule and more time to play. One family stated that their doctor suggested homeschooling, while another family stated that the small private school that their child was comfortable in had closed.

As examples:

"I didn't want to litigate my children's education...we landed on unschooling by following our kids' individual needs. Being autistic, they learn and develop best when doing interest based, self-led learning on their own timelines."

"I've been a volunteer special education advocate for 7 years. Almost every single parent I've ever worked with has cried because of how hard it is to ensure whatever is agreed to be an 'appropriate education' for their child. And then the whole process starts over with new team members the next year."

"My child was unappreciated at school, curiosity and imagination were being stamped out...I was being told that my 6 year-old had trouble sitting still for long periods, she was too fidgety, and was perhaps ADHD because at 6 years old she would rather dig holes in the playground

then sit and listen to lectures...we began to realize the institution of school was not for her or for us.”

“We had constant battles with the school and we didn’t feel his needs were being met. We didn’t feel he was flourishing or thriving.”

“When he was going to school, I followed the recommendations of the specialists (medication). But he was sick. I no longer wanted to medicate my son. They told me no medication, no school. So we did without school.”

“(What made me leave) was her decreasing confidence in her intelligence as other children began reading and she did not. When she told me she was the ‘stupidest’ kid in her class I knew I had to make a change.”

The Benefits of Unschooling Students with Disabilities

When asked about the benefits to unschooling students with disabilities, twenty-seven responses were coded as “personalized education,” where the education the child was getting through an unschooling environment best met their own individual needs and strengths. Two responses coded under the term “personalized education” specifically mentioned being able to focus more on needed life skills within the unschooling environment. These individuals had children that were identified as having intellectual disabilities.

Fourteen participants alluded to the term “less pressure” when discussing the benefits of unschooling, with two participants specifically mentioning less pressure to medicate their children. Autonomy and freedom were specifically mentioned 13 times in terms of benefits of

unschooling; and an increase in the child's personal happiness was mentioned seven times.

Seven out of 27 participants specifically mentioned that the unschooling environment facilitated increased intrinsic motivation within their children or teens. Other responses remarked on the positive mental health benefits of unschooling, and increased self-esteem their children felt. The availability of healthy meals, the freedom to move/take breaks when one wanted to, and the ability to wake up and go to sleep naturally were also seen as benefits of an unschooling environment, and fell under the coded category of bodily autonomy.

As stated by the participants:

“My children are happy and their issues are gone. They are finally learning.”

“I view unschooling as perfectly suited to the natural learning and development styles of autistic kids. Having strong interests and intensive needs for autonomy, we make more substantive progress together when I don't waste our time and energy trying to force them into a learning procedure (traditional teaching) that is ill suited to their neurotype.”

“Everything we do is catered to her needs and follows her intrinsic motivation. The difference in how she learns is never an issue. She's able to follow her passions regardless of grade level, including starting high school biology at age 8, and becoming captain of her Robotics team at age 9.”

“There is no imposition of arbitrary ideas about when children 'should' be mastering specific learning outcomes. My daughter has been able to learn to read and enjoy it as a result of disassociating reading from the pressure to perform that is so ingrained in school settings.”

“(My son) has found unexpected and beautiful ways to learn and share those ways enthusiastically with me...it is just beautiful to watch him flourish and come back into his voice and self. He has gone from strength to strength.”

“His learning disabilities become strengths in how he approaches information processing. He is aware of his limitations and past and current struggles, but is able to perceive them as aspects of his physiology and tacit experiences rather than as disabling conditions that separate him from others. He is able to develop compensating mechanisms around his limitations. He is motivated intrinsically to pursue his own interests. He has compassion and respect for others, and strives to prove himself as a responsible individual in society. He does not feel the pressure to conform as a teen....He is more mature and discerning than many adults, yet still bounces around and indulges himself in imagination without feeling shame....Unschooling has helped him grow exponentially. It has helped me to understand the value of attunement.”

“We don't have to try and find new, exciting, and manipulative ways to make them learn what the content standards think they should be learning. They are able to get as much sleep as they need, whenever they need it. They are able to eat, drink, and go to the bathroom when their body needs it....They aren't used to comparison so they already feel confident carving their own path. When they lose interest in something, they are allowed to drop it and move into something they are more interested in, so they are learning to trust their own judgment and make decisions....They have already learned that their life belongs to them, and they are the only ones

that can decide what they want to do next. No waiting for validation or directions. But they do learn how to ask for help or support.”

The Challenges of Unschooling Students with Disabilities

When discussing challenges of students with disabilities, 13 mentioned the opinions of others as a huge challenge. Two participants out of 13 specifically mentioned their fear of authorities and one participant cited an overall bias focused on alternative education. This finding is consistent with other major studies on unschooling (Gray & Riley, 2013; Gray & Riley, 2015). Time and/or career sacrifice was listed as a challenge 11 times, including two participants specifically mentioning finances as a struggle. Six participants mentioned caregiver fatigue and/or lack of respite for parents of students with disabilities, and three stated that finding a welcoming community was a challenge. Three brought up the challenge of deschooling the parent, or getting rid of culturally ingrained thoughts regarding the importance of traditional schooling; with one participant specifically discussing personal feelings of self-doubt. Other challenges noted included fear for the future (or, what would become of the child in adulthood); and worry about gaps in learning. Five participants did not list challenges and only focused on the benefits of unschooling their child(ren) with disabilities.

In the participants' words:

“It is difficult to find providers or mentors that understand unschooling or disability. The unschooling community can be quite ableist.”

“I am neurotypical, and raising an atypical son who I am with 24/7 is challenging. I have to remind myself that he is learning even though it looks different. Family and friends do not understand and often ask about our school flow with judgmental questions about curriculum and

math/reading formal education. It's hard because each day is different and spontaneous....I chose to be readily available to go on the (unschooling) ride with him, so less freedom for me."

"We are very much alone in this. We haven't met other homeschoolers doing what we are; we haven't found our community yet."

"I chose to make this my career and invest fully in the journey. It was a financial sacrifice and hard to put on a resume."

"I (have a hard time with) the reactions of others who often assume his differences are because he is unschooled. Finding friends is difficult when groups are irregular and inconsistent. No breaks, no respite. Very difficult to see what may happen in the future as there is nothing to compare with. Others think we are neglectful. It is difficult to meet the needs of others in the family as well."

"All the challenges have been external: the opinions of others, dealing with bias against both alternative education and people with disabilities."

"My biggest challenge is the well-meaning concern of family members who believe that dyslexic children require intensive phonics-based instruction. Not having support from these people because they believed we were making irresponsible decisions was hard when my daughter was still not reading."

“Other people don’t get it. They think school and curriculum must be best because that’s what most kids are doing. It’s also more difficult to make connections and find places to go that will accommodate my younger child. He’s a member of the community and he belongs here, but we rarely ever see other disabled children out and about.”

“I sometimes struggle with caregiver fatigue. We don’t have as much assistance as I wish we did. But I have come to believe that no support is better than harmful support...”

Needed Supports

When asked the question “is there an area in which you had more support?”, there seemed to be great clarity regarding where supports were most needed. Fifteen participants mentioned the need for more unschool friendly services, including tutors, reading interventionists, psychologists, physicians, counselors, and physical/occupational therapists. Fourteen participants also mentioned a need for more community and social support, including support groups for unschooled children/teens with disabilities, unschooling/disability friendly homeschool groups, and unschooling/disability friendly community activities. Ten participants stated that they needed more childcare help and respite services (not just on weekends/holidays; but during the weekdays as well), while seven participants called for the normalization of the choice to unschool through advocacy, and more research on unschooling and unschooling outcomes. Six participants stated financial support as a need, specifically wanting financial support without more homeschooling regulation (as that seems to be the trade-off for state-based support or tax incentives within the United States). Three parents spoke specifically about the difficulty their children had in finding friends like them; and would appreciate some social support outside of unschooling groups and other more formal gatherings.

As shared by the participants:

“Unschooling (students with disabilities) is amazing, but it can be really hard on mothers in particular. If your child’s behavior is very unusual, then it can be hard to connect with other unschoolers, and you never get any time away from the child. This can lead to extreme isolation.”

“I wish mental health diagnoses included descriptions of free (or unschooled) children and not just those in schools.”

“It isn’t easy to find support that isn’t based on absolutely ableist assumptions within the school systems or even the professionals working with disabled children. So we are careful who we reach out to but have been blessed to find wonderful people.”

“Other than when we participate in community programs like the Special Olympics, when people ask, they frown on homeschooling and unschooling. We don’t mind but I wish the negativity wasn’t there.”

Other Comments

In the last question of the survey, I asked “is there anything else you want me to know?”, leaving the participants of the survey free to share what was on their mind. I appreciated their honesty, as well as their ideas. For example, when this survey came out over three years ago, the title of the survey originally used the term “special needs”, as many schools, colleges and textbooks still used the term to describe individuals with disabilities. Many parents wrote to inform me that the term “special needs” was considered offensive, and preferred the term

“neurodiverse” or “disabled”. As example, one person stated *“The term ‘special needs’....please just rethink using it....it’s not a good term”*; while another shared *“Special needs is no longer an appropriate term for disabled children. The disability community is clear that they prefer direct terminology instead of euphemisms”*. I am appreciative of these comments and learned so much from the conversation.

Some wanted to share their unschooling experience overall:

“Unschooling looks so different from family to family. We’ve hesitated to even consider ourselves unschoolers because most people assume that means we are lazy. But it’s quite the opposite. We spend a great deal of time and effort to keep our kids engaged and discovering new things...”

“Children are made to learn. As adults, we often interfere with this. We have to learn to step back and watch them do what they are designed to do.”

Many parents wanted to share the joy and healing they found in the unschooling experience:

“Not all children are happy in school and children cannot learn when they are unhappy. Listening to them, supporting them in the direction they want to go is important for them. I think society has lost touch with this reality.”

“The history of education really showed me how much we failed to make a system that was flexible and gentle enough for kids....I wish more people in school places...knew to look at unschooling. The excuses to not do it are costing their children’s emotional wellbeing to conform and mask difficulties when they could be flourishing.”

“Whole life unschooling (radical unschooling, partnership, attunement) has been the constant that saved him from being lost....it is as if the authentic process of unschooling is the very leveling aperture that keeps us upright and flying.”

Still others see a strong need for increased research on unschooling:

“I truly hope for the creation of a strong evidence base that elucidates how great unschooling can be for neurodivergent kids, perhaps especially autistic kids. An evidence base of published research will make advocacy easier and keep unschooling kids and families more safe.”

as research would assist in legitimizing the educational choice:

“Here in Quebec, I have to be hidden to live radical unschooling. I would like so much more research...”

“We moved from another country to homeschool/unschool, in Europe, many countries still don’t allow homeschooling and unschoolers are in a very poor situation, having to hide their choices.”

Discussion

Several clear themes and needs came out of this study, the first to explore the experiences of families who are unschooling students with disabilities. These themes and needs, in order of discussion, include: unschooling as a healing environment, unschooling as providing a personalized learning environment for students with disabilities, time/career sacrifices and lack of respite for unschooling families, the need for unschooling friendly practitioners, a need for community, and the need for normalization and legitimization of unschooling as a choice.

Unschooling as Healing

The unschooling environment as a healing learning space has been alluded to many times. Michaud (2019) discussed her experiences with unschooling as a healing environment within her peer reviewed article in *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*. Within the piece, she discusses how unschooling provided a transformative, peaceful environment for her son with both FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Riley and Ricci (in press, 2023) are currently working on a book of essays that explores the link between unschooling and radical healing. In his blog Freedom to Learn in *Psychology Today*, Peter Gray (2021) states that:

Instead of admitting that the school system is disordered, an abnormal environment for children's learning, unable to accommodate normal human variation, the school bureaucracy chooses to label the children as disordered...The psychiatric community obliges by providing official diagnostic criteria and categories to support the labels. (Para. 5).

He then refers to a small survey he did of parents whose children had been diagnosed with dyslexia while in conventional school and then chose to homeschool. All ten respondents reported student strong resistance and fear surrounding reading. However, when pressure to read was removed within a home learning or unschooling environment, the children began to show an interest in reading and a want for additional support in learning how to read (2020).

In her book *Raising Free People: Unschooling as Healing and Liberation Work*, Akilah Richards discusses the freedom unschooling families feel (especially Black unschoolers) as they experience bodily autonomy, and how unschooling can help heal school wounds and trauma (2020). Naomi Fisher also explores the concept of the healing aspects of self-directed learning in

her book *Changing Our Minds: How Children Can Take Control of Their Own Learning* (2021).

As a parent in this study shared,

“The switch from school to unschool was because of school trauma, inability to access curriculum, and little scaffolding...I had to guide my son back from a very broken place. I chose to unschool as I didn’t wait to recreate an environment that would trigger him to feel incompetent or misunderstood ever again.”

Unschooling as providing a personalized learning environment

The concept of an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) in the United States is to provide students with a classified disability the services and specific environment they need to best access the general education curriculum. Other countries also utilize documents much like an IEP to outline a student with disabilities’ individual services and supports (Alkahtani & Kheirillah, 2016). However, there are many school districts both within the United States and abroad that struggle to give students needed (and most times legally mandated) services (Voulgarides, 2018) leaving students and parents seeking alternatives. As one parent in the study noted *“An area in which I wish I had more support is accessing her IEP services and other activities she has legal rights to.”* An unschooling environment sometimes provides a child with the 1:1 or small group support that they need to address their individual needs; and can be considered some student’s Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). In the words of a participant *“Students get an individualized education and don’t have the trauma of trying to fit into a largely neurotypical school environment.”*

Lack of Respite

There is significant data on the increased stress levels experienced by parents of children with disabilities (Hsaio, 2018; Miranda, 2019). This is due to the difficulty of caring for complex

academic, emotional and/or medical needs in addition to the daily work of caring for the child.

An advantage of school is that it does provide weekday and, in many instances, after-school support, instruction, and care. Those who unschool, however, have no respite if they are not utilizing school services, making it so that one parent or caregiver has to be on call 24/7. As rates of homeschooling increase, it is essential that the issue of lack of respite for homeschoolers and unschoolers be addressed.

The Need for Unschool Friendly Practitioners

One way to address the above would be to have local listings of homeschool and unschool friendly service providers, including teachers, tutors, physicians, psychologists, speech therapists, counselors, physical therapists, occupational therapists, etc. The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) does have a list of providers here <https://hsllda.org/post/finding-a-homeschool-friendly-special-education-professional> and the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE) also provides a list here <https://www.selfdirected.org/resources/professionals>. However, more local and international listings are sorely needed. Self-directed learning centers can also provide respite for some unschooling families with disabilities, as long as they have staff that are familiar and educated about the needs of neurodiverse students and students with other learning, emotional, or physical disabilities.

The Need for Unschooling Community Specifically for Students with Disabilities

So many in this study called for unschooling and disability friendly companionship/friendship, not only for their children but also for themselves. Many spoke of not yet being able to “find their tribe,” and found many local unschooling groups ableist and exclusionary. There is a need within the unschooling community to be more open and inclusive

to all students, and to have conversations about what true inclusion really means. As one participant shared,

“I wish we had access to more community members who were willing to work with my kids on their interests. Many such people aren’t comfortable working with autistic kids. I also wish the unschooling communities online and locally weren’t so frequently ableist....We haven’t had access to as much community, including co-ops, because so many unschoolers I have encountered....do not grasp what being radically inclusive looks like.”

Normalization of Unschooling as a Choice

We know from past research (Gray & Riley, 2013; Gray & Riley, 2015), as well as this study, that one of the biggest challenges of unschooling is the lack of understanding surrounding this educational option, as well as the opinions of others (family, friends, neighbors, etc.). This lack of understanding contributes to the issues of lack of respite, lack of unschooling-friendly practitioners, and a lesser feeling of community. Sometimes, lack of understanding contributes to punitive national and international rules and regulations regarding both homeschooling and unschooling. As one participant stated *“I wish this style of learning was recognized by the government of my province so we wouldn’t have to feel like outlaws.”* This is why it is essential that more research be done, not only to legitimize the unschooling of children and teens with disabilities, but also to legitimize unschooling itself as a viable educational option for all who desire this choice.

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