

SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND FAMILY FORMATION IN LATVIAN LEGISLATION: CURRENT AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to identify the current perspectives on sexuality education and family formation values in Latvian educational legislation and to discuss its connection with the historical legacy of the interwar period (1918–1939). The research question is: how sexuality education and family formation values are covered in current Latvian normative documents in the field of education? The study is based on current mandatory and relevant regulatory documents which mention family formation values and sexuality education. The documents analysed were the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, Education Law, the General Education Law, the Youth Law, the Guidelines for students' upbringing, the State Basic and General Secondary Education Standards, as well as the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia 'Latvia2030' and the National development plan of Latvia for 2021–2027. To answer the research question, the study involved desk-based content analysis and interpretation. A list of keywords that captured sexuality education and family formation values was created. A contextual analysis of these concepts was carried out to find out what the documents mean and imply, with an ethically neutral attitude. The study found that Latvia's legislation defines sexuality education and family-formation values, but the regulation of the implementation is inconsistent. These results were discussed in the cultural and historical context of Latvia, with an emphasis on the interwar period (1918–1939). The study will help improve pedagogical practice by establishing the conceptual foundations for integrating family formation values into sexuality education and will promote the development of the normative base by preparing proposals for a report on policy recommendations in this area.

Keywords: *education for family formation, historical perspectives, Latvian educational legislation, normative documents, sexuality education*

Introduction

The project “Promoting sexuality education for family formation in the Latvian education system” (2024–2026)¹, implemented at the University of Latvia, aims to explore the relationship between sexuality education and family formation values. The need for the study stems from several national and international challenges. The related challenges in contemporary Latvian society and culture are:

- 1) A deep demographic crisis: the total population of Latvia dropped from 2.4 million in 2000, to 1.9 million in 2024 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2024, 26–34).
- 2) A persistent crisis of marriage: in 2020 Latvia had the highest overall divorce rate in the European Union (2.7 per 1000 inhabitants); in 2023 there were 504 divorces per 1000 marriages; and in January 2024 45.8% of families had one parent with one or more minor children (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2024, 55–67).
- 3) Over the past 10–15 years, debates and confusion about the definition of marriage and family have intensified both in Western societies (e.g., Murray, 2019; Girgis, Anderson & George, 2020) and in Latvia, where, in 2023, a signature collection intended to amend the constitutional definition of family (Central Election Commission, 2023). Earlier forums and conferences from 2010 to 2012 already addressed the need for unified family legislation (Association “Family Association”, 2010; Saeima, 2011, 2012). Uncertainty about family concepts remains particularly evident among young people (Grīnberga, 2022).
- 4) The actualization of the moral dimension of education in legislation, especially since 2015, when the amendments to the Education Law (Saeima, 1998) renewed the relevance of virtue education (Maslo et al., 2023). The recent education reform (Skola2030, 2019; Namsone, 2018) declares the need for integration of virtues and values in education, but the new content of education does not consistently cover this (Mūrnieks, 2024).
- 5) The gap between sexuality education and family formation in recent scientific research in Latvia (Grīnberga, 2023; Ķīvīte-Urtāne et al., 2023; Mileiko et al., 2016; Papardes zieds, 2022), and the need for value-based sexuality education materials for students.
- 6) The context of domestic violence (8243 family conflicts registered in 2023), but also at school (Sprinģe et al., 2023) and in Latvian society (State Police, 2024). A plan to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence for 2024–2029 was approved in 2024 (Cabinet of Ministers, 2024).

The choice of the research focus also took into account current challenges mentioned in international research on family-oriented sexuality education (Asgharinekeh & Samimi, 2023), character-centred sexuality education (Beltramo, 2022), sexuality education for family life (Bhagwandin, 2022; Dița & Calbaza-Ormenișan, 2022), self-awareness

¹ <https://www.lu.lv/zinatne/projekti/atveselosanas-un-noturibas-mehanismu-projekti/atbalsts-petniekiem-projektiem/vertibas-balstistas-gimenes-pratibas-un-seksualas-izglitiba-veicinasana-latvijas-izglitiba-sistema/>

and free informed choice (Obelenienė, 2022), sexuality education and fertility (Raith-Paula, 2018) and comprehensive sexuality education (UNESCO et al., 2018).

One of the activities of the project, presented in this article, regards the coverage of sexuality education and family formation values in the normative documents of Latvia regarding education. The research question was: How sexuality education and family formation values are covered in current Latvian normative documents in the field of education? The study included a systematic analysis of the legislation of Latvia in order to find out to what extent they comply with the Constitution of Latvia and reflect the most up-to-date scientific knowledge on sexuality education for family formation, and a discussion of the results in the context of the pedagogical experience of the inter-war period in Latvia.

Methodology

Materials used in the study

The documents analysed were the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima, 1922); the Education Law (Saeima, 1998), the General Education Law (Saeima, 1999), the Youth Law (Saeima, 2009); the Guidelines for students' upbringing (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016); the Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018), and the General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019); the Sustainable development strategy of Latvia 'Latvia2030' (Saeima, 2010) and National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 (Saeima, 2020).

Methods

The following categories were used for the content analysis of these documents: 1) hierarchical level of documents; 2) relevance and clarity of words and concepts used regarding family formation and sexuality education; 3) number of references to family and marriage values; and 4) educational implications and specific outcomes for students (in educational standards).

At the beginning of the analysis, a list of key words and concepts reflecting sexuality education and education for family formation was created. The key words were selected based on (1) the values referring to family formation declared in the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima, 1922), in particular in the Preamble and in the Section 110; and (2) relevant keywords used in international scientific literature on sexuality education for family formation (see above). Three groups of concepts were identified as interrelated and complementary:

- (1) Family formation (family, marriage, parents, children, mother, father, generations)
- (2) Sexuality education (gender, female, male, sexuality, fertility, life);
- (3) Family values (love, happiness, trust).

How often and in what contexts these words are used in documents was investigated, clarifying exactly what they mean, declare, define, presuppose and assert.

Results

This section presents firstly the overall frequency of relevant terms referring to family formation and sexuality education in Latvian normative documents referring to education, and then their meaning and implications are explained by groups of documents: first in the highest normative documents, then in the educational standards at different levels, and finally in the strategic documents focused on future perspectives.

Overall frequency of relevant terms used in Latvian legislation regarding education

The number of references to family and marriage values was analysed in the main normative documents related to education (see Table 1).

Table 1 Frequency of terms related to sexuality education and family formation in Latvian legislation

Documents Concepts	Constitution	Education Law	General Education Law	Youth Law	Guidelines for students' upbringing	Basic Education Standard	General Secondary Education Standard	Sustainable development strategy Latvia2030	National development plan of Latvia 2021–27
Family formation									
Family	3	10	1	–	8	4/21	5	13	112
Marriage	1	1	–	–	3	3	2	(2)	1/3
Parents	2	33	4	–	5	(21)	3	23	24
Children	–	10/62	13	–	2	6	–	95	52
Mother	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	2
Father	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
Generations	1	–	–	–	1	(1)	1/11	7	11
Sexuality education									
Gender	–	1	–	–	2	3/7	1/4	(3)	(3)
Woman	1	2	–	–	–	–	–	3	(7)
Man	1	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	(6)
Sexuality	–	–	–	–	p	–	1	–	1
Fertility	–	–	–	–	–	–	(1)	(3)	–
Life	1	11	–	–	2	5/18	2/15	1	1
Family values									
Love	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Happiness	–	–	–	–	–	6	2	–	2/5
Trust	(2)	–	–	–	1	2	(2)	(8)	(15)

Note: 1) a number in brackets indicates that the concept has been used in other senses than those related to family formation values; 2) In fractional notation, the first number represents relevant uses related to family formation or sexuality education; the second number indicates total mentions in the document.

Key concepts related to family formation and sexuality education in the highest normative documents

Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Saeima, 1922)

The Preamble to the Constitution which is “a philosophy of the values and history of Latvian life” (Kūle, 2016, p. 396) emphasizes the central role of the family, stating that “the family is the foundation of a cohesive society. Everyone shall take care of himself, his relatives and the common good of society, acting responsibly towards others, future generations, the environment and nature”. This statement outlines a set of values divided into three interconnected categories: family, relatives, and future generations. These can be viewed as three concentric arcs representing the individual’s perspective and broader societal responsibilities. The first arc highlights the family as the foundation of society. The second focuses on caring for one’s close circle – relatives and influential figures in personal development. The third arc introduces a future-oriented view: responsibility toward future generations, which conceptually includes also procreating and raising children to ensure a sustainability.

The Section 110 of the Constitution clarifies the understanding of family and marriage: “The State shall protect and support marriage – a union between a man and a woman, the family, the rights of parents and rights of the child. The State shall provide special support to disabled children, children left without parental care or who have suffered from violence.” Given the intentions of the Members of the Parliament at the time when this article of the Constitution was voted on, it can be argued that in Latvia marriage is understood to mean only the union between a woman and a man. Such a union also results in the formation of a family. The emphasis on the rights and protection of children (in the second sentence of the Section) implies that the next generation – children – are an essential asset. It can be concluded that procreation, upbringing, rights and protection of children should be a focus of both individual and public policies, including education policies. How these values are offered to the younger generation is determined by the Education Law.

Education Law (Saeima, 1998)

Section 2 of the Education Law defines the purpose of education. “According to the age and needs of an educatee, he or she shall be ensured an opportunity to [...] have moral, aesthetic, intellectual, and physical development, by promoting the development of a knowledgeable, skilful, and socialised individual”. Section 10.1 of the law states that “the education system shall ensure the moral, aesthetic, intellectual, and physical development of an educatee in accordance with the values enshrined in and protected by the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, in particular such values as life, human dignity, freedom, family, marriage, work, nature, culture, the Latvian language, and the State of Latvia.” As it can be seen, the values mentioned in the Constitution have been included in the Education Law. Life is mentioned first, pointing implicitly to the openness to procreation as a precondition for the existence of the State and for education. Similarly, the Constitution mentions family and marriage as relevant values. It can be concluded that the Education Law develops a set of values in line with what is declared in the Constitution.

Guidelines for students' upbringing (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016)

A key document that directly regulates the education process in Latvia – ranking hierarchically below the Constitution and laws – is the Cabinet of Ministers (2016) Regulation No. 480, referred to as the Guidelines for students' upbringing. This document explicitly states that the educational process should promote learners' understanding, attitudes, and actions that reflect core values, including life, human dignity, freedom, family, marriage, work, nature, culture, the Latvian language, and the Latvian State. Notably, marriage and family are presented as fundamental values. The Guidelines stress that education should not only foster awareness but also shape attitudes and lead to action. In terms of sexuality education, this means providing accurate information about sexuality and relationships, fostering a positive and responsible outlook toward family life, and preparing students for building and sustaining families in the future.

Paragraph 6 of the Guidelines details educational objectives related to attitudes. It emphasizes promoting self-discipline, respect for life, cultivating healthy habits, and most significantly, an orientation toward family and marriage (6.6). This includes recognizing the unity of generations and the role of family in preserving national values. Family and marriage are clearly identified as desirable life goals for young people. Furthermore, Paragraph 10.4 elaborates on the responsibility of educational institutions to educate students about the value of family and marriage, the role of parents, and family dynamics. They are also encouraged to organize activities that reinforce these themes, such as celebrating Family Days, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Lastly, Paragraph 17.4 outlines criteria for content evaluation, ensuring that educational materials do not promote cruelty, violence, pornography, degradation, promiscuity, or harmful habits, particularly concerning sexuality and family life.

Key concepts related to family formation and sexuality education in education standards

Two education standards (Basic and General Secondary) were analysed, including the sections that define the learning outcomes for pupils at the end of each education stage (Years 3, 6 and 9).

Family and marriage in education standards

Family. In the Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018), family is mentioned 21 times in total, but only 4 times directly as a value. In the General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019), the family is mentioned 5 times in total, and the word 'family' appears only 3 more times in the desirable outcomes, and 2 times in the context of the transmission of cultural heritage. Moreover, the General Secondary Education Standard states that pupils only "evaluate the role of marriage and family in the development of human personality" (outcome S.V.1.2.), but do not prepare for such relationships, nor do they evaluate their advantages (as is clearly stated in the Basic Education Standard).

Marriage. Marriage is mentioned 3 times in the Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018) in terms of values. The standard's outcome section mentions 'marriage'

twice, and once quite clearly and specifically articulates the relationship and value of family and marriage: The pupil “justifies views on the importance of family and marriage for the sustainability of society, evaluates the advantages of marriage compared to non-registered relationships” (outcome S.9.2.4.). In contrast, the General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019), when the perspective of marriage is closer to students, mentions marriage twice, but only once in the outcomes to be achieved.

Other concepts related to sexuality education and family formation in education standards

The Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018) makes multiple references to parental involvement (21 times), yet fails to acknowledge the role of parents in the context of family. While children are mentioned six times, there are no statements that frame children as a central value in family life or in the context of marriage and family formation. The concept of ‘life’ appears 18 times, but only five as a value. There is no reference to human life as something to be promoted or valued, nor to childbirth. Terms derived from the root ‘sex’ appear seven times: two addressing sexual diversity, one mentioning sexual life, and four in the context of sexual reproduction in Biology. The term ‘contraception’ is used once (outcome D.9.7.3.2.) in the context of critically considering postponing sexual intercourse and using contraception. However, key values and relationship skills necessary for family life receive minimal attention. ‘Trust’ and close concepts are only mentioned twice, but not in relational contexts. ‘Love’ is entirely absent, and ‘friendship’ appears only in indirect references (‘friendship games’, ‘environmentally friendly’).

The General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019) makes 15 references to the word ‘life,’ yet only twice refer to life as a value. ‘Fertility’ appears once but with no connection to human fertility. In learning outcomes, openness to procreating and raising children is entirely absent. The word ‘parent’ is mentioned three times, but not in the context of family life. The only reference to care for future generations appears in a social science topic title (outcome no. 3), emphasizing sustainability and preservation of inherited values. Health education includes a general statement on the importance of preventive measures, including sexual and reproductive health, but details remain vague. Respect for diversity, including gender diversity, is mentioned once (no. 14.8). The word ‘sex’ is mentioned 3 times in the subject matter Biology.

Key concepts related to family formation and sexuality education in strategic documents for the future

Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia ‘Latvia2030’ (Saeima, 2010)

The document mentions the family 13 times, including 5 in the context of values. Marriage is mentioned only 2 times, in the context of the divorce problem, but not as a value or as a primary institution safeguarding family life. It can be concluded that the authors of the Strategy do not consider marriage as an important factor for the formation and existence of a family. The word life is mentioned only in the context of ecosystems, and

procreation of new life is not mentioned. The word fertility is never used in the sense of childbearing. The term 'sex' is used only in the context of gender discrimination. Women are mentioned 3 times in total; men are not mentioned once.

National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 (Saeima, 2020)

In this document, words derived from family appear 112 times, including in headings such as “Strong families, healthy and active people” (1st priority). The Plan promises support for forming large families and sets out the intention to strengthen the family as a core societal value. This includes increasing social protection for parents, promoting a family-friendly environment, celebrating large families, enhancing the role of fathers, and improving education related to parenting, relationships, and intergenerational solidarity. However, the plan only aims to ‘raise public awareness’ of these skills rather than integrating them into the formal education system. There is no indication that these values will be embedded in educational standards. Sexual health is mentioned once in a statement about psychological and emotional health and reducing disease risk. However, sexuality as a broader human experience is not addressed. Sexuality education is not explicitly mentioned, and women’s dignity is notably absent as a value. The first goal under the 1st priority is: “Healthy and active people in Latvia together build an inclusive society, with more children, happy families, responsible parents who are secure about their future”. Despite this promising language, the Plan does not specify within which documents or educational levels these goals will be implemented.

Discussion

The study found that, although the values of sexuality education and family formation are included in the Constitution, the Education Law, and the Guidelines for students’ upbringing, they are not consistently reflected across all relevant legislation and education standards. Key national planning documents only partially address family formation skills and preparation for marriage. Significant values regarding sexuality education and family formation, such as love (not addressed in any of the documents analysed), complementarity of man and woman, procreation, and openness to life, are missing. The question about how these findings relate to Latvian historical legacy between the World Wars is discussed in this section. How were the topics of sexuality education and family formation addressed in Latvia during that period in educational discourse? This historical perspective would help to formulate culturally sensitive recommendations to improve Latvia’s legislation and educational practice.

As Znotiņa (2014) points out, “in general, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a reserved attitude towards the sexual education of children. Public attitudes, judging by opinions in the press, could be divided into two mutually opposed groups: deniers and supporters of sexuality education” (p. 200). Among other authors, Jūlijs Students, Eleonora Upatniece and Milda Liepiņa stand out in the field of sexuality education and family formation.

J. Students (1898–1964), a Latvian pedagogue, psychologist, and philosopher, presented a comprehensive moral framework for understanding love and sexuality in his book *Ethics* (1930). His concept of the ‘ethics of love’ distinguishes love of one’s neighbour and love between the sexes. Students emphasizes that opposite-sex love is universal and deeply rooted in the human experience (p. 51). However, this love must be grounded in conscience and ethics to be considered true. Sexual passion, although a natural and important element, cannot form the foundation of a lasting relationship. Love must be guided by moral judgment, a sense of duty, and responsibility to ensure its permanence and depth (p. 52). According to Students, the essence of true love lies in its moral characteristics: virtue, unicity, illumination, indivisibility, and mystery. These qualities make love not just a personal experience but a spiritual force capable of building and sustaining the family. For example, he asserts that “true and real love can only be for one person and once in a lifetime” (Students, 1930, pp. 53–54). The idea of ‘unicity’ (in Latvian – ‘vienlaulība’) plays a central role in his concept of the ideal family, which is built on a unique, lifelong love between two people of the opposite sex. Sexual activity before marriage, in his view, often damages the emotional connection between partners and leads to physical and emotional depletion. “True love is in many cases destroyed by sexual intercourse before marriage,” he warns (p. 58). He further argues that those who expend their passions too early become unfit for the responsibilities of family life, as “premarital sexual relations can cause emotional exhaustion and indifference (p. 57).

E. Upatniece (1893–1980), a prominent child and youth psychologist in inter-war Latvia, also made significant contributions to the field of sexuality education and family formation. She strongly emphasized that sexuality education should be rooted in family values, guided by love and example (Upatniece, 1938). She believed that children should be allowed to engage in role-play, such as pretending to be parents, to naturally explore family roles (Upatniece, 1931, p. 2). Upatniece advocated for open, honest communication with children. She asked, “Why should sexual matters be an exception?” when everything else in a child’s world is explained (Upatniece 1931, p. 3). Talking to children about how babies are made, in her view, prepares them for future family life, as these truths are integrated into their play and early understanding of relationships. She also stressed the importance of puberty as a critical period. Mistakes in sexuality education during this time, she argued, often lead to unhappy marriages later in life, where husbands feel misunderstood and wives lack emotional readiness for motherhood (Upatniece, 1938).

Another important contributor to the discourse on sexuality education and family formation during Latvia’s interwar period was Milda Liepiņa (1889–1972), an assistant at the University of Latvia. Her essay “The eroticism and sexual development of youth” (1929a, 1929b), present a holistic and value-based perspective on sexuality. Liepiņa linked sexuality education to spiritual purity, love, and the transmission of life within the family: “Love has been stamped by nature itself with the seal of immortality – for the fruit of love is life” (1929a, p. 319). Liepiņa emphasized the physical and spiritual complementarity between men and women (p. 325). In her view, eroticism has a deeper, preparatory role – it is meant to “prepare for married life and fulfilling life’s responsibilities” (Liepiņa, 1929b, p. 359).

She also advocated for postponing sexual relations until marriage: “A life of premature sex is undoubtedly harmful, because it consumes important forces necessary for the growth of the organism and the development of spiritual powers” (p. 363). For Liepiņa, true sexual love involves the entire person – both spirit and body – and flourishes only within committed relationships (1929b, p. 360–361). She also warned that “purely sensual desire degrades human beings, because it turns the other person into an instrument of one’s own carnal pleasure” (1929b, p. 361). Liepiņa also noted that the desire for love and family appears early in life, even before puberty, though initially in immature forms. She saw it as crucial to guide youth wisely: “It is not the inner stirrings of the youth, but the behaviour of small-minded adults and the obscene scenes of life that seduce the youth” (1929b, p. 362). Liepiņa also believed that young people are capable of mastering their impulses: “The human being has been given the power to rule over one’s impulses; in this power humans differ from other living creatures” (1929b, p. 363).

During Latvia’s inter-war period, the pedagogical discourse emphasized sexuality education as closely linked to marriage and family formation. The importance, for the formation of future stable marital and family life, of implementing a sexuality education based on the complementarity between man and woman, mutual all-embracing love, a sexual life based on ethical values, and self-control for the sake of the future family, was clearly supported. This historical legacy is largely absent from Latvia’s current education legislation regarding sexuality education and family formation. As a result, sexuality education is rarely addressed in a context that supports family formation.

Conclusions

The study found that although the values of sexuality education and family formation are included in the Constitution, the Education Law, and the Guidelines for students’ upbringing, and at least formally supported in future-oriented documents, they are not consistently reflected and practically supported across all relevant legislation and education standards. Notably, love as a value or subject for discussion is not addressed in any of the documents analysed. This situation is not consistent with Latvian cultural heritage, as formulated in the inter-war period, which conceived sexuality education as closely linked to marriage and family formation, stressing the importance of the complementarity between man and woman, mutual love, ethical values and virtues, and openness to life for promoting the formation of stable families.

Contemporary sexuality education in Latvia tends to emphasize health and biological aspects, but it fails to prepare students for building lasting relationships or families. International research (e.g., Ketting & Winkelmann, 2013; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021) supports this concern, highlighting the need to evaluate sexuality education programmes not only for health outcomes but also for how well they prepare young people for future family life. A broader, more holistic approach to sexuality education is essential for addressing these gaps. In addition to these gaps, in current Latvian legislation in Latvia the term ‘gender’ and related concepts like gender roles and gender identity are

absent, and the broader concept of 'lineage' (In Latvian – 'dzimta') that includes extended relatives and households, is not present either.

The authors propose improvements to face these legislative gaps, advocating for a comprehensive strategy on family formation rooted in the values established in Latvian legislation: family, relatives, and future generations. This strategy should be structured around three concentric perspectives: individual, societal, and future. Individually, family formation involves caring for oneself and close relatives. Socially, education should emphasize the family as the foundation of society. From a future perspective, families bear responsibility for nurturing the next generation. Thus, education must go beyond the biological and psychological to include anthropological and socio-cultural dimensions. It should preserve and transmit family culture across generations and consider public health, demographics, and economic implications.

The study recommends that education legislation be revised to include:

- Comprehensive sexuality education (covering sexual life, hygiene, sex drive, gender roles, and equality).
- Respect for gender differences and the opposite sex.
- The value of marriage as a stable, enduring union.
- Stability in relationships built on trust.
- Core values such as love, forgiveness, patience, and friendship.
- The importance of childbearing, nation-building, and generational responsibility.

It also suggests reconsidering the concept of 'vienlaulība' to describe stable partnerships and examining the use of 'gender' as distinct from 'sex,' a term present in societal debates but absent from legal texts. It is recommended that improvements to legislation and regulatory framework be based on the framework of 'ethics of love' (Students, 1930) and contemporary similar approaches (e.g., Girgis et al., 2020), urging caution in adopting foreign models without thorough evaluation. Future research is intended to develop conceptual proposals to promote value-based sexuality education for family formation in Latvia, and these proposals will inform a policy report aimed at advancing both pedagogical practices and educational legislation in Latvia.

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