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Teachers' and caregivers' predictions of autistic students' kindergarten transition success

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ABSTRACT

Successful transitions to kindergarten improve children's short- and long-term outcomes. Autistic children are more likely than their typically developing peers to face challenges during these transitions. There are no standard transition planning practices for autistic students; therefore, decisions about classroom placement and supports rely primarily on caregiver and teacher perceptions. No published studies examine the predictive validity of caregiver and teacher perspectives or how to incorporate them into decision-making. We examined whether caregivers and preschool teachers could predict children's adjustment to kindergarten, and whether caregiver-teacher communication and teachers' autism experience moderated prediction accuracy. The sample included 93 caregiver-child dyads, 68 preschool teachers, and 54 kindergarten teachers. All children had either a medical diagnosis or educational classification of autism. Caregivers and preschool teachers completed a survey, predicting the success of their student/child in kindergarten. Preschool teachers' prediction of children's successful adjustment was positively associated with children's positive affect, like contentedness or excitement, in kindergarten. Caregivers' prediction of children's successful adjustment was negatively associated with children's interfering behavior. Neither caregiver-teacher communication nor teacher autism experience moderated the association between predictions and child outcomes. Findings suggest that teachers and caregivers offer complementary insights that should be included in transition planning to better support autistic children's transitions to kindergarten.

Successful transitions from preschool to elementary school, which include adjusting to new routines, physical spaces, academic and social expectations, teachers, and students, are associated with short- and long-term benefits for children (Fontil et al., 2020). In the

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short-term, these include positive peer relationships and academic gains (Ahtola et al., 2011; Lopez & Benner, 2025; Pan et al., 2019; Schulting et al., 2005). Later outcomes include adolescent wellbeing (Gregory et al., 2020), higher rates of college attendance and higher income (Chetty et al., 2011). In the United States, kindergarten marks the start of a new school system, distinct from preschool. For autistic children, the transition from preschool to kindergarten is considered a significant developmental milestone (Forest et al., 2004; Marsh et al., 2017).

1. Transition Challenges

The transition to kindergarten is accompanied by significant changes in routine, including introductions to new people and environments. Many autistic children thrive on routine, so this change can create social, emotional, and academic challenges (Mandy et al., 2016). Autistic children are more likely than other children to face challenges that make the transition to kindergarten difficult (Fontil et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2017; Nuske et al., 2019). For instance, autistic children often start kindergarten with less developed emotion regulation skills and more frequent interfering behavior (i.e., behavior that interrupts classroom routine) than their typically developing peers (Marsh et al., 2017), which affects their school readiness (Pellicano et al., 2017). School readiness refers to a child's preparedness to learn at school and includes academic and social-emotional competence (Pellicano et al., 2017). More recent conceptualizations reflect a systems-wide perspective. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics defines school readiness as "the readiness of the individual child, the school's readiness for children, and the ability of the family and community to support optimal early child development" (Williams et al., 2019). This expanded definition highlights the need to attend to both child- and system-level factors when preparing for kindergarten. While school readiness and transition success are closely related concepts, in this study, we define "school readiness" as the baseline preparedness of the child and school before entry, whereas "transition success" refers to the child's behavioral and affective functioning after some adjustment to the new school environment.

1.1. Transition Planning

Kindergarten transition planning is often fragmented and varies greatly from school district to school district, and from child to child (Cook et al., 2024; Lopez & Benner, 2025). For example, there is no systematic method for determining whether autistic kindergartners should be placed in general education or more segregated classrooms, nor are there evidence-based ways to develop their support plans. One study found that placement hinged on a student's readiness, but definitions of "ready" were subjective and varied widely, resulting in many different ways of determining placements (Frake et al., 2023).

Transition plans rely on input from teachers and caregivers, typically obtained during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Collaboration among caregivers, preschool teachers, and kindergarten teachers is central to transition success (Fontil et al., 2020; Puccioni et al., 2020). In practice, however, limitations of the IEP process may prevent collaboration. For instance, preschool staff may not be invited to the meeting, invited teachers may be unable to attend, or due to administrative deadlines, placements and supports may be suggested even before IEP meetings have occurred. These limitations are in part due to legislation; under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, preschool teachers are not mandated to attend IEP meetings (34 CFR § 300.321). Even when all parties can meet, discrepancies between caregiver and teacher reports of autistic children's behavior and functioning are common (Kang et al., 2023; Lees Thorne et al., 2026; Levinson et al., 2020).

Experts recommend including caregiver and teacher perspectives when assessing children's needs and designating supports (De Los Reyes et al., 2023; De Los Reyes & Makol, 2021). However, it is unclear how to incorporate different views into these decisions, and the current system provides few strategies for resolving discrepancies. This is particularly important because children's outcomes are negatively affected when participating parties' perceptions and values are misaligned, (Ehrlich et al., 2021). In the absence of a more systematic approach to transition planning, adult perceptions of a child's readiness for transition may substantially influence placement and supports. Therefore, understanding the accuracy adult perceptions of children's readiness is critical.

1.2. Current Study

We define the success of a child's transition by kindergarten teachers' observations of classroom adjustment, using standardized measures of affect and behavior. Social-emotional adjustment is one core component of successful transitions: it reflects a child's capacity to manage the emotional and interpersonal demands of a new school environment (Durlak et al., 2011; Hirst et al., 2011; Lopez & Benner, 2025) and is positively associated with school readiness (Lam et al., 2022). Positive affect is a central, observable indicator of social-emotional adjustment (Hernández et al., 2016; Hirst et al., 2011). Positive affect (e.g., happiness) is linked to peer engagement at school and self-esteem among autistic children (Gilmore et al., 2019; McChesney & Toseeb, 2018). Success may also be defined by the absence of ongoing interfering behavior. Autistic children's interfering behavior may indicate distress (Nuske et al., 2023) and therefore suggest a less successful transition, while less frequent and/or less severe interfering behavior may indicate a more successful transition. Consistent with the tripartite model of school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), affect and behavior reflect children's responses to the proximal classroom environment, while other aspects of transition success (e.g., academic outcomes) are more distal and may require a longer time to exhibit change. Dysregulation, which encompasses both affect and behavior, directly impacts a child's ability to engage with classroom material (Graziano et al., 2007; Li & Bai, 2025), so measuring affect and behavior provides a proxy for capacity to learn. Taken together, affect and behavior can be understood as proximal measures and broader representations of a child's success in the classroom.

Despite the centrality of adult perceptions in transition planning, no studies have directly examined the alignment of these

perceptions with children's adjustment to kindergarten. Effective communication between caregivers and both preschool and kindergarten teachers facilitates shared understanding and smoother transitions (Fontil et al., 2020; Puccioni et al., 2020). Caregiver communication with preschool teachers may provide insight into their child's functioning at school, while communication with future kindergarten teachers may provide insight into expectations. In addition to communication between caregivers and teachers, teachers' experiences may influence their predictions. Theories of teaching expertise argue that decisional capital, the ability to make reasonable judgments about students, is developed over many years (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). Teaching experience is associated with greater ability to identify and predict both neurotypical and autistic student needs (Devi et al., 2024; Seidel et al., 2021).

To advance research in this area, the current study examined:

1. Whether caregivers and preschool teachers can predict children's success in their transitions to kindergarten
2. Whether communication between caregivers and both preschool and kindergarten teachers moderates the association between caregiver predictions and child outcomes. We hypothesized that more effective communication would result in more accurate predictions.
3. Whether preschool teachers' experience teaching autistic students moderates the association between teacher predictions and child outcomes. We hypothesized that more experience, and therefore more reference points from observing past students and their transitions, would result in more accurate predictions.

2. Conceptual Model

Our conceptual model illustrates factors that may affect preschool teachers' and caregivers' predictions of transition success (Fig. 1). The model is grounded in research on transitions, which has identified the importance of emotion regulation skills and adaptability (Marsh et al., 2017; Nuske et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2017). It also borrows from wellbeing science, in which positive affect is a core component of wellbeing (e.g., Seligman, 2018). Our conceptual model incorporates ecological context, proposing that the different settings each adult has access to offer different opportunities for observing these factors and that the adults' prior reference points may influence their interpretation. For example, caregivers primarily interact with and observe their child at home, whereas teachers interact with and observe the child at school. Caregivers' understanding of their child in school therefore may be based mostly on communication with their teacher. The model incorporates factors that we directly measured (e.g., years teaching autistic students), factors that we proxied (e.g., quality of caregiver-teacher communication), and factors that we did not measure but that may still influence prediction accuracy (e.g., adult beliefs about a child's capacity for success). In some cases, additional

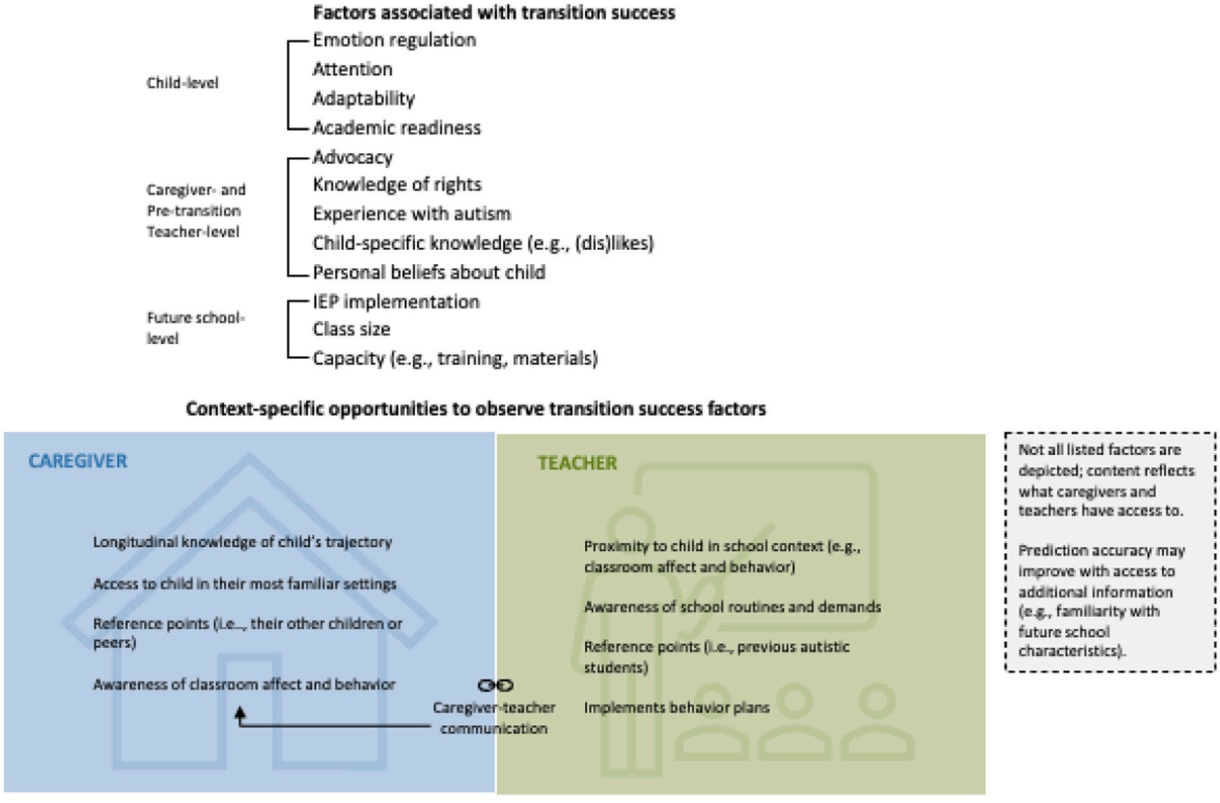

Fig. 1. Caregiver and Teacher Opportunities to Observe Factors Associated with Transition Success.

contextual knowledge may have contributed to adult predictions. For instance, some school districts use a catchment system to assign schools based on geographic location, so caregivers and preschool teachers may be familiar with the future environment, which could shape their predictions.

3. Methods

This study used data from a multi-site randomized controlled trial of an intervention to improve autistic students' transitions to elementary, middle, and high school by supporting how caregivers navigate the transition process (Building Better Bridges; BBB; Nuske et al., 2024). Study sites included Davis, California; Los Angeles, California; Rochester, New York; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Seventy-five percent of the original sample qualified as under resourced, operationalized as transitioning to a Title I school and having a household income of less than 250% of the U.S. federal poverty line (Nuske et al., 2024). The current study uses a subset of participants from the original sample and included all caregiver-child dyads in which the child was preparing for a transition from preschool (defined as any educational setting prior to entry into the K−12 system) to kindergarten, their preschool teacher, and their kindergarten teacher. The income distribution of this subsample was similar to the full sample, with most families qualifying as under resourced. Participants in this subsample included children with either a medical diagnosis or educational classification of autism and their caregivers (n = 93 caregiver-child dyads), preschool teachers (n = 68), and kindergarten teachers (n = 54).

4. Procedures

All procedures were approved through each site's Institutional Review Board and participating schools' Research Review Boards. The data collection period comprised the last six weeks of the preschool academic year and the first six weeks of the elementary school,

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline.

	Caregivers		Children		Preschool teachers		Kindergarten teachers	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Gender								
Female	84	90.32	15	16.48	60	92.31	48	94.12
Male	9	9.68	76	83.52	5	7.69	3	5.88
Age								
20–29	25	26.88	-	-	9	13.64	13	26.00
30–39	49	52.88	-	-	26	39.39	11	22.00
40–49	16	17.20	-	-	19	28.79	19	38.00
50 +	3	3.23			12	18.18	7	14.00
Child Age								
< 5	-	-	47	50.54	-	-	-	-
≥ 5	-	-	46	49.46	-	-	-	-
Race[a]								
African Amer./Black	22	25.29	23	26.14	6	9.53	0	0.00
Caucasian/White	44	50.57	43	48.86	43	68.25	38	77.55
Asian Amer./Pacific Islander	5	5.75	4	4.55	1	1.59	2	4.08
Multiple	0	0.00	4	4.55	1	1.59	2	4.08
Other	10	11.49	8	9.09	3	4.76	3	6.12
Prefer not to answer	6	6.90	6	6.82	9	14.29	6	12.24
Ethnicity								
Not Hispanic or Latino	31	33.33	33	35.48	47	71.21	35	70.00
Hispanic or Latino	61	65.59	58	62.74	16	24.24	13	26.00
Prefer not to answer	1	1.08	2	2.15	3	4.55	2	4.00
Income								
< $30,000	43	46.24	-	-	-	-	-	-
$30,000–59,999	33	35.48	-	-	-	-	-	-
$60,000–89,999	12	12.90	-	-	-	-	-	-
$90,000 or more	5	5.38	-	-	-	-	-	-
Experience teaching autistic students								
0–2 years	-	-	-	-	10	15.62	22	43.14
3–9 years	-	-	-	-	32	50.00	12	23.53
10 + years	-	-	-	-	22	34.38	17	33.33
Type of teacher								
General education	-	-	-	-	9	13.64	10	20.00
Special education	-	-	-	-	54	81.82	39	78.00
Other	-	-	-	-	3	4.55	1	2.00

Note. Percentages reported are based on non-missing responses to each survey item, rather than percentage of each sample. Dashes represents data not collected.
[a]Race and ethnicity reporting is not exclusionary, meaning percentages may sum to over 100%. Categories not endorsed by any participants are not reported.

after the transition to kindergarten occurred. At study enrollment, caregivers and preschool teachers completed questionnaires on their pre-transition perceptions of the transition and child affect. Preschool teachers completed an additional measure on children's interfering behavior in preschool.

Six weeks after the transition, caregivers and kindergarten teachers completed questionnaires on their perceptions of the transition and the child's affect; kindergarten teachers completed an additional questionnaire on the presence of children's interfering behavior in the classroom. Kindergarten teachers' reports of child affect and behavior were used as the primary outcomes, given their direct observation of children in the classroom.

We examined associations between caregivers' and preschool teachers' predictions of transition success and kindergarten teachers' reported child outcomes, irrespective of intervention status. While the primary study intervention had begun by the time we collected our prediction measures, it was not designed to alter adults' ability to assess children's transition readiness, nor affect children's affect or behavior. Rather, the intervention primarily focused on supporting caregivers' navigation of the transition process (e.g., learning about their rights; see Nuske et al., 2024 for module details).

5. Measures

5.1. Demographics

Caregivers and teachers completed demographic questionnaires at enrollment. Collected information included sex, age, racial/ethnic background for all participants, caregivers' household income, teachers' years of experience teaching autistic students, and teaching position (e.g., general versus special education). Caregivers, preschool teachers, and kindergarten teachers were predominantly white, non-Hispanic females. Children were predominantly white, non-Hispanic males. Complete demographic information is provided in Table 1.

5.2. Transition Evaluation Questionnaire (TEQ)

The Transition Evaluation Questionnaire (TEQ) was developed as part of the original study to measure dimensions of teacher and caregiver perceptions of school transition planning, including communication, success, support planning, and necessary information. The TEQ has been used in studies of transition networks (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021) and to understand factors associated with perceptions of transition planning (Dimachkie Nunnally et al., 2024). Each item on the TEQ asks about a different construct involved in the transition process (see Supplementary Materials). In this study, we use single items from the TEQ as both predictors and moderators (described below). When evaluating constructs in isolation, single-item measures are psychometrically defensible, reliably, and can be comparably predictive as multi-item scales (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Wanous et al., 1997). Caregivers completed the TEQ both before and after the transition. Preschool teachers completed the TEQ before the transition, and kindergarten teachers completed it after the transition.

Our independent variable of interest was one item from the pre-transition version of this questionnaire, completed by preschool teachers: "Based on current transition planning, how successful do you think your/the child's transition will be to his/her new school?" This item was selected because it directly aligns with our primary research question (Aim 1). Other TEQ items were not included because they did not explicitly ask the respondent to predict the child's transition outcomes and could introduce confounds. This item was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being "not successful", 3 "somewhat successful", and 5 "very successful." A definition of success was not provided to the respondent, so individual definitions of "success" may have varied.

In secondary analyses (described below), we examined two additional pre-transition TEQ items as proxies for communication about transitions between caregivers and teachers. One item assessed this communication with their current school (preschool): "How effective has communication been about the transition process between you and your child's current school team during this school year?" The second assessed this communication with their future school (kindergarten): "How effective has communication been about the transition process between you and your child's future school team during this school year?" Both items were rated on a similar 6-point Likert scale as the success item, with an additional option at 0 ("I don't know anyone on the current/future school team"), and comparable ratings from 1 ("not effective") to 5 ("very effective").

Table 2
Selected Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning Items.

	Caregiver Item	Teacher Item
Positive Affect	"My child is enthusiastic about school."	"In my class, this student is enthusiastic."
	"My child appears happy to go to school."	"In class, this student appears happy."
	"When working on schoolwork, my child seems to enjoy it."	"When working on classwork, this student seems to enjoy it."
	"For my child, learning seems to be fun."	"For this student, learning seems to be fun."
Negative Affect	"My child is anxious about school."	"In my class, this student is anxious."
	"My child seems unhappy about school."	"In class, this student seems unhappy."
	"My child appears depressed about school."	"In my class, this student appears to be depressed."
	"My child is angry about school."	"In my class, this student is angry."

5.3. Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning (EDL)

The Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning (EDL) measure assesses behavioral and emotional engagement and disaffection in the classroom (Knowles et al., 2024; Skinner et al., 2009). Authors of the EDL conceptualize engagement as active participation and emotional involvement. Disaffection is characterized by withdrawal, lack of effort, and negative emotional responses. The EDL has strong internal consistency across cultures (Immekus & Ingle, 2019; Ritoša et al., 2020). Caregivers and teachers completed the EDL before and after the transition. The kindergarten teachers' post-transition reports of these items were included in analyses as measures of child outcomes.

Because the primary study did not include a comprehensive measure of social-emotional wellbeing, we selected a subset of EDL items that contained relevant social-emotional wellbeing information, detailed in Table 2. Other EDL items were excluded due to potential confounds (e.g., responses to "When working on classwork, this student appears frustrated" might be confounded by a child's academic abilities). Authors reviewed items a priori to determine content validity and confirmed internal consistency for each scale: caregiver-reported positive affect (α =.73) and negative affect (α =.86), and teacher-reported positive affect (α =.84) and negative affect (α =.80). To ensure measurement of two distinct constructs, authors also conducted an exploratory factor analysis using kindergarten teacher EDL responses, which represent children's outcomes in kindergarten. Selected EDL items loaded onto two separate factors from.61 to.84 for factor 1, positive affect, and.52–.91 for factor 2, negative affect. Items from each factor had loadings of $\leq$ .09 onto the other factor (Table 3).

5.4. School Situations Questionnaire (SSQ)

The School Situations Questionnaire (SSQ) is a measure of interfering behavior in classrooms (Barkley, 1981; Dimachkie Nunnally et al., 2024; Handen et al., 2015). The SSQ has both strong internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Altepeter & Breen, 1989). Only teachers completed the SSQ: preschool teachers reported behavior before the transition, while kindergarten teachers reported behavior after the transition. Teachers were asked to rate *if* a student has interfering behavior in nine common classroom scenarios (referred to as situations, e.g., small group activities, free-play time) and if they do, *how severe* that behavior is on a 9-point scale (1–3 = mild, 4–6 = moderate, 7–9 = significant severity, with definitions of mild, moderate, and significant provided). This results in two types of scores: the number of situations a child has interfering behavior in and the severity of behavior across situations. Situations where no interfering behavior occurred are assigned severity scores of zero. This ensures that the estimate of average behavioral severity considers areas where children do not have interfering behavior, providing a more accurate and thorough picture of behavior across contexts. The kindergarten teachers' post-transition reports of these items were included in analyses as measures of child outcomes.

6. Analyses

The study assessed associations between both caregiver and preschool teacher success predictions as measured by the TEQ and child outcomes reported by kindergarten teachers on the selected EDL items, the number of situations in which interfering behavior was observed, and the mean severity of behavior across those situations. We also examined moderators of these associations, including caregiver-teacher communication for caregiver predictions and experience with autistic students for teacher predictions.

Descriptive statistics are presented for the observed data with some variation in sample size due to variation in measure response (n = 93 caregiver-child dyads, 68 preschool teachers, 54 kindergarten teachers). Missing data were handled using multiple imputation via the MICE package in RStudio (Van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). Variables with missing values were imputed using predictive mean matching, and 10 imputed datasets were generated. All inferential analyses (i.e., t-tests and linear regressions) were conducted on these imputed datasets, with results pooled using Rubin's rules (Rubin, 2018). Within preschool data, 93 observations were nested within 68 teacher clusters, with 72% of clusters containing a single student (maximum cluster size = 3). Within kindergarten data, 66 observations were nested within 53 teacher clusters, with 83% of clusters containing a single observation

Table 3
Results From a Factor Analysis of Kindergarten Teacher Responses to the Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning.

EDL item	Factor loading				
	1	2	h^2	u^2	com
Factor 1: Positive Affect					
For this student, learning seems to be fun.	**.84**	.03	.69	.31	1.0
When working on classwork, this student seems to enjoy it.	**.82**	.08	.63	.37	1.0
In my class, this student is enthusiastic.	**.70**	−.06	.52	.48	1.0
In class, this student appears happy.	**.61**	−.22	.51	.49	1.2
Factor 2: Negative Affect					
In my class, this student appears to be depressed.	.09	**.91**	.79	.21	1.0
In class, this student seems unhappy.	−.09	**.85**	.79	.21	1.0
In class, this student seems anxious.	.04	**.58**	.32	.68	1.0
In class, this student is angry.	−.25	**.52**	.42	.58	1.4

Note. N = 528. The extraction method was minimum residual with an oblique rotation. Calculated using imputed data.

(maximum cluster size = 4). Given the limited extent and small size of clusters, we opted not to use multilevel or GEE models (Austin et al., 2024). Instead, we used univariate linear regression, which is unlikely to meaningfully bias standard errors under these conditions. All analyses were conducted using RStudio for Macintosh, version 2024.12.1 +563.

Linear regression was used to estimate the extent to which caregiver and preschool teacher TEQ scores predicted each child outcome. Kindergarten teacher reports were used as primary outcomes because they were thought to most reflect a child's affect and behavior in school (as opposed to caregiver reports, which would not be based in direct observation). Interaction terms were added to test whether prediction strength varied by caregiver-teacher communication or teacher experience. For teacher experience, models were stratified based on low or high teacher experience, operationalized as at or below (low) versus above (high) the mean years of experience teaching autistic students ($M = 8.03$, $SD = 6.69$). This approach was selected because teachers with varying levels of experience might conceptualize child outcomes differently (e.g., defining severity of interfering behavior on the SSQ), therefore potentially obscuring effects if all included in a single model.

Intervention group status was not included as a covariate because our goal was to examine the association between adult's success predictions and child outcomes, rather than to estimate intervention effects. Moreover, prior analyses reported no significant between-group differences in TEQ total scores for either caregivers or teachers at the relevant timepoint (Nuske et al., 2024), suggesting that group assignment did not substantially influence their predictions. Chi-square tests indicated that teacher and caregiver responses to the success prediction item did not significantly differ by intervention group ($p = .67$ and.08, respectively). Because caregivers were direct recipients of the intervention, intervention group was included as a covariate in sensitivity analyses of their prediction models.

An exploratory analysis assessed whether caregiver predictions of success were associated with caregiver-reported kindergarten outcomes. This analysis was conducted to understand if caregivers' predictions were consistent with their own reports.

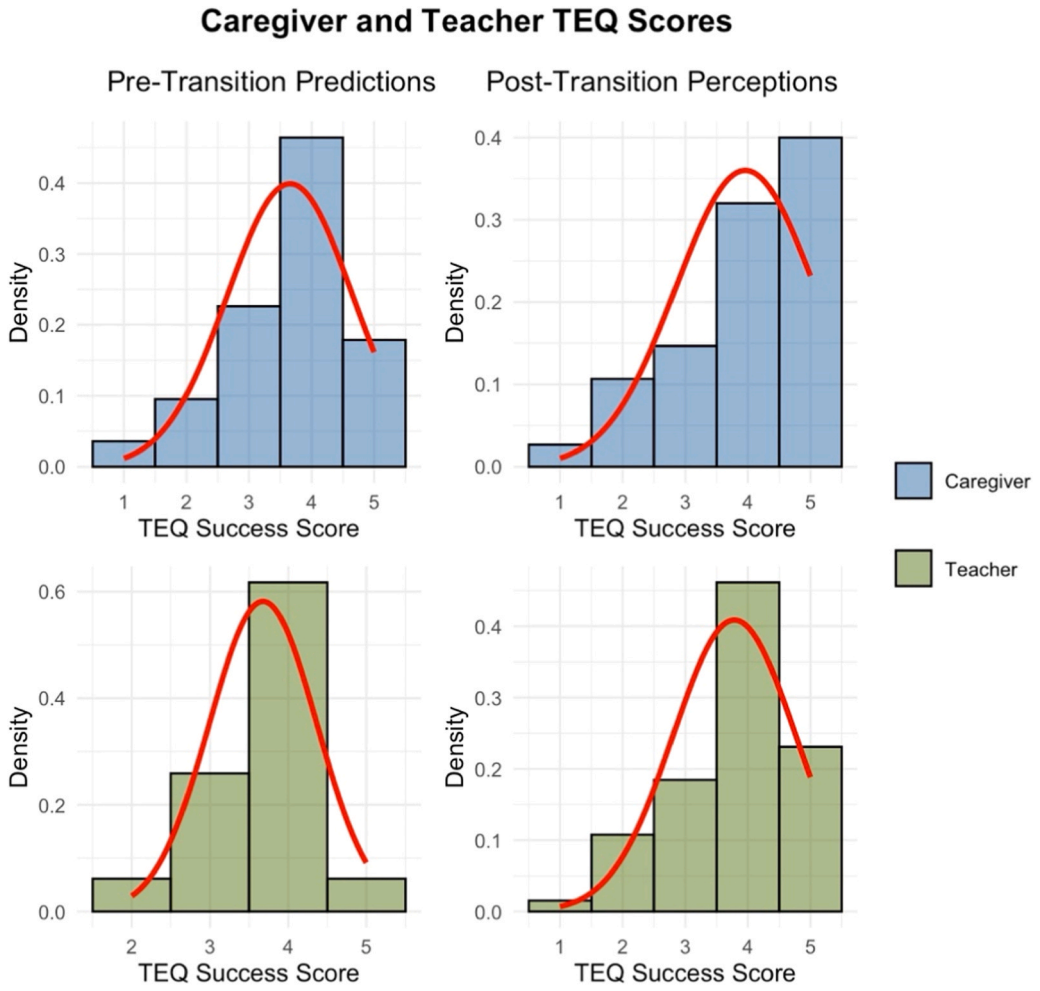

Fig. 2. Distributions of Caregiver and Teacher TEQ Success Scores.

7. Results

7.1. Sample Characteristics and Initial Comparisons

We first examined descriptive statistics for predictions of transition success and kindergarten child outcomes using observed data to characterize the overall sample. Initial group comparisons were conducted using multiply imputed data. Fractional degrees of freedom reported below are due to pooling across these imputed datasets.

Pre-transition predictions were, on average, optimistic in both groups. Caregivers predicted that their child's school transition would be between "somewhat successful" and "mostly successful" ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.00$). Preschool teachers had similar predictions ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .69$). Caregivers' and preschool teachers' mean success prediction ratings were not statistically significantly different ($t(60.64) = -0.39$, $p = .70$, $d = -.06$). Post-transition success perceptions followed a similar pattern and were not statistically significantly different ($t(46.95) = 1.41$, $p = .17$, $d = .22$). Distributions of TEQ success scores pre- and post-transition are depicted in Fig. 2.

Caregivers' and kindergarten teachers' mean reports of positive affect did not significantly differ ($t(49.47) = 0.76$, $p = .20$, $d = .25$), nor did mean negative affect reports ($t(59.24) = -.25$, $p = .60$, $d = -.11$). Teachers reported that on average, students exhibited interfering behavior in three or four classroom situations ($M = 3.52$, SD = 3.11). Interfering behavior was most frequently reported during individual deskwork (e.g., worksheets, fine motor activities), small group activities, and class lessons ($n = 54$), with an average severity across all situations of 1.54 ($SD = 1.66$). Visual inspection of the data confirmed a positive skew with a few higher-scoring cases; these were retained to preserve sample heterogeneity. Additional details on the specific classroom situations where interfering behavior was measured are provided in Table 4. Full distributions of transition success, affect, and behavior scores can be found in Table 5.

7.2. Primary Analyses (Aim 1)

We estimated whether caregiver and preschool teacher predictions of transition success were associated with teacher-reported child outcomes in kindergarten. Separate univariate linear regression models were used to assess associations between adult success predictions and child positive affect, negative affect, and interfering behavior in kindergarten, as reported by the kindergarten teacher.

Preschool teacher predictions of success were significantly associated with kindergarten teachers' reports of positive affect ($b = 1.23$, $SE = .55$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .07$). Caregiver predictions of success were not significantly associated with kindergarten teachers' reports of positive affect ($b = .31$, $SE = .39$, $p = .40$, $R^2 = .01$). Caregiver predictions of success were significantly associated with kindergarten teachers' reports of the severity of interfering behaviors ($b = -.45$, $SE = .21$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .07$), while preschool teacher predictions were not ($b = -.43$, $SE = .32$, $p = .19$, $R^2 = .03$).

Neither teacher nor caregiver predictions were associated with kindergarten teachers' reports of negative affect or number of situations in which a child exhibited interfering behavior. All primary analysis regression results are presented in Table 6.

7.3. Secondary Analyses (Aims 2 and 3)

We next tested whether caregiver-school communication or teacher experience with autistic students moderated the association between adult predictions of success and child outcomes.

For caregiver predictions, communication with both the current (preschool) and future (kindergarten) school were tested. On average, caregivers reported that current-school communication was between "somewhat effective" and "mostly effective" ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.28$), while future-school communication ranked between "a little effective" and "somewhat effective" ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.68$). Neither variable significantly moderated the association between caregivers' predictions of success and child outcomes (e.g., current-school communication × caregiver success prediction on child positive affect: $F(3, 59.70) = 1.88$, $p = .14$, $R^2 = .01$).

Table 4
Endorsed Contexts and Severity Ratings on the School Situation Questionnaire.

Item	Frequency Endorsed (n)	Severity endorsed (M, SD)
Does this child present any problems with following instructions, commands, or rules for you in any of these situations?		
During individual deskwork	54	4.40 (1.99)
During small group activities	54	3.92 (2.00)
During free-play time in class	38	3.46 (2.05)
During lessons to the class	54	4.06 (2.06)
On field trips	6	5.00 (2.61)
During special assemblies	23	4.26 (2.07)
At recess	31	3.73 (2.12)
At lunch	33	3.50 (1.87)
During one-on-one instruction	45	3.67 (2.18)

Note. $N = 65$ responses from 54 unique teachers (teachers reported on multiple students if applicable). *n*s may differ from *N* due to missing data and clustering. Calculated using raw data.

Table 5
Distributions of Measure Scores.

Measure	Timepoint	Respondent	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	Possible Range
TEQ: Success	Pre-transition	Caregiver (n = 84)	3.65 (1.00)	1	5	1–5
		Teacher (n = 81)	3.68 (.69)	2	5	
	Post-transition	Caregiver (n = 75)	3.96 (1.11)	1	5	1–5
		Teacher (n = 65)	3.78 (.98)	1	5	
Positive affect	Post-transition	Caregiver (n = 68)	13.12 (3.01)	3	16	0–16
		Teacher (n = 66)	11.72 (2.71)	4	16	
Negative affect	Post-transition	Caregiver (n = 67)	6.12 (2.78)	3	16	0–16
		Teacher (n = 66)	6.37 (2.33)	4	16	
Situations with interfering behavior	Post-transition	Teacher (n = 65)	3.71 (3.10)	0	9	0–9
Severity of interfering behavior	Post-transition	Teacher (n = 65)	1.54 (1.66)	0	7.33	0–9

Note. Calculated using raw data. *n*s based on responses per individual student, rather than individual respondents. *n*s may differ from *N* due to missing data and clustering.

Table 6
Associations between Caregiver and Teacher Predictions of Success and Child Outcomes in Kindergarten.

Variable	Pre-Transition TEQ Respondent	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		R^2	*p*
				LL	*UL*		
Positive affect	Caregiver	.31	.39	−.42	1.08	.01	.40
	Teacher	1.23	.55	.05	2.24	.07	.04*
Negative affect	Caregiver	.09	.31	−.53	.71	.00	.77
	Teacher	.19	.48	−.76	1.15	.00	.69
Situations with interfering behavior	Caregiver	−.33	.33	−.99	.43	.02	.33
	Teacher	−.61	.50	−1.60	.39	.02	.23
Severity of interfering behavior	Caregiver	−.45	.21	−.87	−.02	.07	.04*
	Teacher	−.43	.32	−1.07	.21	.03	.19

Note. Calculated with imputed data. Fractional degrees of freedom are due to pooling across imputed datasets.

For teacher predictions, years of experience teaching autistic students was treated as a continuous variable and tested as a moderator of the association between success predictions and child outcomes. On average, teachers reported 8.03 years of experience teaching autistic students ($SD = 6.69$). Years of experience teaching autistic students did not statistically significantly moderate the association between teacher predictions of success and any child outcome (e.g., experience teaching autistic students × teacher success prediction on child positive affect: $b = -.09$, $SE = .09$, $p = .29$, $R^2 = .09$).

7.4. Exploratory and Sensitivity Analyses

Additional analyses were conducted to assess whether caregiver predictions of success were associated with caregiver-reported kindergarten outcomes. Caregiver predictions approached a statistically significant association with their reports of negative affect ($b = -.58$, $SE = .33$, $p = .09$, $R^2 = .05$), but not positive affect ($b = .21$, $SE = .54$, $p = .69$, $R^2 = .01$).

As a sensitivity analysis, intervention group was added as a covariate to caregiver-prediction models. In the adjusted model, the association between caregiver predictions of transition success and children's interfering behavior was attenuated ($b = -.33$, $SE = .21$, $p = .13$).

8. Discussion

We found that preschool teachers' and caregivers' ratings predict different, complementary aspects of the success of children's school transitions. Preschool teachers' ratings predicted child positive affect in school, while caregivers' ratings predicted kindergarten teacher reports of severity of interfering behavior. In other words, the more successful a preschool teacher predicted a child would be, the more positive affect their kindergarten teacher reported, and the more successful a caregiver predicted their child would be, the less severe interfering behavior their kindergarten teacher reported.

Neither teachers' nor caregivers' ratings predicted negative affect in school. The negative affect items included in this study

primarily represented internalizing behavior, apart from one item asking about anger. One explanation for this lack of association is adults' tendency to underreport child internalizing problems, likely because they are inherently less visible and therefore more difficult to detect (Aguilar-Yamuza et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2011; Tandon et al., 2009; van de Looij-Jansen et al., 2011). Neither teachers' nor caregivers' predictions of success predicted the number of situations with interfering behavior. The number of situations with interfering behavior may be highly context-dependent (i.e., when/where triggers occur varies) and less connected to children's general tendencies. Prior work suggests that it is difficult for adults to identify triggers in different environments (Dumitru & Ciobanu, 2022).

While there were associations between caregiver predictions and severity of interfering behavior, it is worth noting that the average severity of behavior in this sample was quite mild (1.54 on a 9-point scale): visual inspection confirmed that few outliers were present and did not meaningfully drive the association. Findings related to caregiver predictions should be interpreted with some caution given the sensitivity analysis, which suggests that effects may be sensitive to the intervention.

Differences in the validity of caregivers' and teachers' predictions may be explained by several factors. Differences in caregiver and teacher ratings of autistic children's behavior and functioning are well-documented (Kang et al., 2023; Lees Thorne et al., 2026; Levinson et al., 2020). These differences may reflect divergent schemas about what constitutes a successful transition. The association between caregivers' predictions behavior severity, despite the mild severity across the sample, suggests that caregivers focus on interfering behavior when assessing their children's likelihoods for success. This is consistent with literature demonstrating that parents are very concerned that their child may exhibit challenging behavior in school (Azad & Mandell, 2016; Benjamin et al., 2025). Conversely, while teachers also endorse behavioral concerns (Azad & Mandell, 2016), they may also consider classroom observations of affect. Relatedly, the context in which caregivers and teachers observe children influences their predictions. Preschool and kindergarten teachers observe children in school, whereas caregivers observe them at home. Children's affect and behavior at home may differ significantly from school (De Los Reyes et al., 2019, 2023; Lees Thorne et al., 2026). This may, in turn, inhibit caregivers' abilities to predict outcomes at school.

Opportunities, or lack thereof, for caregiver involvement may influence the information caregivers can draw on when forming their predictions about their child's transition to kindergarten. For instance, most participants in the current study had relatively low household income. Prior studies find that economic stress imposes barriers to school involvement (Coba-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Cooper, 2010), such as inflexible work schedules (especially during the school day), limited leave, and competing household responsibilities or stressors. These barriers may translate to less parental involvement, which in turn results in fewer opportunities to observe their child in school or to attend relevant meetings. In addition, systems may not be in place for teachers to connect with caregivers outside of standard work hours. It is worth noting that SES is just one factor that may impact caregiver involvement; several others (e.g., parental beliefs and expectations; opportunities offered) may influence involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

In secondary analyses, we examined whether caregiver-teacher communication and teacher experience moderated the association between adult predictions and child outcomes. Despite the importance of communication for caregiver-teacher collaboration in transition planning, neither communication with the preschool team nor communication with the future school team moderated the association between caregivers' predictions and child outcome. The lack of association may have resulted from the restricted range in caregiver ratings, which reduces statistical power to observe an association. With the current data, our findings may suggest that communication about the transition is not informing caregiver predictions in a meaningful way, which may indicate that there is limited information about the new school, and schools are missing opportunities to build shared expectations and understandings with caregivers.

Teaching experience did not moderate the association between teachers' predictions and children's transition success. Experience with other autistic children may not improve predictions for current students due to heterogeneity in autism presentation (Kim et al., 2016; Jones & Klin, 2009). These differences in presentation may limit the extent to which prior experience generalizes to new students. Additionally, experience does not necessarily translate to skill. Teachers may have worked with many autistic students but still not possess autism-specific expertise that would inform their predictions. Furthermore, pre-transition teachers do not often receive feedback from the post-transition school on a child's status in their new school. This may be especially true in the transition to kindergarten, when children enter a new system, and infrastructure for cross-system communication is limited (Dimachkie Nunnally et al., 2024). Therefore, more experience with transitions would not necessarily result in more accurate predictions. It may be that classroom-based observations support more accurate predictions, even in the absence of extensive experience. The phrasing of the question ("Based on current transition planning, how successful do you think your/the child's transition will be to his/her new school?") may have minimized differences between teachers with varied levels of autism experience by prompting them to think of other aspects of the transition (e.g., support plans, communication with the future school) alongside their observations of each child. Findings suggest that seeing the child in school and familiarity with the transition plan itself may be more influential than teaching experience in shaping accurate predictions.

9. Implications for Practice

These findings have important implications for improving transition planning. The current approach to kindergarten transitions relies heavily on IEP meetings and inputs from attendees of that meeting. Our findings suggest that we should be intentionally including and drawing upon both preschool teachers' and caregivers' insights. Preschool teachers may be especially useful in understanding what supports are necessary for increasing positive affect, whereas caregivers' insights may provide guidance for what behavioral supports may be put in place in kindergarten. Together, their perspectives may offer the most comprehensive understanding of the child and the supports necessary to support a smooth transition.

Prior work demonstrates that caregivers view their preschool teachers as trusted sources (LaBarbera, 2017) and perceive the broader elementary school systems as less responsive to their needs (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; LaBarbera, 2017; C. Li & Burke, 2025). This distrust may discourage caregivers from communicating their insights during transition planning. Therefore, the benefit of involving preschool teachers in transition planning is twofold: first, children's affective needs may be more effectively communicated through discussion than they would via documentation alone, and second, their presence may make caregivers feel more comfortable voicing their perspectives. Ultimately, both preschool teachers' and caregivers' unique insights should be considered in developing transition plans, and the presence of preschool teachers may offer additional comfort to caregivers and advocacy for the children.

10. Implications for Future Research

Future research is needed to determine how to best integrate preschool teachers' and caregivers' insights in transition planning. Because there are currently no legal mandates ensuring preschool teachers' participation in transitions, additional work is needed to demonstrate the value of their insights and most effective mechanisms for involvement. If increasing the role of preschool teachers in transition planning improves child outcomes, this work may be used as a policy lever to legally ensure their participation. For example, policy changes may include amendments to transition requirements to mandate preschool teacher participation in kindergarten transition planning or IEP meetings.

Establishing systems and tools that share information across preschool and home contexts may be one avenue worth exploring. For example, as described in BBB, ais a brief document containing key child information (e.g., strengths/vulnerabilities, likes/dislikes, strategies, goals) co-generated by teachers and caregivers (see Supplementary Materials; Nuske et al., 2019). This type of tool ensures that the kindergarten teacher has access to information from multiple stakeholders with expertise in different areas. Formal education planning documents, like IEPs, provide in-depth information on a child's academic and functional performance, goals, and services based on their disability. Like an IEP, the child snapshot includes need-to-know information about a child's disability and services, but it also captures person-centered knowledge (e.g., a child's likes and dislikes) that are excluded from formal documentation. This person-centered knowledge may be especially useful during transitions because it offers ways for the teacher and child to connect.

Since teachers may be able to accurately predict which children will have socially and emotionally successful kindergarten transitions, elevating their role in transition planning through this type of collaborative planning approach may allow schools to proactively identify children in need of additional emotional support. Combining this information with caregivers' inputs on behavior allows for a holistic sense of each child prior to their arrival in kindergarten and providing this information in a structured format (e.g., the child snapshot), may help ensure that receiving schools have access to key insights needed to support each child effectively.

11. Limitations

Some study limitations should be considered. First, though kindergarten transitions have unique circumstances (e.g., transitioning into a new school system) that are worth studying in isolation, constraining this study to only kindergarten transitions significantly limited our sample, which may have reduced the precision of our estimates. Second, an explicit definition of "success" was not provided on the TEQ. While this decision allowed caregivers and teachers to evaluate the transition through their own context-specific reference points, it also introduces variable interpretations across participants. Because "success" was left open to interpretation, caregiver and teacher predictions and ratings in this sample may reflect a wide range of factors beyond children's affect and behavior that cannot be definitively confirmed within these data. Similarly, the TEQ item used in moderation analyses did not define "effectiveness," so caregivers' interpretations of what constitutes effective communication may impact their ratings. This measure also was specific to communication related to the transition and does not account for the content, quality, or frequency of communication, or any interpersonal factors (e.g., trust) in other communication. Additionally, study outcomes rely on kindergarten teacher reports of child affect and behavior rather than objective child indicators. While teacher observations offer ecologically valid insights into children's school functioning, they are subjective and vulnerable to bias, which may introduce variability in how these outcomes are assessed.

Information regarding children's specific developmental needs and co-occurring diagnosis were not included in this dataset. A child's unique combination of cognitive, adaptive, communication, and/or sensory support needs may directly influence how a caregiver or teacher conceptualizes what a "successful" transition looks like for that individual child. In turn, this could alter the baseline expectations that form their predictions. For example, a child with co-occurring hyperactive ADHD may be more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, which may make their interfering behavior easier to predict. Given the heterogeneity in autism, future work should incorporate more detailed information on a child's presentation.

Several additional factors may also influence predictions of transition success. Placement lateness, when a child's placement is determined, is a proxy for how much information the caregiver knows before the transition and has been shown to impede school-family collaboration in transition planning (Fontil et al., 2020), which may influence prediction accuracy. It is also well-established that teachers' expectations affect student academic outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), and it is certainly possible that this may apply to affective and behavioral outcomes as well. Finally, SES is closely linked to the amount of time and flexibility that caregivers may have to participate in transition planning (Cooper, 2010). Although SES is discussed in relation to limited opportunities to observe the child in school, this sample does not include enough higher-income families to test meaningful distinctions in prediction accuracy by income. Future work should also explore *how* predictions of transition success are formed and what factors are needed to support successful transitions. These findings can then inform the development of interventions that target both accurate understanding of children's transition needs and effective support strategies.

Lastly, caregiver, preschool teacher, and kindergarten teacher samples were predominantly composed of White, non-Hispanic females. This limits the generalizability of our findings, as cultural background may influence how caregivers and teachers define and conceptualize transition success, the nature of caregiver-school relationships, and the extent to which these patterns of prediction accuracy hold across more diverse samples.

12. Conclusion

Transitions to kindergarten are associated with short- and long-term outcomes across several developmental domains, including social-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. Improving these transitions for autistic students, therefore, may help to promote stronger outcomes in these areas. This study evaluated the utility of preschool teachers' and caregivers' insights in preparing for transitions to kindergarten in an under resourced sample. To our knowledge, this is the first study to directly assess how well these perceptions align with actual outcomes in kindergarten. Results indicate that preschool teachers can predict children's affective outcomes in kindergarten, while caregivers can predict children's behavioral outcomes. The ability to accurately assess transition outcomes may be context-dependent (i.e., content used to inform predictions differs based on home and school). We therefore recommend including both preschool teachers' and caregivers' perspectives in transition planning. This presents an opportunity to systematically strengthen kindergarten transitions. Preschool teachers' and caregivers' insights and suggestions should be intentionally called for and integrated into transition planning processes to support successful transitions to kindergarten.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of each site's Institutional Review Board, as well as the Research Review Boards of the participating schools and preschools. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.reia.2026.202992.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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