

Summary advice for schools on Ramadan

by Newham SACRE for schools

The following advice is taken from 'A briefing paper on Ramadan' Published January 2019

- In Newham we have two main denominations of Muslims – Sunni and Shi'a. The vast majority of our Muslim pupils in Newham schools are Sunni. Both groups of Muslims use the same Qur'an, but there are differences in the way they practice their religion. In Newham where we have Muslim people from a variety of continents and countries these differences are cultural as well as scriptural, at times. Knowing a Muslim family's heritage can help a school understand differences in the ways in which individuals practice their religion.
- Fasting (*sawm*) during the twenty-nine or thirty days of Ramadan is one of the basic duties of Islam for all Muslim people. These duties for Sunni Muslims are called 'pillars' in that they support and strengthen a Muslim's life as do pillars in a building. The other pillars for Sunni Muslims are: the declaration of faith, prayer/worship five times daily, paying a portion of wealth to charitable causes and making the pilgrimage to Makkah once in your lifetime. Fasting is the fourth pillar and is seen as an act of worship. For Shi'a Muslims fasting is one of the ten obligatory acts they must follow.
- During the daylight hours of Ramadan, Muslims are supposed to refrain from eating, drinking (including water) and sexual activity. It is a time when they try to be even more aware of *Allah* (Arabic word for 'One God'). Muslims will also try to live a better life generally during Ramadan – by trying not to use bad language or think ill of others, for example.
- Because of variations in timing due to geographical location, timetables showing when daylight begins and ends during each day of Ramadan are published by Muslim communities and are often printed in local newspapers.
- Fasting during Ramadan binds the Muslim community (*Ummah*) together, both locally and world-wide. Even those Muslims who, for whatever reason, do not fast pray five times daily will often try to keep the Ramadan fast.

What does the Qur'an say?

"Fasting is prescribed for you as it was for those before you, so that you may be conscious of Allah." (2:183) "But he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on. Allah desires your well-being, not your discomfort." (2:185) "Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was sent down, as a guide to mankind. So, any [one] of you who is present (in his home) during that month should spend it in fasting." (2:185) "Eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from the black thread, then complete your fast until the night appears." (2:187)

At what age are children expected to start observing the Ramadan fast?

Shari'ah (Islamic law, based on the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet) states that fasting during Ramadan is only obligatory from the age of puberty.

It is natural, however, that Muslim children will wish to emulate their elders and so, from an early age, Muslim children will often fast for one, two or more days during Ramadan. They will be proud of this and their elders will express pleasure. A competitive spirit will often develop between children in that they will compare the number of days on which they have fasted with others, and

this is something that elders will educate them against. The level of observance among children, of course, will depend upon the particular individual, family or community. **But most Muslim parents would not wish their children at primary school to be fasting on school days, but rather make this an activity that they do at the weekends at home, when they can rest or sleep in the afternoons of the fasting days and have the experience of community as they fast as a family together.**

What is the responsibility of a school if a child becomes ill or suffers as a result of fasting while at school?

The responsibility which a school should exercise towards fasting pupils is no different to that applying to any pupil in the school. A school will obviously want to be sensitive towards pupils who are fasting, but Muslim scriptures are clear that if you are not able to operate normally (at school or work), you are not well enough or old enough to be fasting. Fasting is something that no-one should really know about.

Given that the obligation to fast does not override health considerations, a pupil who faints can be offered water if judged appropriate by a suitably qualified first-aider or if the pupil requests it. In the same way if a child can not concentrate or becomes listless at school, a drink and food should be given. If the child does not want to take water or food, the school should contact home, so that parents can explain that the fast days still counts even if child eats and drinks when not 100% or well. A Muslim pupil might need to be reassured that this is the case.

Are there any other parts of the curriculum for which Ramadan has implications?

As well as the month of Ramadan being a time of fasting, it is also a period when Muslims try to be even more conscious of God and to lead better lives. Undoubtedly, the Muslim community would appreciate and respect a sympathetic and understanding stance by schools during the month of Ramadan. In turn, most schools would have as one of their underlying values – whether implicit or actually stated – respect for the family backgrounds from which children come.

The summer term is often a time when Relationships education might be covered in Year 5 & 6, and schools might want to move this component to another time so it does not clash with Ramadan. Schools should consider the needs of any Muslim teachers who might be required to teach this element of the curriculum at a time when their religion asks them not to think about such matters. Even if pupils are not fasting they might be uncomfortable with thinking about sexual matters during Ramadan, or parents may find it difficult to talk through issues with their children if they are fasting.

Should a school make special provision during Ramadan?

This is a matter for a school's discretion but the following may be considered:

- being aware of the impact of Ramadan on meetings for parents (in that Muslim parents may find attendance at such meetings difficult because of involvement in customs associated with Ramadan);
- dedicating specific assemblies to Ramadan so that the whole school community can learn about its place in Muslim life; as well as considering fasting in different religions;
- arranging a meeting with Muslim parents prior to Ramadan to discuss issues such as lunchtime arrangements, examinations or sporting activities; and
- writing a letter to Muslim parents prior to the month of Ramadan.

For more information please refer to SACRE's full document or email claire.clinton@rematters.co.uk



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