

An open white door with silver handles is set into a light-colored wall. The door is open, revealing a paved path that winds through a lush green forest. The sun is shining brightly from the end of the path, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is bordered by green grass and wildflowers.

# Preparing for LIFE

How to Help One's Children Become  
Mature and Responsible Adults

**Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari**

**Preparing for Life**  
**How to help one's children become**  
**mature and responsible adults**

**Muhammad Abdul Bari**

*Preparing for Life: How to help one's children to become mature and responsible adults*

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# Introduction

**M**odern life has brought with it many opportunities as well as several challenges. Complex social issues are continuously emerging in families and communities. While technological progress has made life much easier and the world is becoming ever smaller, people are also suffering from the onus of being too engrossed in electronic gadgets to the detriment of a normal life and direct human communication.

The mass introduction of smartphones and the spread of the internet are keeping people incredibly busy with social media. While technological devices have helped to enhance people's education and entertainment, they have also created an information overload and heightened a culture of individualism, self-indulgence and consumerism. Young children are often left alone, for various reasons, with smartphones or iPads becoming

their constant friends. As parents are getting busier, these devices become like nannies for some little children. Experts are warning that, if unsupervised and overused, these devices can have a harmful effect on young brains. The easy access to pornography and extremist materials is also a real concern for parents, as they are a danger to their natural growth and safety.

Reduced human contact with young people is becoming a source of great worry. In fact, human interaction in today's world among people living under the same roof has significantly diminished. People are always in a hurry, with little time to think, just as they are increasingly becoming loners. They hardly have time for others, be it their families, neighbourhoods or communities.

The family, with what it entails of love and sharing and caring, has always been the bedrock of human society. But this institution has been weakened in recent decades in developed societies and elsewhere. The fast increasing lack of interaction among family members is widening the generational and cultural gaps between the young and the old. The rise in mental health problems, anti-social behaviour and violence is costing people socially and economically.

It is the responsibility of the adults in the family and community to redress this growing imbalance in people's lives; they must keep on building and strengthening their families and neighbourhoods. People cannot afford to succumb to the pressures of life's grinding machine and inhibit their children's physical, mental and emotional development. They must find enough time for their families and raise their children, proactively and creatively, as decent human beings and good citizens.

In these days of growing social tension, economic inequality and political uncertainty as well as increasing intolerance, identity confusion and lack of compassion towards one another it is one's added responsibility to invest in one's children's upbringing and their overall wellbeing. One's children are one's future and trust (Arabic: *Amānah*), they need to be reared and cared for effectively in order for them to be well-equipped to create a better world.

Faith is in a flux in developed, secular and pluralist societies. Some people consider it to be of no value while others have become dogmatic and insular due to the faith they cling to, but many are simply confused. Universal human values and the teachings of different faiths have always provided people with a moral anchor and spiritual solace in the past and they have the ability to do so in the future.

As a civic activist in communities and a teacher in inner city state schools, particularly in the East End of London since the mid-1980s, I have been a keen observer of young people growing up with economic difficulties and social deprivation. I have observed how parents, communities and religious institutions try their best to raise their children with growing constraints amidst real-life challenges. Nowadays, an increasing number of people is becoming fearful of other potential pitfalls relating to their children such as sexual exploitation and radicalisation.

As a behaviour-specialist teacher in Tower Hamlets, I started running parenting courses, since the late 1990s, first on the internet, and then I ran a culturally sensitive course: *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities*. Later on, in the mid-2000s, I developed my own *Building Families* course that I have been occasionally running in Britain and some other global cities, which I kept improving on. A few years ago, when I took an early retirement from teaching, I launched a social enterprise, *AmanaParenting Ltd*. The *Building Families* course is about developing a whole child within the family and community contexts in a pluralist society, but with an ethos of inclusivity and an emphasis on the universal values of faith.

This book is the outcome of my long experience in working with families and young people, particularly those of Muslim persuasion, in an increasingly secularised society. Post-7/7 Britain has put British Muslims at the sharp end of serious challenges, such as higher levels of prejudice, discrimination and Islamophobia. At the same time, the Muslim community has huge opportunities to perform better with its educational and economic achievements and also to flourish by working



with others for a better Britain. This book is a humble reminder to parents about multi-faceted parenting to help their children prepare for life with the ethos of universal human and Islamic values.



# Raising one's 'little angels' as God's stewards on earth

**A** newborn baby is a bundle of joy and a treasure in any family; a little angel sought after by parents, especially mothers. This 'love' comes following pain, after a nine-month long pregnancy which can only be experienced by women. That is why the mother's position is higher than that of the father's in all religious and cultural traditions. 'Paradise lies at the feet of the mothers,'<sup>1</sup> said Islam's Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). Women have to be particularly careful about their own health, food habits and lifestyle during pregnancy.

Pregnancy is a 'sacrifice' that some women avoid making in today's consumerist culture because of their busy lives and individualistic frames of mind. But this unique experience to feel and see a living being growing inside their bodies must be thrilling. A woman's life changes

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1 *Sunan al-Nasāʾi*. 3104

## Bridging generational and cultural gaps

Over the centuries, Europe embraced secularism and curtailed the role of organised religion in the public domain. In Britain, however, ethics and morality have their roots in its main religion, Christianity, and are still influenced by it. In post-WWII Britain, the practice of religion has increased with the arrival of many faith communities from, mainly, the Commonwealth nations which has instigated a debate on the role of religion in a secular, and increasingly atheist environment. It is in this context that the emergence of diverse Muslim communities should be considered.

Britain's Muslim community is evolving and Muslims are still arriving to the UK from war-torn countries as refugees and asylum seekers. Muslims are a group of overwhelmingly ordinary people who have similar hopes, aspirations, frustrations, failures and successes to

any other people in the land. With a higher proportion of youth in their midst, they have issues relating to identity crisis amongst some of them, but they otherwise have all the potentials to succeed.

However, with the rising of educational levels in the last couple of decades and rapid technological progress in recent times, young Muslims are instituting some changes in their social attitude and cultural practices. Like the youths of other communities, they are also influenced by change-makers such as television, the internet and social media; sometimes they even set the tone of change. As direct human interaction in society is diminishing, online activities and social networking are occupying much of young people's time. Many parents, especially from the first generation immigrant population, are obviously struggling to keep pace with these changes.

Building a life-long connection with one's children is not easy. There have always been inter-generational gaps in every society at all times. But the gap between first generation parents and their techno-savvy children in Muslim communities appears to be much wider. This gap is more visible in areas such as lifestyle, fashion, musical tastes, religious practices, culture and even politics.

Due to a great religious emphasis on the family values of reciprocal care and share, the young and old tend to remain physically close whenever possible. But in the new social environment, with its economic hardship for many families, young Muslims spend less time with the adults around them, even if they happen to live under the same roof. In some cases there is some disconnection between parents and their teenage children. Scary stories of juvenile delinquency or young people wandering around in gangs frighten some elderly people, including Muslims. On the other hand, young people also feel undervalued as they are often demonised by the adult world. There is always a need for more empathy, recognition and respect for one another.

Over two thirds of British Muslims have roots in South Asian countries. For economic and other reasons, the majority lives in Britain's inner cities. Together with Muslims from other parts of the world, the

community has become hugely diverse. Many are used to religious and social conservatism, but some practices are obviously cultural and not necessarily “Islamic”.

Muslim culture, however different internally, has features that often converge on the nature of the family and its values, dress and modesty, an understanding of spirituality, the practice of greeting one another, food habits, celebrations, creative expressions, expectations in life, environmental views, illness and bereavement, etc. How much of this culture is being passed on to the new generations of Muslims to help them form an inclusive identity in a secular, pluralist society is a matter of continuous discussion, inside and outside the community.

However, whilst maintaining cultural uniqueness is important for an ethnic or faith community, it is vital for all citizens to be an active part of the wider society. For this to happen positively and naturally, an awareness and understanding of the mainstream society are essential. Parents’ interaction with the wider society helps them to raise their children and prepare them for better citizenship. Better inclusiveness in mosques and community centres can really help the local community to be on the same wavelength regarding social integration.

Muslim children, like their peers from other communities, are exposed to all sorts of challenges and opportunities in modern life. Parents at home need to be aware of what goes on in their children’s lives. They should work with teachers and imams to help their children develop with confidence in their own worth. Here is a list of some manifestations of identity<sup>21</sup> that most young Muslims grow up with at home – but should learn how to confidently and comfortably live with others in a diverse secular society.

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21 *Race, Religion and Muslim Identity in Britain*, by Muhammad Abdul Bari, Renaissance Press, 2005, p. 109.

Manifestation of identity	Examples
Faith/belief	The belief system, i.e., whether and how someone believes in monotheism, the trinity, original sin, etc.
Marriage/Family	Issues regarding marriage, man-woman relationship, the extended family structure and family ethos, etc.
Appearance/clothes	Cultural and religious expressions regarding modesty and beauty, likes and dislikes, e.g., dress for men and women, beards, hairstyle.
Food/eating habits	Type of foods and drinks and how they are consumed, e.g., alcohol, pork, Halal or Kosher.
Socialisation	Visits, family gatherings, pub culture, etc.
Rituals	Prayer and prayer facilities, holidays, pilgrimage, etc.
Creative expressions	Art, calligraphy, poetry, music, dance, drama, architecture, e.g., minarets.
Celebration/entertainment	Religious, historical and national, e.g., Eid, Diwali, Hanuka, Christmas.
Verbal expressions	Vocabulary, terminology and expression.
Visits and holidays	Time and places people visit and go to on holidays.
Inter-generational interaction	Respect and sensitivity when people of different generations talk and interact.
Economic habit	Incomes, expenditures, investment, issue of ethics, e.g., interest.
Illness and bereavement	Religious and cultural requirements as well as taboos regarding them.

## Core duties and basic rights in the family

**A** very learned, wise and successful Asian father that I know sent me an email a while ago in which he wrote: ‘The motto of a budding family should be parenting, parenting, parenting. Many problems caused by adolescents could be avoided through proper parental care and discipline. A large share of the blame for the 2011 summer riot in England is on the parents who are not doing their job properly.’

This resonates with social reality on responsible parenting, although the situation is slightly more complex in today’s rights-based society. A society based on a robust family structure, in which parental authority is used lovingly and effectively, will more likely transform the energy of its youths into nation building elements. And wherever the family structure is weak, the energy of the youths turn into the kind of disorder one sees in the inner city streets of many developed countries.

The family is the core organisation of any society. Effective, positive and assertive parenting should be at the heart of every family in order for society to advance. Children grow under the care of adults, fully dependent on them for their survival, protection and development. The mother and father are naturally the first people in a child's life. Not only do they make sure of their children's balanced growth but they also preserve and strengthen their family's intellectual, cultural and spiritual heritage.

In a powerful speech at the Labour Party Conference in 1996, the labour leader who became Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, set the tone of his future government: 'Ask me my three main priorities for Government, and I tell you: education, education and education.' Education is vital for any country's progress. The Meiji rulers in Japan transformed their country in the 1870s and 1880s through their bold and innovative educational plan.

However, education starts at home with good-quality parenting. 'Home is the best school' goes the old maxim.

Parenting means more than the mere raising of children. It is a conscious endeavour that starts from the moment a baby is conceived in its mother's womb. It is the duty of parents to give such a conscious attention to their baby in its embryonic stage; it is also a basic right of every baby to be nourished and nurtured by its parent.

The task of parenting does not end with children's puberty or when they reach the age of sixteen or eighteen. In the Islamic tradition, it continues until one's offspring reach the age of twenty-one. In fact, it is a life-long commitment that involves the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing of the child beginning from its conception in the womb. Of course, the nature of parenting changes as children grow from dependence to inter-dependence in their adult lives.

The reward of effective parenting is enormous and long-lasting. On the other hand, poor parenting or abdicating parental responsibility can bring distressing consequences for the family, wider society and the nation as a whole.



## Being aware of children's online activities

Children of the present generation, particularly in the developed world, are fortunate in the sense that they can benefit from a number of things that the previous generations simply did not have, from state-of-the-art educational facilities to sophisticated technological gadgets that could barely have been imagined even two or three decades ago. One of the greatest inventions of the present time is the World Wide Web. The mere fact that information can be shared instantly in a number of ways across the globe is astonishing. One can use the internet, in a hand-held laptop or palm-held smartphone, to check one's ancestry for several centuries back, or perhaps research the credentials of an organisation for which one is applying for a job.

## Benefits and harms

With these easily-accessible gadgets, the social media have now amazingly flourished and are affecting the personal and social lives of many adults and children in developed countries; the average weekly screen time has shot up significantly. It is reported<sup>34</sup> that average American adults say: ‘we watch when we want, not when anyone tells us, and usually alone, and often while doing several other things. The sound bite has been replaced by virality, meme, hot take, tweet.’ The fear is that, in such an environment, serious national issues cannot be realistically explored in any coherent and meaningful way.

Online activities seem great and cool to growing children who want to explore the world with a click of the button. This does have its own benefits as it enables friends to stay in regular contact with one another; it also facilitates the cultivation of relationships with people that are otherwise difficult to reach. Depending on their choice, they are also more aware of their chosen topics such as sports, economy and politics. Although aimed for slightly older students of around A-Level age, LinkedIn, for example enables aspiring young professionals to connect with one another to further and fulfil their career ambitions.

For average children, the possibilities are endless; it can be a wonderful educational tool that they are increasingly expected to use in their learning. However, it is this very fact that makes the internet a potentially dangerous tool. As children have now access to small devices, such as mobiles, watches and tablets, they can be in touch with a multitude of harmful or even dangerous sites and may watch pornography or be potentially targeted by cyber bullying or groomed for sex or radicalisation.

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34 [https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/02/amusing-ourselves-to-death-neil-postman-trump-orwell-huxley?utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm\\_term=211477&subid=16675586&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/02/amusing-ourselves-to-death-neil-postman-trump-orwell-huxley?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm_term=211477&subid=16675586&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2).

**W**e live in a time of complexity and uncertainty within modern life. Whilst the overuse of technology and social media has reduced human interaction in families and neighbourhoods, we have also seen an upsurge of empathy and compassion for fellow human beings during times of difficulty and crises.

Positive parenting is about raising a child as a better human being and a better citizen. Our parental obligation is to help children grow into mature and confident adults with a positive character and good social and life skills.

Preparing for Life is a reminder to, particularly, Muslim parents about their unique and entrusted role in preparing their children for life with universal human and Islamic values.

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**Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari** is an educationalist, community activist, author, parenting consultant and commentator on social and political issues. He has written for various newspapers, blogs and journals including The Huffington Post and Al Jazeera English, and is the author of a number of books on marriage, family, parenting, identity and community issues from contemporary British Muslim perspectives.

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