

Chapter 68: The Child and the Religious Duties

It is true that the boys attain the age of responsibility (*baligh*) at fifteen and the girls at age nine. This is the age when the juridical norms become mandatory for them. But the performance of religious duties may not be postponed till the child reaches the age of responsibility. They must be encouraged to perform the religious duties from early childhood so that when they become compulsory, they would already be in the habit of fulfilling them.

Fortunately, in families of religious people, a child starts to emulate its parents performing the religious rites. Sometimes he spreads the prayer carpet for the parents, sometimes he puts down his head to the ground in supplication with the parent. He repeats Allah o Akbar (God is Great) and La ilaha illa Lah with his parents. He will recite small religious couplets with his mother.

The thoughtful parents make good use of this natural instinct of the child to emulate. If a child does these things, the parents give him a smile of appreciation. There should not be an element of force in making the child learn the religious rites.

The parents should not start formal teaching of the religious rites in early childhood. At the age of five the child can learn to recite the Sura al Fatiha (The Opening) of the Holy Qur'an. This has to be done slowly in several days to keep the interest of the child in learning to do the recitation.

At the age of seven the child should be asked to offer regular prayers. The parents should themselves set an example to the child by offering all the five prayers, regularly and punctually, at their appointed times. At the age of nine years make it binding on the children to offer regular prayers.

They should explain to the children that the prayers are mandatory when they are home and also when they travel. If the child abstains from praying, the parents should deal with him strictly. If the parents are themselves regular at offering their prayers, they can easily make the children habituated of following suit.

When the children reach the age of responsibility, they will already be regular at offering the mandatory prayers. If the parents take the excuse that the child is still too small, and they would teach him to pray

when he comes of age, then it would be very difficult to initiate the child into regular prayers. It is a common belief that old habits are difficult to change. This is the reason that the Prophet of Islam and the Holy Imams have asked the parents to initiate the children to offer prayers from the six or seven years of age.

Imam Muhammad al Baqir says:

“We encourage our children start praying from the age of five years and at seven years we order them to pray five times a day regularly. ”¹

The Prophet of Islam has said:

“When your children are six years old, order them to offer the prayers. When they are seven, ask them more strictly to be regular at prayers. If necessary, they must be punished if they don’t become regular in their prayers.”²

Imam Muhammad al Baqir or Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq has said:

“When the child is seven years old, then ask him to wash his face, the feet and the hands before offering prayers. But when he is nine years old, teach him the correct method of doing the Wudhu’ (the mandatory ablutions prior to offering prayers). This is the time when the child is strictly instructed to offer regular prayers.”³

Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq says:

“When a child is six years old, then it is necessary he learns to offer prayers and if he is physically capable he must also be encouraged to fast during the month of *Ramadhan*.”⁴

The child should be initiated slowly to fasting during *Ramadhan*. A child who is physically fit for fasting should be woken up at the time of *sahr* (the meal before sunrise), so that he eats at this time instead of the breakfast at the regular morning times. If the child is keen to fast the whole day, encourage him to complete it.

But, if during the day, the child feels uneasy, he may be permitted to break his fast before time. The number of fasts by the child may be increased gradually. When the child reaches the age of understanding, he must be instructed that offering regular prayers five times a day and fasting on all days during the month of *Ramadhan* is mandatory.

If he is irregular in his compliance of these, he would be a sinner and liable to punishment by God. The parents must explain to the child the advantages and the rewards of fasting during *Ramadhan*. This will give more courage to the child to do the fasting.

During the last days of *Ramadhan*, make other duties lighter for the child. He must be allowed more

hours of rest during the day. At the end of the fasting period, the child must be given some gift as an encouragement for his efforts. During the fasting period the parents should take care that the children don't try to eat something hidden from others' view.

It is necessary for the parents to instruct the children at the proper time about the wet-dreams they get at puberty. They must be instructed about doing the *ghusl* (the mandatory cleansing bath after having an emission) and *istinja* (the washing of the genitals with water after urinating).

It is necessary to remind here that if they wish their children to be regular visitors to the mosques and religious symposia, then they must put them into the habit from their childhood. They should take them to the mosque and the places of religious discourses. These visits will create interest in the children for going to the congregations.

In the end, it will not be out of place to remind that before reaching the age of understanding it is not mandatory on the child to observe the compulsory religious rites. If he is unable to perform certain rites at certain times, he is not committing any transgression. But it will not be proper for the parents to leave the children totally independent to do whatever they wish to. The child must be told that if in his innocence he causes any physical or bodily harm to others, he shall have to pay the Deeth (the fine for harming others) when he reaches the age of understanding.

On the other hand if the child is left free without any checks whatsoever, he might get into the habit of committing sins and wrong acts. The dictum is: 'Old habits die hard' The habits cultivated during the childhood remain with the person, however much one tries to banish them. Therefore it is necessary for the parents to instruct the children about the dos and don'ts from their very early days. They must stop them from doing taboo acts and encourage them to do good deeds.

1. Wasail al-shiah, v 3, p. 12

2. Mustadrak al-wasail, v 1, p. 171

3. Wasail al shiah, v 3, p. 13

4. Wasail al shiah, v 3, p. 12

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