Introduction

Literacy is one of the most important cultural tools in most contemporary societies. Learning to read and write is therefore central to the curriculum of primary education. Before formal literacy learning, young children already demonstrate their orientation towards the existence, features, use and usefulness of written language, taken together in the broad concept of emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). In a recent review, Teale, Whittingham, and Hoffman (2020) noticed how the umbrella terms emergent literacy, early literacy, and beginning reading were used to describe literacy practices and literacy environments of children in the preschool period until third grade. They also noted an increased emphasis on literacy development within sociocultural contexts, highlighting the presence of literacy in children’s natural environments alongside more formal educational activities in order to stimulate literacy development. We choose to use the term emergent literacy to emphasize the developmental stage where children become increasingly aware of literacy, in interaction with texts and adults or other children. This rather informal knowledge about literacy forms an important basis for later formal reading and writing instruction and literacy development (e.g. Bus, IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators play an important role in stimulating children’s emergent literacy by orienting them to written text, from a very young age. Through their interactions, adults help children to make sense of the world, which in many cultures contains a salient linguistic landscape. Children may get oriented to (adult’s engagement with) written text through shared reading and (role) play with peers, but also through more everyday events like noticing print on food packaging at the breakfast table, observing parents scrolling on their smartphones, and reading aloud during digital technology use (e.g. Davidson et al., 2020; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2013).

These interactions with children around written language may arise spontaneously or intentionally. Intervention studies like that of Reese et al.
have shown that interventions targeting parental skills are found to be effective in enriching parent-child interactions relevant for literacy development. Besides interactions with adults, other children may also be a resource to develop aspects of narratives (Cekaite et al., 2014; Ninio & Snow, 1996) and to develop individual writer’s identities (Kissel et al., 2011). This chapter aims at constructing recommendations for early childhood professionals to recognize and elicit meaningful teacher-child and peer interactions around written text and thereby adding to the emergent literacy development of young children. Accordingly, this chapter discusses three interactional environments in educational settings in which children are oriented to aspects of emergent literacy: everyday interactions around text, shared picture book reading, and collaborative writing. The affordances of these settings are illustrated by analysing how aspects of literacy interactively come about in preschool and kindergarten.

Everyday Literacy Events

In many contemporary societies, print is omnipresent and ever-present, so children are exposed to environmental print from early on. For educational purposes, instances of environmental print are increased, for example through letters on toys or word walls and other literacy displays in (pre-school) classrooms. Both adults and young children are found to refer to environmental print, thereby highlighting it as a certain type of visual information, different from pictures. Because of the natural occurrence of print in the daily environment of children, its role in emergent literacy development is a matter-of-course.

Being tuned in to children’s spontaneous attention to written text will help early childhood educators to engage them in meaningful literacy interactions, orienting them to the meanings and purposes of literacy (Haas Dyson, 1995). Although this may lead to very short, fleeting snippets of interaction, the value of these moments cannot be underestimated because of the authentic context, following the child’s focus and interest.

However, research has shown that young (two- to four-year-old) children’s spontaneous, child-initiated orientation to text in preschool classrooms is rare (Deunk, 2009). Therefore, early childhood educators can incorporate their own authentic adult acts of reading and writing, like administration, into the curriculum, thereby creating opportunities for meaningful interaction about text.
Child-Initiated Orientation to Environmental Print

The recognition of print and understanding its uses and functions is a gradual process. The perspectives of the literate adult and the young child that has hardly any experience with literacy may be so different that it is hard to imagine how a child in that early stage of development may see the world. Through interactions with children, early childhood educators may get more insight in the literacy knowledge a child has acquired at a certain point in time. An example of how interaction with children can help literate adults appreciate a child’s perspective is given in Extract 8.1.

Extract 8.1 features Raoul (3 years; 6 months), who focuses on the print on a colouring pencil, which reads the store brand name (see Figure 8.1). Raoul’s orientation shows that he recognizes letters as a special type of visual information, knows that these letters in combination have meaning and can be read, and knows that others have the skills to do so.

Extract 8.1 Colouring pencil [RAO, Raoul (3;6), MEL, Melanie (2;4), TEA, Diana (teaching assistant)]

1  RAO:      hm colour          hm kleur
2  MEL:      blue               blauw
3  TEA:      yes there you’ve   ja daar heb je
            got ↑light blue      ↑lichtblauw melanie, well done goed zo

... 6 → RAO:  this is another   dis nog een (licht),
       (light), look           kijk
7  RAO:      (1.7) ((holds up   (1.7) ((houdt het
       pencil))              potlood omhoog))
8  RAO:      look ((leans over  kijk ((leunt naar
       to Diana))            Diana))
9       (1.1)                        (1.1)
10  RAO:     look ((leans       kijk ((leunt dichter
       closer to Diana))       naar Diana))
11  TEA:     that’s purple      dat is paars
12 → RAO:   look ((points at   kijk ((wijst naar de
       text at pencil))        tekst op het potlood))

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At first, teaching assistant Diana does not recognize Raoul’s focus on print and thinks Raoul is interested in the colour, in line with the topic of conversation somewhat earlier (‘that’s purple’, line 11). However, Raoul persists (‘look’, line 12) and manages to use Diana’s expertise, being a literate adult, to crack the code and read the print for him (‘it says hema’, line 14). Of special interest is Raoul’s perseverance: when Diana focuses on the colour instead of the text, Raoul initiates a repair sequence, to fix the misunderstanding (lines 10–14), followed by a confirmation sequence (lines 15–18), also initiated by him.

Explicating Expert Acts of Literacy

Just like environmental print is naturally part of children’s daily environment, so are people in their surroundings performing acts of reading and writing. Throughout the day, literate people read different types of text, ranging from environmental text to text messages, headlines, instructions, and newspapers and books. Also, writing is a common practice for literate people, ranging from scribbling a note to typing a text message, signing a card, making a grocery list, and keeping a diary. Part of emergent literacy is that children become aware of literate experts performing these frequent acts of reading and writing, and develop an understanding of their relevance.

Because reading and writing is so self-evident to people who have learned to do so, the act of reading and writing in everyday life often goes unnoticed. Yet, explicating this offers great opportunities for making written text and all its features salient to young children. Early childhood educators can help children increase their awareness and understanding through engaging with them in interactions during these expert acts of literacy. In Extract 8.2, early childhood educator Molly engages with a couple of children in

(Source: Deunk, 2009)
conversation about different characteristics of text and writing during a free
drawing activity. This extract illustrates attention for different aspects of
emergent literacy: the concrete act of name writing, and the use of writing,
in this case to indicate ownership.

Extract 8.2 The functions of writing [KIM, Kimberly (3;6), KIR, Kirsten (2;6),
TEA Molly (early childhood educator)]

A couple of children are drawing. Molly sits with them at the table.

1 TEA: do I need to write something on it kimberly?

2 (0.7)

3 TEA: yes?

4 (0.6)

5 KIR: no mine

6 (0.5)

7 TEA: ((to kimberly)) what shall I write on it then?

8 (0.4)

9 TEA: what shall I write on it? and what shall I write?

10 KIM: (3.7) ((points to the paper))

11 TEA: there? write there? and what shall I write?

12 (2.2)

13 KIR: [mine]

14 → TEA: ((to kimberly)) [write kimberly? so everyone knows it’s yours?]

15 TEA: ((to kimberly)) [yes?]

16 KIR: [my]

17 TEA: well done. it’s that one isn’t it?
In Extract 8.2, teacher Molly offers Kimberly her writing skills. Molly makes an effort to let Kimberly dictate what she should write (lines 1, 3, 7, 9, 11), to no avail. Even though Kimberly does not respond verbally, she is engaged in the interaction and does point to where she wants the text to be written. Molly then suggests she could write Kimberly’s name on the drawing (line 14), a common practice in early childhood classrooms in order to keep track of authorship and to make sure children take their own products home. Interestingly, Molly adds *why* this would be useful (‘So everyone knows it’s yours?’ , line 14), adding to the knowledgebase on the use and functions of writing. She does so again in line 25, when talking to Kirsten, who persists in making use of Molly’s writing skills as well (lines 5, 13, 16, 19). Just as Raoul in Extract 8.1, Kirsten (line 22) is also oriented to Molly’s reading skills in addition to her writing skills. When writing Kirsten’s name, Molly explicitly orients Kirsten to the act of name writing by verbally accompanying the activity before (‘I’m going to write here’, line 37,

(Source: Deunk, 2009)
This type of free drawing activity creates opportunities for interactions about different aspects of emergent literacy, like the concrete act of writing and the indication of ownership. In literate societies, written text has authority, which is an important characteristic because it influences decisions in everyday life. Therefore, gaining understanding of the status of text over oral information is important for the emergent literate child. Of course, for children, the legal consequences of having something ‘put in writing’ are not relevant, but understanding the higher status of written text is. In Extract 8.2, Molly emphasized twice that once the name is written on the drawing, ownership is publicly established (‘so everyone knows it’s yours’, line 14, and ‘then everybody knows it is kimberly’s’, line 25), implicitly also making clear that contesting ownership will be harder from then on. These kinds of interactions, which also take place during other activities in pre-school environments such as book loan activities (Deunk, Berenst, & de Glopper, 2013) and pretend play (Morrow & Tracy, 2005), contribute to children’s growing understanding of the use and status of text in the literate world they live in.

Shared Book Reading

Shared book reading is one of the most studied environments in relation to children’s language and literacy development (e.g. Bus, Van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), especially when children are actively involved in interactions during shared reading (e.g. Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005; Mol et al., 2008). Adults may assist children in understanding written language by means of reading aloud the picture books, but also by adding comments, asking questions, and explaining potential difficult parts of the book or text. Individual picture books may differ in how easily they elicit complex interaction, also partly depending on contextual preconditions and individual characteristics, interests, and competences of the adult and the child (Muhinyi et al., 2019; Teale et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the importance of shared reading for emergent literacy is undisputed, and always worth highlighting, not only because of world knowledge being conveyed through books and social-emotional insights through its characters, but also because shared reading can lead to meaningful interactions about features of text and books. The remainder of this particular section will focus on how shared reading may establish meaningful interactions, centred around aspects of story structure and story understanding.
Talking about Story Structure

During shared picture book reading, kindergarten teachers pay attention to the structure of stories. A recurrent element that is discussed is the title of the book in relation to the rest of the book. Teachers display an orientation to the title as written text and use this moment in time to address the reading of and reflecting on the title as an important component in the activity of reading a book. In Extract 8.3, the teacher directs children’s attention to the title as something that can be read, at the same time stressing that this is the first thing to be read.

Extract 8.3 The title of the book [KRI, Kris (6;2), RIC, Rick (6;2), TEA, Teacher]

1 → TEA: I will first tell what it says there on the cover because the cover is the title of the book, isn’t it?
2 (0.9) (0.9)
3 → (0.3) (0.3)
4 and it says en daar staat op
5 (0.3) (0.3)
6 KRI: mine= van mij=
7 TEA: =m- =v-
8 (1.1) (1.1)
9 RIC: mine= van mij=
10 TEA: =mi:ne =van: mij

Not only does the teacher show an orientation to the title of the book as written text that she is able to read, she also displays an orientation to the structure of stories and shared book reading, in which the title of the book is expressed as ‘first’ (line 1). These references to the logical ordering of book reading are also shown by Berenst (2006) and Clay (1991). They demonstrate how parents place emphasis on the start and ending of books, and how young children are oriented on the reading direction and the page turning in books. These and other ‘book handling skills’ of young children are also described in Lowe (2011) and Edwards (2014).

In Extract 8.4, the teacher also displays an orientation to the title as something you can read on the front of a book (‘please have a look’, line 20), but in this case she also underlines the title as revealing important
information about the contents of the book. By asking for an explanation (Gosen, Berenst, & de Glopper, 2015a) for why the book is titled 'shhh', the children get oriented to the title as essential to the content of the story.

Extract 8.4 Providing explanations [DAN, Daniël (5;2), RIC, Rick (6;2), REB, Rebecca (5;11), DRI, Dries (5;7), TEA, teacher]

20 → TEA: please have a look kijk maar eens eventjes

22 TEA: <because the name of <want dit boek heet this book is ((finger to lips)) shhh> mond)) sssst>

23 RIC: [who wrote it [door wie is het geschreven

24 → TEA: [why ((shakes head)) (waarom ((schudt I- why would the hoefd)) ik- waarom zou book- would the book het boek- zou het boek be called this way zo heten

25 → RIC: maybe someone is misschien slaapt er asleep iemand

26 TEA: ‘h ‘oh’ [((looks around in circle)) rond]

27 → DAN: [or maybe [of misschien there is a giant is er een reus in de close by who wants to buurt die hun wil eat them opeten

28 TEA: (((glances questioning ((kijkt vragend van from daniël to book)) daniël naar boek))

29 → REB: (that you [therefore (dat je [daarom stil have to be silent) moet zijn)

30 DRI: (((stamps on floor)) boom boom de vloer)) doem doem [doem

31 TEA: [what did you say [wat zeg je rebecca ik rebecca I don’t hear verstaa het niet you

32 → REB: that you therefore dat je daarom stil have to be silent moet zijn [wat daniël zei

33 TEA: [could be [zou kunnen
In this extract, the children make inferences on what the story will be about (lines 25, 27, 29, and 32) after the teacher initiated a request for explanations in line 24. At the same time, we see an example of Rick (line 23) orienting on another aspect around characteristics of a story: the author of the story. As in Extracts 8.1 and 8.2, he orients to the teacher as the one having the skills to read this information. However, the teacher is postponing his request to read the author’s name, to maintain the focus on the request for explanations. She is collecting the children’s contributions in lines 26, 28, and 33 without explicitly evaluating them. Rick then offers a contribution in line 69 in which he uses the cover page of the book as an information source, thereby orienting to story structure again. Once more, the teacher does not respond to his contribution by (dis)confirming his hypothesis as could be expected in conversation. Instead, she refrains from answering and directs the children’s attention to the continuation of the book as the source of information for finding the answer together in the continuation of the shared reading (line 70) (see also Gosen, Berenst, & de Glopper 2013, 2015a, 2015b). This specifies the structure of books with content that is released page by page. At the same time, making predictions gives children the opportunity to lay the grounds for further understanding of the book content, which is addressed in the next section of this chapter.

Reflecting on Story Understanding

The previous two extracts were both derived from the beginning of a shared picture book reading session, while there are also ample instances of interaction during and after the reading. After reading a picture book, children are often invited to evaluate the (events of the) book that was just read (see also Berenst, 2006). During shared reading, teachers can create moments of interaction to discuss children’s understanding of the story so far. An example of such an interaction is displayed in Extract 8.5. Here, teacher and children discuss the explanation for a book character’s emotional state.
Extract 8.5 Understanding the story so far [RIC, Rick (6;2), KYR, Kyra (5;6), TEA, teacher]

232 → TEA: but why- why is he sad then maar waarom- waarom is die dan verdrietig
233 RIC: well becau[se he th-nou om[dat-ie d-
234 → KYR: [because he could not have the [omdat hij niet de vlieger [mocht
235 → TEA: [((points at kyra)) [((wijst naar kyra)]

(Source: Gosen, 2012; Gosen, Berenst, & de Glopper, 2015a)

Preceding this fragment of interaction, teacher and children have concluded that the main character of the book appears sad. Hereafter, the teacher asks the children to explain why this is the case. In providing this explanation, Kyra (line 234) shows that she understands the causal relationship between an earlier event in the book and the emotional state of the book character. Kyra thus shows that she is able to step back from the storyline and reflect on it as a reader. In this extract, the teacher evaluates her answer as correct by pointing at Kyra (line 235). This differs from the responses to possible explanations as shown in Extract 8.4, because there is now known information that is reflected upon (Gosen, Berenst, & de Glopper, 2015a). In this case, the teacher’s feedback and request for explanation helps Kyra and the other children in the classroom to practise deriving meaning from texts, a skill that will increasingly be required at school.

Collaborative Writing

Apart from teachers and other adults, children also form a source for emergent literacy learning. For young children, emergent literacy is ideally embedded in meaningful play activities, since play is regarded by Vygotsky (1978, p. 103) as the leading activity. In peer interaction during play, children may construct all kinds of actions and activities such as reasoning and problem-solving (Hiddink, 2019a) but they may also display their orientation to literacy by constituting stories (Ninio & Snow, 1996). For instance, children may discuss different aspects that are associated with literacy, such as the role of protagonists and the logical event order and different forms of reflexivity (e.g. Cekaite et al., 2014).
Alongside these aspects in relation to emergent reading, peer interaction also contributes to children's writing. Conversations about each other's literate performances, like drawings, mark making, and texts, may stimulate individual children to reflect on their products and on their identity as literate beings (Coates & Coates, 2006; Kissel et al., 2011). Furthermore, interactions in the process of collaborative writing, may contribute to children's emergent writing development, as will be shown in this section.

**Peer Interaction about Correctness**

It is often reported that the practice of literacy seems to be reduced to decontextualized performances (e.g. Van Oers, 2007) without a clear idea about what is already apparent in children's emergent writing development. For instance, writing in kindergarten is often limited to an orientation to the alphabetic script, but by doing so, early childhood educators neglect how young children's writing emerges. To quote Sulzby, Teale, and Kamberelis (1989, p. 69): 'Most destructive, we think, is the assumption that children cannot write (that is cannot compose) until they have mastered the mechanics and that the only way they should write is through conventional orthography'. Berenst (2015) demonstrated that before young children are oriented to the alphabetic script, different kinds of writing aspects are already apparent in children's writing products.

As Extract 8.6 demonstrates, when children are oriented towards the alphabet, they mainly focus on discussing the correctness of orthography of words. In contrast to younger children (like Raoul in Extract 8.1), who are oriented on a word as a complete unit, these children are already oriented to the individual letters in a word and also in the order in which those letters should appear. Similarly to older children (Herder, Berenst, De Glopper, & Koole, 2018), young writers may recruit help from their peers. Here, Irene asks for help while writing the Dutch word ‘vla’ (in English, ‘custard’), after she wrote the letter ‘v’.

**Extract 8.6 Recruiting help for letter writing [IRE, Irene; IMK, Imke; VIC, Victor; kindergartners aged 5–6 years].**

1 → IRE: who wants to take a look what you write next to the v?  
wie wil even kijken wat na de v je schrijft?

2 VIC: I don’t  
ikkuh niet
While Irene writes the first letter of the Dutch word ‘vla’ (in English, ‘custard’), she invites others to check on the whiteboard what the next letter has to be (line 1). Although Victor refuses at first, after an insertion sequence in which Irene answers Victor’s question about what she wants to write (lines 5–6), Victor tries to take the paper from Irene, but when this is not successful, he goes to check the word on the whiteboard and mentions the next two letters of custard (lines 7–9). This negotiation about the letter placement between young children demonstrates how they can initiate such interactions themselves. Moreover, it displays their disposition to write words correctly by recruiting help and by using available resources in the classroom.

The activity the children work on during Extract 8.6 is that of constructing a dinner menu as part of a Storyline Approach (Bell, Harkness, & White, 2006). The final product is displayed in Figure 8.2. During the construction of the product, the children did not discuss its formal text structure. However, Figure 8.2 illustrates children’s un-explicated ideas about the formal text structure of a dinner menu. Their knowledge of dinner menus having three subsequent courses is reflected in their choice to write down the appetizer, main course, and dessert in the correct order from top to bottom. Moreover, they write the words from left to write and as separate units (see also Berenst, 2015). By doing so, they show their understanding of the spatial and sequential aspects of written language.
Peer Interaction about Appropriateness

Although young children in peer interaction during writing mainly discuss the correctness of orthography, on some occasions we observed children discussing forms of appropriateness before writing, as Extract 8.7 demonstrates. Here, children are going to write an invitation for guests of the party of a King.

Extract 8.7 Discussing forms of appropriateness [IRE, Irene; IMK, Imke; VIC, Victor; kindergartners aged 5–6 years]

Before they start writing, Irene raises the question about the names of the guests (line 1). By doing so, she displays her orientation to the formal structure of an invitation, namely that the first element is to whom it is addressed. After a pause, she reformulates her question (line 3). Her
question is treated here by herself, by Imke, and by Victor as a proposal to write it down (lines 4–6), after which Irene starts writing it down (line 7).

Although we would expect that the answer to Irene’s question (specifically the actual names of the guests) should be written down on an invitation, and not the question itself, this simple sequence of a proposal that is immediately agreed upon displays that the children have an idea about the entire speech activity (Levinson, 1992) ‘inviting guests’, as a sort of possible preliminary brainstorm, in which ‘what are the names of the guests?’ is a part of it, before writing the actual invitation. Even though young children may discuss forms of appropriateness, these discussions are scarce in peer interaction between young children, especially in contrast to older children in primary school, who more regularly collectively reflect on different kinds of appropriateness (Herder et al., 2018).

This might be an opportunity for teachers to explicitly discuss different kinds of writing aspects with children who show that they are already oriented to certain writing characteristics. Early childhood teachers are probably more aware than other adults in children’s lives that the opportunities to demonstrate orientations to aspects of emergent writing are central to children’s literacy development. Nevertheless, even for professionals, it may sometimes be difficult to respond contingently to their emergent literacy demonstrations. This is illustrated in Extract 8.8, which is part of the same activity as Extract 8.7. Here, the teacher joins the peer interaction.

**Extract 8.8 Teacher’s reorientation [IRE, Irene; IMK, Imke; kindergartners aged 5–6 years; TEA, Teacher]**

1 → TEA: ((comes walking with imke)) what do you want to know? wat wil je weten?
2 → IRE: what are the names of the guests? hoe heten de gasten?
3   TEA: what do you say? wat zeg je?
4   IRE: what are the names of the guests? hoe heten de gasten?
5 → TEA: [well, we don’t know that, but I think that uh:: the king’s chef is able to write it on the envelope himself] [nou, dat weten we niet, maar ik denk dat uh:: de kok van de koning dat zelf wel op de envelop kan schrijven]
6   (0.2)
In line 1, the teacher asks the children what they want to know. In response, Irene repeats their question (line 2) that they already wrote down, demonstrating their orientation to the speech activity (Levinson, 1992) of ‘inviting guests for a party’ (and/or to the text structure of an invitation). After an insertion sequence (lines 3–4), the teacher’s instruction as response (line 5 and following), in which she reorients the children to the preceding whole-class instruction on the content of the invitation, concludes the problem-solving interaction in an information-delivery format, as often in teacher interventions (e.g. Hiddink, 2019a, 2019b; Koole, 2012). Interestingly, the children’s approach to writing the invitation is different to what they are required to do. This possible clash might explain why the teacher does not elaborate on the children’s own orientation to this aspect of the product as part of their emergent writing. In any case, it emphasizes that in order to respond contingently in interaction it is important to notice and recognize children’s literacy practices.

Recommendations for Practice

With this chapter, we aimed to emphasize the importance of interactions around reading, writing, and text with and among young children in order to stimulate their emergent literacy. We showed (a) how everyday classroom activities can provide opportunities for meaningful interaction about various aspects of literacy, (b) how the common literary practice of shared book reading creates opportunities to discuss story structure and story
understanding, and (c) how children display and discuss productive literacy practices in peer interactions during meaningful activities that are elicited by teachers. From our analyses of the everyday interactions children in preschool and kindergarten classrooms take part in, we extract some key suggestions for early childhood educators:

- Treat and make books, reading, and writing an obvious, inevitable part of life. Besides creating reading spots with freely accessible books and regular shared reading sessions, this means initiating literacy stimulating interactions throughout the day, in a range of contexts.
- Plan educational activities, like shared reading or collaborative writing activities, to create contexts for enriched interaction about literacy. In addition, pay keen attention to children's spontaneous focus on aspects of literacy, and grasp the opportunity to elaborate with them on this.
- Be aware of every time you read and write in the presence of a child, even the most everyday moments of reading and writing. Try to use these moments to make your literacy act explicit and engage with children in conversation about it.
- Use shared reading interactions to move beyond a focus on new vocabulary. Rather, initiate more complex interactions about story structure and children's understanding of the story to prepare them for reading comprehension skills. Try to direct children's attention to the activity of reading together to find the answers instead of providing them with answers as a teacher.
- Be sensitive to what aspects, besides the alphabetic script, children themselves are already demonstrating during their (emergent) writing or in their writing products in order to strengthen these practices, by eliciting meaningful contexts in which collaborative writing is embedded.

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