

Lesson 3: Religious Training of children

Parents have been given the noble duty of guiding the future generation. It is their task to ensure that their children get a sound religious education. In this they are carrying on the work of the Prophets, who guided the people. The Holy Qur'an says:

O you who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is man and stones.
(66: 6)

In today's society, a lot of emphasis is placed on secular education. A child is pushed to strive for excellence in academics. A college or University education is a necessity, both for boys and girls. Education is indeed very important, but the significance of religious education for a balanced personality must not be overlooked.

The world is producing a generation that knows a lot, but is greatly deficient in moral and spiritual values. The Holy Prophet (S) was once talking to his companions about the importance of religious education. He told them he was "*baree*" (far) from the parents of the last times. They asked him the reason and he explained that those parents would give a lot of importance to secular education, but neglect the religious education. May the Almighty protect us from being amongst them.

What exactly is meant by religious education? The following are some necessary parts of a religious training.

Beliefs

In God

A firm faith in the Creator is the source of all good. If a child grows up to believe in God, he will learn to be conscientious. Life will hold meaning and responsibility. Children must be taught about the existence of God, and the abundance of blessings He has bestowed upon us. Nature, Science, etc. could all be used to point out the greatness of the Creator. Expose the child to books and films that show people with a firm faith in God, and illustrate how the faith helps them overcome obstacles and problems.

Children should not be given the impression that Allah would like to punish humans for every wrong they do. Some parents and educators warn children about the punishment of Allah in order to scare them into being good. Although it is necessary to talk about punishment at times, it is of greater advantage to focus on the positive side.

Allah is greatly merciful, loves us and is willing to help and guide us. Teach children to love Allah, trust in Him, and to ask from Him all their needs. This positive attitude will help the child build a lasting relationship with Allah.

In the Hereafter

Children should be gradually introduced to the idea of death and the life hereafter. Although it may be confusing for younger children, it is advisable that parents talk about it from time to time, especially as the children grow older. A death in the family or community could be used as an example that all humans are mortal, and each one of us will go the same way. It is best to be honest with the child.

In the Prophets and Imams

It is necessary for children to understand the role of the Prophets, and to have love for the Holy Prophet (S) and the Imams (a). This can be taught by reading stories from their lives to them. It is also important to attach significance to the occasions when we commemorate their births and deaths. Going to the *Masjid* or *Imambargha* on these occasions helps a great deal. They remember the said personality and also learn something about him or her. It is a great way of keeping their faith alive.

Rituals

Although beliefs are most important, parents have also to teach the practical part of following religion. Faith and action go together. From a young age, a child should be encouraged to pray, recite the Qur'an, perform wudhu etc. Some parents think it is a bother to have young children do these things and wait until they are almost *baligh*. The love for such actions does not develop, and many children then have to be forced to carry them out. It is much better to start at an age when children are willing to imitate the parents and have an interest in praying and doing wudhu.

The daily prayer is the most important action in Islam, and it is the duty of all parents to ensure that the child prays properly and regularly.

A Hadith of the Holy Prophet (S) says: *Teach your children the prayer when they are seven, and beat them if they do not recite it when they are ten.*

Thus when the child becomes *baligh* and does not wish to pray it is necessary to force him to do so. It should be mentioned that children need to be observed when they first begin to pray by themselves. Many children pray very quickly, and the actions resemble a quick exercise rather than a prayer. If

possible, parents should try and pray with their children, at least sometimes.

Encourage the child to follow the parent in prayer, as this will make the child pray slower and more carefully. If this is repeated enough times, it becomes a habit. It is not a good idea to tell children to pray by themselves in their rooms, out of the view of parents. This could encourage the child to skip prayers altogether, and then lie about it. Parents must not allow opportunities where children are tempted to lie. *Shaytan* is very strong, and a child is easy prey.

A hadith by Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a) on getting children accustomed to fasting says: *We enjoin our children to fast when they are seven years old, whatever part of the fast they are able to keep. So when it is midday or further [into the day], and thirst overcomes them, they break the fast, so that they become accustomed to fasting and can endure it.*

Another important part of religious training is to teach the child to recite the Qur'an. It is a right of the child, as specified by a hadith of the Prophet (S) Many parents are already aware of this responsibility and strive to make their children good reciters of the Qur'an. But one must be wary not to do it to compete with others, or to show off to the community.

Some children become fluent reciters of the Qur'an but are not regular in their prayers and are generally lax in their obedience to Allah. Fluency in Qur'an recitation is not a criteria. It is undoubtedly an asset. The child must also be encouraged to understand the Qur'an. This could be done through reading the translation occasionally, or even learning the Arabic language.

Morals

This is an extremely important aspect of Islam and should not be ignored. Good morals are the key to a virtuous life. The child should be taught about noble characteristics such as honesty, kindness, justice, contentment etc. He should be taught to avoid jealousy, backbiting, greed, extravagance etc. Many opportunities come up in daily life for parents to bring up such issues.

It is not necessary to give a lecture or nag. A small reminder, or a simple discussion often makes a lasting impression. Grandparents can play an influential role here. They could be asked to advise children and narrate stories to them. Many children remember the advice given to them by their parents and grandparents long into adulthood. Parents should never underestimate the effect of their words and deeds on the hearts of their children.

Methods of Religious Training

Be a model to your children

Actions speak much louder than words. No amount of advice of a parent to refrain from backbiting will

work if the child often hears the parent backbiting himself. When the child is exposed to hypocrisy, lying, selfishness and other such qualities at home, it is very likely that he will grow up following the same. A good example from the parents works even without words.

A child who grows up in a home where time of prayers is maintained, where hypocrisy in relations is avoided, and where contentment prevails, will grow up to do the same. Although it may seem a huge task to be able to be a good model for the child, parents should know that it is the only way they can really teach their children. No other way is as effective.

Relate stories

Stories are a very appealing way to teach lessons. The Holy Qur'an says after narrating the story of Prophet Yusuf (a);

In their narrations there is certainly a lesson for men of understanding. (12: 111)

Children are especially fascinated by stories. They can become absorbed in a story without realizing that they are learning some lessons. Many parents read to their children each day, especially when the children are young. It would be a good idea to occasionally read Islamic story books. Many of these are available today, with beautiful and colorful illustrations.

Parents should use these to inspire children. As they begin to read by themselves, parents should encourage occasional reading of some good Islamic and moral books. When left to decide for themselves, children read a lot of junk literature. If it is not possible to avoid all of it, it should be at least minimized as much as possible. The child must be given alternative choices so that he can still read.

Questions and Answers

Children ask a lot of questions. Sometimes parents do not have the answers and must admit that they need to look it up. But it is unfair to ignore the questions or dismiss them as unimportant. The more they ask, the more they will learn.

An interest in his questions and confusions will help the child develop his mental and intellectual abilities. Encourage the child to learn more by asking more, even if all the answers cannot be given immediately.

Some Don'ts in Religious Training

Don't do it harshly. Getting angry with the child and forcing him leads to resentment. It is better to explain, and discuss with the child.

Don't overdo it. Teach religion in moderate doses. Overdoing it can be harmful and can be a burden for a child. A young child, for example, should not be made to recite a lot of *duas* and *mustahab* prayers if he is unwilling.

Don't teach Islam to show off. Children should not be taught to be religious so parents can be proud of them in the community.

Don't make Islam a burden. Some parents believe that Islam is too difficult. Although they practice it, they pass on the feeling that to them *hijab*, fasting, and other such rules are really a great burden. This will discourage the child.

Wise Words

1. A virtuous child is a fragrant flower from the flowers of Heaven.

Holy Prophet (S)

2. No parent has given a better gift to his child than good manners.

Imam Ali (a)

3. The Rights of a child

It is the right of your child to know that he is from you, and with all his virtue and vice, is connected to you in this world. You are responsible for instructing him in good manners, guiding him towards his Lord, helping him to follow His commands which concern you or him, and you will be rewarded or punished [according to how you fare in this responsibility]. Therefore you should endeavor in his training like the person who is going to be adorned by his good influence [upon his child] in this world and [wants to be] vindicated in the presence of his Lord concerning his responsibility about the child.

Imam Zaynul Abidin (a) in *Risalatul Huqooq*

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