

Guest editorial

Safeguarding children in madrassahs: a way forward

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There is no place in Islam for child abuse. It is pure village culture mentality.

(Kerbaj, 2008)

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* clearly states that all children have the right to protection from violence, exploitation, trafficking and other forms of physical, verbal and emotional abuse (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 1989). Although some progress has been made in encouraging governments to uphold and fulfil these rights, the ill treatment of children continues to occur, at all levels and in all societies across the world: 'These violations are under-recognised and under-reported barriers to child rights, and undermine survival, development and participation. Both the physical and psychological effects of child protection abuses can be marked, leading to lifelong consequences and profound difficulties' (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2009a, p. 21, 2009b).

The reasons for abuse include poverty and ignorance, but ultimately adults ill treat children because they can, and because frequently they can get away with it (Black, 2009). Any situation in which an adult has power, control and authority over children is one in which abuse may occur. This is not to say that every adult is an abuser, but that certain situations offer opportunities to perpetrators of abuse. Those who are concerned about the protection of children have to be aware of this and take appropriate preventative action. One well-documented situation is the classroom, because it offers perpetrators access to children while free from the gaze of other adults who might query or challenge inappropriate behaviour.

In the UK and many other countries, there are now well-established safeguarding systems in place in schools both to protect pupils from abuse and to protect

staff from unwarranted allegations (see, for example, Department for Education and Skills, 2006, as well as the UK Children Act 2004 and the UK Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006). These systems have been extended and enforced in many supplementary schools and some faith organisations, such as Sunday Schools (Church of England, 2010). However, this does not include madrassahs, institutions in which traditional methods of physical punishment may still be used, so an adult can still rely on the defence of reasonable punishment if charged. However, if a mark, such as a graze, scratch or a bruise, results from a punishment, a charge of actual bodily harm can result, and the use of an implement may lead to an even more serious charge of grievous bodily harm. Sir Roger Singleton, the government's Chief Adviser on the Safety of Children in the UK, is currently seeking a complete ban on any form of punishment in supplementary schools and all faith schools, including madrassahs (Singleton, 2010). If successful, this change in the law will bring its application in these establishments in line with that applied in mainstream schools.

There are over 1600 madrassahs in the UK, usually located in mosques, and with over 200 000 children attending from the age of 4 years up to their mid teens (Kerbaj, 2008). In these settings, Muslim children are taught to commence any recitation from the Holy Qur'an with the words: 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind', yet the paradox is that some of these same children will, when receiving training in the correct pronunciation of the divine text in madrassahs, be subject to quite the opposite of kindness, namely emotional, physical and, in exceptional cases, even sexual abuse (Kerbaj, 2008). Such treatment clearly goes against both the spirit and the letter

of Islamic ethics (Gatrad and Sheikh, 2001) and UK law (Children Act 2004), and must be eradicated.

The spate of reports in the national media detailing episodes of child abuse in madrassahs in the UK makes uncomfortable reading (Herbert, 2002; Britten, 2004; Adams, 2008), but has nonetheless been useful in bringing to public attention something that has been swept under the proverbial carpet for far too long. One report from Rochdale suggested that victims had grown up to accept abuse such as slapping, punching and ear twisting, and that social workers were faced by parents who refused to take action against abusers (Kerbaj, 2008). In nearby Bolton, there was also a failure to carry out Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks (Greaves, 2010).

We are not suggesting that there is widespread maltreatment of children in madrassahs, or that this is a 'Muslim problem.' Child abuse cases have been reported in establishments run by other faiths, including for example the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, the USA and (more recently) Germany (McCluskey, 2000; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Butt and Connolly, 2010). In the UK, the Roman Catholic Church has put in place a well-organised system for child protection, as has the Church of England (e.g. the Diocese of Westminster, www.rcdow.org.uk/child_protection; see also Church of England, 2010). Members of other faiths are also grappling with this issue.

However, to return to the Muslim context, the reality is that a number of children are routinely subjected to some form of punishment in madrassahs, and that in some instances this goes beyond what is nowadays deemed acceptable. This may to some extent be a generational phenomenon, typically involving Imams imported from back home, who are often ill equipped to teach in a modern Western setting. Many of the teachers in madrassahs are themselves poorly educated, receive inadequate training, and lack opportunities for professional development. Furthermore, they have to contend with very large classes, and those working in the UK may not be proficient in English. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that many resort to threats of violence or, in some cases, exemplary punishment. The authors have witnessed, albeit outside the UK, the brutal punishment practised in some madrassahs, including the humiliating 'hen position', a practice in which a victim is forced to hold his ears while squatting with his arms fed through his legs. However, none of this can excuse the fact that punishment of this kind is wrong. For example, the Prophet Muhammad, who is the role model for Muslims par excellence, taught that 'He is not one of us who shows no mercy to younger ones and does not acknowledge the honour due to our elders' (www.knowtheprophet.com/morals.htm).

Maintaining the status quo with regard to the safety of children in madrassahs is not an option. The situation needs to change. No form of child abuse, whether psychological, physical or sexual, should be tolerated, and if it is suspected, mandatory investigations should be initiated with the prospect of appropriate penalties against the individuals and organisations responsible. Such a move should be led from within the Muslim community itself, and in this regard it is encouraging to see that debate has begun and progress is being made. This debate centres around the need for Imams to be properly trained, able to communicate in English (as is now required before they come to the UK), and able to demonstrate their understanding of the host culture (Noon, 2004). Examples of welcome initiatives include the lobbying and guidance from, among others, the Islamic Foundation and the Muslim Council of Britain (Tawfik, 2007).

There is now a training school for Imams in Cambridge, to help to integrate Islam into British society (www.allah.eu/about-islam/cambridge-imam-training-program.html). Also welcome is the creation of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), (www.minab.org.uk), an elected body to which over 600 mosques and organisations are affiliated. Particularly important in this regard is the setting, for the first time, of a series of national standards of practice for Muslim organisations (www.minab.org.uk/essential-documents/standards) which include, among other things, the need to ensure that good governance structures are in place, that services are delivered by suitably trained people, and that young people and their needs are woven into the very fabric of the organisation. More broadly, however, there is also a drive in many parts of the UK to employ and train Imams who are British born and bred, and who are thus able to connect meaningfully with their students.

If these Imams are appropriately remunerated and have opportunities for professional development, these initiatives should reap long-term dividends on several fronts, including the emergence of a new cohort of British Muslims who are far more comfortable with both their national and religious identities than were previous generations. A further positive consequence of this development might be the breaking of the link between faith and vengeance that may subliminally be implanted in the minds of vulnerable young people as a result of abuse.

The British Muslim community is still quite young and poorly resourced. It also has an unprecedented range of challenges to deal with, often under the glare of the media spotlight. The best chance of promoting the developments that many in the Muslim community now recognise as important will therefore

come through initiatives that have the support of others in mainstream society, be they schools, the local authority or those in the voluntary sector. One particularly welcome development that has taken place in Walsall is that the Safeguarding Children Board has followed the recent example of Kirklees Council (Kirklees Council, 2007) and produced comprehensive guidance on the safety of children in madrassahs.

Walsall's Good Practice Guide clarifies the responsibilities of mosques, madrassah management committees, the Union of Muslim Organisations and the Safeguarding Children Board itself. According to the guide all madrassahs should:

- have a written Child Protection Policy Statement
- identify a designated child protection member, who is trained and supported and have a Code of Conduct for all staff (See appendix 2)
- hold parents' evenings
- Talk to young people and encourage their involvement and participation
- Have an Attendance Register for every teacher
- Arrange regular staff meetings to discuss issues of concerns and update everyone on new developments
- Encourage Management Committee members to visit Madrassah classes unannounced
- Make sure everyone involved in the Mosque and Madrassah actively promotes a culture of openness, where everyone (including children) feels free to share their views and concerns

(from Walsall Safeguarding Children Board, 2007 p.12).

In addition, Mosques and Madrassah Management Committees should:

- appoint a lead person with responsibility for safeguarding children for each Madrassah
- adopt the safeguarding policies and procedures outlined in the attached guidance
- provide training for all Imams/Ustads and volunteers on child protection and abuse
- adopt the recruitment policy and procedures outlined in the guidance
- develop communication strategies to meet the needs of all children.

(Walsall Safeguarding Children Board, 2007 p.7).

What this means in practice is that those responsible for the provision of education in madrassahs must develop a clear understanding of their legal obligations with regard to child safety, including CRB checks.

(Coleman, 2009).

These data reveal that those mosques which are registered charities tend to have a CRB policy in place because this is a legal requirement, under charity law, if the income of the mosque is above £5000. However, many mosques are not aware of this requirement

(www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/about_us/fscumosque.pdf), and the Commission's Faith and Social Cohesion Unit is therefore encouraging mosques to fulfil this legal obligation.

We believe that, if implemented nationally, the principles expounded in *Safeguarding Children in Madrassahs: a good practice guide* (Walsall Safeguarding Children's Board, 2009; Rao and Hurry, 2011), including Imam training and the implementation of CRB checks for all staff, can go a long way towards ensuring the protection of children in madrassahs. Until such time as the ritual humiliation of children in madrassahs is confined to the dustbin of history, as is now the case with corporal punishment in mainstream schools, paediatricians dealing with Muslim children need to be aware of the possibility that non-accidental injury may have been inflicted by a religious teacher, who is him- or herself in need of very basic religious training.

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