

Ramadan: A Simple Guide for Schools



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1. Overview

This simple guide for schools during the month of Ramadan has been produced by the **Islamic Society of Britain (ISB)** in collaboration with **Lewisham Islamic Centre** in order for schools to recognise and build upon the essence of Ramadan without compromising the normality of everyday school life. ISB's Schools Outreach Project plays a pivotal role in promoting the understanding of Islam in schools by monitoring the content of Religious Education and its delivery. This guide has already been circulated in schools to enable teachers to utilise this opportunity in teaching pupils about Ramadan and inviting guest speakers to shed light on the subject, in a bid to foster diversity and inclusion.

When Ramadan falls during peak periods of exams or mocks, acknowledging pupils' needs may contribute to fostering good relations, tackling prejudice, and promoting understanding between different groups, as quoted in the Equality Act 2010.

Muslims cannot be specific in advance regarding the date of **Eid ul Fitr** – the Islamic holiday that marks the end of Ramadan - as it is dependent on a visual moon sighting. It is advised that schools follow their own policies on holidays for religious and cultural needs, and at the same time consider those parents/carers who request further days. ISB provides an update on www.isb.org.uk as soon as confirmation has been received.

Ramadan: The Month of Fasting

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; a month during which the Qur'an was revealed. It is commanded in the Qur'an for all healthy males and females to fast once they attain the age of puberty (for some children this can be as young as age nine). Certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting include menstruating girls & women; those for whom fasting has a detrimental effect on their overall well-being; those who depend on medication or nourishment for survival; and a traveller facing serious hardship due

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to fasting. Any missed fasting days must be atoned by fasting or feeding the poor if one is unable to fast.

Fasting is an act of worship of great spiritual, moral and social significance for Muslims. The physical dimension of fasting involves completely abstaining from drinking, eating smoking and sexual activity, from dawn to sunset, for the whole month. The spiritual and moral dimension of fasting involves God-consciousness, exercising self-control, having empathy towards the poor, having appropriate dealings with others, giving charity, observing additional worship such as reading the entire Qur'an within the month.

As some Science and Religious Education (including the information taught as part of the Science Curriculum) would be associated with sexual relations, it would be appreciated by Muslim families if schools could reschedule teaching these topics until after Ramadan. Schools can play a part in the development of the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural aspects of their pupils by recognising and building upon the spirit of Ramadan.

Schools should demonstrate through their practice that they appreciate and value cultural and religious diversity and that they seek to promote racial equality and religious harmony. Pupils who fast and engage in extra prayers and charitable activities during Ramadan should be seen positively and their achievements acknowledged and revered in school assemblies. This will in turn inevitably boost pupil confidence and positive self-image.

A typical day for a fasting Muslim would be: a pre-dawn "Suhr" meal; dawn "Fajr" prayers; midday "Dhuhr" prayers; mid-afternoon "Asr" prayers; breaking the fast at sunset with an "Iftar" meal; sunset "Maghrib" prayers; night-time "Isha" prayers; extra night-time "Taraweeh" prayers. The impact of this routine on a student will be further discussed below.

2. Primary School Pupils

As fasting is a responsibility as well as an obligation in Islam, it is important that pupils are supported while continuing with normal school life especially those in Primary School. Because fasting for primary age children is best done under parental supervision and out of school hours, it is imperative that teachers and staff are made aware of fasting children to safeguard them against health risks.

Although schools may wish to make suitable arrangements to support pupils, it is equally important that pupils realise that Ramadan is not an opportunity to try to gain special individual rights within the school.

It is a common practice for Muslim children to begin **fasting** before they attain puberty, to become progressively accustomed to the obligation. Although fasting for the entire month does not become obligatory until the age of puberty, most children aged 10 and 11 (years 5 & 6) are likely to fast the entire month. Children who are very enthusiastic may be encouraged by their parents to fast only on certain days of the week, especially the weekends. It is also important to be aware that young children are more likely to fast when Ramadan falls in the winter months, when the days are shorter, and the climate is cooler.

The younger the children, the more difficult it tends to be for them to fast without their physical stamina and concentration levels being affected. All staff need to be aware of some of the effects of prolonged dawn to dusk fasting which include sleepiness, mood swings and headaches. This is more prominent in very young children; therefore, it is recommended that schools liaise with parents to encourage them to fast half days (i.e., until break or lunch time) or to avoid fasting during school days. Whether a pupil decides to fast or not is a matter to be decided between the parent and child.

Because breaking the fast before the correct time may be regarded as being worse than not fasting at all by some young pupils and their parents. Schools should not

encourage these children to break their fast early unless it is for health and safety reasons. The overriding consideration should be that the children do not feel disadvantaged in school activities because of their religious observance.

On the other hand, if a fasting child exhibits health concerns, the school has an overriding safeguarding duty of taking action to enable the child to have the best outcome, as governed by DfES's statutory guidance. Schools are encouraged to have a closer and more direct link with parents so that they can express their concerns as they arise and share responsibility of choices. New and supply staff may need to be made aware of the importance of Ramadan and the school's responsibilities.

3. Secondary School Pupils

If GCSE/A Level examinations falls during the month of Ramadhan, secondary schools may need to anticipate in advance in order to prepare the pupils in achieving their best. Fasting is obligatory for Muslim pupils in secondary school and the only dispensation are those who are ill or girls who may be menstruating. Families will normally make their own decision on such issues affecting their children. Schools would normally acknowledge the moral and spiritual values associated with fasting and the positive benefits that this has on their students. However, having to take examinations on top of long hours of fasting over the summer period will be a challenge for students.

A sensitive approach may be required while asking Secondary school pupils whether they are fasting or not as it may be embarrassing especially for female pupils on their periods. Schools may however need to know which pupils are fasting or not through liaising with parents and carers in order to offer guidance on the best way to avoid dehydration, eating nutritious food, getting appropriate rest periods, organising revision sessions etc.

Since fasting pupils have plenty of spare time during lunch break, schools can support Muslim students by providing a quiet room during break times where they can pray, rest or revise between examinations. In addition, fasting pupils can also

utilise the long gap between when school terminates and **Iftar** (breaking of the fast), by having a good rest and balancing it with revision periods.

4. Prayers during Ramadan

Ramadan is a time when Muslims try to spend more time in prayer and religious contemplation. Muslims offer extra prayers every night called **Taraweeh**. Many Muslims, including children, will stay up very late saying prayers and reading the Qur'an; schools liaising with parents to reduce the impact on their children's academic performance in the day would be encouraged.

Schools are also requested to set aside a place acceptable for prayer, for mid-afternoon "**Dhuhr**" prayers (during lunch break). This prayer changes its time to reflect different seasons. In wintertime this is likely to be between 12.00pm - 1.00 pm, whilst in summer it is likely to be between 1.00 pm - 2.00 pm. Where possible, washing facilities should be available for pupils getting ready for their prayers. Preparation for prayer – ablution - includes washing the visible parts of the body like the face, hands, and feet.

Schools should be sympathetic to pupils' desire to offer prayers at prescribed times. This opportunity for offering prayers during school time should be available throughout the year.

The essential times of prayer are as follows :-

Essential times of prayer

1. After first light and before sunrise. (Fajr)
2. Between the sun reaching its zenith and mid-afternoon (Dhuhr)
3. Between mid-afternoon and sunset (Asr)
4. After the full setting of the sun (Maghrib)
5. In the dark of the night (Isha)

Please refer to the year's Ramadan Timetable for exact dates and times.

As it is also customary for more pupils to offer their prayers in school during Ramadan, Schools might also consider the provision of a larger room for prayers or contacting their local Mosque to arrange for an Imam to lead Friday prayers.

5. Celebrating Ramadan

Muslims approach Ramadan with enthusiasm and it is customary for Muslims to congratulate one another on its arrival. Schools can value and build on this spirit by having themes based on Ramadan at collective worship or assemblies, and by organising communal 'Iftar' when pupils, parents, community members and teachers – both Muslims and non-Muslims – join in ending of the fast and eating together. As communal iftar in summer is not possible due to the long hours of fasting, schools may instead enter the charitable spirit of Ramadan by raising funds for the poor and the needy.

Because fasting is an Islamic obligation, teachers can take this opportunity to be more inclusive by teaching the pupils about Ramadan and inviting guest speakers from the Muslim community to explain the subject – **Islamic Society of Britain** would be happy to be a liaison. This will help in promoting diversity as well as enable Muslim pupils to feel more comfortable within the school environment. Schools may consider incorporating Ramadan into the Religious Education Programme, encouraging teachers to utilise opportunities across the curriculum to develop knowledge and understanding of the basic tenets of Islam.

6. Physical Education

Whilst the discipline and the challenge of fasting is to continue with the normality of everyday life, staff should exercise a degree of understanding, by encouraging pupils to avoid excessive exertion in Physical Education to prevent dehydration. Some pupils may need to reduce physical exercises during fasting while others may wish to continue as normal without putting themselves at risk.

Strenuous activity during fasting may make some children feel tired or drowsy, or even develop headaches due to dehydration. This may necessitate some Muslim pupils reducing their physical activity during Physical Education. Schools may wish to consider and plan less vigorous activities for everyone during Physical Education in Ramadan to encourage overall participation.

7. Examinations during Ramadan

It is inevitable that certain statutory and internal examinations may fall during Ramadan. Considering that Ramadan is set by Lunar calendar, its date changes by 11 days every year over the solar Gregorian calendar. If Ramadan falls during GCSEs and A-levels exams in the summer months, it is suggested that schools consider these future dates of Ramadan when preparing their annual Diary of Events.

Schools should give appropriate consideration when scheduling internal exams because the combination of preparing exams and fasting may prove challenging for some pupils. Good examination room management during hot weather will enable the exam invigilators to be vigilant of all students and not only those who are fasting.

In the event that the school notices any indications of dehydration or fatigue in a child during statutory exams, the child should be asked if they are fasting and advised to drink water immediately. The child should be reassured that in their current situation, they are allowed to break their fast and make it up later. Schools may need to notify the pupils of this allowance during exams briefing or incorporate it into their exams instructions.

8. Parents' evenings and after school functions

In general, 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 and conditions. However, during Ramadan, the evenings can be a very

busy period for Muslim families, particularly if Iftar falls in the early hours of the evening.

All schools should work to ensure effective communication with parents and understand and respect the needs of the communities they serve. Furthermore, some parents may spend their time observing the special evening prayers called **Taraweeh** at the mosque or at home. This may make it difficult for them to attend meetings or other functions in the evening during the month of Ramadan.

Schools can enhance their understanding of Ramadan by engaging in active dialogue with the local Muslim community and Mosques, by sharing information and seeking to ensure that school practices are consistent with parental wishes and religious beliefs. If they organise parents' meetings to talk through the issues and share ideas, schools will be more likely to have the support of all parents for their particular policies in this area. The scheduling of parent evenings before or after the month of Ramadan would be appreciated by parents and is likely to ensure better attendance.

9. Medication

No oral medication can be taken by a person who is fasting. Anyone needing regular medication (e.g., insulin) during fasting hours is normally exempt from fasting, in any case. Medication can be taken once the fast has ended. Medical injections can be taken by a person who is fasting, although not those injections that influence the body's nutrition. Guidance should be sought from local Muslim organisations on specific issues if necessary. During emergencies, where a child's wellbeing is at risk, medicine should be administered. Routine vaccinations should be scheduled, if possible, for other times of the year.

10. Detentions and after school activities

When Ramadan falls during the winter months, after-school detention or activities for a pupil who is fasting could mean that the pupil is not able to reach home in time

to break their fast. Whilst accepting full responsibility for breaching school rules, schools should be aware that pupils should be able to carry out their religious duty of breaking the fast on time.

Although a drink or anything to eat provided by the school is sufficient, some parents may request that their children break the fast at home with their family. The need for pupils to be at home before sunset might also have implications for the school's behaviour management practice, e.g., after-school detentions. Schools may wish to consider alternative sanctions during this period, including the use of lunchtime detentions.

Schools need to know Muslim pupils may be unable to participate in extra-curricular activities during Ramadan because parents will want them home in time to break their Fast. Thus, it may be possible, for example, for sports practice sessions to be held before school starts or at lunchtimes.

11. Swimming during Ramadan

Schools with a significant number of Muslim pupils should try to avoid scheduling swimming lessons during Ramadan to remove unnecessary barriers to full participation. Pupils who are fasting are usually physically able to take part in most activities during Ramadan without putting themselves at risk. Although participation in swimming is an acceptable activity whilst fasting, the potential for swallowing water may be an issue. Some pupils or parents consider the risk too great and may wish to avoid swimming whilst fasting. Schools should not ask fasting pupils to do anything which might be construed by them or their parents as breaking the fast.

12. Absence from School due to Religious Holidays

The month of Ramadan culminates with the festival of **Eid ul-Fitr**, which takes place either 29th or 30th day after the beginning of the Islamic month. Muslims cannot be specific with the date beforehand as it is dependent on a visual moon sighting. ISB

customarily provides an update on www.isb.org.uk as soon as confirmation has been received. It is advised that schools follow their own policies on holidays for religious and cultural needs, and at the same time consider those parents/carers who request further days.

13. Features of good practice in schools

- A written policy in place on the requirements and implications of Ramadan for Muslim pupils.
- Staff awareness and availability of training regarding factors affecting pupils during Ramadan.
- Acknowledgment and celebration of the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship, assembly themes and communal breaking of the fast.
- The provision of prayer facilities during the month of Ramadan and beyond.
- Adequate supervision of fasting children, during the lunch hour and strong cohesion between the school 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 activities such as swimming during Ramadan.
- The school ensures fasting children do not engage in strenuous exercises to prevent dehydration.
- If possible, the school avoids holding parents' meetings in the evening during the month of Ramadan.
- Schools follow their guidance on holidays for religious and cultural needs.