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## Exploring the Sri Lankan Teacher Attitudes Pertaining To Corporal Punishment against Their Knowledge and Perceived Skills Pertaining To Child Protection

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explored the Sri Lankan pre/school teachers' (n = 365) knowledge, and perceived skills of child protection against their general attitudes pertaining to violence/ abuse as well as their specific attitudes pertaining corporal punishment using a four point rating scale. Results conveyed that while teachers' knowledge and perceived skills of child protection was high, teacher who favored corporal punishment as an acceptable mode of disciplinary strategy had higher knowledge (M = 32.1, S.D = 3.02) than those who did not (M = 31.29; S.D = 2.97),  $t(363) = 2.634$ ,  $p = .009$ . Based on its findings, the study offers recommendation for teacher trainers and child protection practitioners.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Teachers, Attitudes, Corporal Punishment, Child Protection

Corporal punishment was widely used and accepted all over the world. Today corporal punishment is illegal in many countries including Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2008). However, studies convey that it is still being widely used as a form of discipline in Sri Lankan schools (Jayaweera, & Gunawardena, 2010; Perera, 2009; De Silva, 2001; de Silva, 2007), creating psychological and physical distress within students. In an era in which plethora of research studies and interventions pertaining to alternative forms of discipline are available the practice of corporal punishment is a questionable tactic. Hence, the aim of the present study was to find out whether the prevalence of corporal punishment practiced by the Sri Lankan teachers was due to the lack of knowledge and skills of its negative effects or whether is it due to attitudes they hold in favour of corporal punishment?

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### ***Corporal Punishment***

Definitions of corporal punishment have evolved over time (Straus, 1991; Hyman, 1990; Straus, 1994; Straus & Donnelly, 2005), becoming more sensitive to the distress felt by the children, supported by recent evidence which strongly conveys that school corporal punishment is associated primarily with negative effects (Hyman, 1996; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003; de Silva, 2004; de Silva, 2007). Recent definitions of it refers corporal punishment as intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior (Shumba, 2003) and includes such methods as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking using various objects such as wooden paddles, belts, sticks, electric cords or others (Grossman, Rauh & Riveira, 1995; Shumba, 2003).

The prevalence of corporal punishment is reported to be high (de Silva, 2007; Perera, 2009) in Sri Lanka. However, comparatively few have complained about it in the past due to the fact that physical punishments are to a large extent accepted by both children and adults in South Asia (de Silva, 2004; UNICEF, 2001). A study carried out by de Silva (2007) found a high prevalence and frequency of corporal punishment in a cross-sectional study of 1226 school children in Colombo. When de Silva (2004) surveyed 976 Sri Lankan students from 197 schools of seven provinces in Sri Lanka who answered a questionnaire pertaining to their experiences of corporal punishment, she found that sixty-two students (6.4%) experienced physical punishment by teachers during the preceding 4 weeks and 156 (16%) during the year. Those who witnessed physical punishment of other students during the preceding 4 weeks was 552 (56.6%) while 688 (70.5%) recalled witnessing such an event during the year. Also, when Perera (2009) explored the prevalence of physical and emotional abuse reported by late adolescent school children in southern Sri Lanka, using an anonymous questionnaires she found that almost one fifth of the males and females in the sample reported experiencing physical abuse at least a few times in the 3 months preceding the survey, while almost one third of the males and females in the sample have experienced emotional abuse at least a few times in the 3 months preceding the survey. Results of this study convey that school absenteeism, deliberate self-harm, substance use, and family conflict were associated with physical and emotional abuse.

These findings are not by any means different from the situation in other South Asian countries. Eighty three percent of the Afghanistan children interviewed said they had been slapped, kicked and caned at school. In Pakistan, corporal punishment prevails in more than 40 per cent of government schools and some 35 per cent of private schools (UNICEF, 2001).

In the cultural milieu of Sri Lanka, which spontaneously expects a child's obedience, corporal punishment may not seem uncommon or unusual disciplinary strategy (Jayaweera et al, 2010; De Silva, 2001; de Silva, 2007). Sri Lankan teachers may consider corporal punishment as a prevalent, frequent and favored mode of disciplinary strategy due to following factors 1. Past

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cultural prevalence and preference of teacher centered approach to teaching (De Silva, 2001; De Silva, De Soyza & Kannangara, 2000), 2. High student density in urban, popular schools due to parental preference, creating an inadequate teacher, child ratio in which classroom management has become a daunting, impossible and difficult task for teachers of such schools, 3. Past educational practices which made corporal punishment an integral part of schooling for most Sri Lankan teachers, during their student days due to its excessive usage (De Silva, 2001) making them its strong proponents, 4. Inadequate salaries received by the Sri Lankan teachers which might make them frustrated venting their frustration at students, 5. Absence of specific practice based training on positive discipline (Pathirana, 2006).

However, the effectiveness of corporal punishment as an appropriate disciplinary technique has always been questioned within international (Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005) as well as in national contexts (de Silva, 2001; 2007; de Silva, 2004). Studies have constantly pointed out the adverse physical, and psychological effects of corporal punishment on children (Robinson et al, 2005; Gershoff, 2002; de Silva, 2004; de Soyza, Newcomb & Rajapakse, 2008) as well as its negative long term effects (Robinson et al, 2005; Straus, 1991) such as delinquency in adolescence, spousal & child abuse and crime outside the family (Straus, 1991).

The results of a study carried out by de Silva (2007) conveyed that corporal punishment directly predicted to what extent a child would be maladjusted and that non-parent-to-child violence (i.e. domestic, school, peer and community violence) significantly affected this psychological impairment. De Silva (2004) found that Sri Lankan students who were physically punished by their teachers felt humiliated or angry because of the punishment. Students who witnessed physical punishment felt sorry for their friends, but justified the need to use it as a correctional method. After 10 years Pathirana (2014) came up with similar findings during qualitative in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan adolescents.

Though many research studies have explored the prevalence, antecedents, and effects of parental corporal punishment and its psychological consequences (de Soyza, 2008; Gershoff, 2002); very few seem to address the teacher practices, perceptions (Baginsky, 2003) or teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment in Sri Lankan school settings (Pathirana, 2008).

On the other hand child maltreatment continues to be a national epidemic (Perera, Østbye, Ariyananda & Lelwala, 2009; Fernando, & Karunasekera, 2009; National Child Protection Authority, 2005). Therefore, it is important to gain insights of factors which contributes to corporal punishment which is categorized as a form of physical abuse (Holzer, & Lamont, 2013; WHO, 2000; UNICEF, 2000).

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As part of the multiagency approach to child protection the role of the teachers looms large. Knowledge and competence of child maltreatment and protection of the teachers has far reaching implications for children, as teachers are likely to be involved in a child protection issues in their career compared to other professionals. Within this context, the importance of investigating teachers' perceived knowledge and competence of child protection seems to be an urgent necessity. A study (de Silva, 2004) which explored the teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment conveys that Sri Lankan teachers seem to fall into three groups pertaining to their attitudes on corporal punishment. These groups are teachers who favor and argue in support of physical punishment, and those who opposed it and those who favored it in the past, and regretted having used it. However, studies which explore the preschool teacher and school teacher attitudes against their knowledge and perceived skills seem to be nonexistent. Therefore, it is important to find out whether teacher practices of corporal punishment is due to inadequacy in knowledge and skills or due to the cultural milieu which seem to favor it.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment against their child protection knowledge and perceived skills of imparting child protection.

Participants were (227, 65.42% female and 120, 34.58% male) preschool teachers and school teachers between the age group of 23 to 60 years; from 12 districts in Sri Lanka who participated voluntarily. Survey completion took approximately twenty minutes, per individual. In order to optimize the results of the study, purposive sampling was used. Maximum variation, which allows the space to gather different types of information about the topic was utilized when selecting the participants. Experts in the areas of early childhood education and research methodology were consulted in order to compile a diverse list of participants.

Attitudes of the participants were measured by administering a questionnaire piloted and used by the author to measure teacher attitudes within pre/school teachers (Pathirana, 2008). The survey questionnaire was anonymous and comprised of 19 items to assess teacher knowledge of child protection (n = 10), perceived attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment (n= 01), general attitudes pertaining to violence abuse against children (n = 01) and perceived skills (n = 02). For this study, participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Disagree; 4 = Strongly Disagree) conveying the extent to which they agree with the statements.

The frequencies and percentages of the teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment against their perceived knowledge and skills of child protection awareness were calculated using SPSS statistical package. The teacher responses of strongly agree and agree for corporal

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punishment were considered as an attitude for corporal punishment whereas teacher responses of disagree and strongly disagree were considered as an attitude against corporal punishment.

**RESULTS**

*Table 01 – Frequencies and percentages of teacher perceived knowledge against their attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment*

Knowledge	Agree to Co Pu' (n = 235)		Disagree to Co Pu' (n = 130)		R.T*
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	
21-25	08	2.2	02	.6	10
26-30	80	21.9	37	10.1	117
31-35	128	35.1	74	20.3	202
36-40	19	5.2	17	4.7	36

Note: N = 365; R.T = Raw Totals; *M* = 14.26; *S.D* = 3.3; *Range*: 07

The table 01 lists the knowledge of the teachers against their attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment. The knowledge displayed by the sample of teachers was scored keeping the minimum and maximum values procured by them as the range. Out of the maximum score of 54, 36 had procured a score in the range of 36 to 40 which amounts to over 66.7% of the total score (n = 54). Moreover, 202 teachers have obtained a score above 31 which amounts to 57.4% of the total score. Hence out of the total sample of 365 teachers 238 teachers seemed have scored above 57.4% conveying that their knowledge pertaining to child protection awareness is high.

When exploring the relationship between attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment and knowledge of child protection awareness, it was conveyed that eight teachers (2.2%) who had scores in the range between 21 to 25, have reported that corporal punishment is acceptable while 02 (.6%) have mentioned that it is not. Teachers who had scored in the range of 26 to 30, 80 (21.9%) have said that the corporal punishment is acceptable while 37 (10.1%) have said that it is not. Among the teachers who scored in the range of 31 to 35, 128 (35.1%) had said that it is acceptable while 74 (20.3%) had said that it is not. The teachers who had the highest scores pertaining to knowledge, in the sample; having scores in the range of 34 to 40, 19 (5.2%) have said that corporal punishment is acceptable while 17 (4.7%) have mentioned that it is not

Therefore, when examining the table number 01, it could be said that a definite trend cannot be identified pertaining to teacher attitudes of corporal punishment and their knowledge of child abuse awareness/ prevention. Equal number of teachers who seemed to have possessed high knowledge pertaining to this issue had positive and negative attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment. However, t-test conveyed that teachers who favored corporal punishment had higher perceived knowledge (*M* = 32.15, *SD* = 3.02) than teachers who did not hold positive attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment (*M* = 31.29, *SD* = 2.97), *t* (363) = 2.634, *p* = .009

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**Table 02 – Frequencies and percentages of teacher perceived skills on their attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment**

Skills	Agree to Co Pu' (n = 235)		Disagree to Co Pu' (n = 130)		R.T*
	f	%	f	%	
07-11	41	11.2	25	6.9	66
12-16	140	38.4	84	23	224
17-21	48	13.2	19	5.2	67
22-26	06	1.64	02	.56	08

Note: N = 365; R.T'' = Raw totals; M = 31.6; S.D = 3.01; Range: 21 – 40

The table 02 lists the perceived competence of the teachers pertaining to child protection against their attitudes on corporal punishment. The perceived competence listed by the teachers was displayed keeping the minimum and maximum values for the perceived competence as the range. In the category of 7-11, 41 (11.2%) are in favor of corporal punishment while 25 (6.9%) are not in favor of it. Majority of the teacher in the sample have scored between 12 to 16 for perceived skills, out of which 140 (38.4%) accept corporal punishment while 84 (23%) do not. Next in line is the teachers who scored between 17 to 21, out of these teachers 48 (13.2%) seem to favor the corporal punishment while 19 (5.2%) do not. Among the teachers who are in the highest range for perceived competence (22-26), 06 (1.64%) seem to be of the perception that corporal punishment is acceptable while 02 (.56%) seem to think that it is not. Again there a clear trend cannot be observed between the perceived competence of the teachers who favor and do not favor corporal punishment. Majority of the high scorers do also seem to favor the corporal punishment. t-test conveyed that there was no significant difference in reported perceived skills and teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment. Teachers who favored corporal punishment did not significantly differ from (M = 13.92, SD = 3.2) from teachers who did not favor corporal punishment (M = 14.44, SD = 3.34),  $t(363) = -1.431, n.s$

## **DISCUSSION**

The focus of this paper was to explore in detail, one facet of the broader debate surrounding the corporal punishment of Sri Lankan children; relationship between teacher attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment against their child protection knowledge and perceived skills of imparting child protection and care for their students.

Several contributions to the existing literature on corporal punishment emerge from this study. First, the results conveyed that teachers surveyed displayed a high knowledge of child protection awareness (M = 31.6/ 40; S.D = 3.01) and moderate amount of perceived skills (M = 14.26/26; S.D = 3.3). Second, analysis of relationship between attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment and child protection knowledge conveyed that teachers with higher knowledge of child protection awareness perceived corporal punishment as an acceptable method disciplining

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children. Third, there was no significant difference between teachers who were for and against corporal punishment pertaining to perceived skills. Therefore, the results of the present study convey that though child protection awareness programs conducted by government (Ministry of Education, 2008; UNICEF, 2008) and non-governmental organizations (PLAN, 2008; UNICEF, 2001; Pathirana, 2008; UNICEF, 2013) may have improved child protection knowledge of the teachers such programs have not created a significant attitudinal change within the teachers. Given the cultural context and past educational guidelines of Sri Lanka, in which corporal punishment was viewed as positive and beneficial mode of discipline, it could be hypothesized that it is difficult to create attitudinal change within teachers in few years, using small number of training programs. However, in keeping the best interest of the young Sri Lankan children professionals and advocated should not be discouraged by such findings as above. For instance, literature conveys that when taken an effort to train teachers on child protection, their knowledge pertaining to it has marked a significant improvement (Pathirana, 2008)

Teachers' high knowledge of child protection awareness may be due to the successful impartation of the child protection awareness programs carried out by the government (UNICEF, 2001; UNICEF, 2013) and nongovernmental organizations (PLAN, 2008; Pathirana, 2008). However, the overwhelming number of teachers ( $n = 235$ ) who favoured corporal punishment as opposed to those who did not ( $n = 130$ ) cannot be ignored. More alarming is that fact that teachers who favoured corporal punishment as an appropriate disciplinary strategy had higher knowledge of child protection awareness in comparison to the teachers who did not. Hence, even though child protection training/ awareness programs carried out by the government and non-governmental organizations (Pathirana, 2008; UNICEF, 2013; PLAN, 2008) may have left a positive impact on the Sri Lankan teachers in terms of knowledge they may have not created the attitudinal change expected by the program organizers.

Compared to the child protection knowledge, teacher perceived skills pertaining to child protection seem to be moderate to low. Again, majority of the teachers who scored high on perceived skills seem to favour corporal punishment as an appropriate disciplinary strategy in comparison to those who did not.

Studies, which examined the teacher practices pertaining to corporal punishment, from the perspective of the students, illustrate that corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy remains to be prevalent and frequent among the Sri Lankan teacher (UNICEF, 2013; UNICEF, 2008; de Silva, 2004). While confirming with the findings of these studies, the present study conveys that teachers may use corporal punishment even though they are aware of the fact that it is abusive and may threaten to the psychosocial wellbeing of their students.

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Results of the present study also convey that the knowledge or perceived skills may not be a significant factors in preventing/ minimizing corporal punishment. Therefore, rather than exclusively concentrating on improving the knowledge and skills of the teachers' through awareness/ training programs; policy makers and program implementers' need to focus on creating attitudinal change within the teachers.

Moreover, the present study stresses the importance of monitoring the teacher attitudes and practices with the intention of rectifying disciplinary strategies used by the teachers if found to be a threat to the psychological wellbeing of the Sri Lankan children. In addition, practical/ feasible and culturally appropriate strategies of teaching the students with behavioral problems must be an integral part of the teacher training education, empowering the student teachers from the very beginning of their teacher education training. Though special education as a subject/s and courses have been included in the pre/school teacher training curricula in Sri Lanka (Open University of Sri Lanka, 2012a; 2012b), Sri Lankan teacher seem to be still struggling to identify alternative disciplinary methods to replace the vacuum left of the banning of corporal punishment by the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka. Therefore, the present study urge the curriculum developers and teacher trainers to evaluate the effectiveness of such subjects and courses with the mission of providing effective teacher training curricula of managing disciplinary problems; with an emphasis towards promoting psychological wellbeing of Sri Lankan students.

Moreover, faculties, departments and teacher training colleges of education need to collaborate and network in order to develop resource materials, revise syllabuses, come up with universal/ practical and culture sensitive strategies of classroom management to help the teachers and teacher trainees to cope with behaviors that they believe may cause them to implement corporal punishment. Since teacher trainees are bound to experience behavioural problems of students when they work in schools, it is believe that that they would immensely benefit from practical, child friendly disciplinary strategies.

In fact, past studies confirm the relevance and importance of child protection training (Baginsky, 2003; Pathirana, 2008) imparted to teacher-trainees and teachers, as well as the evaluation of the training programs (Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005; Walsh & Farrell, 2008), including trainings on corporal punishment. Therefore, future studies need to explore the duration, content, attitudes and perceived knowledge/ competence of the teachers after procuring such trainings. When Baginsky (2003) surveyed the existing child protection courses in U.K she found that only a maximum of 3–4 hours was being devoted to child protection on a few courses. However, at times, duration of such courses were as short as one hour, and courses which requested the teacher trainees to submit some written work for assessment on child protection, were extremely few. Moreover, it is also important to provide trainings and evaluations once teachers are in



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practice, Baginsky's (2003) study also conveys that in-service training for newly qualified teachers impacts on the confidence of both those who have had and those who have not had training prior to qualification. Training programs of such a short duration may not contribute to positive attitudinal change.

Moreover, Sri Lankan teachers may carry beliefs about caning from their own schooling experience. Therefore, when they are not provided with suitable alternatives they will resort to their own experience, which often is the use of corporal punishment. Teachers may also feel helpless and may not be able to cope with classroom management due to lack of competence resulting from the absence adequate resources and training (Cicognani, 2004). Hence the present study also suggests the importance of providing applicable and practical training to Sri Lankan teachers, which would inculcate a sense of confidence within them to use alternative disciplinary strategies.

Also, legislative changes required to create corporal punishment an unlawful act remains to be done. As a result, corporal punishment remains lawful, as in the illustration of acceptable criminal force in the Penal Code, 341 (Sri Lanka – Country Report, 2011), though the Section 2 of Circular No 2005/17, issued by the Ministry of Education in 2005, declares that corporal punishment should not be used in schools. However, as at 2010 this had not been confirmed in legislation (Sri Lanka – Country Report, 2011), though the teacher have been made aware that is a punishable offense (De Silva at al, 2003). With this loophole and in the absence of adequate awareness and training on alternative disciplinary strategies teachers and school administrators may be in shortage of power to eradicate it from the schools.

As a result, even after introducing the government circular in 2005, corporal punishment is still being used and favored as a disciplinary strategy by the Sri Lankan teachers (National Child Protection Authority, 2005). However, this phenomenon is not only an exclusive practice within the Sri Lankan context. When Cicognani (2004) explored the teachers attitudes pertaining to the banning of corporal punishment in the South African schools she found that teachers even after the ban viewed corporal punishment as having a place in education. They were mostly concerned amongst others issues about their personal safety and felt the administering of corporal punishment will ensure their safety. Though teachers reported that they have found alternatives disciplinary strategies which work, they still felt that the training provided did not meet their needs in the classroom situation.

There are several limitations to this study. First, teacher knowledge and attitudes were not explored in depth. Hence, future studies need to concentrate on exploring teacher insights and alternatives for corporal punishment as well as ways of ending corporal punishment in Sri Lankan schools. In fact studies carried out at global level reports that when requested to provide

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alternatives for corporal punishment teachers are capable of coming out with creative and insightful strategies (Kilimci, 2009). Another limitation of this study was its small sample size. Hence, the future studies should also need to explore this factor with a more representative sample of preschool and school teachers.

For instance, when Kilimci, (2009) asked the teachers in Turkey for alternatives for corporal punishment they came up with strategies such as necessity to separate the younger students from older students, reduce the classroom population, necessity of educating the parents both in terms of integration and child education and importance involving civil organizations must be involved in the education issue and necessity of providing facilities such as sports or arts centres to distract students from misbehaviour. When Cicognani (2004) asked the teachers to provide workable alternative disciplinary strategies they came with ones such as dealing with learners directly, contacting parents and providing some form of written or physical punishment.

Such studies point out the importance of asking the teachers and helping them to apply viable child and culture friendly/ sensitive strategies which they perceive would work in the context they operate. Such an approach would be effective and make teacher feel confident to impart the alternative disciplinary strategies coupled with frequently prescribed ones in the western guidebooks. Hence, the present study also recognize the importance of conducting future studies to explore the Sri Lankan teachers' perception of viable child friendly/ sensitive alternatives to corporal punishment and addressing cultural beliefs pertaining to corporal punishment.

Examining attitudes pertaining to corporal punishment from an historical perspective does not simplify matters. Though, beatings have been stoically borne and tacitly accepted by students in the 'by gone days', during the past decade this form of practice has been widely challenged by different sectors including students. However, in the absence of an effective violence prevention curriculum within the Sri Lankan educational system, corporal punishment remains a disciplinary option for many teachers as they feel helpless in the face of school violence. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that confused, over-worked and under-qualified Sri Lankan teachers will give up corporal punishment voluntarily, especially when they considered it their only means of keeping order in class.

A major consolation is the introduction of the concept 'The Child Friendly Schools' by the government of Sri Lanka, which addresses corporal punishment along with other issues (Ministry of Education, 2008). One of the criteria to be categorized so is for the school to have a code of conduct on corporal punishment as well as bullying that are clearly understood by the school community. Occurrence of teachers using corporal or psychological punishment and of bullying is to be monitored, and the school Disciplinary Committee is to discuss all incidents of

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these behaviors to minimize such incidents and to provide support to affected individuals (Sri Lankan Country Report, 2008).

However, at the policy level, government has not attempted to fill the vacuum left by the banning of corporal punishment and urgently need to do so. The introduction of school level codes of conduct and national policy on early violence prevention seems also be required, in addition to programs to create attitudinal changes within the teachers. These proposed strategies would be in line with consensual democratic ideas about school governance, involving a new approach of a different philosophy towards punishment.

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### *Conflict of Interests*

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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