

Stages of Childhood

The life of a human being passes through two main phases. The first phase is childhood, from birth to twenty one years. This phase is divided into three stages of seven years each. The second phase of adulthood is from twenty one years to the end of life. This phase consists of young adulthood, mature adulthood (when a human being is at the peak of all his faculties), and old age.

The character and personality of the human being are essentially formed during the stages of childhood. The characteristics that he acquires will stay with him all his life. It is with great difficulty that an adult can change the traits and habits acquired in childhood. That is why Islam lays a lot of importance on correct training during this stage.

Training during the phase of childhood, according to Imam Ali (a), is like carving on stone. It remains forever, and the fruits of it – both good and bad – can be seen as the child grows. The training done during the first three stages is an obligatory duty on parents. It is the right of the child that he receives this training, even if he is not too inclined to it. When this right is fulfilled correctly by the parents the result is usually a righteous child. If that is not the case, despite the efforts of the parents, then the parents are not responsible and are not guilty in the eyes of God.

Many hadith talk about the stages of childhood, and the duties of parents at each stage. These hadith should be understood properly and applied appropriately. Sometimes a misunderstanding of the hadith results either in a rejection, or an extreme application.

The Holy Prophet (a) has said:

A child is a master for seven years, a servant for seven years, and a deputy for seven years.

Another hadith of Imam Jafar as-Sadiq (a) says: *A child plays for seven years, learns for seven years, and becomes aware of halal and haram for seven years.*

Some hadith mention the age of seven as the age when real learning should begin. The Holy Prophet (s) says: *Order your children to say their prayers when they are seven, and punish them when they are ten [if they don't say their prayers], and separate them in their beds.*

Imam Husayn (a) says; *We command our children to fast when they are seven, whatever they can fast from the day . .*

The First Seven Years

When a child is master for the first seven years it does not mean that he should always be allowed to do whatever he wants. What it means is that parents need to understand that the child is acting on his *fitrat* (instinct). What he wants most is the love of parents and to have fun. Whatever he should learn at that age should be through play, not serious

learning. It is a stage when there is a lot of informal training without the child realizing that he is being trained. He thus becomes a willing partner and learns with enjoyment.

Parents learn a lot about their child in the first seven years. They recognize his nature, his temperament, his likes and dislikes, his way of thinking etc. This will help them train him in the correct way and predict ways in which he could go wrong. Once parents recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their child they can plan to train him accordingly. They can work with his strengths and enhance them, and help him overcome his weaknesses.

Without recognition of each individual child and their unique personality, it is very easy for parents to make the mistake of bringing up all their children in the manner which they think right, without considering individual differences or catering for specific weaknesses.

Just as parents get to know their child during this stage the child also learns to know and understand his parents. He figures out how he can get them to do what he wants, and how he can get away with things. He learns how to get their attention, and how to affect them. Thus the first seven years set a foundation for the relationship between parents and children.

Dr. Ali Qaemi in his book *Khanwadeh wa Niyazmandihaye Kudakan* (The family and the needs of children) writes that the child during the first seven years has the following unique traits.

1) Desire for Fun and Pleasure

A child during this stage strives for pleasure. He likes to play, laugh, have fun, do as he desires, avert grief from himself, and remove any obstacle that comes in the way of his having a good time. He works to achieve this pleasure, prepares for it, sometimes disobeys for it, and is often stubborn and naughty. Efforts to discipline and restrain are met with resistance. That is why it is necessary for a parent to channel the child's pleasures into what is acceptable and right. Informal training and subtle discipline are done through the medium of fun and games. Story telling is a good method of informal teaching during this time. It gives pleasure to the child and he unconsciously absorbs the lessons that may be part of the story.

2) Love of Play

Islam emphasizes the need for play in the life of a child. A human being needs activity and movement in daily life, especially a child. A child learns many things through play. He learns about himself and the world around him, develops his skills and senses, learns to cooperate and deal with others.

Through play a child experiences different emotions such as happiness, anger, frustration, disappointment, excitement etc. He learns to deal with these emotions and channel them correctly. Playing gives the child joy and he is willing to play even when he is tired. Few parents have to force a child to play. The positive effects of play are subtle, without the child feeling that he has to learn, with no resistance or opposition.

During the first seven years the parent should be a partner in play. The Holy Prophet (s) used to play with his grandchildren, and pretend to be a camel while they sat on his back. As he rode with them through the streets people would come up and tell Imam Hasan(a) and Husayn (a): ‘What a great ride for you!’ And the Prophet (s) would say: ‘and what great riders they are’. The status of the Prophet did not prevent him from playing and going along with childish play. He has said: *Whoever has a child should act like a child with him.*

Systematic learning is not to be done in the first seven years. A child may be able to absorb the learning and know things fast, but it is possible that this will have effect later on. It can lead to an inability to enjoy life, increased frustration, repressed anger, weak bonds with the family, aversion to learning etc. Children need to be allowed to be children. When we push them, and expect a lot from them, they may try hard to please us but this will not be without consequences. Most of the informal training that comes at this stage should come from the parents. Islamic teachings on children prefer the home to any time of formal schooling during this stage, emphasizing the fact that the mother is the best and most effective teacher for the child.

3) Ability to Imitate

Children during this stage love to imitate others around them. Thus a young child will pray with the mother, try to recite Quran and duas, do matam at mosque etc. This is a natural urge - to copy those around him. Many habits are formed in this way. That is why it is important for parents to be good role models, showing habits which the child can imitate. It is also important for parents to be aware of outside influences which the child may try to copy, especially characters on television and film. Constant exposure to these characters may result in the imitation of undesirable behavior.

4) Limited perceptions

The child during this stage, especially the first three years, is very limited in his understanding and perception. Everything is understood through his outer senses and he learns about the world around him through his eyes, ears, sense of touch, etc. He does not have a deeper understanding of things as adults do. His power of thinking, concluding, problem solving, concept of time, are all very limited. Even when he learns new concepts it takes time before he can apply them generally. A child during this stage cannot differentiate between right and wrong and is prone to test things for himself.

5) Questioning and Exploring

A child during this stage, especially after the first three years, is extremely curious. He has lots of questions and demands answers. This is not through an understanding of the importance of knowledge, but just to satisfy the inherent curiosity and thirst for awareness that is part of human nature. It is necessary to answer the questions, and more importantly to answer them according to the age of the child.

By the end of this stage the child’s personality comes through. Parents become aware if the child has a clam temperament, or an angry one. Is he slow or efficient? Easy going or

difficult? Parents understand what makes the child behave in a certain way and how to motivate him, calm him, please him, etc.

Certain changes now need to take place in preparation for the second stage. The child has to abide by appropriate behavior and has to understand that there are consequences for inappropriate behavior. The child is not allowed to sleep with the parents, or siblings, in the same bed. He begins to perform wajibaat like Salaat and fasting. A certain type of behavior is now expected from him. It is a gradual control which slowly becomes stronger as the child gets older. It is also preparation for the second stage where the child will have to learn to obey rules and follow orders. His position will now change from the master to the obedient follower, or servant.