

Ramadan – The Month of Fasting

The importance of fasting

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is the fourth ‘pillar’ of Islam, an act of worship of great spiritual, moral and social significance for Muslims. It is obligatory for all males and females to fast once they attain the age of puberty (for some children this can be as young as age nine) The physical dimension of fasting involves completely abstaining from all forms of nourishment, foods, liquids (including water) and smoking from dawn to sunset for the whole month. Younger children may fast for all or part of the month but this is entirely optional. The spiritual and moral dimension of fasting is considered to be of far greater importance than the physical dimension. In general, Muslims are encouraged not to use Ramadan as an opportunity to avoid aspects of normal life but rather to cope with normal life under a different set of guidelines and conditions. However, schools need to be aware of some important considerations in relation to fasting pupils. Fasting pupils will normally get up before dawn to have their breakfast, which does interrupt their sleeping pattern.

During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness, in order to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealings with others, including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness and avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour. In addition, having empathy with the poor, donating generously for charitable causes, the sharing of food and inviting others to one’s home to open the fast are important features of Ramadan. Muslims also focus on reading more of the Qur’an and performing additional prayers in the mosque every evening.

Schools can develop the spiritual, moral social and cultural aspects of their children and school life by recognising and building upon the essence and spirit of Ramadan. Whilst the discipline and challenge of fasting is to continue with the normality of everyday life, staff should exercise a degree of understanding, by encouraging pupils to avoid excessive exertion in physical education to prevent dehydration. By the same token they may praise pupils who are clearly making a special effort regarding their altitudes and behaviour.

Teachers can take this opportunity to be more inclusive and teach pupils about Ramadan in religious education and to invite guests from the Muslim community to take collective worship or assemblies. Some schools offer their staff awareness training about factors affecting their pupils during Ramadan.

The Islamic calendar is based on a lunar cycle, therefore, the month of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year on the Gregorian calendar; hence it takes Ramadan about 33 years to move through the seasons from January to December.

Primary school pupils

Although fasting for the entire month does not become obligatory until the age of puberty, it is common practice for Muslim children to begin to fast before this age, in order to become progressively accustomed to the obligation. Most children aged 10 and 11 years (years 5 & 6) are likely to fast all 30 days. Children are enthusiastic and get a great sense of achievement joining their families in taking part in the spirit of Ramadan and often begin at a younger age.

The younger the child, the more difficult it tends to be for children to fast without their physical stamina and concentration levels being affected. This can be problematic for very young children and we would advise that schools liaise with parents to encourage very young children to fast half days or to avoid fasting during school days as this can have a significant effect on their concentration levels and degree of alertness while at school. It is important to be aware that young children are more likely to fast when Ramadan falls in the winter months, when the days are shorter and the climate is cooler.

Whether a pupil decides to fast or not is a matter to be decided between the parent and the child. Breaking the fast before the correct time maybe regarded as being worse than not fasting at all by some pupils and parents. Schools should not encourage children to break their fast early unless it is for health and safety reasons. The overriding consideration should be that the children do not feel disadvantaged in school activities because of their religious observance.

Prayers during Ramadan

The same daily prayers are offered in school time as at other times of the year, but in Ramadan it is usual for more students to offer their prayers in school. Schools should recognise this by putting in place acceptable arrangements for prayer, including reasonable extra space ready for the first day of fasting, these arrangements should be shared with pupils, parents and staff so that everyone is clear of the facilities offered.

Celebrating Ramadan

Muslims approach Ramadan with enthusiasm and it is customary for Muslims to congratulate one another on its arrival. The school can value and build on this spirit by having themes based on Ramadan at collective worship or assemblies, and by organising communal 'Ifta' (breaking the fast) when pupils, parents, community members and teachers –both Muslims and non-Muslims – can all join in the ending of the fast and eating together. Some schools enter into the charitable spirit of Ramadan by raising funds for the poor and the needy in the world.

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The majority of pupils who are fasting are able to take part in most physical activities during Ramadan without putting themselves at risk or in danger. Fasting may make some children feel tired or drowsy, or even develop headaches due to dehydration. This may necessitate some Muslim pupils having to reduce their physical exercise. Schools may wish to consider and plan less strenuous activities in physical education lessons during Ramadan.

Examinations during Ramadan

It is inevitable that certain statutory and internal school examinations may fall during Ramadan. Schools should give appropriate consideration when scheduling internal examinations, since the combination of preparing for exams and fasting may prove challenging for some pupils.

Parents' evenings and after school functions

During Ramadan, the evenings can be a very busy period for Muslim families, particularly if the breaking of the fast (Iftar) falls in the early evening. Furthermore, some adults will spend their time observing additional religious activities, like the special evening prayers (Taraweeh) at the mosque. This may make it difficult for parents to attend meetings or other functions in the evening during the month of Ramadan. The scheduling of parent evenings before or after the month of Ramadan would be appreciated by parents and is likely to ensure better attendance.

Exemption from fasting

There are certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting. These include menstruating women, those for whom fasting is likely to have a seriously detrimental effect on health and physical well-being and those who cannot survive without taking medication or nourishment, for example diabetics. Those travelling on long and difficult journeys may not fast if it is likely to cause serious hardship. Any missed fasting days have to be made up at a later date or in some circumstances compensated for, by feeding the poor.

Medication

No oral medication can be taken by a person who is fasting. Anyone needing regular medication during fasting hours is normally exempt from fasting in any case. Medication can be taken once the fast has ended. Medical injections can be taken by a person who is fasting, although not those injections that influence body nutrition. Guidance should be sought from local Muslim organisations on specific issues if necessary. During emergencies, where a child's wellbeing is at risk, medicine should be administered. Routine vaccinations should be scheduled for other times of the year.

Detentions and after school activities

When Ramadan falls during the winter months, after-school detention or activities for a pupil who is fasting could mean that the pupil is not able to reach home in time to break their fast. Whilst accepting full responsibility for breaching school rules, schools should be aware that pupils are able carry out their religious duty of breaking the fast on time. A drink or anything to eat is sufficient and many schools do make this provision available when required. Some parents may request that their children break the fast at home with their family.

Swimming during Ramadan

In general, participation in swimming is an acceptable activity whilst fasting. However, for many pupils this activity may prove to be an issue, as the potential for swallowing water is very high. Some pupils or parents consider the risk too great and may wish to avoid swimming whilst fasting. Others may take the view that as swallowing water is unintentional it does not break the fast.

Schools with a significant number of Muslim pupils should try to avoid scheduling swimming lessons during Ramadan to remove unnecessary barriers to full participation.

Sex and relationship education

Whilst fasting, Muslims are not permitted to engage in any sexual relations and are expected to take measures to avoid sexual thoughts and discourse. Schools are therefore advised to avoid scheduling the teaching of sex and relationship education, including aspects that are part of the science curriculum, during Ramadan.

Special Ramadan evening prayers (Taraweeh)

During Ramadan many pupils may observe special additional prayers called Taraweeh. These usually take place at the mosque every evening and last approximately an hour. These prayers are optional and may be observed individually or with one's family at home.

RAMADAN – THE MONTH OF FASTING

Features of good practice

- School has a written policy for the requirements and implications of Ramadan for their Muslim pupils.
- School offers its staff Ramadan awareness training about factors affecting pupils during Ramadan.
- School recognises and celebrates the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship or assembly themes and communal Iftar (collective breaking of the fast).
- School is aware of the likely increase in the number of pupils offering prayer during the month of Ramadan and facilities are provided accordingly, for example a larger area for daily prayers.
- Adequate arrangements are in place to supervise fasting children, during the lunch hour. These arrangements are well publicised amongst pupils and parents.
- School takes account of Ramadan when planning internal examinations and tries to avoid scheduling them during the month of Ramadan.
- School avoids scheduling sex and relationship education and swimming during Ramadan.
- School teachers are considerate and mindful that fasting children avoid engaging in over-demanding exercises during physical education lessons that may result in dehydration.
- If possible, school avoids holding parents' meeting and other school social events in the evening during the month of Ramadan.
- School gives the option for those Muslim pupils who are entitled to free school meals to take packed lunches home, should they wish to do so.

Islamic Festivals

Like all other religions, Islam has a number of special celebrations. The two main annual celebrations are Eid ul-Fitr (festival of charity) and Eid ul-Adha (festival of sacrifice)

Festival of Charity (Eid ul-Fitr)

Eid ul-Fitr celebrates the successful completion of the month of Ramadan and every Muslim is required to give to charity on this occasion. The day starts with a light meal followed by special congregational prayers often attended by the whole family. Muslims usually spend the rest of the day visiting relatives or friends, and eating special food. It is customary to wear one's finest or new clothes and also to exchange gifts and money.

Festival of Sacrifice (Eid ul-Adha)

Eid ul-Adha celebrates the completion of the Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Makkah). In many countries after the public prayers, those who can afford to, sacrifice a lamb or a goat to signify the Prophet Ibrahim's (Abraham's) obedience to God, shown by his readiness to sacrifice his son Ismail (Ishmael). Eid ul Adha is celebrated by Muslims all over the world, not only those performing the Hajj. Many Muslims arrange for their sacrifice to be made overseas so that the meat of the sacrificed animal reaches those they consider to be in most need of it. The day of Eid ul-Adha itself is similar in nature to the day of Eid ul-Fitr.

Celebrating Islamic festivals

Schools can recognise and celebrate the Eid festivals by highlighting the importance of the message of Eid through collective worship and assemblies. Schools may want to share sweets amongst all children to mark this event. In addition, schools may make the normal school meals a special Eid meal for all the children and invite some parents and special guests. Holding balls and discos to celebrate Islamic festivals would be considered inappropriate by Muslim parents.

As Eid days are based on the lunar calendar, there can be some uncertainty in determining the exact dates of the two Eids in advance. This makes planning for Eid holidays difficult. Schools are advised to liaise with their local mosque or other Muslim organisations for more information. Schools should allow at least one day off for each of the Eid celebrations as obligatory religious observance. Eid holidays should be marked as authorised absences.* In addition, schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils can alter school holidays to have time off at Eid without prejudice to their pupils and the schools' attendance record.

Other celebrations

There are a number of other important occasions in the Islamic calendar which schools can recognise through assembly themes. They include the Islamic New Year

(Hijjah), Night of Power (Lailatul Qadr), Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the day of Ashurah**

Social events and celebrations

When organising either celebrations or social events, it is important for schools to consider the appropriateness of certain events, such as school balls/discos, fashion shows that might inadvertently exclude pupils and parents from the Islamic faith background. Alcohol is prohibited within Islam, and its presence at a function may make it uncomfortable for some pupils and their parents to attend.

* For further information, see Section 444 of the 1996 Education Act

** Children who belong to the Shi'a Muslim community may take this day off as a religious holiday

ISLAMIC FESTIVALS

Features of good practice

- The school includes possible dates for the two Eid festivals in their yearly calendar.
- The school grants Eid holidays as authorised absences for the observance Of the special Eid prayers and celebrations for the two Eid festivals.
- The school recognises and celebrates the two Eids and other Islamic festivals in collective worship or assembly themes.
- The school celebrates Eid by sharing sweets amongst their children to mark the event. In addition, the school may make the normal school meal a special Eid meal for their pupils.

Physical Education

Physical education is a very important part of school life and full participation is to be encouraged, in order to develop a healthier lifestyle. Physical education is a compulsory part of the national curriculum at all key stages and covers six areas of activity: athletics, dance, games, gymnastics, outdoor and adventurous activities, and swimming. At Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils must experience all six areas of activity. At Key Stage 3, pupils pursue at least four areas of activity, whilst Key Stage 4 pupils are required to pursue at least two.

There are some basic Islamic requirements for modesty which need to be considered in order to remove any unnecessary barriers for Muslim pupils to participate fully in physical education and swimming in particular.

Dress for physical education

The most suitable sportswear for boys and girls that respects the requirements of Islamic modesty is a tracksuit. In addition, for girls, the headscarf can be tied in a safe and secure manner, or a special sports hijabs can be used.

Changing (primary schools)

In the vast majority of primary schools, when changing for PE, both boys and girls have no choice but to change in mixed group environments for sports activities. Muslim children are likely to exhibit resistance to this sort of compromising and immodest exposure, but are often pressurised to conform to institutional norms which do not take account of their own or their parents' beliefs and values.

Schools need to take account of, and be more responsive and sensitive to, the moral values of the children and communities they serve. In primary schools where there are no separate changing facilities, schools can use portable partitions to allow girls and boys to change in single gender groups within the classrooms. Teachers also need to be sensitive to gender separation in this context.

As a permanent solution, schools could consider providing separate changing facilities that include individual changing cubicles, particularly in schools that have significant or large Muslim pupil populations.

Changing (Secondary schools)

In secondary schools, changing facilities are always gender specific but almost always communal. Communal changing compromises the Islamic modesty requirements and having to change down to their undergarments in the presence of their peers and teachers can be a source of embarrassment or even be undignifying for many pupils. Pupils who may have problems with weight or physique can be subjected to

unnecessary embarrassment in situations where there is no choice but to change communally.

Secondary schools can provide a choice for their pupils to change in greater privacy, for example, by including individual changing cubicles within changing facilities.

Mixed gender sports activities

Some sports involve physical contact with other team players, for example basketball and football. Most Muslim parents would find it objectionable for boys and girls to play such sports in mixed-gender groups. Schools can respond positively to this concern by making sure that contact sports are always in single gender groups.

Showering after physical education

Some schools may have policies for children to shower at school after sports activities. These arrangements sometimes take the form of naked communal showering, which involves profound indignity. The practice of allowing Muslim children to shower in bathing costumes or shorts does not solve the problem if other pupils are naked in the same communal shower area. Islam forbids nakedness in front of others or being among others who are naked.

Muslim children should not be expected to participate in communal showering. Sensitivity and understanding by school and staff in these matters will be much appreciated by both Muslim pupils and their parents. One practical solution in a school environment would be the installation of individual shower cubicles. In the absence of separate cubicles for changing and showering, Muslim children should be allowed to delay showering until they reach home.

Swimming

Swimming is a requirement of the national curriculum at Key Stage 2 and becomes optional at Key Stage 3. It is a beneficial and enjoyable activity that develops a valuable skill for life.

Many schools, both primary and secondary, hold mixed swimming lessons but the changing arrangements, although single gender, are often communal. Some schools have taken the initiative of offering single-sex swimming lessons and ensure that their pupils change in individual cubicles. However, they do not always ensure that the accompanying teacher and pool attendants are of the same gender as the children. Adjoining changing and showering areas of the pool are sometimes used by members of the public at the same time as the children. This raises serious concern in that some members of the public may sometimes become totally naked in the presence of these children.

The practice of boys and girls swimming in mixed-group sessions or being exposed to complete nakedness of others, when changing, is unacceptable for reasons of modesty and decency to Muslim parents, as well as to many non-Muslim parents. Given the choice between mixed or single-sex swimming, Muslim parents would always opt for a wholly single-sex environment for swimming.

The Swimming Charter published by the DfES in December 2003 under the heading 'Ethnic Minority Groups' states:

The Swimming Advisory Group's report highlighted the fact that many children from ethnic communities were failing to reach the minimum Key Stage 2 target. This is particularly true for children of Islamic faith background whose parents may object on grounds of modesty and decency, Muslim girls in particular may exhibit reluctance to swimming in mixed classes with boys. Making alternative arrangements such as all male and all female classes can often solve these issues. Schools, local authorities and pool managers should work together to remove unnecessary barriers to learning. They should consider block booking separate classes for girls and boys (either from a number of schools or with different age groups from the same school), using same sex teachers for classes, if appropriate, and adopt flexible clothing codes.

Schools should make every effort to provide a single-sex environment for swimming and allow Muslim children to wear swimwear that complies with the requirements of modesty and decency according to the teachings of Islam. Some schools have been able to meet these requirements in providing an appropriate single-gender environment and also allowing girls to wear full leotards and leggings in the pool. Provided these guidelines are adhered to, there should be no reason why Muslim children should be withdrawn from swimming lessons.

If schools are unable to make arrangements for a single-sex environment for swimming, then Muslim pupils should have the option to be excused from swimming on religious grounds. Parents should be encouraged to take advantage of single-sex arrangements that some swimming pools offer outside school hours, where their children can go and learn to swim.

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