

Ramadan Guidance for Schools

This section is extracted from a comprehensive guidance document on 'Meeting the needs Muslim pupils' to be launched by The Muslim Council of Britain in December 2006. As we normally get many queries about Ramadan from schools just before or during Ramadan, we have made this section available for reference and hope that schools will find this helpful.

5.0 Ramadan – the Month of Fasting

Good Practice – Ramadan

- Schools have a written policy for the requirements and implications of Ramadan for their Muslim pupils.
- School offers Ramadan awareness training about factors affecting their pupils during Ramadan.
- The school recognises and celebrates the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship or assembly themes and communal Iftar (collective breaking of the fast).
- The school is considerate of the likely increase in the number of pupils offering prayer during the month of Ramadan and hence facilities are provided accordingly e.g. larger area for daily prayers.
- Adequate arrangements are in place, to supervise fasting children, during the lunch hour. These arrangements are well publicised amongst pupils and parents.
- The school takes into consideration the month of Ramadan and hence avoid scheduling internal examinations during this month.
- The school tries to avoid scheduling Sex and Relationship Education and swimming during Ramadan.
- The school ensures fasting children do not engage in over-demanding exercises, as this may result in dehydration.
- If possible, the school avoids holding parents' meetings in the evening during the month of Ramadan.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is the fourth 'Pillar' of Islam, an act of worship of great spiritual, moral and social significance for Muslims. It is obligatory for all

males and females to fast once they attain the age of puberty (for some children this can be as young as age 9). The physical dimension of fasting involves completely abstaining from all forms of nourishment, food, liquids (including water) and smoking from dawn to sunset for the whole month. Younger children may fast for all or part of the month but this is entirely optional. The spiritual and moral dimension of fasting is considered to be of far greater importance than the physical one.

Muslims are encouraged not to use Ramadan as an opportunity to avoid aspects of normal life but rather to cope with normal life under a different set of guidelines. Schools need to be aware of important considerations in relation to pupils fasting. Children fasting will get up before dawn to have their breakfast. This interrupts their sleep pattern. By the same token when Ramadan falls during the summer months they will need to stay up later than usual.

During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealings with others including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness, mannerisms, avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour. In addition having empathy with the poor and donating generously for charitable causes, sharing of food and inviting others to one's home for opening the fast are important features of Ramadan. Muslims also focus on reading more Qur'an and performing additional prayers in the mosque every evening.

Schools can develop the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of their children and school life by recognising and building upon the essence and spirit of Ramadan. Whilst the discipline and the challenge of fasting is to continue with the tasks of everyday life, staff can be asked to exercise a degree of understanding e.g. encourage pupils to avoid excessive exertion in physical education to prevent dehydration. By the same token they may praise pupils who are clearly making a special effort regarding their attitudes and behaviour. Some schools offer their staff awareness training about factors affecting their pupils during Ramadan.

Teachers can take this opportunity to be more inclusive and teach pupils about Ramadan in Religious Education and to invite guests from the Muslim community to take collective worship assemblies.

Islamic calendar is based on the lunar months and therefore the month of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year on the Gregorian calendar; hence it takes Ramadan about 30 years to move through the seasons from January to December.

5.1 Primary School Pupils

Although fasting for the entire month becomes obligatory at the age of puberty, it is common practice for Muslim children to begin to fast before this age to become progressively accustomed by the age of puberty. Most children aged 10 and 11 (years 5 & 6) are expected to fast all 30 days. Children are enthusiastic and get a great sense of achievement in joining their families in taking part in the spirit of Ramadan and often begin at a younger age.

The younger the age, the more progressively difficult it becomes for children to fast without their physical stamina and concentration levels being effected. This can be problematic for very young children and we would advise that schools liaise with parents to encourage very young children to fast half days or to avoid fasting during school days as this can have a significant effect on their concentration levels and degree of alertness whilst at school. It is important to be aware that young children are more likely to fast when Ramadan falls in the winter months, when the days are shorter than the much longer and hotter summer days.

Whether a pupil decides to fast or not is a matter to be decided between the parent and child. Schools need to be aware that breaking the fast before the correct time may be regarded as being worse than not fasting at all. Schools should not encourage children to break their fast early unless it is for serious health and safety reasons. The overriding consideration should be that the children do not feel disadvantaged in school activities because of their religious observances.

5.2 Celebrating Ramadan

Muslims approach Ramadan with enthusiasm and it is customary for Muslims to congratulate one another on its arrival. The school can value and build on this spirit by having collective worship/assembly themes based on Ramadan, organising communal Iftar (breaking the fast) when pupils, parents, community members and teachers - Muslims and non-Muslim can all join in the opening of the fast and eat together. Some schools enter into the charitable spirit of Ramadan by raising funds for the poor and the needy in the world.

5.3 Physical Education

Majority of pupils who are fasting are able to take part in most physical activities during Ramadan without putting themselves at risk or danger. Fasting can make some children feel tired, drowsy or have headaches due to dehydration, which may necessitate some Muslim pupils having to reduce their physical exercise. Schools may wish to plan alternative, less strenuous activities during Physical Education classes.

5.4 Examinations during Ramadan

It is inevitable that certain statutory and internal school examinations may fall during Ramadan. Schools should give appropriate consideration when scheduling internal examinations, since, the combination of preparing for exams and fasting may prove difficult for some children.

5.5 Parents Evening and School Functions

During Ramadan, the evenings can be a very busy period for Muslim families; particularly if the opening of the fast (Iftar) falls in the early evening. In addition some adults will spend their time observing additional religious activities, e.g. special evening prayers at the mosque. This may make it difficult for parents to attend meetings or other functions in the evening during the month of Ramadan. The scheduling of parent evenings before or after the month of Ramadan would be appreciated by parents and is likely to ensure better attendance.

5.6 Exemption from Fasting

There are certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting. These include menstruation, those for whom fasting is likely to have a detrimental effect on health and physical wellbeing and those who cannot survive without taking medication or nourishment e.g. diabetics. Those travelling on long and difficult journeys may not fast if it is likely to cause undue hardship. If fasting days are not completed, then they would have to be made up at a later date or in some circumstances compensated for as prescribed by Islam e.g. feeding the poor.

5.7 Medication

No oral medication can be taken by a person who is fasting, but anyone needing regular medication during fasting hours is normally exempt from fasting in any case. Medication can be taken once the fast has been broken. Medical injections can be had by a person who is fasting, although not those injections that influence body nutrition – guidance should be sought on specific issues if necessary. During emergencies, where a child's life is at risk or severe illness is diagnosed, then medicine should be administered. Routine vaccinations should be scheduled for other times of the year.

5.8 Detentions

When Ramadan falls during the winter months, after-school detention for a pupil who is fasting could mean that the pupil is not able to reach home in time to break fast. In such cases, schools need to be aware that pupils must be able to carry out their religious duty, whilst accepting full responsibility for breaching school rules. To

break the fast, a drink is sufficient and many schools do make this provision available when required. In cases of uncertainty consultation with parents is advised.

5.9 Swimming during Ramadan

In general, participation in swimming is an acceptable activity whilst fasting. However, whilst fasting, for many pupils this activity may prove to be an issue, as the potential for swallowing water is very high. Some pupils may interpret that deliberately doing something that is prohibited includes putting themselves in a situation, where the prohibited act is very likely to occur. Hence they may wish to avoid swimming whilst fasting.

Schools with a significant number of Muslim pupils should try to avoid scheduling swimming lessons during Ramadan.

5.10 Sex and Relationship Education

Whilst fasting Muslims are not permitted to engage in any sexual relations and are expected to avoid sexual thoughts and discourse. Taking this into account schools should avoid scheduling the teaching of this subject during Ramadan.

5.11 Special Ramadan Evening Prayers (Taraweeh)

During Ramadan many pupils may observe special additional prayers called *Taraweeh* which take place at the mosque every evening and last approximately an hour. These are normally performed in congregation at the mosque but can also be observed individually or as a family at home.