

What You Want Versus What's Good for You: Paternalistic Motivation in Children's Helping Behavior

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Children help others to complete their goals. Yet adults are sometimes motivated to help others in a “paternalistic” way, overriding a recipient's desires if they conflict with the recipient's best interests. Experiments investigated whether 5-year-olds ($n = 100$) consider a recipient's desire, and the consequences of fulfilling this desire, when helping. Children overrode a request for chocolate in favor of giving fruit snacks, if chocolate would make the recipient sick. Children did not override a request for chocolate in favor of carrots, even if chocolate would make the recipient sick, but they gave carrots if the recipient requested them. By age 5, children balance different motivations when helping, considering the recipient's desires, consequences of fulfilling them, and alternative forms of helping available.

Adults are often motivated to help each other, and several decades of research in developmental psychology suggests that helpful behavior has its origins in early childhood (Hay, 1979; Rheingold, 1982; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). Children actively help others to complete their unfulfilled goals as early as 14 months (e.g., Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). Some have argued that children's early helping behaviors are motivated by an intrinsic desire to help others and see their goals fulfilled (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008, 2009), and indeed children's prosocial responses are most robust and appear at the earliest ages in tasks in which an experimenter demonstrates a clear goal such as reaching for a dropped object (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). These studies suggest that one strong motivation underlying children's helping is a

desire to fulfill others' goals by giving them what they want in that moment.

However, researchers interested in altruistic behavior in adults have suggested that helping often requires not only a motivation to satisfy a recipient's goal or desire but also a motivation to consider the potential consequences of one's helping for the recipient (Batson, 1991; Jacobsson, Johannesson, & Borgquist, 2007; Sibicky, Schroeder, & Dovidio, 1995). For example, adults induced to feel empathy for another person are less likely to help the person with their current goal (completing a difficult task) if helping now will have detrimental consequences in the long run (Sibicky et al., 1995). Indeed, helping someone get what they want now can potentially have negative or suboptimal downstream consequences for that person in the real world. Consider a parent who does all of their child's homework for them. This might help the child succeed and make him or her happy in the present but may lead to failure and unhappiness later on. In this type of situation, adults often help in a way that could be considered paternalistic—that is, overriding the kind of help a recipient wants right now because they believe the recipient will ultimately be happier or better off if their

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desire is not fulfilled. This behavior suggests that fulfilling others' desires is not the only factor motivating adults' helping; adults are also motivated to provide help that they believe would lead to a good outcome for the recipient, and this latter motivation can win out when the motivations conflict.

Despite the wealth of research on children's inclination to help (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Hay, 1979; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007, 2008), and selectivity in who they help (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010), very little work has investigated what outcome children are motivated to achieve when helping. We ask whether children are motivated only by a desire to see others' goals fulfilled or if they are also motivated by a concern with the potential consequences of fulfilling these goals. Such a concern might require children to paternalistically override others' wishes in some situations.

Previous work has shown that children by age 3 sometimes help by overriding a recipient's request for an object, if the object cannot be used to achieve the recipient's stated goal. For example, if an experimenter said she wanted to pour a cup of water and requested a cup that children knew was cracked, children overrode the request and offered a functional cup instead (Martin & Olson, 2013). This ability to help by overriding others' requests when they conflicted with their ultimate goals could be seen as a mild form of paternalism. However, paternalistic behavior in adults is more complex, requiring an understanding of a possible conflict between an individual's desires and the potentially negative consequences of fulfilling those desires. That is, adults might override an individual's desires to prevent the negative consequences even when the individual has never committed to an ultimate goal of avoiding such consequences. To illustrate the difference between these forms of paternalistic overriding, we might not say I was being strongly paternalistic if my friend points to a lighter and asks me to hand it to him so he can light a candle and I get him a different lighter because I know that one doesn't work. But we would likely say I am being strongly paternalistic if a child points and asks me for a working lighter to try lighting it and I offer a toy instead because I don't want him to burn himself. In the first case, I detect a conflict between the object my friend is asking for and the goal he wants to complete and recognize that I should prioritize the ultimate goal (likely inferring that my friend is unaware that the lighter on the counter is broken). In the second case, there is no obvious conflict with the child's

own goals—I just don't want the child to get hurt and probably think the child will ultimately be less happy if he gets hurt.

We investigated whether by age 5 children are motivated to help only by fulfilling a recipient's desires or also by paternalistically overriding a recipient's desires when fulfilling them could lead to negative consequences for the recipient. We chose to test 5-year-olds because previous research suggests that younger children have difficulty simultaneously considering others' desires, the future consequences of fulfilling these desires, and the alternate options available; they tend to focus mainly on the desire information or make choices at chance (Lagattuta, 2005; Prencipe & Zelazo, 2005). We were specifically interested in whether children would take into account (a) a recipient's desires, (b) the consequences of fulfilling those desires, and (c) the alternative options available when deciding whether to help through desire fulfilling or through paternalistic overriding. Therefore, we wanted to test children at an age where they would likely be able to hold in mind these three pieces of information.

Participants interacted with a confederate child on a video screen who they were led to believe was in another room. Children saw the confederate express a desire for a specific snack (chocolate), then received information that this snack always results in a negative consequence for the confederate (chocolate makes the confederate sick) and that the confederate was clearly aware of this consequence. Children were then given the opportunity to help by providing the confederate child with a snack, either the desired snack (chocolate) or an alternative snack. We chose to use a two-alternative forced choice method (rather than asking children to give the requested snack or nothing) based on previous work using a similar method to investigate questions about children's helping and sharing behavior (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010; Shaw & Olson, 2012). The presence of an alternative also reflects real-world situations where we are surrounded by choices and would usually be able to offer some alternatives to someone who makes a request (e.g., if a child wants to play with your hammer you might say no but offer them a set of plastic tools instead).

If children consider the consequences of their helping actions, and are motivated by a concern with the confederate's overall welfare, they should override the confederate's wishes in favor of providing a snack that does not make the confederate sick. If children are only motivated to help by

fulfilling others' stated goals, they should provide the desired snack regardless of the negative consequences. Children's responses in this situation (*paternalism* condition) were compared to their responses in a situation where there was no negative consequence of fulfilling the recipient's desire (*no paternalism* condition).

Experiment 1

Participants

Participants were forty 5-year-old children (Mean age = 5 years, 5 months; range = 5 years, 1 month to 6 years, 0 months) from the New Haven, CT, area, tested either in the laboratory or at preschools with their parents' consent. One additional participant was excluded due to a computer malfunction. Participants were run in this experiment between July 2012 and February 2014.

Procedure

Children were randomly assigned to the paternalism condition ($n = 20$; 10 girls) or the no paternalism condition ($n = 20$; 10 girls). Half the children in each condition were run in the laboratory, and half in preschools. Children in both conditions sat next to an experimenter at a table with a laptop. The experimenter told children that they would interact with a child in another room who they could see on the laptop screen. In reality, the videos of the confederate child were prerecorded and presented in a way to resemble contingent interaction. The experimenter directed her attention to the laptop screen showing a still image of a room that resembled the room they sat in and called the confederate child by name (Benjamin for male participants, Simone for female participants), inviting him or her to "come and say hi." The confederate (referred to from here on as Benjamin for ease of explanation) came on screen and sat down on the floor, looked at the camera, and said, "Hi, my name is Benjamin! I'm coloring this picture," and held up a half-colored picture before exiting the screen. Once Benjamin left the screen, the experimenter paused the video.

The experimenter told the child they could send Benjamin items by placing them in a large red chute attached to the wall and that the items would emerge from an identical red chute attached to the wall in "Benjamin's room." The experimenter then told the child that he would later be given the chance to send a snack to Benjamin using the chute,

and could choose to send either chocolate or fruit snacks (the experimenter held up a small bag of chocolates and a small bag of fruit snacks) but that first they would ask Benjamin which one he wanted. The experimenter again called out to the screen (while holding up the snacks), "Hey Benjamin! Do you want chocolate or fruit snacks?" Benjamin came on screen and said, "I want the chocolate!" with positive affect (Benjamin always looked at the camera while speaking and then exited to the right). Next, the experimenter told the child that he would get to send a snack later, but first they would get to practice by sending Benjamin a ball; this step was designed to convince children that Benjamin would really receive the items from the chute. The experimenter waited until the child had placed the ball in the chute and returned to the table. The experimenter called to the screen, "Hey Benjamin! We sent you something!," and started the video. Benjamin entered and retrieved the ball from his chute, saying, "Wow, thanks! A ball!"

What happened next differed by condition. For children in the paternalism condition, a woman entered the room on the video screen from the left, saying, "Hi Benjamin." The experimenter pointed to the woman on the screen and said to the child, "That's Benjamin's mom." Benjamin's mom briefly chatted with Benjamin about the ball, then provided information about the negative consequences of eating the desired snack, "Hey Benjamin, remember last week you got so sick from eating all that chocolate? Chocolate always makes you really sick, doesn't it?" Benjamin replied "yes" to each question. Children in the no paternalism condition saw an identical scene with Benjamin's mom except that the desired snack was not mentioned, "Hey Benjamin, remember last week you got so sick? You felt really sick, didn't you?" The critical difference is that the paternalism condition sets up a conflict in which the desired snack has negative consequences for the confederate, testing whether children's helping is paternalistically motivated, whereas the no paternalism condition has no conflict and establishes children's baseline tendency to provide the confederate's desired snack.

In both conditions, Benjamin's mom said to Benjamin, "I'm going to work now! Bye!" and exited to the left while Benjamin exited to the right. The experimenter stopped the video and told children that they could now send Benjamin a snack. The experimenter held both snack bags in one hand and said, "I am going to put the snacks in front of you, and you can go ahead and put just one of

them in the chute to send Benjamin." The experimenter then released the two bags on the table in front of the child at the same time and gazed toward the wall in front of her rather than at the child. If the child addressed the experimenter, the experimenter repeated that it was up to them to choose. After the child chose, the experimenter called out to Benjamin to say they had sent him something, and Benjamin entered, looked in his chute, looked at the camera, and said, "Thanks for giving me a snack!," then exited. The experimenter told the child that Benjamin would eat his snack later. After the procedure was complete, the experimenter asked children two questions, "Why did you decide to give Benjamin the [chosen snack]?" and "Do you remember which snack Benjamin said he wanted?" A subset of children in each condition were also asked, "Do you remember what Benjamin's mom said when she came in?" This last question was added once the study had begun and therefore was only asked of a subset of participants (paternalism = 13; no paternalism = 14).

For children tested in preschools, the procedure was modified slightly because the chute could not be transported and attached to the classroom walls. The experimenter told the child that Benjamin was in a room at a different school and that they could send specific items to Benjamin by pressing specific keys on the laptop keyboard that would cause items identical to the ones they chose to be transported into Benjamin's chute. For the ball-sending and snack choice parts of the experiment, the experimenter told the child to place the ball, and then whichever snack they wanted to send, into a box on the table. This procedure was designed to keep the child's giving action as similar as possible to the laboratory procedure (i.e., all children picked up items and dropped them in an opaque container). The experimenter then told the child which button to press and reminded them that Benjamin would now receive a replica of the item in his chute. In both laboratory and preschool settings, children never questioned whether the video was prerecorded or expressed doubt that the confederate existed. To the contrary, many continued to talk about Benjamin or Simone after the study was over.

Coding of Children's Justifications

A primary coder and a reliability coder unaware of condition assignment coded children's verbal responses to the "Why?" question. Responses were coded into three categories: (a) responses referencing the recipient's desire (e.g., the recipient asked

for or wanted the snack), (b) responses indicating the possibility that the recipient might get sick (e.g., "chocolate makes her sick"), and (c) response category of "other" which included a variety of responses such as "I don't know," "because they are squishy," or "because I like chocolate."

Results and Discussion

A Fisher's exact test revealed a significant effect of condition on children's tendency to give the requested snack (chocolate). Children were more likely to give the chocolate in the no paternalism condition ($n = 15$) than in the paternalism condition ($n = 5$), $p = .004$ (see Figure 1). This pattern of differences between the two conditions was the same for children of both genders and for children tested in laboratory and preschool settings. Binomial sign tests revealed that children in the no paternalism condition gave the chocolate at significantly above-chance rates, and children in the paternalism condition gave the chocolate at significantly below-chance rates, both $ps = .041$.

Children's verbal justifications for their choices are presented by coding category in Figure 1. Two children did not provide verbal responses to the "Why?" question. Coders agreed on the category assignment of 33/38 responses, $\kappa = .78$, 95% CI (0.60, 0.96). Here, we focus on children who made the majority snack-giving choice in each condition. In the no paternalism condition, of the 13 children who gave the requested snack and gave an answer to the "Why?" question, 10 gave justifications that indicated the recipient wanted that snack. No children mentioned the recipient getting sick; all other children gave other responses. In the paternalism condition, of the 15 children who overrode the request and gave the fruit snacks, 3 children gave justifications that indicated the recipient wanted that snack, 4 children indicated that the recipient might get sick if they gave chocolate, and the rest of the children gave other responses. Interestingly, although children in the two conditions clearly responded differently because of the information about what made the recipient sick, the majority of children in the paternalism condition did not seem to have access to the reason for their behavior.

Importantly, 97.3% of children who were asked which snack Benjamin had requested answered correctly that he had asked for the chocolate. Thus, children in the paternalism condition did not simply forget which snack Benjamin had chosen; they were instead able to focus on something other than this clearly expressed desire—the possibility that

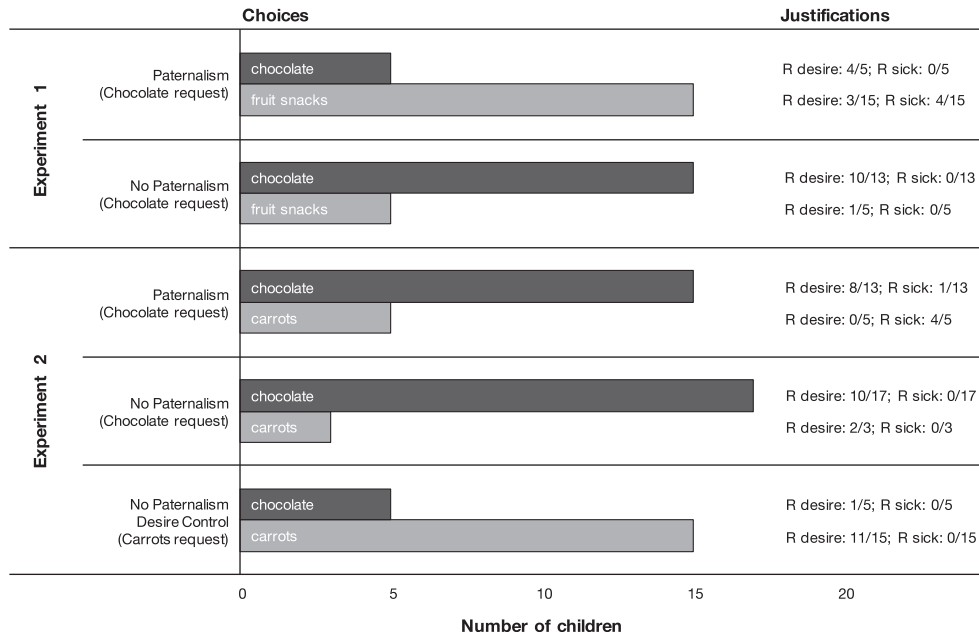


Figure 1. (left) Number of children choosing to give each snack in each condition; (right) number of children giving each coded type of justification in response to the “Why?” question, referencing the recipient’s desire for a specific snack (R desire) or referencing the recipient getting sick (R sick).

the desired snack might make Benjamin sick. In both conditions, children who were asked whether they remembered what Benjamin’s mom had said were able to generate an appropriate answer (for paternalism, that chocolate made or makes him sick; in no paternalism, that he got sick) at high rates (paternalism = 13/13; no paternalism = 12/14).

The results of Experiment 1 suggest that 5-year-old children’s helping is motivated in part by a consideration of the potential consequences of their helping for the recipient. When children knew that fulfilling the recipient’s desire could result in a negative consequence for the recipient, they went against their usual response of fulfilling the desire and provided an alternative item instead. These results go beyond previous work in which children overrode a recipient’s request when it was not consistent with the recipient’s stated goals (Martin & Olson, 2013). Here, children overrode the request of a recipient who had acknowledged that what he wanted would make him sick and had never stated any goal to avoid getting sick.

Thus, children seem to balance their motivation to helpfully fulfill the recipient’s desire against another motivation to avoid a negative outcome for the recipient and can engage in paternalistic behavior when these motivations conflict. However, another possibility is that the information about the

recipient becoming sick is so salient to children that they no longer consider the recipient’s stated desire at all. If children really experience conflict between these two motivations, there should be situations in which their motivation to fulfill the desire wins out despite the potentially negative outcome.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we investigated whether children weigh their motivation to avoid negative consequences for the recipient (getting sick) against a motivation to satisfy the recipient’s general desire (presumably to eat something tasty). Children participated in an identical procedure to Experiment 1, but the alternative snack was carrots rather than fruit snacks. Because carrots are relatively different from the requested chocolate and considered by most children to be less desirable, children here might be more likely to help by providing the recipient’s desired snack despite the negative consequences. In addition to paternalism and no paternalism conditions, we included a *no paternalism desire control* condition in which the recipient asked for carrots and children could give carrots or chocolate, to rule out the possibility that children consider only their own desires and preferences when choosing what to give.

Participants

Participants in the paternalism and no paternalism conditions were forty 5-year-old children (Mean age = 5 years, 4.5 months; range = 5 years, 0 months to 5 years, 12 months) from the New Haven, CT, area, tested either in the laboratory or at preschools with their parents' consent. Participants in the no paternalism desire control condition were twenty 5-year-old children (Mean age = 5 years, 5 months; range = 5 years, 0 months to 5 years, 11 months) from the Cambridge, MA, area, tested in the laboratory with their parents' consent. One child was excluded for having a chocolate allergy. Participants were run in this experiment between July 2012 and January 2015.

Procedure

Children were randomly assigned to the paternalism condition ($n = 20$; 13 girls) or the no paternalism condition ($n = 20$; 8 girls). Half the children in each condition were run in the laboratory and half in preschools. An additional group of 20 children (10 girls) was assigned to the no paternalism desire control condition, all run in laboratory. The procedure for the paternalism and no paternalism conditions was identical to the procedure for these conditions in Experiment 1, except that children were given the option of sending chocolate or carrots, rather than chocolate or fruit snacks. The procedure for the no paternalism desire control condition was identical to the laboratory procedure for the no paternalism condition except that the recipient requested carrots rather than chocolate.

Results

A Fisher's exact test revealed no significant effect of condition on children's tendency to give the requested snack (chocolate). Children were equally likely to give the chocolate in the no paternalism condition ($n = 17$) and in the paternalism condition ($n = 15$), $p = .695$ (see Figure 1). Binomial sign tests revealed that children in both conditions gave the chocolate at significantly above-chance rates, both $ps < .041$ (see Figure 1). This pattern of differences between the two conditions was the same for children of both genders and for children tested in laboratory and preschool settings. Children were also more likely to give the requested chocolate in the paternalism condition of Experiment 2 than in the paternalism condition of Experiment 1, Fisher's exact test, $p = .004$. Children in the no paternalism desire

control condition were less likely to give chocolate ($n = 5$) than children in either of the other Experiment 2 conditions, both $ps < .01$; they gave carrots more often than expected by chance, $p = .04$.

Children's verbal justifications for their choices are presented by coding category in Figure 1. Two children did not provide verbal responses to the "Why?" question. Responses are presented in Figure 1 categorized in the same way as in Experiment 1. Coders agreed on the category assignment of 52/58 responses, $\kappa = .85$, 95% CI (0.72, 0.97). Here, we focus on children who made the majority snack-giving choice in each condition. In the paternalism condition, of the 13 children who provided the requested snack and gave an answer to the "Why?" question, 8 children gave justifications that indicated the recipient wanted that snack. One child said that the recipient "is sick of chocolate," and the rest of the children gave other responses. In the no paternalism condition, of the 17 children who gave the requested snack, 10 gave justifications that indicated the recipient wanted that snack. No children mentioned the recipient getting sick; remaining children gave other responses. In the no paternalism desire control condition, of the 15 children who gave the requested snack, 11 gave justifications that indicated the recipient wanted that snack. No children mentioned the recipient getting sick; remaining children gave other responses.

As in Experiment 1, the vast majority (96.7%) of the children who were asked which snack Benjamin had requested across the three conditions answered correctly. In all three conditions, children who were asked whether they remembered what Benjamin's mom had said were able to generate an appropriate answer at high rates (paternalism = 19/19; no paternalism = 15/18; no paternalism desire control = 17/20).

General Discussion

Our experiments reveal that 5-year-old children are not only motivated to help others by giving them what they want, they are also motivated to consider the consequences of their helping behavior and paternalistically override others' desires in some situations. Children overrode a recipient's request for chocolate more so when the chocolate would make the recipient sick than when it would not. However, they only overrode the request to prevent this consequence when they were able to give a relatively desirable alternative (fruit snacks), not when the alternative was less desirable (carrots). Thus,

children are motivated to be paternalistic in their helping, but they balance conflicting motivations when deciding whether to help in this way: Here they weighed the negative consequence of the recipient getting sick against his or her desire to have a tasty snack.

A large body of research has investigated the cues that prompt children to help others (e.g., Warneken, 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007) and *who* children choose to help (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010; Vaish et al., 2010). The current studies build on this work by asking a related but previously unanswered question: Given that children are going to help a particular individual, what outcome are they motivated to achieve? We find that 5-year-olds, like adults, consider the consequences of their helping for the recipient and are sometimes motivated to override a recipient's desires if the consequences for the recipient might be negative (Sibicky et al., 1995). Yet, whether children act on this motivation depends on contextual factors that might affect the valence of the outcome, such as the availability of alternative options that might still allow them to partially satisfy the recipient's desire. There are likely many other contextual factors that influence whether children act on their motivation to fulfill the recipient's stated desire or to prevent the recipient from becoming sick. For instance, increasing the severity of the consequence (e.g., the recipient is seriously allergic to chocolate) might push children to paternalistically override a request even in the absence of an alternative means of help. An important open question for future work concerns whether children, when weighing these different factors when deciding how to help, are assessing what they themselves think would be best for the recipient or whether they are acting based on a prediction of the recipient's ultimate happiness.

Children's tendency to paternalistically override others' desires that might result in negative consequences likely changes across development, as children gain experience with the consequences of their own and others' decisions and observe the outcomes of their own helping actions. Previous work has found that 18-month-olds provide alternative means of help rather than completing a recipient's goal-directed action when they know the recipient lacks information (Buttelmann, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009) and that 3-year-olds override requests for objects that will not help the recipient achieve her stated goal (Martin & Olson, 2013). Future research should investigate whether children younger than age 5 are also motivated to paternalistically override

a request which might result in negative consequences when the recipient has no stated goal of avoiding such consequences, more similar to adult paternalistic behavior in which we sometimes make decisions others may not like on their behalf.

This work suggests that children are sometimes motivated to help by overriding others' requests in favor of providing a better outcome. However, we do not mean to imply that children are selflessly motivated to promote the welfare of the recipient. As in adults, children's paternalistic behavior is most likely driven by a variety of factors that benefit the self directly or indirectly. For instance, children may override the request because they want to avoid potential blame for allowing the recipient to become ill or may think that the recipient will be more grateful if he doesn't get sick and thus be more likely to reciprocate later on. Further research will be needed to examine how factors such as potential future interaction or the presence of observers might influence children's motivation to engage in paternalistic helping. Investigating how children help when there is potential conflict between a recipient's current desires and long-term welfare may provide particularly novel insights into the nature of these deeper motivations.

Our work suggests that children are not only motivated to consider the consequences of their helping intervention to a recipient but also motivated to helpfully fulfill a recipient's desires. From childhood to adulthood, managing these conflicting motivations is an important part of functioning in the social world.

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