

Speaking Out and Advocating for the Muslim Child in Mosques and Community Centers

by Sakeena Abdulraheem

Today's Mosque is among the most diverse institutions in the nation where discussing issues such as child abuse and gender relations is nonexistent and taboo. Child abuse can be prevented by providing culturally sensitive educational tools to the Muslim community. These seminars provide preventative measures for families that are at risk for experiencing some form of abuse in their families or have already been victims. Islam places a huge importance on family and parenting relationships. Islam and other community organizations that provide religious and mental health counseling to youth and their families are instrumental in removing many cultural roadblocks such as tradition, lack of communication, and denial that hinder progress in addressing child abuse. Islamic values are often not implemented in some Muslim families that come from war-torn countries or countries where cultural Islam is common practice. I will explore just a few of the many barriers that social workers and child advocates face in their communities and some of the tools and strategies that can be incorporated to address this ever increasing problem.

Some traditions can be huge roadblocks in addressing issues of child abuse in the Muslim community. The trends that I have observed the most in terms of behavior and social interaction in many eastern cultures are the following: 1) Do not discuss controversial problems or problems that would otherwise be embarrassing or shocking to the family out in the open, among other family members or out in public; 2) Do not talk about your feelings; 3) The belief that gender bias and gender segregation is a reality and should be accepted. Healthy social interaction between the opposite genders is important in all aspects in life. It is important for children to witness healthy interaction between the genders in terms of development of their social skills and as they grow into adults. In more traditional Muslim families that observe gender segregation this interaction does not exist until marriage. Young couples do not learn how to interact with the opposite gender until that point. Therefore, women or children who have been victims of abuse do not realize that they are victims until they are exposed to other families that do not suffer from the same issues or are not subjected to similar cultural norms. Healthy interaction between the sexes is also infrequent because there is a fear of crossing boundaries and violating religious codes of ethics that would lead to dating and so forth.

However, if a child has parents who are uncomfortable interacting with one another and are verbally or physically abusive towards one another, that is the first impression the child is left with in terms of understanding what a relationship should be between the opposite genders. The children in many of these types of families are at risk of experiencing some form of abuse. The Quran clearly stresses the importance of healthy gender interaction in terms of daily life and in terms of the institution of marriage with the use of the word "Qawaam" or protection. By definition this means one that stands firm in another's business, protects his interest, and looks

after his affairs and stands firm in managing one's own affairs with steady purpose. This particular verse is under the context of marriage and states the following:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more than the other (strength), and because they support them from their means, therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in absence what Allah would have them guard.”

Community resources such as culturally aware youth counselors, mentors, psychiatrists and therapists are important in providing emotional healing to communities that are emotionally conflicted and trying to reconcile American culture with the culture of their parents and household. Mentors who understand the struggles of at-risk children will serve as a testimony and walking example for children and families by providing hope that the community can overcome these challenges.

In terms of gender bias, young men at early ages seldom deal with the same social restrictions that young women are expected to observe. Young men are not held to the same standards culturally, but religiously it is clear that the genders are both held accountable for their actions in the society. The American Muslim population is working to find a healthy medium that promotes healthy interaction between the genders in future generations so that the youth will have a balanced ethical standard in which they can follow.

Other barriers such as discussing problems, controversial issues, politics, emotions, and having an open relationship and discussion with your family at the dinner table is not a part of the cultural norms of the society in many Muslim countries as well. When young women are faced with sexual harassment or abuse the blame and responsibility is often put on the victims. Children often turn to trusted family friends or relatives in hopes that they will receive emotional support, and families many times request that victims look the other way or simply ignore that the incident occurred. Many families also fear humiliation and bringing a bad name to the family. These families do not like to go against the cultural grain and bringing attention to taboo issues such as these is definitely going against the grain of society.

Another cultural roadblock that many of these families are experiencing is denial that the issues of sexual violence and any form of abuse of Muslim children occur. Many Muslim leaders are afraid to step forward and speak out against any form of child abuse for fear of a political backlash or as some leaders experience, social isolation. As a result, the question becomes how can Muslim community leaders and social workers become more proactive in addressing child abuse and provide preventative non-culturally threatening tools to families to prevent child abuse?

A strategy for promoting more positive and healthy relationships in families has been in emphasizing the importance of open communication. Healthy communication in families paves the way to healthy parent-child connections. Seminars should be focused on the most neglected among the various relationships in families, which is opposite gender parenting relationships.

Teen parenting seminars discussing healthy father-daughter relationships, mother-son relationships and vice versa are the most effective in starting dialogue about these issues. Parents are a child's first introduction to the world, which is why these relationships are so important and fragile. Psychologists often note the importance of the mother-son relationship due to the fact that a woman often has the opportunity to teach her son how a woman wants to be treated and how he should expect to be treated by the opposite sex. For this reason it plays one of the most important roles in the life of young men and in determining the success of the future relationships that they pursue.

Parents should explore the connection they have with their own child as healthy or unhealthy as it may seem and to seek out ways to make that connection healthier. Recognizing unhealthy patterns of behavior or any form of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse is the first step to getting help and beginning the healing process. Positive behavior that creates a healthy connection between mother and son includes the following:

- Establish good communication between you and your son by being attentive and really listening when he asks you a question or makes a statement regardless of how serious or small the issue may seem.
- Be supportive and build trust with your son. If you talk with other people about something your son has confided in you, he will feel less comfortable confiding in you in the future.
- Be tender or gentle. Men seek out a woman's perspective on every issue, and as their mother you have the opportunity to show your son a different perspective as well as provide a platform where your sons can express their emotions freely.
- Provide your son with various reading materials on various life issues that will improve his transition into becoming a young adult.
- Approach touchy subjects with caution and sensitivity and consider ways in which your message that you would like to convey to your child will be most effective.
- Be an example—actions speak louder than words. You cannot expect your son to understand what a functional relationship is if you are always arguing with your husband. You cannot expect him to value the concept of honesty if you are always lying to others. Think of areas in your life that you need to improve and tweak them for the sake of setting a positive example for your children.

Acknowledgement and open communication are the first steps in the healing process for Muslim families and families of all faiths and backgrounds. Muslim families can turn to Quranic principles and traditions of the prophet (pbuh), which are values that empower children and can be enforced in society. This will pave the way for growing healthier and safer families, empower more communities to speak out against child abuse, and promote vigilance against lurking predators.

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