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# Teaching Muslim Children about the Harms of Bullying

Umm Ahmed : 13-17 minutes

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Bullying - the intentional act of harming another person or what may be attributed in the Arabic language as *Zulm* - is becoming a growing concern for children as well as adults, in different segments of the society, the world over. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, one-third of global youth are subjected to bullying. And, this ranges from as low as 7% in Tajikistan to as high as 74% in Samoa. Moreover, bullying has more commonly been observed to impact youth belonging to low socioeconomic status in wealthy countries, and in comparison to those who are locally born, immigrants are more prone to be bullied.

With the ever-growing fear of Islamophobia in the West, it comes as no surprise that many Muslim children are being bullied. Faith-based bullying takes place in public schools, non-Islamic private schools, charter schools, and even at the neighborhood playground. According to a recent survey conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, Muslim students in California (aged between 11-18 years) were being bullied at more than twice the reported national average of 20%. This alarming figure is a major cause of concern for Muslim parents.

Bullying can take varied forms - physical, verbal and emotional - and tends to happen in schools, outdoor spaces such as playgrounds or in the streets, it has increasingly taken a route through online platforms in the form of cyberbullying. The latter usually involves sending or sharing harmful or humiliating content about someone to embarrass them. The content may be shared anonymously, which makes cyberbullying even more threatening for the victim. It often happens over social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok), text messages, emails, or online gaming forums. Thanks to Covid19, the percentage of cyberbullying spiked up significantly as children and adults spent more time on gadgets and devices, whilst being homebound. According to research, 21% of children aged 10-18 had been subjected to cyberbullying as of July 2020. And, as the CAIR survey indicates, high levels of online Islamophobic bullying, harassment, and discrimination (by both peers and adults) continue to be experienced; 29.72% of respondents in a recent survey reported that a student at the school made offensive comments or posts about Islam or Muslims directly to them on social media.

## Is my child being bullied?

Given the global upsurge in statistics on bullying, it is important that parents stay on the lookout to identify any signs of their child being bullied. Although there may not be physical signs such as bruises, it might be helpful to pay attention to the following red flags:

- Your child appears to be disinterested in his usual activities and seems to exhibit a withdrawn attitude.
- Your child complains of frequent tummy aches and appears to be stressed or nervous.
- Your child acts differently and tends to get upset easily.
- Your child avoids certain situations (for example; hanging out with specific friends, or going to school).

In such instances, it might be beneficial to open a discussion about social situations whereby you may ask your child if they are aware of any hurtful behaviors that happen around school or the neighborhood. As children grow through their teenage years, it becomes even more challenging to dig deeper into the facts. The best way to go about it then might be to ask them generally if they're getting on well with friends and peers. Body language can give away some cues, too.

Identifying the signs and symptoms of bullying sometimes can be difficult. This could be because children tend to internalize such experiences based on their own feelings, hiding the details even from their parents. If we think of it from the child's perspective, their reasoning could be based on:

- A lack of understanding demonstrated by parents. Parents can be insensitive to the views of their child and so they tend to hush them up by saying they're being too sensitive.
- Fear of being pulled out of school by the parents in reaction to the news
- Fear of losing out on friends and being mocked at
- Even blaming themselves for the harassment ("If I was only smarter or thinner or prettier, etc.)

The extent to which a victim is bullied can vary, but the earlier it is identified the better. The matter must be taken seriously because bullying can take a toll on the victim's health and well-being in a variety of ways including;

- It can leave the person feeling more vulnerable and susceptible to being bullied.
- The individual experiences feeling worthless and that shatters their self-confidence, impacting their personality and outlook on life.
- In severe cases, bullying can lead to suicidal thoughts and ultimately the act of committing suicide.

## How to Stand Up Against Bullying

Part of growing up and helping your children become independent means that you provide them with the tools (or rather skills) to cope in challenging situations. Bullying is definitely one such situation, where we need to equip our children to use the right strategies in order to tackle the problem. More so, because you may not necessarily be around them when they are being bullied.

Here are some ways we can help our children grow into confident individuals and rightfully take on the bully or address the situation at hand.

### 1. Nurture good parent-child communication.

Above and beyond everything else, comes our relationship with our children. Even before one can begin to confront their child about being bullied, we need to make sure that we maintain a healthy parent-child bond with them, starting from their early years. This means that our children should feel comfortable in approaching us. And we should make it a point that we confide in them, listen to them attentively, keep our own emotions in check, and not overreact in troubling situations. By staying calm and being patient, we offer the child the much-needed reassurance and support that they need in such instances and they feel more confident in sharing things with us.

### 2. Develop an appropriate response.

Before we jump in to help our child work up a plan or develop a response to the act of bullying, it is vital to reassure the child that any type of bullying behavior is not appropriate and certainly not welcome. Every child has the right to feel safe and be in an environment which guarantees safety and establishing that environment will necessarily involve the adults in their lives.

That said, it might be helpful to mention then that a bully could be triggered by an aggressive reaction or response. All bullies enjoy being in control and ownership over a situation and others, and when they may lose that control, they may behave even more harshly. Also, showing signs of weakness by crying or looking scared or upset when faced by a bully can be rewarding for the bully and make them feel more in control. Teaching our children to practice self-control through breathing exercises is a good way to help them learn to keep calm, in the moment. Also, by acting brave, ignoring the bullying and walking away one can avoid escalation or complication of matters.

Establishing a buddy system where friends can support you can be a great blessing. Usually, a bully would avoid the victim if they are not alone. Therefore, encouraging your child to avoid isolated places and stay close to friends in places where bullying is most likely to happen, can help them feel more secure and less anxious, especially while the situation is being remedied.

### **3. Encourage talking to an adult.**

It is important that your child feels safe wherever they are; be it at home (if they are being bullied by a sibling) or at school. We also need to encourage our children to speak up against injustice and harmful behaviors whether they are done in public or private, by another child or an adult.

Talking to a trusted adult, such as a teacher or school counselor, can help address issues when the bullying takes place at school. Sometimes, students are subject to bullying from teachers as well. In such instances, it is important to teach our children not to hesitate but rather communicate the issue to the school counselor either directly or through parents. When the parent-child-educator partnership is strong, the child automatically feels secure and less anxious when confronted with such situations.

### **4. Ensure that the situation is fully remedied.**

Trust your child when they report an incident which is causing them distress. You can pitch in your voice and send in recommendations to the school in order for the situation to be fully remedied and chances of further occurrences to be reduced.

Liasing with the school counselor can be beneficial as that can help both, the child who is bullied as well as the bully himself. When children receive immediate emotional support in the form of counseling, it helps to stop the vicious cycle of bullying, as the behavior is brought into focus and subsequently rectified through adopting behavior management strategies. We have learned over time that bullies are often bullied themselves. They also deserve our supportive action toward change.

Bringing bullying instances into the limelight can help create a general awareness among different groups. They can also be used as a means to create opportunities for positive dialogue in a typical classroom setting. For example, if a hijabi Muslim girl is bullied in her class by another non-Muslim student who tries to ridicule her

for covering her hair, then this incident must be used by the teacher to discuss how everybody has an equal right to practice their faith.

## **5. Reporting the incident formally.**

It is also important for families to record any instances of bullying with the school authorities. Every school system has reporting mechanisms in place, though some don't make this information readily available. Go to your local board of education if you run into problems in this area. Reporting serves to ensure that school students, teachers, and administrators are held accountable for maintaining an environment that is safe for all students. You may also want to report the incident to organizations like CAIR who collect these statistics nationwide.

## **Saying No to Bully Culture**

On the flip side of the situation, some parents find it embarrassing to own up to the fact that their own child has behavioral issues. These can include picking on other children and demonstrating aggressive behavior toward them. We need to understand that it is not just others that we need to be pointing fingers at, but instead, if the problem is being initiated from our own child, then we must take it up seriously, too. After all, such behavior impacts the bully himself in a negative manner, as well.

Here are some ways we can help our children act more responsibly toward others in general.

### **1. Understand bullying behavior.**

For parents, it can be particularly tricky to identify their own child as a bully in public. However, by paying close attention to their behavior at home toward siblings (if any) and with close family and friends, we can help gauge if there is an area for concern. It is also important to understand the reason for the breakout of such behavior as sometimes children behave aggressively when they do not know how to regulate their emotions. (See another article about this topic called [Mastering the Art of Self-Regulation](#) for more details.)

If there is a frequent show of physical violence or verbal abuse, then that should set you up to fix their behavior at home. We must also pay close attention to our own behaviors, as parents, to notice how we react and respond in stressful situations, in order to provide a positive role model.

### **2. Let your child know that bullying is unacceptable.**

It is imperative that parents establish firm boundaries when it comes to controlling bullying behavior from home. You must focus attention on the negative behavior rather than the person (be it the victim of the bullying or the bully him/herself). You must tell your child that any hurtful behavior will result in consequences, but be sure not to shame them in the process. It is essential to communicate that all feelings are valid and must be communicated but at the same time harassing someone or trying to gain control over others is not the appropriate response to the problem.

### **3. Teach love, kindness, and respect.**

Parents must consciously strive to teach their children to treat others with love and kindness. This calls for nurturing that environment inside the home, in order to embed these values into the hearts of our children. Also talking about patience and demonstrating anger management in instances where conflicts arise can be invaluable coping skills.

#### **4. Reinforce positive behavior.**

Using praise and rewards in an effective manner can help reinforce positive behavior, in comparison to disciplining them through punishment. When your child shows improvement in terms of controlling his/her anger or handles a conflicting situation in a positive manner, be sure to acknowledge and appreciate them for their efforts.

Bullying is a sign of weakness rather than a strength. It reflects personal insecurities, a narcissist attitude and has long-term impacts on the bully's health and that of the person being bullied. As Muslim parents, we need to help each other and our children to be more vocal about the reporting of such incidents so that we can adopt the right strategies to help overcome the harms associated with bullying. Let us stand tall and say no to bullying culture!

*Umm Ahmed is an early childhood educator and mother of three boys. Always on the quest to learn, she is passionate about seeking knowledge and passing it on to others. A writer in the making, she draws inspiration through deep conversations, laws of nature, and her own children. She and her family are currently living in Abu Dhabi, UAE.*