

Childhood as a Formative and Integral Stage in Faith According to Islamic Psychology

Childhood is a sacred and foundational stage in Islamic psychology, one that shapes the moral, spiritual, cognitive, and emotional development of an individual. Within the Islamic worldview, human development is viewed as holistic, integrating both physical and metaphysical dimensions and addressing the material, psychological, and spiritual needs of the child. The child encounters the world for the first time, and begins to form emotional and psychological structures that shape their personality, sense of boundaries and limits, self-concept, and understanding of relationships with others. The early years of a person's life are understood not only as a time for growth and learning but also as spiritually significant, where the soul begins to form its relationship with Allah, the self, and others. This understanding is reflected in the Qur'ān through the wisdom of Luqman the Wise, who addresses his son with advice: *"And remember when Luqman said to his son while he was instructing him, 'O my son, do not associate anything with Allah. Association [with Him] is great injustice."* This highlights the responsibility of the parents to address the spiritual and ethical needs of their children, such as the foundational teaching of *Tawhid*, the existential basis of all creation.

Islamic psychology, also referred to as *'Ilm al-Nafs* (literally translated as science of the soul), focuses on understanding the soul (*nafs*), intellect (*'aql*), and spiritual heart (*qalb*), and how these interact in the process of human development. Childhood is especially emphasized as it represents the stage where the soul is most impressionable and formative in terms of ethical, spiritual, and psychological development. As Imam Ali ('a) says to his son Imam Hasan ('a), "The heart of a young person is like an empty, fertile land — whatever is planted into it, it accepts." The Qur'ān affirms this as *"Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing, and*

He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks.” This verse highlights the God-given faculties of perception and reflection, granted at birth but developed through nurturing and engagement with the external world. Although the verse suggests we have no knowledge at birth, Islam clarifies that we have a set of proclivities, inclinations, and moral sensibilities that draw us towards beauty, truth, morality, and God. *“So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth; the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created people. No change is there in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.”* This tells us that a child’s innate inclination will be towards the truth of the One, the Everlasting. However, the child’s attitudes and desires can be shaped by their environment, and the inclinations of the *fitrah* can be ignored if a child’s desires run rampant in an unhealthy environment or corrupt society. Therefore a child’s *fitrah* requires a nurturing spiritual and ethical environment that allows the child to focus on their natural spiritual longings, where they can recognize Allah and His signs, receive the divine teachings of Islam, and integrate its moral fabric into their lives. This is crucial. It also implies that prevailing social and cultural conceptions of right and wrong that deviate from Islamic teachings play a part in the moral and ethical deviations we witness in the world today.

The concept of *fitrah* is a cornerstone of Islamic psychology. It asserts that children are innately pure, curious, and spiritually inclined toward recognizing and integrating *Tawhid* into both their individual and communal lives. The responsibility of nurturing and responding to this disposition falls primarily on caregivers and society at large. Children are not born with sin or corruption, but rather with the potential to recognize truth and goodness. When properly nurtured, the *fitrah* enables them to develop into upright, God-conscious individuals. Conversely, deviation from this natural path often results from poor parenting, neglect, or harmful societal influences, or a failure to constructively engage children who follow their desires to the wrong end. Thus, Islamic psychology emphasizes the early years as a critical period for instilling virtues such as compassion, honesty, patience, justice, and faith as non-negotiable principles for a *fitrah*-aligned lifestyle. Psychologically, the formative years are

crucial in laying the foundation for a believer to enhance their *fitrah* through education, knowledge, community, and spiritual practice. Importantly, this vision is not just an individual, family-based conception of an Islamically integrated childhood, it also encompasses a sense of communal connection and a commitment to social justice. Imam Ali (‘a) writes to his son Imam Hasan (‘a):

I hastened to train you before your heart became hardened and your mind preoccupied, so that you may, through the seriousness of your judgment, receive from affairs that which those with experience have already striven for and tested. In this way, you are spared the burden of seeking, and relieved from the trouble of experimentation. Thus, what came to us through toil comes to you readily, and what was obscure to us becomes clear to you.

The Qur’ān provides directives regarding parental responsibility, and the importance of early moral and spiritual education. In *Surah At-Tahrim*, the believers are commanded “*O you who believe! Ward off yourselves and your families against a Fire (Hell) whose fuel is men and stones...*”. This verse serves as a powerful reminder of the spiritual responsibility entrusted to parents. Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (‘a) operationalized this teaching by offering developmental guidance: “*When a child reaches seven years of age, they should be commanded to pray.*” The instructional nature of this hadith reflects an understanding of childhood development stages, recognizing the child gradually becomes capable of comprehending spiritual responsibilities. Imam al-Şādiq has also said, “*Let your child play for seven years, then teach them discipline for seven years, and then keep them close to yourself for seven years.*” This gradual approach aligns with developmental psychology, which recognizes that moral reasoning and self-regulation evolve with age.

Love and mercy are foundational principles in Islamic child-rearing. The Prophet Muhammad (‘a) exemplified profound compassion toward children. He was often seen playing with them, carrying them on his shoulders, and showing affection in ways that were revolutionary in a patriarchal society. In particular, he paid special attention to his grandsons Imams al-Hasan (‘a) and al-Husayn

(‘a) and regularly reaffirmed their dignity and honor. This was a counter-cultural practice amongst the Arabs of his time who were ennobled with the message of Islam. He said, *“He is not of us who does not show mercy to our young ones and respect to our elders.”* His emotional attunement extended even to moments of worship. On one occasion, he shortened a congregational prayer upon hearing a child crying. This incident is not only a testimony to his empathy, but also a profound example of how Islamic teachings integrate spiritual duties with emotional intelligence and parental sensitivity.

Modeling ethical behavior is a fundamental pedagogical approach in Islamic psychology. The Qur’ān states, *“Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow...”* The Prophet Muhammad (‘a) and the Imams of the Ahlul-Bayt (‘a) embodied moral virtues both in their public and private lives. Their character served as a living example of ethical and spiritual excellence. Children, especially in their early years, are highly impressionable and learn primarily through observation and the imitation of the behavior of their parents and elders. Imam al-Ṣādiq recounts how his own father, Imam al-Baqir, modeled expressing his fears and concerns to Allah: *“Whenever my father was aggrieved by a situation, he would gather the women-folk and children, and would call out to Allah in front. They would say, ‘Amen.’”* Here, we see the father modeling a healthy expression of emotions. Further, the conduct of parents and caregivers has a direct and lasting impact on the child’s character. Islamic teachings advocate consistency, kindness, and patience in adult behavior to help children internalize positive values. Inconsistency, hypocrisy, or harshness can lead to confusion, resentment, and moral dissonance in children. *“Be fair with your children, just as you love that they be fair with you, with kindness and respect.”*

Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, and Ibn Sina made significant contributions to the understanding of childhood development. Al-Ghazali viewed the child’s soul as a clean slate, ready to receive impressions, and emphasized the importance of early training in *adab* (manners) and belief. Ibn Sina classified development into stages: infancy, childhood, later childhood, and youth, each with corresponding educational and emotional needs. These categorizations are strikingly similar to modern developmental theories, yet

they are uniquely distinguished by their integration of spiritual dimensions. The Islamic tradition regards the child not just as a future adult but as a spiritual being in-the-now, with dignity and rights.

Emotional regulation and character formation are central to the Islamic vision of a healthy personality. Children are taught to manage emotions such as anger and jealousy while cultivating virtues like patience and humility. The Prophet Muhammad (‘a) said, *“The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger.”* In this context, strength is understood not only as physical power, but psychological maturity, marked by awareness of boundaries, appropriate use of anger, defensive mechanisms, and rejection of ethically unethical behavior. Islamic educational practices encourage reflection, repentance, and forgiveness, guiding children to take moral responsibility for their actions. The ultimate goal is not merely behavioral conformity but moral autonomy grounded in *taqwa* (God-consciousness).

Play and creativity are also recognized as essential components of childhood in Islam. Contrary to the misconception that Islam discourages play, prophetic traditions show that play was encouraged as a means of joy, learning, and socialization. The Prophet Muhammad (s) allowed his grandchildren al-Hasan (‘a) and al-Husayn (‘a) to play on his back during prayer and was often seen smiling and joking with children, even encouraging playful wrestling. The Messenger of Allah would crawl on all fours for al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, and he would say: “What an excellent camel is your camel, and what excellent riders you are!” Such behaviors foster emotional security, creativity, and social competence. Modern psychological research aligns with this, emphasizing that play is crucial for brain development and emotional resilience.

Education in Islam encompasses more than only religious instruction, it includes emotional, ethical, and social learning as well. From an early age, children are taught *tawhid* (oneness of God), basic acts of worship, and social etiquette. The goal of education is to nurture the intellect (‘*aql*), purify the soul (*tazkiyah*), and strengthen the heart (*qalb*). Instruction is tailored to the child’s level of

comprehension, with emphasis on love, repetition aimed at integration, and modeling- rather than coercion or fear. In today's digital age, a child's digital presence, experience, and interactions have become deeply tied to their existential identity.. It is essential for parents to guide children in setting boundaries, interacting safely online, recognizing digital opportunities for growth, and avoiding harmful and non-Islamic content. Parents who feel overwhelmed by the demands of digital literacy are encouraged to seek guidance from experts while reinforcing Islamic teachings and principles to promote appropriate behavior in the online environment.

Islamic tradition took revolutionary steps to affirm the value and dignity of female children. In a society where burying daughters alive was once considered acceptable, Islam honored their existence and introduced spiritual incentives for their care. The Prophet ('a) said, *"Whoever has three daughters, and he is patient with them, feeds them, gives them drink, and clothes them from his wealth - they will be a shield for him from the Hellfire."* This radical shift not only safeguarded the lives of girls but emphasized the psychological and spiritual reward in nurturing them with dignity. Islam unequivocally condemns all forms of child abuse and rejects physical violence or emotional abuse as legitimate forms of discipline. Modern psychology aligns with this view, showing that children who experience violence or abuse often suffer long-term symptoms of trauma that persist into adulthood. These effects demand appropriate clinical interventions aimed at healing and dismantling the impact of early childhood trauma.

The community also plays a vital role in child development. Islam promotes a model of collective responsibility, where the broader society contributes to the moral and spiritual upbringing of children. This communal approach ensures that children are surrounded by positive role models and consistent values across various settings, including the home, mosque, and neighborhood. *"The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those—Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise."* This verse emphasizes the collective nature

of religious and spiritual expression and its importance in creating networks that children can model and benefit from while forming their identity, particularly in non-Muslim societies.

In cases where children experience trauma or adversity, Islamic psychology offers both spiritual and therapeutic resources for healing. Practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *tawakkul* (trust in God), and *dua* (spontaneous prayer) are complemented by compassionate listening, emotional validation, and community support. Islamic counseling methods emphasize building self-worth, reconnecting with one's *fitrah*, and processing emotions within a spiritually affirming framework. When integrated with modern clinical theories and therapeutic interventions, Islamic psychology emphasizes holistic well-being, one which does not ignore the spiritual, ethical, and communal needs of children. This integrated approach prepares them to become responsible adults, fulfilling the innate purpose embedded in their *fitrah*.

Islamic psychology regards childhood as the most formative and spiritually significant stage of life. The Qur'ān and Sunnah offer a deeply compassionate and psychologically sound framework for nurturing the child's physical, emotional, and spiritual development. The emphasis on *fitrah*, parental responsibility, mercy, modeling, education, and community support reflects a holistic vision of human flourishing. When these principles are implemented with sincerity and knowledge, they foster the growth of individuals who are not only balanced and ethical but also deeply connected to their Creator. The Islamic model of child development stands as a timeless guide for Muslim families and educators committed to cultivating a generation rooted in faith, compassion, and resilience.