

Natalie Matthews-Ramo

COVER STORY

FAMILY

Parenting Doesn't Matter

We're all terrified we're going to mess up our kids. The science says we probably won't have much impact at all.

By [DANIEL ENGBER](#)

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Here's one way I might have screwed up my infant daughter: I let her go way too long without giving her solid food. At a four-month checkup, our pediatrician suggested it was time to change her diet. "You could even try a piece of steak," she said. This seemed a little much. We'd planned to start with mashed-up peas or carrots or maybe Cream of Wheat; the thought of shoving London broil in her mouth put us off the

whole idea for months. Every evening one of us would venture, “Maybe now’s the time to start with solid food?” And then every evening we’d agree to wait. It sounded like a lot of effort, to boil carrots or whatever, after having gotten through the day. Also, what if boiled carrots made her choke?

As this went on, we sometimes wondered if we might be lousy parents—so scared of messing up, and so averse to changing our routine, that we’d deprived our baby girl of steak. Then, one night, I fell into a reverie. We’d failed to give our daughter solids yet again that day, and I’d started on my standard stretch of self-recrimination: *Would we ever wean our daughter?* If we put it off until October, I thought, we’d miss the chance to give her cake for her first birthday. Then I tried to picture what would happen if we waited even longer. I imagined her in kindergarten, drinking from a bottle while the other kids had string cheese; then in middle school, as the Girl Who Never Learned to Chew; then as a businesswoman on the go, toting Nalgene full of breast milk in her purse. The sillier these scenarios became, the more comforting I found them—and the more it seemed to me that nothing that we did as parents would really make a difference in the end. Of course our girl would try some mashed-up peas eventually. Of course she’d eat a piece of steak at some point between her six-month checkup and her Sweet 16. And that milestone would be attained even if we dragged our feet today, tomorrow, and all of next week, too.

My worries vanished: We weren’t lousy parents—just a bit hands-off, but that’s OK.

Soon I found myself applying the same exculpatory logic to many other tasks of early parenting.

“Dan, should we get started on the potty training?”

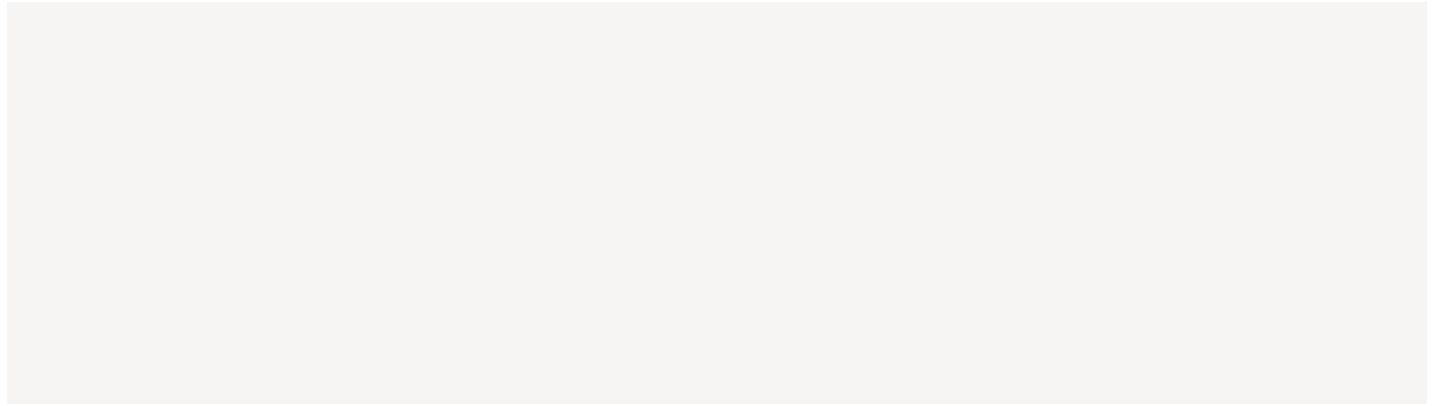
“Eh, why bother? It’s not like she’ll be shitting in her pants at high-school graduation.”

Now, I sometimes fret that this idea has too much sway inside my head. Whenever we're confronted with some new conundrum—what to do for preschool, for example, or how to handle toddler tantrums—I'm inclined to fall back on my blanket rule, my anti-principle of parenting: It's not like she'll be doing this forever, I'll say. Everything will work out fine. Or else, I guess, everything *won't* work out fine. But even then, would it really be our fault?

Not unless we'd acted like a pair of ogres: like if we really had stopped our girl from eating solid food for years or made her wear a diaper to her high-school graduation. But short of that, I can't shake the intuition that any choices that we make as parents—or any choices that we fail to make—won't matter in the long run. I'm glad to say my daughter has been eating lots of mush these days and isn't drinking so much milk. This was bound to happen at some point just as she's bound to poop into a toilet, regardless of the method we decide to use for teaching her, whether it's the Brazelton approach, the three-day plan, or some other potty-training scheme I haven't heard of yet. Other, more fundamental outcomes in her life—I mean aspects of our daughter's character, her passions, and her long-term health—may be far less certain at this point. But if I'm honest, these feel just as unresponsive to our parenting.

I find that sort of comforting, but also sort of sad.

* * *



| Illustration by Natalie Matthews-Ramo.

Let's talk about the weird-shit rule of parenting. It's a principle that I just made up. Here's the gist: Provided that you have the means to satisfy your child's basic needs, and assuming that you aren't acting in a way that's flagrantly abusive, the only way to really change her life—to alter her nature, for better or worse—is to do some weird, outrageous shit. I don't know exactly what that shit would be; I guess it could be pretending that your baby's French, or depriving her of toys, or suspending her inside a window cage. (To be honest, even that shit might not be weird enough to make a difference in the long run.) But otherwise, in the absence of weird shit, the weird-shit rule stipulates that as long as you love your kids in more or less the way that normal parents do, and try your best to be benign, you'll be pretty much irrelevant.

Parents tend to understand the weird-shit rule, yet parents also tend to think that they're exceptions. They might be scared their shit is weird by accident, and that it's messing up their kids in lots of little ways. Or else they might be proud of how their shit is so exceptional and weird the better way that makes a child more amazing. I'm here to say that both of these are fantasies. You're almost certainly not a weirdo parent. Maybe you've pursued the most extreme attachment parenting, and your baby never leaves your side. That's not weird enough to count as weirdo parenting. Perhaps you sleep-trained your kid before she could even lift her head? That also isn't weird. What about cloth diapers? Sorry, pretty normal. Gave up on breast-feeding earlier than your perfect next-door neighbor? Doesn't really matter. A total ban on screen time till the age of 5? A little odd, I guess, but also: not that weird!

No, when I say “weird shit,” I’m referring to the stuff you’d never dream of doing. It might be well-intentioned, at least according to some weirdo logic, but it’s also very, very far outside the norm. Weird shit would be insisting that your child only poops at certain times, or that she never hears a word beginning with the letter P. Weird shit would be depriving her of song, or telling her you’re ghosts. So I’m confident in saying that, chances are, your parenting is pretty normal—and your pretty normal parenting won’t, in the end, change all that much about your child’s future.

I’m proud to say my weird-shit rule is supported by the science of parentology. When behavioral geneticists study pairs of fraternal and identical twins, including those who grew up together or separately, and measure how they differ as adults, they tend to find very little impact from what they call the siblings’ “shared environment”—the set of factors that includes whatever aspects of their lives those kids might have in common if they lived together: things like their neighborhood or school, or their parents’ personalities, social class, and strategies for raising children.

If these factors are irrelevant, then what *does* affect a child’s future? Twin studies say a large proportion of the differences between children’s cognitive abilities, personalities, and chances of ending up with mental illness (among other long-term outcomes) can be explained solely by their DNA. And most of the rest appears to come from random chance, quirks in their biology, and specific non-parent-related life experiences: the teachers they had, or the friends they made along the way.

This has always been a strong result and was supported in the last few years by an omnibus analysis of almost 3,000 twin studies conducted between 1958 and 2012. It has, at times, been used to make some bold, bleak claims about what it means to raise a family. Twenty years ago, a panic over parenting swept across the media when developmental psychologist Judith Rich Harris put out a book, *The Nurture Assumption*, that claimed the links between parents’ actions and the outcomes of their kids were based on flimsy science. A raft of essays followed, addressing what appeared to be her central provocation: “Do Parents Matter?” A “modern-day cult of parenting” had taken hold, as Malcolm Gladwell put it at the time, but now it seemed as

though it wasn't doing any good. If it was, then wouldn't major changes in parental methods—participation trophies and all that—have had transformative effects? Yet for Harris, the evidence seemed pretty clear: Parents changed; their kids did not.

This line of thinking thrives in certain academic circles, even as it so egregiously contradicts our sense of parenting as the most important job we'll ever do (and undercuts a massive industry in parenting self-help). In a pair of recent essays for the online site Quillette, Saint Louis University behavioral geneticist Brian Boutwell said that Harris had it right. Quoting from her book, and referring to that big analysis of several thousand twin studies, he affirmed there's little reason to believe that we can help determine our kids' intelligence, personality, or mental health. We aren't really “puppet masters” of our kids' development, he argued, but rather something more important—their guardians and friends.

Boutwell does concede—as do all adherents to this theory—that parents can be cruel or kind, and that there are obviously many ways to screw up a little person's life. If a child ends up inside a Romanian orphanage, for example, studies say that will change her for the worse. So might any approach to “parenting” that could be classified as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. My weird-shit rule assumes a childhood that clears these very modest thresholds; it takes it as a given that a parent won't behave in vicious, hateful ways.

In another sense, the rule applies only to those parents who possess some degree of privilege. A vast and terrible gap exists, of course, between the richest and the poorest families in the U.S., with obvious effects on children's lives. It matters quite a bit to kids' development when they have lead in their drinking water, or face a bloom of Legionella microbes, rampant air pollution, super-busted schools, and racism. These broad effects of bad environments may be minimized in twin studies, which sometimes draw from groups that lack diversity. Research done inside a welfare state like Norway, for example, or among middle-class families in Minnesota, capture just a narrow band of

variation on these measures. It tends to overlook the kids who don't have some minimal degree of health and safety.

Nor will these studies tend to show what happens when a parent acts in weird-shit ways—whether that environment is extra-bad or extra-good. When it comes to how, exactly, people choose to raise their kids—which toys they buy, which rules they set, how they nurture and communicate—the research only tests for ordinary differences across a given set of families, rather than the total range of possible decisions and behaviors. So when those studies tell us that a person's style as a parent doesn't really matter, they're referring to gradations in the mostly-normal shit that parents do. They're saying that parents aren't so important, assuming their behavior falls within the standard bounds of their community. But if they were doing something very different—I mean, if they were off the reservation, parent-wise? Then it's really hard to say.

The more I think about this science, the more it makes me think that parents *ought* to shake things up. Maybe if my wife and I were weird enough, we could move the needle for our daughter, even just a bit, and make her a happier, healthier woman. That's just in the long view: How we act around the house would also have effects on her right now while she's still a kid. If studies tell us that genetics wins out in the end for lots of traits and outcomes, they also say its influence is weakest—and ours is strongest—when our child is still young and less able to control her own environment. (That's especially true for intelligence.)

But then I also know that any weird shit we dreamt up could also make things worse. We might follow the advice of *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Woman Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* and act as though we're living in Bordeaux, on the theory that our daughter would grow up to be more patient, adventurous, and self-reliant. But what if the latest

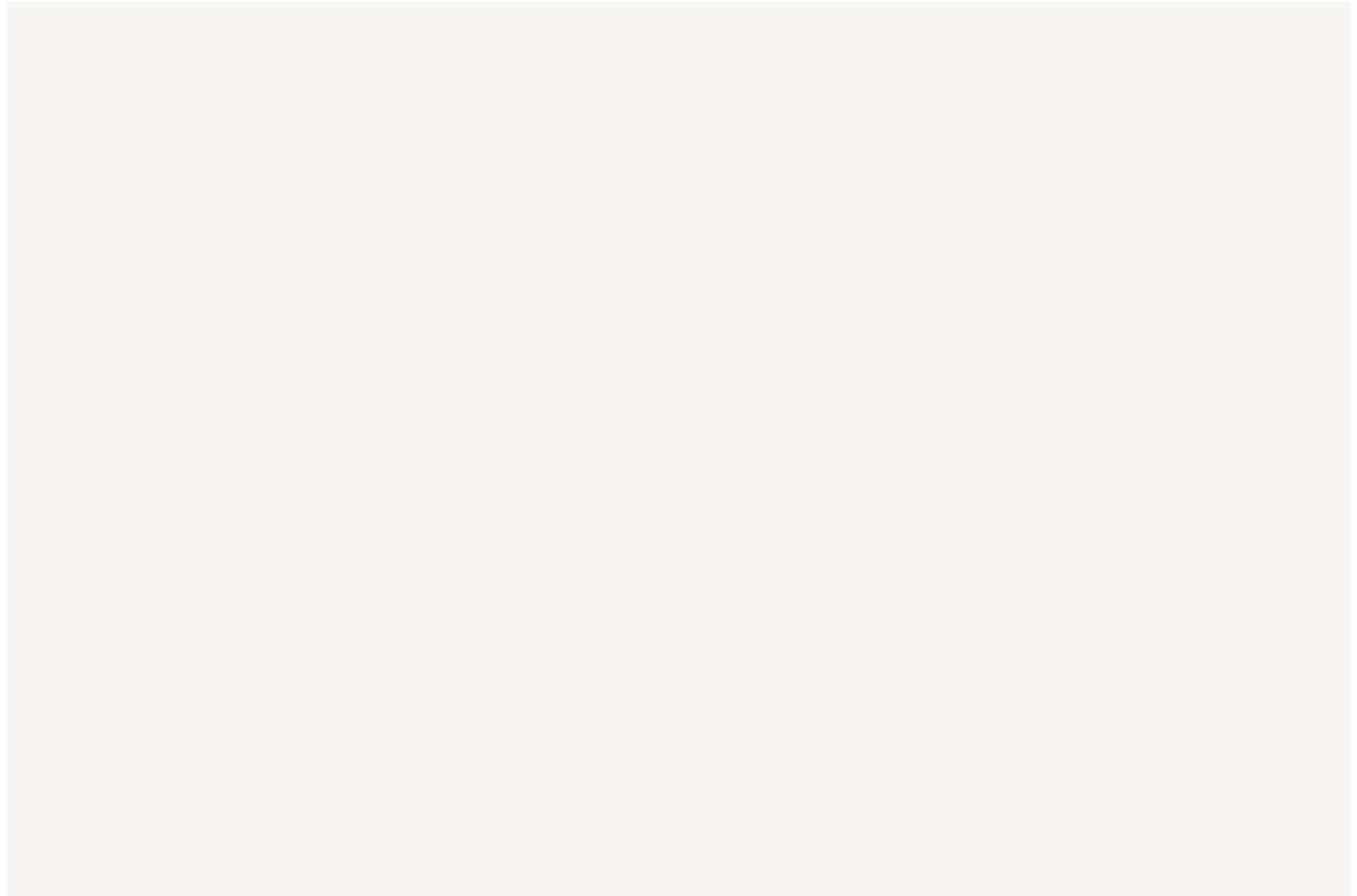
self-help fad turned out to be off the mark? What if it were weird but also really bad? What if we picked out the wrong book on Amazon and ended up with *Bringing Up Bebeluș: One American Father Discovers the Wisdom of Romanian Orphanages?*

That concern might be enough to put me back into my anti-parenting position: Let's not try to rock the boat; we'll do well enough just by virtue of our being normal people who adore their kid. But then again, that's just for me; I know the stakes are higher for my wife. She's the one who has to weigh the benefits of breast-feeding, then figure out when it's time to stop. She's the one who's made to feel that moms must always maximize their nurturing potential, so they can love their kids in the best and most effective ways. I mean to say my laissez-faire approach to parenting isn't just a function of my social class, but of my gender, too: It feels much easier for a dad to make pronouncements like, "Eh, it's not like she'll be pooping in her pants at high-school graduation." Plus, one (not-yet-published) [academic survey](#) says that mothers tend to have a better intuition of how genetic factors influence a person's personality, intelligence, mental health, and other traits.

So maybe this decision about the weirdness of our shit should be up to mom, instead of dad. But either way, it's based on the belief that the weirdness of our shit is up to us. It takes it as a given that, by reading books and articles and Facebook-group advice, we might really learn to change the underlying structure of our interactions—that we'd have the strength to budge the shared environment we call *our home*. I've come to think this can't be true. Maybe it's a corollary to the weird-shit rule of parenting: Even if you want to be a more extreme and efficacious parent, you probably can't.

That's in part because genetics works on parents, too. If it's true my daughter's personality will largely be driven by her DNA, then the same is true for me and my partner. Our inclinations as her caregivers—the degree to which we'll behave with warmth, or try to do the weird-shit things we read about online—will be a function of our heredity. In fact, a recent [study of](#)

22,000 Icelanders finds strong evidence for what researchers call “genetic nurture” effects. A person’s educational attainment can be explained, in part, by her parents’ genetic makeup—even when she did not inherit the parental genes in question.



| Illustration by Natalie Matthews-Ramo.

My approach to raising children will also be a product of the culture I grew up in and an outgrowth of behaviors I observed (and experienced) when I was very young. Some of these behaviors can be changed: I was spanked, for example, when I misbehaved; our perfect daughter, were she ever to misbehave, would receive a time-out. Ours may be the nicer, better way to raise a kid—certainly it’s now standard in our community—but I don’t really think the spankings I received in the early 1980s, when that approach was

commonplace, made me any more aggressive or unhappy as a grown-up. (They just hurt my little tushie!) So while this may be the sort of switch that one can choose to flip as modern parents, I can't believe that it will transform very many children's lives years down the line.

On top of that, I'm pretty sure that how I treat my daughter day-to-day has more to do with who she is than whom I'd like to be—it's driven not only by my own innate qualities and sensibilities, but by *hers*. So far her disposition is, by all accounts, that of a lamb. This helps me to be an easygoing parent: No yelling, lots of tickling. But what if she were mischievous or mean? Then it's likely that my wife and I would act in different ways—and not because we'd thought it through, read some books, and decided how to be.

I know that all the anxious time we've spent discussing solid food and punishment and potties will seem pointless in the long run (if not much sooner). But the immutability of parental shit suggests it won't do much to change our family. It also makes it hard to figure how we could make our parenting any weirder—or any more straightforward—than it is already, than it would be if we chose to leave it unexamined. In that sense, I don't think it really matters what we do, so long as we can stay within the normal bounds of loving, cruelty-free behavior. Like almost every other set of parents in the world, we'll continue to make sure—as best we can—that our daughter is not malnourished, dosed with lead, victimized by violence, abandoned in her education, or otherwise subjected to gross abuse or deprivation. If we succeed in that, then she's likely to be her, and we're likely to be us, and there's nothing else to say.

I know that makes it sound like I don't believe in free will—that I don't believe that parents can be good or bad by choice. I also worry that it lets me off the hook for smaller things that I should really try to do, like always putting down my phone when I'm playing with my daughter. This fatalism needn't be

deflating, though. After all, the point of putting down my phone is to make our time together now as rich and enjoyable as it can be, not to make my daughter better later on. Indeed, once I gave up on the notion that I could sculpt her personality, or even do that much to shape my own, it helped me see my loved ones in a different way. I could put aside the awful instrumentalism that runs through the literature of child-rearing. I could broaden out my focus to a different set of goals. “A good relationship is one in which each party cares about the other and derives happiness from making the other happy,” wrote Judith Rich Harris, the parenting skeptic, in 2006.

That sounds right to me. 📌



Daniel Engber is a columnist for Slate.

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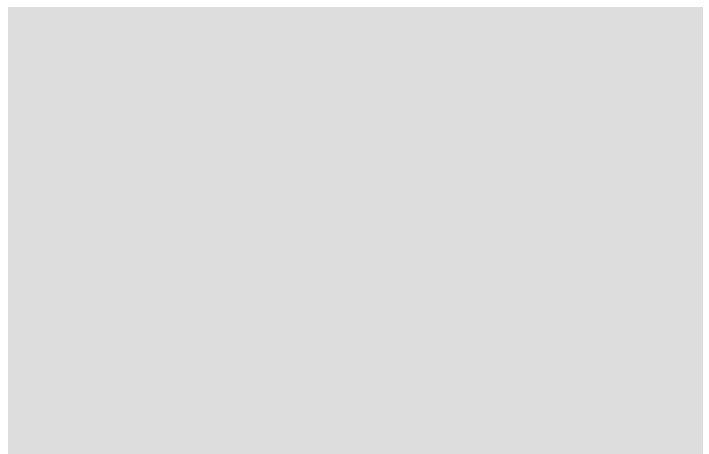
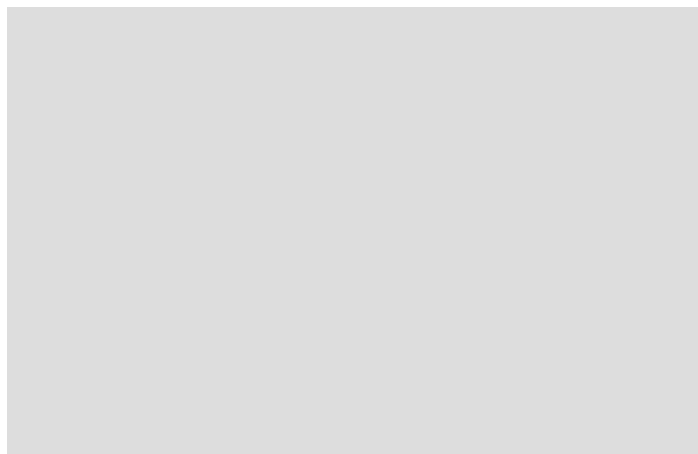
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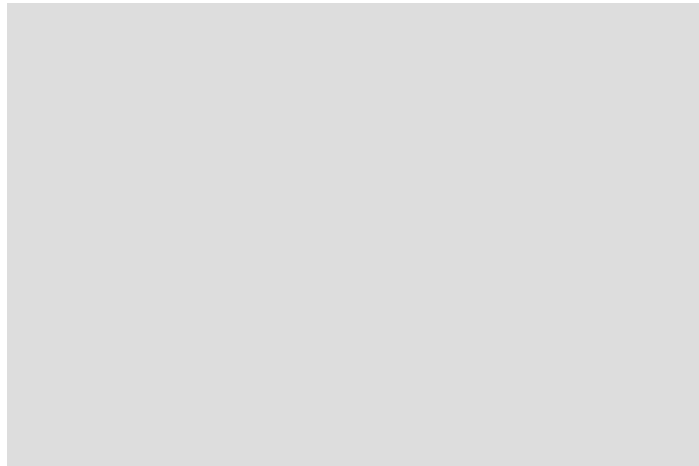
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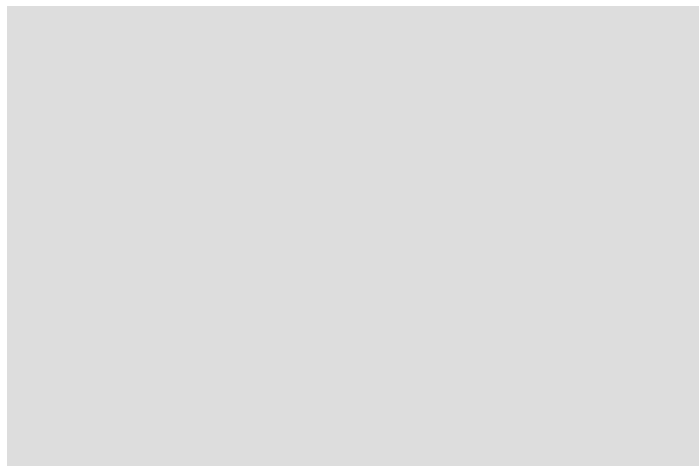
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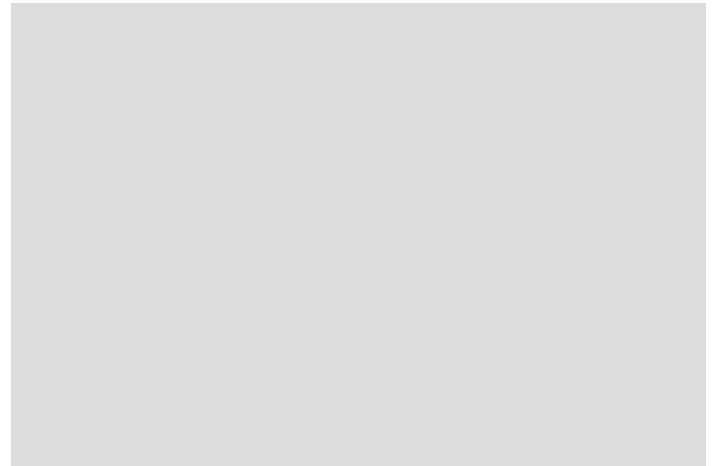


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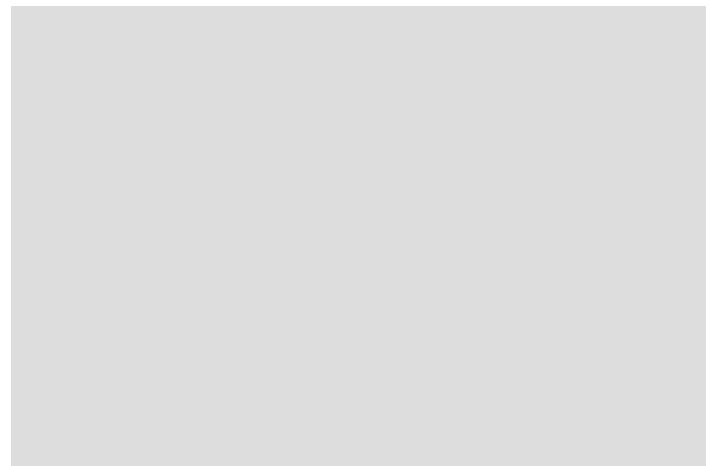
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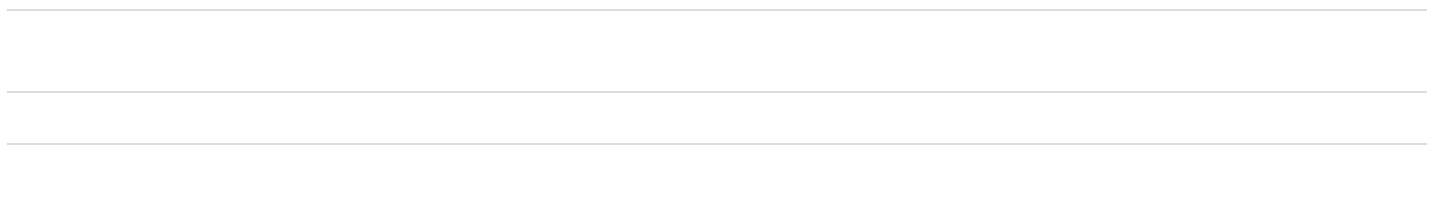
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