



Talking with your Children about Islamophobia and Hate-Based Violence

Islamophobia and prejudice based on religion cause many painful consequences, and can lead to discrimination and hate-based violence against Muslims (e.g., terror attack at a masjid/mosque). Muslim children and adults may experience anxiety, fear, worry, confusion, and anger in anticipation of, and after hate-motivated events are committed against them or members of their community. Some may struggle to make sense of what happened and may feel hopeless and helpless that they or their loved ones will be targeted.

Islamophobia is the unfounded fear, hatred of, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims. There are many factors that can heighten Islamophobia in society, including:

- When a person labeled as “Muslim” commits an act of violence, others may blame or attribute aggression and violence to all Muslims;
- When a violent or terrorist act is committed against Muslim communities, other Muslims may experience worry and fear that their community members or prayer places (masjids/mosques) may be targeted next;
- Islamophobia and rhetoric against Muslims may increase during wars and election cycles.

Understanding the circumstances that can increase fear of Islamophobia and hate-based violence can help children cope with their reactions. The presence and support of trusted and knowledgeable adults and caring peers can help children work through their feelings and reactions. Supportive adults can also provide an important buffer against negative consequences.

To Help Children, Consider these Ideas and Actions:

Pay attention to your own reactions:

Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If parents are calm and hopeful, children will feel calmer too. There are many verses in the Qur’an and examples in the Hadith of The Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him, PBUH) about patiently and positively managing your reactions when bad things happen. For example, Surah ash-Sharh says “with every difficulty, there is relief.” (94:5)

Seek your own supports:

Before talking to children, take time to ensure you feel comfortable talking about the issues first. If you feel upset, make an effort to connect with other adults to help you cope with your own reactions. Hate-based violence against Muslims can lead to painful thoughts such as “we will always be targeted by non-Muslims.” or “no one really cares about Muslims suffering.” These thoughts are not helpful for children to hear. If you are struggling with painful thoughts, seek additional support. Muslim institutions (e.g., masjids/mosques, schools, community agencies) often sponsor support groups and mobilize communities of all faiths during and after a crisis, so consult your local institution to see what may be available to help you communicate your true feelings in a way that is helpful for children.

Talk to them about the event:

You might fear that talking about incidents of Islamophobia and related hate-based violence might make your children feel afraid or isolated. You may want to protect them from these events. However, talking to your children will help them know you are there in times of distress. Talk to your children as often as they have questions.

You may also think that your younger children may be unaware of discrimination or hate-based incidents. However, many children learn about such events through TV, radio, and social media, as well as through their older siblings, friends at school, or in their neighborhoods. Children might also realize for the first time that someone is targeting Muslims because of their religion. Not talking about these topics will make the events seem even more out-of-control and threatening.

Talking with your children lets them know that you are available and can handle the topic. Always be truthful with them, being mindful of their age and providing developmentally appropriate information in words they can understand. Actively addressing children’s fears as a parent or caregiver is more productive than ignoring problems and hoping they go away.

Listen to your children

Ask what your children have learned about the event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words. Answer their questions. Don’t assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. Gently correct any misinformation they may have. For example, a child may see a shooting on television and assume it happened in their neighborhood. The easiest way to have this conversation might be during an activity, such as drawing or while going for a walk.

Provide comfort to children who are feeling sad, scared, worried, angry, or confused. Let them know it’s ok to have these feelings and that many people may feel that way. Be patient, as these worries can often last a long time. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was praised in the Qur’an for his approachable and kind nature. In the same way it’s important for parents and caregivers to also be approachable, reachable, and easy to access.

Some cultures do not believe it is appropriate to have certain “adult” conversations with children, but doing this in an age-appropriate way is a prophetic tradition of the Muslim faith. For example, it’s narrated in the Prophetic Hadith that young children would take Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by his hand to talk to him and he would listen to what they had to say. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also checked in with a child who lost his pet (a little bird) to see what his understanding was. When the bird died and the child grieved for it, the Prophet (PBUH) asked how he was doing using a playful rhyming of words, showing that he could talk in manner appropriate for the child’s age. (al-Bukhaari, #5778; Muslim, #2150)



Focus on safety:

Let children know you will always do your best to keep them safe. Let them know adults are working hard to make sure they will stay safe. Discuss steps that are being taken in the community or school. Some children may be comforted knowing that a person responsible for an act of hate-based violence has been arrested and is no longer an immediate danger. After you feel that a sense of safety has been established, you can also talk to children about things they can do to increase their safety, such as following family rules and identifying trusted adults with whom they can talk if they feel threatened by others. Seek community support for protecting everyone. Praying together as a family may help establish a group sense of safety and connectedness. Also, keep in mind acts of kindness. Highlighting specific examples of people in your community who stand up for and protect the Muslim community can also help children feel safer.

Monitor access to media:

Monitor your own viewing of media – often parents think children cannot hear and see what they are watching and reading. However, children tend to notice a lot more than we realize.

Limit what media your children view as well, depending on their age. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) states, “Each of you is like a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his or her flock.” In this way, it is our responsibility to protect children from harm as much as possible and one of the ways we can do that is by limiting their exposure to negative media messages.

Watch for behavior changes:

Your children may show you through their behavior that they are struggling with what they have heard or seen. Children may experience physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches), nightmares, sleep problems, or may engage in behaviors that seem younger than their age, such as wanting to sleep in your bed or bed wetting.

You may notice a change in their ability to listen or remember information both at home and at school. Approach any behavior changes with compassion and acceptance, rather than labeling them as being weak, baby-like, unreasonably timid or dismissing their feelings by saying “grow up” or “get over it”. Children need help and positive encouragement from parents and caregivers to deal with stress. Consult with a doctor or therapist about these changes.

Maintain your routines:

Stick to your family’s daily structure of activities: mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc. to reduce anxiety and help children feel more in control by allowing them to know what to expect.

Consider this a teachable moment:

Talk about ways younger and older children can contribute to both their faith community and their community at large. Discuss how they may answer difficult questions about their faith. Role-play scenarios where they might be confronted by someone and help them practice an appropriate response. Remind them if they ever feel uncomfortable with the way people are addressing them or questioning them, let a trusted adult know.

Times like these can make you feel like you have lost control, so any constructive activity you/your family can engage in that makes you feel in control and maintain a positive life outlook will help you to feel less vulnerable. Encouraging pride in one’s heritage and faith can also be protective and helpful for children.



Age-Specific Guidelines

Preschoolers:

- Young children generally do not need to know about negative current events unless they directly affect them. However, do not assume that they have no knowledge of the event, especially when around older children. Young children are sensitive to parental stress.
- If you think your children know about the traumatic event or if they ask you questions, talk to them and answer their questions at a level they will understand. Have them start the conversation and use simple clear words when responding.
- Young children may feel guilty after a traumatic event, as if somehow they are to blame for what happened. They need to be reassured that they are not responsible.
- It's common for young children to repeat what they have seen or heard in their play or with words to help them process a scary event. Let them play freely and find a calm time to talk with them about what has happened. If they continue to play out these events, it may be helpful to see a doctor or therapist for further help.

School-Age Children (Ages 7-12):

- Ask them what they already know about the current events.
- Ask them about their concerns and worries.
- Gently correct any misinformation.
- Reassure them of their safety and what is being done in their community or school to improve safety.
- Discuss Islamophobia in a larger context: as one form of discrimination, that people fear things they don't understand and that people can blame an entire group for the actions of a few.

Teenagers (Ages 13+):

- Assume they know about current events.
- To start a conversation, begin by understanding what they know. Ask:
 - What have you seen, heard and read on television or social media?
 - What do you understand about both current events and Islamophobia?
 - Have you experienced anything negative from others in reaction to current events?
 - Have you experienced anything positive from others in reaction to current events?
(Give your own examples of the kindness and understanding non-Muslims have shown you).
- Invite them to explore how they may answer difficult questions about their faith.
- Invite them to think of concrete ways in which they can positively create change. Help teens think through ways of responding if peers ask them about their manner of dressing, their name, or other indicators of their Muslim identity.
- Discuss Islamophobia, prejudice, and injustice in a larger context. Broaden the conversation to include how persecution, discrimination, and fear of minority groups has been pervasive throughout world history, and American history in particular (e.g., Native Americans, Jews, African Americans, Latinos, LGBTQ community, immigrants, etc.).

Before an Event

Talk to your children about Islamophobia before an event happens. Talk to them in a way that doesn't make them fearful or isolated. Rather, consider what will help them feel prepared when something happens or when they experience Islamophobia in their own lives. Saying something like, "There are people who might not understand what Islam is about and who act in a way that is hateful towards Muslims," creates an environment where it's okay to not know the answer. Even admitting that you don't know why people engage in acts of hate against Muslims normalizes that you do not need to explain other people's bias-motivated behaviors. This might be more powerful and meaningful than trying to come up with an answer. Put the conversation in context so that children don't feel that the world is against them or that there is something wrong with them. It might be helpful to talk about other groups that have been targeted by hate-based violence in the US, such as African Americans, immigrants, Jews, and the LGBTQ community.

- Identify Islamophobia as an act of hate as opposed to generic bullying.
- Pay attention to everyday microaggressions (small acts or behaviors that convey hate or prejudice against a group). Don't wait for big events.
- Talk to children about their experiences around bias and microaggressions.
- Help your children identify trusted adults that they can speak to if they are experiencing bullying or other victimization.
- Support children in seeking help from those in authority such as teachers or Muslim leaders.
- Reach out to leaders and community organizations who may be able to help if you feel that your children are being targeted at school because of their faith, but appropriate steps are not being taken to address Islamophobia.
- Remind your children and adolescents that it's not their responsibility to answer every question or correct every assumption or misunderstanding about their religion. This is an unfair burden for children and adolescents to carry.

Build a more resilient community before events happen. Hate-based violence aims to fracture the communities it targets.

- Support your children to engage in community building activities (e.g., events in the community and masjids/mosques that promote equity and inclusion and fight hate).
- Connect youth with other Muslims in the community.
- Give children a strong Muslim identity that can be protective in the face of Islamophobia and hate-based violence.
- Build alliances with other communities in your area to help reduce the sense of isolation and alienation and foster positive support that counters the negative impact of Islamophobia and hate-based violence.
- Encourage your children's school to engage in activities that promote equity and inclusion. Connect your school with leaders from your community who can talk about this issue.
- Use faith as a guiding principle that can provide comfort and hope in times of fear and despair.
- Link community members with important resources such as crisis counselors, religious leaders, law enforcement, schools, and community organizations to ensure that community members, especially children and adolescents, have support when Islamophobia and hate-based violence occurs.



Additional Resources:

- <http://www.muslimmentalhealth.com/>
- <https://www.muslimwellness.com/>
- <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/11/dismantling-islamophobia>
- <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/countering-islamophobia>
- <https://www.teachingforchange.org/challenge-islamophobia>
- <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/community-violence/nctsn-resources>
- <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence/mass-violence>

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