

Khan, H. (2019a, April 9). Perspective | Parents, we need to teach our children about the dangers of hate-laced speech against Muslims. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/04/09/teaching-my-son-all-parents-stand-up-against-muslim-hatred/>

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ON PARENTING

Parents, we need to teach our children about the dangers of hate-laced speech against Muslims

Perspective by Hena Khan
April 9, 2019 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

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When I was in elementary school, a boy called me “Indira Gandhi.” It was intended as an insult, but I was more surprised than offended. Gandhi was the former female Prime Minister of India, which wasn’t too shabby.

But then the boy went on to call the only other South Asian kid in our class, “Rajiv Gandhi,” the Prime Minister at the time who was also Indira’s *son*. And then, I was offended. Because, to fifth-grade me, linking us as mother and son was just gross.

Gandhi was the worst of the name-calling I experienced as a child growing up in Potomac, Md., in the 1980s, and yet, as relatively harmless as it was, I still remember it. At the time, my peers obviously knew I was brown, and most knew I had Pakistani heritage, but they didn’t know that I was Muslim. Or if they did, they didn’t understand what that meant.

[*\[My daughter's imaginary colonial town has a mosque. It led to an interesting discussion.\]*](#)

Muslim kids growing up in today’s America face an entirely different landscape. Almost half of American Muslim kids experience bullying or discrimination in school, according to nationally representative data published in 2017 by the

[Institute of Social Policy and Understanding](#). And, as analysts point out, if this is what is being reported, in all likelihood the numbers are higher.

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I regularly hear alarming stories of Muslim girls getting their hijabs yanked off. Muslim kids are being singled out and harassed for their faith by fellow students and sometimes even teachers and administrators. In one case that made national news last year, an elementary-aged child received sloppily handwritten death [threats](#) in her cubby, of all places.

There is a very [disturbing trend in schools](#) that is not getting enough attention, perhaps because it is not quantified: hate-laced speech against Muslims that is being normalized and accepted by children.

This includes my own children, and it breaks my heart.

As a mother who remembers what it was like to grow up as a minority and to feel different, I often ask my children about how they are treated by their peers. Over the years I posed questions they found annoying at times, like “Do you wish you had a different name?” or, “Has anyone said anything mean to you?” My concerns were always dismissed, and I felt grateful to live in an area where diversity is celebrated and international nights are a big deal at schools.

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Then, a couple of summers ago, I was invited to lead a writing workshop at a summer camp for Muslim kids in nearby Bethesda. At one point, we discussed microaggressions, and whether the kids had experienced them. A tween in a

hijab, born and raised in America, said she often has people compliment her English. Another said she was tired of people asking her where she was from. And then a boy said, “All of us hear things like ‘terrorist,’ ‘ISIS,’ and ‘Allahu akbar . . . boom,’ all the time.” The rest of the kids nodded in agreement while I was stunned into silence.

I came home and asked my sons, now in middle and high school, about what I had heard. I said, “These kids live in our county, and they experienced this in school.” And my kids, like the others, nodded their heads and said, “Oh, yeah.” They apparently heard the same types of things all the time, too. When I asked why they hadn’t told me, it was because no one was saying these things directly “to” them. They were just witnessing these things being said in reference to their faith and Muslim people in general. And, sadly, they had decided that there was nothing they could do about it.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, my middle-schooler came home and for a change shared the painful reality of “jokes” people made at his expense. He told me that “Bin Laden” had been added to his name, that he was asked if he was going to blow things up, and more. Some of the comments were made by people he considered friends, and he didn’t know how to react or respond. To be honest, neither did I at first. But as we talked through it, I told him that he had to take a stand and tell people that it is not okay to make these kinds of comments because they are rooted in hate and anti-Muslim sentiment. And they are as unacceptable as anti-black, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQ or speech against any other group.

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I suggested talking to his close friends in confidence. These are good kids of all backgrounds who, like many others, probably don’t realize the implications and the hurtfulness of such comments. I told him to explain that it is offensive, and to ask them to back him up the next time someone else says something. It could be as simple as saying, “Hey, that’s not okay. You can’t say stuff like that.”

My son understood this in theory, but he still hadn’t brought it up to his friends when I asked later. I get it. When you already feel different, and are associated with a group that is being vilified, it’s hard not to want to hide or just blend in,

especially if you aren't oozing extra self-confidence.

But the truth is my son shouldn't have to face this alone. He shouldn't have to report his friends to the administration or have these difficult conversations with others. He shouldn't have to, as I tried to convince him, be the one to make it easier for his younger cousins and Muslim friends who are coming up in school behind him.

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I hope my son does find the courage to stand up for himself. But we, the adults, need to step in and [do our jobs as parents](#), neighbors and educators, and very clearly and loudly declare that it is not okay to say anti-Muslim things. To stem the tide, this needs to be stated explicitly, not lumped generally into other "say no to hate" policies. Just like offensive words targeting other marginalized communities have been called out specifically, sometimes through national media campaigns, we need to do the same in these instances to start changing the culture. It is not okay to call Muslim kids terrorists or ISIS or Taliban. It is not okay to use the phrase Allahu akbar disparagingly. And so on.

Anti-Muslim speech and attitudes are dangerous. They are the seeds of hate that can grow, fester and turn violent, not only on the playground, but as we saw in New Zealand recently, in unthinkable ways.

We owe it to all of our kids to take a stand and take the time to talk to our children, students, friends and colleagues about this issue. Each of us must do our part to actively reject hateful words and phrases in every form, at every age, starting now.

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Hena Khan is the author of several children's books featuring Muslim characters, including "[Amina's Voice](#)," "[Power Forward](#)" and "[Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns](#)," and a lifelong resident of Montgomery County.

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