

Levels and family correlates of positive adolescent development

A cross-national comparison

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Understanding positive youth development is crucial to inform prevention and intervention programs for behavioural and emotional problems, and to foster positive behaviour. This article reports the levels of positive school engagement, and family characteristics associated with engagement, in adolescents in Australia and the United States.

Traditionally, developmental research has tended to focus on emotional and behavioural problems of adolescence (such as antisocial behaviour, violence, depression, anxiety). Increasingly, it is recognised that an absence of problem behaviours does not necessarily equate to positive development (Mahoney and Lafferty 2003). This has created a shift toward the study of positive youth development. Understanding how positive behaviour develops is crucial for prevention, and promoting healthy development should not only increase positive behaviour but also reduce problematic behaviour.

Positive youth behaviour has been defined in a number of ways (for example, prosocial behaviour, academic achievement, school engagement and positive attitudes towards school, good peer relationships, engagement in the workforce) but there is currently no general agreement regarding what a complete set of positive youth outcomes should encompass (Catalano et al. 2004). In this paper, our

focus is on one aspect of positive behaviour, namely positive engagement with school.

To date, relatively few studies of adolescent positive behaviour exist. There are even fewer cross-national comparisons of positive youth behaviour. This is unfortunate because cross-national studies have the capacity to illuminate the influence of cultural and contextual factors on youth behaviour, and inform more universal theories of development.

What the growing body of research on positive behaviour in *young* children is showing is that more girls than boys engage in prosocial behaviour, and that prosocial behaviour increases with age, as children's cognitive processes develop (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998). More recent meta-analyses of studies with adolescents have shown that, in general, adolescents engage in more prosocial behaviour than younger children, and that the trend for higher involvement of females than males is even clearer in adolescence (Fabes et al. 1999).



A model of prosocial development

The Social Development Model (Catalano and Hawkins 1996, 2002) underpins the research reported in this article. The model draws together knowledge on the impact of risk and protective factors on development. Risk factors increase the likelihood of problematic behaviour, whereas protective factors both increase the likelihood of positive behaviour and reduce the influence of risk factors.

The Social Development Model theorises that young people learn prosocial and antisocial behaviours from socialising agents including peers, family, school, and community organisations. Socialisation occurs through processes involving: opportunities for involvement in activities and interactions with others; the degree of involvement and interaction; the skills to participate in those

interactions; and reinforcement from performance in activities and interactions with others. A bond develops between the individual and a socialising agent when: opportunities exist for the individual to become involved in activities and interactions; when the individual's skills allow for active participation in those activities and interactions; and when the individual's performance is rewarded consistently. This bond affects behaviour independently by creating an informal control on behaviour.

According to this model, an adolescent's behaviour will be prosocial or antisocial depending on the predominant behaviours, norms, and values held by those to whom they are bonded. The model has been found to predict a range of behavioural outcomes including substance use (Catalano et al.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the Washington State and Victorian students: International Youth Development Study

	Washington State, USA			Victoria, Australia		
	Year 7	Year 9	Total Sample	Year 7	Year 9	Total Sample
N	955	979	1934	974	968	1942
Mean age (SD)	13.1 (0.4)	15.1 (0.4)	14.1 (1.1)	12.9 (0.4)	14.9 (0.4)	13.9 (1.1)
Location						
Rural	295 (30.9%)	187 (19.2%)	482 (24.9%)	262 (26.9%)	200 (20.7%)	462 (23.8%)
Large or small town	154 (16.1%)	121 (12.4%)	275 (14.2%)	210 (21.6%)	220 (22.7%)	430 (22.1%)
Urban	506 (53.0%)	671 (68.5%)	1177 (60.9%)	502 (51.5%)	548 (56.6%)	1050 (54.1%)
Family structure						
N	928	956	1884	937	920	1857
Married/Living with partner	699 (75.3%)	728 (76.2%)	1427 (75.7%)	739 (78.9%)	750 (81.5%)	1,489 (80.2%)
No partner	229 (24.7%)	228 (23.8%)	457 (24.3%)	198 (21.1%)	170 (18.5%)	368 (19.8%)
Mother's education						
N	878	904	1782	904	893	1797
Did not complete secondary	97 (11.1%)	60 (6.6%)	157 (8.8%)	351 (38.8%)	392 (43.9%)	743 (41.4%)
Completed secondary	577 (65.7%)	514 (56.9%)	1091 (61.2%)	301 (33.3%)	258 (28.9%)	559 (31.1%)
Completed post-secondary	203 (23.1%)	329 (36.4%)	532 (29.9%)	217 (24.0%)	216 (24.2%)	433 (24.1%)
Other	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.1%)	2 (0.1%)	35 (3.9%)	27 (3.0%)	62 (3.4%)

1996), violence (Huang et al. 2001), alcohol misuse (Lonczak et al. 2001), antisocial behaviour (Catalano et al. 1999), and positive youth development (Oxford et al. 2000).

Although a range of factors are associated with the development of positive behaviour, including characteristics of the individual, peers, school and community, this article focuses on *one* socialising agent described in the Social Development Model – the family and its relationship to positive school engagement. Mahoney and Lafferty (2003: S4) have recognised that “the social contexts in which adolescents are embedded, and particularly the family

context, are fundamental to promoting desirable youth outcomes”.

The major family risk factors identified in the Social Development Model are parental attitudes favourable to drug use, parental attitudes favourable to antisocial behaviour, family history of antisocial behaviour, family conflict, and poor family management. High scores on these factors have been associated with problematic outcomes for adolescents (Hawkins et al. 2000). The converse of this is that low scores are hypothesised to be related to positive outcomes.

Family protective factors in the Social Development Model include rewards for prosocial involvement, opportunities for prosocial involvement, and family attachment. These factors have been related to positive outcomes (Oxford et al. 2000).

The cross-national study

This article draws on the first wave of data collected in 2002 as part of the *International Youth Development Study* – a large cross-national study investigating the development of substance use and other behaviours in Australian and American school students. It reports on the risk and protective factors associated with one of a number of behaviours measured in the larger study – namely, positive youth engagement at school.

The two main questions addressed in this article are: How engaged are students in early to mid-adolescence with their schools in Victoria and Washington State? Which family risk and protective factors are related to engagement?

The study surveyed 2,884 students in Victoria and 2,885 students in Washington State – a combined

Table 2 Summary of family risk and protective factors measured in the International Youth Development Study

Risk factor scales
- <i>Poor family management</i> (e.g., poor monitoring by parents), 9 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.79$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.81$.
- <i>Family conflict</i> (e.g., family members argue, yell, and insult), 3 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.79$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.79$.
- <i>Family history of antisocial behaviour</i> (e.g., familial adults in trouble with police), 10 items $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.76$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.81$
- <i>Parent attitudes favourable to drug use</i> (e.g., parents condone use of cigarettes or alcohol), 4 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.76$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.85$
- <i>Parent attitudes favourable to antisocial behaviour</i> (e.g., parents condone stealing), 3 items, α_{AUS} & $\alpha_{US} = 0.70$
Protective factor scales
- <i>Attachment</i> (e.g., student feels close to mother/father), 4 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.76$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.75$
- <i>Opportunities for prosocial involvement</i> (e.g., parents ask student for input into family decisions), 3 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.73$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.75$
- <i>Rewards for prosocial involvement</i> (e.g., frequency parents notice when student is doing a good job and let him/her know about it), 3 items, $\alpha_{AUS} = 0.73$, $\alpha_{US} = 0.75$

sample of 5,769 students. Surveys were administered in the classrooms of 152 schools in Victoria and 153 schools in Washington during 45-60 minute periods. The results presented in this article focus on Year 7 and Year 9 students (see Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of students included in the study).

The study design and methods used to recruit and survey study participants are described in the accompanying boxed inset.

Measures

The measures used in the study included school engagement and family characteristics that may influence youth behaviour. The measure of school engagement included two questions: How many times in the past year (12 months) have you: (1) Looked forward to going to school? (2) Been involved in sports, clubs, organisations, or other activities at school?

For each question, students chose one response from the following eight options: never, 1 or 2 times, 3 to 5 times, 6 to 9 times, 10 to 19 times, 20 to 29 times, 30 to 39 times, and 40 plus times.

A range of family characteristics that place adolescents at risk for problematic outcomes (risk factors), or protect them from problematic outcomes (protective factors), were also measured via adolescent report. Table 2 shows the scales assessing family variables, example items of each, the number of items, and the scale's internal consistency.

Findings

Reporting on school Years 7 and 9, this section looks at the levels of school engagement (assessed here as “looks forward to going to school”, and “participates in positive school activities”), and findings on family characteristics associated with “engagement”. (Students were only included in these analyses if they appeared to have answered the survey honestly. This was assessed using specially designed items on the survey.)

Levels of school engagement

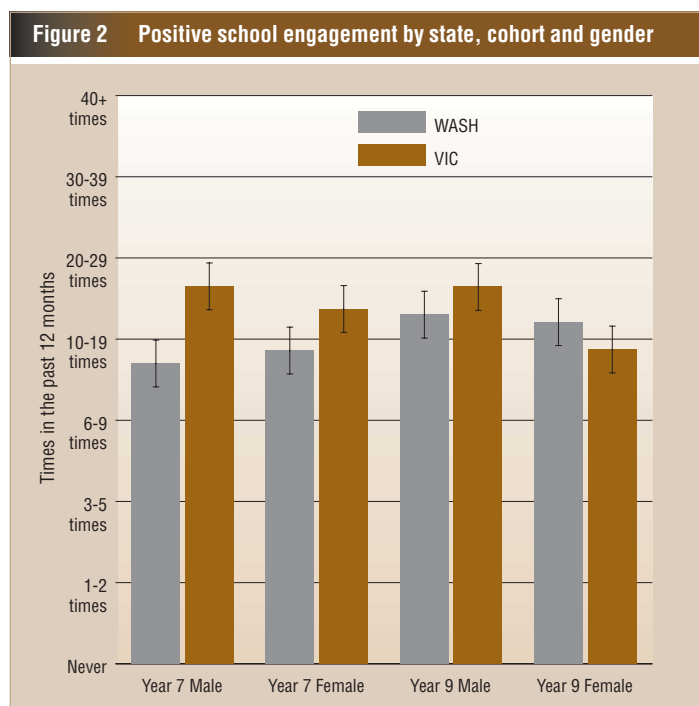
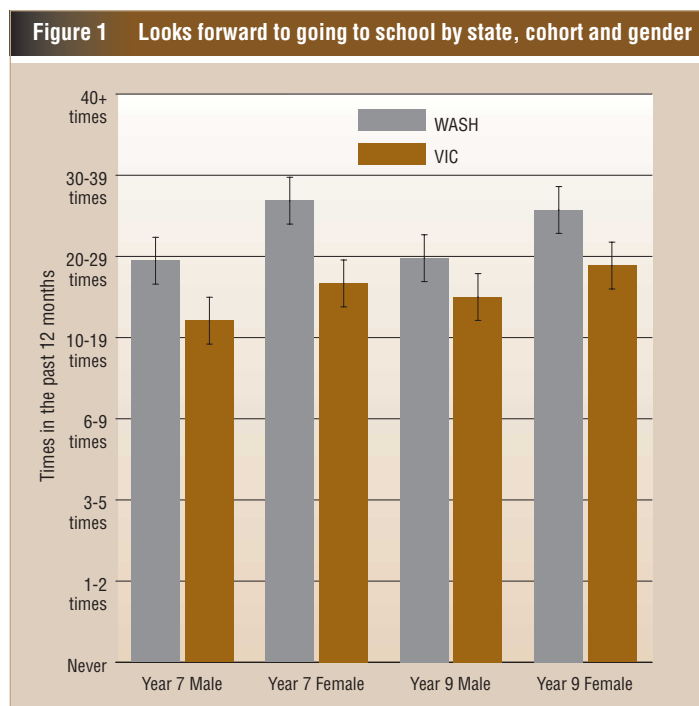
Figures 1 and 2 present mean estimates and 95 per cent confidence intervals (CIs) separately for each state and for males and females.¹

Figures 1 and 2 show some interesting state, gender, and age differences in school engagement. In Years 7 and 9, Washington State students reported that they looked forward to going to school more often than did Victorian students. This was the case for males and females. On average, Washington students had looked forward to going to school 10-19 times (males) or 20-29 times (females) in the past 12 months. This corresponds to once or twice per month. In contrast in Victoria, on average, students looked forward to going to school only 6-9 times (males) or 10-19 times (females), or at most once per month. While the overall rates are disturbingly low, this is particularly so for boys and Victorians.

Figure 2 shows that in Year 7 Victorian students reported that they participated in school activities in the past year more often than Washington students, on average 6-9 times compared with 3-5 times. The trend in the same direction for Year 9 was not significant.

In terms of gender differences, females in Years 7 and 9 in Washington had looked forward to going to school more often than males. For Victoria, the only gender difference was that Year 9 males participated in school activities more often in the preceding year than Year 9 females.

There are interesting age differences in school engagement. In Victoria, older adolescents tended to look forward to going to school more often than





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younger students, although confidence intervals overlapped; whereas there were no age differences in Washington. For participation in school activities, older students in Washington participated more often than younger students. In Victoria, there were no age differences for males but older female adolescents participated less often than younger adolescents.

Family characteristics associated with school engagement

Multiple regression analyses were used to study the associations between school engagement and family characteristics. Each analysis had two steps: in the first step, all variables were entered

(family characteristics, state, gender, age, mothers' level of education); and in the second step, the family characteristics were omitted. These analyses showed that family characteristics significantly added to the explanation of school engagement above demographic characteristics such as student age and mothers' education.

Tables 3 and 4 summarise the pattern of the results found for "looks forward to going to school" and "participation in school activities" respectively, across each year level. The tables show that, in general, the correlates were similar at each year level, but with slightly more significant correlates for both measures of positive school engagement at Year 7 than at Year 9.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STUDY

The same methods to recruit and survey participants were used in both sites (Victoria and Washington State). In each state, a two-stage cluster sampling procedure was used. In the first stage, schools at each study year level were selected at random from a stratified frame of all schools in Victoria (Catholic, Independent and Government) and Washington (Public, Private, and Alternative). At stage two, single classes from each school for the selected year level were chosen at random; in a few schools, two classes from different year levels were randomly chosen.

In Victoria, 165 classes in 152 schools (65 per cent of eligible schools, N=233) agreed to participate. In Washington, 155 classes in 153 schools (73 per cent of

those approached, N=212) participated. There were between 50 and 56 classes at each of three year levels – Year 5 (10-11 years), 7 (12-13 years), and 9 (14-15 years).

In total, 2,884 students in Victoria and 2,885 students in Washington State were recruited into the study, for a combined sample of 5,769 students. Within each age group, approximately equal numbers of males and females participated in the study.

Standard data collection protocols were followed in each state. The student survey protocol consisted of a self-report instrument, adapted and extended from the "Communities that Care Youth Survey" which has shown good reliability and validity in large samples (Arthur et al.

2002; Pollard, Hawkins and Arthur 1999). The instrument included instructions on how to answer the questions and assurances of confidentiality that were presented prior to survey administration by trained study staff.

Surveys were administered in classrooms during a 45-60 minute period. Students absent from school on the day of the survey were administered surveys later under the supervision of school personnel or, in a small percentage of cases, over the telephone by study staff. Upon completion of the survey, students in Washington State received \$10, while students in Victoria received a small pocket calculator, upon return of parent consent forms regardless of their participation in the survey.

Family characteristics associated with looking forward to going to school

Table 3 shows that Year 7 students who lived in Washington State looked forward to going to school more than Victorian students, but no differences were found in Year 9. In terms of family factors, students whose mothers had more education looked forward to going to school more in Year 7. High scores on looking forward to going to school were also associated with less family conflict and more opportunities for prosocial involvement for both age groups and with more rewards for prosocial involvement for Year 7 students only.

For older adolescents, less favourable parental attitudes towards antisocial behaviour, and less poor family management were associated with higher levels of looking forward to going to school. Of all the possible variation in “looks forward to going to school”, 16 per cent (Year 7) and 10 per cent (Year 9) was explained by the variables included in this study.

Family characteristics associated with participation in positive school activities

Table 4 shows that Year 7 Victorian students were more likely to participate in positive school activities than Washington students but there were no differences at Year 9. Higher levels of maternal education were associated with more participation in school activities in both age groups. Participation was associated with both more rewards and more opportunities for prosocial involvement, as well as less favourable parental attitudes towards drug use for younger students. Less poor family management was associated with more participation in Year 9 only. Year 9 males were more likely to participate in school activities than females. Using this model, 8 per cent of the variance in participation was explained for both age groups.

Summary

In summary, there were few differences between Victoria and Washington and a number of similarities across age in the associations between school engagement and family characteristics. Opportunities and rewards for prosocial behaviour were positively associated with school engagement. Parental attitudes toward antisocial behaviour and drug use were also associated with school engagement. It appeared that family management was particularly important for Year 9 students, whereas family conflict was associated only with looking forward to going to school. Of the demographic characteristics, mothers' education was associated with both measures of school engagement. This multivariate analysis reflected the pattern of results regarding gender differences already described – for older female adolescents participation in activities was less than males. There were some family measures in this study, specifically family history of antisocial behaviour, and attachment to family that were generally not associated with school engagement.

Discussion

Levels of school engagement

Overall, the levels of looking forward to going to school and participation in positive school activities were around the mid-point of the scale which indicated that students looked forward to going to school quite rarely (on average about 10-19 times a year), and students typically participated in school activities less than once per month. This relatively low level of engagement may reflect the challenging transition from primary school into early high school, and perhaps an increased focus on academic achievement rather than enjoyment at school at the secondary level. It is also possible that early adolescents may not appreciate the value of attending school and furthering their education.

In general, Washington students looked forward to going to school more, but participated less, than

Table 3 Risk and protective factors statistically significantly associated with looks forward to going to school

	Year 7	Year 9
	<i>N</i> = 1635 % variance explained = 16%	<i>N</i> = 1677 % variance explained = 10%
Washington vs Victoria	Higher in Washington	NS
Mothers' education	Higher if higher education	NS
Family rewards for prosocial involvement	Higher if more rewards	NS
Family opportunities for prosocial involvement	Higher if more opportunities	Higher if more opportunities
Parent attitudes favourable to antisocial behaviour	NS	Higher if less favourable attitudes
Family conflict	Higher if less conflict	Higher if less conflict
Poor family management	NS	Higher if less poor management

Notes: Statistically significant, $p < .05$; T = trend towards statistical significance, $p < .10$; NS = not statistically significant, $p > .10$.

Table 4 Risk and protective factors statistically significantly associated with participation in school activities

	Year 7	Year 9
	<i>N</i> = 1637 % variance explained = 8%	<i>N</i> = 1676 % variance explained = 8%
Washington vs Victoria	Higher in Victoria	NS
Effect of being female	NS	Higher in males
Mothers' education	Higher if higher education	Higher if higher education
Family rewards for prosocial involvement	Higher if more rewards	NS
Family opportunities for prosocial involvement	Higher if more opportunities	NS
Parent attitudes favourable to drug use	Higher if less favourable attitudes	NS
Poor family management	NS	Higher if less poor management

Notes: Statistically significant, $p < .05$; T = trend towards statistical significance, $p < .10$; NS = not statistically significant, $p > .10$.

Victorian students. These differences may be due to differences in the structure of schools in the two countries. In the United States, Year 7 students are usually in middle school or junior high school, separate from Year 9 students who are in high school. In Australia, Years 7 and 9 are usually in the same school. Having Year 7 and 9 students in separate schools, as in Washington, may facilitate stronger school engagement. This finding requires further exploration because it may have important implications for the school structure.

Family characteristics associated with school engagement

The results emphasise the strong link between parents' level of education and adolescents' school adjustment. In this study, higher maternal education was associated with more school engagement. This suggests schools need to look for ways to facilitate school involvement for children of parents who have lower levels of education.

The family protective factors associated with school engagement were rewards for and opportunities to participate in prosocial activities. Thus, if families provide opportunities and encourage their adolescents to contribute to decision-making (e.g., where to go for the annual family holiday), it seems their children tend to be more positively disposed towards school.

The family risk factors related to school engagement were parental attitudes to antisocial behaviour and drug use. Thus, parental attitudes that are less accepting of problematic behaviours are associated with more positive behaviours in adolescents.

Lower levels of family conflict were associated with looking forward to going to school in both age groups. Not surprisingly, having a positive home environment seems to foster engagement in school. Poor family management was associated with both measures of school engagement for Year 9 students. This measure covered the clarity of family rules, and parents' monitoring of their adolescents' activities such as completion of homework and the whereabouts of the adolescent, and it seems these sorts of parental approaches help young people to feel positive about school.

Although there was support for the Social Development Model (SDM), some of the risk and protective factors identified within the SDM (specifically family history of antisocial behaviour, and attachment to family) were generally not associated with school engagement. Most studies that have tested the SDM to date have examined problematic rather than positive behaviour. These findings require replication but suggest that family factors may be important in the development of school engagement.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The International Youth Development Study includes relatively large, representative samples of students from Victoria and Washington State. It has successfully used matched procedures for both recruitment and survey administration. The study presented here is one of the few to investigate the

development of positive youth behaviours (defined here as school engagement) in adolescence. It includes a range of measures of family characteristics, enabling a detailed investigation of the impact of these characteristics on positive youth behaviour in two different age groups of students. However, the results presented here are based on data collected at one point in time (cross-sectional analyses). To identify possible causal relationships, longitudinal data are required. The International Youth Development Study will soon have two more waves of data to begin to investigate the characteristics in 2002 that predict school engagement two years later in 2004, as well as to explore the consistency of school engagement across time.

The data used in this study were based solely on adolescents' reports of both their school engagement and family risk and protective factors. This raises the possibility that some of the associations found are due to shared method variance – in other words, those adolescents who perceive their family in positive terms may also engage with school in positive ways, whereas those with problems in one domain may tend to perceive the other domain as problematic too. Increasingly, research methods are expanding to include multiple informants (e.g., parents, teachers). However, research shows that adolescents are reasonably reliable reporters (Huizinga and Elliott 1986; Smart et al. in press).

This analysis has considered only a limited set of family factors as correlates of school engagement, and unsurprisingly, these accounted for only small to moderate amounts of variance in positive behaviour. It is undoubtedly the case that other factors, notably school performance, peer relationships and individual characteristics are also influential. Nevertheless, this analysis has served to identify some important dimensions of family influence during adolescence.

Given the comprehensive measures of risk and protective factors in the International Youth Development Study, future work will be able to investigate the relative importance of family characteristics compared with characteristics of the individual, peers, school, and community.

Conclusion

Although understanding the development of problematic behaviour has been the focus of much research attention until recently, it is crucial that the factors that promote positive youth behaviour are also understood. Interventions for problematic behaviours no longer simply strive to reduce problem behaviours, they also seek to promote positive behaviours to replace the problematic ones. To ensure that these interventions are appropriate and maximally effective, we need to understand how positive behaviour such as school engagement develops.

This article has shown that there are several modifiable family characteristics associated with positive behaviour. These include parents boosting both rewards for and opportunities to participate in prosocial activities, and the importance of expressing clear



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disapproval of antisocial behaviour and drug use. The findings here also suggest that family management practices and family conflict impact on adolescents' views about school and home and need to be addressed. Overall, the findings illustrate the validity of "ecological" approaches to development, which emphasise the inter-relationships between young people's developmental contexts such as home and school.

Endnote

1. The means have been adjusted to take into account the sampling design, the clustering of students in classes within the schools, and student age. The adjusted mean is more likely to be close to the "true" population value (although in general we have found that adjusted and unadjusted estimates are similar). The 95 per cent CIs specify an upper and lower value and we can say that we are 95 per cent confident that the population lies within these two values. If the 95 per cent CIs for two different means do not overlap, we can say there is a significant difference between the two means.

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The International Youth Development Study

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