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## Ramadan - The Month of Fasting

### The importance of fasting

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is the fourth 'pillar' of Islam, an act of worship of great spiritual, moral and social significance for Muslims. It is obligatory for all males and females to fast once they attain the age of puberty (for some children this can be as young as age nine). The physical dimension of fasting involves completely abstaining from all forms of nourishment, food, liquids (including water) and smoking from dawn to sunset for the whole month. Younger children may fast for all or part of the month but this is entirely optional. The spiritual and moral dimension of fasting is considered to be of far greater importance than the physical dimension. In general, Muslims are encouraged not to use Ramadan as an opportunity to avoid aspects of normal life but rather to cope with normal life under a different set of guidelines and conditions. However, schools need to be aware of some important considerations in relation to fasting pupils. Fasting pupils will normally get up before dawn to have their breakfast, which does interrupt their sleeping pattern.

During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness, in order to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealings with others, including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness and avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour. In addition, having empathy with the poor, donating generously for charitable causes, the sharing of food and inviting others to one's home to open the fast are important features of Ramadan. Muslims also focus on reading more of the Qur'an and performing additional prayers in the mosque every evening.

Schools can develop the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of their children and school life by recognising and building upon the essence and spirit of Ramadan. Whilst the discipline and the challenge of fasting is to continue with the normality of everyday life, staff should exercise a degree of understanding, by encouraging pupils to avoid excessive exertion in physical education to prevent dehydration. By the same token they may praise pupils who are clearly making a special effort regarding their attitudes and behaviour.

Teachers can take this opportunity to be more inclusive and teach pupils about Ramadan in religious education and to invite guests from the Muslim community to take collective worship

or assemblies. Some schools offer their staff awareness training about factors affecting their pupils during Ramadan.

The Islamic calendar is based on a lunar cycle, therefore, the month of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year on the Gregorian calendar; hence it takes Ramadan about 33 years to move through the seasons from January to December.

## **Primary school pupils**

Although fasting for the entire month does not become obligatory until the age of puberty, it is common practice for Muslim children to begin to fast before this age, in order to become progressively accustomed to the obligation. Most children aged 10 and 11 (years 5 & 6) are likely to fast all 30 days. Children are enthusiastic and get a great sense of achievement joining their families in taking part in the spirit of Ramadan and often begin at a younger age.

The younger the child, the more difficult it tends to be for children to fast without their physical stamina and concentration levels being affected. This can be problematic for very young children and we would advise that schools liaise with parents to encourage very young children to fast half days or to avoid fasting during school days as this can have a significant effect on their concentration levels and degree of alertness while at school. It is important to be aware that young children are more likely to fast when Ramadan falls in the winter months, when the days are shorter and the climate is cooler.

Whether a pupil decides to fast or not is a matter to be decided between the parent and child. Breaking the fast before the correct time may be regarded as being worse than not fasting at all by some pupils and parents. Schools should not encourage children to break their fast early unless it is for health and safety reasons. The overriding consideration should be that the children do not feel disadvantaged in school activities because of their religious observance.

## **Prayers during Ramadan**

The same daily prayers are offered in school time as at other times of the year, but in Ramadan it is usual for more students to offer their prayers in school. Schools should recognise this by putting in place acceptable arrangements for prayer, including reasonable extra space ready for the first day of fasting, these arrangements should be shared with pupils, parents and staff so that everyone is clear of the facilities offered.

## **Celebrating Ramadan**

Muslims approach Ramadan with enthusiasm and it is customary for Muslims to congratulate one another on its arrival. The school can value and build on this spirit by having themes based on Ramadan at collective worship or assemblies, and by organising communal 'Iftar' (breaking the fast) when pupils, parents, community members and teachers – both Muslims and non-Muslims – can all join in the ending of the fast and eating together. Some schools enter into the charitable spirit of Ramadan by raising funds for the poor and the needy in the world.

## Physical Education

The majority of pupils who are fasting are able to take part in most physical activities during Ramadan without putting themselves at risk or in danger. Fasting may make some children feel tired or drowsy, or even develop headaches due to dehydration. This may necessitate some Muslim pupils having to reduce their physical exercise. Schools may wish to consider and plan less strenuous activities in physical education lessons during Ramadan.

## Examinations during Ramadan

It is inevitable that certain statutory and internal school examinations may fall during Ramadan. Schools should give appropriate consideration when scheduling internal examinations, since the combination of preparing for exams and fasting may prove challenging for some pupils.

## Parents' evenings and after school functions

During Ramadan, the evenings can be a very busy period for Muslim families, particularly if the breaking of the fast (Iftar) falls in the early evening. Furthermore, some adults will spend their time observing additional religious activities, like the special evening prayers (*Taraweeh*) at the mosque. This may make it difficult for parents to attend meetings or other functions in the evening during the month of Ramadan. The scheduling of parent evenings before or after the month of Ramadan would be appreciated by parents and is likely to ensure better attendance.

## Exemption from fasting

There are certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting. These include menstruating women, those for whom fasting is likely to have a seriously detrimental effect on health and physical well-being and those who cannot survive without taking medication or nourishment, for example diabetics. Those travelling on long and difficult journeys may not fast if it is likely to cause serious hardship. Any missed fasting days have to be made up at a later date or in some circumstances compensated for, by feeding the poor.

## Medication

No oral medication can be taken by a person who is fasting. Anyone needing regular medication during fasting hours is normally exempt from fasting in any case. Medication can be taken once the fast has ended. Medical injections can be taken by a person who is fasting, although not those injections that influence body nutrition. Guidance should be sought from local Muslim organisations on specific issues if necessary. During emergencies, where a child's wellbeing is at risk, medicine should be administered. Routine vaccinations should be scheduled for other times of the year.

## **Detentions and after school activities**

When Ramadan falls during the winter months, after-school detention or activities for a pupil who is fasting could mean that the pupil is not able to reach home in time to break their fast. Whilst accepting full responsibility for breaching school rules, schools should be aware that pupils are able to carry out their religious duty of breaking the fast on time. A drink or anything to eat is sufficient and many schools do make this provision available when required. Some parents may request that their children break the fast at home with their family.

## **Swimming during Ramadan**

In general, participation in swimming is an acceptable activity whilst fasting. However, for many pupils this activity may prove to be an issue, as the potential for swallowing water is very high. Some pupils or parents consider the risk too great and may wish to avoid swimming whilst fasting. Others may take the view that as swallowing is unintentional it does not break the fast.

Schools with a significant number of Muslim pupils should try to avoid scheduling swimming lessons during Ramadan to remove unnecessary barriers to full participation.

## **Sex and relationship education**

Whilst fasting, Muslims are not permitted to engage in any sexual relations and are expected to take measures to avoid sexual thoughts and discourse. Schools are therefore advised to avoid scheduling the teaching of sex and relationship education, including aspects that are part of the science curriculum, during Ramadan.

## **Special Ramadan evening prayers (Taraweeh)**

During Ramadan many pupils may observe special additional prayers called Taraweeh. These usually take place at the mosque every evening and last approximately an hour. These prayers are optional and may be observed individually or with one's family at home.

## RAMADAN - THE MONTH OF FASTING

### Features of good practice

- School has a written policy for the requirements and implications of Ramadan for their Muslim pupils.
- School offers its staff Ramadan awareness training about factors affecting pupils during Ramadan.
- School recognises and celebrates the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship or assembly themes and communal Iftar (collective breaking of the fast).
- School is aware of the likely increase in the number of pupils offering prayer during the month of Ramadan and facilities are provided accordingly, for example a larger area for daily prayers.
- Adequate arrangements are in place to supervise fasting children, during the lunch hour. These arrangements are well publicised amongst pupils and parents.
- School takes account of Ramadan when planning internal examinations and tries to avoid scheduling them during the month of Ramadan.
- School avoids scheduling sex and relationship education and swimming during Ramadan.

School teachers are considerate and mindful that fasting children avoid engaging in over-demanding exercises during physical education lessons that may result in dehydration.

- If possible, school avoids holding parents' meetings and other school social events in the evening during the month of Ramadan.

School gives the option for those Muslim pupils who are entitled to free school meals to take packed lunches home, should they wish to do so.