

The Adolescence Stage

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Introduction

As the child develops through the childhood stage it enters the adolescent stage. This stage is one of the most important in the life of an individual because of its critical linkage to the other stages. The stage is considered as very vital because it is at this stage that the child is to cross over into a life that will shoulder him with the responsibility of being recognized and accepted as a member who contributes positively to the development of the society in all ramification. At this stage also exists a “confusion” in the individual as he tries to understand himself and also assert his position in the society.

Parents, teachers and other members of the society need to handle the individual at this stage very cautiously and tactfully because their efforts and modes of treatment and training may mar their desire for an acceptable and positive contributing member of the society as the adolescent is trying to “seek out and understand himself” without really having all the needed ingredients to grasp the real understanding of what reality is; to him, reality is just his world.

THE CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENCE

In the simplest form, adolescence is seen as the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, **from ages 10 to 19**. Thus, Hu and Nash (2019) and Stehlik (2018) saw adolescence (from Latin *adolescere* ‘to mature’) as a transitional stage of physical and psychological development that generally occurs during the period from puberty to legal adulthood (age of majority). Isanghedighi (1994) observes that the period of adolescence marks the period when the quality of various psychological traits such as interest, aptitude, values, thinking, reasoning, judgment begin to transcend those of childhood and progress to adulthood quality.

Adolescence begins at puberty, which now occurs earlier, on average, than in the past. The end of adolescence is tied to social and emotional factors and can be somewhat ambiguous. Spear (2000) concludes that adolescence is a distinct phase of the developmental life cycle in humans and other animal species. Thus, Uzoka (2018) observes that in Nigeria, adolescence is assumed to end by

the age of eighteen, during which the individual can be allowed to exercise his civic right or franchise.

It is pertinent to note that growth and development at whatever stage is affected, individually or conjointly, by nature and nurture. Thus, Curtis (2015) pointed the APA (2002) noting that the most commonly used chronologic definition of adolescence includes the ages of 10-18, but may incorporate a span of 9 to 26 years depending on the source.

THEORIES OF ADOLESCENCE

The theoretical understanding of adolescence was made possible by an understanding of the concept of adolescence stage. There are a number of theories from which the adolescence stage was contextualized; however, such extend to the philosophical perspective including the biosocial, organismic to the contextual. Curtis (2015) and many others are of this view.

Biosocial Theories

The primary theorists here include G. Stanley Hall (1904), Arnold Gesell and James Tanner; whose main focus was physical and sexual development determined by genes and biology. Their biosocial conception of adolescent development was based heavily on Darwin's (1859, 1979) theories of phylogenetic evolution. This perspective assumes that development is controlled by genetically pre-determined physiologic changes mimicking the stages of human evolution, termed recapitulation (Hall, 1904; Muuss, 1996).

Organismic Theories

Psychological – Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud who mainly focused the adolescence as a period of sexual excitement and anxiety. Darwin's work also influenced Freud's (1962) intra-psychic theories of psychosocial development emphasizing energy, drive, and instincts, propelled by biological forces (Muuss, 1996).

Psychosocial – main focus was identity formation; adolescents struggle between achieving identity and identity diffusion. Primary theorist Erik Erikson's (1968) construction of child development theories around psychological conflicts reflects his Freudian psychoanalytic training; however, Erikson emphasized the social aspects of child development rather than the internal psychic.

Cognitive – focuses on formal operational thought; moving beyond concrete, actual experiences and beginning to think in logical and abstract terms. Although Piaget's, primary theorist, conceptualization of "egocentrism" in childhood psychology is compatible with Freudian theory,

Piaget focused on the conflict-free, rational aspect of development and emphasized the growth of cognition (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000).

Social Cognitive Learning – Primary Theorist - Albert Bandura. Mainly focus on the relationship between social and environmental factors and their influence on behavior. Children learn through modeling.

Moral – the primary theorist was Lawrence Kohlberg and he stressed that moral development primarily involves moral reasoning and unfolds in stages. Kohlberg's (1980) theory of moral development in adolescence relies heavily on a Piagetian understanding of conceptual-cognitive development, and James Fowler credited Kohlberg as providing the most profound influence for his work on faith development (Fowler, & Dell, 2004). Kohlberg (1980) also inspired Selman's (1980) work on Social Cognition.

Contextual Theories

Contextual theories of development play a significant role in defining adolescence. The major contextual theorists contributing significantly to the understanding of adolescent development include Margaret Mead (1921, 2001) mainly focused on the culture in which the child grows up, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) primarily focuses on the context in which adolescents develop; adolescents are influenced by family, peers, religion, schools, the media, community, and world events, and Richard Lerner's developmental theory emphasizes probabilistic ontogeny, as opposed to predetermined epigenesis. His theory appreciates the potential for human plasticity and recognizes the reciprocal interdependence of biological and contextual forces (Lerner & Castellino, 2002).

Although generally appearing in the educational literature and not frequently cited in discussions of adolescent development, it is important to note the contributions of the social constructionists, particularly Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's theories emphasize the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition through the construction of personal meaning. Vygotsky argues that social learning precedes and directly influences cognitive development.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF ADOLESCENCE

As young people transit from childhood into young adulthood in the adolescence stage many changes in the form of physical, behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social happen to take place. Of importance is to note that such transition does not happen altogether at once but rather through

some sub-stages also. Thus, researchers suggest adolescents undergo three primary developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood which include early adolescence (10 to 13 years), middle adolescence (14 to 16 years), and late adolescence/young adulthood (15 to 17 years and beyond).

Early Adolescence (Ages 10 to 13)

Early Adolescence occurs between ages 10-13. During this developmental period, adolescents experience the beginning stages of puberty. Both sexes experience significant physical growth and increased sexual interest. Cognitively, adolescents in this stage have a limited capacity for abstract thought but intellectual interests expand and become more important. Although adolescents in this stage have limited interest in the future, they develop deeper moral thinking during the early adolescence stage (Rice and Dolgin, 2002).

During this stage, children often start to grow more quickly. They also begin notice other body changes, including hair growth under the arms and near the genitals, breast development in females and enlargement of the testicles in males. They usually start a year or two earlier in girls than boys, and it can be normal for some changes to start as early as age 8 for females and age 9 for males. Many girls may start their period at around age 12, on average 2-3 years after the onset of breast development. These body changes can inspire curiosity and anxiety in some—especially if they do not know what to expect or what is normal. Some children may also question their gender identity at this time, and the onset of puberty can be a difficult time for transgender children. Early adolescents have concrete, black-and-white thinking. Things are either right or wrong, great or terrible, without much room in between. It is normal at this stage for young people to center their thinking on themselves (called "egocentrism"). As part of this, preteens and early teens are often self-conscious about their appearance and feel as though they are always being judged by their peers. Pre-teens feel an increased need for privacy. They may start to explore ways of being independent from their family. In this process, they may push boundaries and may react strongly if parents or guardians reinforce limits.

Middle Adolescence (Ages 14 to 16)

Middle Adolescence occurs between ages 14-16. During the middle adolescence stage, puberty is completed for males and females. Physical growth slows for females but continues for males. Adolescents in this stage continue to experience a growing capacity for abstract thought. During this stage, adolescents begin to set long-term goals and become interested in the meaning of life

and moral reasoning. Adolescents in this stage of development experience numerous social and emotional changes including increased self-involvement and an increased drive for independence (Rice and Dolgin, 2002).

Physical changes from puberty continue during middle adolescence. Most males will have started their growth spurt, and puberty-related changes continue. They may have some voice cracking, for example, as their voices lower. Some develop acne. Physical changes may be nearly complete for females, and most girls now have regular periods. At this age, many teens become interested in romantic and sexual relationships. They may question and explore their sexual identity—which may be stressful if they do not have support from peers, family, or community. Another typical way of exploring sex and sexuality for teens of all genders is self-stimulation, also called masturbation. Many middle adolescents have more arguments with their parents as they struggle for more independence. They may spend less time with family and more time with friends. They are very concerned about their appearance, and peer pressure may peak at this age. Middle adolescents are more able to think abstractly and consider "the big picture," but they still may lack the ability to apply it in the moment. While they may be able to walk through the logic of avoiding risks outside of these situations, strong emotions often continue to drive their decisions when impulses come into play.

Late Adolescence (Ages 17 to 19)

Adolescents in the late adolescence/young adulthood phase typically experience fewer physical developments and more cognitive developments. Adolescents gain the ability to think about ideas rationally, delay gratification, plan for the future, and gain a firm sense of identity. During this last phase of adolescent development, young people also experience increased emotional stability and independence (Rice and Dolgin, 2002).

Late adolescents generally have completed physical development and grown to their full adult height. They usually have more impulse control by now and **may** be better able to gauge risks and rewards accurately. Teens entering early adulthood have a stronger sense of their own individuality now and can identify their own values. They may become more focused on the future and base decisions on their hopes and ideals. Friendships and romantic relationships become more stable. They become more emotionally and physically separated from their family. However, many reestablish an "adult" relationship with their parents, considering them more an equal from whom to ask advice and discuss mature topics with, rather than an authority figure.

CHANGES IN ADOLESCENCE

During the adolescence stage, different forms of changes happens simultaneously within an individual and to cope with them is not a simple matter. Adolescence is a combination of growth in both biology and sociology because as biological changes are taking place in an individual so also with other aspects as he interacts in the society chiefly for recognition and acceptance. Let us look at some of the changes that are markedly important during the adolescence stage.

Physical Changes

During adolescence, young people go through many changes as they move into physical maturity. Early, prepubescent changes occur when the secondary sexual characteristics appear.

In girls. Girls may begin to develop breast buds as early as 8 years old. Breasts develop fully between ages 12 and 18. Pubic hair, armpit and leg hair usually begin to grow at about age 9 or 10, and reach adult patterns at about 13 to 14 years. Menarche (the beginning of menstrual periods) typically occurs about 2 years after early breast and pubic hair appear. It may occur as early as age 9, or as late as age 16. Girls' growth spurt peaks around age 11.5 and slows around age 16.

In boys. Boys may begin to notice that their testicles and scrotum grow as early as age 9. Soon, the penis begins to lengthen. By age 17 or 18, their genitals are usually at their adult size and shape. Pubic hair growth, as well as armpit, leg, chest, and facial hair, begins in boys at about age 12, and reaches adult patterns at about 17 to 18 years. Boys do not start puberty with a sudden incident, like the beginning of menstrual periods in girls. Having regular nocturnal emissions (wet dreams) marks the beginning of puberty in boys. Wet dreams typically start between ages 13 and 17. The average age is about 14 and a half years. Boys' voices change at the same time as the penis grows. Nocturnal emissions occur with the peak of the height spurt. Boys' growth spurt peaks around age 13 and a half and slows around age 18.

Behavior Changes

The sudden and rapid physical changes that adolescents go through make adolescents very self-conscious. They are sensitive, and worried about their own body changes. They may make painful comparisons about themselves with their peers. Physical changes may not occur in a smooth, regular schedule. Therefore, adolescents may go through awkward stages, both in their appearance and physical coordination. Girls may be anxious if they are not ready for the beginning of their menstrual periods. Boys may worry if they do not know about nocturnal emissions.

During adolescence, it is normal for young people to begin to separate from their parents and make their own identity. In some cases, this may occur without a problem from their parents and other family members. However, this may lead to conflict in some families as the parents try to keep control. Friends become more important as adolescents pull away from their parents in a search for their own identity.

In mid- to late adolescence, young people often feel the need to establish their sexual identity. They need to become comfortable with their body and sexual feelings. Adolescents learn to express and receive intimate or sexual advances. Young people who do not have the chance for such experiences may have a harder time with intimate relationships when they are adults.

Adolescents very often have behaviors that are consistent with several myths of adolescence. The first myth is that they are "on stage" and other people's attention is constantly centered on their appearance or actions. This is normal self-centeredness. However, it may appear (especially to adults) to border on paranoia, self-love (narcissism), or even hysteria. Another myth of adolescence is the idea that "it will never happen to me, only the other person." "It" may represent becoming pregnant or catching a sexually-transmitted disease after having unprotected sex, causing a car crash while driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or any of the many other negative effects of risk-taking behaviors.

Social Changes

During adolescence, you'll notice changes in the way your child interacts with family, friends and peers. Every teen's social development is different. Your child's unique combination of genes, brain development, environment, experiences with family and friends, and community and culture shape development. Social changes show that your child is forming an independent identity and learning to be an adult. At this stage, the teen would be engaged with identity searching, seeking more independence, seeking more responsibility, looking for new experiences, thinking more about "right" and "wrong", influenced more by friends, starting to develop and explore a sexual identity and communicating in different ways.

Emotional changes

Shows strong feelings and intense emotions at different times. Moods might seem unpredictable. These emotional ups and downs can lead to increased conflict. More sensitive to your emotions, more self-conscious, especially about physical appearance and changes. Goes through an "invincible" stage of thinking and acting as if nothing bad could happen to him. The teen's

decision-making skills are still developing, and the child is still learning about the consequences of actions.

Cognitive Changes

Ramsey (2020) observe that some common features indicating growth from more simple to more complex cognitive development include:

Early Adolescence. During early adolescence, the use of more complex thinking is focused on personal decision making in school and home environments. This can include beginning to demonstrate use of formal logical operations in schoolwork, to question authority and society standards and to form and verbalize their own thoughts and views on a variety of topics.

Middle Adolescence. The focus of middle adolescence often includes more philosophical and futuristic concerns. Examples may include thinking about and beginning to form their own code of ethics (such as, What do I think is right?), thinking about different possibilities and begins to develop own identity (such as, Who am I?), thinking about and begins to consider possible future goals (such as, What do I want?) and begins to make their own plans

Late Adolescence. During late adolescence, complex thinking processes are used to focus on less self-centered concepts and personal decision making. Examples may include increased thoughts about more global concepts such as justice, history and politics, develops idealistic views on specific topics or concerns, begins to focus thinking on making career decisions and begins to focus thinking on emerging role in adult society.

Furthermore, Sanders (2013) observe that there are three main areas of cognitive development that occur during adolescence. First, adolescents develop more advanced reasoning skills, including the ability to explore a full range of possibilities inherent in a situation, think hypothetically (contrary-fact situations), and use a logical thought process. Second, adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly. Adolescents move from being concrete thinkers, who think of things that they have direct contact with or knowledge about, to abstract thinkers, who can imagine things not seen or experienced. This allows adolescents to have the capacity to love, think about spirituality, and participate in more advanced mathematics. Third, the formal operational thinking characteristic of adolescence enables adolescents to think about thinking or meta-cognition. This characteristic allows youth to develop the capacity to think about what they are feeling and how others perceive them.

Moral Changes

Some of the most common changes in thinking about morals and values that occur during this life stage include **seeing the world in shades of gray** by beginning to understand that not every question has a clear-cut answer and as they develop empathy, they begin to see why other people make different choices and to understand those choices better. They also begin **understanding the reasons behind rules** by sensing more fully how rules are related to ideas such as justice, public good, and safety. The questions and debates adolescents raise about rules are normal and helpful. The reasons and logic adults provide help adolescents form their views of the world and how it works. When adolescents get answers that satisfy their questions about a rule, it becomes personal to them, and they are better able to see why a rule makes sense thus, they begin **forming their moral code**. As part of establishing their values, adolescents may think more about what is right and what is wrong, what their role should be in the world, and what they should do when faced with personal moral dilemmas. They may spend time exploring their own religious traditions more deeply, as well as looking at other religions, philosophies, and forms of spirituality, thus **becoming more interested in big questions**.

Retrieved from <https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/adolescent-development-explained/moral-development>

IDENTITY FORMATION IN ADOLESCENTS

Identity development is a stage in the adolescent life cycle. For most, the search for identity begins in the adolescent years. During these years, adolescents are more open to ‘trying on’ different behaviors and appearances to discover who they are. In an attempt to find their identity and discover who they are, adolescents are likely to cycle through a number of identities to find one that suits them best. Developing and maintaining identity (in adolescent years) is a difficult task due to multiple factors such as family life, environment, and social status. Two main aspects of identity development are self-concept and self-esteem. While the idea of **self-concept** is known as the ability of a person to have opinions and beliefs that are defined confidently, consistently and with stability. The aspect of **self-esteem** is defined as one’s thoughts and feelings about one’s self-concept and identity.

Expanding on Erikson’s theory, Marcia (1966) described identity formation during adolescence as involving both decision points and commitments with respect to ideologies (e.g., religion, politics)

and occupations. While, **foreclosure** occurs when an individual commits to an identity without exploring options, **identity confusion/diffusion** occurs when adolescents neither explore nor commit to any identities. Conversely, **moratorium** is a state in which adolescents are actively exploring options but have not yet made commitments. As mentioned earlier, individuals who have explored different options, discovered their purpose, and have made identity commitments are in a state of **identity achievement**.

Developmental psychologists have researched several different areas of identity development and some of the main areas include:

- **Religious identity:** The religious views of teens are often similar to those of their families (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCullough, 2012). Most teens may question specific customs, practices, or ideas in the faith of their parents, but few completely reject the religion of their families.
- **Political identity:** An adolescent's political identity is also influenced by their parents' political beliefs. Although adolescents do tend to be more liberal than their elders, especially on social issues (Taylor, 2014), like other aspects of identity formation, adolescents' interest in politics is predicted by their parents' involvement and by current events (Stattin, Hussein, Ozdemir and Russo, 2017).
- **Vocational identity:** While adolescents in earlier generations envisioned themselves as working in a particular job, and often worked as an apprentice or part-time in such occupations as teenagers, this is rarely the case today. Vocational identity takes longer to develop, as most of today's occupations require specific skills and knowledge that will require additional education or are acquired on the job itself. In addition, many of the jobs held by teens are not in occupations that most teens will seek as adults.
- **Ethnic identity:** Ethnic identity refers to how people come to terms with who they are based on their ethnic or racial ancestry. For many ethnic minority teens, discovering one's ethnic identity is an important part of identity formation. Phinney (1989) proposed a model of ethnic identity development that included stages of unexplored ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and achieved ethnic identity.
- **Gender identity:** A person's sex, as determined by his or her biology, does not always correspond with his or her gender. Fluidity and uncertainty regarding sex and gender are especially common during early adolescence, when hormones increase and fluctuate creating

difficulty of self-acceptance and identity achievement (Reisner, Katz-Wise, Gordon, Corliss and Austin, 2016). Gender identity, like vocational identity, is becoming an increasingly prolonged task as attitudes and norms regarding gender keep changing. The roles appropriate for males and females are evolving and some adolescents may foreclose on a gender identity as a way of dealing with this uncertainty by adopting more stereotypic male or female roles (Sinclair & Carlsson, 2013). Those that identify as transgender or other face even bigger challenges.

ADOLESCENT CRISIS AND RESOLUTION

As noted earlier, the adolescence stage always comes with its challenges that may affect the individual him/herself and others around him alike. Such challenges may arise as a result of an outright non conformity to some values or standard, noncompliance with rules and authority or just sheer emotional outburst in order for the adolescent to show that he/she is now “grown up” and shouldn’t be treated as a kid anymore. Parents, teachers and elders should not meet such behaviours with harsh stands or punishment but rather should be handled with utmost care in order not to break something that is already bent. Thus, the following might be of help in meeting the adolescents’ perceived grievances.

- **Be a role model for forming and maintaining positive relationships** – with your friends, children, partner and colleagues. Your child will learn from observing relationships where there is respect, empathy and positive ways of resolving conflict.
- **Get to know your child’s friends**, and make them welcome in your home. This will help you keep in touch with your child’s social relationships. It also shows that you recognise how important your child’s friends are to your child’s sense of self. If you’re concerned about your child’s choice of friends, provide gentle and consistent guidance.
- **Listen to your child’s feelings**. If your child wants to talk, stop and give your child your full attention. If you’re in the middle of something, make a specific time when you can listen. Respect your child’s feelings and try to understand your child’s perspective, even if it’s not the same as yours.
- **Be explicit and open about your feelings**. In particular, tell your child how you feel when your child behaves in different ways. For example, ‘I felt really happy when you invited me to your school performance’. This helps your child learn to read and respond to emotions. It also models positive and constructive ways of relating to other people.

- **Be a role model for positive ways of dealing with difficult emotions** and moods. For example, there will be times when you're feeling cranky, tired and not like interacting with your child. Instead of giving your child the silent treatment, you could say, 'I'm tired and cross. I feel like I can't talk now without getting upset. Can we have this conversation after dinner?'
- **Talk with your child about relationships, sex and sexuality.** Look for 'teachable moments' – those everyday times when you can easily bring up these issues. This is often better than having a 'big talk'. Find out what your child already knows. Correct any misinformation and give the real facts. Use the conversation as a chance to discuss appropriate sexual behaviour and values. And always let your child know you're available to talk about questions or concerns.
- **Focus on the non-physical.** Teenagers are often self-conscious and anxious about their bodies and appearance. So reinforce the positive aspects of your child's social and emotional development. For example, you could praise your child for being a good friend, or for having a wide variety of interests, or for trying hard at school and so on.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS OF NIGERIAN ADOLESCENTS

The family, the school and the society should understand the need to handle the adolescents in a way to help them surmount the numerous hurdles and challenges they apparently struggle with. Among such challenges exhibited by the Nigerian adolescence, Uzoka (2018) discussed three outstanding ones. She pointed out that one of the significant is their inability to manage their sexual behaviours which lead to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and teenage pregnancies. Likewise, Uzoka, Sibani and Ikpekaogu (2017) observe that the uncontrollable sexual habit experienced in tertiary institutions is a rapid way of being infected with AIDS and other STDs, and the more common ones such as Gonorrhoea and Syphilis. These were corroborated by Nwachuku (2000) study that observe that at least in one of every ten of the undergraduate (Nigerian) students, there is a history of STD.

Substance and drug use and abuse is another problem faced by the Nigerian adolescents. It is to this extent Aliyu (2015) noted that the problem of drug abuse among adolescents in Nigeria is on the increase. Likewise, a study by Tsagem and Tambawal (2016) observes that the consumption of illegal drugs and the harmful use of other psychoactive substances such as alcohol, pharmaceutical drugs, inhalants and solvents has for a considerable time increasingly escalated at

an alarming rate over the years in Nigeria. Correspondingly, drug abuse was found as one of the major anti-social behaviours among adolescents in Nigeria (Rogo, 2015).

Finally, a problem of Nigerian adolescents is that of moral value decadence and moral degeneration (Uzoka, 2018). Though Sharon (2016) as cited in Uzoka (2018) pointed out that adolescence period is usually associated with a time for developing independence which involves breaking down rules, Uzoka (2018) observes that adolescents' way of dressing and loss to parental respect are almost the order of the day. Immodest dressing in the higher institutions of learning has been shelved under the umbrella of fashion. Alemike (2001) as cited in Uya (2015) indicated that adolescents had lost respect to their parents resulting in moral degeneration and further noted that our schools have become centers of sexual activities, examination malpractice, cultism and drug abuse; all of which are pointers to moral degeneration.

EDUCATIONAL AND COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS IN NIGERIAN SETTINGS

The period of adolescence is of great importance to parents, school and the society. Thus, the following would prove very helpful in handling and helping the adolescent under various situations.

- ✓ Help adolescents in reviewing any poorly made decisions. Encourage them to think about possibilities of the future and compliment and praise them for well-thought-out decisions.
- ✓ Encourage adolescents to think independently and develop their own ideas. Help them in setting their own goals.
- ✓ Include adolescents in discussions about a variety of topics, issues, and current events. Encourage them to share ideas and thoughts with adults.
- ✓ Parents need to remember that it is natural and normal for their adolescent to be interested in body changes and sexual topics. It does not mean that their child is involved in sexual activity.
- ✓ Help adolescents in getting adequate sleep, hydration, and nutrition.
- ✓ Adolescents most often need privacy to understand the changes taking place in their bodies. Ideally, they should be allowed to have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, they should have at least some private space. Teasing an adolescent child about physical changes is inappropriate. It may lead to self-consciousness and embarrassment.
- ✓ Adolescents who are allowed to use or have access to firearms need to learn how to use them properly. Young people need to be very aware of possible dangers including sudden death.

- ✓ Threats could occur with regular substance abuse, and with the experimental use of drugs and alcohol

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