



DRAMA-BASED INTERVENTIONS FOR THE PSYCHOSOCIAL RECOVERY OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Abstract:

Periods of health emergencies, natural disasters, social upheavals, or economic instability increasingly disrupt the fabric of communities, with children and adolescents often bearing the brunt of the psychosocial consequences. This paper explores how such crises impact minors, not only highlighting the particular difficulties they encounter, but also examining the factors that underpin their resilience. Within this context, the study turns its attention to drama-based interventions as an alternative avenue for support and recovery. It delves into practices such as drama games, story dramatization, improvisation, and puppetry, assessing their relevance and adaptability. Adopting a narrative review methodology, the article presents and evaluates concrete examples where drama-based approaches have been put into practice in response to various forms of crisis. These cases illustrate that incorporating theatrical expression and experiential creativity into psychosocial interventions can ease the burden of trauma, strengthen collective bonds, and gradually restore young people's emotional well-being. The versatility of these methods, their capacity to foster empathy, self-awareness, and social inclusion, and their suitability across different cultural and educational settings are all brought to the fore. The study suggests that drama-based methodologies offer more than just temporary relief. By encouraging active participation and personal expression, they lay the groundwork for genuine empowerment among youth. On this basis, the systematic integration of such interventions into educational and community programs, both as preventive measures and as part of recovery strategies, is recommended to support psychological resilience and social cohesion during periods of uncertainty.

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Keywords: drama-based interventions, psychosocial recovery, children, adolescents, crisis, resilience

1. Introduction

In a world marked by continual change and unpredictability, whether stemming from public health emergencies like the recent Covid-19 pandemic, extreme natural phenomena such as earthquakes and floods, environmental disasters like wildfires, or crises on the political, social, or economic front, including armed conflict, communities are routinely confronted by events that arrive without warning and leave lasting scars (Mastrothanasis, Pikoulis, *et al.*, 2025). Living through such experiences can be deeply traumatic, making it especially difficult not only to manage the immediate aftermath but also to comprehend the full scope of the situation, place it in perspective, and ultimately begin to heal from the emotional wounds it causes. The effects of these crises are rarely distributed evenly; entire communities may require psychosocial support, yet the burden often falls most heavily on those already vulnerable, children and adolescents, in particular, who may find themselves cut off from the usual safety nets, including their own families (Correa-Salazar *et al.*, 2025).

Cultural interventions encompass a wide spectrum of creative practices, with drama-based approaches such as drama games, story dramatization, and related techniques holding particular promise for supporting the mental and social well-being of children and adolescents (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). Especially during periods of turmoil, creating environments where young people feel secure becomes essential. Through these interventions, children are encouraged to confront their emotions and take part in activities that help to release fear, tension, and stress—always within the context of a group, which in turn strengthens their sense of belonging and fosters both psychological and social resilience (Hirsu *et al.*, 2020). The integration of the arts into psychosocial recovery is now recognized internationally as a sound and effective practice (Melvin *et al.*, 2025; Winner *et al.*, 2013).

The present study sets out to illuminate the psychosocial impact of different types of crisis on children, adolescents, and young people. It places particular emphasis on the resilience that can develop under such conditions, as well as the psychological and social effects that typically emerge among these groups. Subsequently, the discussion turns to drama pedagogy as a tool for managing and overcoming crisis, focusing on techniques and practices that have already been tested in real-world contexts. At the heart of this paper is a systematic mapping and evaluation of examples drawn from the literature (scoping review), offering an overview of drama-based interventions. With this methodological approach, the intention is to demonstrate how such interventions can serve as structured tools for psychosocial support for young people facing a crisis.

2. The psychosocial impact of crises on children and adolescents

Although a crisis inevitably affects the entire community, its negative consequences are never distributed evenly. Certain groups, such as women, children, adolescents, and others living in vulnerable circumstances, tend to bear a disproportionate share of the burden (Bubeck *et al.*, 2024). These groups are often deprived of the social, psychological, and economic resources needed to cope effectively with the upheaval brought by crises, which further amplifies the impact on their mental health and overall well-being (Mastrothanasis, Pikoulis, *et al.*, 2025; Philippopoulou-Iosifidou & Mastrothanasis, 2025; Pikoulis 2024; Puchner κ.ά., 2018).

Focusing on children and adolescents specifically, it is worth remembering that their ability to make independent decisions is largely shaped, and often limited, by their parents or wider family environment. When faced with a crisis, the experience itself, the emotional and social wounds it leaves, and the journey toward recovery are all profoundly influenced by family dynamics, both in terms of the relationships between members and the cultural context that frames how freely children can express themselves within the family (Jones, 2015). The way adults manage the repercussions of a crisis is crucial, as the emotional burden carried by parents, especially heightened anxiety-often transfers directly to their children, exacerbating the vulnerability of the youngest family members (Lehmann *et al.*, 2022). Adults who struggle to regulate their own stress or negative feelings can inadvertently fuel a process known as emotional contagion within the family, sometimes resulting in cycles of dysfunction (Prince & Kim, 2024).

The psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children is a case in point. Extended school closures and home confinement proved deeply disruptive during a period of life that is critical for children's development, learning, and socialization. The loss of day-to-day interaction with peers and teachers, and the break from the typical routines of schooling and informal social learning, left children in a state of social isolation, sometimes accompanied by loneliness, depression, or even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Kostas κ.ά., 2023; Lehmann *et al.*, 2022). Deprived of familiar routines and face-to-face contact, many children experienced heightened feelings of isolation, disruptions to their sleep cycles, and increased emotional distress (Alcon κ.ά., 2024; Faisal κ.ά., 2022; Hammerstein κ.ά., 2021; Meherali *et al.*, 2021).

Anxiety within the family and the broader difficulty adults faced in navigating the pandemic often compounded these effects. Children exposed to these conditions exhibited high levels of distress and emotional difficulties, including persistent sadness and anger, sometimes escalating to depressive symptoms, negative emotional responses, and trouble with problem-solving. Behavioral issues, delays in the development and use of social skills, and increased hyperactivity were also frequently observed, often as a consequence of prolonged confinement in limited living spaces. At the same time, reliance on digital devices and especially social media grew sharply, leading to loneliness, withdrawal, and reluctance to return to pre-pandemic routines (Touloupis *et al.*, 2023). Notably, alongside more familiar forms of psychological strain, new

phenomena emerged, such as so-called “*digital fatigue*”, as well as the widening of educational disparities linked to unequal access to technology (Dumitru *et al.*, 2024; Gregersen *et al.*, 2023; Kyriakidis *et al.*, 2024).

The toll of other crises, natural, man-made, or mixed, can be equally severe for young people. Earthquakes, environmental disasters, wars, and any phenomenon or behavior that threatens life or well-being, whether directly or indirectly, can tear at the fabric of society, psychological stability, the economy, the environment, and, ultimately, the viability of life itself. Such conditions give rise to what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck described as a “*risk society*”. Children and adolescents living through crises display a wide range of reactions, reflecting the complexity and depth of their psychological trauma (Correa-Salazar *et al.*, 2025). The initial stage may involve shock and heightened tension, which can lead to either hyperactivity and heightened vigilance or, conversely, emotional withdrawal, anxiety, fear, or even hysterical responses. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are not uncommon, nor are feelings of hopelessness, survivor’s guilt, anger, confusion, disorientation, distractibility, low self-esteem, insecurity, grief, sleep disturbances, and declines in academic performance (Jiao *et al.*, 2020; Lehmann *et al.*, 2022; Meherali *et al.*, 2021; Racine *et al.*, 2021; Spiteri *et al.*, 2023). Such psychological and behavioral manifestations are frequently accompanied by deep internal wounds, difficulties with self-image, and strained relations with others. Early recognition and targeted support are essential, as failure to address these issues can impede psychosocial development and make it harder for young people to reintegrate and adjust to a safe, functioning environment later on (Chang, 2005; Hamidi & Sobhani Tabar, 2021). In addition, the collective trauma and sense of uncertainty that define today’s crises can amplify feelings of insecurity, blur developmental prospects, and present new challenges for both education and social systems.

Yet it must be emphasized that children’s resilience is often remarkable. With the right guidance, many are able to process and move beyond the effects of crisis, sometimes more readily than adults anticipate, and some even find themselves compelled to take an active role in responding to dangers, as is the case with environmental challenges and climate-related crises (Uekusa & Matthewman, 2023; Whittle *et al.*, 2020).

While the psychological and social burdens of crises can be deep and far-reaching, children’s potential for adaptation and recovery is significant, particularly when they benefit from interventions that encourage active participation, self-expression, and a sense of community. In this context, strengthening psychosocial resilience through artistic and creative activities is now seen as a key pillar of both prevention and recovery (Davis & Phillips, 2020; Paris *et al.*, 2023).

3. Drama pedagogy as a means of psychosocial support

Following exposure to a crisis, children and adolescents face a lengthy period of recovery during which they must gradually readjust to their community and re-establish, as far as possible, their personal and social equilibrium. This process is rarely quick; it requires

time and, perhaps even more critically, targeted interventions designed to help restore a sense of psychological balance and safety. Various forms of drama pedagogy can play a vital role in this journey. For drama-based interventions to be effective, however, there must first be a protective and supportive environment in place. The creation and careful oversight of safe, predictable spaces, so-called children-friendly spaces, offer children the stability they need to continue learning, engage in creative activities, and participate in drama-based sessions. The involvement of professionals with experience in crisis management, alongside the mobilization of volunteers, can further enhance these efforts. When embedded within a broader framework of support, drama-based techniques provide alternative avenues for self-expression and for working through trauma. They help young people regain a sense of agency, enabling them to process emotions in a creative and experiential manner (Kladaki *et al.*, 2025; Mastrothanasis, Kladaki, *et al.*, 2025). Different modalities of applied and educational theatre contribute to managing the fallout of crisis by harnessing the healing power of expression, imagination, and the integration of body and mind. Rooted in experiential methods, these approaches cultivate resourcefulness in problem-solving, encourage trust, promote decision-making skills, and foster cooperation, self-expression, and self-awareness, all of which are key to shaping personal identity in young people. Moreover, such interventions strengthen a sense of community, nurture emotional intelligence, and help reconstruct group cohesion, serving as a counterweight to the disintegrative effects of crisis (Philippopoulou-Iosifidou & Mastrothanasis, 2025).

The objective of implementing these techniques during times of crisis is multifaceted: healing psychosocial wounds, rebuilding trust, managing anger and other difficult emotions, developing a collective spirit, and providing opportunities for learning through a different lens. In essence, the aim is to address traumatic experiences holistically while also nurturing an attitude of resilience and even resistance, empowering young people to take action against crises that often stem from social inequality and, in many cases, are preventable (Tam, 2020). Drama-based interventions do not simply provide relief; they foster participation, initiative, and a sense of collective responsibility among children and adolescents (Mastrothanasis, Pikoulis, *et al.*, 2025). Through hands-on engagement, individuals gain confidence and begin to view themselves as active members of a community capable of shaping the world around them.

Play, in particular, plays a pivotal role in children's psychosocial growth, equipping them with the skills needed to cope with crisis. According to Vygotsky (1978), play is governed by socially constructed rules and involves a realm of imagination, offering children a unique way to work through reality, both emotionally and cognitively. As a multifaceted theatrical method, whether as role-play or dramatic play, drama games offer opportunities for emotional expression. The combination of physical and cognitive engagement deepens self-awareness and supports personality development. In this way, children and adolescents confronting crisis can externalize experiences, ideas, emotions, and concerns in a secure setting that, while grounded in

reality, is ultimately shaped and managed by themselves and the facilitator. Notably, drama games and theatrical expression create a protected space for safely re-enacting lived experiences, thus enabling understanding, acceptance, and the processing of trauma, without the immediate risk of retraumatization.

Story dramatization, a technique that weaves together oral storytelling with elements of theatre (Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2025), helps to restore community bonds after a crisis by drawing on stories rooted in shared history or tradition. It offers both children and adults the opportunity to express themselves, share their emotional burdens, and relieve stress, all while engaging collectively and gaining deeper understanding of their experiences (Hirsu *et al.*, 2020). For children, this technique promotes sociability and helps them to make sense of crisis—allowing them to recognize such events as part of the broader human experience, rather than isolated or unique occurrences, and preparing them for similar challenges in the future. Readers' theatre, which blends staged reading with interpretive performance of selected, contextually relevant texts, can also serve therapeutic and educational purposes (Mastrothanasis *et al.*, 2023). This method fosters understanding, emotional release, and the cultivation of empathy.

Improvisation is another core tool in drama pedagogy. It can be applied both within drama games and in devised theatre, from which community theatre often emerges (Gallagher, 2010). Community theatre is closely linked to social realities, drawing on the experiences, knowledge, and language of the group to create a space of immediacy, dialogue, and interaction between “actors” and audience (Sextou & Patterson, 2014). This fosters the sharing of experiences and gives a platform to vulnerable groups, such as crisis survivors (Bubeck *et al.*, 2024). The dynamic, spontaneous nature of improvisation stimulates creativity and enhances adaptability in unpredictable situations, while also promoting resilience both individually and collectively. Through improvisation, children are able to experiment with different narratives and roles, building flexibility, imagination, and problem-solving skills, qualities that are essential for coping with difficult or changing circumstances (DeBettignies & Goldstein, 2020; Drinko, 2013; Sawyer, 2000). In community theatre, improvisation acquires a collective dimension, fostering solidarity and active participation. Through this process, those most at risk gain a voice, while the group as a whole is empowered, building trust and a sense of community in the face of crisis (Folostina *et al.*, 2015; Gallagher *et al.*, 2017; Jones, 2015; Joronen *et al.*, 2011).

Puppetry, too, stands out as an especially effective drama-based method, capable of activating both memory and empathy, two qualities essential to processing traumatic or painful experiences (Lenakakis *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Paroussi & Lenakakis, 2023). Through storytelling and creative engagement with puppets, children are encouraged to bring to the surface memories they might otherwise avoid, but in a way that shields them from immediate psychological harm. Puppetry helps map the collective memory of the group and supports the gradual reworking of experience. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to reduce anxiety and emotional strain; children and young people often see their puppet

as a reflection of themselves, a neutral “mirror” that makes it easier to recognize, accept, and reconcile their feelings and behaviors. The puppet also serves as a kind of “shield,” a symbolic object that makes it possible to project and externalize even the most difficult or repressed emotions, facilitating catharsis and reducing anxiety. As a mediating tool, puppetry offers a safe space for the expression and processing of unspoken traumas that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Papouli, 2019). In this way, it strengthens self-awareness, cultivates empathy, and contributes to the psychological resilience of children, acting as a bridge between their internal world and the environment around them. Mask work can serve similar purposes (Papouli, 2024).

A range of drama-based techniques have been deployed in recent years to provide psychosocial support to children and adolescents caught up in crisis, often as part of rapid-response interventions. These approaches have consistently proven effective, bringing measurable benefits to the individuals and groups involved (Chang, 2005; Hirsu *et al.*, 2020). What sets them apart is their flexibility, interdisciplinary outlook, and their capacity to adapt quickly to the needs of target populations, combining experiential methods, creative expression, and collaborative group work.

4. Scoping review of drama-based interventions in crisis situations

War stands as one of the gravest forms of crisis, inflicting deep psychological wounds at both the individual and collective level. Dramatherapy and psychodrama, psychotherapeutic modalities that draw upon drama games and a range of drama-based techniques such as storytelling, improvisation, and dramatization, offer a structured space in which individuals can approach their trauma. Through simulation, active engagement, and the externalization of thoughts and emotions, these methods serve a therapeutic function, helping to process and relieve emotional burdens (Keiller *et al.*, 2023).

A telling example is that of a ten-year-old boy, a refugee from Sierra Leone, who carried with him the trauma of war, violence, and the loss of a family member, while also struggling to adapt to a new school environment and encountering bullying (Jones, 2015). With the support of a therapist, the child took part in individual sessions over several weeks. Through play and improvisation, gradually incorporating elements from his own experience, and dramatized storytelling, he was able to explore, understand, and eventually express feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger that had previously overwhelmed him. This process marked the beginning of his psychological recovery. Subsequently, under the therapist’s guidance, a role-play activity was organized for the whole class, in which the child assigned classmates the roles of his family members, set within the context of war. This group intervention provided both therapeutic and educational benefits, not only for the boy, who found a way to communicate his traumatic experience, but also for his classmates, who developed empathy through their participation. The result was an end to the bullying and the child’s smooth integration into the class

community, underscoring the potential of theatre as a tool for psychosocial recovery and school inclusion.

This example highlights how experiential processing of trauma through drama techniques can promote not only individual healing, but also a shift in the dynamics of a school community, fostering acceptance, understanding, and cohesion. Similar drama-based psychosocial interventions have proven effective in the wake of large-scale natural disasters. After the 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, therapeutic workshops were organized by public authorities in more than eight primary and secondary schools to support children who had lost family members (Chang, 2005). These workshops primarily used improvisation to recreate the sudden onset of the earthquake, encouraging children to express themselves through sounds, images, and actions, thus externalizing feelings of fear, grief, and insecurity. For most participants, these interventions brought relief, helping them to cope with grief and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. In cases of more severe trauma, individual sessions were conducted, utilizing improvisation and role-play within a dramatherapy framework to facilitate processing. Creating a safe environment and using group techniques fostered mutual support and trust, both crucial for children's reintegration into daily life.

Following the earthquakes in Mexico in 2017, a range of cultural and artistic initiatives took place, driven by volunteers, musicians, actors, storytellers, and the Ministry of Culture, which established a protocol for emergency cultural interventions. Among other components, this protocol included reading and dramatized storytelling programs for children and adults (Hirsu *et al.*, 2020). These activities strengthened community ties, allowing participants to find meaning in their shared history and traditions, which served as psychological anchors. Participants could reflect on their present circumstances, prepare for an uncertain future, and reinforce prevention networks. Data collected through questionnaires and interviews helped identify gaps and needs, leading to the refinement of rapid intervention protocols and better volunteer training.

Engagement with community theatre, especially through spontaneous expression and improvisation around traumatic events, can help address the aftermath of natural disasters. In the Thua Thien Hue province of Vietnam, a region frequently hit by floods, the involvement of women and children in community theatre helped raise awareness of risks, encouraged action to prevent and manage crises, strengthened solidarity, and empowered those most vulnerable (Bubeck *et al.*, 2024). Experiential participation gave local communities a voice, promoting self-initiative and adaptability in the face of constant change.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was yet another crisis with lasting consequences for children and adolescents. During periods of lockdown, new forms of theatrical expression and communication were sought, leading to the adoption of digital theatre in education as an alternative avenue for connection and shared experience (Chatzichristodoulou *et al.*, 2022; Gallagher *et al.*, 2020). These digital drama-based programs helped preserve a sense of community, strengthened resilience, and prompted

a re-examination of the boundaries of artistic and pedagogical practice in conditions of isolation. Around the world, remote puppetry programs were developed to foster social-emotional growth and engagement among children, for example, in New York, Zimbabwe, Greece and India (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020; Timplalexi, 2020). Through stories reflecting pandemic-related feelings, students created and animated their own puppets, giving form to their fears, anxieties, and insecurities, and developing skills in creativity, cooperation, and critical thinking. The use of puppetry as a tool for communication and support in remote learning was widely recognized as beneficial.

Another example, demonstrating the multiple dimensions of drama-based approaches in crisis contexts, is found in the study by Giotaki and Lenakakis (2016). Here, a drama intervention program was implemented in a kindergarten class to facilitate children's negotiation and understanding of complex social and economic issues during a period of socioeconomic crisis. The program was designed to allow children to express their perceptions of the economic crisis while also learning to manage their emotions, develop empathy, and build social solidarity. Techniques such as Forum Theatre, dramatized storytelling, improvisation, and role-taking enabled children to embody everyday experiences of crisis, such as unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, and to propose alternative strategies for coping and support. The study's findings showed that, through participation in drama activities, even young children developed deeper insight into social issues, enhanced their empathy, and adopted a more participatory attitude toward difference (Giotaki & Lenakakis, 2016). Most notably, theatre, even at the preschool level, can serve as a space for dialogue, empowerment, and re-interpretation of reality, fostering not only psychosocial support, but also the skills needed to face everyday challenges collectively and creatively.

5. Summary findings and prospects for implementation

In times of crisis, it is the most vulnerable members of a community who are often hit the hardest, with children particularly exposed to psychosocial consequences as their resilience is tested on many fronts. A defining feature of childhood is dependence on the family and, more broadly, on the adult world; children lack the autonomy to act independently or to control the conditions shaped by a crisis. Their psychological journey toward recovery, therefore, depends significantly on how adults manage their own anxiety, demonstrate resilience, and serve as role models.

Children and adolescents may present with a wide spectrum of symptoms after exposure to crisis: anxiety, depression, attention difficulties, fear and insecurity, anger, and post-traumatic stress symptoms are all common (Jiao *et al.*, 2020; Lehmann *et al.*, 2022; Racine *et al.*, 2021). The literature shows that such symptoms do not remain confined to the emotional sphere; they affect day-to-day functioning, social behavior, and school adjustment as well (Meherali *et al.*, 2021).

Targeted psychosocial support through drama-based interventions can make a substantial contribution to managing and alleviating the consequences of crisis

(Hernández-Holguín *et al.*, 2023; Philippopoulou-Iosifidou & Mastrothanasis, 2025). Artistic methods such as drama games, story dramatization, and improvisation, whether used individually or in combination (as in dramatherapy, puppetry, or community theatre), along with the innovative potential of digital theatre, which came to the fore during the pandemic, all offer meaningful opportunities for experiential engagement. Through these practices, children are able to tap into their imagination and creativity, strengthen empathy, give voice to their emotions, and develop psychological resilience (Olsen & Lan, 2024). Moreover, the social interaction fostered in a safe environment builds collective spirit and a sense of belonging, which can counteract feelings of isolation and insecurity. Carefully selecting and tailoring drama-based methods to the needs and profile of each group makes it possible to address a broad array of psychosocial challenges, providing practical solutions even during the most trying times.

The case studies analyzed in this paper demonstrate that drama-based interventions are applicable across a wide range of crisis situations, at both the individual and collective level, and can be implemented by professionals or appropriately trained volunteers, under the initiative of either public or private bodies, in Greece and beyond. The assessment of such interventions highlights their effectiveness in strengthening psychological resilience and social cohesion, confirming the added value of the arts in crisis management and recovery.

Given the positive results already observed, there is a clear need to integrate drama-based techniques more systematically within educational systems and to include them in prevention and intervention programs, both for building resilience after a crisis and for preventive purposes, particularly in regions where crises are likely to occur. At the same time, there is a case for developing structured rapid-response drama-based intervention programs, built on partnerships between mental health and educational agencies, to ensure timely, evidence-based, and effective management in every crisis (Mastrothanasis, Pikoulis, *et al.*, 2025). Strengthening the connections among educational institutions, cultural organizations, and mental health services can be decisive in taking a holistic approach to the consequences of crisis, laying the groundwork for resilient and healthy communities (Coccolini *et al.*, 2021; Karamagioli *et al.*, 2017; Puchner *et al.*, 2018).

6. Conclusion

This scoping review makes it clear that drama-based pedagogical approaches can play a pivotal role in supporting the psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents during and after crises. The cases discussed illustrate not only the adaptability and creative potential of theatrical practices across diverse social and cultural settings, but also their capacity to foster resilience, empathy, and a sense of community.

Incorporating the arts, and theatre in particular, into interventions aimed at promoting mental health and social cohesion among young people proves to be especially valuable when communities are confronted with unprecedented or distressing events. The techniques explored here go beyond serving as mere tools for relief; they lay

the groundwork for skill development, the processing of trauma, and the cultivation of an active stance toward the challenges of our time.

An interdisciplinary approach, combined with close collaboration among educators, artists, and mental health professionals, can further enhance the effectiveness of such interventions. In a world where crises increasingly become part of everyday reality, the use of drama pedagogy as both a preventive and restorative instrument takes on particular significance, opening new pathways for supporting and empowering younger generations.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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