NURTURING the SHAKSIYYAH ISLAMIYYAH
in the Young Child

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Many Muslims all over the world consider education to be a key to the revival of the Ummah. It is hoped that education will dispel ignorance and provide us with the tools for progress. Those who look to the western world as a model of progress and development often assume that western-style educational systems are what Muslims need.

Those systems, however, reflect core values of western society such as secularism, individualism to be taught together, since iman (faith) is of little use without ‘amal (action). “In the lifetime of the Noble Prophet® education was dynamic. It was practical and relevant.” In fact those who received this education, the Sahabah (Companions) went on to transform whole societies. Seeking knowledge became a preoccupation of the emerging and expanding Islamic society. Education was understood by the first Muslims, and developed by later generations, as tarbiyah, and its goal as shakhsiyyah Islamiyyah; so let us begin by defining these two terms.

“Tarbiyah...is one of the truly beautiful words in Arabic – deeply rich in meaning. Usually it is translated as education. According to the classical lexicographer al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 402/1011) the word tarbiyah means “to cause something to develop from stage to stage until reaching its completion [full potential].”

This implies that something (the fitrah or intrinsic nature) already exists within the child and that education is a process of unfolding and bringing out more than a process of instilling and pouring in.

Education is therefore not something ‘done to’ students but a continuous developmental: process through which they draw closer to Allah (swt). The outcome of this process is the development of Shakhshiyah Islamiyyah (the Islamic personality).

This article takes an introductory look at some of the methods employed at Islamic Shakhshiyah Foundation to apply these principles to Muslim children living in a western society. However, since life in many parts of the Muslim world bears an unfortunate similarity, the following points may also be of use to parents and teachers there too.

1. Understanding the ‘Shakhshiyah Islamiyyah’
Firstly teachers and parents all need to have a clear understanding of our objective, the Shakhshiyah Islamiyyah. Imam al-Ghazali described it beautifully:

“The godly man is wise, courageous and temperate in the noblest sense of the words, and in the highest degree. He engages in worship, prayers, fasting,
‘the word tarbiyah means “to cause something to develop from stage to stage until reaching its completion [full potential]”

Clearly this is no easy task. Every aspect of life has to be lived in complete submission to Allah (swt). Scholars have distinguished two aspects of character: ‘nafsiyyah and ‘naffiyyah. The former concerns the seeking of knowledge and the development of our intellect (‘aql), in harmony with the fiqah. The latter deals with the inner self, which impacts on our relationships both with Allah (swt) and with ourselves.

Furthermore, since this personality exists not in a void but in a world created specifically to test it, children need to understand the wider world and the society they live in. While avoiding exposing them to the negative aspects too soon, the acceptable facets of western life should be pointed out so that a proper balance is established. So for example, understanding the role of the local fire or ambulance service in the community is a very positive learning experience for young Muslim children.

Most importantly, if we understand the importance of context in developing the shakhsiyah, there is no sharp distinction between sacred knowledge and worldly knowledge. All knowledge should lead to action for the sake of Allah. Islamic concepts must be discussed in the context of life with real-life examples that children can relate to. We find that children themselves are able to provide them, as children as young as three can give excellent examples of how to show kindness or have sabr.

An awareness of the self can also be developed in a similar way with children. This can be done through a basic approach to what will insha’Allah become a lifelong endeavor to regulate the nafsiyyah. Human beings have complex emotions, but Islam teaches that emotions, feelings, likes and dislikes should ideally be in submission to Allah (swt). As Imam al-Ghazali said the principal emotions should be love and fear of the Divine. “And the motive force behind a perfect life is nothing other than the love and fear of God.”

Indeed it is this motive force, as it matures in the young child with every passing year that leads to a profound sense of accountability and in turn a high level of behaviour in society. Still, it is vital to remember that children are not accountable for their actions and will make mistakes, and so educators must not expect perfection. Tarbiyah is a continuous and intensive task until the child reaches adulthood. It must never be forgotten by either murabbi — parent or teacher — that they cannot nurture children’s shakhsiyah without nurturing their own. Muslims must teach by example.

2. A parent-school partnership within a strong community

According to an Arab saying, it is not just parents who bring up a child but the whole community. There is much wisdom in this, and the Muslim community in Britain needs to understand this if it is to prosper. Parents and schools must work closely together, and this happens best when parents take the main responsibility for the tarbiyah of their children. The role of the school and wider community is secondary but nonetheless important. ‘Amr ibn Sa‘id, or Sa‘id ibn al-‘As narrated that Allah’s Messenger⁴ said, “A father can give his child nothing better than a good education.” In these busy times it is difficult to give daily and continuous attention to our children’s personality as well as their other needs, but this is the primary role of the parents and needs to be approached with care, effort and discipline, as well as an understanding of the Islamic principles pertaining to children. Communication between parents and teachers must be thorough and consistent, each party respecting the other’s role.

Education is therefore not something ‘done to’ students but a continuous developmental process through which they draw closer to Allah (swt). The outcome of this process is the development of Shakhsiyyah Islamiyyah (the Islamic personality).
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3. A holistic integrated curriculum
The decline of the Islam in the Muslim world and ever-increasing westernization has led to Islamic education being restricted largely to mosques and madrassas, and being by and large isolated from the mainstream of society. This is seen in schools as well, where Islam is taught separately from other subjects. Sometimes it is taught by rote and through an academic approach that does not encourage children to ‘live’ Islam. The challenge for our time is not just to integrate the teaching of Islam into other subjects but to integrate the curriculum more generally.

4. The oral tradition and thinking skills
The backbone of the curriculum at Islamic Shakhshiyyah Foundation is the Halaqah (Circle Time). Islam is taught by traditional oral methods. The ‘lesson’ consists of the teacher sitting on the floor in a circle with the children, introducing an Islamic topic which the children then discuss. This was one of the teaching methods of the Messenger of Allah® instituted in the early years in Dar al-Arqam. The impact of this simple approach is exceptional. It immediately brings focus to the individual child and what is going on in his other mind and heart. The child engages with Islam on a personal and group level, building strong relationships in the class. Children also develop reasoning and reflective skills as well as oral skills and self-confidence. All these are beneficial to the development of shakhshiyyah Islamiyyah.

5. Developing a sense of purpose
One of the beauties of Islam is the sense of purpose that results from a strong relationship with Allah (swt). This is especially evident in young children when they use this sense of purpose in learning and applying. A four year old contemplating the wonders of Allah’s creation in a project on animals in the rainforest gains immensely from the idea that all these animals have a purpose in the ecosystem and can begin to reflect on his own place in the community. It is important that this sense of purpose be maintained through the ups and downs of childhood and into maturity.

6. The role of the teacher
The concept of a teacher in Islam has been widely discussed by scholars. For the purpose of this article, the importance of the teacher and his/her qualities as first a Muslim and second a teacher is fundamental to any discussion about the tarbiyah of young children. To some young children the teacher is the ultimate role model and fine details of behaviour will be imitated. The child should have a strong and trusting relationship with the teacher and feel free to make mistakes, ask questions, confide in the teacher, and seek advice. The teacher must introduce, encourage and inspire. The example of the Messenger of Allah® is of course the most excellent example and the best source of inspiration for the Muslim teacher.

In conclusion, nurturing the next generation to achieve shakhshiyyah Islamiyyah is a duty for us all. This requires the community as a whole, and educationalists especially, to question, reflect and challenge perceived norms in education. This will lead us to integrate Islamic knowledge and values into our educational organizations and develop teachers, curricula and resources to meet the needs of Muslim children today. Education in itself is not the solution, but tarbiyah leading to shakhshiyyah Islamiyyah definitely for both children and adults is a part of the process of the revival of Islam.