

Helping children deal with Bullying

Raising strong Muslim children means making children proud of their Islamic identity. It means helping children feel confident about who they are. Confidence and self-esteem is a great asset for a child, and is crucial as an adult. Not over confidence which borders on pride, but a sense of satisfaction with oneself, along with a knowledge of the flaws that need improvement. Such healthy confidence is a vital ingredient for the progress and success of the human being. The roots of this important quality are often built, or destroyed, in childhood.

The child who lacks confidence gives in to wrong more easily. He is easily swayed by others as it is difficult to be firm on your own principles when you don't believe in yourself. The views and opinions of others will carry greater weight. There is a higher risk of succumbing to peer pressure, being influenced by others [negatively], and even becoming the target of bullying in schools etc.

Bullying children is becoming more and more common, with recent statistics revealing that more than 40% of children have experienced some type of bullying. Muslim children around the world are often vulnerable to bullying. Islamic values such as modesty, hijab, refraining from *Muharramat*, etc. all stand out in interactions with non- Muslims. Although most people show respect and consideration for different beliefs, these can sometimes become a target of negative attention, and even bullying. Parents and other significant adults need to teach children not to succumb to such unpleasantness and learn to stand up for themselves and their beliefs.

To strengthen children so they can stand up for themselves, Islam encourages the following:

1) **Respect the child.** Every human being has an innate desire for respect. Religious scholars believe that within the human resides a Divine spirit. Almighty Allah says in the Qur'an: *So when I have made him complete, and breathed into him of My spirit fall down into prostration to him (15:29)*. This Divine spirit, with its greatness and nobility, propels the human being towards dignity and respect. He needs to be valued, and would not naturally put himself in a derogatory or lowly position. The Creator Himself has respected the human being when He says: *And indeed We have honored the son of Adam. (17:70)*. Thus every child needs respect and responds well to it. The Holy Prophet (s) has said: *Respect your children and improve their manners.*

2) **Give children opportunities to speak in front of others.** This could be formal presentations, or social encounters with others. These opportunities to communicate with others outside the immediate family help children become accustomed to speaking up, even with people who are older, not very familiar, etc. Communication is a skill, and can be developed early in life through constant practice. It requires courage, but can soon become a pleasant habit, done almost without thinking. The child can learn to speak up in settings which may seem intimidating to others.

3) **Foster leadership qualities in children.** Show them the skills and talents that the Almighty has blessed them with. Each human being is unique, and has been granted special gifts by God to play a part in the tapestry of the world. Allow children to see themselves as contributing members of society, and thus understand that they have a niche. This brings them security, belonging, responsibility etc. They are then less likely to succumb to others, and may instead be able to help and guide others.

4) **Help children respond well to positive criticism.** Many parents today shower a lot of praise on children, even when undeserved. This creates a false sense of grandeur which does not allow for any criticism. Let children know that every human being has good and bad qualities, and that the good should be enhanced, and the bad worked upon. An awareness of the self is the root of spirituality, and a huge step forward in the journey towards God. The famous saying of Imam Ali (a) says; *Whoever knows himself, knows God.* When you know yourself, you are able to take criticism. You can understand that it is true, so you need to work upon it. At the same time you do not feel completely worthless because of it, as you know your good points also. This acknowledgement of one's strengths and weaknesses can be developed at a young age.

5) **Talk to children often.** Having a close relationship with children encourages them to be open with their parents. Talk to children about different things, and bring up sensitive topics sometimes so children feel safe to talk. Children who are able to broach sensitive and awkward topics with their parents are more likely to reveal bullying incidents that they might encounter. Parents can then advise or intervene as necessary.

Helping children be assertive without being aggressive will go a long way in creating a community of strong and firm believers. These are the believers who will not be afraid to be upright and steadfast, having *Istiqamah* in all that they do. As the Holy Quran says, *Be steadfast, the way you have been commanded* (11:112).