

CHAPTER NINE

OUR CHILDREN IN A WESTERN SOCIETY

- What are our obligations towards our children
- They are the future of Islam in America
- How best to support them
- What are the dangers they are exposed to
- Islamic schools and the challenge they face

Our Children Are The Future

Many Islamic centers in America are busy trying to cope with financial difficulties, and organizing various groups to address the needs of their community. In their daily struggle, they forget to plan for the future, or put the needs of the children at the top of their priorities. They may not involve the younger generation in leadership positions or engage them in such a way to give them direction and responsibility.

The future of Islam depends on how well we educate and groom the next generation. What do we teach them, and how do we inspire them to fulfill their role as the leaders of tomorrow. The elders in each community should work closely with the youth, listen and learn. At the same time educate, serve as examples and give directions and set up goals and priorities.

THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

Caring for our children implies providing for them and raising them

well aware of their duty to God. A family life that provides love and security is essential for the well being of the children. When they see their father respecting their mother and consulting her before making decisions, the children will grow up respecting their wives and aware of the importance of caring and trusting.

Educating the children regarding moral values and religious teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah is a duty both parents must understand and fulfill. The Qur'an states:

﴿ يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قُوًا أَنفُسِكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ غِلَاطٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾ [التحریم: ٦]

“O you who believe protect yourselves and your families from Hell fire that is fueled by mankind and stones, guarding it are angels harsh and severe that do not disobey God and do what they are commanded” (At-Tahreem 66 : 6).

Many Muslim families feel their responsibility in educating their children and concentrate their efforts on teaching their children how to pray and memorize the Qur'an. This is well and good, but falls short of what is really needed in a Western society. What the children need more than anything is a rational explanation of the wisdom and reason for Islamic teachings and guidelines. They need to be convinced of the importance of worship rituals and why they should pray or fast or give charity. Islam is not only prayers and fasting, but a way of life, character and morals and how we behave with others.

Parents must serve as examples to their children and apply what they are teaching them in their lives. If they tell them to pray, they must pray regularly and show that these prayers indeed have an effect in their character and behavior. If they fast the month of Ramadan, they need to demonstrate that their fast made them patient, humble and kind. This way they impart to their children that applying the principles of Islam truly had a significant effect on their life.

Islam teaches us to be moderate in our way of life and avoid extreme positions. We learn to listen and learn, be kind and forgiving, humble and

respectful of others, and not talk about others in a negative way in their absence.

Parents should also teach by example how to interact with others who do not share their convictions. Therefore, having a relationship with Christians and Jews and others is important, for the children are going to interact with children who are not Muslims. If the parents isolate themselves and refuse to have any interaction with non-Muslims, they obviously convey to their children the idea that such interaction is not allowed in Islam.

Muslim children growing in a non-Muslim environment face many problems. Just to name a few:

- Having a boy friend or a girl friend
- Alcohol and drugs
- Pre-marital sex

Unless the parents discuss these issues openly and explain the views of Islam, it puts the children at a great disadvantage, as they face tremendous peer pressure and they do not know how to respond.

There is nothing wrong in having friends that do not share the same religious convictions. What is important is choosing good friends that will help and not harm. Friends that encourage wrong behavior like drugs or sex or disrespect of the parents, or make fun of moral values and religious convictions are dangerous and should not be allowed. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) explained the influence of friends when he said:

(The example of a good friend is that of a person carrying musk; he will either gives you a gift, or you will buy from him, or you may smell something nice. A bad friend is like the person blowing on fire: he will either burn your clothes, or at least you will have a bad smell).

Bokhari & Muslim

Children are vulnerable to peer pressure. They want to conform and be like their friends. They do not want to be outcasts or looked down upon. This is especially true of minorities who may be picked upon because of their color, or ethnic background, or religion. To be strong and able to

withstand this pressure requires extra care, love, understanding, but above all open communications and having no walls or barriers between children and their parents. To feel comfortable to come and talk and seek advice is invaluable.

WEEKEND SCHOOLS

Not all parents are able to or have the time to educate their children in religious matters or Islamic values and morals. Also children require interaction with other children of similar age that share their own convictions and have similar traditions. This is the reason that in many Muslim communities the idea of a weekend Islamic school had strong support. Such a school usually functions on Sunday where the children get formal religious education that they lack in the secular schools they attend during the week. The education at home should supplement the teachings and expand such knowledge, and puts it in practical terms.

What children learn in such Islamic schools relate to selected verses of the Qur'an, and selective saying of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). They are also taught Islamic history, stories of other prophets, rituals of worship and a little Arabic, the language of the Qur'an.

The quality and usefulness of such teaching on weekends depends on the curriculum, but more importantly on the teacher and his/ her approach. Some impart the notion that Islam is hard rules that cannot be understood or deviated from, and use a conservative extreme ideology. Others are moderate and teach an Islam that is rational, tolerant and not restrictive.

Some schools spend a great deal of time on memorization of short Qur'anic Surahs (chapters) even though the children may not understand the meaning, value or how to apply these verses in their life. Others teach the meaning, guidelines and principles of Islam. If they ask their students to memorize certain verses, they make sure that they understand their meaning first.

Most weekend Islamic schools are run by volunteers who devote their

time and effort. Such teachers understand their responsibility and are devoted and committed.

Some of these schools are successful in their limited mission and objective. Others fail for several reasons:

- Clash of personality and ideology among the teachers and those responsible for the school
- Lack of resources
- Lack of commitments of the parents to bring their children regularly or on time
- Or the children rebelling because they realize that what they learn at weekend school is at odd with their environment

Weekend Islamic schools are learning from their mistakes and evolving. The curriculum is slowly changing to address current issues, and the hard line approach is softening.

Still there are many problems that cry for a solution. To cite one example, in many schools, boys and girls are segregated because those responsible feel that this segregation is necessary from an Islamic perspective. They cite the saying of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that a boy or young man should not be alone with a girl or young woman for Satan incites temptation). Their understanding of this tradition is flawed because boys and girls meeting in an Islamic school in the company of others will not do something wrong. Where else would they meet and get to know one another! They need each other in a normal and respectful atmosphere where they can talk and relate to the opposite sex. During the week, Muslim boys and girls are exposed to their peers and there are no safeguards like in an Islamic school.

FULL TIME ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Is a relatively new phenomenon. Muslims first concentrated their efforts at building mosques and Islamic centers. It is only recently that many Muslims realized the urgent need for Islamic schools.

Because of the separation of church and state, religion is not taught in public schools. Children need religious education, morals and Islamic

values as they need academic education. Since the schools do not provide such needs, and the effort of weekend schools is of limited value, the idea of a full time Islamic school came to life. The concept is that the children will be educated regarding Islam, and apply their Islamic guidelines in to their academic studies. They are to learn morals and develop noble character, and understand how to interact with others, and be effective members and leaders in their community. Learning Arabic and having a better understanding of the Qur'an, tradition of the Prophet and Muslim history and tradition are essential goals also.

Many Islamic schools are not chartered or recognized by the state. This is regrettable, because the success or failure of any school depends primarily on its academic achievement and how the students perform. The quality of the teachers has a great impact on academic standards and achievement. Since many schools lack the necessary resources, they are unable to hire qualified teachers or to retain such teachers because of strong competition from other schools.

Most Islamic schools lack the necessary funds, because they depend exclusively on donations from their community. Many members of the community believe in supporting mosques and Islamic centers, but refuse to support such an Islamic school unless their children go to that school. They cannot see the need and urgency for such schools, and that it is our responsibility, whether we have children there or not.

Some Muslims adhere to the view that Zakat (obligatory charity) money cannot be used to support schools. They fail to understand that a ruling by earlier scholars that lived in a different environment must be modified if the circumstances change. More recent scholars have explained that schools in a non-Muslim country that serve the needs of Muslims does indeed fulfill the criteria to be funded through Zakat money. In the Qur'anic verse 60, chapter 9, that deals with the eight categories entitled for Zakat, "in the cause of God" easily applies to Islamic schools.

﴿ إِنَّمَا الصَّدَقَتُ لِلْفُقَرَاءِ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْعَمِلِينَ عَلَيْهَا وَالْمَوْلَاةِ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَالْغَرَامِينَ وَفِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَأَبْنِ السَّبِيلِ فَرِيضَةً مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴾ [التوبة: ٦٠]

"Alms (obligatory charity) are for the poor, and the needy, and those employed to administer the funds: for those whose hearts have reconciled to truth; for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: thus it is ordained by Allah, for Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom" (At-Tawba 9 : 60)

Another problem that such Islamic schools face is the lack of qualified teachers and administrators. There are few Islamic institutions of higher learning in this country. We need colleges and universities that will graduate the leaders of Islamic centers and Islamic schools.

Teaching Arabic is important to get a better understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah. A problem that our Islamic school in Cincinnati faced was the disparity in understanding and speaking that non-Arabs faced relative to students that spoke Arabic at home. Soon it was realized that there had to be two tracks for the Arabic language classes: one fast more advanced track for students of Arab descent where Arabic is the spoken language at home, and a slower more basic track for students of non-Arab descent.

What is important is teaching Arabic in a way that enables the student to read and recite the Qur'an, not so much for conversation. We felt strongly that proper understanding of the Arabic Qur'an and understanding the meaning and lessons from a Qur'anic chapter was more important than memorization of a Surah (chapter) without understanding its meaning and implication and how we can use this guidance in our lives.

Developing curriculum especially Qur'anic studies and the Sunnah as well as Arabic curriculum is a challenge in a Western society. It is not enough to translate from Arabic to English courses taught in a Muslim country, because the culture is different and the needs of the students are also different.