

Imam Sajjad's Advice on Upbringing

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Abstract

When reflecting on the hadiths of the Ahlul Bayt, we realize the wisdom they have left behind for all people. In his advice to his son, Imam al-Sajjad emphasises on specific etiquette, good conduct, and various acts of worship. Examples of such conduct include the proper etiquette during birth, prayer for children, and involving children in enlightening Islamic discussions. Moreover, advice on how to teach religion and social skills, as well as how to resolve difficulties is also described.

The following three hadiths are regarding Imam Sajjad's advice to his son:

Refrain from upsetting people and respond to their needs flowingly. Help your tongue in being silent, for there are states in which the tongue can be damaging. Refrain from socializing with the unintelligent, even if it is a friend, similar to how you would refrain from befriending an intellectual person who is your enemy. Avoid being hostile with people, for you may either be challenged by a tolerant and patient person or be harmed by a mean person.

Refrain from lying, be it small or big, serious or humorous; for if a person says a small lie he will find the audacity to say a big lie.

My son! Be patient during difficulties, do not oppose other people's rights, and do not consent to your brother in doing something that damages you more than benefiting him.

The aforementioned are examples of advice regarding ethics and acts of worship, and this shows that applied and verbal training are insufficient on their own. To the same extent in which we teach kids the good and evil in actions in their rightful place, we should be ready make suggestions and advise because maybe certain actions have not yet been carried out or have not been experienced. Hence,

before an incident, the child must be made familiar with it so as to know how to maturely deal with it bearing in mind that ordering, prohibiting, and suggesting more than necessary will lead to dissatisfaction and become overwhelming, consequently yielding no results.

Traditions and Etiquettes During Birth

Since Islam as a complete religion sets a unique importance for training children, it includes practices and etiquettes for their upbringing from birth.

Amongst the common practices to be carried out at the beginning of birth are reciting the call to prayer (adhan) in the child's right ear, and a shorter call to prayer (iqamah) in the child's left ear, circumcising boys, choosing an appropriate name for the child, sacrificing an animal, and holding a reception for family and friends. Serving food is a tradition that was carried out by Imam Sajjad. Jabir said, "Ali bin Husayn's custom was to serve food when his children were born."

Giving a good name to the child holds great importance in Islam and in some instances is seen as a means to an individual's prosperity or decline in life. The Prophet considered giving a good name a child's first right that is to be performed by the parents. Just as we see amongst the names of the Infallibles that Muhammad and Ali are plentiful, likewise it has been narrated that the Imams would name their male children "Muhammad" for the first few days after their birth, and afterwards, if they wanted to, would give them another name. Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad al-Azrami narrates an incident in this regard that happened to Imam Sajjad:

Mu'awiyah made Marwan bin Hakam the governor of Madinah and instructed him to allocate an amount for the Qurayshi youth. Imam Sajjad says. 'I went to him and he asked my name.' I said, 'Ali bin al-Husayn.' He asked, 'What is your brother's name?' I said, 'Ali.' He said, 'Ali and Ali! It seems your father plans to name all his children Ali.' Subsequently he fixed a set amount for me and I left and went to see my father. I told him about the incident. My father said, 'Woe unto the son of Marwan! If I have a hundred children, I would not like to name them anything but Ali.'

Fostering Faith and Religion

Family is the most important union for raising children. A great part of people's beliefs and faith are formed and enriched in the home by the father and mother; it with the parents' teachings that the child makes his or her first contact with his Lord.

A child's understanding of God from a young age will influence his personality a great deal and will give purpose to his future. Having a proper understanding of God and seeking nearness to Him is the most important principle in Islamic teachings and upbringing.

As found in Islamic narrations, especially in Imam al-Sajjad's **Treaties on Rights** (Risalat al-Huquq) as

one of the parents' major responsibilities is that of familiarizing the child with God, the Creator of the universe.

Through inspiration from the Ahlul Bayt, parents must acquaint their child with God and His attributes and blessings using simple and comprehensible language.

Imam al-Sajjad said regarding a father's responsibility: "And in relation to managing your child, you are responsible to raise him well and familiarize him with his Lord."

Emphasis on Children Learning Prayer

The late Mirza Nuri writes in Mustadrak:

Imam Sajjad would encourage the kids that were with him to perform noon (dhuhr) and afternoon ('asr) and also sunset (maghrib), and nightfall ('ishaa) prayers together. To those adults who objected to the Imam, he would say, 'This is easier and better and will cause them to willfully pray and not harm their prayer with sleep and leisurely activities.' The Imam did not order the kids to anything else other than obligatory prayers. He would say, 'If they have the strength and patience to perform the obligatory prayers, do not prevent them.'

Even though the Imams were extremely kind and gentle in raising children and would only consider the minimum burden upon them, they emphasized on prayer as an obligation because of its grave importance in everyone's lives.

The Imam himself was a practical role model in performing prayer and encouraged his children to perform the recommended prayers. A narrator says that Imam's son, Zayd, said: "My father, Ali ibn Husayn, would never fail to perform the fifty rak'ah prayers." The narrator asked: "What do you mean by fifty rak'ah prayers?" Zaid replied, 'Seventeen rak'ah are the obligatory daily prayers, eight rak'ah are the recommended prayers before dhuhr prayer, four rak'ah are the recommended prayers after dhuhr prayer, four rak'ah recommended prayers before 'asr prayer, four rak'ah after maghrib prayers, eight rak'ah are the night prayers, three rak'ah are salat al-witr (two rak'ah with the intention of shaf' prayer and one rak'ah with the intention of witr prayer), and two rak'ah after fajr (morning) prayers. Then he added, 'My father (Imam Zain al-Abideen) would teach these prayers to his children.'

Regarding his father's qualities, Imam Baqir says, "The recommended prays in which his holiness could not perform during the day, he would make up for during the night. He would say, 'My children, it is not mandatory upon you to make up the recommended prayers. However, if you have made a habit of performing a good act, I would like you to be persistent in doing it.'"

In addition to this, the Imam taught his children to take advantage of worshipping and supplicating on nights such as the fifteenth of Sha'ban and Eid al-Fitr. Zayd said, "My father, Ali bin al-Husayn, would gather all of us on the night of the fifteenth of Sha'ban. Thereupon, he would divide the night into three

parts. In the first part of the night, he would perform prayer for us; then he would say a prayer and we would say “Amen”. Then he would repent, and we would likewise repent and ask God to grant us heaven, until the rise of dawn.”

Sayyid bin Tawus narrates from Imam Baqir, “On the night of Eid al-Fitr, Imam Sajjad would remain in the mosque, and while performing prayer until morning, he would spend the night awake in devotion and would tell his children, ‘The virtue of this night is no less than the Night of Measure (Qadr).’”

Prayer for Children

In Sahifah Sajjadiyah,¹ Imam Zayn al-Abideen prays for his children in the following:

O God, be kind to me through the survival of my children, setting them right for me, and allowing me to enjoy them: My God, make long their lives for me, increase their terms, bring the smallest for me, strengthen the weakest for me, rectify for me their bodies, their religious dedication, and their moral traits, make them well in their souls, their limbs, and everything that concerns me of their affair, and pour out for me and upon my hand their provisions! Make them pious, fearing, insightful, hearing, and obedient toward Thee, loving and well-disposed toward Thy friends, and stubbornly resistant and full of hate toward all Thy enemies.

Many great scholars recommend the father and mother to pray to God for their children’s guidance and well-being. One of the most effective prayers before God is a parent’s prayer for his or her child. Even though the infallible Imams had righteous children, still, like Imam Sajjad, they would raise their hands in prayer and ask God to place their children on the right path and grant them a long and respected life. This matter in itself shows the importance of this act and points out this responsibility to the parent; to never deprive your children from this blessing. Imam al-Sadiq says, “There are three forms of prayer that will not be denied God’s kindness, mercy, and acceptance: the prayer of a parent for his child, in the event that he shows kindness towards his parent, and his curse the moment he is unaffectionate and disobedient towards his parent.”

Discussing Islamic Sciences with Children

Zayd, Imam Sajjad’s son, tells his father, “My dear father, tell me of my grandfather, the Messenger of God, when they took him to the heavens and his Lord ordered him to perform fifty sets of prayer. Why did he not ask God for a reduction for his nation (Ummah) until Musa bin Imran told him, ‘Ask God for a reduction, for your people do not have the tolerance for such a thing.’”

The Imam replied, ‘My child, the Prophet of Islam was not such a person to turn back and request after his Lord has ordered him, and when Prophet Musa asked the Prophet and interceded on behalf of the Prophet’s nation, the Prophet did not feel such a request was worthy of rejecting. Hence, he requested God to decrease the prayers for his nation and God reduced the fifty sets of prayer to five sets.’”

The Social Upbringing of Children

Proper Interactions with Others

The Imams interacted with the highest level of courtesy, respect, and generosity with the people they interacted with. Even if the other party was ungrateful or faithless, they still would not step out of the domain of etiquette and respect. Imam Baqir heard his father say, “If a person sat to your right and spoke ill of you and then after went to your left and apologized, accept his apology.”

Imam Baqir narrates, “When my father was on his deathbed, he held me to his chest and said, ‘My child, I advise you to what my father told me when he was passing, and this is a will his fathers advised him to: Beware of oppressing the one who finds no helper other than God.’”

Befriending Others

Friendship and socializing is an important need, and is unhealthy when taken to the extremes. Parents play an important role in their children’s social lives: One of the parents’ responsibilities is to oversee how their children make friends, since children and youth are affected most by their peers, and may emulate those who are influenced by immoral friends, and eventually make the wrong decisions that lead to an unsuccessful future. Imam Sajjad forbade friendship with those who possess the following qualities:

a) A person who lies: “Imam Sajjad told one of his sons the following regarding what groups of people to refrain from socializing with: ‘My child! Keep in mind five groups of people and abstain from accompanying, speaking with, and befriending them...Do not socialize with a liar for he is like an illusion. He will make far seem close to you and close seem far.’” So the first group to avoid is the liars who speak against the truth and form wrong thoughts and ideas in people’s minds. Hence, for this reason they cause intellectual deviation in people.

b) A sinner (fasiq): In continuation of the previous narration, Imam Sajjad says, “Do not socialize with a sinner because he will sell you out for nothing but a piece of bread or even less.” Such people easily trample over his friend’s rights and forget the promise they have made. These kinds of people are only after their personal gains and when they see they can make a better profit elsewhere, they will leave their friends and pay no attention to them.

c) The stingy (bakhil): Imam Sajjad told one of his children, “Do not make friends with a stingy person, for when you gravely need his help, he will leave you.”

d) The foolish (ahmaq): Imam Sajjad said, “Do not befriend a foolish person for when trying to help you, he will harm you.”

e) One who has cut off family ties (qat’ rahim): He also said, “Stay away from socializing with someone

who has cut off his family ties for I have seen such a person cursed in three places in the Qur'an. God has said, 'Did you reach power? Do you want to cause corruption on earth and break your family ties? These are the people that God has cursed, whom He has deafened their ears and blinded their eyes.' And he said,

“And those people who break God’s covenant after it has been established and disrupt that which God has ordered to be joined and cause corruption on earth, God’s curse is upon them and the ills of the next world are for them. (13:25)”

In the chapter, The Cow (al-Baqarah), God has said:

“Those who break God’s covenant after they have pledged to keep it, and sever whatever God has ordered to be joined, and act depraved on earth, will be the losers. (2:27)”

A person who has cut off his relation with his family is rejected, and from God’s perspective, is abominated and cursed upon. Hence, reason tells us to deter from someone who is cursed by God and under no circumstances to befriend him or her.

How to Resolve Problems

Performing Prayer to Remove Difficulties

Abu Hamzah al-Thumali says, “Imam Sajjad would tell his children, “My children, if a calamity or poverty befalls you and you have a difficult task or necessity, one of you should make ablution for prayer and perform four sets or two sets of prayer; after the prayer, recite this supplication: “O abode where complaints are overseen! Oh hearer of all that which is whispered! O healer of all distress! O knower of all secrets! O remover of calamities He wills, O savior of Moses, O selector of Muhammad, O He who resolved Abraham’s needs! I beseech you just as he whose poverty, misery, and afflictions have become severe and his strength has weakened and his resorts have lessened. I call upon you like the supplication of he who has drowned and is a stranger and a poor person who has no alternative to resolve his tragedies but You. O most loving of benefactors! O Lord! You are glorified! It was I who was oppressive. Then Imam Sajjad said, ‘There is no individual who recites this prayer unless God disentangles his difficulties.”

Patience before Difficulties

Imam Sajjad advised his son, Imam Baqir, in his will:

My son! Be patient with difficulties and troubles and do not place yourself in fatal situations; do not advance upon something which harms you more than benefiting you.

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1. A composition of prayers and supplications

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