

Islamic Rules for Children Fasting in UK Primary and Secondary Schools

1. In Islamic law, children are not required to fast during Ramadan: they are only required to fast when they become adults.

2. a) The age of adulthood is disputed: some traditional views look at only biological factors, i.e. puberty. This usually equates to 12-15 years old for boys and 9-15 years old for girls (depending on when their periods start).

b) The stronger traditional view is that emotional and intellectual maturity is also required for adulthood, ie 15-20 years old for both sexes. [This view is found in all four of the main Sunni schools of law - cf. Sheikh Wahba Zuhayli's *Al-Fiqh al-Islami wa adillatuhu* (Islamic Jurisprudence and its Evidential Bases); the age of 18 or 19 was often mentioned classically as true adulthood.]

3. In Islamic tradition, children are often encouraged to fast, even though it is not a legal requirement, in order to prepare them for adulthood. The situation here is analogous to that of prayer (5 times a day), which is also expected of adults. For prayer, the ages of 7-10 are traditionally when they begin. Hence, many parents introduce their children to fasting at a similar age.

4. In Islamic law, the health of an individual is the first priority after their faith. This is why adults are exempt from fasting if they are sick or face other hardships that make fasting too difficult, eg travelling or unduly laborious or safety-critical work, e.g. medical surgeons or airline pilots.

5. In Islamic law, the decisions of relevant authorities in disputed matters are upheld and respected, eg court judgments or school policy.

6. Hence, if a school has a policy on fasting in the best interest of children, with input from Muslim parents, governors and leaders, parents are obliged by Islamic law to abide by that policy, even if it goes against their wishes.

7. Violation of such a policy by parents would entail going against their religion in two ways:

(i) by breaking their agreement with the school to abide by its policy and rules; and

(ii) by mistreating their child, since the school policy and Islamic law have the same purpose, ie to safeguard the health and education of the child.

8. a) Since social services have the same aim as Islamic law also, ie to safeguard children, a school's referral to them would also be in accordance with Islam.

b) Such a step is not ideal, of course, because of the status and importance of parents and the parent-child relationship in both Islam and UK society, and all attempts should be made to reach agreement such that a referral is not necessary.

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