

# Bringing up Muslim Children

## Summary of Cardiff University research project



### Authors

Jonathan Scourfield, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Asma Khan and Sameh Otri

## Bringing up Muslim Children

### How did we do our research on how children learn to be Muslims?

- ◇ Analysis of existing data from the Home Office Citizenship Survey.
- ◇ Interviews with 60 Muslim families in Cardiff. In total we spoke to 99 parents and 120 children. Families came from all parts of Cardiff and from a range of different backgrounds. The children were aged 12 and under.
- ◇ In 24 families the children kept oral diaries, using digital recorders and photo diaries using digital cameras.
- ◇ The researchers observed a range of Islamic education classes.

Ethnic origin of families interviewed  
20 Pakistani  
10 Bangladeshi  
5 Indian  
5 Somali  
9 Middle Eastern  
7 Mixed ethnicity  
4 Others

### The transmission of religion

**Muslims 77%**  
**Christians 29%**  
**Other religions 65%**  
**No religion 93%**

### Passing on religion to the next generation

Analysis of the Home Office Citizenship Survey 2003 shows that Muslims are more successful than other religious groups at passing on religion to their children. The percentages here refer to the proportion of adults completing the survey who said they practised the religion they were brought up in.

### Teaching and learning about Islam: The big picture

Although parents might be critical of particular mosques or groups of Muslims or critical of the way they themselves were taught Islam as children, they were not critical of Islam itself. There was a common core of belief in Islam that almost all the families shared, even though there were plenty of variation between families in how they practised their religion. Although parents tended to see themselves as making choices about the religious upbringing of their children, all but one family with children of school age arranged for their children to learn to read the Qur'an in Arabic. The content of the teaching in religious education classes was therefore fairly traditional.

Most of the children had busy lives, many attending religious education classes at least three times a week and some of them also taking part in similar out-of-school activities to their non-Muslim peers. The children were generally very knowledgeable about Islam from a young age. Some started learning to pray as young as four and learning the Qur'an as young as five.

### Why does Islam seem to be passed on so successfully?

We can't know this for certain from our research, but if religion is central to children's routines and they spend their time in Islamic places (including home), then their faith is likely to become central to their identity. If this is how children grow up then it is likely religion will become part of their lives without them needing to make a conscious choice to embrace it, at least when they are in the primary school years.

Ethnicity is also important. Being a Muslim for young children tends to be taken for granted and this is probably connected to their ethnic background. Being in a minority, especially when there is some hostility from the media and elsewhere, may well make Muslims' identification with Islam stronger. If families' main social networks are other Muslims, often from the same ethnic group, then this will probably reinforce children's identification with Islam.

### A child's eye view

The children themselves tended to describe learning to be a Muslim as about learning a set of rules (e.g. how to pray and read the Qur'an). They tended to focus on concrete details rather than anything abstract about their faith and tended to remember the more dramatic details from the stories they had been told. Most children seemed to have a clear sense of an unseen world, but children's experiences of religion were very variable and tended to be different from those of their parents, as we might expect at this stage of childhood.



Some of the children experienced tensions between Islam and the secular Western entertainment on offer. One boy told us he struggled to pray when tempted by the TV and computer. At the same time, other children seemed very comfortable with more than one identity at once, being clear about their Muslim faith but also enjoying aspects of secular culture and not seeing conflicts between the two.

### Learning to pray

You just learn because you do it for every single day basically of a year yeah? Well most of the year. And like you're just never going to forget it.

(Aamira Miller, age 11)

## Bringing up Muslim Children

### Learning to be a Muslim in the family

Mothers are typically the main teachers of children in families. It is usually seen as mothers' responsibility to ensure children are introduced to Islam and in most families it is mothers who are more available for this. Some Muslim fathers are very uninvolved in their children's religious learning.

#### 'Time to pray' cake on 7th birthday



Some work patterns (e.g. work in restaurants) make it very difficult for fathers to spend time with children, especially after school.

Where grandparents are nearby, they are often quite involved in religious nurture. This is more likely to be an option for ethnic groups who have been settled in Cardiff in fairly large numbers for some time, e.g. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Where families have been separated

through divorce, the religious teaching of children is sometimes a difficult issue, with disagreement between parents about how children should be brought up to be Muslims.

In mixed ethnicity families in particular, we found parents talking of the 'values' of Islam. There was more a sense in these families and in some of the smaller ethnic groups of parents having to work out religious nurture for themselves. In some of the larger ethnic groups, however, there was more of an expected ethnic tradition of religious teaching.

Parents use a range of Islamic media to support children's learning, including TV, DVDs, Internet and Islamic songs. Some teach them Qur'an themselves, although a larger number arrange a Qur'an teacher, either in the home or the mosque.

### Mosques and Islamic classes

As well as classes where children learn to read the Qur'an, there are two other types of classes the children in our study attended: Islamic studies and Arabic language classes with some Islamic content. Parents and children spoke highly of some Qur'an teachers, especially those who were fluent in English and in a community language. Both parents and children appreciated classes that were seen to be 'fun'. There was also some criticism, however, e.g. of teachers speaking on mobile phones during lessons

and reports of children being physically punished.

Many of the parents we interviewed were positive about mosques with an ethnic mix and some were critical of those which are largely used by one ethnic group. There were also some people, however, especially grandfathers, who valued the use of the mosque for mixing with others from the same ethnic group and using a shared language. This opportunity was really only there for men in such mosques, as the majority of Cardiff mosques do not have facilities for women and the parents were generally critical of this.

*Our mosque .....  
there's so many  
different Muslims  
go there from  
different parts of  
the world and it's a  
really beautiful  
thing to see (Mr  
Morris)*

Although some parents made decisions about which mosque to attend according to their school of thought or movement within Islam (e.g. they

were Salafi or Bareilwi), most spoke of choice of mosque and classes for children in much more practical terms, such as closeness to home, times of classes and ease of parking. It was often difficult to categorise parents in terms of their school of thought, as different family members might attend different mosques.

### Social networks

Social networks are very important to the religious upbringing of children as peers can be a big influence. The parents we interviewed tended to express concern about bad influences on their children when looking ahead to the teenage years but in the primary school years parents did not tend to worry. There was a tendency for parents to be more concerned about the morality of daughters than sons.

Having non-Muslim friends seemed to be more of a problem for parents than for children. Children's social networks are often tied to their parents' own networks and parents therefore tend to exert a fair degree of control over who their children mix with outside of school. It should be noted that this would also be the case in many non-Muslim families. Other Muslims are not immune from bad behaviour and there were examples given of bad influences from other children at the mosque. Many of the parents' networks were based on common ethnic



## Bringing up Muslim Children

origin, which often also means the same social class background. Families from smaller ethnic groups were more likely to seek out other Muslims, regardless of ethnicity, in order to attain a sense of community. Mixing with the same ethnic group was often seen as a positive, with ethnically-specific communities often seen as 'safe' places in which children can learn about their religion in a way that conforms to how their parents were taught and can safeguard against misunderstandings and different interpretations of Islam. Some parents also saw down-sides to mixing mainly within one ethnic group, such as negative peer pressure leading to educational under-achievement. Mosques were generally enjoyed by children as places for meeting friends. Parents too were often positive about the social opportunities offered by mosques, although as noted on the previous page there was concern about the lack of facilities for women.

### Experiences of schools

Most of the children we interviewed attended state English medium primary schools, though small numbers also attended Welsh medium state schools and private schools, including Muslim schools. Parents generally preferred schools with a good mix of ethnicities and religions, and especially those with a number of other Muslim children. Being one of very few Muslims at school can be a very difficult experience for a Muslim child. Schools were generally very accommodating of parents' requests for children to pray in school hours. Some schools were very aware of the importance of Ramadan, for example providing a lunch-time discussion group for children who were trying to fast. Schools with a high number of Muslim children generally showed more sensitivity than others. There were some examples of religious insensitivity, such as can be seen in the quotation above.

Only a small number of parents were primarily concerned about educational standards. Religion was much more of a cause for concern. State primary schools were certainly not seen as secular by Muslim parents or children. Rather, parents had the impression that there was quite a bit of Christian content. Christmas was described as a particularly difficult time of the year for a large number of parents in our sample, although not

*They told our class to make a picture of how God, how we think God looks like... and I told my teacher that I couldn't do that, cause I'm not allowed to like in my religion ..... and everybody started making fun and all that....and then I was sent to the Head Teacher. (Madiha Mahmood, age 10)*



apparently as much a problem for children, who were happy enough to participate in Christmas plays.

### Experience of Cardiff

Parents and children were, on the whole, very positive about Cardiff as a place to practise Islam and bring up children as Muslims, in comparison with other cities. Cardiff was said to be both 'big enough' and 'small enough' at the same time. For many people, the positive remarks about Cardiff were mostly about the lack of harassment rather than anything more positive to say about the acceptance of Islam, however. There were some instances of Islamophobia, but most of the negative comments related to the need for more facilities (e.g. a Muslim high school). That said, many parents who had grown up in Cardiff also remarked on how many more facilities there are now than when they were children.



### Identity

'Muslim' was the most popular choice, when we presented parents and children with a range of identity cards to choose. Interviewees also chose a range of other identities. In choosing (or not choosing) national and ethnic identity labels, parents and children from the same family often agreed. Some people were keen to identify as Welsh but for most this label was associated with *speaking* Welsh rather than any idea of Welsh citizenship, which made many people reluctant to embrace this identity.

### What might our findings mean for Muslim communities?

We discussed emerging findings with our advisory group from local Muslim organisations, especially those working with children and families. Following this discussion, these things can be highlighted as findings that Muslim communities might want to reflect on.

- We came across what could be seen as good practice in Muslim parenting, such as parents explaining the meanings of Islamic practices to children from a young age.
- We also encountered good practice examples in formal learning, such as, for example, the enactment of a 'Hajj' and the use of modern teaching methods such as small group learning.

- Given the importance of mothers in religious nurture, mosques could potentially support this vital role more pro-actively by becoming more accessible to women and girls.
- Mosques could also reflect on the strength that can be derived from the multi-culturalism inherent in Islam, especially for British Muslims from smaller ethnic groups.
- Muslims organisations could potentially think about realistic ways of supporting the greater involvement of fathers in religious nurture, given the challenges of some men's working hours.

### **What might our findings mean for public services?**

Some general implications arise from the research which are relevant to health, social care and education staff.

- The importance of appreciating the amount of out-of-school learning Muslim children are involved in.
- The value of the transferable skills involved in religious learning.
- The value of dialogue and collaboration between state schools and Muslim organisations.
- The importance of front-line staff having some basic knowledge of Islam.
- The importance of appreciating the different world view of most Muslims.

There are a variety of possibilities for public services to engage with Muslim families in such a way that takes religion seriously. One would be the provision of parenting classes from an Islamic perspective. Another would be to combine supplementary education (e.g. Qur'an classes) with mainstream schooling in some way, e.g. homework clubs after school which include some religious education.



### **To find out more, please contact**

Dr Jonathan Scourfield  
Cardiff School of Social Sciences, The Glamorgan  
Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT.  
Phone: 029 20875402  
E-mail: [scourfield@Cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:scourfield@Cardiff.ac.uk)

The research is part of the Religion and Society Programme, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council.