



# Guidelines for Establishing Same Sex Attracted, Trans\* and Gender Diverse Youth Groups in Victoria

A BETTER PRACTICE GUIDE



## Acknowledgements

Rainbow Network would like to acknowledge the work of the Eastern Region Gay and Lesbian Youth Project (ERGLYP; March 2002-2005) for their development of the original "Procedure Manual for Social Support Programs for SSAY".

Rainbow Network would further like to acknowledge that this document does not address the specific needs of young intersex people. We acknowledge young intersex people have many of their own specific service needs, and as such the network will endeavour to explore these needs in more detail through future community consultation.

### **Lottie Turner**

Coordinator, Rainbow Network Victoria,  
Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria,  
Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health  
and Society

### **Liam Leonard**

Director, Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria,  
Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health  
and Society

### **Roz Ward**

Manager, Youth Programs, Gay & Lesbian  
Health Victoria, Australian Research  
Centre in Sex, Health and Society

### **Micah Scott**


Coordinator, Year 7 Self Program, Gay  
& Lesbian Health Victoria, Australian  
Research Centre in Sex, Health and  
Society

### **Zoe Birkinshaw**

Project Officer, Zoe Belle Gender Centre

### **Damien Stevens**

Community Development Worker -  
Diversity Project (Greater Shepparton),  
Uniting Care Cutting Edge



# Guidelines for Establishing Same Sex Attracted, Trans\* and Gender Diverse Youth Groups in Victoria

## **Purpose**

This document provides a framework by which organisations can establish safe, supportive and inclusive group environments for same-sex attracted, trans\* and gender diverse (SSATGD) young people. It asks the reader to consider several aspects of group work establishment and facilitation, and in doing so encourages the reflection of varying principles of group work within a local context.

Many groups in both metropolitan and regional Victoria have built sound policies and protocols around the running of their SSATGD support groups. These policies and protocols are an invaluable tool in ensuring accountability and sustainability of the group. However, it is the process behind the development of these policies and protocols that should be emphasized as their most critical element.

This document is based on principles first explored in a set of guidelines created by the Eastern Region Gay and Lesbian Youth Project (ERGLYP; 2002), together the practice wisdom and knowledge of the writer and all those listed within the acknowledgments of this document.

# Why establish support groups for SSATGD young people?

The most recent Writing Themselves In (WTI3) report surveyed the health and wellbeing of 3,134 SSATGD young people across Australia. Of those 3,134 young people, 31% (n=946) came from Victoria - the most heavily represented state in the study (Hillier, Jones et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup>

This research suggests SSATGD young people continue to experience heterosexist and homophobic abuse (Hillier, Jones et al. 2010). Moreover, young people who experience these forms of discrimination are significantly more likely to:

- be at risk of homelessness;
- misuse alcohol and other drugs;
- report having a sexually transmitted infection;
- experience feelings of compromised safety at social occasions and public events;
- have self-harmed; and
- have attempted suicide.

## Acronyms

### ARCSHS

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society

### GLHV

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria

### RN

Rainbow Network

### LGBTI

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex

### SSATGD

Same sex attracted, trans\* and gender diverse

Within the same research, those young people who reported minimal to no heterosexist, homophobic or transphobic abuse were significantly more likely to feel safe in all reported facets of their lives, have increased feelings of self-worth, and feel a stronger sense of community connectedness.<sup>2</sup> This evidence shows that supportive environments can considerably enhance the mental health and wellbeing of SSATGD young people.

Almost all young people who reported disclosing their sexuality or gender identity to a youth worker in WTI3 also reported receiving a positive and supportive response (Hillier, Jones et al. 2010). As youth workers are seen to be an important confidant for young SSATGD people within this research, it makes sense that they be involved in widening that support to include the establishment and facilitation of social support groups to enhance young people's sense of self-worth and community connectedness.

The remainder of this document will explore some useful principles to consider when establishing a youth group for SSATGD young people.

## The local context

When thinking about the establishment of a support group for SSATGD young people, it is important to explore what local assets are in place and available, what young people in the area want, what the local community needs are, and where the service gaps are.

When setting up the group, it is a good idea to build support from the local community, including other organisations and services providers. When you do this, you begin the process of establishing a community of practice and network, which in turn allows you to build and share practice wisdom, support and knowledge.

Another aspect to consider is that of recruiting a reference or advisory group. Many successful

<sup>1</sup>Writing Themselves In 3 (Hillier et al., 2010) is the third national study into the health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender diverse young people.

<sup>2</sup>Reported areas included their home, school, social occasions, sporting events and the street.

support programs across Victoria, indeed Australia and the world, have a reference group who oversee the management of the group, or simply act as an additional support.

Reference/advisory groups are commonly made up of local school and youth service representatives, as well as community members. You can distribute a callout for interested parties through lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) specific organisations, and local and queer media.

### **The roles of a reference group can vary, however some can include:**

- guidance in building group protocols and aims;
- advice and support for group facilitators (where appropriate);
- facilitation and support regarding group awareness campaigns and community awareness raising;
- identifying service gaps and assets within the community;
- input into sustainability measures; and
- supporting the building of communities of practice and networking initiatives.

## **Values of the program**

The values of the program will likely mimic that of the host service or organisation. In addition to those values, in 2001 the then Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Health (MACGLH) developed a set of LGBTI-inclusive guidelines to be used by funding bodies when determining the success of LGBTI-specific grant applications. The ERGLYP took these guidelines and localized them for use when developing support programs for SSATGD young people. Those recommendations are as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- that the program is inclusive of the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people or those young people experiencing confusion around these issues;
- that measures are in place to ensure that issues for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people can be addressed in a confidential, informed and sensitive manner as they arise;
- that the program does not pathologise issues of same sex attraction or gender identity, but locates the problem in the society around the young people who experience difficulties with these issues;
- that the program addresses the issue of appropriate support and/or training in the area for all those involved in the program whether they be young people themselves, families, school communities or health care providers;
- that the program is based on an understanding that the problem is not located in the young people themselves but in the society around them;
- that the program does not problematise or pathologise issues of same sex attraction or gender identity;
- that the program places the confidentiality and personal safety of young people above all other considerations;
- that it applies no pressure on young people to “come out” to families, friends and communities;
- that adequate monitoring and evaluation will be carried out, ideally in an action research framework; and
- that it does not duplicate services or other initiatives already happening.

<sup>3</sup>These recommendations were taken from the ERGLYP's "Procedure Manual for Social Support Programs for SSAY". Not all recommendations and language are endorsed by Rainbow Network.

# Target group

When determining the target group (whom the group is for), it is useful to survey the local context to establish:

- if there is an existing group in the area;
- if there is an existing group in the area, identify the function of that group and if it is necessary to form another;
- the age range of group participants;
- if the group will be open or closed;
- if the group is closed, how many participants can be involved;
- if it will be a queer-straight alliance (QSA) or solely for same sex attracted/gender diverse/SSATGD young people;
- what geographical/local government area/s the group will cover; and
- if young people need to live, work or study in the area to access the group.

These are just some of the questions that are useful to explore when establishing the target group. It is also important to consider what support is offered to those young people who sit outside the target group once it is established. Young people who sit outside the target group may be too old or too young, or assessed as high risk, i.e. due to anti-social behaviour and acute mental health concerns (including suicidal ideation).

In instances where a young person is not able to participate in the group for any of these reasons, considerations of adequate referral pathways and one-on-one support should be made.

## Aims

The aims of the group will be dependent on the target group, model of practice used, philosophy of the group/host organisation, and resources available. It is important to have a clear aim established for the group, as this will provide you with a framework to guide the group's sustainability and ability to support the young people engaged. For example, the group may aim to:

- facilitate better access to health services, support and information for SSATGD young people;
- engage young SSATGD people in self-determined health and wellbeing initiatives; or
- support the building of self-worth, community connectedness and resilience amongst local SSATGD youth.

The group environment can engage a number of pathways in working towards its aim/s, including:

- creating a confidential, non-judgmental environment where young SSATGD feel safe to explore and disclose their experiences with peers;
- challenging social isolation by facilitating connectedness to another community of young people;
- providing opportunities to discuss shared joys and challenges;
- supporting youth led social change and activism;
- exploring ways in which young people can challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia; and
- encouraging help-seeking behavior.

# Program model

It is important to determine what form the group will take (what the running process will look like, what activities/services are offered). There are a number of successful social support group models; however, different models take different resources. In determining the best model, it is useful to consider who the group is for, the venue, financial resources, group facilitation, and location.

A number of government departments and funding bodies now look to program logic models as a way to understand the aims and processes of programs when determining their possible funding. In its simplest form, a program logic provides a blueprint for the intended aims, activities, outputs and outcomes of a program.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 provides an example of what a program logic model might look like in reference to a social support group for SSATGD young people.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1: Example program logic for SSATGD youth social support group

<p><b>Aims:</b> to provide a safe space for young SSATGD people to share their experiences and build community connectedness with their peers and likeminded individuals.</p>		
<p><b>Resources:</b> 0.2 EFT position, venue, catering and resource costs.</p>		
<p><b>Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Examine local context (including establishing a reference group)</li> <li>→ Determine target group</li> <li>→ Clarify aims</li> <li>→ Establish support for group worker from host organisation and local community</li> <li>→ Conduct risk analysis</li> <li>→ Communicate plans to stakeholders</li> <li>→ Conduct needs analysis</li> <li>→ Consult participants</li> <li>→ Develop action plan</li> <li>→ Implement plan</li> <li>→ Repeat needs analysis</li> </ul>	<p><b>Outputs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ A measure and description of the group's role and performance against intended aims and values</li> <li>→ An action plan for change</li> <li>→ A measure and description of achievements /processes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Young people are engaging in the group</li> <li>→ Young people are feeding back increased feelings of self-worth and community connectedness</li> <li>→ Stakeholders are referring young people to the group</li> <li>→ The group is accessible to the target group</li> <li>→ The host service has increased capacity to meet the needs of SSATGD young people</li> <li>→ The host service has built collaborative working relationships with other local service providers</li> </ul>



<sup>4</sup>W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide (2004).

<sup>5</sup>The Program Logic Model in Figure 1 has been adapted by the model established by Barrett, C., L. Turner and L. Leonard (2013). Beyond a rainbow sticker. Melbourne, Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria.

# Youth participation

Participant led planning and initiatives in the social support group will aid in group members' sense of empowerment and inclusion, as well as their participation and engagement in the group. In order to effectively foster participation, it's important to be open to changes in internal processes if needed.<sup>6</sup>

True youth participation is a multi-step approach, and participants in social support groups are more likely to be engaged and committed when involved in all of the following steps:

- decision making and planning of which activities to pursue;
- implementation of their chosen activities; and
- opportunities to provide feedback on their experiences of the process.

When engaging in a model of youth participation, it's important to provide opportunities for participant involvement to be meaningful and for outcomes to be visible. For example:

- if participants decide to provide feedback through a survey, it's important for them to have access to the results, and any actions taken afterwards; or
- if the participants plan a community event, it's beneficial for them to be engaged in the event itself, whether through hosting or attending.

Gradually introducing new participants to decision-making processes can help them become familiar with new processes, places and people. Some good baseline activities for introducing youth participation can be found in the *Group initiatives (pg 6)* section of this guide. Going beyond these activities and inviting the participants to create their own initiatives is crucial for sustained engagement.

## Continuous process of feedback and change

The needs and desires of participants will vary over time, particularly as they get older or new members join. It's important to continuously invite feedback, and be open to suggestions and change. It's crucial to actively provide channels of communication between the facilitator and the participants, and not rely on feedback to be provided on its own.

## Acknowledging contributions

Acknowledging contributions made by participants, and highlighting the outcomes of their involvement increases their engagement. Inviting participants to suggest activities they would like to be involved in is a great way to recognise and validate the important role they play in group process.

## When ideas are not realised

There may come a time when an idea raised cannot be implemented for reasons such as budgeting constraints or OH&S compliance. In cases where ideas are not realised, it's important to be transparent about the reasons why the idea cannot be implemented, and to facilitate discussion around practical alternatives.

<sup>6</sup>This section uses principles explored in Bell, J., A. Vromen and P. Collin, (2008). *Rewriting the Rules for Youth Participation: Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision making*. Barton, ACT, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.



# Group initiatives

When exploring possible group initiatives, it's important to involve participants as much as possible (see *Youth Participation pg. 5*). When having conversations around group activities, it's useful to view them in terms of what they are trying to achieve with questions, such as:

- What do we want to do during the time together?
- Do we want to interact and socialise with each other?
- Do we want to engage with the community?
- Do we want to learn more about certain topics?

If the group is stuck for ideas, the following list may act as a useful catalyst for conversation with group participants about potential group initiatives:<sup>7</sup>

- developing an identity for the group (name, logo, social media page, fliers etc);
- providing SSATGD friendly resources and media for young people at every session;
- having an additional "go to box" for condoms, lube, dams, health information, and referral information about additional service providers;
- offering a library system of SSATGD books, magazines, zines, films, and documentaries for participants to borrow;
- utilising guest speakers/attendees the participants can look up to and be inspired by;
- forming partnerships with other groups to go on excursions and camps; and
- engaging personal development workshops and activities designed to support participant understanding of safe sex, relationships, coming out, health and wellbeing, online/digital safety, celebrating diversity, and challenging homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

## Establishing a group agreement

When working in a group environment, it is important to create group guidelines to support the safety of all group members. This agreement may include:

- respecting diverse opinions and ideas;
- respecting confidentiality;
- using non-judgmental, inclusive language;
- peoples' right to have their names, pronouns, bathroom preferences respected; and
- the establishment of a conflict resolution process.

Ideally this process is done in partnership with participants, and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure their continued relevance and importance.

## Individual support

At times, group facilitators may find individuals within the group require more intensive individual support. It is important to have guidelines in place for internal or external referrals to counseling and support services. Another option may be to offer a designated time during the running of the group for individual members to talk to the facilitator. The facilitator would need to ensure the space for these discussions is within a private and safe environment. This space would also provide an environment where both the participant and facilitator can determine if more intensive, one-on-one support is required.

<sup>7</sup>This list should be considered a guide only, and participants should be encouraged to engage in decision making over the respective group's activities and initiatives.

# Logistical considerations

There are a number of logistical elements to consider when establishing a group. Some of these considerations include:

- **Transport**  
Is your venue close to public transport? If not, do you have an alternative transport option, i.e. a mini bus to collect and drop off participants?
- **Time**  
What time will the group run? How long will the group run? Some participants will have to schedule their attendance around school/university/work commitments, as well as public transport running times.
- **Catering**  
Depending on what time the group runs, and how long it runs for, it will be important to consider providing food and beverages for participants.
- **Venue**  
Where will you run the group? What size space will you require?
- **Access**  
Is the venue accessible for people with a disability?
- **Toilets**  
Does the venue have accessible toilets? Are the toilets wheelchair accessible? How possible will it be for young gender diverse people to use the toilets of their choice, i.e. are the toilets used by other groups who may make group members less able/ comfortable to use their preferred toilets?

# Facilitation of the group

Exploring the ways in which the group might be facilitated is a process worthy of careful consideration. Commonly, co-facilitation is the preferred mode of facilitation as it can offer facilitators and the group:

- alternative frames of reference;
- alternative avenues of individual support; and
- the opportunity to debrief regarding content and process (McDermott 2002).

Another consideration is who will be facilitating the group. In terms of future sustainability, it is worthwhile reflecting on the various values and frameworks for practice that contribute to effective facilitation styles. This process can then be re-examined and transferred to future facilitator recruitment. You may also like to consider forming a partnership with another youth service provider, with that partnership including the provision of a second facilitator. Forming partnerships with other service providers will also provide participants with access to greater service provision.

# Intake and referral

This consideration invites you to reflect on how young people are going to access the group. It may be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Are your intake forms inclusive of diverse genders and sexualities, i.e. do they allow space for self-disclosure of gender, preferred pronoun and preferred name?
- Will referrals be internal, external or both?
- If the group is open to external referrals, how will you communicate participation criteria to external agencies?
- If the group is open to external referrals, how will you ensure the inter-agency confidentiality and privacy of potential participants?
- Will you have a formalised referral form?
- If you have a formalised referral form, how much information is necessary to gather?
- What will be the process of accepting referrals?
- Will you ask to meet with new participants prior to their first group attendance?
- What, if any, records will you keep regarding group participants and process?
- Where will you keep your records?
- Will you have any processes/partnerships with external service providers for specialised care referral, i.e. alcohol and other drug, sexual assault, family violence, mental health, and homelessness service providers?

It is important to remember that there are strict laws regarding the sharing of private information. If taking or performing an inter-service referral, it is best practice to obtain written consent from the participant.

For more information regarding your rights and responsibilities when working with personal information regarding young people, see Youthlaw's "What do I do when..." (Radonic, Cohen et al. 2012).

## Parents, guardians and participant privacy

In Victoria, there is no set age below which an organisation or service provider must seek parental/guardian consent instead of the young person themselves (Radonic, Cohen et al. 2012). It is reasonable to accept a young person's consent if you:

- believe them to have the capacity to understand all issues involved; and
- believe they are of mature enough mind to provide informed consent regarding their wellbeing (Radonic, Cohen et al. 2012).

It is worth acknowledging that obtaining parental/guardian consent can be problematic when working with SSATGD young people, as:

- the young person may not have disclosed their sexuality and/or gender identity to their parent/guardian; or
- if the young person has disclosed their sexuality and/or gender identity, they may not be supported by their parent/guardian.

It is, however, best practice to obtain parental/guardian and the young person's consent if the young person is under the age of 18 *if you can* (Radonic, Cohen et al. 2012).

# Publicity and promotion

Considering how you are going to promote and advertise the group is an important step in the establishment process. Once the group is up and running, involving group participants in the promotion and advertising of the group is a valuable tool in empowering the group around group process and guidance. You may also find a more informal process of promotion is carried out when group participants discuss the group with their peers once they feel comfortable, safe and confident within the environment.

It is important to reflect on exactly what information you will advertise, as well as the medium through which you will advertise. In the interest of safety and participant confidentiality, pay careful consideration to publically advertising where and when the group will be run if you are utilising a venue outside of your own organisation, and if you will be the sole facilitator of the group.

The group can be promoted through a variety of different mediums, including:

- promotional flyers and posters for community and organisation notice boards;
- writing a generic introductory letter to be sent to all local schools and community services, including referral information and further promotional material;
- advertising on websites and/or social media pages; and
- contacting local government youth networks with an offer to speak at their networking meetings.

## Starting points for group promotion



Rainbow Network  
Safe Schools Coalition Victoria  
Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria  
Gay and Lesbian Switchboard  
JOY 94.9  
Star Observer  
Social media pages  
Local government youth services  
Local schools  
Local community health organisations  
GP clinics  
Neighbourhood houses

# Regional considerations

There are a number of additional considerations to be made when establishing a group in regional or remote areas. For instance, some young people may need to travel some distance to attend the group. In these instances, when logistically, safely and confidentially viable, the group may consider traveling to additional areas to run the group (e.g. every three months).

# Supervision and debriefing

As youth workers, social workers, psychologists, teachers, and health-care providers, our work within social and community services can be incredibly challenging. We are exposed to ongoing trauma, we often work with little feedback, and our work frequently relies on a less than stable political climate. The culmination of all of these factors, without adequate support and supervision, often makes us susceptible to burnout.

Whilst our work can be rewarding, inherent in its nature is an element of hardship. How do you continue to work within such an environment? Do you have access to meaningful professional supervision? What does professional supervision even involve?

The Australian Association of Social Workers states professional supervision's purpose is to:

*... facilitate competent, independent practice and not to perpetuate dependency. The word supervision has a specific meaning in the social work profession going far beyond the concept of line management in administration and management (writer's own emphasis)...Supervision is most effective when it is valued by both the supervisor and supervisee, when both parties are motivated and able to give it a high priority, and where there is recognition of the rights and needs of the supervisee as an adult learner. Social work supervision encompasses administrative, educational, and supportive functions, all of which are interrelated. (Australian Association of Social Workers 2000)*

For all of the reasons listed above, it is vital that workers engaging in the facilitation of support groups have adequate access to debriefing and professional supervision.

## Evaluation

When facilitating any form of cultural change, it is valuable to remember that change does not occur in a strictly controlled environment; rather, it is made possible by a number of variables, i.e. human relationships, communication, perceptions, time, values, locale, culture, attitudes, and belief systems (Fletcher 2012). In this sense, careful consideration of evaluation models, tools and strategies is important when assessing if and how your group has worked towards its aim.

Utilising effective evaluation techniques is key to not only ensuring you are meeting the needs of the young people accessing the group, but also to provide the evidence you will require for sustainable, recurrent funding. Ideally, evaluation should be an ongoing process, with participants able to provide both informal and formal feedback. This feedback will allow you to direct, and in some cases change, the processes of the group in order to better meet the needs of the participants.

# Activity Checklist

Surveyed the local context (pg 4)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Built relationships and gained support from other local service providers (pg 5)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identified the target group (pg 6)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Established the group's aims and purpose (pg 6)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered the group's values (pg 5)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developed a program logic model (pg 7)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Logistics have been carefully considered (pg 10)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Confirmed the facilitation (roles and style) of the group (pg 10)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Built sound intake and referral processes and policies (pg 11)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developed/added to existing privacy policy (pg 11)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered supervision and debriefing processes for facilitators (pg 13)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developed publicity and marketing plan (pg 12)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered a model of evaluation (pg 13)	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Ongoing support from Rainbow Network

There are a number of services Rainbow Network can offer at all stages of planning and establishing support groups for SSATGD young people. Just some of these services include:

- information on campaigns you could get involved in;
- access to our specialised professional supervision program;
- links with guest speakers;
- links with other SSATGD youth projects around Victoria;
- providing more resources for your group;
- providing training for your local government youth network;
- guidance and support regarding SSATGD-inclusive practice;
- support in running campaigns around challenging homophobia, biphobia and transphobia; and
- advertising and promoting the group.

# Additional resources and links

# References

## Rainbow Network

Rainbow Network is the Victoria-wide support network for anyone working with same sex attracted, intersex, trans\* and gender diverse (SSAITGD) young people. We offer free training, resources, a monthly eBulletin, secondary consultation and professional supervision.

[www.rainbownetwork.com.au](http://www.rainbownetwork.com.au)

## Safe Schools Coalition Victoria

Safe Schools Coalition Victoria (SSCV) is a coalition of schools and individuals dedicated to creating safer educational environments where every family can belong, every teacher can teach, and every student can learn.

[www.sscv.org.au](http://www.sscv.org.au)

## Minus18

Minus18 is Australia's largest youth-led network for gay, bi, lesbian and trans\* youth, offering online networking, advocacy, resources and social support.

[www.minus18.org.au](http://www.minus18.org.au)

## Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria.

[www.yacvic.org.au](http://www.yacvic.org.au)

## WayOut

WayOut works with communities in Rural Victoria to raise awareness about the impact of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia on young people.

[www.wayout.org.au](http://www.wayout.org.au)

## Zoe Belle Gender Centre

Zoe Belle Gender Centre works to improve the inclusion and health of the intersex, transgender and gender diverse communities.

[www.gendercentre.com](http://www.gendercentre.com)

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