

A simple guide to dealing with Muslim Students during the Month of Ramadan

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar that has special significance for Muslims all over the world. It is a time of active religious observance through fasting and spiritual reflection, and an opportunity to strengthen a Muslim's adherence to their faith. During this month, Muslims reconnect with their faith and with their family and community, due to the communal nature of the month's devotions.

The last ten days in particular are seen as a time to increase acts of worship, especially Laylatul-Qadr, the Night of Power/ Decree, which many people spend in prayer. Ramadan begins and ends at a different time each year as it follows a lunar calendar. The end of the month is marked by a celebration known as Eid Al Fitr, which is celebrated for between one and three days.

What is fasting?

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is prescribed in the Quran and is one of the 5 pillars of Islam. Fasting involves abstaining from all food and drink from dawn to sunset. As such, Muslims all around the world fast for different lengths of time, depending on their geographical locations. It is highly recommended for Muslims to wake before dawn and eat a light meal, known as Suhoor. The meal at sunset is known as Iftar; it is customary to break the fast with a date, followed by a light meal.

Fasting does not simply consist of abstaining from food and drink; it facilitates the attainment of spiritual purity. This is through the development of a greater sense of mindfulness regarding one's actions, in particular monitoring behaviour and speech. Thus, fasting requires total commitment, both spiritually and physically. Many Muslims find that Ramadan is their favourite time of year, as it brings them closer to their families and friends, and ultimately facilitates a nearness to God.

Abstaining from food and drink is intended to increase mindfulness, as well as compassion and empathy for those less fortunate. It is a way of reconnecting with the idea that all sustenance and nourishment is from God, and that we are blessed and fortunate to receive these from Him. It is also a lot less physically demanding than it may seem, as the body quickly becomes accustomed to not eating or drinking during daylight hours. In fact, fasting has been shown to have many health benefits.



Who needs to fast?

Fasting is required of all Muslims who have reached the age of puberty, and who are physically able to do so. Those with medical conditions whose health may be endangered as a result of fasting are not required to do so, nor are breastfeeding mothers or those who are travelling long distances.

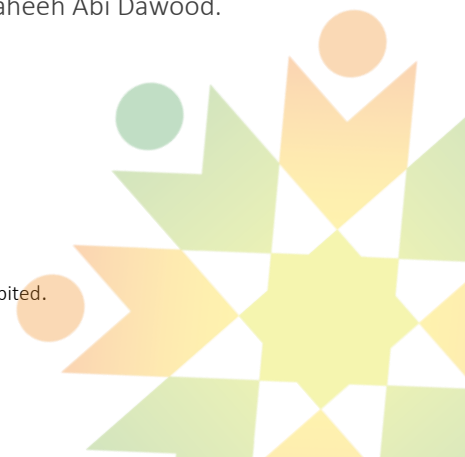
Accommodating Muslim students

During Ramadan, Muslim students may appear to be more tired or inattentive, particularly at the beginning of the month. You can help by allowing teachers to grant concessions to fasting students where possible, such as requests for time out, flexible schedules and lighter homework assignments, or less strenuous playground activities, especially towards the latter half of the day. It may be helpful to develop a policy for these requests so as to minimise confusion amongst the staff body as well as students and their parents.

You will also notice that many children will be absent for at least one day for Eid Al-Fitr celebrations at the end of Ramadan, so please bear this in mind when excursions or assessments are planned. It will also be useful for students to have somewhere to gather and pray during and after Ramadan. A room for prayer at lunchtime and supervision during the prayer time would allow students to complete their midday prayers. These prayers generally require between 5-10 minutes to complete. Your support in facilitating these measures is greatly appreciated.

ISRE's position is that parents and children should be educated about the risks of fasting for children, and be reminded that fasting is not obligatory on children before they reach the age of adolescence.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "The pens have been lifted from three: from one who has lost his mind until he comes back to his senses, from one who is sleeping until he wakes up, and from a child until he reaches the age of adolescence." Narrated by Abu Dawood, 4399; classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood.





ISRE acknowledges that some parents may strongly encourage their children to fast in Ramadan from an early age, and we have received requests from schools to provide some guidance in regards to our young students not coping with the fast, for example, feeling unwell or complaining of stomach pain.

For young children that demonstrate an eagerness to participate in Ramadan, ISRE has the following suggestions:

- To get used to the idea of giving up something for the sake of Allah SWT; choose a favourite food to 'fast' from, for example, pizza or chocolate.
- Try to fast for half the day
- Try to fast from food but continue to drink water and other fluids
- Attempt their first fast on the weekend or during school holidays, so they can rest when needed.

Whilst developing good habits at a young age is important, ISRE recommends parents/carers not to push children beyond their capacity as this will avoid any possible association of Ramadan with anxiety and stress in the future. If the child insists on fasting, please ensure sufficient snacks, water or money are available if they change their mind during the day. Also carefully watch for signs of dehydration or exhaustion.

For further assistance...

If you have any questions around dealing with your Muslim students or any other aspect of Islam, you are welcome to call our office on (02) 9708 0880 or email us at info@isre.org.au.

We are always looking to improve our support to Muslim students in NSW Public Schools and for those who come into contact with them, so please send us any suggestions you have on how we can best do this.

