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for every child

ECE SPOTLIGHT SERIES
BUILD TO LAST: SCHOOL READINESS
What is it? Why is it important?

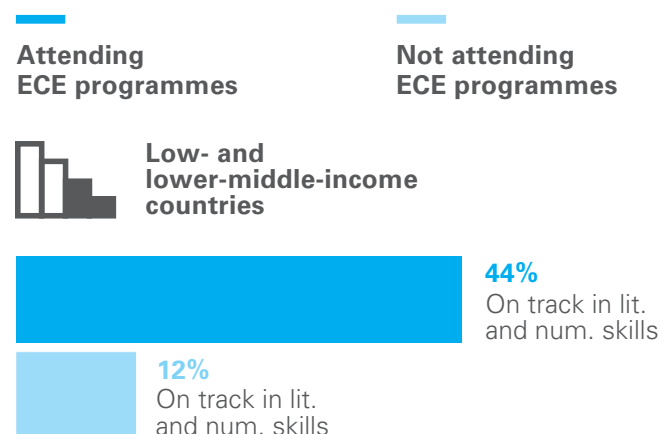**SCHOOL READINESS :** What is it? Why is it important?

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A significant proportion of new entrants to primary education lack basic school readiness skills. Unless addressed, this early learning deficit will repeat in each subsequent cohort, perpetuating achievement gaps. Quality early childhood education supports children to develop the foundational skills that will determine their future health, development, well-being, and relationships. School readiness is the outcome of quality ECE systems, setting children up to succeed in primary grades and beyond.

School readiness[1] refers to a comprehensive approach to create an enabling environment for young children's learning journeys, across three dimensions- children's readiness for school; schools' readiness for children; and families' and communities' readiness to support learning at home and in organized settings. These mutually reinforcing dimensions succeed when:

- children have opportunities to develop core foundational skills in social-emotional learning, cognition, motor skills, language, executive function and more;

- parents and caregivers actively support learning and development through their day-to-day parenting practices, as well as through structured engagement with teachers and school leaders; and

- ECE settings and primary schools understand how to smooth the transition for all children through consistent and inclusive play-based approaches to teaching and learning.[2]

With learning gaps evident **as early as Grade 1**, and with **two out of three 10 year olds** unable to read a simple sentence, quality early childhood education (ECE) offers a high impact opportunity to remediate learning gaps

Figure 1: Percentage of children on track in literacy and numeracy (lit. and num.) skills by ECE programme attendance and country income group. First published in A World Ready to Learn

Attending ECE programmes

Not attending ECE programmes

Low- and lower-middle-income countries

44%
On track in lit. and num. skills

12%
On track in lit. and num. skills

Source: Computations by UNICEF, based on MICS and DHS datasets (2010–2015) for 48 countries.

(See Figure 1). Attending a quality ECE programme is one of the **strongest predictors** for supporting a child's readiness for school and a **key determinant** of academic success at age 17, regardless of household income. The positive effects are particularly strong for **marginalized**

What is ECE?

A child's learning journey begins at birth. **Early childhood education** encompasses early learning experiences at home as well as organized, play-based learning activities in preschools, kindergartens, community-based centres and other settings before transitioning to primary school. ECE is part of a holistic approach to early childhood development and is anchored in the principles of the **nurturing care framework**.

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1   Britto, P.R., School Readiness: A Conceptual Framework, UNICEF, New York, 2012.

2   Ibid.

children. In Ethiopia, Save the Children implemented a quality pre-primary education programme focused on improving emergent literacy and mathematics skills. Children with the lowest socioeconomic status in the programme made almost double the gains in their language and literacy scores as their better-off peers, practically closing the learning gaps between these children by the start of Grade 1, regardless of household income.[3]

Investing in ECE as part of a broader focus on foundational learning has been identified as key to addressing **challenges of equity**, as well as increasing system efficiency. For every US$1 invested, ECE offers economic returns of between US$9[4] and US$17[5], and results in lower repetition rates and dropout in primary and secondary school. In turn this frees up future funding to deal with emerging challenges and shifting priorities.

This brief captures some emerging approaches to supporting school readiness so that future investments in ECE, such as those captured in the **Tashkent Declaration**, can be well targeted to narrow achievement gaps, achieve returns on investment and support the achievement of national and subnational ECE system goals.

Children ready to learn

In their earliest years, children form **more than 1 million brain connections every second**. If provided with quality opportunities for holistic development, even the very youngest children can be set on a trajectory that will have lifelong benefits. These opportunities begin in the home where parents can provide **nurturing care** to support holistic child development and early learning from birth for their babies and toddlers. The home learning environment can be complemented by organized learning opportunities for preschool-aged children, where children can be supported by skilled teachers to develop a range of holistic skills.

Quality, play-based ECE supports early learning and holistic development. Through **play** children acquire new words and expressions, but more significantly, practise the **skills** to think, plan, negotiate and adapt. Through teamwork and persistence in their play tasks, they develop skills for socialization, and the sense of well-being and resilience that fuels the motivation to try again and achieve. These aspects of 'learning how to learn' establish pathways that connect early learning experiences with later academic and social-behavioural outcomes. For this reason, learning through play is a core pedagogical approach in high quality ECE settings.

While all children have the capacity to learn foundational skills, not all children have the opportunity. Children who benefit from quality ECE demonstrate positive improvements in cognitive and problem-solving abilities, fine-motor skills and socio-emotional and behavioural outcomes which form the foundation for future learning.

When children are not able to access universal, quality ECE services, accelerated education programmes or alternative models can support them to develop school readiness before they enter Grade 1. In Mozambique, children who did not attend a pre-primary programme were offered 120 hours of **accelerated school readiness programming** before the beginning of Grade 1. Children who participated in the programme demonstrated **significantly higher scores** in emergent literacy, emergent numeracy, executive function and motor skills than children who did not access either pre-primary or the accelerated learning programme.

The Philippines **Kindergarten Catch-Up Education Program** (KCEP) is an alternative model focusing on children who live in difficult circumstances and are unable to finish the General Kindergarten Education Program. KCEP supports children aged 5 years and older with foundational learning skills and holistic development opportunities. The programme is implemented through a range of models including school-based, daycare-based and home or community-based to ensure that children in a range of circumstances can benefit.

3   Dowd, Amy J., et al., 'Realizing Capabilities in Ethiopia: Maximizing early childhood investment for impact and equity', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2016, 477–493.

4   Muroga, A., Zaw, H.T., Mizunoya, S., Lin, H., Brossard, M. & Reuge, N., COVID-19: A reason to double down on investments in pre-primary education. Innocenti Working Paper 2020-06. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2020.

5   Zubairi, A. & Rose, P., Bright and early: How financing pre-primary education gives every child a fair start in life: Moving towards quality early childhood development for all. REAL Centre, University of Cambridge, 2017.

Evidence from Cambodia shows that training primary school teachers to implement a school readiness skills programme during the **first two months of first grade** can be very successful. The programme included a range of components, such as the development of special curricular documentation, a teacher training programme, regular monitoring mechanisms to support teachers and the upgrading of classroom and student assessments for monitoring and reporting purposes. Children who participated in this programme performed significantly better than children who did not receive the intervention, in both school readiness skills (basic language skills, the concepts of number, time and space, hygiene and working in groups) and achievement of formal curriculum (terminal achievement test) in primary school.

Children impacted by crisis can be supported to access ECE through national programmes, or through partnerships with non-government actors. The Government of **Jordan** has demonstrated strong commitment to universalizing access to two years of pre-primary for all children, including children with refugee status. A partnership with UNICEF resulted in the establishment of **54 Kindergarten classrooms** in Za'atari and Azraq refugee camps, serving 4,000 Syrian children living in the camps. **Ahlan Simsim** is a collaboration between Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee, which delivers early learning and nurturing care through a combination of mass media and direct services across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. **Parents have reported** that their children have used techniques demonstrated in the programme to practise emotional regulation, and report a wider emotional vocabulary.

Children with disabilities are **25% less likely** to attend early learning services than those without disabilities. To address low enrolment among children with disabilities, Bulgaria **sensitized parents** of all children to the importance of pre-primary education. The initiative improved communication between parents and pre-primary teachers about special education needs and other topics, and increased parental confidence that pre-primary centres could support children with disabilities effectively.

Children who learn in their **mother tongue** in pre-primary and in the early grades are more likely to develop foundational skills than when taught in a second or unfamiliar language. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, a **linguistic revitalization programme** supports caregivers and community leaders to guide their youngest children in learning their native language from an early age, paving the way for greater success in preschool through the transition to primary school. In **Myanmar,** ethnic languages and cultural committees (LCCs) were supported to develop resources in ethnic languages which reflect the culture, traditions, customs and costumes of different communities. Due to these efforts, the availability of resources in local languages, including storybooks, poems and other materials, has improved significantly. The programme promotes literacy and language development among young children, preserves cultural traditions and strengthens community identity.

In some situations, it might not always be possible for young children to learn in their mother tongue; for example during emergencies, crises and forced displacement. In such circumstances, early childhood education programmes, when possible, should ensure interpreters and cultural mediators are available to support young children's familiarity and development in different languages.
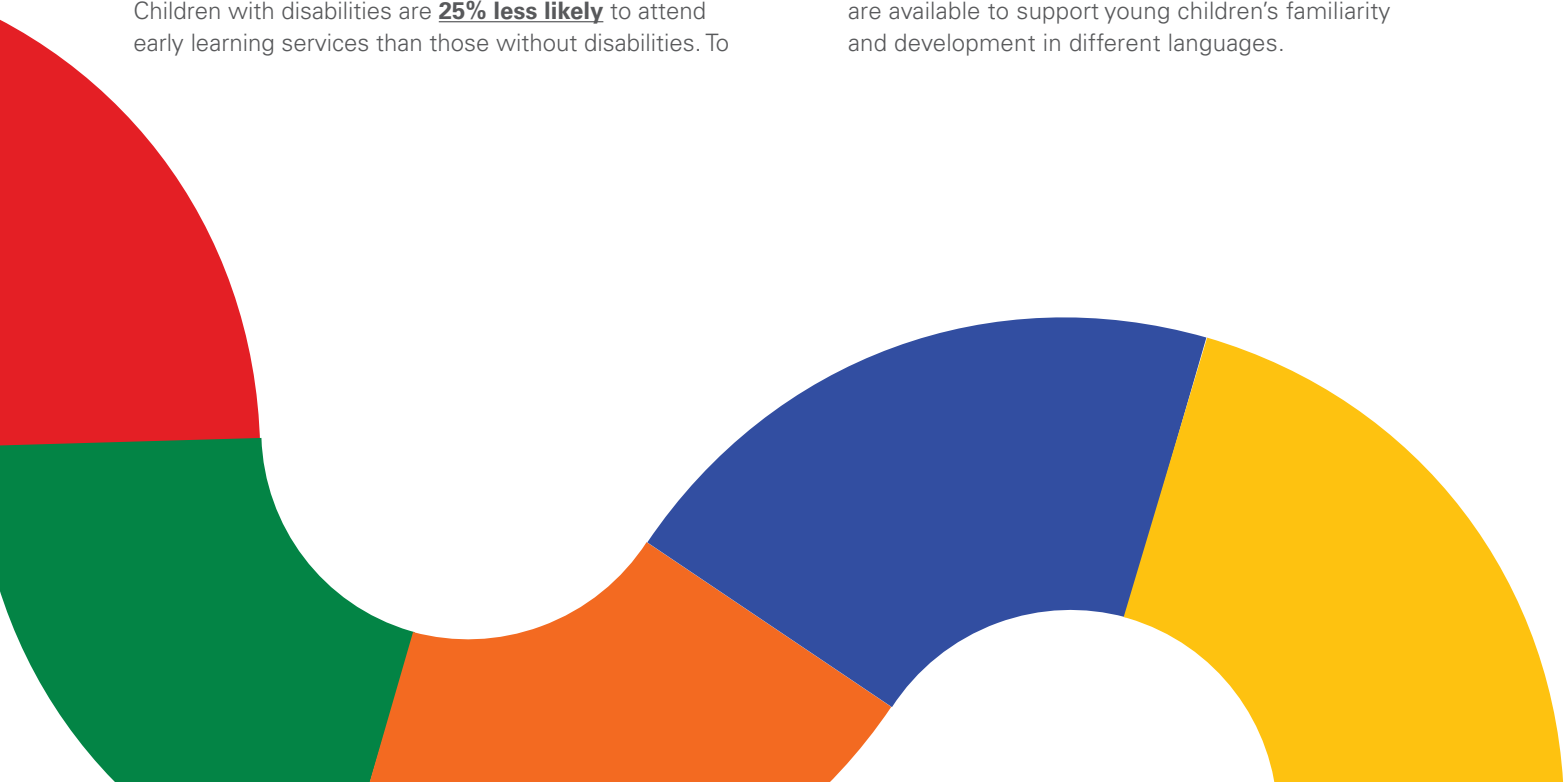
Ready parents

Early learning **begins in the home**, where young children spend most of their time. Relationships and interactions with parents, siblings, extended family members and neighbours have a significant influence over how children understand and experience the world around them and how they learn and develop. By recognizing and promoting the importance of **parenting and caregiving**, governments can partner effectively with parents to support development and learning from birth by promoting nurturing, responsive and stimulating home environments. Ready parents understand how to support learning at home, appreciate the importance of on-time enrolment in ECE and primary, and are empowered to engage with ECE and primary settings to support quality provision.

By implementing high quality parenting programmes, governments can equip caregivers with the knowledge and skills they need to support their children's learning. **Responsive parenting**, adequate nutrition, and accessing health and other essential services support **holistic development**. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Education leads the multisectoral Nurturing Care Parenting programme. The programme has been developed by drawing on best practices from a range of parenting programmes in multiple sectors. The face-to-face sessions are facilitated by a trained commune focal point who provides parenting education in local languages. In Jamaica, the IRIE Homes Toolbox supports child safety and well-being by improving positive parenting for children aged 2-6 years. Use of the tool among parents led to reduced harsh punishment by parents, increased parental involvement and decreased behavioural difficulties among higher-risk children.[6] During COVID-19 school closures, the Dominican Republic launched a programme to provide accessible **home-learning kits** to the parents of pre-primary children with disabilities to support holistic development within the home, an initiative which continued after school reopening.

UNICEF supports innovative digital and non-digital tools to actively engage parents in their children's development and learning. UNICEF's mobile parenting application, Bebbo, provides parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 6 with evidence-based advice and interactive tools to promote children's development and well-being. The app encourages parents to engage in daily practices that support early learning, including cognitive, motor, socio-emotional and language skills. Bebbo is available in 14 countries across Europe and Central Asia in 14 different languages (with 23 language variations) and since its launch in 2021, the app has already been downloaded by over half a million users.

The home environment influences children's perceptions of themselves and others. For this reason, parental engagement programmes may focus on challenging harmful stereotypes which prevent all children from accessing their potential. Evidence from a pilot in the Gambia[7] found that for both mothers and fathers **participation in a parental engagement programme** increased engagement between male caregivers and children, but also improved communication between male and female caregivers, and challenged gendered social norms around fatherhood in some communities. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, UNICEF supported Lao Women's Union to implement the parenting package **Love and Care for Every Child** in four districts of two provinces. The materials and training modules address harmful norms around gender and disability. Through the training 1,127 village facilitators from 252 villages have gained knowledge and capacity to implement community engagement and behaviour change communication activities with parents in their communities.

Parental support is essential to supporting a smooth transition to primary school for children, beginning with right-age enrolment. In **Ghana**, the Ministry of Education, with support from UNICEF, launched a media campaign featuring well-known personalities to deliver key messages about right-age enrolment in kindergarten and primary school. Following the campaign, pre-primary net enrolment increased from 73.8 per cent (2018/19) to 89.3 per cent (2020-21).[8]

Parents and caregivers influence the quality of services at pre-primary and primary. Studies in Malawi and Chile suggest that the positive impact of pre-primary programmes may

6   Francis, T., & Baker-Henningham, H., 'The Irie Homes Toolbox: A Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial of an Early Childhood Parenting Program to Prevent Violence Against Children in Jamaica', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 126, 2021, [106060]. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106060

7   UNICEF, Early Learning Assessments of Primary Education Entrants in the Gambia. **https://www.unicef.org/gambia/reports/early-learning-assessment-primary-education-entrants-gambia**

8   Data retrieved from Ministry of Education Ghana, Education Management Information System

fade over time unless parents are educated to reinforce messages presented through pre-primary education, and pre-primary and primary curricula are well coordinated.[9] To allow parents and caregivers to perform this role effectively, families should be sensitized to the importance of approaches such as play-based learning and inclusion.

The home environment continues to be critical to learning during and after transition from ECE to primary school. In Nepal, a **formative assessment package** for use at home has been developed as a complement to face-to-face learning in ECE centres, preschools and primary schools. Piloted in 2022, the package engages families in the assessment of child skills at home through a combination of observation and activity-based tasks. Parents use the results to support home-based learning using simple activities. Through home visits, SMS and other strategies preschool teachers support parents to understand and use the assessment approaches. The package can also be used to reach young learners during times of temporary and permanent school closures.

Parents and caregivers influence and participate in the formal and informal accountability structures which are crucial for service quality in ECE settings and primary schools. In the **Gambia**, mothers' clubs and school management committees in 33 communities served as entry points for service improvement after COVID-19 related school closures. In Bulgaria, parents and caregivers were actively engaged in the development and piloting of Bulgaria's new ECCE quality framework indicators, a significant step in formalizing parents as partners in quality assurance.

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9 Özler, Berk, et al., 'Combining Pre-School Teacher Training with Parenting Education: A cluster-randomized controlled trial', *Journal of Economic Development*, vol. 133, 2018; Yoshikawa, Hirokazu, et al., Investing in Our Future: The evidence base on preschool education, Society for Research on Child Development, Washington, DC, 2013.

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Ready schools

Smoother transitions from pre-primary to primary can be achieved through a range of approaches from preparing parents, to fostering pedagogical continuity and inclusion, to building the competencies of teachers to deliver the curriculum through playful approaches, and by providing children with peer support to help them adapt to new routines and environments.

Play is one of the most important ways in which children gain essential foundational skills from **birth to age 8**. As countries integrate play-based learning into ECE settings, it is important to introduce and consolidate play-based approaches in the early years of primary school, to ensure curricular and pedagogical continuity.[10] To ensure that teachers, headteachers, school inspectors and other relevant staff can provide pedagogical continuity, the ECE and primary workforce should have access to appropriate training and skills development. Quality assurance and performance evaluation procedures should be updated to reflect the integration of inclusive play-based approaches.

In **Serbia**, the Years of Ascent curriculum was adopted in 2018. It provides a common foundation for curriculum development in nursery, preschool and preparatory preschool programmes, promoting a coherent approach between pre-primary through the transition to elementary school. Following the adoption of the new curriculum framework training programmes were developed for pre-primary teachers and trainers. New methods of monitoring and ensuring quality implementation of the curriculum were introduced, and inspectors trained to deliver these new approaches.

Inclusive approaches to service delivery and pedagogy experienced by children in ECE settings should be continued in primary school. For example, in multilingual environments primary school teachers and leaders should be supported to develop the skills they need to support phased transitions from mother tongue to **language of instruction**, and to make use of all children's native languages in the classroom where no single language is dominant. In Ghana, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been introduced as a disability-inclusive approach to teaching and learning.[11] UDL was piloted in primary schools in 2021, and subsequently scaled to 10,000 primary schools. When Ghana later developed a comprehensive

ECE training package for ECE teachers and caregivers, UDL principles were integrated into the comprehensive ECE training package for ECE teachers and caregivers. Introducing UDL principles in both ECE and primary increases the capacity of ECE and primary teachers to deliver inclusive teaching and learning experiences and supports continuity of pedagogy as children transition from ECE to the early grades of primary school, thus smoothing transition for children with and without disabilities.

Continuing to **screen for disability** and/or developmental delays among children in the early grades of primary school is essential to facilitate appropriate referral and identification, and to promote early intervention. For children enrolling at primary school identified as at risk of or with developmental delays or disabilities, continuity of access to early intervention and support services is **critical to smooth transition** and to promote their full participation in learning. Effective communication between pre-primary settings, parents and caregivers, other professionals working with the child and family, and the primary workforce is key to establishing a learner-friendly environment and ensuring that individual education plans and effective support strategies are implemented consistently between settings.

The use of formative assessment approaches from the beginning of Grade 1 allows teachers to tailor their instruction to the needs of all students as they arrive, helping to narrow achievement gaps which may be present in the first grade of primary school. **Ethiopia** has embedded an Assessment for Learning initiative in all primary schools, pre-primary settings and refugee camps following successful pilots in which learning in both mother-tongue and mathematics improved when this approach was used. Guided by the policy on Kindergarten Education in the Philippines, the Early Childhood Care and Development checklist for children ages 3-5 is designed to be administered by pre-primary teachers. Broadly, these are consistent with the Philippine Early Learning Development Standards for children ages 0-5 and reflective of the ECCD Council's National Early Learning Curriculum and DepEd's Kindergarten Curriculum. The assessment and accompanying portfolios are handed over to kindergarten and grade 1 teachers as the child graduates to the next level, to better facilitate children's transition to primary school.

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10 Britto et al., 2012.

11 Ghana Education Service, Differentiated Learning: Implementation Guide and Resource pack, n.d.

The role of parents remains critical to child development and learning among children of primary school age. Evidence from Chile demonstrates that providing parents of primary school students with targeted information can improve **learning outcomes**. A study of children in eight elementary schools in a low-income community in **Chile** found that after four months of providing parents with data about student grades, attendance and behaviour, children in the pilot demonstrated higher mathematics scores and were more likely to pass the grade at the end of the year. School leaders and teachers should be supported to communicate effectively with parents, to support children's learning journeys.

Peer support programmes can be used to help children become familiar with their new school environment,

routines and rules. In **Timor Leste** the 'Ready to LEAP' (Learn, Engage, Achieve, Progress) programme pairs students in Grades 5 and 6 with first graders to build confidence and adapt to learning in a school setting.[12]

Building capacity to support school readiness

To enhance school readiness, governments can adopt a comprehensive approach to ECE system strengthening in core functions including planning and budgeting, curriculum, workforce development, quality assurance, and engaging families and communities. The **ECE Accelerator Toolkit** supports ECE system analysis, planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, and implementation.

In addition to overall system strengthening, the following strategies can be adopted:

1. **Expand access to quality ECE services, which deliver an inclusive, play-based curriculum.** ECE expansion programmes should prioritize the inclusion of marginalized children, and adopt alternative models, accelerated ECE programmes and partnerships with a wide range of providers where contextually relevant. Curricula should be inclusive, and the quality of services actively strengthened by Government using quality assurance mechanisms.

2. **Partner with parents to support the home-learning environment and support the quality of classroom-based learning.** Ensure parents have access to information about how to support their child's learning journey at home from ages 0-6 and beyond. Sensitize

parents to the importance of right-age enrolment in both ECE and primary. Empower parents to engage with ECE and primary school teachers, leaders and other key stakeholders to support their child's learning and to support accountability of ECE centres and primary schools for delivering quality services.

3. **Smooth transition by supporting pedagogical continuity between ECE and the early grades of primary school.** Ensure that ECE and primary teachers have access to high quality pre- and in-service training to support the development of competencies to deliver play-based, inclusive teaching and learning experiences. Complement training with ongoing supportive supervision, mentoring and other relevant approaches, to allow teachers and school leaders to continuously improve services.

UNICEF advocates for inclusive access to quality ECE for all children. For further details, please see programme briefs on gender, disability inclusion, and ECE in emergencies.

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12 UNICEF, Children in Grade 1 inspired to learn by peer mentors, n.d. **https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/stories/children-grade-1-inspired-learn-peer-mentors-timor-leste**

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