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Family Foster Care for Abandoned Children in Egypt

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The profile of Egyptian foster children has changed tremendously since the establishment of Egyptian family foster care in 1959. This is a result of changes in foster family practice and changes in the profile of foster families. The changes in family foster care practice included terminating the use of wet nurses and replacing them with Childhood and Motherhood Care Centers and by determining a specific age that foster children would leave the foster care system. The changes in the foster family profile included the educational qualifications of foster mothers, the jobs of foster mothers and foster fathers, the motivation to be a foster family, and the number of bedrooms in a foster family home. These changes have been made in the hope of offering the highest quality of welfare for foster children and their foster families and achieving the best interests for both of them.

Key words: *Egypt, foster children, foster care, family foster care, child abandonment*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the current profile of Egyptian foster children and their foster families and to inform

the reader how and why this profile has changed over time since the establishment of Egyptian family foster care system in 1959 and during the period of the first Family Foster Care Act of 1968 and the second Act of 1996. These two Acts regulate the structure and the function of the Egyptian Family Foster Care System. They have defined the goals of Egyptian family foster care: established which children are eligible to be foster children; set the terms of fostering; defined the roles of the foster care social worker, the Family and Childhood Administrations, the Family and Childhood Directorates, and the Foster Care Committee. The main objective of creating these two Acts is to arrange relevant social welfare for abandoned babies [for more details, please see Egyptian Ministry Decree 17 (1968) and Egyptian Children Act 12 (1996)]. While the changes in the Egyptian family foster care legislations (1968 and 1996) will be highlighted in a forthcoming paper, this paper is concentrated mainly on the changes in the profile of foster children and foster families (family foster care practice).

Egyptian family foster care deals with the international problem of abandoned babies (Browne, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Johnson, Agathonos-Georgopoulou, Anaut, Herczog, Keller-Hamela, Klimácková, Leth, Ostergren, Stan, & Zeytinoglu, 2005) and their rights within the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The discovery of dead and discarded newborn infants appears to have become a constant aspect of life across the United States (Sanger, 2006). It was found that in 1998, 105 babies had been left in public places. Further, there are also a handful of abandoned babies every year in England and Wales recorded by the Office for National Statistics (Mullender, Pavlovic, & Staples, 2005). These children should be granted their rights, including the right to know their real birth circumstances, to search for their biological families, to contact their biological families, and even to be reunited with them. These children need help from policy makers, researchers and practitioners to obtain these rights, in order to be equal to adopted children. Adopted children already have such rights (Midford, 1994; Gair, 1999; Feast, Marwood, Seabrook, & Webb, 1998). To help abandoned children to get their rights, Egyptian family foster care has established the foundations.

The uniqueness of the Egyptian family foster care system

is that it includes health care services and social care services. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom (U.K.), the arranged social care for abandoned babies includes a small amount health care. Health care services for abandoned babies, such as the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center are unique, because these centers are dedicated to the welfare of abandoned babies (Abdel Mageed, 2004, 2005). The abandoned babies have to remain in this center for up to two years. They receive welfare services such as clothing, milk, periodical medical examinations and a medical card. These services are delivered by a team of professionals which includes a qualified social worker

Concerning social care services, Egyptian family foster care policy has set up two guidelines which are practiced to encourage reunification between abandoned children and their biological families. The first guideline is to record the circumstances of the abandonment. The Egyptian personal Affairs Law no. 11 (1965) states that an abandoned child must have a general population birth certificate, and that the child's particulars should be registered as follows: (1) date of birth (the day the baby was found); (2) place of birth (the location where the baby was found); (3) age (estimated by a pediatrician); (4) gender; (5) name and address of the individual who found the baby; and (6) name given to the baby by the police department.

The law also states that the exact details of the abandoned baby should be recorded in a special file which includes a baby photograph, birth certificate, full description of the baby (including fingerprints and any marks on the baby), what the baby was wearing when found, any objects found with the baby, the baby's condition and mood (i.e. warm, cold, crying, asleep), and appearance (clean, dirty, etc.). This information has been used to help abandoned children to search for, contact and be reunited with their biological families (Kellanay, 2001). These procedures are emphasized by English researchers (Winter & Cohen, 2005).

The second guideline of the law stresses the importance of the reunification process as a requirement for use in the recruiting of potential foster families. In the Egyptian Children Act of 1996, article 87, term 10 states:

The prospective foster family should promise to keep [the child safe from] all contact and not reunite the child even for a short period of time to their biological parents if they know them or [unite the child with] any other person except through the Family and Childhood Administration.

According to term 11:

The prospective foster family should...cooperate with the Family and Childhood Administration in planning for the child['s] interest; including the return [of] them to their biological family or moving them to a new foster family or a child care home.

This unique aspect of Egyptian family foster care could be transported to other countries. In England and Wales, adopted children have rights of access to their original birth certificates and adoption contact registers have been established by law; abandoned adopted children have no such rights. Official help is available to adopted children in attempting to establish the identities of their biological families; the same official help is not available to abandoned adopted children. There are always abandoned children who are unable to know their parents (O'Donovan, 2000). Fifty-eight babies were abandoned from 1990 to 1997. Of those, there was only one case of reunification with a biological family (Towers, 2006).

In the situation of abandonment, infant identity rights are not mentioned and identity rights are overlooked. Further, these children are unable to know their real circumstances and to search, contact and reunite with their biological families when they grow up. More importantly, there has only been one study concerning searching, contacting and reunifiying abandoned children with their biological families. This study shared some useful pointers about searching and reunifying abandoned children with their biological families, and further stated that, "...as the last English adoption bill of 2001 has overlooked such issues of abandoned children, there is an urgent need to explore such issues" (Winter & Cohen, 2005).

Twenty-five years ago there was no statutory right of access

to birth records. That right was introduced by the English Children Act 1976. While the adoption contact register has been a good idea for normal adopted children, it has been less useful for the ever-increasing number of abandoned children. Therefore, there is a need to do far more for abandoned children and their families. There should be an official Abandoned Contact Register, operated like the Adoption Contact Register but using the known facts of abandonment as linking information to make a match between abandoned children and their biological families (Mullender, Pavlovic, & Staples, 2005).

In the U.S., while there are many legal efforts to deal with infant abandonment, so far there is no child welfare effort regarding the identity rights of abandoned children, their knowledge of their real circumstances, and aid with searching for, contacting and reunifying with their biological families when they grow up. In early 2000, Infant Safe Haven Laws were enacted across the U.S. to decriminalize abandonment of newborns in response to much-publicized discoveries of dead and abandoned infants (Sanger, 2006; Cesario, 2003). Sanger (2006) has analyzed the enactment of Safe Haven Laws. She suggests that these laws have been succeeding. Although enactment of these laws is widespread, no efforts toward abandoned children's identity rights are found. Therefore, it is hoped that this paper will stimulate child welfare practitioners, researchers and policy makers to start thinking about the rights of abandoned babies and that it will further inspire research ideas to promote ongoing growth in this field.

Method

The data for this study were collected from foster children's and foster parents' case files during the first phase of the larger research project. This larger research project was concerned primarily with using qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the stressful fostering experiences of Egyptian foster families, including parenting stress and the emotional and behavioral problems of their foster children. The findings reported here provide basic information about the profile of foster children and foster caregivers in the Cairo Region. The files of 78 Egyptian foster children

and 78 foster caregivers in five different Family and Childhood
Administrations in the Cairo Region were examined.

Data were collected between January 5 and March 5, 2005.
This incorporated two types of information: first, data about
foster children, such as gender, the age of abandonment and
admission to the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center
(CMC), length of stay in the Childhood and Motherhood Care
Center, child care home, or foster family, the foster child's
current age and education. Second, data were gathered about
the foster family, such as the present age of foster caregivers,
their educational qualifications, their motivation, their occu-
pation and monthly income, and the number of bedrooms in
their homes.

The larger research project was focused on foster fami-
lies and their foster children in Family and Childhood
Administrations in Cairo, because the majority of foster chil-
dren and foster families are located in two main regions, Cairo
and Alexandria. These areas contain 50 % of all foster families
and foster children in the country (Arab Republic of Egypt,
1997).

Five Family and Childhood Administrations were selected
out of thirty across Cairo. Each selected area contributes in
a different way to the understanding of the profile of foster
families and foster children (from below average to the highest
socio-economic educational level of foster families). An effort
was made to ensure that the five Family and Childhood
Administrations are representative of the social demographics
of the foster families population (N=776) in the Cairo Region.
This study used procedures that were used by Rowe and
Lambert (1973) for selecting research areas. This research has
been considered a classic of foster care research, as they had
significant research experience in the field of child welfare, es-
pecially foster care (Rowe, Hundleby, & Garnett, 1989; Rowe,
Cain, Hundleby, & Keane, 1984).

The decision as to which areas should be involved was
left to the directors of the Family and Childhood Department
in Cairo and their staff, because this seemed the only practi-
cal method in these circumstances. Their choices were influ-
enced not only by the need to obtain the right number of foster
children and foster caregivers, but also by the more personal

problems of staffing, the physical movement of area teams into new offices, the probable interest of the staff and their willingness to take part. It is likely that this bias favored the best-organized areas and those with a high proportion of social workers in senior positions, since they were the ones most likely to be interested. On the other hand, some areas may have been selected because it was known that they had a sufficient number of children aged 5 to 15 years (Rowe and Lambert, 1973). It was agreed from the outset that the names of the participating administrations and their children would not be given to anyone except the researcher so as to ensure confidentiality.

The five participating Family and Childhood Administrations represented different socio-economic and educational levels of the general population. One represented a below-average sector, one was average, two served above-average clients, and one drew from the highest sector. Foster children whose foster families were involved in disciplinary proceedings, who had been in care less than four years, who were younger than 5 or older than 15, or who had siblings in foster care were all excluded from the study.

After applying the previous criteria on the five Family and Childhood Administrations, 86 foster children were identified. Eight children were further excluded: two were older than 15 years; in one case it was deemed that there would be communication difficulties that were too severe for the researcher to overcome without assistance; four children had stayed less than four years in foster families; and one child had a sibling being fostered. Therefore, the total sample was 78 foster families, 78 foster children and 11 social workers. The Family and Childhood Administrations had between 6 and 20 families with one child each and two to five social workers.

Results

The characteristics of Egyptian foster children included demographic and fostering aspects. They involved the foster child's gender, current age, and type of school. Fostering features were comprised of age of abandonment and admission to

the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center, length of stay in the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center, length of stay in a child care home, and length of stay in the foster family.

Of the 78 foster children in this study, 53 (68%) were female. Most abandoned children (64, or 82%) were taken into the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center (CMC) within a week of their birth. Five (6%) were placed within the first year, another 5 (6%) in their second year, and only 2 (3%) beyond the second year.

Table 1. Length of stay for abandoned babies in the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center

Length of Stay	N	%
<6 months	26	33
7 - 11 months	23	30
12-24 months	28	36
Missing	1	1
Total	78	100.0

Table 2. Length of stay for abandoned children in a child care home

Length of Stay	N	%
> 11 months	3	4
12-24 months	7	9
25-36 months	2	3
Fostered from CMC	65	83
Missing	1	1
Total	78	100.0

Table 1 illustrates that length of stay for abandoned babies in the Childhood and Motherhood Care Center was fairly evenly distributed. Table 2 shows that length of stay (LOS) for abandoned children in a child care home was short. While the majority of the sample (83%) was fostered from CMC, only 16% of foster children were fostered from a child care home. The longest stay for abandoned children (3%) in the child care home was between 25 and 36 months. The shortest stay (4%)

was less than 11 months.

All children in the sample stayed in foster care at least four years. The most common length of stay was 6 to 7 years (30%). Another 21 children (27%) stayed less than six years. Eighteen (23%) were cared for 8 to 9 years, six (8%) stayed 10-11 years, and ten (13%) were in care 12 to 15 years.

Foster children represented a wide range of childhood ages. Less than one quarter of foster children (21%) were in the 5 to 7 year age group. About half (51%) ranged from 8 to 11 years. Less than a third (29%) were 12 to 15 years old.

Table 3. Foster Children's Types of School

Type of School	N	%
Secondary School	1	1
Industrial School	1	1
Extreme Disable	1	1
Commercial School	3	4
Pre-nursery	4	5
Nursery	6	8
Preparatory School	6	8
Primary School	56	72
Total	78	100.0

Table 3 shows the types of school that foster children have joined. As can be seen, the main type of school was primary. A small minority (5%) were ready for school, and a few (8%) attended a nursery. A similar number were in preparatory school (this is an uncompleted educational stage and spans for three years after primary school). Another small minority of them (4%) joined commercial schools (this is a final educational stage after preparatory school and takes three years to finish). A tiny minority of them (1%) joined secondary schools (a pre-university educational stage of three years offering general, non-vocational subjects) or industrial schools (also three years, parallel to secondary schools). Only one foster child did not join schools due to extreme physical and mental disability.

Foster family characteristics included demographics, fostering, and children's well-being aspects. Demographic

features were the foster parent's ages and the foster mother's educational qualifications. The only fostering feature was motivation to be a foster family. The three aspects of children's well-being were foster parent occupation, foster family's monthly income, and number of bedrooms in the foster home. These characteristics are highlighted in the tables that follow.

Foster families in this research have become foster parents for three main reasons which are commonly expressed as "substitute child," "pleasing God," and "filling the nest." Substitute child means that the potential foster family has biological children who have died or have grown up and become independent. These parents want to continue offering children love and security. Pleasing God means there are religious reasons for fostering—altruism and philanthropy. Filling the nest means that foster families have space in their homes which motivates them to look after an abandoned child. In the current research, the most common of motive for fostering was the desire to look after a substitute child. For a minority of foster families (18%), pleasing God was a primary reason for fostering. Only one family expressed filling the nest as their motivation.

Table 4. Ages of Foster Parents

	Foster Mother's Age		Foster Father's Age	
	N	%	N	%
Deceased	1	1	7	9
Divorced	-	-	1	1
26 - 31 yrs	2	3	-	-
32 - 37 yrs	12	15	3	4
38 - 43 yrs	21	27	7	9
44 - 49 yrs	17	22	26	33
50 - 55 yrs	12	15	19	24
56 - 61 yrs	8	10	10	13
62 - 65 yrs	5	6	-	-
62 - 71 yrs	-	-	4	5
Missing	-	-	1	1
Total	78	100	78	100

One of the first demographic features is foster parent ages. Table four shows that a great number of foster parents have reached Shakespeare's fifth stage of aging (Shakespeare,

1599).

In terms of education, foster mothers in the sample were comparatively well-educated. Only a small minority of them (6%) was illiterate. Almost one third (32%) had a Bachelor's degree. More than one quarter (28%) had obtained a diploma in a particular field (there are four forms of diploma: commercial, industrial, agricultural, and nursing, which are achieved after three years studying in preparatory school). A minority of foster mothers (5%) gained a certificate in a particular field (this is two years studying in the same field after earning one's diploma). About one quarter of foster mothers (24%) could read and write. A small minority of them (1%) achieved a Ph.D. degree.

Table five shows that a slight majority of foster mothers were employed outside the home, and slightly less than a half (47%) were housewives. In Table six, we see that more than half of foster fathers (58%) are administrators, engineers, and army or police officers; the others have taken up unique positions.

Table 5. Foster Mother's Occupation

Occupation	N	%
Nurse	1	1
Accountant	1	1
General Practitioner of Medicine	1	1
Social Worker	1	1
Head of Department in the University	1	1
Pharmacist	2	3
Manager	2	3
Teacher in Preparatory School	4	5
Administrative Employee	20	26
Housewife	37	47
Missing	8	10
Total	78	100

A great number of foster families in this study had low monthly income. For a vast majority of foster families (76%), their monthly income ranged from £ 30 to £ 249. A minority of foster families' monthly income ranged from £ 250 to £ 499 (12%) and £ 500 to £ 1000 (1%).

Table 6. Foster Father's Occupation

Occupation	N	%
Accountant	1	1
Salesman	1	1
Manager	1	1
Medical Analyst	1	1
Builder	1	1
Lawyer	1	1
Pharmacist	1	1
Veterinarian	1	1
General Practitioner of Medicine	1	1
Chef	2	3
Restaurant Owner	2	3
Merchant	2	3
Driver	2	3
Teacher	2	3
Free Trading and Business	5	6
Engineer	7	9
Military or Police Officer	8	10
Retired	9	12
Administrative Employee	21	27
Missing	9	12
Total	78	100

The majority of foster families (65%) had two bedrooms in their homes. About one quarter of them (23%) had three bedrooms. A small minority of them (5%) had more than three bedrooms, and a minority of them (6%) had only one bedroom in their homes.

Discussion

There have been significant changes in the profiles of Egyptian foster children which differ from previous research. In previous research, the proportion of male and female foster children were almost equal—48% males and 52% females (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). There are many reasons for Egyptian families to voluntarily abandon their babies at birth

(Sujimon, 2002; Diop-Sidibe, Campbell, & Becker, 2006). There are four main reasons for child abandonment. First, parents may abandon a child out of lack of concern for, or interest in the child. They may be unwilling to maintain the child because of its physical condition or ancestry (Boswell, 1988).

Second, parents may abandon a child if they are unable to provide for it and hope that that someone of greater means or higher standing might find the child and bring him or her up in better circumstances (Boswell, 1988). In developing countries, including Egypt, child abandonment is a phenomenon whose context is related to the coping strategies fashioned by poor people. The abandonment of children allows the rest of the family to survive. Biological families in despair abandon their biological children, while other families rescue them, offering a life with care due to the kindness of strangers (Georgopoulou, 2002).

Third, a mother may abandon an out-of-wedlock child to avoid the shame on herself and her family (Sujimon, 2002). Finally, unwanted pregnancy may be a consequence of domestic violence (Diop-Sidibe, Campbell, & Becker, 2006). About one third of Egyptian rural women (34%) have been beaten by their current husbands. Beaten women are more frequently reluctant to ask their husband's permission to go to the clinic to get a contraceptive method. Moreover, they are less likely to have post-natal care for their most recent babies (Diop-Sidibe, Campbell, & Becker, 2006).

Further, it is perfectly normal for children to separate from their families at an early age and care for themselves with only occasional visits home. This separation of children from their biological families may be for shorter, longer, or permanent periods. They often operate within a family-based order that allows them to contribute to their families and siblings (Ransel, 2002).

Children fostered from a CMC are now greater in number than children fostered by the previous wet nurse system. In previous research, 53% of abandoned children were fostered by wet nurses (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). In the current research, 83% of foster children were fostered by a CMC. Alternatively, they were fostered by other agencies, such as hospitals. The creation of CMCs as medical centers dedicated to care for these

abandoned babies has attracted prospective foster families.

Currently, abandoned babies are fostered at an earlier age than in the past, because infants and very young people have ideally been considered more adaptable (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000). Fostering young children is easier than fostering older children (Wilson, Sinclair & Gibbs, 2000), because young children adjust more easily than older children. Due to successful recruitment efforts, the number of foster placements of abandoned children at early ages has increased (Arab Republic of Egypt, 1997). Foster care committees also feared that some families who fostered older children may want to use these abandoned children as maids (El Noshokaty, 2002).

Although more children enter CMCs, the length of stay for abandoned children with wet nurses was longer than their length of stays in CMCs. Of those fostered by a wet nurse, less than a quarter of them (13%) remained from 10 to 20 months. One third of abandoned children (34 %) stayed with a wet nurse for between 20 to 30 months. Less than a quarter of them (13%) remained from 36 to 40 months and 4% of them stayed more than 8 years (100 months) [Mustafa & Eywais, 1980]. Of those fostered by a CMC, 33% stayed less than 6 months, 30% remained from 7 to 11 months and 36% of them stayed from one to two years. This is because there was no time limit for a wet nurse to transfer an abandoned child to a foster family or to a child care home, while there is a two-year time limit for CMC stays.

The current age of foster children tends to be younger and the length of stay in their foster families tend to be shorter than in previous research. In previous research, 24% of foster children ranged in age from 6 to 11, 18% of them ranged from 12 to 15, and 50% from 16 to 20. Five percent of them ranged from 22 to 27 (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). Currently, the age of foster children has become younger, because abandoned babies are currently placed in foster families earlier, due to cancellation of the wet nurse system and the emerging CMC. Additionally, the majority of prospective foster families (83%) tend to foster very young babies under two years old. Further, foster children's cases are closed when the foster child reaches 18, or 21 years old for those who are still in school. In the Act of 1968, there was no final and limited closing for foster child cases.

Concerning the length of stay in foster families, the previous research stated that about 57% of children stayed in a foster family between 11 to 16 years and 2% of cases stayed less than 10 months (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). The average length of placement was 17 years (Abedel Mageed, 1990).

The educational situation of foster children has improved from the previous research. In the previous research, 27% of them could only read and write, 41% of foster children were in primary and preparatory schools, and 22% of them had a diploma. Three percent of them were in university and 5% were above the diploma level (Mustafa, & Eywais, 1980). In the current research, most foster children (72%) have entered primary school. A minority of them (8%) are in preparatory school. This improved educational situation for foster children may be due to better-educated foster mothers, the specific motive of seeking a substitute child for fostering, the occupations of foster fathers and mothers, the adequate number of social workers and other professionals, and the smaller caseloads of social workers.

There are key changes in the profile of the Egyptian foster family that differ from the previous research. The age of both foster mothers and foster fathers is now lower. In the previous research, 36% of foster mothers were between 40 and 49 years old and 40% of them were between 50 and 59. The average age of foster mother was 43 (Abdel Mageed, 1990). Currently, 49% of foster mothers are between 38 and 49 years old and 25% of them are between 50 and 61. Regarding the current age of foster fathers in the previous research, less than half of foster fathers (43%) were between 40 and 56 years of age; a minority of foster fathers (16%) were between 61 and 69 years (Mustafa & Eywes, 1980). Currently a great majority of foster fathers (83%), range from 32 to 61 years old. This may be a more appropriate age for foster parents looking after abandoned children.

The educational qualifications of foster mothers have also changed. In the previous research, the majority of foster mothers (71%) were illiterate, while a minority of them (22%) could read and write (Mustafa & Eywes, 1980). In another study, 70% were illiterate while 26% could read and write. Very few (4%) of them had primary school certificate (Abdel Mageed, 1990). Presently, about one quarter of foster mothers (24%)

can read and write. Almost one third (32%) have Bachelor's degrees. More than one quarter of them (28%) have obtained a diploma in a particular field. This is the result of changes in foster parent recruitment (El Noshokaty, 2002).

Motives for fostering have changed somewhat. In previous research, the motive of one third of foster families (30%) was the desire to care for a substitute child. Twenty four percent of cases wanted to please God (Team of Social Workers, 1965). Another study found 37% of foster families wanted to look after a substitute child, 24% wanted to please God, and 16% were motivated by financial rewards (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). Currently a majority of foster families (81%) want a substitute child and eighteen percent want to please God.

Experience has shown that foster families whose motive for fostering was to look after a substitute child have cared for foster children better than other foster families. They have adequate time and energy to look after these children. Consequently, family foster care practitioners have preferred to recruit a large number of foster families with this motive (Sadden, 1980; Salem, 1987; Michael, 1990; Abdel Mageed, 1990).

The number of foster families whose motive was to please God has been decreasing. This motive is common among older people, and social workers prefer not to recruit them. It was discovered that grandmothers raising their grandchildren are likely to get depressed or feel stressed and have less satisfaction in parenting (Rodgers-Farmer, 1999; Kelley, 1993; Daly, 2000).

Foster mothers have more varied employment now. In previous research, about 85% of foster mothers were housewives. Presently, less than a half of foster mothers (47%) are housewives and 43% are employed in various jobs. This change is due to the increased educational qualifications of foster mothers. Further, when women work, husbands may share the parenting responsibility. Sharing parental responsibility may in return give foster children a fruitful and relevant experience.

Foster families have more bedrooms in their homes than before. In the previous research, 74% had two bedrooms and 21%) had one (Mustafa & Eywais, 1980). Currently the majority of foster families (65%) have two bedrooms and about one

quarter of them (23%) have three. A minority of them (6%) had only one bedroom. A small minority of them (5%) have more than three bed rooms.

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