

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

SUPPORTING VULNERABLE AND LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN THROUGH **RAMADAN:**

ISLAMIC GUIDANCE WITH SOCIAL WORK
AND MEDICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Preface



Ramadan is a very important month in the Islamic calendar. These guidelines provide ways in which the Ramadan experiences of children in care can be managed and enhanced. It is aimed at care professionals and care providers who are looking after these children. Ramadan is perceived and experienced in many different ways. It is a month of fasting, yet it is also a month of much celebration, joyfulness and togetherness, for families and communities. Children's memories and experiences of Ramadan, will be shaped by their specific family experiences prior to coming into care. It is important that care professionals work with children to understand their perspectives and approaches to Ramadan. This document provides theological, cultural and practical information that can then be used to guide children's experiences. Without aligning to any particular denominational or ethnic group, we aim to outline theological discussions that have Ijma or consensus across different schools of thought. We also provide an overview of cultural practices within diverse British Muslim communities. We hope that this guidance will support social workers and foster carers in making Ramadan a memorable and positive time for the children in their care. Above all, we need to be led by the children we care for, in providing a Ramadan experience that they find positive and uplifting - spiritually and experientially

The author of this guidance, Tay Jiva MBE, is a qualified social worker with over 20 years' experience of working with vulnerable children. Tay has three Master's degrees, is a co-editor of Islamic guidance on adoption and fostering, and has been awarded an MBE for her adoption and fostering work with Muslim community groups.

This document has also been edited and/or endorsed by Islamic leaders, social work professionals, parents/carers of vulnerable children, health professionals and their respective organisations (see end of document for list of contributors).

This guidance does not align itself with any particular Islamic sect or cultural group - diverse groups of contributors have been invited to participate; indeed, if any Muslim group feels they are not represented in this guidance, they are welcome to consult with the author to make appropriate edits.

Carers and professionals who are responsible for supporting children with fasting through the Ramadan period are urged to speak to the previous carers/professionals and the child about previous experiences of Ramadan. In much the same way that a child may struggle during key celebrations (such as birthdays, new year, anniversaries etc.), if the events bring to the fore memories of traumatic or distressing incidents, Ramadan may also cause a regression in the child's mood and/or behaviour. In such circumstances it would be expected that the child would be supported in much the same way support would be offered at other times – sensitive support would be given with gentle encouragement for the child to develop positive mental models and associations of Ramadan and fasting. If it is felt that fasting is distressing for the child, the child should be encouraged to engage in the other Ramadan activities mentioned below; and if the other activities are distressing (for whatever reason), the child should be reassured that it is OK for them to not participate and that if/when they choose to participate, the support will be available to them. Under no circumstances should a child (or adult) feel judged or shamed for whether they fast or not.

It is important to remember that Ramadan is a social experience as much as a personal spiritual journey. Ramadan as a social phenomenon will be something that Muslim children are likely to have experienced, and to be removed from this level of social engagement will either incur a sense of loss, or may potentially bring back other difficult memories that the child struggles to process.

One of the main channels of attaining God consciousness for a fasting person is that they grow the awareness that God is constantly watching them, hence they refrain from eating, drinking and other acts of lewdness, despite being alone in a place. This consciousness then goes on to help them refrain from sins outside Ramadhan as well. For children in care who are mindful of God's presence, it is important that they understand that God is Kind, Caring and Forgiving. The awareness of God should bring a feeling of peace and hope.

For some families Ramadan has a celebratory mood to it and the child may have previously experienced:

- The anticipation of the new moon to herald this month: This excitement is social and involves a mini celebration. Girls in some ethnic communities have henna patterns painted on their hands and local mosques may have mini charity stalls and gatherings in what some communities call 'the night of the moon'. This is repeated the night before Eid. The absence of this, especially for girls, may cause some feelings of loss.
- The purchasing of ingredients and preparation of food for the Ramadan meals.
- The discussion of where the family will send their charitable donations to. Children are encouraged to give a few pounds from their pocket money and older teenagers are encouraged to give a little more – for children in care it may not be appropriate to encourage them to use their pocket money and instead carers may prefer to give children the opportunity to 'earn' money by completing prayers or tasks, for which the money could be donated to a charity of their choice.
- Fun-filled activities for the whole-family to engage in, such as arts & crafts or quizzes etc.
- houses decorated with Ramadhan banners, cards, lanterns.



It is essential that children in care are supported to realign their new environment with their own cultural experience and so children (and where possible their parents or former carers) should be involved in discussions around what activities they associate with Ramadan. This document is largely focused on fasting, but parents/carers should note that fasting is only one aspect of Ramadan and other factors such as charitable giving, prayer and being kind in speech are also key religious components to having a successful Ramadan.

For children who are in short term fostering placements, all reasonable efforts must be made to offer the child consistency in beliefs and practice between the practice of Islam by the carers with parental responsibility, and the practice of Islam in the fostering home. That said, carers should never support any perspectives which lead to harmful behaviour (e.g. physical punishment towards anyone in the home). There are many Prophetic traditions, known as Hadith, which clearly indicate that fasting requires complete serene engagement from worshippers (adults in particular) and any anger, use of harsh or severe words, may nullify the fast. Therefore, any form of verbal rebuking, scolding, or chiding is not permitted during fasting. The child/ren in placement may not be aware of this and it would be of great benefit to the child/ren if they were to observe this level of self-control in their carers.

Non-Muslim carers of Muslim children (or indeed Muslim carers who practice in a different way to the child is used to) may be offered support via a 'buddy' system with other Muslim carers within the organisation. If the organisation does not have other Muslim carers (or those with the information needed), the author of this document should be approached for advice.

This document is headed with Arabic calligraphy which translates as 'In the name of Allah, the Kind, the Caring'. 113 of the 114 chapters of the Quran start with this line; from this we should infer that all our efforts should have the core values of being kind and caring. These names: 'The Kind, The Caring', are derived from the 'Ninety-nine Names of God' in Islam and constitutes a major tenet of the religion. These two attributes are usually taught to young children as children are reminded to begin their activities with this short prayer and to call upon God's Kindness and Care. For children in the care system, it is possible that they may not have been taught the importance of these attributes. For those children who are engaged in developing their understanding about Islam it would be good practice for carers to gently remind Muslim children about (and role model) these values. Furthermore, it is hoped that the implementation of the following guidance will be approached with the same values in mind.



What is Ramadan?

“The Quran was revealed in the month of Ramadan; the Quran is a guidance for people, it contains clear teachings and distinguishes right from wrong; whoever is present in the month must fast in it, but if anyone is ill or on a journey, then let him fast an equivalent number of days later. Allah wants ease for you, not difficulty, and wants to see you complete the compulsory number of fasts. So, glorify Allah for guiding you and become thankful” (Quran, 2:185)



Ramadan is the name of the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, consisting of 29 or 30 days. The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar (i.e. based on monthly cycles of the moon's phases), so every year Ramadan is approximately 11 days earlier relative to the solar/Gregorian calendar. In order to find the dates of Ramadan in any particular year, the information can be found by searching on the internet; that said, Muslims do not start fasting until the moon is sighted in the part of the world that they align themselves with (e.g. some people fast with Saudi Arabia, whereas others look for the moon sighting closer to home). For non-Muslim carers of Muslim children, information would be needed about the practice of the birth parents and links would need to be made with Muslims/mosques who would be able to inform you about the moon sighting when it is confirmed – local Muslims (e.g. staff in the social care organisation) can signpost to local links (alternatively the author or any local contributors of this document can signpost to appropriate services if this is required). There is never any harm in reaching out to local professionals who are Muslim, as they may be able to 'point' you in the right direction.

The reason why many Muslims choose to follow Saudi Arabia is because the Kaaba is in Mecca. The Kaaba is considered to be the 'House of God' - a symbolic religious structure; and Muslims pray in its direction. It has become common practice in recent years for parents to purchase colouring books with pictures of the Kaaba and Arabic calligraphy for younger children. By having visual reminders such as these (all year round), it will reaffirm the positive previous experiences of the child and will help to safeguard the child's sense of identity.

A consequence of Ramadan moving backwards every year is that Ramadan can move through various seasons – in some years Ramadan will be on long hot days, and several years later the fasts will be on shorter cooler days. This needs to be considered when planning fasts and schedules; if Ramadan falls on long hot days, steps should be taken to ensure the children in your care are kept cool, do not dehydrate and are well rested.

Ramadan is an important month for Muslims because the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during this month. Furthermore, Muslims believe that the gates of Heaven (Jannah) are open and the gates of Hell (Jahanam) are closed and locked for the duration of Ramadan.

The purpose of Ramadan is to undergo a period of spiritual cleansing whereby Muslims can become closer to Allah (God) through the process of fasting and extra recitation and reflection of the Quran. The following verse from the Quran illustrates this: 'O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may attain God consciousness.' To facilitate this spiritual journey some Muslim families designate a space in their homes for prayer and reading of the Quran. Prayer mats will be lined up and prayer beads and copies of Quran are kept nearby. Muslim children in care should be offered a prayer mat, prayer beads and a copy of the Quran, so that they may maintain this habitual behaviour in their new homes if/when they feel inclined to do so (these can be provided for free via the author). The direction of prayer, known as the Qibla, involves facing towards the Holy City of Makkah (towards the Kaaba), and in England this will be south east. Carers who are not clear about the prayer rituals should consult other Muslims and/or Muslim organisations for support.

¹ All translations of the Quran are from 'The Majestic Quran: A Plain English Translation', translated by Dr Musharraf Hussain, Al-Azhari, OBE, DL, D.Univ



The last 10 days of Ramadan

A particularly blessed night, called 'Laylatul Qadr' (translated as the Night of Power/Destiny/Glory) is believed to fall on one of the last ten nights of Ramadan: Some Muslims believe it can fall on any of the last ten nights, some believe it falls on the odd nights and others believe it is likely to fall on the 27th night. Muslims tend to pray for extended periods on one or all of the last ten nights, either in the mosque or at home. Younger children in care should be supported to practice in a way consistent with the practice of those who have parental responsibility for the child (if it is safe for the child to do so), and older children should be supported to express their own views about how they would like to practice their faith.

Some adult Muslims may choose to spend the last ten days of Ramadan in the mosque or in a room within the home for l'tikaf (worship in seclusion) – although it should be noted that this is only completed by a minority of Muslims and typically this would not be completed by children. For children who may wish to extend their prayer time in the mosques, they should always be in the company of a well-known and trusted adult. Parents/carers of older children in the care system should consult with the child's social worker before agreeing to a child staying in the mosque overnight or engaging in any level of l'tikaf at home: If there are no safeguarding issues, significant logistical implications and/or there is no significant impact on education, older children should be supported to complete their l'tikaf if that is the child's wish.

Introduction to fasting

“Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you so you become mindful of Allah. Fast for a fixed number of days, but if any of you is ill or on a journey then let him fast an equivalent number of days later. The obligatory compensation on those who do not fast, is to feed a needy person, if they can afford it. However, anyone who voluntarily does good will benefit from that, but to fast would be better for you, if you knew”

(Quran, 2:183-184).

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is a compulsory obligation for any Muslim who is able to fast. Fasting is considered to be one of the ‘five pillars’ of Islam, alongside the declaration of faith/belief; prayer; giving money to the poor; and making the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia for ‘Hajj’.

The fast lasts from a pre-dawn meal (called suhoor or sehri) to the sunset meal (called iftar or iftari), between which times Muslims do not consume any food or water. There are a minority of Muslims who do not rigidly follow the sunrise to sunset timings, especially during long summer days – children in care should be encouraged to practice in a manner consistent with the way the child had previously practised fasting.

Non-Muslim carers may wish to join local initiatives whereby people of different faiths (and no faith) come together to support their Muslim neighbours and friends by holding the fast together and/or completing the Iftar together. Information about local initiatives can be accessed via other local Muslims, local mosques or via the internet.



Daily routine when fasting



An overview of key times for fasting are:

Time:	Activity:	Details:
Prior to sunrise*	Sehri/Suhoor meal	Children who are fasting should be supported to wake for the Suhoor meal. The meal should be substantial enough to support the child through to the end of the fast.
Sunrise*	Fajr prayers**	
Early afternoon*	Zuhr prayers**	
Late afternoon*	Asr prayers**	Many people go to their local mosque after Asr prayers, and remain until the end of night-time prayers.
Sunset*	Iftar	The fast is opened at the iftar meal, often with dates (as per the custom and example set by Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him). Some families also prefer to have well water from Mecca called Zam Zam (foster parents should attempt to find out if this was preferred by the child's previous carers): The author/contributors can help carers to locate reputable vendors of Zam Zam water if it is required. It is good practice, according to religious teachings, to open the fast on time i.e. this should not be delayed.
	Magrib prayers**	
Night-time*	Isha prayers**	
	Taraweeh & Qiyam prayers	This additional prayer is not a compulsory prayer but is recommended: If this is prayed in the mosque, the entire Quran is recited within the prayer over the duration of Ramadan. Sunni Muslims perform Taraweeh and Qiyam prayers, usually in the mosque but also at home. Shia Muslims perform Qiyam prayers, only at home.



*Exact local times for the prayers can be obtained from a local mosque, or from a search on the internet. Prior to Ramadan, some thought would need to be given around how to manage sleep/work/study schedules around prayer and eating times, for example, many Muslims stay up later and then will either sleep in after praying Fajr prayers, or they may have a nap during the day.

**These are the five compulsory prayers for Muslims. Islamic teaching dictates that Muslim children should pray five times a day and complete all fasts when they reach puberty; in reality, some people who identify as Muslim do not pray or fast and many others only complete partial prayers and fasts. In order to determine how to support children in care through Ramadan, carers and social workers must firstly determine the wishes and previous practice of those with parental responsibility. Carers and social workers should also include the child in any decisions regarding prayer and fasting, with the expectation that Muslim children would be encouraged to develop their understanding of and attachment to the faith.

If parents/carers of Muslim children do not have the knowledge required to teach the child/ren about these prayers, advice can be sought via other Muslim parent/carers networks, or in the local mosque. Carers must do their best to ensure that children in foster care are supported by Muslims that follow the same sect as their birth parents, at least until the child is old enough to make their own choices in this regard. If the carer or social work team struggle to find a mosque with adequate facilities (e.g. women’s prayer space or teachers who are police checked and able to support children in care), the author of the document can signpost you to those who can offer appropriate advice/support.

Permissible or impermissible during fasts?

 Permissible during fasting	 Impermissible during fasting
Accidental eating	Intentional eating
Accidental drinking	Intentional drinking
Using an inhaler for health purposes e.g. asthma	Sexual activity
Small amounts of bleeding Blood donation	Self-induced vomiting
Using eye drops or kohl	Smoking, or other drug use
Tasting food that is not swallowed during cooking	Injections that provide nourishment
Swallowing own saliva	Oral medication (e.g. painkillers) and prescribed medicine
Using water to rinse the mouth and nose (being careful to not swallow any water)	
The use of insulin injections is contested – subcutaneous injects do not invalidate a fast; however, fasting can be dangerous for diabetics, in which case fasting is not advisable. Diabetics should follow the advice given by their doctor.	

Some Muslim families do not have televisions or listen to music at any time as they believe these activities are sinful; other Muslim families temporarily stop watching television, listening to music and/or from commenting on social media during Ramadan, with the intention of focusing on their prayers and connecting to their faith; and some families continue with many/all of these activities during Ramadan, either believing they don’t lead to sin, or not wishing to give them up despite believing they may incur sin. Families must seek their own guidance on the position they wish to take; however, carers of children in care should attempt to respect the background of the child (whilst balancing the wishes of the child alongside their age and capacity). None of these activities invalidate the fast.

It is customary to watch or listen to recitations of the Quran and ‘nasheeds’ (Islamic songs), especially those performed by children. Local mosques usually organise nasheed and recitation competitions too. Many Muslim children find these activities to be fun, relaxing and it uplifts their mood and sense of connection to their faith.

Conditions when fasting is excused



Fasting is excused for the following categories, so people in these categories should not be fasting (according to Islamic teaching):

1. **The physically sick:** The level of sickness required to make one exempt is subjective; however, it is clear that one must not risk substantial or long-lasting ill health by fasting. Medical treatments, such as routine vaccinations, should be postponed until after Ramadan.

The British Islamic Medical Association has written guidance regarding common illnesses and fasting; it can be found at <https://britishima.org/ramadan-rapid-review/>. Those suffering considerable illness should seek advice from their medical practitioner.

2. **The mentally unwell:** Again this is subjective and a personal judgement has to be made to assess the individual's capacity to keep fasts. In some instances, medical advice may be required.

3. **The traveller:** The distance covered is considered to be around 80km for fasting to be exempt; while some authorities allow exemption for shorter distances, as long as one is leaving one's home town or city, so even 10-20 miles (16-32km) would be a sufficient journey to exempt someone from fasting.

4. **The elderly** who are physically unable

5. **The pregnant woman** or a breast-feeding mother who feels that she may cause harm to herself or her baby if she fasts

6. During **menstruation** or post-natal bleeding

7. **Pre-pubescent children.**

If any of these conditions commence following the start of the fast, the fast would be considered to be ended and the individual can resume eating and drinking.

If a child wishes to do so, any missed fasts can be made up after Ramadan. Some people choose to wait until the shorter winter days to make up the missed fasts. For some, a child who has reached the age of puberty and has missed a fast, is encouraged to make up for it later rather than pay penalty for it. Feeding a needy person is an option when completing fasts later is not an option (e.g. long standing health problems) - a missed fast can be replaced by providing a meal (or money) to feed a needy person for two meals a day, e.g. for someone's suhoor/sehri and iftar/iftari, who otherwise would not have the resources to be able to eat well.

Food and hydration while fasting



Contrary to what non-fasting people may assume, fasting in itself does not make someone lose weight or gain weight - the key difference in how fasting changes someone's weight is in what is eaten in between fasting times: for example, if someone eats a lot of fatty and sugary food, but fasts much of the day, they will still put on weight (and likely not receive the nutrition required to remain healthy). It should also be noted that the purpose of fasting is not to alter one's weight, rather the primary reason to fast is for religious observance.

Fasting adults and children should start the fast with a substantial suhoor/sehri (morning meal), ideally comprising of food that keeps people fuller for longer, such as complex carbohydrates and proteins e.g. porridge, eggs, cheese or bread.

The suhoor/sehri meal should replenish lost energy, but not be so heavy that it makes people lethargic, as energy is required to complete evening prayers and also stay awake long enough to drink enough water.

Replenishing the body's water is essential to being able to fast successfully throughout Ramadan. Sugary drinks and diuretic drinks such as tea and coffee should be avoided (or consumed in small quantities). Both adults and children may be tempted to fill up on food (especially their favourite foods) at iftar time, which may make it difficult to drink enough water subsequently.

The Department of Health has been supported by the NHS to produce a 'Ramadan Health Guide' (https://warwick.ac.uk/services/equalops/a-z/a_guide_to_healthy_fasting.pdf) and the British Nutrition Foundation also has information on it's website (www.nutrition.org.uk).

General healthy eating guidance should continue to be followed, such as The Eatwell Guide (<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>).

Where carers are able to join the child by fasting for some or all of the day, this would be a significant gesture of support for the child; however, if there are older children or adults who are not fasting in the home, care should be taken to not eat near the fasting child. This can be easily arranged by ensuring that the child is occupied in another area of the home while those who are not fasting have their food. Carers should be mindful that even the smell of food may make the challenge of fasting unnecessarily difficult for their child/ren.

Preparing younger or inexperienced children for fasting



There is no set age for when children start fasting, since children start puberty and begin adolescence at different times; however, it is common for Muslim children to keep 'mini' fasts (e.g. 2 hours a day) from the age of 5 and then increase the fasting times and frequency as the child becomes older - it is not uncommon for 10-year-old children to keep the full 30 fasts. If the child, or the individuals with parental responsibility wish for the child to keep longer fasts at an earlier age, foster carers and social workers must put a plan in place to ensure that the wishes of the child and those with parental responsibility are respected as far as possible without placing the child's health at risk; that said, it should be noted that it is rare for children to regularly complete full fasts much earlier than age 10. Children keeping shorter fasts should be encouraged to fast prior to iftar if possible, so that the family can open their fasts together. Older children who are not accustomed to fasting or going for long periods without food should start with smaller fasts either during Ramadan, or older children may wish to start shorter fasts before Ramadan, with a view to keeping full fasts during Ramadan. Carers should gauge the child's health and advise about what is a sensible length of time to fast. Some effects of fasting such as tiredness, hunger and loss of concentration should be expected and the child should be supported to manage these by distracting them with games/toys or fun activities, keeping the child cool and encouraging them to rest.

It is important that children are supported to increase their enthusiasm and motivation for fasting by making it an enjoyable experience that they feel proud of and they should be rewarded for any effort that they make. Under no circumstances should a child be forced to fast (or do anything else) by threats of violence, by shaming them, by other harm or even by way of threatening negative consequences. Children should be encouraged to fast by use of positive reinforcement (such as rewards and encouragement); books and other resources (such as chocolate calendars/charts etc.) are available online and in shops selling religious books and resources for Muslims. Children in care hold a high status in Islam and as such, we should be patient and forgiving with them and we should teach them to be the same with themselves.

Even if a child is not fasting (through choice, age, health reasons etc.), they can benefit from other practices of Ramadan, such as sitting with the family for iftar and/or going to the mosque and praying with others: Where children are engaged in prayer, charitable giving or other good work, they should be praised for their participation in these religious aspects of Ramadan. During the Covid-19 lockdown mosques are closed; however, attendance at mosque may be replaced by prayers, teaching and preaching sessions online or in the family group.

A teacher, doctor or other professional may wish to discuss the needs of the child with the parent/carer, in order to ensure that the child is supported to the best of everyone's abilities; however, unless there are safeguarding concerns, the decision to fast remains with the child and whomever retains parental responsibility.



Potential benefits to children of fasting:



1. Strengthening of religious identity

Children in care have a right to be supported to practice their faith in a way which aligns to the practice of their birth parents (or previous carers) and they also have a right to have their wishes and needs taken into consideration. Supporting the child to engage in fasting, and all other cultural and religious practices connected to Ramadan, will help to consolidate the child's identity as a Muslim. Whilst children should be encouraged to develop their faith throughout the year, Ramadan has a special importance in being able to boost the faith of Muslims and bring Muslim communities together. If placed with practising Christians, the discussion of Lent fasting may also create a better understanding between the carers and children as well as to signify to the children that the two religions have commonalities. Similarly, followers of all faiths, e.g. Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs – all have traditions of fasting in their religions.

For many children in care, who have been moved from their birth families, the child may question their own identity. Securing the child's religious identity can provide the child the resilience needed to grow into a confident adult. This also creates ownership of the child over his or her expressions of faith and this will entail improved levels of self-esteem and confidence.

2. Link to cultural and ethnic identity

The food that is eaten during Ramadan can have considerable meaning in terms of cultural identity and belonging. Children who have moved home may hold negative or positive memories in respect of the food offered to them; carers and social workers must work to understand the wishes of the child and consider the food choices offered to the child carefully. If it is determined that a child derives comfort from eating food linked to their heritage, the carer should find recipes that the child would enjoy, perhaps link to communities who would assist in sources ingredients, and involve the child in preparing the dishes of their choice. This process is likely to be therapeutic and healing for the child; further, it will build the relationship between the child and carer(s) and increase the trust between them.

Attendance at the local mosque during Ramadan can also consolidate the child's connection to people who share common culture and heritage, thereby consolidating the child's sense of belonging to a community group. This is particularly important for children who are from an ethnic minority group and placed in white British homes, therefore may struggle to reconcile their British identity with their ethnic heritage. During the Covid-19 lockdown mosques are shut; however, attendance at mosque may be replaced by prayers, teaching and preaching sessions online or in the family group.

3. Improved ability to empathise with others

A key benefit of Ramadan is that while hungry, Muslims who normally have good access to food are inclined to show increased concern for those who are constantly short of food. Children should be supported to empathise with those who have less food than them. It should never be conveyed to vulnerable children or children in care that others are 'more' or 'less' blessed or fortunate than them (considering that the challenges for vulnerable children are significant), only that we must think of the blessings we have and be strong in overcoming our challenges and hardships.

Alongside fasting, one of the other pillars of Islam is to give money to charity: This money can be given all year round, but many Muslims choose to give their obligatory charitable donation during Ramadan. Children are not obliged to give money (unless they are teenagers with saved earnings); however, they should be encouraged to donate some pocket money, or they should be rewarded for their fasts and prayers by way of money which can be donated to a charity of their choice (it may not be appropriate to ask a child in care to donate their pocket money to charity, so carers should consider the latter option if possible). Since many children in care can feel disempowered, the act of choosing and donating to a charity may help to increase the child's self-esteem.

In addition to (or instead of) donating money, children may choose to bake/cook for friends and neighbours, carry out acts of kindness, help in the home, volunteer with a charity, or show kindness to a friend who may need support. Acts such as these are considered to be 'charitable' and whilst they are not a part of the compulsory 'zakat' donation, they are certainly highly commended and blessed acts, which will improve the child's empathy, attachment to their community, and self-esteem.

4. Encouraging positive behaviour and mindset

It is part of the Muslim faith to have good character; this means speaking kindly to others, being patient, controlling the temper and ego, not gossiping about others, walking away from arguments, not holding grudges and not cursing. There is an increased focus on these positive qualities during Ramadan and Muslim children should be encouraged to be the 'best version' of themselves during Ramadan – notwithstanding that children will struggle at times and at such times adults must focus on being kind, merciful and forgiving. Of course, the best way for children to learn these values is for adults to role model this themselves.

5. Improved family and social relationships

The factors listed above should lead to improved family relationships; however, family and social relationships can also be improved by engaging in additional activities; for example, by spending more quality time together, playing games together, praying together, and indeed from fasting together. The ritual practice of all waking for the sehri meal, managing a full (or part) day of fasting then enjoying the iftar meal together can be relationship building experiences.

Prior to Ramadan there should be enthusiastic discussion about the plans and importance of Ramadan – Ramadan should be a treasured and enjoyable month, where family and social relationships are improved via shared interests and activities.

When non-Muslim carers/parents make the effort to support the child, it further demonstrates and role models the commitment, respect and empathy the carer has towards the child, which in turn is likely to be reciprocated by the child. Non-Muslim family, friends, social workers etc. may choose to support the child by perhaps keeping a fast and sharing an iftar with the child. Those that are not fasting should avoid eating or drinking near a fasting child whenever possible.

Relationships with the neighbours (of any religion/faith etc.) can be improved by sharing iftar food with them or offering to assist in any tasks that they may need help with (particularly in respect of elderly neighbours).

6. Improved self-esteem

As outlined in the above sections, Ramadan offers numerous opportunities for a child's identity to be strengthened and for their relationships to improve, thereby leading to an improvement in the child's sense of belonging, attachment to their community and family, and improved confidence and it can help children to develop the strength and hope needed to overcome difficulties.

Children's confidence and self-esteem can also be improved by way of empowering them with tasks and decision making through Ramadan; for example, they can decide how to decorate the house, they can pick iftar meals or (if they are very capable) they may have the job of raising others for the sehri meal. Some children even lead the prayers in the home. Children should be encouraged to choose their own tasks and responsibilities, with the option to change responsibilities when they wish to; all actions and responsibilities should be rewarded with praise and/or other rewards.

7. Impact on health and hygiene

In terms of impact on health, there is a growing body of literature which suggests that intermittent fasting has health benefits including reduced inflammation, improved cardiovascular health, and reduced obesity. However, it should be noted that Muslims do not fast for health benefits, Muslims fast because it is a compulsory aspect of their faith.

Under no circumstances should a child's health be placed at risk: If a child states they feel lightheaded, dizzy, nauseous, like they're not able to focus or there are other symptoms suggesting that they may be dehydrated or have low blood sugar, the child should be encouraged to drink some water and/or eat, thereby breaking their fast, which can be made up later in the year, e.g. during the shorter days of winter. Some children may have families or previous carers who have told them that ending fasts is not an acceptable option and/or they may have been told that Allah would be angry and/or may punish them. Carers/parents should reassure the children that prior to puberty, children are free of sin, and after puberty Allah should be thought of as kind, caring, compassionate and forgiving. Children should be rewarded for good intention and effort – if they are not able to complete the fast at all, or for as long as they hoped they could, they should be reassured that Allah will reward their efforts and intention and they will be guided to complete longer fasts when the time is right for them.

Islam teaches that personal hygiene is a pre-requisite of worship throughout the year but more so when fasting. The special attention given to personal cleanliness is also considered a form of respect to the ritual of fasting; for example, everyone is expected to have short clean fingernails, wear clean fresh underwear and wash regularly. Use of deodorant/scents is also preferred. Homes are also expected to be tidy and clean and all members of the household are expected to participate in maintaining a clean and tidy home (the extent of household duties depends on an individual's abilities and other commitments).

Whilst fasting, some people develop foul smelling breath, which is a natural side effect of not having food for extended periods of time. The smell can be reduced/controlled when completing ablutions (washing) before prayers and most Muslims also recommend brushing teeth (some Muslims use toothpaste while fasting, others only use toothpaste after iftar). Use of a 'miswak' (natural toothbrush) is commendable, but not essential.

8. Impact on educational performance

See 'Association of School and College Leaders' guidance 'Ramadan: Exams and Tests, 2020' (www.ascl.org.uk).

The guidance recognises that fasting may have an impact on the cognitive performance of children observing fasts; however, it also states that 'unless there are legitimate safeguarding concerns, schools and colleges should not dictate to children who are considered old enough, or their families, how they observe Ramadan which is a personal decision'.

Ealing Council and 'Discover Islam Europe' (www.discoverislam.co.uk) have also produced 'Ramadan (Fasting) Guide for Primary and Secondary Schools'.

Social workers and other members of the 'team around the child' are expected to consider the positive impacts of participating in Ramadan and how they may impact positively on the child's long-term performance in education. The educational performance of many vulnerable children could be improved by supporting them with their sense of identity, belonging, empathy, behaviour, mindset, improving family relationships, self-esteem and self-care: As outlined above, a child who is supported well through Ramadan should show improvements in all these aspects and consequently the long term impact on their educational achievement is likely to be positive.

Celebrating Eid



The end of Ramadan is marked with the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (not to be confused with Eid Al-Adha, which occurs at the end of the time of the Hajj pilgrimage). Eid al-Fitr is a significant day for Muslims (as significant as Christmas is to Christians). The specific date for Eid day can vary by one or two days depending on the practice of the Muslim family (in the same way that the date of the start of Ramadan can also vary).

Either new clothes, or smart clean clothes, should be worn on Eid day; then, on the morning of Eid al-Fitr, mosques hold the morning Eid prayer – females should make enquiries before attending the prayers since some mosques have facilities for the whole family and other mosques only have facilities for men. Attendance at Eid prayers can increase one's sense of belonging to a wider Muslim community. During the Covid-19 lockdown, while mosques are shut, attendance at mosque may be replaced by prayers, teaching and preaching sessions online or in the family group. Carers should be aware that celebrating Eid during lockdown may feel particularly isolating for some children (and adults), for whom this period of socialising on Eid may have been the highlight of their year.

Traditionally, prior to the prayers, an obligatory donation of approximately £5 is made to charity by (or on behalf of) each family member – this is called Zakaat ul-Fitr; however, this donation can be made prior to Eid day and it is encouraged that it is made in advance (perhaps a week or more before Eid) so that the money can be distributed to those in need prior to Eid day. This is a must and has to happen before the Eid prayers so care should be taken to ensure that the donation is made on time.

Following Eid prayers families will have celebratory lunch together, and then in the afternoon Muslims will visit family and friends, where each home will offer food and/or snacks to their visitors.

Children's enjoyment of Eid al-Fitr can be improved by decorating the house, giving them toys/gifts/money and gifts may also be given to children as they visit homes. Children may also be supported to make or buy Eid cards and/or make special treats to give to friends, family and neighbours.

Attendance at school on Eid days varies according to the preferences of the family and school – some children take one or more days off school, others take half a day off school and some may attend the full day at school, choosing to celebrate Eid after school and on non-school days. Planning school activities around Eid time can be challenging for schools with high numbers of Muslim children – parents must be consulted with regards to plans, with an understanding of the importance of Eid to Muslims.

Eid al-Fitr can be a particularly lonely time for children who are separated from their families, or adults who have a small support network. Indeed, children in care who have previously lived in isolated households may not have experienced Eid as described above – for these children it may be particularly beneficial for them to be able to celebrate Eid with joy and in the company of the wider community. Many Muslim communities will hold celebratory Eid events in the weeks following Eid day – attendance at these events may be particularly beneficial for those who do not feel well connected to the wider Muslim communities.

Muslim carers of non-Muslim children



On a final note, it is recognised that many fasting Muslim foster carers in the UK will be caring for non-Muslim children throughout the month of Ramadan. Some families may choose to make slight adjustments to family routines which would meet the needs of those fasting in the family alongside the needs of those who are not fasting.

Some non-Muslim children may also show an interest in fasting or engaging in the other activities linked to the month of Ramadan. As with Muslim children placed in non-Muslim homes, who would be invited to engage in Christmas activities and celebrations, the same can be offered to non-Muslim children in Muslim homes; this should be done with absolute sensitivity and respect of the child's religious and/or cultural beliefs and identity. For example, it is not uncommon for people of different faiths to choose to fast on one day, to show solidarity with Muslims – non-Muslim children in care who want to fast could perhaps be encouraged to join part of (or the whole of) the fast with this group. Any significant decisions for any child in care should be discussed with the child's social worker, and due consideration should be given to the wishes of those holding parental responsibility.



Resources



Online resources

Little wings creative (free resources): <https://www.littlewingscreative.com/>

Muslim Council of Britain Ramadan information, including guidance on Covid-19 restrictions: <https://mcb.org.uk/resources/ramadan/>

Muslim Children's TV (subscription based): <https://muslimkids.tv/>

Ramadan activities for children: <https://productivemuslim.com/get-your-kids-to-love-ramadan/>

'Ramadan Advice with Laith and Layla' by One4Kids/Zaky on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5vfWTTpNkDfP-8s0KbqJhw>

'Ramadan Workbook' (free download), <https://an-nasihah.com/project/ramadan-workbook/>

'Ramadan Worksheets': Available on 'images' of internet search engine.

Ramadan books (available to order online)

'A Party in Ramadan' by Asma Mobin-Uddin

'Craft it up this Ramadan and Eid' by Zaynab Abdullatif

'It's Ramadan, Curious George' by H.A.Rey

'My First Ramadan (My First Holiday)' by Karen Katz

'Night of the Moon: A Muslim Holiday Story' by Hena Khan

'Raihana's First Time Fasting' by Qamaer Hassan

'Ramadan Moon' by Nai'ma B.Robert

'Rashad's Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr' by Lisa Bullard

'Tell me more about Ramadan' by Bachar Karroum

'The Ramadan Date Palm' by Fateman Mashouf

'The White Nights of Ramadan' by Maha Addasi

'Under the Ramadan Moon' by Sylvia Whitman

'Zachariah's Perfect Day' by Farrah Qazi



Contributors statement:

The contributors listed below agree that whilst there may be some points in the guidance that could be argued/discussed further, the wider message of the document is endorsed.

Also, it should be noted that all contributors worked with the author on an individual basis and so other than signing this document (for the sake of the benefit of Muslim children in care), it should not be presumed that signatories are linked to each other in any other way.

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SUPPORTING VULNERABLE AND
LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN THROUGH
RAMADAN

