

A woman with dark curly hair and glasses, wearing an orange shirt, is sitting on the floor and reading a book to a young girl. The girl is wearing a dark blue t-shirt with a giraffe pattern and is looking down at the book. The background is a simple indoor setting with a blue chair and a white wall.

Single Parent Families Impact Report

Issue 32

**Spotlight: OPFS Childcare
Connector Service
August 2025**

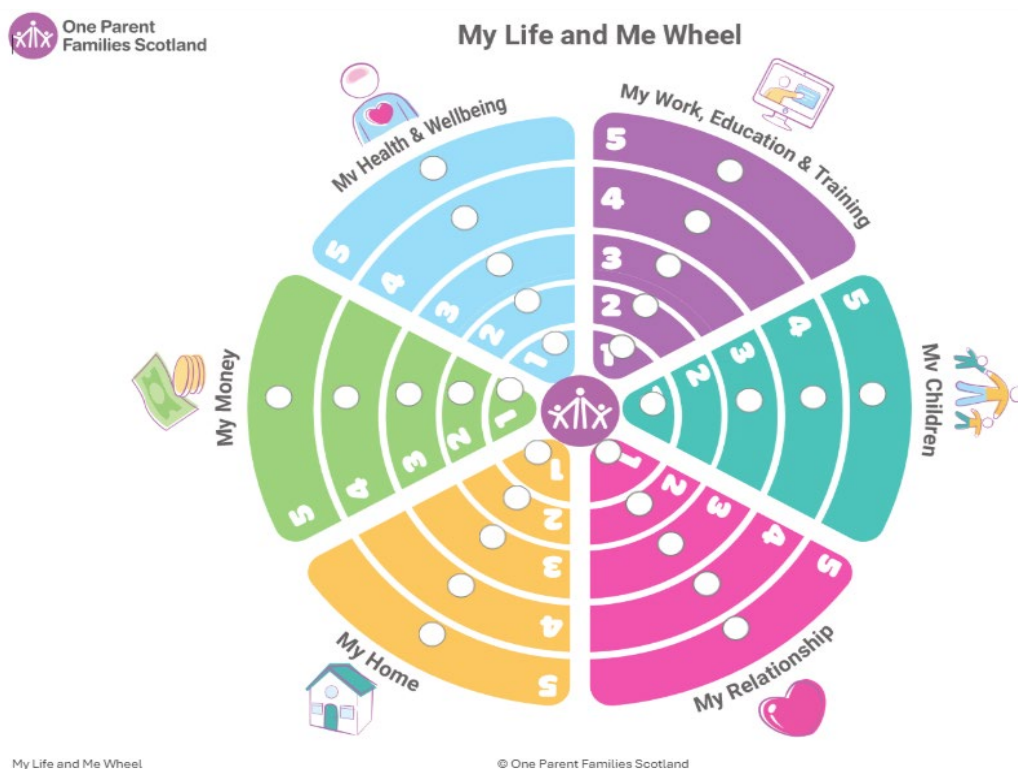
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Introduction

OPFS gathers the experiences of single parent families across Scotland through our seven local services, our national Advice and Information service and our digital support. This gives us an early warning of the key issues affecting families. We describe in our reports how OPFS responds to these challenges.

We produce **four reports each year** where emerging issues are drawn out and highlighted under the following **My Life and Me (MLAM)** headings, which represent the key areas of support within our services:



In previous Impact Reports, we shared key emerging issues alongside a spotlight on a specific policy area such as Conditionality. From this edition onwards, we are adopting a different approach. Each report will highlight **two or three of the most prevalent MLAM areas emerging from our local services**, along with our responses to these. The spotlight section will now feature a case study that shares a single parent's

experience, illustrating the OPFS service approach and its impact on single parent families.

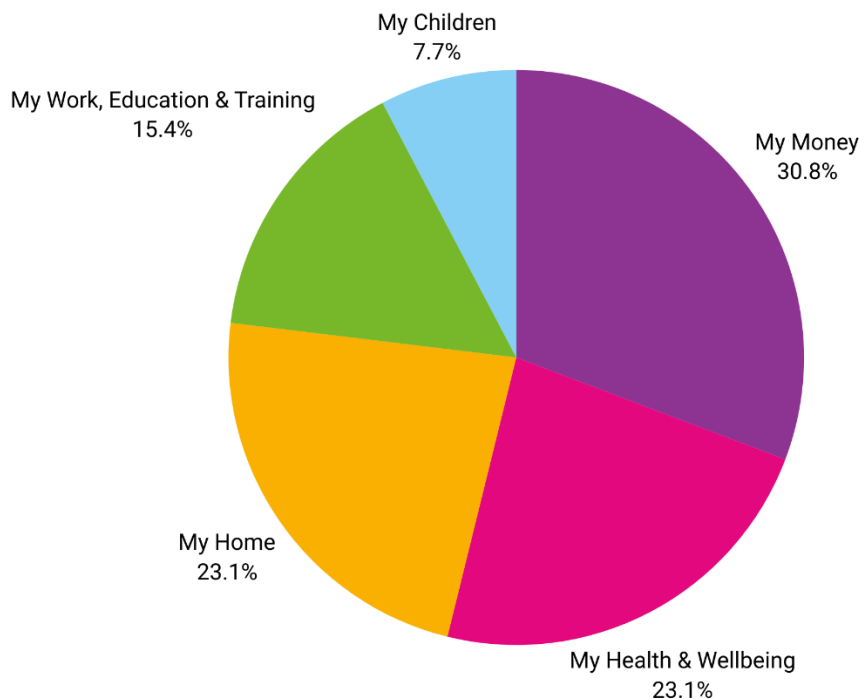
The case study in this edition centres on a single parent's experience of our **Childcare Connector service**, demonstrating how tailored support for accessing childcare can also address other MLAM areas: **My Money**, **My Health & Wellbeing** and **My Work, Education and Training**, highlighting the interconnected nature of the support offered through our services.

Methodology and overview of key emerging issues

OPFS local services, national telephone and online Advice & Information services have dealt with wide ranging issues over the past three months.

This report is put together through a process of researching which issues across our **six key MLAM areas** have impacted single parents the most during the period pertaining to the report. This is achieved by tracking data across our national helpline, local face-to-face services in seven different local authority areas and our national Support and Advice service.

There is some variation between national and local service data. However, **My Money** consistently emerged as the most common issue reported across all our services.



The above pie chart shows the distribution of the key MLAM issues for the period of July - August 2025. **My Relationships** is excluded from the above representation because it interacted with overlapping issues which were included in the headlines of the other topics.

Based on the distribution of issues, the **three main key MLAM issues** which will be examined in this report fall under the following MLAM headings:

1. **My Money**
2. **My Health and Wellbeing**
3. **My Home**

1. My Money

Key challenges:

- Financial pressure due to high childcare costs and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis resulting in rising food, fuel, energy and housing bills.
- Parents forced to rely on food banks, crisis loans and emergency financial support.
- Parents often forced to make impossible choices between paying for essentials like heating and food and meeting their children's needs, such as school uniforms and transport.
- Complexity of navigating the benefits system, particularly when parents' circumstances change (for example working additional hours or taking on childcare costs).
- Delays and mistakes in the delivery of benefits further disadvantaging parents, setting them back financially and adding to the challenges they already face.



I have not worked since my daughter was born; she is now 6 years old. I had thought that I would return to work when my daughter started primary school, but I was unable to find a job that would fit in with her school hours, I don't have any friends or family that could help me with school drop-off and pick-up, and after school care was so expensive, I couldn't see how I would be able to afford it.

Single parent who used the OPFS Childcare Connector service

OPFS responses:

- Financial health checks to ensure parents are getting all the money they can.
- Linking families to our [**money and debt advice service**](#) to manage day-to-day financial pressures and signposting to local support such as food and clothing banks.
- Support with managing household budgets, along with guidance on accessing emergency support such as food and fuel vouchers.
- Linking families to OPFS services such as the Childcare Connector service, which helps overcome childcare barriers. Families are also supported through the Employability Service, which helps parents secure long-term financial independence.

Outcomes:

Parents gain immediate relief from being taken seriously and listened to. They are aided to navigate immediate financial pressures, are supported holistically in other areas of difficulty (including childcare and employment) and are supported toward longer-term financial stability as a result. In the long-term this contributes to overall family wellbeing and economic stability.



On meeting with the Childcare Connector service, I was able to work out my finances, apply for help from the DWP Flexible Support Fund for the deposit and apply for money towards my childcare costs. It was like the whole world had opened up for me, allowing me to go to work knowing that my daughter was safe, well and happy.

Single parent who used the OPFS Childcare Connector service

2. My Health and Wellbeing

Key challenges:

- Mental health pressures, including anxiety, low mood and stress, which are all often worsened by parenting responsibilities.
- Difficulty accessing timely NHS support due to long waiting lists.
- Medication is often found to be ineffective, and parents do not feel listened to when discussing the nature of their mental health issues with GPs.
- Parents frequently prioritise their children over their own wellbeing, exacerbating stress.



I have struggled with anxiety for years now and it can get really bad, I worry about how this will affect the kids. I feel guilty that I can't take them places like other families and I don't feel like anyone else really gets how much that makes my mental health worse because I feel like a bad mum.

Single parent, Dundee

OPFS responses:

- Running group sessions, holiday programmes and peer support networks, all of which help to reduce social isolation and encourage new friendships among single parent communities.
- Free counselling is provided across our local services, as NHS waiting lists are extremely long and going private is costly.
- Targeted interventions through our wellbeing sessions, which address areas like anxiety, sleep, food and low mood.
- Signposting to other local organisations for other forms of support where appropriate.
- Staff training to provide informed mental health guidance and emotional support.

Outcomes:

Parents feel immediate relief when receiving single parent tailored support, especially if they have previously felt dismissed when trying to access support elsewhere, for example from their GP. By attending our group sessions and peer support networks, as well as our wellbeing sessions, parents develop good coping strategies for the future, experience reduced social isolation and often go on to form lasting friendships.



You encouraged me and kept reminding me about my goals which helped me achieve so much more than I expected in a short space of time and get my volunteer role. I struggle with my ADHD and you help me keep on track.

Single parent, Dundee

3. My Home

Key challenges:

- Shortage of affordable, appropriate housing means that families are often placed in temporary and/or overcrowded accommodation. This can impact family wellbeing as well as damage children's education and development.
- Limited access to suitable, larger homes for families mean that there is a long waiting lists for appropriate housing.
- Poor-quality housing, including damp and mould issues, create serious health risks.
- Debt can arise from rent arrears, mounting utility bills or expenses associated with repeated moves.

OPFS responses:

- Ensuring parents understand their rights and supporting them to challenge unsuitable or unsafe housing conditions.
- Shelter Scotland has provided OPFS staff with training on how to support parents with housing issues.

- OPFS Glasgow hosts a monthly Shelter drop-in hub, giving single parents access to specialist, tailored advice from Shelter on housing issues. This partnership ensures families receive expert guidance and support on complex housing needs.
- Support for families in managing stress linked to housing instability.
- Linking in with the Financial Inclusion Team, who support parents in trying to secure the correct entitlements, including housing related benefits.

Outcomes:

Parents are not only supported to navigate complex housing systems but are also empowered to advocate for themselves. Parents are also supported to maximise their income, for example by being pointed towards welfare support to help with housing costs. This leads to parents eventually being able to afford and access safer, more suitable accommodation for themselves and their families.

Spotlight: Childcare Connector service



Meeting up with the Childcare Connector service helped me to know how to stay in control and improve my family finances; I wouldn't have known where or when to go, or even what kind of help to ask for. I was afraid to go back to work in case I couldn't pay my bills on time and just ended up in a guddle. I wouldn't have moved into my job if I hadn't had this help and advice.

Single parent who used the OPFS Childcare Connector service

Lack of access to childcare can be a significant barrier for single parents seeking suitable employment. Added to this, trying to navigate the fragmented and complicated childcare landscape can be confusing and overwhelming. Parents who try to plan childcare that will be flexible enough to meet their needs often feel unsupported and don't know where to turn for advice.

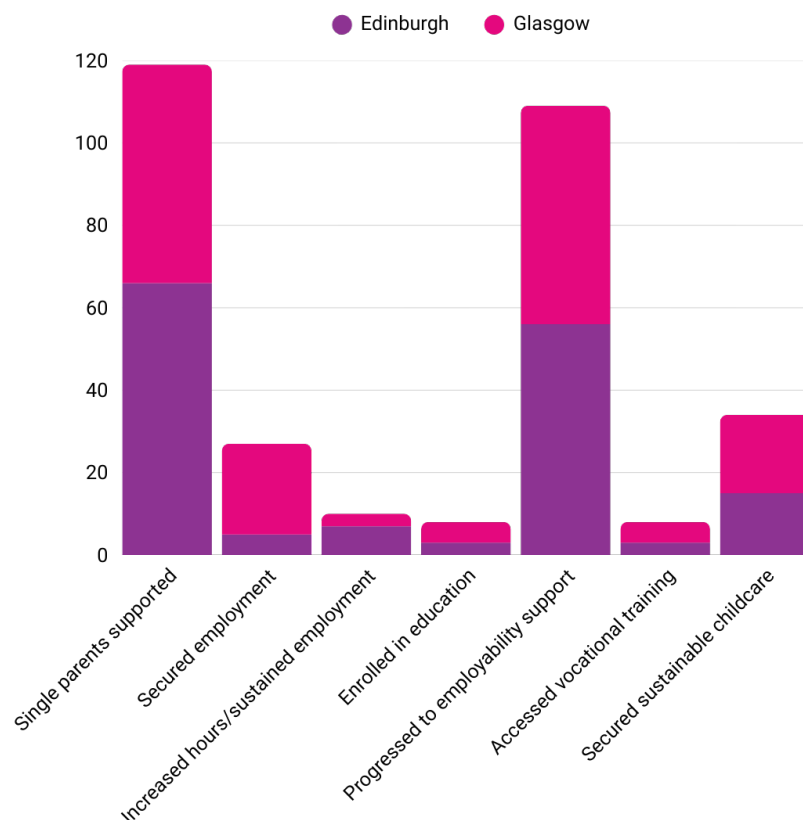
The lack of flexible, affordable and single parent-tailored childcare options often means that single parents end up having to turn down work, training and/or educational opportunities. Many single parents cannot work a standard nine to five schedule, resulting in a need for childcare which does not conform to these hours. Unfortunately, this is often more unaffordable than standard nine to five childcare - or is entirely unavailable in many local areas.

To address the barriers single parents face when trying to access and arrange childcare, OPFS runs a free **Childcare Connector service**. The

service began its operations in Edinburgh, but it has now expanded to Glasgow. A further expansion of this service in Dundee and East Renfrewshire is currently underway.

The Childcare Connector service is a targeted, personalised childcare advice and support service. The Childcare Connector's role exists to support parents through each step in finding childcare, from understanding their options to feeling confident in their childcare choices. This in turn enables single parents to take up education, training, volunteering or employment opportunities.

Between April 2024 and March 2025, the Childcare Connector service supported single parents in a variety of different ways:



Head to our [local services page](#) to make a referral to our Childcare Connector service.

Case study: As told by our Childcare Connectors



I would have had to quit [college] if it wasn't for her [OPFS Childcare Connector], she has been so helpful and helped me find childcare at the last minute [...], I feel very supported.

Maria, single mother, Edinburgh

Maria's story: a single mother from Edinburgh

Background

*Maria is a single parent to two young children. She is originally from Poland. She has been living in Edinburgh for several years and is currently in receipt of Universal Credit. Without close family nearby and only being able to speak limited English, Maria found it really challenging to balance work and study aspirations while caring for her children.

She reached out to OPFS for support when she secured a place on a college course but was unsure how she could manage childcare. So far, she had not managed to find any affordable or flexible

childcare in her area. Maria also wanted to continue working part-time and maintain her income, particularly during the school holidays. Like many single parents in similar situations, Maria wasn't familiar with the childcare system in Scotland, how childcare funding works or what her rights and entitlements were as a single parent.

Initial support

In our initial meetings, we carried out a full financial health check and offered income maximisation advice. Maria was supported to understand how to claim for childcare costs through Universal Credit (UC) and how different childcare options such as childminders, summer camps and nursery placements could fit her family's needs. On top of this, her college was able to fund some of the childcare costs.

She was guided through:

- Childcare funding options (including through her college) and application processes
- The structure of early learning and childcare in Scotland
- Completing paperwork and communicating with childcare providers
- Navigating college-funded childcare and UC reimbursement systems

Maria later brought her children along to a couple of events at OPFS's summer programme including the Messy Play Day. As she doesn't have family here, this really helped her to meet new people and socialise. On one of these trips, Maria even exchanged phone numbers with another parent, and they later independently met up.

Further support

As trust developed between us, Maria let us know that one of her children was displaying behaviours which indicated that they may have additional support needs (ASN). We worked together to ensure her child had access to the right environment by helping to secure a place with a local childminder during the holidays in a small, supportive setting. This ended up being much more appropriate than a larger childcare setting like a summer camp. Additionally, we visited her child's school for a child's planning meeting, where we discussed some additional support with other professionals like the head teacher and health visitor. This was a huge extra support for Maria due to her language barrier.

Maria was supported by the Childcare Connector service in a holistic way. What began as a request for help with finding childcare turned into a much broader support journey. Her confidence grew as she began to understand the systems around her. We provided emotional support during her child's subsequent autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis and signposted her to specialist services who can provide ongoing support with ASN and family assistance.

*Pseudonym

Outcomes and impact of support



I'm grateful for the big help I received [...] and I want to add that Natalia [OPFS Childcare Connector] does her work with heart and commitment. I felt cared for and I'm grateful for all her help.

Maria, single mother, Edinburgh

1. Empowered, informed parent

Through consistent support, Maria developed a stronger understanding of her rights and options as a single parent. She is now more confident in:

- Navigating complex systems (such as UC, college funding and childcare applications)
- Advocating for her children's needs (including ASD)
- Accessing services independently in the future

She also shared that support with form-filling, emails and phone calls helped her feel more in control and built her confidence with everyday literacy and communication tasks.

2. Sustained education and employment

By securing Maria's children spaces at a local childminder, Maria was able to:

- Start college and pursue her long-term employment goals
- Continue working during the school holidays

- Build a path toward financial independence

This continuity of care helped reduce stress and gave her the stability to focus on personal development.

3. Improved wellbeing and community connection

This support made a real difference to Maria and her family by:

- Reducing isolation
- Making it possible for them to enjoy low-cost family days out
- Helping Maria form a new friendship with another parent she exchanged numbers with

This community involvement and social aspect was particularly valuable as Maria had no extended family locally or a large support network nearby.

4. Better outcomes for children

The coordinated support helped ensure that Maria's child, who was displaying symptoms of ASD, was placed in a setting appropriate to their needs, with professionals working together to develop a plan.

This early intervention is likely to result in better emotional and educational outcomes, as the child is now supported in a safe, nurturing environment.

Reflections from our Childcare Connectors

Lack of flexibility

*“In our work supporting single parents, we often see how gaps in systems can create barriers for single parents who need childcare to access education and employment. For example, **there is a real lack of flexible and affordable childcare within Edinburgh, especially during term time.** Without practical support, it can feel almost impossible for single parents like Maria to continue in education.*

Lack of ASN support

*We also notice significant challenges for parents like Maria, who is a parent of a child with ASN. In Edinburgh, many childminders are not trained to support children with ASN. **Some specialist provisions do not provide additional care options for children with ASN.** On top of this, early learning and childcare settings often lack resources, meaning they do not have the capacity to provide the correct support for children with ASN. These gaps leave parents like Maria juggling multiple responsibilities, worrying about their children’s needs and struggling to find reliable, appropriate childcare. This in turn means that they can’t focus their time and energy on furthering their own education, work and training opportunities.*

Navigating a complex landscape

***A broader pattern we see is a lack of knowledge and understanding about the childcare system,** not just among single parents, but among professionals like college staff and Job Centre work coaches. Many are unaware of how funding works and don’t know what rights and entitlements apply to single parents. Additionally, single parents face unreasonable pressure from Job Centres, which often impose unmanageable employment*

requirements and demand weekly meetings and phone appointments. This combined with a complex welfare system and a lack of flexible, well-paid job opportunities puts significant pressure on parents. Additionally, all of this puts multiple barriers in the way of single parents aiming to build stability for themselves and their children.

Maria also has a language barrier. This means that it was even more difficult for her to access the support she needed than someone who is a native English speaker. Support systems are often complex, and many single parents don't know what helps or what rights they're entitled to.

For Maria, as a non-native English speaker, this made things even harder. Fortunately, one of our Childcare Connectors speaks Polish - and OPFS provides an interpretation service. However, many other services do not, meaning parents like Maria often receive less support simply because of a language barrier.

Ultimately, when professionals understand the childcare landscape, families can access guidance before problems escalate."



You are a lifesaver, wow! OPFS has had an amazing contribution to my journey and is helping me achieve all my goals!

Maria, single mother, Edinburgh

OPFS recommendations

We recognise that there are a combination of policy and operational factors which result in the challenges parents face, but we know that change is possible. Below, we have outlined what we believe must happen so we can all get it right for single parents.

OPFS is calling for:

Systemic and policy changes:

- A universal funded childcare entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.
- Flexible delivery that enables families to access childcare when they need and want it (including for children with ASN).
- Work towards a childcare system that is not based on profit making.
- A high-quality service which delivers positive outcomes for children and realises children's rights.

Employment support:

- Flexible employment which is paid at least at the Real Living Wage.
- A diverse and skilled childcare workforce that is valued, fairly paid and gender balanced.
- Introduction of a new National Outcome on valuing and investing in care and all those who provide it, as has already been agreed.

Cross-service collaboration:

- Strengthened partnerships and collaborations between services (for example between the voluntary sector and the statutory services who work directly with single parents).
- Fair and sustainable statutory funding for family support services.

Advocacy and education:

- Improved awareness of single parents' unique needs and rights among decision makers, statutory bodies, service providers and single parents.
- Widening of available resources, such as clear, accessible guidance on childcare funding, welfare entitlements and ASN provision.

Early intervention and preventative support:

- Support that is offered before crisis arises, for example to help single parents with transition periods, such as starting education or training.
- Support for parents to build the confidence and skills they need to navigate complex systems independently. Statutory bodies should also work to ensure that systems are simplified and tailored to the needs of users.

To learn about our policy position on childcare, [read our joint position paper with Close the Gap.](#)

Conclusion

Single parents juggle multiple responsibilities as the sole carers and breadwinners for their families, often without local family networks or wider tailored support. Many face barriers accessing education, employment and training due to the lack of affordable, flexible childcare. **These challenges are compounded by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis,** which often forces parents to rely on food banks, crisis loans and emergency financial support in order to afford essentials. For parents with limited English, or parents who have children with ASN, accessing the right support can be even more challenging and available support options may be limited.

Maria's experiences of using the Childcare Connector service illustrates how **early, individualised support can change a family's life across multiple key MLAM areas.** The Service not only helped Maria to access the appropriate childcare, but also provided practical guidance, reassurance and the foundations of a support network. As a result, the service ensured that Maria could continue college and maintain part-time work during holidays to maximise her income. This in turn helped her to gain confidence, understand her rights and take steps towards gaining financial independence and long-term support.

A recurring theme in our work is the complexity and fragmentation of the systems families must navigate. Childcare funding, welfare benefits, housing systems and **mental health and wellbeing support options are often poorly understood by both parents and professionals.** These gaps reinforce inequalities and make accessing opportunities more difficult for single parents. All of this can leave parents feeling overwhelmed and under-supported, highlighting the importance of holistic services that offer tailored, individualised support across multiple areas of a parent's life.

What makes the most impact is early intervention and personalised guidance. When professionals understand the childcare landscape and are proactive in offering support, parents can make informed choices and take up opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach.

Systemic and policy changes are also needed to address these challenges at a broader level. There are several factors which would significantly reduce barriers for single parent families. For example, expanding funded childcare hours and improving access to flexible and well-paid employment. Equally, partnerships between statutory and voluntary services ought to be strengthened to ensure families receive coordinated, consistent support. Advocacy and education also remain key. Raising awareness among professionals, policymakers and the public by providing clear guidance on rights, entitlements and childcare options empowers single parents to navigate systems with confidence.

Maria's experience reminds us that small, practical interventions like helping a parent find the right childcare can have a ripple effect, creating long-term benefits for the whole family. By combining practical help with emotional support and advocacy, OPFS aims to empower families and contribute to improving outcomes for children in single parent families across Scotland.



**One Parent
Families Scotland**
changing lives, challenging poverty

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