

Understanding Ramadan

A guide for Early Years, Schools and those working with young people 2016

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the most holy month in which Muslims fast (do not eat or drink) from sunrise until sunset every day for the whole month. This year Ramadan starts on **the 6th of June** and will continue for 30 days until the **5th of July**.

Muslims (including those who may not normally practice or pray) take the holy month very seriously by:

- Fasting (not letting anything pass their lips) from sunrise to sunset
- Praying more during the night
- Praying more and mediating during the day

Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are pregnant or nursing are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year. If they are physically unable to do this, they must feed a needy person for every day missed.

Muslims do this for three main reasons:

- 1) To connect with humanity: to experience the reality of those living in hunger and poverty and to gain true sympathy for them.
- 2) To connect with themselves: to get rid of their worst habits – selfishness, greed, envy and pride in order to promote love, compassion, peace and equality.
- 3) Forgiveness from sins: God promises to forgive all sins in their holy month.

Ramadan is therefore, not only a period of physical restraint but also mental and emotional refocus: a detox for the mind, body and soul.

Muslims end the fasting month of Ramadan with the Islamic holiday of Eid ul-Fitr. It is a day of thanksgiving in which families and friends visit each other and exchange gifts.

Children and Young People Fasting

Children practice fasting from a young age, depending on their development and the wishes of their parents. They may begin by 'fasting' for half a day, until lunchtime, and then move onto the occasional full day. Many children want to fast so that they can express their Muslim identity and show that they too are adhering to the

requirements of their faith. If you are working with any Muslim children, try and find out from parents/carers if the children are fasting and when.

You should avoid giving the impression that fasting 'is a nuisance, disruptive of routine or silly' or a negative experience. Fasting is an intensely spiritual activity in which the whole Muslim community is involved. Muslim people can be offended when non-Muslims, however well intentioned, seek to discourage children from fasting. Ramadan is an important time during which a you can demonstrate a your commitment to equal opportunities and to valuing children's beliefs and cultures.

Medication

Sometimes illness prevents fasting. A mild cold or headache probably won't be a problem, but if someone is too ill to fast then they should stop fasting to recover sufficiently. It is important that essential medication is taken when required, for example, asthmatics should use their inhaler if necessary. Young Muslims might try to 'tough it out' but they should not risk their health for fasting.

Physical Education

Children who are fasting may feel weak and tired during the day, especially in the afternoon. Strenuous physical exercise may make them feel worse or faint or result in dehydration. You should use your discretion regarding physical education during Ramadan e.g. by re-scheduling strenuous sports activities and replacing them with less strenuous activities or by exempting Muslim pupils who are fasting.

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.

Swimming

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 water is unintentional it does not break the fast.

Other examples of good practice:

- Ensure that all staff and volunteers are aware that it is Ramadan and of its implication for pupils who are fasting.
- If you are aware of young people who are fasting, consider making a supervised quiet room available for pupils where they can pray, rest and avoid having to watch others eat.

- Be aware when planning evening meetings (e.g. staff or parent teacher meetings), of the need of Muslims to break their fast and perform salah (prayer).
- Hold an assembly marking Ramadan and celebrate Eid ul-Fitr as a community after its celebration in the community so that Muslim pupils, parents and teachers can contribute.
- Be aware that children maybe absent from regular activities to celebrate Eid with family and friends.

For more information and activities to do in the classroom, please visit <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/islam/ramadan.shtml>