



YCS Effective Practice Briefing: Supporting Muslim Children

YCS Effective Practice Briefings are produced by the YCS Quality Development Team in collaboration with children, staff and key stakeholders. Based on up to date evidence, the briefings provide concise and easily accessible advice and guidance for staff working with children in custody and will be reviewed as further information becomes available.

1. The Islamic Faith

This briefing covers a range of good practice that will enable staff to understand and respond to the needs of children who follow the Islamic faith. It suggests a range of very practical measures to help staff demonstrate that they have considered and responded to the child's individual circumstances and that will help to minimise any unnecessary barriers to engagement and building trust.

Islam is an Abrahamic faith similar to Christianity and Judaism. There are two main sects in Islam: Sunni and Shia, and there are several denominations within these sects; all can have slightly differing beliefs and practices. Children who identify as being Muslim come from different backgrounds and cultures as well as coming from families or communities with varying levels of practice. As approaches to the faith can vary, it's important to speak to individual children and ask them about the specific support they need to allow them to follow their religion. As with children from other faith backgrounds, not all Muslims are religiously observant, and some may not observe any religious practices. It is important that a child feels supported upon arrival and not judged whether they are a devout Muslim or not.

2. Prayer

- To help children who may wish to pray, consider identifying the direction of Mecca (Kiblah) in reception and on living units. Recognise that reception and pre unit allocation may offer the first opportunity the child has to pray that day. Being able to support this while they are waiting by offering a prayer mat, as well as a scarf for female children to cover their hair, would allow them to feel welcomed and accepted. It would also help reduce any anxiety practicing Muslims may have of not being able to pray.
- Before prayer a 'state of purity' achieved by ritual washing needs to be attained: The hands are to be washed and the mouth and nasal passage rinsed. The face and forearms and feet are washed alongside the wiping of the head and ears. Make sure children are made aware of where this can be done, and are supported to do so, should they wish to pray whilst in reception, or on their living units.
- Recognise that puberty may cause an increased need to ritually shower to ensure they are clean for prayer.

3. Food

- The majority of people will be aware of the term "halal" and will associate this with food. Halal refers to anything that is allowed and hence permissible for Muslims to consume. The opposite is true for "haram", that which is not allowed.
- Muslims are allowed to consume meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic rites (see below). Muslims can consume all types of fish, all fruits, all vegetables and dairy products, provided they do not contain any gelatine.
- There are no restrictions on who can cook halal food, provided that the food does not come into contact with foods that are not halal or is prepared with the same utensils that are used when preparing non-halal ingredients, without being properly cleaned first. For example, if an egg was cooked in sunflower oil or vegetable oil in which a non-halal meat was cooked previously the oil would be considered haram and not permissible for a Muslim. Similarly, if the food was prepared on the surface that non-halal food was prepared, the surface would need to be cleaned.
- Upon arrival it is unlikely the child will have been able to choose their meal. Make sure in advance that the kitchen observes the correct cooking methods to keep halal and haram food separate so you are able to reassure the child that the meal is suitable for them.

4. Dress

How a child dresses is their choice. Children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds may choose to wear clothes which represent their diverse cultures. For example, traditional dress for Muslims from Pakistan will be different to those from Iraq. You may find that the child may prefer to wear a traditional dress e.g. a Pakistani girl may wear 'shalwar kameez', which is a long tunic with trousers or she may prefer to wear clothing which is interpreted as being in accordance with the teachings of Islam such as a dress which is long and loose and conceals the shape of her body. Children born and raised in the UK may prefer to wear western clothing. It is important to understand and facilitate the wishes and feelings of the child in relation to clothing in a culturally, religiously appropriate and sensitive manner.

For more information please see 'practical support for children who have specific personal, cultural or religious care needs' effective practice briefing ([HMPPS Intranet - YCS Bulletin 56, pg3](#))

5. Family

Family and community play an important part in Muslim cultures. Muslim children coming into custody may have a strong perception that they have brought shame on their family in the local community. This may be particularly significant for girls and for children from non-European cultures, who may feel also feel a deep sense of isolation from being away from their homes. In these circumstances one of the child's greatest needs upon arrival will be their phone call home to speak to their parents. It is good practice to make sure the child knows this is going to happen and to facilitate it at a time that works best for the child. It is also important to observe the child after the phone call and to check on how they feel.

6. Ramadan

Fasting

During Ramadan children are allowed to take part in fasting. However, it is important to be aware of the following:

- Prepubescent children **don't have to** fast during Ramadan, but they may wish to try and join in to feel closer to their religion and their family members who may be fasting at home.
- Levels of prescription relating to Ramadan may vary: Some families may take a very strict approach whereas others may not expect all the days to be completed, if any.
- Girls are exempt from fasting during menstruation. If they are religiously-observant, girls will complete the missed days before the start of the next Ramadan. This should be supported by liaising with the kitchen to still provide the hot food at the appropriate time so they can still adhere to their faith.
- Girls who are pregnant, or breast feeding do not have to fast.
- Children who are unwell, have an ongoing illness, such as diabetes, or must take regular medication with food are also exempt from taking part in fasting.
- For children who do fast, it is helpful to take the time the night before to remind them when their scheduled activities might be a gym session and encourage them to really focus on hydrating the night before. Also, if after physical activity, or on really hot days, they need to take in some water let them know this is ok and their health comes first. If they are concerned tell them they can add the fasting day on to the end of Ramadan, so they still manage to complete the 30 days.

Some children may not be able to adhere to Ramadan completely, even if they wish to do so. Going all day without eating or drinking is challenging, particularly in an unfamiliar environment away from home. Some children may also wish to offer additional, longer prayers called Tarawee during the night and/or have extra time for reflection and reading Quran throughout the day. It is important that children are made to feel included within the community aspect of Ramadan, including Eid al-Fitr, even if they don't fast. Children should be given the opportunity to participate but not be made to feel like they did something wrong if they don't want to or don't manage to complete the whole month.

Additional support for children who choose to participate in Ramadan

Routine

The routine of each day allows children who are actively participating in Ramadan to maintain focus throughout the month. When at home support for this routine would be given by the family, such as ensuring the child wakes in time to carry out their ablutions, have their breakfast (SUHAR) before their morning prayer and complete their prayer before sunrise. The rest of the day would continue around the prayer timetable, the five daily prayers include: Dawn/Daybreak prayer, **Dhuhr** (noon prayer), **Asr** (afternoon prayer), **Maghrib** (sunset prayer), and **Isha** (night prayer).

For those children who are participating in Ramadan:

- remind them the night before what time they would need to be up to complete all the tasks before sunrise and to set their alarm clocks.
- offer additional support by asking night staff to knock on their doors to remind them they need to get up if the child would like that.
- between prayers encourage them to engage in positive and constructive activities, e.g. studies or community-based/charity work.
- check in with them if their energy levels or mood appears low, remind them that they are doing really well and though it might be a difficult task when they achieve it, they will feel a great sense of achievement.
- if they struggle one day and break the fast offer support and encouragement to not give up.
- if they decide they can't do any more, suggest they write the days they achieved of Ramadan and that next year they try to complete more days.

By being actively engaged in their Ramadan journey and offering up support through the month a feeling of community and unity will be felt by those children. This is an important part of the month of Ramadan and an aspect that is difficult to create in custodial environments.

Support

Remember that the Iman and on-site Chaplaincy team are there to help, they will advise on the start of Ramadan. If you are unsure of anything or feel a child needs additional support, contact the Chaplaincy team. This is true of any time during the child's custodial journey not just Ramadan.

7. Islamophobia

Islamophobia is defined as the dislike of or prejudice against Islam and individuals who are Muslims. It may be directed toward individuals or groups due to their perceived or actual religious beliefs. This definition covers both intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and anti-Muslim racism. Recognise that children arriving into custody from Muslim communities, who may have experienced negative behaviour toward themselves or their families, may have increased concerns about how they will be treated in custodial settings. This may also have affected their self-esteem and confidence, for which they may need additional support.

Evidence from a third-party reporting organisation, Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks), has found that following trigger events, such as the Manchester arena bombing, there has been an increase in reported anti-Muslim hostility within schools in England and Wales. These occurrences of Islamophobia have highlighted that Muslim youth are vulnerable to abuse and that Islamophobia-based bullying is becoming an increasing problem. This can impact on children in a range of ways, which can in turn increase their risk of experiencing difficulties in life and developing mental health problems associated with bullying.

Amongst children, such prejudice, victimisation and bullying may take the form of:

- name-calling
- offensive 'jokes'
- verbal/physical assault
- graffiti
- intimidation
- exclusion from friendship groups

It is important to note that verbal abuse is not solely linked to the words Muslim or Islam. It can also relate to culture, race and negative stereotyping in the media post-trigger events etc. Any related behaviour should be addressed as soon as it is noticed. Actions to take include engaging in conversation with the child or children displaying the actions to encourage learning about others and Islam and explaining how their behaviours might affect someone. It is important to encourage positive behaviour, interactions and inclusion, but also to take steps to support the child who was the victim of the behaviour.

8. Useful Resources

[What is Ramadhan and why do Muslims Fast?](#)

[How do children feel about fasting during Ramadan?](#)

[Tackling Islamophobia Resource - Children's Commissioner for Wales](#)

[Islamophobia Resource - Experiences - Bing video](#)

[Preventing and Tackling Islamophobia nasuwt](#)