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Talking to Muslim children about acts of violent extremism

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Muslim children are growing up in a challenging time in America. Our nation is engaged in military conflicts in places with predominantly Muslim populations, and the domestic war on terror is focused disproportionately on Muslim citizens. There is also a surge in Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims in America. Round the clock cable news coverage, combined with a constant exposure to social media contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity and urgency for all Americans and especially Muslims. In this complex environment, it is important for parents of Muslim children to recognize their own needs and their children's needs.

1. Start with yourself, be their anchors

- Children should be able to view their homes and families as safe environments. Adults who are stressed and fearful can convey those emotions to children. Children need calm, reassuring, and honest adults when they are feeling afraid.
- Your relationship with children matters. Children will only come to you to talk about difficult topics if you maintain a warm loving relationship with them.
- Evaluate your own use of media. Are you constantly watching the news and sometimes yelling at the TV when a politician makes an outlandish comment about Muslims? Limit your own consumption of the news and social media if it is affecting you negatively.
- Take care of yourself spiritually and emotionally.
- Be careful about what you say in presence of children, they may take your words literally. Avoid statements like, "They think we are all terrorists," or, "I am moving out of America," unless you want your young child to accept these as factual statements.

2. Know the facts

- Facts help us maintain a realistic perspective. Learn them yourself and teach your children at an age-appropriate level. Here are some examples:
- In the United States, most acts of terror are not perpetrated by Muslims.
- FBI statistics reveal that 94 percent of terrorist incidents in the United States between 1980 and 2005 were committed by people who were not Muslim.ⁱ
- In 2015, there were at least 355 mass shooting incidents in the United States.ⁱⁱ Only three of these, or .008 percent, were perpetrated by Muslims.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Statistically, the chances of an American being killed in a terrorist attack by someone claiming that Islam sanctions their actions is, 1 in 20,000,000, are markedly lower than the chances of them being killed by a dog, 1 in 116,448.^{iv}
- There are more than 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, 6-7 million in America.
- Islam does not permit hurting innocent people, so no matter what the perpetrator's religion, acts of terror are un-Islamic.

- Do not repeat conspiracy theories. Your children will find those confusing.

3. Have age appropriate conversations

- Listen to your children. Do not force them to talk about things, give them opportunities to express themselves through sports, art etc. Do not try to dominate the conversation with them.
- Protect them from frightening images and conversations on TV/ internet.
- Sometimes, it is difficult to help calm the anxiety and fears in the minds of young people, don't hesitate to get the help of licensed mental health professionals in your area if the child is unusually angry, depressed or anxious.
- Use this as an opportunity to teach civic engagement lessons to the children. Encourage them to respectfully communicate their concerns to government representatives by writing letters, or calling them.
- Educate them about the civil rights struggles of other communities.
- Continue to encourage positive ways of engaging in the larger society, like volunteering at the local soup kitchen, interfaith activities etc.
- Look for signs of bullying. According to a recent CAIR survey in California, 55 percent of Muslims students reported being bullied due to their religion. Educate yourself about the anti-bullying resources available to your family through the school system and with CAIR.
- If your children are afraid for their safety, take their fears seriously and ensure their safety. Fearing for one's safety is not a healthy part of a child's development.
- Young children usually do not need too much information. If they ask questions, give them accurate yet brief information. Avoid giving unnecessary details. Reassure them of their safety with the family.
- Elementary school age children may have questions that require more detailed answers. It is important for them to know that they can ask you any question, and that you will answer them honestly. Let them know that. Resist the urge to give out too much information. Make sure that they feel safe. Sometimes hate incidents can happen in venues like the school, or on the bus. Encourage them to let you, or the teacher know if they feel uncomfortable with the behavior of others. In case of a hate incident, quickly enlist the school administration's help. If school administrators are not helpful, then contact CAIR.
- Elementary school age children may find it easier to express their feelings through art, coloring, and age appropriate writing activities. Take the time to engage in those activities with them.
- Teenagers can be unpredictable. They may appear to not value or need you at times, yet your calm supportive presence is very important for them. In addition to providing support to them, be aware of their social media use and friendships.
- A teenager who is despondent about being berated and being called a terrorist by other teens may find himself or herself quite welcome in an online forum that focuses on the grievances of young Muslims in America and glamorizes violent acts. Be aware of their online activities. Cyber-bullying (bullying via the internet) does not end at school. Teenagers are very susceptible to being bullied through social media.
- Try to encourage positive adult influences in the teen's life, but be aware of what messages they are getting from these adults. Make time for dinner table discussions about Islamic doctrine that prohibits terrorism, and the fallacy of the extremists' narrative. Discuss safe online behavior. Beware of unobserved online spaces.

Additional Resources

Know your rights as a Muslim youth at school

<https://ca.cair.com/sfba/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Kids-Know-Your-Rights-Pocket-Guide.pdf>

A brief CAIR guide advising youth on their rights when responding to bullying and when requesting religious accommodation for things such as wearing a hijab at school and being excused to celebrate Eid.

Mislabeled: the impact of bullying and discrimination on California Muslim Students

<https://ca.cair.com/sfba/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CAIR-CA-2015-Bullying-Report-Web.pdf>

This 2015 report finds that 55 percent of Muslim students have been subject to at least one form of religion-based bullying. This is twice as high as the national average of students reporting being bullied at school. The findings are based on a statewide survey of over 600 Muslim students, ages 11 to 18.

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CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

ⁱ Omar Alnatour. "Muslims are not terrorist: A factual look at terrorism and Islam," Huffington Post, December 9, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omar-alnatour/muslims-are-not-terrorist_b_8718000.html.

ⁱⁱ Megan Hickey, Joshua Barajas, and Laura Santhanam. "Here's a map of all the mass shootings in 2015," PBS Newshour, December 2, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/heres-a-map-of-all-the-mass-shootings-in-2015/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Geysar Gurbanov. "Islam is not a religion of Violence," U.S News and World Report, December 11, 2015,

<http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/faith-matters/2015/12/11/the-san-bernardino-shooters-dont-prove-islam-is-a-violent-religion>.

^{iv} Ibid.