EXPLORING POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT AS A STRATEGY TO REDUCE CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

Exploring Positive Reinforcement as a Strategy to Reduce Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract

Challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms can disrupt learning and affect classroom relationships, highlighting the need for supportive and meaningful behavioral strategies. This descriptive qualitative study explores the use of positive reinforcement as a strategy to reduce challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms. The study involved semi-structured interviews with four early childhood teachers to gain deeper insights into their experiences, techniques, and perspectives regarding positive reinforcement. Analysis of the interview data identified key themes relevant to the study's focus. First, positive reinforcement was described as helpful in reducing challenging behaviors, as children appeared to respond more positively to rewards than to punishment or correction. Second, the use of tangible rewards (such as stickers and stars) and intangible rewards (such as verbal praise and hugs) was perceived as most helpful when personalized to each child's interests and developmental level. Third, individualized and learner-based reinforcement enabled teachers to address the unique behavioral challenges of each child. Fourth, educators described lasting classroom changes tied to positive reinforcement, including improved behavior, motivation, and teacher-child relationships. Lastly, teachers described positive reinforcement as a consistent and proactive approach to guiding children's behavior, particularly when used with clear expectations. Overall, the study highlights meaningful insights into educators' use of positive reinforcement, though limited by a small participant group and a descriptive approach, suggesting future research using phenomenology to gain deeper understanding of how such practices are experienced in early childhood settings.

Keywords: *positive reinforcement, reduction of challenging behavior, positive behavior, strategy, early childhood*

Introduction

Challenging behavior is a broad term encompassing actions that are socially unacceptable and potentially harmful, disrupting education, daily activities, and social participation (Kim, 2023). According to Powell et al. (2007, as cited in Meadan et al., 2016), these behaviors are often repetitive and can interfere with meaningful learning and the development of positive social interactions. In early childhood settings, Miller (2014) observed that teachers often perceive challenging behaviors as aggressive, defiant, or disruptive to the classroom environment. Such behaviors can hinder teachers' ability to effectively deliver lessons and limit students' engagement in learning (Cameron, Connor, Morrison, & Jewkes, 2008).

In the United States, over the past decade, there has been a notable surge in the suspension and expulsion of young children from childcare programs (Hoffman & Kuvalanka, 2019; Garrity et al., 2019). Consequently, managing challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms has become a significant national concern. Similarly, in Japan, challenging behavior has been identified as a growing concern within educational settings (Inoue, 2019), with studies indicating a rise in such behaviors over the past decade (Otsui et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, Nanit (2020) found that among kindergarten pupils, attention-seeking was the most common form of misbehavior, while the use of profane or inappropriate language was the least observed. The study also revealed that aggressive behavior, aimless running, shouting in class, and temper tantrums were significantly linked to lower scholastic performance in early childhood development areas. In a similar vein, De Luna (2019) examined the strategies employed by teachers to manage challenging behavior in early childhood classrooms, providing valuable insights into local practices.

Given this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the use of positive reinforcement as a strategy to reduce challenging behavior in early childhood classrooms. Challenging behaviors often emerge in preschool and may persist into elementary school, highlighting the need for early intervention (Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017). Positive reinforcement techniques have been described as helpful in supporting children's behavioral improvements in the classroom (Gunaretnam, 2021).

This study may offer early childhood educators insights into how positive reinforcement can support the management of challenging behaviors. School administrators can use the findings to enhance teacher training programs, while parents will gain a better understanding of how reinforcement impacts their children's behavior. Despite existing literature, there remains a gap in studies focused on early childhood classrooms in Mindanao, Philippines. Mondi et al. (2022) highlighted the limited exploration of specific behaviors considered challenging in childcare contexts, emphasizing the need for further inquiry into which behaviors require support or guidance. This makes the present study particularly valuable for future researchers and policymakers. For this reason, the research is being conducted to provide a deeper understanding of how positive reinforcement is used to address challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore how positive reinforcement strategies are used to manage and reduce challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms. Specifically, this study sought to:

1. How do early childhood educators describe the role of positive reinforcement in reducing challenging behaviors in the classroom?
2. What types of positive reinforcement strategies do educators report using in early childhood settings?
3. How do educators describe the behavioral changes they observe in learners after implementing positive reinforcement?
4. What are educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of positive reinforcement in managing challenging behaviors?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the perceived influence of positive reinforcement on reducing challenging behaviors in early childhood. This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of behavioral changes as observed and experienced by educators within the early childhood classroom. A qualitative descriptive methodology, regarded as the most basic form of qualitative study within the interpretive paradigm (Stanley, 2023), is appreciated for its flexibility in incorporating sampling methods and data collection techniques (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

Participants

The participants of this study included four early childhood educators from a licensed school in Mindanao. As noted by Subedi (2021), qualitative research does not require a predetermined number of participants, as the focus is on achieving the research purpose rather than representing a large population. In line with this, purposive sampling was used to select individuals who had direct and consistent interaction with learners, ensuring they could provide rich and relevant insights. Robinson (2024) explains that purposive sampling involves the deliberate choice of informants based on their capacity to supply meaningful information related to a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was utilized with the aid of a self-developed interview guide to explore participants' insights and perceptions of using positive reinforcement in early childhood classrooms. This approach offers a clear advantage over other qualitative interview types by allowing researchers to collect rich insights and relevant data while staying focused on the study's core objectives (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview guide was developed specifically for this study and underwent a validation process involving pilot testing with non-participant educators and expert consultation to ensure its clarity and relevance with the research objectives. Each objective was addressed through five open-ended questions. Additionally, semi-structured interviews commonly use open-ended questions that prompt participants to explain their thoughts, express personal views, share their stories, and speak freely in their own words (Karatsareas, 2022). Gadgets such as mobile phones were used as audio recorders to document participants' responses during the interviews for accurate transcription and analysis. The recorded data were manually transcribed using word processing software (e.g., Microsoft Word) to ensure the clarity and accuracy of participants' responses.

Procedure

The researchers undertook the following steps in gathering data for this study:

The researchers first requested permission to conduct semi-structured interviews and invited prospective participants to take part in the study. Once participants agreed to join, consent letters were provided specifying the time and place of the interviews. The interviews were then administered, and the collected data were transcribed. Throughout the process, the researcher assured participants that their identities would remain confidential. To ensure a deeper understanding, the interview questions were translated into the participants' native language, and their responses were translated into English for accurate analysis. Microsoft Word was utilized for manual transcription, allowing for fast, clear, and organized documentation of the participants' answers.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to identify repetitive patterns and emerging themes in the data. Interviews were transcribed, observation notes were coded, and documents were analyzed to triangulate the findings. Codes were organized into broader categories representing types of reinforcement and behavioral outcomes. According to Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019), thematic analysis (TA) is often misunderstood as a single analytic method but is more accurately described as an umbrella term for various approaches aimed at identifying themes across qualitative datasets. Clarke and Braun (2017) further explained that TA involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring themes in qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was secured, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used,

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and all data were treated with strict confidentiality. As stated by Yesuf (2024), the ethical review process is important in research, safeguarding that these studies are undertaken in a manner that upholds the rights and well-being of participants.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the data analysis, organized according to corresponding themes that emerged from the participants' responses. Verbatim quotations are included to preserve the authenticity of the participant's responses with translations provided in English to ensure clarity and facilitate a better understanding of their perspectives. Participants are coded as P1 through P4 to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1. *Summary of Qualitative Findings*

Theme	Description
Educators' Experiences in Reducing Challenging Behaviors	Participants observed a decrease in disruptive behaviors when positive reinforcement was applied.
Using Varied Forms of Rewards	Both physical rewards (e.g., stickers, tokens) and emotional rewards (e.g., praise) were used to reinforce positive behavior.
Tailoring Reinforcement to Individual Needs	Participants shared that reinforcement was based on each learner's needs, preferences, and functional use of rewards.
Observing Progress Over Time	Participants perceived that desirable behaviors were maintained over time with continued reinforcement.
Reinforcement as a Strategy for Behavior Shaping	Participants viewed positive reinforcement as an effective tool for shaping and guiding learner behavior.

Educators' Experiences in Reducing Challenging Behaviors

Participants described specific strategies they use in the classroom that they perceive as effective in reducing challenging behaviors among their students. As educators highlight, when students receive positive reinforcement such as praise, they gradually develop and become more motivated in school, as reflected in their responses. Once a student becomes engaged, unwanted behaviors tend to diminish.

The following are excerpts from participants' perceptions on using positive reinforcement as a way to reduce challenging behaviors:

"…makatabang siya in a sense na maningkamot sya na makakuha ug taas na grades sunod na exam or quizzes."("…it can help in a way that it motivates him to strive for higher grades in the next exam or quizzes.") P1 Lines, 10-11."Ang pag-praise sa usa ka bata kung nay maayo nga nabuhat, usa kini ka way na magbinuotan siya pirme, dili lang sa skwelahan pati usab sa ilang balay."("Praising a child when they do something good is one way to encourage them to consistently behave well, not just in school but also at home.") P2, Lines 73-74. "...kanang as teacher, dili ta magsawa gud nga muhatag jud og reward every single good performance nila, or naa tay task gibuhat nila og mayo, bisag simple ra kaayo nga butang." ("...as teachers, we should never get tired of giving rewards for every good performance or when they do a task well, even if it's just something simple.") P3, Lines 28-29. "Para sa akoa, kay kanang e-praise nimo sila kung naa silay mabuhat nga maayo. Pero if dili pud maayo, kay e-redirect nako (laugh), pero most of the time, praising them makes them proud of themselves, and that drives them to do more good things sa klase." ("For me, I praise them when they do something good, but if it's not good, I redirect them instead. Most of the time, praising them makes them proud of themselves and motivates them to do more good things in class.") P4, Lines 36-38

P1 highlighted that students tend to strive for higher grades, and when they aim for academic success, they are more likely to be engaged in class rather than displaying disruptive behaviors. P1 explained that giving positive reinforcement helps students develop the drive to excel, as they feel motivated when they receive praise or recognition from their teachers, stating that "it can help in a way that it motivates him to strive for higher grades in the next exam or quizzes" (P1, Lines 10-11). In the same manner, P2 noted that praise encourages consistent positive behavior not only in school but also at home, suggesting its broader influence: "Praising a child when they do something good is one way to encourage them to consistently behave well, not just in school but also at home" (P2, Lines 73–74). P3 stressed the importance of acknowledging even small achievements, believing that consistent recognition inspires continued effort, stating that "…as teachers, we should never get tired of giving rewards for every good performance or when they do a task well, even if it's just something simple" (P3, Lines 28–29).

Meanwhile, P4 adopted a balanced approach, using praise to reinforce good behavior and redirection to address inappropriate actions. P4 observed that praise boosts students' self-esteem and promotes sustained positive conduct: "For me, I praise them when they do something good, but if it's not good, I redirect them instead. Most of the time, praising them makes them proud of themselves and motivates them to do more good things in class."

Participants' accounts indicated that positive reinforcement encourages desirable actions. According to Ismail (2023), the use of positive reinforcement can enhance student engagement in the classroom. When students are engaged, they may be less likely to display undesirable attitudes. Rafi et al. (2020) also support this view, stating that positive reinforcement, when used properly, helps encourage and sustain positive behavior in young learners.

Using Varied Forms of Rewards

The responses suggested that both tangible and intangible rewards contributed meaningfully to managing classroom behavior and reinforcing positive conduct. It shows that giving positive reinforcement to students does not always have to involve material rewards. Participants perceive that simple actions like praising can also help boost students' confidence, encourage them to learn, and minimize undesirable behaviors both inside and outside the classroom.

The following are excerpts from participants' perceptions on using varied forms of rewards as positive reinforcement:

"...pwede siya mga kuan, stickers, stamp pads, smiley faces ug uban pa." ("...it can be things like stickers, stamp pads, smiley faces, and so on.") P2, Line 35. "Meaning akong mga positive reinforcement dili lang siya tangible like atong mga stickers, stars, food, and toys, but also kanang spending time with them which is internal na." ("It means my positive reinforcement isn't just tangible things like stickers, stars, food, and toys, but also things like spending time with them, which is more internal.") P3, Lines 67-69. "Para sa akoa kay kanang e-praise nimo sila kung naa silay mabuhat nga maayo." ("For me, it's when you praise them whenever they do something good.") P4, Lines 36–37

Participants emphasized the importance of both tangible and intangible rewards in reinforcing positive behavior. For instance, P2 mentioned using items such as stickers, stamp pads, and smiley faces, illustrating that tangible materials can serve as effective reinforcers: "…it can be things like stickers, stamp pads, smiley faces, and so on" (P2, Line 35). P3 highlighted the value of intangible reinforcement, such as spending quality time with students, which helps build emotional connections and fosters intrinsic motivation. As P3 explained, "It means my positive reinforcement isn't just tangible things like stickers, stars, food, and toys, but also things like spending time with them, which is more internal" (P3, Lines 67–69). Similarly, P4 observed that simple verbal praise encourages children to repeat positive actions, stating, "For me, it's when you praise them whenever they do something good" (P4, Lines 36–37). These accounts are supported by Bakar and Zainal (2020), who noted that positive reinforcement techniques reduce disruptive behavior and increase student concentration.

The findings also align with Guay (2022) review of studies which concluded that both intrinsic motivation and autonomous extrinsic motivation can contribute to positive outcomes for learners. Tangible rewards, such as stickers and stamps, serve as extrinsic motivators, while praise and quality time foster intrinsic motivation. Children are more likely to stay motivated, learn well, and behave positively when their emotional needs are supported (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Tailoring Reinforcement to Individual Needs

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of adapting reinforcement to each child's personality, preferences, and needs. Participants perceive that positive reinforcement should not be given randomly. Instead, they emphasize the importance of knowing their students well, as the purpose of reinforcement is lost when it is given without considering whether it is meaningful or functional for a particular student.

The following excerpts are participants' responses, showing that each student has different needs that educators should understand:

"...ang uban malipay sa pagduwa, ug naa pud uban malipay lang sa pagtagad." ("...some are happy when they get to play, and there are also others who are simply happy when given attention.") P2, Lines 38–39. "Sa paghatag og positive reinforcement, just like sa naingon nako ganiha, mag-vary na siya depende sa gusto sa bata, iyang needs, mood ba niya, or health condition. Mao na nga butang nga dapat nato i-consider, og dapat individualized jud na siya." ("In giving positive reinforcement, just like I mentioned earlier, it varies depending on the child's preferences, needs, mood, or health condition. These are things we need to consider, and it really has to be individualized.") P3, Lines 88–90. "Since lahi-lahi jud ug personality ang mga bata, mag-differ jud kung unsay effective sa ilaha na positive reinforcement. As a teacher, you must be very flexible to address those different unique characteristics kay one shoe doesn't fit everyone jud baya. So as a teacher, you should find a way para ma-cater jud sila tanan." ("Since children have very different personalities, the kind of positive reinforcement that works for them also varies. As a teacher, you must be flexible to address these unique characteristics because one size doesn't fit all. You should find a way to cater to every learner.") P4, Lines 50–53

Participants emphasized the importance of individualized reinforcement, noting that strategies should be based on each child's preferences, mood, health, and needs. P2 observed that some children respond best to play, while others are more motivated by attention "...some are happy when they get to play, and there are also others who are simply happy when given attention." (P2, Lines 38–39). P3 added that a child's health and emotional condition must also be considered when giving reinforcement "In giving positive reinforcement... it varies depending on the child's preferences, needs, mood, or health condition..." (P3, Lines 88–90). P4 supported this, stating that no single approach fits all children and that teachers must be flexible to meet each learner's unique needs "Since children have very different personalities... one size doesn't fit all..." (P4, Lines 50–53). Participants' insights also aligned with the findings of Watling and Schwartz (2004), who emphasize that effective reinforcers vary across individuals and must be identified systematically and dynamically. Educators perceived that using varied forms of positive reinforcement supports students in reducing undesirable behaviors, as it reflects the uniqueness of each learner. The data reveal that children's responses to reinforcement are varied, which underscores the need for tailored interventions based on each child's unique experiences and behaviors to enhance engagement and task performance (Alsedrani, 2017).

Observing Progress Over Time

Participants associated positive reinforcement with perceived improvements in learners' behavior and motivation. They highlighted gradual changes in students' behavior, particularly within the classroom setting. According to the participants, positive reinforcement contributes significantly to students' learning and helps reduce undesirable behaviors.

The following excerpts illustrate participants' perceptions of the influence of positive reinforcement on student behavior:

"Mas ano siya, mas kanang… mas ganahan sila mo buhat ug maayo na pamatasan kesa sa mag-away or mang-bully sila sa ilang classmates." ("They tend to prefer behaving well rather than fighting, bullying, or doing other negative things to their classmates.") P1, Lines 14–15. "As a teacher, ang positive reinforcement makatabang jud ni siya og dako sa pag-mold sa character sa atong learner. Mas makabuild sila og trust sa atua isip ilang teacher, nga which is a good way sa pag-develop og positive behavior og hinay-hinay makuha ang dili maayo nga character or attitude nga ginapakita sa bata." ("As a teacher, positive reinforcement truly helps in shaping learners' character. It builds trust in us, which helps develop positive behavior and gradually eliminates negative traits.") P3, Lines 22–25. "Makita jud nimo especially in their character, they are more well-behaved, as I mentioned earlier, and sa outputs jud, you can see changes jud kaayo." ("You can really see the changes, especially in their character, they are more well-behaved, and there are noticeable improvements in their outputs.") P4, Lines 79–81

"Ang long-term effects sa positive reinforcement sa learners, for me, is makadevelop ka og rapport sa mga bata nga dili sila mahadlok sa school. Mas maging excited sila sa school kay friendly si teacher, masaligan si teacher. Og syempre, ang pinakatumong jud is if dili man totally mawala kay bata pa man sila, pero mas ma-lessen jud ang mga disruptive behaviors. Mas magpakita sila og desirable behaviors, which is makatabang jud sa ilang learnings."

("The long-term effect of positive reinforcement is building rapport so learners won't be afraid of school. They become more excited to attend, feel safe with the teacher, and while challenging behaviors may not fully disappear, they are reduced. Desirable behaviors increase, which supports learning.") P3, Lines 50–56

"…again, siguro ang effects sa positive reinforcement sa ilaha kay mura na sila ma-conditioned to do the expected right things like how to behave well in a specific setting."

("Positive reinforcement helps condition them to consistently do the right things, such as behaving well in specific situations.") P4, Lines 28–30

The participants' verbatim responses revealed perceived improvements in both learner behavior and academic performance as outcomes of positive reinforcement. Learners were reported to intentionally demonstrate prosocial behavior, such as avoiding fights and refraining from bullying, due to an awareness of the benefits tied to such actions. As one participant stated, "They tend to prefer behaving well rather than fighting, bullying, or doing other negative things to their classmates" (P1, Lines 14–15). Positive reinforcement was also identified as a motivating factor for academic engagement and improved performance, as indicated by another participant: "You can really see the changes, especially in their character, they are more well-behaved, and there are noticeable improvements in their outputs" (P4, Lines 79–81).

Furthermore, participants emphasized that positive reinforcement contributed to character development, teacher-learner trust, and a gradual reduction in undesirable behaviors. One participant shared, "As a teacher, positive reinforcement truly helps in shaping learners' character. It builds trust in us, which helps develop positive behavior and gradually eliminates negative traits" (P3, Lines 22–25). These outcomes were collectively interpreted by participants as contributing to improvements in learners' behavior and academic outcomes. This aligns with An (2022), who affirms that positive reinforcement is an effective strategy for classroom management, particularly for novice teachers facing behavioral challenges.

Participants also highlighted the long-term impacts of positive reinforcement, noting that learners often transferred learned behaviors beyond the classroom, such as at home. As one teacher explained, "The long-term effect of positive reinforcement is building rapport so learners won't be afraid of school. They become more excited to attend, feel safe with the teacher, and while challenging behaviors may not fully disappear, they are reduced. Desirable behaviors increase, which supports learning" (P3, Lines 50–56). Additionally, positive reinforcement was perceived to help condition learners to act appropriately across different contexts: "Positive reinforcement helps condition them to consistently do the right things, such as behaving well in specific situations" (P4, Lines 28–30).

This finding is consistent with Watling and Schwartz (2004), who suggest that decades of study's have explored the effectiveness of positive reinforcement in shaping behavior. It was described as helping build rapport, reducing fear, and supporting school attendance by fostering a safe and trusting learning environment. Although challenging behaviors may persist, educators observed that the frequency of disruptive behavior tends to decrease, and desirable behaviors appear to increase over time (P3).

As Rumfola (2017) suggests, motivating learners with positive reinforcement helps create an optimal learning environment. This approach aligns with children's natural tendencies to seek attention and rewards, supporting the development of confident and well-behaved individuals. Positive reinforcement was perceived to encourage learners to consistently demonstrate appropriate behavior across various settings (P4).

Reinforcement as a Strategy for Behavior Shaping

Instead of relying on punitive approaches, educators observed that the consistent use of positive reinforcement created a more encouraging and cooperative classroom environment. In addition to improvements in academic performance, participants reflected on how it helped shape students' behavior.

The following excerpts present participants' insights on how positive reinforcement contributes to shaping students' behavior:

"Og malipay kayo ko makita ang mga bata nga naa jud positive impact sa ilaha-akoang strategies pud kung paunsa ma-lessen or mawala ang mga challenging behaviors sa mga bata." ("And I feel very happy when I see that there is a positive impact on the children,it also shows that my strategies are effective in reducing or eliminating challenging behaviors.") P3, Lines 69–71. "…For me noh, ang advantage is naa nay idea ang mga bata how to behave in a classroom setting to receive their rewards." ("For me, the advantage is that the children already have an idea of how to behave in a classroom setting in order to receive their rewards.") P4, Lines 98–99

Morin (2017) emphasizes that consistent reinforcement supports children in internalizing positive behaviors until such behaviors become habitual. This perspective was echoed by participants, who described the use of praise, tangible rewards, and structured routines as contributing not only to improved student behavior but also to strengthening teacher-student relationships, fostering a more effective and nurturing classroom environment.

Participant narratives reflected this dynamic. One participant noted the emotional and behavioral impact of her reinforcement strategies, stating, "And I feel very happy when I see that there is a positive impact on the children, it also shows that my strategies are effective in reducing or eliminating challenging behaviors" (P3, Lines 69–71). Another participant observed that positive reinforcement contributed to learners' understanding of expected classroom behavior: "For me, the advantage is that the children already have an idea of how to behave in a classroom setting in order to receive their rewards" (P4, Lines 98–99). These insights illustrate how reinforcement practices not only guide learners' actions but also promote a sense of clarity and consistency in classroom expectations.

Conclusions

The results of this study reveal that positive reinforcement emerged as a key factor in shaping children's behavior in early childhood classrooms. Educators described using both tangible and intangible rewards, which were perceived as more effective when tailored to individual learner needs. Participants noted that this approach was associated with a reduction in challenging behaviors and the development of more positive conduct among learners. Over time, positive reinforcement was experienced as contributing to lasting behavioral change, increased motivation, and the strengthening of trust between teachers and pupils. Rather than relying on punitive methods, educators reflected that positive reinforcement fostered a more supportive and engaging learning environment, where children were encouraged to demonstrate appropriate behaviors both inside and outside the classroom.

While this study offers meaningful insights, it is limited by its small group of participants, which may have constrained the range of perspectives gathered. Additionally, the use of a qualitative descriptive approach provided a clear and straightforward account of educators' experiences but may not have fully captured the deeper meanings behind their practices. Future research could build on these findings by exploring educators' experiences using approaches such as phenomenology, to gain a more in-depth understanding of how positive reinforcement is lived and interpreted in early childhood contexts.

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