

CHILDREN AROUND THE PROPHET

HOW MUHAMMAD ﷺ RAISED THE YOUNG COMPANIONS



HESHAM AL-AWADI

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INTRODUCTION

This book aims to introduce a dimension to the *Seerah* or biography of the Prophet Muhammad which has rarely been looked at in past narratives, namely how the Prophet interacted with children. It introduces readers to a wide range of methods the Prophet employed when dealing with children. The book emphasizes the complexity of raising children and catering to their needs. It develops analytical skills through the examples the Prophet set and encourages readers to think about the challenges involved when the same time-tested methods are employed in contemporary contexts. Finally, the book aims to familiarize the reader with some of the children that overlapped with the Prophet, as part of a wider endeavor to educate the reader on the shapers of early Islamic history.

Chapter 1 aims to introduce the main characters of the book, namely the Prophet and some particularly important children around him. It focuses on aspects that are believed to have influenced children, such as his compassion and mercy. The second part of chapter one presents a basic background of some of the young companions that lived in Mecca and Medina during the formative years of Islam.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the importance of the emotional dimension within children's personalities, including as a prerequisite to spirituality and belief. When dealing with children, the Prophet aimed to build a relationship based on confidence, love, compassion and mercy. Once this foundation had been laid, children were then more prepared to listen to his teachings and practice them wholeheartedly. Parents should not underestimate the importance of this dimension when dealing with their children, even when it comes to educating them about the teachings of Islam. Real and genuine practice of Islam should be based on persuasion, conviction, and love, rather than lecturing and haranguing.

Chapter 3 aims to demonstrate that parents, in their endeavor to build and strengthen belief in the hearts of their children, must first represent Islam in their own words and actions. They must also emotionally connect their children with Allah, the Prophet, and the Quran. The many narratives mentioned on the love and mercy of the Messenger can be used in the process of creating that link.

Chapter 4 looks at how the Prophet used to teach children the worship of Allah Almighty. With a primary focus on *salah* or daily prayers, the notion of worship requires gradual training and patience on the part of both adults and kids. Many aspects of worship are not religiously compulsory for children, so it is important to make the experience of worship as dear to your child's heart as possible. This chapter explains how the Prophet made this possible.

Chapter 5 discusses how the Prophet developed the morals and behavior of children. A large part of the process is a natural outcome of having successfully made progress in building their *iman* (belief) and training them in the worship of Allah. In all cases, parents must realize that morals are not inculcated in the character of the children through talks and sermons, but most effectively through action; this was also the Prophet's pedagogy.

Chapter 6 examines how the Prophet dealt with and disciplined the sexual desires of children as they grew up. The chapter also discusses some Quranic instructions and advice related to sexual desire, which are particularly useful for parents worried about raising their kids in today's hypersexualized society. The focus is on the role of the parents and the household in disciplining the children through the various manners that they must learn and become accustomed to when they are young.

Chapter 7 explores the ways in which the Prophet encouraged children to be social creatures. The essence of the chapter is to note that the Prophet aimed to build confident and socially involved individuals who were proud of their Muslim identity. One goal of this is to make sure the friendships created outside the household complement the parents' efforts at home.

The Afterward concludes the narrative by tracing the lives of some of the children from around the Prophet once they became adults and parents. The readers will see how these young children internalized the values they learned from the Prophet and the extent to which they implemented them in their lives.

Chapter 1

TMUHAMMAD AND THE CHILDREN

his chapter aims to introduce the book's main "characters", namely the Prophet and the children around him during his lifetime. It highlights his attributes which had an impact on those children, such as his compassion and mercy. The second part of this chapter will present a quick background on some of the children and young companions who lived in Mecca and Medina, in order to familiarize the readers with their names and significance. We will start with an overview of how the Prophet generally interacted with children.

Perhaps the single adjective that best summarizes the Prophet's attitude towards children is "compassionate."

A young man named Anas narrated in a hadith: "I never saw anyone who was more compassionate towards children than the Prophet."

The Prophet never practiced corporal punishment on any women or children, nor did he blame children for wrongs committed by their parents. This went against the norm in a highly tribal society where an entire family or clan would have been considered responsible for one member's actions.

Muhammad's mercy extended to non-Muslim children as well as those born out of wedlock. He advised a woman who confessed to having a child from a premarital relationship to "Go back and suckle him until you wean him." He visited a sick young Jewish boy to wish him well. He was consistently patient with children, no matter what they did.

Once, as the Prophet was holding a woman's baby in his arms, the baby urinated on his clothes, and the Prophet simply splashed some water on his clothes. He recognized that children needed unconditional love. He also knew that children wanted to feel valued and respected.

Anas also said, "As I was playing with my friends, the Prophet passed by us and greeted us".

The Prophet easily connected with kids using his playful sense of humor. Mahmud ibn Rabi'a said, "When I was a boy of five, I remember the Prophet taking water from a bucket with his mouth and jokingly spraying it on my face."

Happy childhood memories are never forgotten. He knew that children loved surprises and presents, including sweets and clothing. When the Prophet was given the first fruit (usually dates) of the season, after praying for Allah to bless the harvest, he would then give the fruit to the youngest children there.

Muhammad always gave gifts in person, seeing presence as more essential than presents in building a strong relationship. He assigned tasks to children to build their sense of responsibility and self-esteem.

Once, he sent little Anas on a mission and he was late going back to his mother.

"What delayed you?" she asked.

"The Prophet sent me on a task," he said.

"What was it?" she asked.

"It's confidential," he replied.

Children like to be given trust, which can sometimes take the form of secrets and confidential missions. This can build the child's sense of purpose and responsibility.

The children around the Prophet were like any other children, making mistakes and needing gentle reminders and guidance when it came to improving behavior.

One young boy recalled: “I was brought to the Prophet and he said, ‘My son, why are you throwing stones at the date-palm trees?’” [Seen as an unacceptable behavior].

The young boy replied, “So I can eat.”

“Do not throw stones at the date-palm trees. Eat from what falls to the ground from them,” the Prophet said.

The Prophet then patted him on the head and prayed, “O Allah: give him enough to eat.”

In general, the Prophet was an ideal role model for a wide range of traits, including trust and honesty. A young companion recalled how his mother asked him to come over and join her and the Prophet, bribing him with the promise of an unspecified gift.

“What are you going to give him?” the Prophet asked.

“Some dates,” the mother replied.

“If you don’t give him anything, that would count against you as a lie,” the Prophet said.

Even though the Prophet did not deal directly with the young boy at the time, the boy overheard the conversation and later narrated the hadith. Even when joking around with children, the Prophet was scrupulously honest.

Now, we will get to know the main characters of this book: The Prophet from a kid’s perspective and some of the key children whom the Prophet helped raise.

The Prophet from a Child's Perspective

I'm not going to provide you with a biography of the Prophet. I am only going to talk about the things which had an impact on children in general. We will talk about his appearance, verbal and non-verbal communication. I'm going to introduce you to things that influenced them and had an impact on their growth and development.

Let's us begin with a name. The name was Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim ibn Abd Manaf ibn Qusay ibn Kelaab ibn Murra ibn Ka'ab ibn Lo'ay ibn Ghalib ibn Fihr. Quite a mouthful, but let's break it down a bit. The "ibn" you see constantly recurring means "son" and tells you Muhammad's father was named Abdullah and his father was named Abd al-Muttalib and so on.

From this Arab naming convention, you can see how important it was in 7th century Arab society (and even today, to a lesser extent) to know someone's lineage, the family and tribe to which they belonged.

Muhammad was born in the year 570 CE; historians disagree about whether he was born in August or March. He was made a Prophet and a Messenger at the age of 40. He remained in Mecca for another 13 years until at the age of 53 when he fled persecution to resettle in Medina where he lived for 10 years. When we talk about the interaction between a child and the Prophet in Makkah, for instance, you know that the Prophet would have been in his 40s or early 50s and can better picture the interaction between the two. Any interactions in Medina, meanwhile, would have taken place while the Prophet was in his 50s or early 60s.

Let's now talk about his appearance. His appearance was described in detail in the book of *Shamail Al-Tirmidhi: The Virtues and Noble Character of The Prophet Muhammad*, which is available in English. Without going into exhaustive detail, I'm going to highlight the features that would have attracted the attention of a child looking at his face.

Have you seen how viscerally young children react to faces? Sometimes children can be brought to tears or laughter simply by looking at a human face. What causes this intense reaction? Sometimes it is out of familiarity. Children smile or cry when they look at people whom they see frequently and either love or fear. But if you remove familiarity as a factor and consider their reaction to human faces purely on the grounds of physical appearance, you will notice they smile or cry based on how reassuring or pleasant the face is to look at.

A 2004 study showed that newborn babies prefer to look at attractive faces, suggesting that face recognition is hardwired at birth, rather than learned. Alan Slater and his colleagues at the University of Exeter showed paired images of faces to babies as young as one day old and found that they spent more time fixated on the more attractive face. If preferring to look at attractive faces is hardwired in babies, then certainly one would expect the same results with children.

The Prophet had handsome features which would have been comforting to children. One hadith describes him as “the handsomest person,” while another says, “I never saw anyone as handsome as the Prophet. It was as if the sun flowed upon his face.”

Let us look at a hadith narrated by Al-Bara’ ibn Azib. He was approached by a man who had heard of the Prophet but never seen him, and the man asked what he looked like: “Was the Prophet’s face like a sword?” the man asked.

“No, it was like the moon,” Ibn Azib responded.

What would Ibn Azib have meant by comparing the Prophet to the moon rather than a sword? Both words symbolized beauty in local culture, but the two words have significantly different connotations.

Imagine the feeling a child would have when looking at a face that looks like the moon or a face that looked as if the sun glowed down upon it. Would this be the same as looking at a beautiful but sharp sword or another weapon? Surely not. The hadith illustrates that the Prophet’s face was

pleasant and reassuring. Some stories show how powerful his face and facial expressions could be, even without speaking.

The Prophet had just resettled in Medina when a prominent local rabbi named Abdullah ibn Salam met him for the first time. Abdullah later described the encounter as follows:

“When the Messenger of Allah arrived to Medina, the people came out to meet him. So, I went among the people to get a look at him. When I gazed upon his face I knew that this was not the face of a liar.” (*Sahih*)

Just looking at the Prophet’s face made a strong impression on Abdullah even though he was not a Muslim. Abdullah quickly recognized that this was not the face of a criminal or an imposter but rather someone trustworthy and incapable of lying.

“Then I believed in him”, said Abdullah, who later converted to Islam.

This was a reaction of a grown man and religious leader within a different faith – imagine the powerful impact the Prophet’s reassuring face would have had on a young child.

The Face of the Prophet

When looking at a human face, children usually pay the most attention to the eyes and lips, because they are the most mobile and expressive elements of the face. So, let’s talk about the eyes of the Prophet as children might have seen it.

Typically, a sleep-deprived person will get red eyes, but that was not the case with the Prophet. His eyes are described as black with a clear defining line between the pupil and iris, as well as a healthy reddish white sclera, considered a sign of eye beauty. The slit of his eyes was long, as well as his eyelashes – another sign of a beautiful eye. He had dense, fine, clearly separated eyebrow hairs.

Muhammad's mouth is described as moderately wide, with healthy, evenly spaced, bright teeth. Even though some people tend to focus on certain parts of the Prophet's life which can give the impression of him as someone prone to weeping and sadness, this could not be more wrong.

One hadith says, "I have not seen anyone who smiled more than the Messenger of Allah."

In another, a young child, Abdullah ibn Al-Harith said, "Whenever the Prophet met me he smiled."

The Prophet was very particular about his oral hygiene. Muhammad regularly used *meswak* to keep his teeth clean and healthy. A *meswak* is a toothbrush of sorts made from the arak tree. It is popular among devout Muslims and is now seen as an organic product.

Muhammad was in the habit of enunciating clearly and speaking at a steady pace. When asked by followers for advice, he would always take into consideration his knowledge of the person's background, strengths, and weaknesses. For this reason, you will notice the same questions receiving different answers based on who asked the question. He told one person who asked for general advice to watch his temper. The Prophet knew that this particular person had a problem with anger management. Another person asking for advice might have received a slightly different answer. This is why context is very important when we read the *Seerah* of the Prophet. Unfortunately, many readers read the *Seerah* verbatim and develop a shallow, unidimensional understanding of it.

The eloquence and clarity of the Prophet's speech was best described by his wife, Aisha. She said, "The Prophet did not speak quickly like you do now, rather he would speak so clearly, unmistakably, and that those who sat with him would memorize what he said."

Note how she said the listeners used to memorize what the Prophet said. Effectively, most of his listeners were like tape-recorders because he used to speak deliberately, choosing his words carefully and giving his listeners a chance to absorb what he said. Occasionally, he even repeated what he said

three times to emphasize its importance and make sure it would not be easily forgotten.

Let's now talk about the hair of the Prophet. His *Seerah* has been recorded in such detail that we can talk about his chest hair, but we are looking at first impressions, things that would be immediately noticed by any observer. A child looking at the Prophet would see nice, clean, black hair, which was neither curly nor limp, and which hung down over his shoulders and ears. He had very little gray hair for a 60-year-old man – reportedly, he only had 20 gray hairs.

Even when he was around 60 years old, the Prophet still had very few gray hairs, which he blamed not on marital disputes or financial worries, but rather on the stress of memorizing the Quranic verses which were revealed to him by Allah.

Why is his hair relevant here? Because to the children around him, he wasn't perceived as an aging grandfather, but rather as an approachable adult. He was someone still up for playing around and joking with them yet deserving of respect. Besides being a prophet, Muhammad was also like a father figure for them. It was this latter aspect which endeared them to him. Presumably, introducing Muhammad as the Prophet would have gone over the heads of younger children, but the perception of him as a father figure could reach across all age groups.

So, imagine a man named Muhammad. He could be your neighbor in Manchester, Houston, or Tamau He has a pleasant, comfortable face and is quick to smile whenever he sees you. He has kind, sympathetic eyes and is clearly a caring and loving person. At the outset, even without having dealt with him, would you not fall in love with him?

Imagine a child growing up under his mentorship and guidance. When this child grows up and talks to the tabieen, and tabi-tabieen, those who didn't see the Prophet but saw the companions. Imagine the excitement of this companion when he speaks about the one who brought him up. This boy was Anas ibn Malik.

Anas ibn Malik lived with the Prophet for 10 years. Allah gave him a long life and he lived until the ripe old age of 103, passing away in the 8th century after having outlived every other contemporary of the Prophet.

He said, “After the Prophet died, not a single day passed by without me seeing him in my dreams and crying every time I remembered his face.”

This was the impact that the Prophet’s physical appearance and his company had on children. Anas still vividly remembered the Prophet’s face from childhood memories even when he was himself a centenarian.

I personally cannot contain my own excitement at times when I am teaching students about the Prophet, and many people are brought to tears by hearing stories of the Prophet, even though none of us have met him in person. Have you ever thought about this? We read about the physical appearance of the Prophet, but do we really understand his impact on the people around him?

Think about your dining room table. If you’re always used to looking at it from the same angle, you will automatically recall it from that perspective. But then if you look at the same table from below while on your hands and knees, you would then gain a different understanding of the table.

Now try to apply the same logic to the *Seerah* . Think about the Prophet’s life from a woman’s perspective, from a man’s perspective, from a teenager’s perspective, and from a child’s perspective. Each of these can lead you to think about different aspects of the Prophet from a fresh perspective. I would encourage you to read or re-read the biographies written by Al-Tirmidhi, Bukhari, and Ibn Kathir, while consciously applying this different perspective.

We described the Prophet’s physical appearance. Now imagine a man so honorable and compassionate who holds your hand, places it on your cheek, and gently gives you advice. Imagine how a child would have felt. I want you to take a moment and think about this. Imagine this scene in your head and feel the warmth. He doesn’t reproach you; he doesn’t yell at you; he

doesn't become violent; when you see him, you don't feel threatened. This was the Prophet. If you as an adult felt safe and open to advice, then how would the children around the Prophet have felt when he was with them?

The Behavior of the Prophet

Now that was the physical appearance of the Prophet, but what about his behavior? Again, I will re-introduce the behavior from a child's perspective.

The Prophet had a deep passion and mercy for children, even before they were born. Aisha once asked the Prophet whether he had encountered a day harder than the day of the battle of Uhud.

In the battle of Uhud, the Prophet's helmet was smashed on his head, blood covered his face and his front tooth was broken. He fell on the ground and it was rumored that he had been killed. For Aisha, this had been the toughest day she could imagine the Prophet had encountered. To her surprise, the Prophet answered that yes, there had been one harder day. It was when he went to Taif looking for an alternative place before settling in Medina. The local population refused to take him in, throwing stones at him and badly injuring him. Even as he was under attack, Zaid ibn Harithah was with him protecting him and staunching the flow of blood.

Imagine if you had been assaulted by an attacker, and when the police asked you whether you wanted to press charges, you said no, because you wanted to give him or his children a chance to change for the better.

The Prophet did something similar. An angel appeared before the Prophet between two massive mountains and said he had an order from Allah to do whatever the Prophet wanted with the people of Taif, offering to crush them between the mountains in revenge. The angel was furious, for he had seen how the people of Taif had mistreated the Prophet. But the human being – the Prophet – showed more kindness and mercy than even the angel and said no, leave them alone. He said he had hope that one day their future

children and grandchildren would change and Taif would become a better city.

This was his vision: It wasn't about ego or revenge. It wasn't about them insulting him and deserving punishment. It was about what he wanted from this world. What did he want from those human beings? Did he want to bomb them? Kill them? Or did he want them to change from within? This vision needs education, tolerance, and mercy. This is not political rhetoric, this is simply based on the attitude of the Prophet towards the people who had mercilessly humiliated and assaulted him.

Let me give another illustration of how deeply the Prophet cared about children. He took deep comfort and joy in the act of prayer. Yet the Prophet would shorten the congregational prayers if he heard a child crying, so as not to prolong the misery of a baby and his mother. He sacrificed his own happiness derived from prayer to have mercy on a young child.

In the hadith narrated by the young Anas: "I have never seen anyone more merciful to children than Allah's Messenger." (*Muslim*)

The Children around the Prophet

So far, I have described the Prophet from the perspective of the children around him. Now I will introduce some of those children.

Let's start with Anas ibn Malik, whom we will encounter frequently in this book, because he is the source of many stories of the Prophet's interaction with children. "Anas" means happiness and keeping someone company and is a lovely name – short and sweet. The Prophet's affectionate nickname for Anas was "Unais".

Anas served the Prophet for ten years, from the age of 10 to 20, so Anas gives a fascinating, unique perspective, as no other young companion had anywhere near this continuous time spent with the Prophet, both at home and outside. He was able to speak authoritatively on questions about the

Prophet's daily routine and habits. Anas was born and raised in Medina, so never overlapped with the Prophet during his earlier years in Mecca.

Hassan ibn Ali was another child around the Prophet. He and his brother, Hussein who was one year younger than him, were the grandsons of the Prophet. Hassan was born three years before the Prophet migrated to Medina.

Their parents, Fatima and Ali, were relatively young when they got married in Mecca. Nothing is wrong with a couple getting married young. They become friends, they are more than just husband and wife; they grow and share life experiences with each other, and the more shared experiences, the stronger the bond.

Imagine Ali and Fatima growing up together and having a baby called Hassan and a year later another called Hussein—both named by the Prophet. When Hassan was born, the Prophet was 56. Knowing the age of the child and the Prophet helps you visualize the relationship. So, whenever you see the Prophet playing with the young toddler Hassan, he would have been in his upper 50s.

Hassan looked exactly like the Prophet and everyone knew this. Abu Bakr al-Siddiq once said to Ali, Hassan's father, that Hassan looked much like the Prophet, and Ali smiled with pride.

The Prophet loved his both grandsons; he used to pray for them by saying, "O Allah! I love them, so please love them." (*Bukhari*)

Imagine a grandfather praying for his grandson or granddaughter, and Allah blesses them with His love!

Another young companion was Abdullah ibn Omar. If you have any knowledge of Islamic history, you have probably heard of his father, Omar ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph who later succeeded the Prophet in leading the Islamic community. Like Anas, Abdullah was 20 years old when the Prophet died in 632. Abdullah became a Muslim with his father and migrated to Medina at the age of 10. Yet the 10 years he spent in

Medina were enough to make Abdullah ibn Omar the pious young companion that we know him as. Not just because his father was Omar, but because he was one of the children that were blessed to know the Prophet personally.

Another young and famous companion was Abdullah ibn Abbas. He accompanied the Prophet for far fewer years than Anas. This was because his father, Al Abbas, only converted to Islam about two years before the death of the Prophet.

Many Muslims now automatically think of Abdullah ibn Abbas as a wizened religious scholar because he authored a widely read *tafsir* of the Quran, drawing on his experiences with the Prophet.

Interestingly enough, he was only 13 years old when the Prophet died and had lived less than 3 years with him in Medina (unlike Anas ibn Malik) as his father only converted after the conquest of Mecca. However, within the limited time Abdullah had with the Prophet, he managed to learn and understand the Quran inside out.

Muhammad even had a special prayer for Abdullah: “O Allah, teach him wisdom and teach him interpretation of the Book.” (*Ibn Majah*)

Abdullah may have had less than 3 years with the Prophet, but he spent as much of his time as he could around him, praying, playing, and talking with him.

Our traditional adult-focused lens usually tells us that the Prophet was most frequently in the company of elders like the future caliphs, Abu Bakr, Omar, and Othman. But our child-focused lens is giving us another, younger perspective. Children and youngsters such as Anas, Hassan, and Abdullah were also around the Prophet.

We have now identified our main characters and are ready to set out on our journey with the Children around the Prophet.

Chapter 2

I DEVELOPING EMOTIONS

In [chapter 1](#), we identified the characters and players in the narrative. So now, whenever I'm speaking about the Prophet Muhammad, you and I share at least some common background information. When I mention Anas ibn Malik, you will at least recognize the name.

In the Afterward, we will complete the jigsaw by introducing Anas ibn Malik as an adult and see Abdullah ibn Omar married with children of his own, so that you can see that they did not become widely-admired adults from nothing. Their greatness stemmed from a lifelong process, which is an important message to us parents.

The earlier a transformation happens, the more long-lasting and stable it can be. Many of us become more observant Muslims during university and do truly changes our lives. But this doesn't compare to someone who was half as observant at the age of 6 or 7 in terms of praying and has already ingrained the concept of modestly lowering his gaze by the age of 8. He will not have any problem lowering his gaze in the summer as a young adult, because he has been doing this for most of his life. This is very different from someone who has just converted to Islam and then goes out and bombs a train station. You can understand the difference if you think of the Prophet as building blocks and shaping the characters of those around him. The blocks take shape gradually over time.

The first block the Prophet built with the children can be summarized in a single word: trust. He wanted to create a relationship built on love and trust with them. Children don't want endless instructions and commands. Kids

being kids, they might not appreciate a circle in *tafsir* or *fiqh* . They want to run, laugh, and play, and they are eager for adults to actively listen and pay attention to them.

So, before the Prophet spoke to them about serious matters such as heaven and hellfire and things related to orders or prohibitions (how important it is to pray, wear the hijab, read the Quran, etc.) he invested a lot of time building bonds of love and trust. Many of the nonverbal messages the Prophet used when communicating with children also served that purpose.

Love and trust are the best paths to encourage good behavior in children, whereas commands alone will eventually backfire. For instance, you can gently pat your child's head or put your hand on hers and ask her to pray instead of nagging or issuing orders.

Remember what the Prophet would say: “Oh Mu’adh, I love you, so don’t forget to recite after every prayer: ‘O Allah, help me in remembering You, in offering thanks to You and in worshiping You properly.’” (*Abu Dawood*)

It is difficult to cleanly separate these two aspects – expressing love but also providing instruction. However, if one of them must come first, it must be the love in order to build a relationship of trust between two people. The two are intertwined, but it is essential that love, emotion, and building a relationship of trust come before teaching any religious lessons. Parents must build a loving relationship so that their children trust them and consider them friends.

This is much easier if the parents are relatively young. If you have kids at the age of 30, for example, then when they’re teenagers, you’re going to be in your mid or upper 40s. That’s not an issue if you’re in good shape like the Prophet, who took delight to racing and playing with his kids. But if you are more like the rest of us, and your physical glory days are a couple decades behind you and that football game in the backyard might mean a heart attack, forget it.

So, when Omar became a Muslim, his son, Abdullah, became a Muslim too. The fact that they were close friends can be seen in the tone of the many

conversations in hadiths featuring both of them. They spent most of their time together. A similar father-son friendship existed in the dynamic between Jafar ibn Abi Talib and his son Abdullah ibn Jafar. There wasn't a large generational gap between Jafar and his son, Abdullah, nor between Omar and his son, Abdullah ibn Omar – perhaps as little as an 11-year difference.

Imagine still being in your 20s while playing basketball with your teenager! I certainly do not encourage you to go out and have kids when you're barely a tween yourself, but I do think the “generation gap” is largely a creation of our own making. It's there because you (and I) are out of touch with our children's reality and the youth culture today. Now, we are never going to be able to hang out with our kids and their friends at the mall without making things horribly awkward, but at the very least we can familiarize ourselves with the music they like and acquire some basic understanding of the social issues they deal with, such as the pressures of having to deal with cyber bullying or creating a picture-perfect life on Instagram.

Now let's examine how the Prophet built an emotional bond with a child's character.

First of all, as I already mentioned, it was through love and self-esteem. I would like to introduce another word: mercy, or *rahma* in Arabic, an extremely important concept in Islam. I know that this is something Muslim scholars preach when they speak about the behavior of the Prophet.

Allah says:

“And We have sent you [Muhammad] not but as a mercy for all that exists.”
(21:107)

I want you to visualize this *rahma* based on what we said in [Chapter 1](#) , how we described our character, Muhammad, in the first narrative. Start by thinking about his physical presence and appearance – the touch, look, and smile. Genuine *rahma* is not for show, and it is not dependent on whether you're in a good mood or even on your changing financial circumstances –

one cannot be merciful when he has a good job then abusive after he gets fired!

The Prophet's mercy was genuine, principled behavior, regardless of mood or circumstance. Almost no one smiles all the time if they're in a bad mood, but the Prophet's default demeanor was friendly, outgoing, and cheerful, even when he was consumed by worry about persecution or conflict. He would cry – such as when his son, Ibrahim, passed away at the young age of 18 months - but situations like this were the exception to the rule.

Abdullah ibn Al-Harith narrated, “I did not see anyone who smiled more than the Messenger, peace and blessing be upon him.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

This is the *rahma* we are talking about. And this was the *rahma* that Anas ibn Malik meant when he said, “The Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, was the most merciful of people towards members of his family. He had his son, Ibrahim, nursed in a Medina neighborhood and the husband of his wet-nurse was a blacksmith. We used to go to him and the house would be full of smoke from the bellows. He would kiss the child and take him in his lap.”

Anas ibn Malik knew what he was talking about out of personal experience. He saw plenty of other people who were merciful, but he saw the mercy of the Prophet as being in a league of its own.

What personal experiences did Anas Ibn Malik go through that enabled him to make such a statement about the Prophet? Let's give a few examples:

Anas ibn Malik's brother, Abu 'Umair, had a pet bird. Imagine your own child or a child you know who is deeply attached to a teddy bear, toy, or pet, to the extent that she refuses to go to bed without it. Now imagine if that toy breaks or goes missing, or worse, if a beloved pet dies. What sort of emotional shock would this have on the little child?

The Prophet could have seen a pet die and simply say, “To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return.” (2:156) This is the traditional Islamic saying in such circumstances. He could have explained that God had predestined that

the pet would die or that the pet is happily living in heaven. Even if this is true, it would not be something a young child would understand.

A child needs comforting, a child needs someone to cheer him up, a child needs someone to talk about the issue consuming her – the lost pet. That's why it's often advised that when someone passes away, it's an essential part of the healing process to talk about their loved ones. If you go and give your condolences and share a story about how the deceased was such a kind-hearted woman, this is healthier than avoiding discussing the loss.

The Prophet realized that Anas' brother was emotionally connected to his pet bird. This hadith is famous and has several narrations, each from a different perspective.

In one narration, Anas recalls, "The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) used to come to visit us. I had a younger brother who was called Abu 'Umair. He had a sparrow with which he played, but it died. So, one day the Prophet (may peace be upon him) came to see him and saw him grieving."

The Prophet asked, "What's the matter with him?"

The people replied, "His sparrow has died."

He then said, "Abu 'Umair! What happened to the little sparrow?" (*Abu Dawood*)

In this touching scene, the Prophet, even with the major responsibilities he shouldered as a community leader, immediately noticed and showed concern for a young child and his emotions.

In Anas' straightforward narration of the hadith, his personal experience shines through. You or I can read an eloquent *tafsir* by Ibn Kathir or others about the following Quranic verse:

"And by the Mercy of Allah, you (O Muhammad) dealt with them gently" (3:157).

However, unlike Anas, we don't have a personal experience of the Prophet's gentle love. The Prophet already knew what had happened to the pet sparrow. But still he wanted to ask because it was a subject of overwhelming importance in the young boy's world. He was not asking because he needed an answer; he was asking because he wanted the child to know that he cared. It's like saying, "Are you doing okay?" He or she will recognize that you've asked, that you showed you care.

Imam Ibn Hajar and other Islamic scholars commented on this particular hadith. One lesson which they derived was that it was permissible to ask a question to which you already know the answer.

There are other lessons learned; for instance, it is wise to speak in a manner appropriate to your audience. The Prophet could not have been as devastated as the young boy by the bird's death. He had already seen his toddler, Ibrahim, die. He had lost his mother as a child, never known his father, lost some of his beloved daughters, and of course, saw his cherished wife, Khadija, die. In the grand scheme of things, it would have been easy to brush off a pet bird's death as insignificant. Yet what was more important for him at this moment was the child's emotion. He wanted to show the child that it was natural to feel grief for a pet or any other loved one.

Mercy on Unborn Children

Imagine if you were a judge or ruler in an Islamic society, and a married person admitted to having committed adultery. According to the Quran and *Sunnah*, there are specific punishments for the perpetrator. But let's look at what the Prophet did:

A married woman came to the Prophet and admitted having committed adultery. He said, "Go back."

She returned, and on the next day she came to him again, and said, "I swear by Allah, I am pregnant."

He said to her, “Go back.”

She returned and came to him the next day. He said to her, “Go back until you give birth to the child.”

She then returned when she gave birth to a child. She brought the child to him and said, “Here it is! I have given birth to it.”

He said, “Go back and nurse him until you wean him...” (*Abu Dawood*)

Why did the Prophet do this? He did this for the sake of the unborn child. This child had the right to life and to proper emotional fulfillment from his mother. It was important that in his first years the child be with his mother. It was crucial that he be breastfed and cuddled by his mother, embraced and kissed.

When the Prophet told the woman to go back, she could have escaped and never returned. She was never put under house arrest, imprisoned, or detained. She continued to go to the mosque and attend the congregational prayers. She went to buy milk or food for her baby in the market, and people knew she had committed adultery. But she was protected because of her child. What more of *rahma* should we expect?

This was not someone who had been an upstanding member of the Islamic community or worshipping God 24-7. No, it was someone who had committed adultery while being a wife and mother. Yet, when one companion lost his temper and angrily attacked the adulterous woman, the Prophet rebuked him and ordered him to treat her respectfully, saying:

“By Allah, who my soul is in His hand, she has repented to such an extent that if a wrongful tax-collector were to repent, he would have been forgiven.” (*Muslim*)

When the woman died, the Prophet prayed for her soul.

“Are you praying for her even though she committed adultery?!” one companion asked in amazement.

“She has repented in a manner that, if it were to be shared among seventy of the people of Medina, it would be enough for all of them,” the Prophet responded.

The Prophet’s attitude embodies *rahma* . When Muslims discuss this story, we usually focus on the woman’s repentance.

But what about her young child? How much will this child come to love the Prophet because he spared his mother for years until he could be independent of her? Wouldn’t the child also grow to appreciate his mother as someone who had repented before she died?

Imagine this child growing up with the other children knowing his story. Do you think they would bully him or would they respect his mother, and by extension, him? Wouldn’t you also think that other mothers would love him as well, and care about him even more because his mother ultimately repented in an impressive show of piety?

I encourage you to extrapolate the meanings within this hadith and others instead of limiting yourself to the literal story conveyed in this case. Surely you would draw the conclusion that you should be more merciful and considerate in your life. If you do not yet have any children, then with those around you like your parents, siblings or towards human beings in general.

The Prophet’s mercy also showed in gestures and body language, such as affectionate pats on the head or hugs. Research studies show that when infants are held, they are healthier, happier, and less aggressive and violent.

Think about a child who has been abused, kicked, beaten, and neglected. Now compare this to another child who has always been loved, cuddled, kissed, and hugged.

This was what the Prophet did with children:

“When the Prophet used to visit the Ansar, he would greet their children, and stroke their heads” (*Nassa’i*).

Abdullah ibn Jafar recalls that when he was young, the Prophet stroked his head and prayed for him. When Abdullah narrated the hadith, he was a grown adult, but still vividly remembered the Prophet's display of affection with pride.

We tend to quickly recall both happy and tragic moments in our life. An abused woman will certainly remember every single time her husband beat her. A child would also remember how many times he has been kicked or beaten, kissed, or cuddled. Abdullah ibn Jafar still remembered after all those years in such detail that he could still recall the prayer the Prophet said for him, word for word.

Abdullah's father, Jafar, died as a martyr. The Prophet prayed for Jafar's children, including Abdullah ibn Jafar. It was fascinating that, after all those years, Abdullah ibn Jafar still remembered that the Prophet – now passed away – had stroked his head and prayed for him after that.

Never underestimate how much a child can remember. Never think that a child is too young to remember verbal abuse directed at him or witnessing a fight between spouses. Incidents that are intense or extreme tend to be registered in their long-term memory. Incidents linked to extreme pain or joy are usually unforgettable. That's why you might still remember certain songs because of the memories they instantly trigger. A particular voice, look, or gesture might trigger old memories. We call these "associations"; something triggers a memory, because the two are linked in your mind.

The Prophet was creating positive associations. He would trigger the long-term memory of children, so they could learn and retain what they had learned; all the while making them feel happy and loved. He would pray for them while stroking their head, smiling, or telling them how much he cared for them, so that they could later recall the prayer.

Kissing Children

The Prophet used to kiss his grandsons, Hassan and Hussein. (*Bukhari and Muslim*)

Once, the Prophet kissed Hassan, and one companion seemed surprised. «I have ten children, and I have never kissed any one of them,” said the man.

The Prophet looked at him, himself now astonished, and said, “Then what can I do if Allah has deprived you of mercy?” (*Muslim*)

In another narration, the Prophet said, “He who does not show mercy to others will not be shown mercy.”

In this hadith, we tend to focus on how merciful the Prophet was with children. But the hadith has other serious perspectives. Imagine the future of those ten children who have never been kissed, hugged, or cuddled. Emotionally deprived, do you think they will easily develop and express love for their parents, spouses, or children? Do you think they would one day gently kiss their father who had never kissed them?

The Prophet was also building the community and society’s emotional intelligence. The man’s comment shows he thought it was culturally unusual to see someone like the Prophet kissing his grandsons in public. The Prophet did so to show parents that this is how they should treat their children.

His *Sunnah* , or way, was not just his words but also his unspoken actions. He wanted to make kissing children a *Sunnah* , a radical change in a society that, until the introduction of Islam, had sometimes buried newborn girls alive, out of disappointment that they weren’t boys.

We tend to interpret “He who does not show mercy to others will not be shown mercy” to mean that Allah will not have mercy on you if you do not show mercy to others. But it could also mean that if you don’t show mercy to your children, your children in return will not treat you well once the tables have turned and you are elderly and dependent on them.

Once, Omar ibn Al-Khattab – now the Caliph – kissed one of his sons. One of Omar’s subordinates, a local governor or civil servant, said to him almost exactly what the companion had said to the Prophet when seeing him kiss Hassan.

“Oh, Commander of the Faithful, do you kiss your son, while you are the Commander of the Faithful?!” said the subordinate.

The civil servant seems to see a contradiction between serving in a public office and showing compassion. Omar ibn Al-Khattab gave the same Prophetic response. He said, “Then what can I do if Allah has deprived you of mercy?” Omar then went on to fire the bureaucrat on the spot, saying that if he could not have mercy on his children, then how would he have mercy on the people he was responsible for?

Carrying Children

The Prophet used to pray carrying Umamah, his granddaughter. When he prostrated he put her down and when he stood up he picked her up again (*Nassa’i*).

We tend to focus on the *fiqh* or jurisprudence of this hadith: is it permissible or not to carry my baby while I am praying? Scholars differed on whether the baby’s urine was impure or not. They argued that it depends on the child’s age and whether or not he was breastfeeding. With all due respect to those focused on *fiqh* , I would like to look at this hadith from the emotional development perspective.

If you enter a mosque during a congregational prayer, you typically see women praying towards the back, men in the front right behind the imam, and often children running around and playing in the middle of the mosque. This would be a reasonable expectation if you entered the mosque during the time of the Prophet. One would expect to find women at the rear, men in the front, and children in the middle.

But now you enter the Prophet's mosque, and what do you see? You see a little girl, Umamah, at the very front of the mosque. In a society that used to bury newborn girls as a source of shame to their families, what message was the Prophet sending?

First of all, he's saying that girls are pure and honorable, so much so that in this hadith men were praying behind Umamah. Let's zoom in on Umamah and her world. Imagine the little girl with her grandfather, twisting her head and looking behind her. She would have seen the living legends of early Islam, larger-than-life figures like Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali, may Allah be pleased with them.

Where is Zainab, her mother and daughter of the Prophet? Couldn't she, another mother, or an older child watch her during prayers? The Imam – the Prophet, in this case – should surely be focusing on his prayers, but the Prophet chose to multi-task.

The Prophet was focused on his prayers yet carrying Umamah or carrying Hassan. He would stretch out the prayer while he was carrying Umamah, in the same way that he would shorten it because a baby is crying.

Now imagine years later, Umamah is a mother herself now and is praying. Wouldn't she carry her own son or daughter with the same patience, care, and passion the Prophet showed her when she was a child? First and foremost, in her memories would be the tender emotions of the experience, not fine details of jurisprudence.

The Prophet, with his noble status, did not see himself as being above playing and joking with children. He did so because he believed we learn more when we are happy. We retain more and recall more when we are having fun.

Can you imagine an imam of a mosque running a race with his wife? In the hadith, Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, said, "The Prophet raced with me and I beat him." (*Ibn Majah*)

Today in some cultures, people might think this is not appropriate, even if in private. In some cultures, even playing with children in public is frowned upon. But the Prophet played with children in public without fearing that his reputation would be tarnished.

In the hadith, Ya'la ibn Murra said, "We went out with the Prophet, peace be upon him, where we were invited to eat. Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, was playing in the road and the Prophet raced the people and then spread out his arms. The boy began to run this way and that, and the Prophet made him laugh until he caught hold of him. He put one of his hands under his chin and the other on his head and then embraced him."
(*Bukhari*)

In a similar situation, Abu Hurairah said, "These two ears of mine have heard and these two eyes of mine have seen the Prophet, peace be upon him, take the palms of Hassan or Hussein in both his hands. His feet were on the feet of the Prophet."

"Climb up," the Prophet said.

Abu Hurairah tells us, "The boy climbed until his feet reached the chest of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace."
(*Bukhari*)

In another hadith, the Prophet used to stick his tongue out to Hassan so that he could see the redness of the Prophet's tongue. The narrator says, "He used to", which implies that the Prophet might have done it more than once.

The Prophet would play with his grandson in public, without being embarrassed of being judged by passersby. He was not embarrassed that this incident would be passed down through countless generations. On the contrary, he wanted us to know that this was his *Sunnah* with children – to play with and entertain them.

This was why Omar ibn Al-Khattab was kissing his son in public. Omar once said, "With his children, a man should behave like a child".

He meant a man should be easygoing, approachable, and friendly, as children are naturally. “However, when that very child was called upon for duty,” Omar continued, “he should behave responsibly.”

Generosity

The Prophet gave children gifts quite regularly and not just during the Eid holidays. He was quick to offer gifts at any time. Obviously, children love gifts, and often give their affection to those who gave them the gifts. Frankly, even grownups are the same.

The Prophet said, “Give presents to each other so that you will love each other.” (*Muwata Malik*)

Gifts have a functional role - in this case, it makes children love you, and the Prophet gave gifts so that children love him. Let me share with you one or two incidents in which the Prophet presented children with gifts.

When the first fruits of the season were brought to the Prophet, Abu Hurairah narrated, “The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, would say, ‘O Allah, bless us in our city and in our fruits...’”

Then he would give fruit to the young child there. Imagine a child taking some dates from the blessed hands of the Prophet, with a long queue of adults waiting to receive their share of the dates. The children can go and play afterwards, but later they will realize how fortunate they were to be first in the queue to take dates from the hands of the Prophet. Imagine the emotional link this would help create between her and the Prophet who favored her over others, including the elders. Certainly, the child would feel enormous gratitude towards the Prophet for having been so considerate.

So, parents, please give gifts to your children. Go to the charity shops if you can’t afford new toys or books. It’s not about how expensive a toy is, it’s about your thoughtfulness and building an experience with your child. In his mind, he will always proudly recall you surprising him with presents

and that you did it because you loved him. The toy will one day break or stop working because it was inexpensive or second-hand, but it will live on in your child's memory.

In the book of Al-Tabarani, the narration of the following hadith was after the Prophet had passed away. One of the *tabi'un* (the generation of Muslims born after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad, but were contemporaries of his companions) met and asked Al-Saib ibn Yazid, now an old man, if he had ever seen the Prophet.

“Yes, I did,” said Al-Saib. Al-Saib was a companion of the Prophet because he had seen the Prophet. Anyone who had been with the Prophet, was a Muslim at the time, and remained a Muslim through the death of the Prophet was considered a companion. Interacting with and talking to the Prophet was more important than visually seeing him.

Abdullah ibn Maktoom, the *Muezzin* giving the call for prayer during the time of the Prophet, was blind yet he was a companion. The King of Abyssinia had believed in the Prophet, but never saw him in person and therefore was not considered a companion.

Now Al-Saib ibn Yazid was a little child when he saw the Prophet but was an old man by the time the hadith was narrated. When asked whether he had seen the Prophet, you can feel in the response his passion for the good old days and fond memories of the Prophet which were immediately evoked.

“I came with a group of children to the Prophet, who was eating dates with a group of his companions”, he said. “When he saw us, he took some dates and he gave them to us,” he concluded.

And that was the end of the story; on the surface, it doesn't seem like the kind of encounter that would linger with someone his entire life. But clearly, it was both a fascinating experience and a source of pride to have met the Prophet in person, even briefly.

The amazing thing is that the old Saib still remembered the incident. It registered in his long-term memory because it was a gift from someone children loved.

Also, notice in the hadith how the young generation of the tabi'un were eager to listen to stories about the Prophet and to link with those who were his companions, however old they had become. Clearly, there was no "generational gap."

Just imagine running into Oprah walking down the street, and you told your son to ask her for a picture together. What are you doing? You are linking your child with that celebrity and giving him a tangible memory of her physical presence.

Now imagine you link that boy with a simple story such as seeing the Prophet. What sort of a bond are you creating with the young generation? You are making them feel as if everything associated with the Prophet is interesting, however brief. Al-Saib's encounter with the Prophet was indeed brief but left a lasting impression.

So far, I have explained the emotional building blocks the Prophet was creating within children's characters. I described how the Prophet used to show his affection for children through hugs, kisses, and playing together. I strongly suggested that without this important emotional dimension in the personality of the child, they will struggle to have emotional intelligence when they become parents themselves. They will never be able to offer as much compassion to society in return.

Caring in Times of Crisis

I will now share another important incident that showed how the Prophet dealt with children with care and compassion.

According to a hadith narrated by Al-Tabarani, the Prophet was sitting in the mosque when Umm Ayman, a well-known companion, came to him and

said, “O Messenger of Allah, Hassan and Al-Hussein are missing.”

Immediately, the Prophet ordered the others to help him look for the lost little boys, who had apparently gotten lost while off playing on their own.

In the end, they found the two boys frightened out of their minds near a huge snake coiled and ready to strike. Remember Hassan and Hussein were only a year apart and very close to each other. Part of their emotional bond was likely thanks to the training from their grandfather, the Prophet.

When the Prophet came, the two little boys were hugging each other out of fear. According to the hadith, the snake looked at the Prophet and then slithered away. The Prophet went to the terrified Hassan and Hussein, wiped their faces, and prayed for them.

The context of the touch is now different from previous contexts when dealing with his grandsons. Now he is wiping their face to comfort them and remove their fear. He then carried them away on each shoulder.

If a photo had been taken of the Prophet carrying his grandsons and showed to Muslims living in London or in Washington centuries later, they would be incredulous. They would see the Prophet hugging two children he had just rescued, like a fireman saving children from a burning building. In an emotional scene such as this one, he was gently wiping the scared faces of his two grandsons, praying for them and carrying them over his shoulder.

He then said to both of them, “You are so dignified in the sight of Allah. I will do what I can to protect you and to help you.”

This incident shows how one should deal with a child in difficult times of fear or need. When you spot your child in fear, even if he had been doing something wrong, don’t reproach him on the spot. Embrace him first. When a newborn baby arrives in the family, his big sister might hit or pinch the newborn out of jealousy. It’s a big mistake to overreact and become furious with the big sister, since she is doing this out of a natural fear that she is being abandoned and has lost her cherished place with the family. So, the way to deal with this insecure attitude is to show her more love by

embracing and kissing her. Make her feel emotionally secure before you rescue the crying newborn.

When the Prophet heard his grandchildren were missing, he immediately began to look for them. Are parents today as careful about the whereabouts of their children? Do they know who their friends are? What virtual friends do they have over the net? What games do they play? What images do they consume?

I think we need to be inspired by this hadith; we need to apply the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad and care more about our children. There are less literal but no less dangerous snakes in society that might harm them one day. Be sure that you don't come to rescue them, only to find out it's too late.

Daughters

Children are children, but daughters need special care and attention; the Prophet was a doting father to his four daughters. One of the immediate examples was how he dealt with his daughter, Fatima.

In the hadith narrated in *Bukhari* , it says when Fatima came to the Prophet, he would stand up for her, make her welcome, kiss her, and sit her down in his place. What's amazing is this was a scene void of dialogue yet still very powerful. There were no spoken words, just gestures of love and respect.

The very simplicity of the Prophet's wordless gesture shows the love and respect with which he treated his daughters. This hadith became well-known mostly in the context of *fiqh* or jurisprudence – Islamic scholars were trying to determine whether it was permissible to stand up for elders or *ulama* out of love and respect. But I see this as missing the forest for the trees. The big picture is that parents need to show love and compassion to their children, especially their daughters.

The Prophet would kiss his daughter rather than ask her to kiss him on the hand or cheek, as some fathers do, particularly in more traditional, patriarchal societies. He doesn't ask her to sit next to him but in his place. In some cultures, inviting someone to sit in your place is a sign of respect and gratitude - a sign of love and pride. From an early stage, the Prophet is fulfilling the girl's natural need for love and appreciation. This emotional fulfillment helps strengthen his daughter's confidence, so she is not vulnerable to the first guy trying to sweet-talk her. A girl coming from a home where she was neglected or abused in any way would be more prone to believe the first guy who tells her he loves her.

When Ali ibn Abi Talib later married Fatima, she had a high level of expectation for how she should be treated, based on how her father, the Prophet, had treated her. Ali had to show at least as much compassion, love, and respect to win Fatima's heart.

Let this be a message to all parents: nothing is wrong with telling your daughter that she is beautiful, spending quality time with her, cuddling her, and carrying her. Like any human being, they need their own emotions to be fulfilled in order to be immune to those who would exploit any emotional vulnerability. You need to stabilize her human need for fulfillment and this was exactly what the Prophet did; he built Fatima's emotional sense of security.

There is another interesting hadith related to a profound experience another child had with the Prophet Muhammad. As an adult mother, Umm Khaled narrated this hadith about a childhood encounter:

Once, the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, was brought some garments, including a small cloak with a border and black stripes. "Whom do you think to be more deserving for it?" he asked.

The people kept silent.

"Bring Umm Khaled," he said. Then she was carried to him and he put it on her. "Wear this dress till it is worn out," he told her twice. Then the Prophet went on looking at the red or yellow marks on the garment, saying, "This is

sana , this is *sana* , Umm Khaled.” In the language of the Abyssinians, *sana* meant “beautiful”.

There are a couple noteworthy details about this story. Despite being an older woman when narrating the hadith, Umm Khaled recalled fine details, such as the colors on her dress. Furthermore, the Prophet’s use of a word in an Abyssinian language, *sana* , is significant.

Umm Khaled spent her early years in modern-day Ethiopia, having migrated there in 615, and the Prophet showed personalized attention by using a foreign word which would have carried connotations of home for Umm Khaled.

Umm Khaled recalls another incident no less fascinating than the one above. She recalled seeing the birthmark around Muhammad’s shoulder known as the seal of the Prophet, and she curiously reached out to touch it. Her father promptly scolded her, but the Prophet told him to leave her alone. This suggests the Prophet was in favor of encouraging children’s natural curiosity, not stifling it for fear of making a social faux pas.

Going back to Umm Khaled’s story of the dress, the Prophet told her repeatedly, “Wear this dress until it is worn out”. We are told that Umm Khaled actually did wear that dress for years until its color had become dark from wear and tear.

Have you ever thought of buying a child two toys instead of one, just because you know one will end up broken right away? The natural process of exploration can sometimes entail some destruction. That’s why our kids often like being at school more than being at home. At daycare or school, children have more freedom to play, experiment, and in the process, damage things. At home all they hear are warnings and prohibitions – what they shouldn’t be doing. The Prophet allowed this young Umm Khaled to poke at his birthmark, a treasured sign of his prophethood. This was the extent to which he was prepared to allow children to explore and play, even with the inevitable damage they can wreak.

Chapter 3

BUILDING FAITH

In this chapter, we will examine how the Prophet built up faith (*iman*) and creed (*aqeedah*) within children. Despite the pivotal importance of the tenet of faith, I purposely delayed discussing it until I first discussed the development of emotions.

In [chapter 2](#), I said the Prophet wanted children to simply love him first before they could believe in him. He wanted to create an emotional bond of mutual trust before building up their faith. Before you ask anyone to believe in something, you have to build a relationship based on love and trust. That was what the Prophet was initially doing by displaying his affection before he did anything else.

After patiently building an organic relationship, it became easier to expect them to have faith in him. It was easier for them to accept him saying: I am the Prophet of Allah; if you want to go to heaven, you need to obey me. You also need to love Allah. You need to love Allah if you really love me, for it was Allah who sent me. This is what the Prophet did, which is why we are discussing the development of faith after that of emotions.

Today, I think our understanding of *iman* and *aqeedah* has, unfortunately, been reduced to theological polemics and confusing questions like, “Does Allah have a hand?”, “Is Allah over the throne?” or “Is Allah everywhere or in heaven?” But endless intellectual debates over these questions are misguided. The simple but more meaningful questions are: Do we really love Allah? Are we really prepared to sacrifice our lives for Allah? Do we love the Prophet more than we love our property, wealth, or family? And

before we can answer this question, do we actually know the Prophet as deeply as we should? Can we love someone we don't actually know much about?

Love is not an intellectual exercise, but rather a genuine feeling that one nurtures. Love is when your heart beats when I mention the name of your loved one. If I say the name "Muhammad", what happens? If you're an observant Muslim, you might automatically say, "Peace be upon him". But then what? This was not at all the case with the Prophet's companions; whenever the Prophet did something or said something; the companions immediately listened closely to him.

As one hadith says, "When the Prophet spoke; the companions bowed their heads and sat completely still, as if birds were sitting on their heads." (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

Can you imagine this level of respect? Anyone who has attended a large meeting or lecture will know it is difficult to gather a roomful of people's attention when they're chatting amongst themselves. But the Prophet's companions were brought to immediate attention by anything he said or even at the mention of something the Prophet had said. This is one measure of their deep love for him. They believed in the Prophet because they loved him first – love first and faith second.

That is why the Prophet says, "None of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father and his children." (*Bukhari*) The young children believed in the Prophet because they built strong emotions and mutual trust through their interactions with him (see [Chapter 2](#)). He built their faith on top of a foundation of emotional ties.

To develop your children's faith, you need first to work on making them love the Prophet; and to make them love the Prophet, you need to nurture that love in your own heart first. If your children are to have faith, they must see genuine love for the Prophet in your eyes. They should hear you praying for the Prophet whenever his name is mentioned and see you praying for him during Friday prayers.

As the hadith says, “The best of your days is Friday... so send a great deal of peace and blessings upon me on that day, for your peace and blessings will be presented to me.” (*Nassa'i*)

In all your actions, you should be inspired by the Prophet, whether it's in eating, drinking, or how you interact with your fellow humans. Your children are more observant than you realize and will put more stock in your actions than in your words. If they see you devoting more time to watching football or *Game of Thrones* than you do reading about the Prophet, they will figure out where your true passions lie. So, before you can build the faith in a child, you need to build his love for the Prophet first.

The children around the Prophet certainly did love him. When describing the Prophet, Ali ibn Abi Talib said, “Whoever saw him for the first time would fear him, but whoever got to know him, loved him.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

What Ali meant was if you saw the Prophet for the first time, you might feel somewhat anxious or nervous out of respect. His presence inspired awe, and it was natural to be intimidated at first. But when you interacted with him and got to know him personally, you quickly came to love him.

When children saw the Prophet, they would shy away at first, like most kids do when they meet an adult for the first time, much less the Messenger of God. But Muhammad had a way with children – showing affection through hugs and kisses, giving little gifts such as dates, and complimenting their clothes (see [Chapter 2](#)). They soon came to adore him. Ali, the narrator of the above hadith, converted to Islam while still a child.

Zaid ibn Harithah was adopted and raised by the Prophet. He had been separated from his family since childhood when he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. After many years of looking for him, his father found him in Mecca. His father went to the Prophet and asked for his son's freedom, so he could return home to his family. The Prophet readily agreed but left the final decision to Zaid.

“You know who I am and have seen the love and compassion I have for you, so you can choose to stay with me or you can go with them,” said the Prophet.

Without hesitation, Zaid said, “I don’t prefer anyone over you. You have taken the place of my father and mother.”

His father was stunned and asked his son how he could choose slavery over freedom.

Zaid said, “I have seen remarkable things from this man that I cannot choose anyone else over him”.

Zaid was concurring with what Ali had told us about the Prophet. Zaid literally chose the Prophet over his own father, due to everything he had seen from interacting with the Prophet. This is the real meaning of faith.

The companions, children included, understood and practiced faith or *aqeedah* (creed) before they evolved into the more complex theology we study today. The Prophet didn’t “teach” *aqeedah* in lectures, he practiced it. If you study the early chapters of the Quran which were revealed in Mecca, you will see how Allah built the faith of the early community. Despite the eloquent beauty of the Quran, the language in the chronologically earlier chapters avoids theological semantics in favor of simpler references to His Creation.

“Say He is One.” (112:1)

“Don’t they look at the camels – how they are created.” (88:17)

“Then tell Me about the seed that you sow in the ground. Is it you that make it grow, or are We the Grower.” (56:63-64)

Faith was built through love and consistently positive role models, not through pedantic lectures. The companions loved him so much, they wanted to be with him forever, even in the afterlife in heaven. Can one love someone that much?

Anas ibn Malik, who worked as a servant of the Prophet starting at the age of 10 and is one of the most common narrators of the hadith, passed down this story:

A man asked the Prophet about the Day of Judgment saying, “When will the Hour [of Resurrection] be?”

The Prophet said, “What have you done to prepare for it?”

The man said, “Nothing, except that I love Allah and His Messenger.”

The Prophet said, “You will be with those whom you love.” (*Bukhari*)

This alone seems like a good hadith, but it’s not quite the end of the story. Anas weighs in on the Prophet’s response by saying, “We had never been as glad as we were on hearing that saying of the Prophet. I love the Prophet, Abu Bakr, and Omar, and I hope that I will be with them because of my love for them, even though my deeds are nothing like theirs.”

Anas was a teenager when he narrated this hadith. As a 15 or 16-year-old who was already spending much of his time with the Prophet, his dream

was to be with him in Heaven. Love doesn't get any stronger and purer than that.

Liking What the Prophet Liked

To love someone doesn't necessarily mean liking what s/he likes. Your wife is a lamb-lover, but you are a chicken fanatic, for example. The Prophet might have regularly eaten gourds similar to pumpkins native to the Arabian Peninsula, but maybe you dislike anything resembling a pumpkin. You love the Prophet, but you strongly dislike pumpkin. Not a problem. But it was a little more complicated for Anas ibn Malik.

In a hadith, Abu Talut related how he came across Anas eating a pumpkin and complaining about how much he couldn't stand it, but he only ate them because Muhammad was a big fan. Anas desperately wanted to have the same taste as the Prophet. You can imagine how this attitude would reflect in more serious matters of faith. Anas was a young boy when he was first introduced to pumpkin by the Prophet. He tells us the story:

Anas said, "I went along with the Prophet to the house of a young tailor. The tailor offered the Prophet a hearty bread and meat soup and got back to work. The Prophet started picking the pieces of pumpkin, and I too started picking them and putting it before him. Since then I have always loved to eat pumpkin."

What's interesting is the Prophet was doing business with talented youth – a tailor, in this case. The Prophet was doing business with and accepting an invitation from a talented young man, while taking another (Anas) under his wing. These were the children around the Prophet.

Your child might one day want to wear tight jeans or get a piercing or tattoo that you are less than enthusiastic about. Youngsters today are willing to do whatever they can to look like their favorite celebrity. Can we reach a level where by our children love the Prophet to the degree that Anas is showing? There's no need to mimic the Prophet in his personal preference for

pumpkin, but can we mimic a particular action that he did and was part of the *Sunnah* ?

Anas might have been doing more than was needed, but he was doing so out of love for the Prophet, even if he personally couldn't stomach pumpkin. Can we get our children to love the Prophet as part of building their faith?

The Secret of the Seerah

You cannot love someone without knowing anything about them. Otherwise, they will be a remote concept. One way to get children to love the Prophet is to tell them down-to-earth, relatable stories about him. Let me share the story of a young companion who showed love for the Prophet. His story is told by the famous Abdul Rahman ibn Auf.

Ibn Auf tells the story of how he was in the Muslim army's ranks during the crucial battle of Badr and looked to see who was next to him on either side. He was a little disturbed to see the fighters on either side were mere boys, and he found himself wishing he had more experienced and stronger warriors alongside him.

One of them got his attention asking Ibn Auf if he knew who Abu Jahl was. "Uncle, do you know Abu Jahl?"

"Yes," I said, "What do you want to do with him?"

He said, "I have been told that he abused the Messenger of Allah."

"By Allah," he pledged, "in Whose Hand is my life, if I see him, my body will not leave his, till either of us meets his fate."

Ibn Auf added: "Then the other boy called my attention, saying the same thing as the first had said."

Why were both boys looking for the same person, Abu Jahl? They had learned that he used to mistreat the Prophet. Note that Abu Jahl is from Mecca, and the two young boys are from the Ansar in Medina. They have never met Abu Jahl and that's why they wouldn't recognize him without the help of someone from Mecca – Abdul Rahman ibn Auf, in this case.

Yet, the fact that they have heard of Abu Jahl and knew that he used to abuse the Prophet tells us that those children knew the *Seerah* of the Prophet. They were aware of his biography, including the Meccan period. It was enough for them to learn that someone, somewhere, somehow used to insult the Prophet, and they were determined to defeat him.

Today, how do we get our children to love the Prophet without knowing him personally? In the hadith, the Prophet himself said, “Adorn your children with three characteristics: love for your Prophet, love for the Household of the Prophet and the reading of the Quran.” (*Al-Tabarani*)

So how can we do this? This is no small feat; children get attached to things or people they see, but they can't see the Prophet. All marketing today is based on real personalities, celebrities and their outfits, accessories, lifestyle, etc. This would be impossible in the case of the Prophet. So, what to do? It's a challenge, but still doable.

There are a couple of things that parents can do to make their children love the Prophet. First, is to tell animated, exciting, and relatable stories about him, and second, to represent him accurately.

So first, learn how to tell stories. Storytelling today is a no less powerful tool than it was in 7th century Arabia. Stories can sell anything and everything, and whoever tells the best story sells the most. Children, especially between the ages of 3 and 6, love stories, especially when told well. This is the age when they appreciate narrative. The companions used to do exactly this: tell the story of the Prophet, whom they had seen first-hand, to their children, who often had not.

Ismail, the grandson of the famous companion, Saad ibn Abi Waqqas, said, “My father – who was called Muhammad – used to teach us the *Seerah* of the Prophet Muhammad.”

You would guess that Saad had passed down the *Seerah* to his son, Muhammad, who in turn taught it to his own son, Ismail. What would you then expect from Ismail when he grows up, gets married, and has children? He will tell his children the same stories his father told him, and so on.

This was how a love of the Prophet used to be passed to generations that had never met him in person and this is how you should pass the love of the Prophet to your children and grandchildren. Listen to or read the *Seerah* , then reflect on what you’ve learned, and how to make this information accessible and relevant to your 5-year-old child, for example. You can begin with interesting and easy-to-imagine stories. For instance, younger children love animal stories. You could tell the story of the Prophet and the crying camel:

The Messenger of Allah entered a man’s garden and saw a camel. When the camel saw the Prophet, it began to weep, its eyes flowing with tears. The Prophet went over to it, patted it on the hump, and gently stroked its head until it calmed down.

“Whose camel is this?” he then asked.

A young man came and said, “It’s mine, O Messenger of Allah!”

The Prophet said, “Don’t you fear Allah about this animal which Allah has placed in your possession? This camel complained to me that you have been starving and overworking it.” (*Abu Dawood*)

When my daughter, Hadeel, was 6, I told her the story of the camel. At that age, my daughter wouldn’t have questioned the fact that the camel was crying, because she was used to stories with anthropomorphized horses, frogs, dogs, fish, and the like. Only when she grows up will she realize this was something remarkable, a miracle, in fact.

The camel was crying because its young owner used to mistreat it. The Prophet put his hand on the camel until it stopped crying. I began engaging Hadeel with thought-provoking questions: What would you do if you saw an animal crying? Why do you think animals cry? How can we make animals happy? What do you think the Prophet would do if he saw you crying? Then seize the moment to instill the love of Prophet Muhammad in a way that moves a child.

The second thing you can do to make your child love the Prophet is represent the Prophet through your actions. Give them presents and say the Prophet also used to give children presents. Let them know all your good dealings with them (gifts, kissing, stroking, playing, etc.) are based on what the Prophet used to do. Let them make that connection. That would be the essence of Allah's words:

“Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah, you have a good example to follow.” (33:21)

Isn't the Prophet a good example and role model to follow? Your child might not have physically seen the Prophet, but he will certainly see you, his parents. I already mentioned ways in which you can do this: saying “*sallallahu alaihi wasallam* ” whenever the Prophet's name is mentioned and seizing opportunities to explain his *Sunnah* in a way that is interesting to a child. But before all this, you must place the building block of emotions; the love and trust come first.

Belief in Allah

Ideally, I would have liked to begin with teaching belief and love of Allah. But like I said, children at this age can't really conceptualize who Allah is. They will love Allah through their love of the Prophet. That's why I started with the Prophet; they can relate more to him. Once they know enough about the Prophet, they will surely love the God that sent us this noble man. That's how belief is built, not through lectures and theological semantics beyond the mind of a child, but through stories and role models.

That was how the Prophet taught children belief or *aqeedah* . He established an emotional bond or rapport first, and then he spoke to them about Allah. Let me give you an example. Abdullah ibn Abbas – then a young boy – said:

“One day I was [riding] behind the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and he said:

’O lad, I shall teach you some words [of advice]: Be mindful of Allah and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, then ask Allah [alone]; and if you seek help, then seek help from Allah [alone]. And know that if the people were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would not benefit you except with what Allah had already prescribed for you. And if they were to gather together to harm you with anything, they would not harm you except with what Allah had already prescribed against you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.’” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

The essence of belief or *aqeedah* is to believe in no one is powerful other than Allah, and that is effectively what this prophetic talk to the boy is all about. Think about it, wasn’t the Prophet’s prayer answered by Allah? Yes, his prayers were answered. Abdullah ibn Abbas was the cousin of the Prophet, and the Prophet could have told the boy, “Whenever you needed something, come to me and I will pray for you.”

No, the Prophet wanted to connect the child to Allah alone. Ibn Abbas surely loved the Prophet, but this love was used to support *tawheed* (the oneness of Allah) and *aqeedah* , not contradict them.

“Say (O Muhammad) I am only a man like you.” (18:110)

When you ask, ask from Him Alone; and if you need help, ask Him alone for help. No semantics, no polemics, but simple brief words – *aqeedah* a young child could understand.

Children learn better when they are happier, having fun, and enjoying themselves. Talk to your children about Allah when they are having a good

time; that's when they will listen most. In the case of Ibn Abbas, he was on a ride with the Prophet. That hadith wasn't inside a house, but outdoors on a ride together.

What's wrong with teaching *aqeedah* to your child while she's having fun? Ibn Abbas was learning about Allah while riding a camel, a donkey, or a mule. Imagine teaching the love of Allah while your child is on a merry-go-round. They are costly these days, but it's worth the investment!

You pay some money for a few turns and say, "Oh Abdullah," or "O Aisha, when you ask, then ask Allah alone."

On their second turn of the merry-go-round (and your child would definitely love a second turn) you say, "If you seek help, then seek help from Allah alone."

Of course, you don't have to say this literally. You know your child best and should understand what short and sweet message will click with him or her.

Belief in the Hereafter

I have always wondered how to get children to really love Allah. At this young age, the love has to be based on emotions not reason. So, part of it can be based on stories and part could be, say, beautiful pictures, such as that of the Kaaba or of Allah's wondrous creation. It could be pinned on the bedroom wall as a reminder of the house of Allah. Tell them one day you will go and visit Mecca.

How do we make the child believe in the Hereafter or in Heaven (*Jannah*)? Again, it has to be tailored to the child's psyche. Let me share my personal experience as a father.

When my daughter was 6, she loved bouncy castles. If I wanted her complete attention or compliance, I could allude to a bouncy castle! Now in the Quran, Allah says to those who will enter Paradise:

“Enter you therein in peace and security- this is the Day of eternal life. There they will have all they desire- and We have more.” (50:34-35)

So, whatever one desires, favorite food, drink, house, car, dress, and, in the case of my daughter, bouncy castles, Allah will provide.

“*Inshallah* , Sara,” I say with an enthusiastic tone, “in *Jannah* there will be lots of colorful and beautiful Bouncy Castles. That’s what Allah says in the Quran,” I then read the verse to her. I assured her that she could play for as long as she liked, and as far as I was concerned, it’s for free!

Salma, my other daughter, is four years old and hates going to bed. So, I tell her, in *Jannah*, there will be no bedtime.

“Really!?” she exclaims, “There is no sleeping in *Jannah* ?”

“Yes,” I say, “and maybe you don’t even have to brush your teeth!”

Don’t you think she would love *Jannah* ? When she is a little bit older, I can tell her in *Jannah* there will be no school or homework. It sounds funny, but you know what I am getting at; it’s about making *Jannah* a loveable, more tangible place that a child becomes attached to.

As I alluded to earlier, another way to get your child to love Allah is by telling stories. Here is an example of a story you might tell a young child between 3 and 6 years old. Yes, I know, this is not a book about stories but about how the Prophet raised the young companions. Still, it’s important, I believe, that we show how we can apply what we learn from the Prophet in a way which is relevant to a child living in the twenty-first century. The story could go something like this:

The story is about a girl called Maha. One day, Maha was sitting with her mother and her younger sister Yasmin. Suddenly, Yasmin felt ill and their mother tried to do all she could to help, but it was no use. She decided to go to the pharmacy to bring some medicine, and she asked Maha to look after Yasmin.

There was nobody else in the house except the two little sisters. Suddenly the lights went out in the house and everything was dark. Yasmin was scared and started to panic in the same way Hassan and Hussein were terrified because of the snake (see [Chapter 2](#)).

Maha recalled some stories her mother used to tell her about Allah and that no matter how terrified you are or how lonely you feel, remember that you are not alone. Trust that Allah is with you and is looking after you.

Maha vividly remembered what her mother used to say in her warm and loving voice: “If all people gathered to harm you, they will never be able to do other than what Allah has destined.”

Maha began to calm her sister down until she stopped crying. She then slowly went to the window and opened the curtain. The dark room was immediately lit by the moon’s light.

“See Yasmin,” Maha pointed at the window, “there’s the moon... It isn’t dark anymore.”

Maha began to tell Yasmin some of the stories she’d heard from their mother. Yasmin listened until she slowly fell asleep.

When their mother returned home from the pharmacy, she was impressed with what Maha had done. She had never thought Maha would still recall these stories and narrate them to her little sister in such a difficult situation. In appreciation of her bravery, their mother promised to buy Maha a new book of stories, including stories about the moon. She also promised to teach her a chapter in the Quran called Al-Qamar (the Moon).

Maybe you could tell a better story, but you get the point. It’s about how you can build a child’s belief in Allah by storytelling.

I once told Hadeel, my daughter, the story of Maha and the moon when picking her up from daycare. Every day, I pick her up from nursery at one o’clock in the afternoon and ask her on our way home what stories Mrs.

Foster told today. I told her the story of Maha and asked what she thought. She said she liked this story more than the stories she had heard in daycare.

So, I'm saying if we tell our children animated yet meaningful stories, we can slowly but surely nurture children's belief (*iman*) and *aqeedah* .

Belief in Qadar (Fate)

Aqeedah is not just about the love of Allah; it's also about belief in fate. This was also indirectly taught to Ibn Abbas in the hadith above. The Prophet tells the young boy in a language he can understand: "Know that if the people were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would not benefit you except with what Allah had already prescribed for you. And if they were to gather together to harm you with anything, they would not harm you except with what Allah had already prescribed against you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried."

Ibn Abbas was only a little child, and in terms of strength would have been helpless to defend himself against any adult trying to hurt him. Yet, the Prophet pointed out that they are all powerless to do anything other than what Allah willed. In other words, the Prophet is telling the boy, don't fear anyone other than Allah, and don't pin your hopes on anyone other than Allah. Isn't this an amazing way to nurture belief in a child?

Love of the Quran

To build the block of belief, one needs to connect the child to the Quran. That's what the Prophet did, and we will learn how we can do it, too.

Today, some young Muslims go to the mosque or to Sunday Quranic School to learn how to read the Quran. Some have even memorized the complete Quran, earning the cherished title of *hafiz* . But a lot of these young boys and girls don't really understand the Quran; either they are not native or

heritage speakers of Arabic or because their familiarity with classical Arabic is weak. In Pakistan, for instance, children are first taught Urdu then basic Arabic. They know the Quran by heart, but their heart doesn't necessarily know the Quran.

A *hafiz* could be a *hafiz* in name only, if she doesn't understand what she's reciting. The Quran might never have a real impact on her behavior because she can't relate to it. Despite her wonderful, flawless recitation, there's always a distance between her and the Quran. This wasn't the case for the children around the Prophet.

The companions, young and old, never felt a gap between the Quran and them. Instead, they were part of it. Two-thirds of the Quran is stories, and a significant part of the stories were about the companions themselves. How could they feel distant from a book that spoke about their surroundings and events that they had first or second-hand knowledge of? We have to first learn about the battle of Badr to grasp the chapter of *Al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War). The companions didn't need to learn about it because they had survived the battle. Those who hadn't participated in the battle had heard stories about it from someone who did. The same is true for all the incidents of *Seerah* referred to in the Quran. I'll give you some examples:

You and I can read Allah's verses: "He frowned and turned away. Because there came to him the blind man." (80:1-2)

Who was the one that frowned? It was the Prophet. And who was the blind man? It was someone called Abdullah ibn Umm-Maktum, the *Muezzin* giving the call to prayer.

The chapter was revealed as commentary on an incident that happened between the Prophet and Abdullah. One day, Abdullah went to the Prophet to ask religious questions while the Prophet busy talking about Islam to the pagan elites of the Quraysh. Abdullah kept jumping in with questions, which annoyed the Prophet. The Prophet was eager to guide leading nobles to Islam and didn't want to be interrupted. In this verse, Allah rebuked the

Prophet for giving undue attention to the influential elites while brushing off someone who, in Islam's egalitarian view, deserved equal airtime.

You and I must read books which interpret the Quran to understand the background behind the chapter. The children of the Prophet, however, didn't. Why? Because every time Abdullah ibn Umm-Maktum gave the call for prayer, they were reminded of his story. Those children saw Ibn Umm-Maktum every time they went to pray in the mosque. Imagine going to the mosque, after you hear the call to prayer – performed by Ibn Umm-Maktum – then a few minutes later Ibn Umm-Maktum does the *iqama* , the second call to prayer.

During the prayer, you hear the Prophet recite: “He frowned and turned away. Because there came to him the blind man.” (80:1-2)

You already know who the blind man was – he's praying next to you! What sort of impact do the verses, read in the voice of the Prophet, have on you? Would the relevancy of these verses be lost on you? Would you daydream or yawn during your prayers? No way!

The companions didn't read the Quran; they lived it. They didn't just memorize the Quran; they were part of it. They were not passive viewers; they were actively part of the Quranic scene.

Zaid ibn Harithah didn't just live the Quran. Rather, the Quran lived inside him. How come? Zaid was the only companion the Quran mentioned by name.

Allah says: “So when Zaid had accomplished his desire from her (i.e. divorced her), We gave her to you in marriage, so that there may be no difficulty to the believers in respect of the wives of their adopted sons when the latter have no desire to keep them.” (33:37)

You and I worship Allah through reciting Zaid's name because it's mentioned in the Quran. When uttering every single letter of his name, we receive reward from it and the reward of ten like it. What more of an honor would Zaid wish for?

Now imagine Zaid himself reading the *surah* where his name was mentioned. Do you think he could read it neutrally with no feeling? And when he, like Ibn Umm-Maktum, hears it read from the mouth of the Prophet in prayer, would he be quietly hoping prayers would finish so he wouldn't be late to his 3:30 meeting?

In the chapter of *al-Mujadilah* (The Women Who Disputes) the first verses say:

“Indeed, Allah has heard the statement of her that disputes with you concerning her husband and complains to Allah. And Allah hears the argument between you both. Verily Allah is all-Hearer and all-Seer.” (58:1)

Do you think the belief of Khawlah bint Tha'labah – the female companion referred to in the verse – would be the same as the belief we have of Allah?

To many of us today, *aqeedah* is theological knowledge, but to Khawlah it was something she could immediately relate to. Allah is All-Hearing and All-Seeing, to the extent that He heard her complaint and documented forever in the Quran. Every time she wanted to increase her faith in Allah, she just needed to read the chapter named after her personal case. To us, *aqeedah* is a mental exercise; to the companions it was more intimate.

To you and me, we need to read an analysis like Ibn Kathir to understand a verse's meaning. To Khawlah, these verses reunited her with her husband, with whom she'd been married for years and had children. But to reunite, Aws ibn Al-Samit, her husband, needed to feed sixty needy persons, and he couldn't afford this, so the Prophet helped him.

If you were one of Khawlah and Aws's children, wouldn't you have loved the Prophet for doing this? Wouldn't you believe Allah was All-Hearing, All-Seeing, and All-Merciful? Wouldn't this be *aqeedah* at heart?

To the companions, the Quran wasn't a fancy book placed on the top of one's shelf to get blessings or to tie the room together. They actually lived the Quran. The Prophet developed children's belief through the gateway of the Quran because they didn't know any other gates.

Today, I have to first get my child out of the gateways of materialism, secularism, and other -isms. To your child raised in the West the Quran, written in a language of which she has limited or no knowledge of, is not easily accessible. This is the challenge. It's not impossible to get your child to love the Quran (there are practical tips later in this chapter), but this will take effort from you.

The children around the Prophet did not just live the Quran; they loved it, because they already loved the one who recited it for them – the Prophet. They heard it directly from the one who had heard it from the Archangel Jibreel. Children around the Prophet also had access to others who recited the Quran beautifully.

“Whoever would like to recite the Quran as fresh as when it was revealed”, said the Prophet, “let him recite it like Ibn Umm ‘Abd.” (*Ibn Majah*)

Ibn Umm ‘Abd was Abdullah ibn Masoud, known for his melodious voice. Another was Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari, whom the Prophet told: “O Abu Musa! You have been given one of the sweet melodious voices of the family of David.” (*Bukhari*)

Practically, the children had the beloved Prophet to listen to and had others like Ibn Masoud and al-Ash’ari. Not only did the children live the experience, but they heard it recited in the most angelic voice.

The children also understood the Quran because it was in their language. They didn’t need it translated or explained. Nonetheless, and as far as our children are concerned, the Quran, especially the short chapters at the end, remains easy to learn and memorize. For example, look at Chapter 114 in transliteration:

1. *Qul a’udhu birabbinn naas*

2. *Malikin naas*

3. *Ilaahin naas*

4. *Min sharril waswaasil khannaas*

5. *Alladhee yuwas wisu fee sudoorin naas*

6. *Minal jinnati wan naas*

Note how the “*naas*” at the end of each verse gives a rhyme, making it easy for a child to remember. The same is true for Chapters 112, 113, and 108. Allah wants to make the Quran easy for children. It’s important for children to memorize parts of the Quran and listen to or read it on a regular basis.

In a hadith, Ibn Abbas proudly said, “Allah’s Messenger, peace be upon him, died when I was 13, and I had learned the Quran.”

Imam Shafi’i reportedly memorized the Quran by the age of 7.

But again, it is just as important to understand it. Ibn Abbas said, “Ask me about *Surat An-Nisa*’, for I learned the Quran when I was still young.” (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*)

Ibn Abbas is saying he gained an understanding of that chapter at a young age.

Also, Hassan ibn Musab ibn Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas asked his father, “Father, when Allah says, ‘Those who are unmindful of their prayers’ (107:5), I wonder who isn’t unmindful at times?”

“It’s not this,” his father explained, “it’s those who deliberately waste time [and as a result don’t do their prayers on time].” (*Musnad Abu Ya’la*)

First, what’s interesting in the hadith is the chain of narration. Hassan is the grandson of Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas, an early companion. Musab is the father of Hassan and son of Sa’d the companion. Hassan’s grandfather was a companion, and his father is a tabi’i (who interacted with the companions but not the Prophet). The chain of narration reveals how the understanding of the Quran was passed from one generation to another.

From whom did the father get this meaning? From his father, Sa'd. And from whom did Sa'd get this meaning? From the Prophet. And from whom did the Prophet get this meaning? From the Archangel Jibreel. And from whom did Jibreel get this meaning? Directly from Allah. The companions understood how to interpret the Quran even if the literal meaning was subtle or unclear.

Now, do you expect that Hassan – after knowing the true meaning of the verse – to ever delay his prayer beyond its fixed time? Of course not. Sadly, today we have Muslim children who delay their prayers or don't pray at all. If every daughter and son in London, New York, and Kuala Lumpur had parents that explained the Quran to them, will we have young Muslims confused about Islam?

Children around the Prophet didn't approach the Quran from a theoretical or semantic perspective, but a practical one. It was a natural part of their everyday life.

Practical Tips: How to Make Your Child Love the Quran

1. Tell stories.

Surely everybody loves stories, and the Quran is full of them. Allah says: "We relate to you the best of stories." (12:3) Tell the story of Yusuf with his siblings (*Surah* 12) Ibrahim with his father (19:41-50) and Luqman with his son (31:13-19).

Children will like it more if you tell the story in a lively and interactive manner. Children also love animal stories, of which the Quran has several. Tell them about the initiative of the ant (27:18) the courage of the hoopoe (27:20) and the good company of the dog (18:18).

2. Try to encourage one Quranic value each week.

The Quran is full of values such as honesty, fairness, and kindness. Select one value the family will practice together for one week. During this week, read about this value in the Quran. If it was kindness, for example, read about showing kindness to parents (17:23). If it's patience, then read about the patience of Ayyub, Job (21: 83-84).

You can use an index to identify a certain manner and its corresponding location in the Quran.

3. Reward them.

Encourage your child to read the Quran and reward them for it. Kiss and hug them when they read or memorize verses.

Show recognition and reward as a sign of good behavior: "I will forgive you for what you did today [name the bad behavior], because you read *Surah Yasin* [the good behavior]."

4. Engage them with competitions and quizzes.

Children love to ask questions, but they like friendly competition too. Ask questions like: How many parts (or *juz* ') are there in the Quran? Name three Prophets (or countries, animals, plants, etc.) mentioned in the Quran. You can do these quizzes while dropping them off at school, on a trip, or when having dinner.

5. Connect to specific chapters.

Use the fact that certain chapters have a specific value to encourage the child to read or memorize. For instance, *Al-Ikhlās* (112), despite its brevity, is considered to be equal to a third of the Quran for its succinct yet eloquent iteration of monotheism.

6. Protection and cures.

My daughter was ill one day with a headache. I put my hand on her head and read *Al-Ikhlās*, *Al-Falaq*, *An-Naas* and said in a voice that she could

hear: “O Allah! Remove this disease and cure her. You are the Great Curer. There is no cure but through You, which leaves behind no disease.”

Of course, a child must take a medically beneficial drug when ill, but he should also believe that Allah is the One who cures, and this cure happens through His words in the Quran. Allah says: “And We send down of the Quran that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe.” (17:82)

7. Prayers.

There are many Quranic prayers (*dua*) and remembrance of Allah (*zikr*) that can help connect a child to the Quran. When in the car to school, for example, your kid can say, “Glory to Him Who has subjected this [the vehicle] to us, and we could have never had it. And verily to Our Lord we indeed are to return.” (43:13-14) When in agony or in distress, your child can say, “There is no god but You, Glory to You; verily I was one of the wrongdoers.” (21:87)

Such prayers help create a strong emotional bond between the child and the Book of Allah.

Children have the ability to understand the Quran and be moved by it. Ibn Abbas narrated that when Allah revealed “O you who believe! Ward off yourselves and you families against the Hellfire.” (66:6) the Prophet recited it before the companions.

Upon hearing the verse, a young boy fainted. The Prophet placed his hand on his heart. When the Prophet felt that his heart was still beating he said, “O boy, say there is no god but Allah.”

The boy uttered it and the Prophet gave him the good news that he would enter Paradise. (*Mustadrak Al-Hakim*)

The boy fainted because he was so deeply affected by the verse. The verse hit him hard and made him lose consciousness. He didn't need an interpreter to explain the meaning of the verse.

When the Prophet gave him the good news that he will enter Paradise, the companions got a little jealous and asked, “Oh Messenger of Allah: him only?”

The Prophet replied, “Have you heard Allah saying: ‘This is for him who fears standing before Me and also fears My threat.’” (14:14)

The boy fainted because of the power of the verse, and hearing it recited in the voice of the beloved Prophet only added to the power of the verse.

Also, note how the Prophet connected the different verses in the Quran. He is using Allah’s words to nurture the young companions’ belief in Allah and the Hereafter.

The companions had a more coherent and broad understanding of *aqeedah* that was beyond theory and semantics. They had a unique way of reacting to and engaging with the Quran. They were able to see links between verses in different *surahs* .

Imagine the boy who fainted, now conscious of the good news that he was going to Heaven. Imagine he tells his friends what happened. What will the feelings of his friends be like?

Think of the companions who were a little jealous. Wouldn’t they go home and tell the story of what happened to their wives and children? They might tell their sons: “Oh! My son, I wish that you had been the one that fainted, and the Prophet gave you the good news of going to Heaven.” Wouldn’t the son begin to have a new relationship with the Prophet and the Quran?

Do you notice how the Prophet is nurturing belief in society and setting high standards and expectations? It’s not about quickly mumbling your prayers to ensure eternal salvation. No! You had to do more than that. You had to pass out due to your genuine, heartfelt interaction with the words of Allah. Don’t take this literally, but you know what I mean.

Practical Tips: How to Build Your Child's Faith and Creed

1. Teach your child about Allah and the meaning of *laa ilaaha illa Allah* in a simple yet remarkable way.
2. Tell him why Allah created us: “And I didn’t create the jinn and humankind except to worship Me.” (51:56). Tell him the broader and practical meaning of worship.
3. Make your child genuinely love Allah.
4. Remind her that it’s He who has provided us with food, drink, shelter, and clothing, and made us Muslims.
5. Don’t scare your child by overdoing talk of hellfire and Allah’s anger and punishment. Your child should not feel terrified or intimidated when thinking about Allah.
6. Connect your child’s consciousness to Allah.
7. Remind him that Allah sees him at all times and places. Remind him that *taqwa* (piety) is in his inner voice, not only when his parents are watching!
8. Let her hear you remember Allah in different situations and conditions: *bismillah* when eating or drinking, *al-hamdu lillah* when finishing your meal, and *subhanallah* (rather than “Wow!”) when surprised.
9. Teach him the six pillars of faith, including belief in the divine will. If explained wisely, children build a strong and balanced personality.
10. Make your child love the Prophet. Talk to him about the Prophet’s life, character and appearance. Let your child hear you supplicate for him whenever his name is mentioned.

Chapter 4

WORSHIP

In [chapter 1](#) , I introduced the characters in our narrative: The Prophet and his character and appearance as were seen by children; I also introduced some of the children that will be referred to repeatedly throughout this book.

In [chapter 2](#) , we discussed how the Prophet built and nurtured emotional development in children, based on love, trust and respect.

In [chapter 3](#) , I described how Muhammad, peace be upon him, built and nurtured belief by using the building block of faith (*iman*) and creed (*aqeedah*). For these blocks to be stable, they must be built on the foundation of emotions – love, trust, and respect.

In this chapter, we will discuss adding the next building block – that of worship (*ibadah*). *Ibadah* , the Arabic word for worship, is obedience, submission, and devotion to God. This block of worship is what cements and holds firm the block of faith or *aqeedah* . Think of the mortar holding these two blocks together being so strong that they are practically one single block. Stronger belief leads to more worship and regular worship strengthens belief. The Prophet, in fact, simultaneously built the child's worship and belief, based on the foundational block of love, trust, and respect. The emotional block – smiling, kissing, cuddling, and conversing – was the base for both blocks.

In this chapter, I will discuss three things the Prophet did when building the block of worship. First, he trained them gradually; second, he created

positive associations with the act of worship; and third, he rewarded the child for worship. To understand this, we need to bear in mind three things about children.

First, children under the age of puberty are not yet accountable, and thus are not required to perform the act of worship or *ibadah* . So, what one is doing during this early period is best understood as training them for when they are old enough to be responsible and accountable for their actions. This is the essence of the hadith: “Teach a boy the prayer when he is 7 years and punish him [if he does not offer it] at 10.”

In another narration: “Order a boy to pray when he is 7 years old.” (*Abu Dawood*)

Whether order or teach, this is your three-year period of child training. So, from 7 to 10 you are training the child to pray five times a day.

Imagine a girl who learned how to pray at the age of 7, if not earlier. Imagine, a boy who is continuously reminded five times a day to pray. Multiply five times a day by 365 days for three years and see how many opportunities you have been given to ingrain the importance of prayer in a child.

Teaching a child to pray should not be perceived as an urgent task that creates tension between you and the child. Actually, it should be an enjoyable experience by creating endless opportunities for bonding (remember the emotional block).

Teaching the child to worship should not be a coercive process: “Pray or else! Fast or else!” Why? Because everything is on your side. There is no time pressure, no immediate deadline – you have time. There is no psychological worry – if you failed today, try tomorrow. It shouldn’t be nerve-racking; it should be fun and relaxing. It should be getting the child into the mood, until it becomes an ingrained habit.

The second thing that is on your side is the child’s true nature. The Prophet said, “Every child is born with his true nature, but his parents convert him

to Judaism, or Christianity...” (*Bukhari*)

According to Hammad ibn Salamah – one of the early scholars – the “true nature” refers to the Covenant mentioned in the Quran when Allah said:

“And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], “Am I not your Lord?” They said, “Yes, we have testified.” [This] - Lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, “Indeed, we were of this unaware.” (7:172)

When explaining “No child is born but upon *fitrah* [the true nature] ...”, Abu Hurairah recited a Quranic verse: “[Adhere to] the *fitrah* of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.” (30:30)

In another narration: “Every new-born baby is born into Islam, and he remains on this until his tongue is enabled to express himself.” (*Muslim*)

The child’s *fitrah* , or true state of nature, therefore, is Islam. His *fitrah* is Muslim. His *fitrah* is to pray. He is naturally with you, but he expects you to teach him and to train him. He will do it.

The third thing on your side is that your child, under the age of puberty, has no sexual desires. Most of the things that lure us away from *iman* and *ibadah* are related to lust and sexual distractions.

“Have you seen him who takes his own lust (vain desires) as his god?” (45:23)

Worldly pleasures for young adults are perpetually a difficult challenge to overcome. But a child doesn’t have these stumbling blocks yet. They are still pure and innocent – another meaning for *fitrah* . He still enjoys a well-told story about Allah or the Prophet, while riding on the merry-go-round.

These three things comprise the framework that shaped the Prophet's approach towards encouraging *ibadah* in children. She already has the potential and the natural inclination towards Islam. Allah had created her as a Muslim, and on the day, she was born you said the call to prayer in her ear – just as the Prophet told us to.

Training

With regards to training, the earlier you train someone to be good, the easier it will be for him to continue to be good. This is why Abdullah ibn Masoud said, “Take care of your children and train them to pray. And get them in the habit of doing the good. Because doing good is a habit.” (*Bayhaqi*)

Abdullah ibn Masoud was young when he converted to Islam, so he can personally relate to this advice.

Imam Ghazali wrote about the importance of training in parenting. He said, “Adopting an effective method for training children is extremely important and necessary. It is because a child is Allah's trust in parents' hands and the child's heart is like a nice, clean, and simple mirror which, although, is devoid of any types of impressions or shapes, is capable of accepting the influence of all types of impressions and influences and it can be inclined towards anything you like. Therefore, if good habits are inculcated in the child then the child after gaining such good upbringing, achieves the real success of this life and of the life hereafter.” (*Majmu'a Rasail Imam Ghazali*)

Imagine your child, if well nurtured, became addicted – but addicted to doing good. Can you imagine your child having the potential to become persistent and compulsive with his good deeds? Yes! It can be done if you train him early on. If you trained him, for example, to kiss the hand of his mother or father when he wakes up, he will keep doing it until he gets used to it. He will do it when he is 10, twenty, and he will do it in front of his wife and children - without being embarrassed - when he's fifty. He will do

it even if he has to kiss your photo when you've passed away. These beneficial practices can become ingrained for life through force of habit.

The Prophet advised that children are trained to pray, for instance, "as early as they were able to distinguish their right hand from the left." (*Abu Dawood*)

In another hadith, it is recommended when they reach the age of 7 (*Al-Tirmidhi*).

He used to teach them what to say in prayers. Hassan, the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, said, "The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, taught me some words to say in the *witr* prayer: 'O Allah, guide me among those whom You have guided, pardon me among those You have pardoned, turn to me in friendship among those on whom You have turned in friendship, and bless me in what You have bestowed, and save me from the evil of what You have decreed. For verily You decree, and none can influence You; and he is not humiliated whom You have befriended. Blessed are You, O Lord, and Exalted'" (*Nassa'i*).

Hassan was the grandson of the Prophet, and he was 7 years old when the Prophet passed away.

The Prophet also watched the children pray and corrected their mistakes. In one incident, he saw Aflah, a young boy, blowing on the ground before prostrating so as not to get his forehead dirty. "Put your forehead on the ground, Aflah," the Prophet said to him. (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

Once, he noticed Anas, then a young boy, doing what most kids would usually do during the prayers; looking around. "O my son!" the Prophet advised, "Beware of looking around during prayers, for indeed looking around during prayers is destruction. If you must do so, then in the voluntary prayer, not in the obligatory one." (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

Note how, in addition to advising him against being distracted when praying, the Prophet is also teaching him the different rulings of obligatory and voluntary prayers.

In another incident, Ibn Abbas, another young boy, prayed with Prophet, and stood next to the Prophet's left side. The Prophet took hold of him and made him stand on his right side. (*Nassa'i*)

Training the child, however, is not confined to prayers, but to everything related to worship. The companions, for example, used to train their children to fast. Children were not required to fast until they reached the age of puberty, but the companions used to train them to fast.

Al-Rubayyi', a female companion, used to encourage her children to fast for as long as they could endure thirst and hunger. "We used to make wool toys for the boys", she said, "And if anyone of them cried, he was given those toys till it was time to break the fast." (*Bukhari*)

"Why is this?!" You might exclaim. "One is not required to do this". But I'm just telling you what the companions did, how they understood the significance of training. They saw the Prophet training children, and they understood the significance of it.

Ibn Hajar, a medieval scholar, commented on the above hadith by saying it showed it is permissible to train children to fast. Children at this age, he concurred, were not required to fast but were trained to do so. Al-Rubayyi' was creative in the way she trained her children to fast. She made wool toys to distract them away from thinking about food and hunger.

I am sure you can come up with plenty of ideas to distract children from their hunger – just think of how easy they can be to distract. The point is to train them to refrain from food until sunset, afternoon, or whatever point they can't tolerate any more. This is not about hunger; this is about discipline and developing willpower. Their ability to refrain from food will later enable them to refrain from other tempting things in life.

In my book: *Muhammad: How He Can Make You Extraordinary* , I speak about the importance of developing children's discipline at an early age. To prove its significance, I refer to the famous Marshmallow Experiment. Stanford Professor Walter Mischel offered a group of four-year-old children a marshmallow, letting them choose between eating it now or saving it for

later and being rewarded with a second marshmallow (delayed gratification). Mischel found that the children who patiently controlled their desire were more disciplined and higher achievers in a broad range of measures later on in life compared to the group that couldn't delay gratification and chose to eat the marshmallow there on the spot. A Muslim child who was previously trained in fasting would probably do well in this marshmallow experiment.

Positive Associations

In addition to training, the Prophet was creating positive associations between the child and the act of worship itself. In psychology, the term “association” refers to a mental connection between concepts, events, or mental states that usually stems from specific experiences. In this case, the Prophet was creating a positive and joyful experience between him and worship in the mind of the child. To the Prophet and the companions – including children – it was a source of comfort, not a burden.

The Messenger used to say, “O Bilal [the *Muezzin* of the Prophet], give the call to prayer: give us comfort by it.” (*Abu Dawood*)

I would now like to show how the Prophet inculcated the love of worship in children, by using prayer as an example. I could have used fasting, *zakat* (alms-giving) or the Hajj pilgrimage as examples, but these are acts of worship less relevant to children. There are a few incidents of children performing the Hajj.

The Prophet once came across riders in a place near Medina and asked them, “Who are you?”

They answered, “We are Muslims, and who are you?”

He said, “I am the Messenger of Allah.”

A woman then lifted up a boy and asked, “Can this one go on Hajj?”

He said, “Yes, and you will have the reward.” (*Muslim*)

In another hadith, a young man came to the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, and said, “I intend to go to Hajj.”

The Prophet then walked with him and said, “May Allah give you piety as your provision, may He forgive your sin, and may He make goodness easy for you wherever you are.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

Prayer, however, is a daily requirement and a major concern for many parents. When it comes to prayers, the Prophet created positive associations; he was making children love doing the act of prayer itself. Second, he was rewarding the child for praying; more about this later.

The Prophet wanted to show the child that praying was always something nice. It’s like telling your young son, “Come with me to the mosque and we will bring some candy from the supermarket afterward.”

It’s like the Prophet giving those children dates or little Umm Khaled a fancy dress ([Chapter 2](#)). What’s the Prophet doing? He is training, rewarding, and creating a positive experience with worship. He’s effectively making the child feel as if he is a central part in the action itself, and that without him the action would not be as valuable. He gave the child a task, responsibility, or sense of ownership, which made the child love prayer.

Let me give examples of the positive associations the Prophet was creating between children and prayers.

Jabir ibn Sumerah said, “I prayed along with Allah’s Messenger in the first prayer. He then went to his family, and I also went along with him, when on the way he met some children. He began to pat the cheeks of each one of them. He also patted my cheek and I experienced coolness or a fragrance of his hand as if it had been brought out from the scent bag of a perfumer.”

Jabir was not related to the Prophet; he was just a young boy who had prayed with him. After the prayer, the Prophet went to his house, and Jabir went with him.

Sometimes when I walk in the street and there is a cat following me, I get spooked and try to shoo it away. But what does it want? Maybe it wants someone to pat on its head or give it some food. Now you're heading home from the mosque and in this case, a child is following you. You might say, "Where are your parents?" You want to get rid of the child because you just want to go home and relax.

Now, what is the positive association here? It's that Jabir went to the mosque to pray, met the Prophet who patted his cheek and made it smell nice. So, wouldn't Jabir love to go the mosque and pray because of that wonderful experience? Wouldn't he want to be seen by the Prophet, anticipating that beautiful scent from his hands?

Let me give you another example of positive association with worship. This hadith is narrated in the collection by Muslim. Abu Mahdhurah was a young companion born as a non-Muslim. This incident happened when the Prophet conquered Mecca in 630. In a famous scene in the 1976 movie *The Message*, Bilal climbs on the top of the Kaaba and gives the call to prayer. This was a shocking scene for the polytheists of Mecca. They never imagined that one day the black slave, Bilal, would be on top of the Kaaba, proclaiming the unity of God and making the call for prayer.

Now picture a group of polytheist young boys, who were watching this and hearing the *adhan* for the first time. As young boys, they started making fun of Bilal and of the *adhan*. Ten of the children began to mock and mimic Bilal. Abu Mahdhurah, one of the ten young boys, was blessed with a beautiful voice. If he was alive today, his *adhan* and Quran albums would have been bestsellers! He wasn't saying the *adhan* properly or in the right spirit of course, but he certainly had the raw talent.

The Prophet said, "Bring the boys in."

They brought all ten, including Abu Mahdhurah, who narrated the hadith. The Prophet then asked the ten boys to do the *adhan*, as if it were an audition. Out of fear, the boys obviously did as they were told, including Abu Mahdhurah.

Once the Prophet heard Abu Mahdhurah's voice, he said, "That's the one whose voice I heard." He let the other boys go and started teaching Abu Mahdhurah the *adhan* correctly.

The Prophet was recruiting talent, the cream of the crop. I'm sure that some of the other nine were also somewhat qualified, but he wanted the best out there.

In a slightly different narration, Abu Mahdhurah said, "The Prophet asked, 'Who is the one whose voice I heard so loud?' The people all pointed to me, and they were telling the truth. He sent them all away but kept me there and said to me, 'Stand up and give the call to prayer.'"

Abu Mahdhurah said, "I stood up and there was nothing more hateful to me than the Messenger of Allah and what he was telling me to do. I stood up in front of the Messenger of Allah and the Messenger of Allah himself taught me the call to prayer."

This is an example very different from most we've seen so far – this was a boy who hated the Prophet and what the *adhan* represented. Then it all changed. But how?

When Abu Mahdhurah finished saying the *adhan*, the Prophet called him, put his hand on his forehead, passed it over his face, over his chest, and over his heart, then prayed, saying, "May Allah bless you and send blessings upon you. "

Abu Mahdhurah said, "O Messenger of Allah, do you command me to give the call to prayer in Mecca?"

"Yes," the Prophet replied.

Abu Mahdhurah said, "Then all the hatred I had felt towards the Messenger of Allah disappeared, and was replaced with love for him." (*Ibn Majah*)

I personally cannot know what prompted this 180-degree turn. Five minutes earlier, the young boy was making fun of the *adhan*. Now, he's waking up

people for the pre-dawn prayers by calling out “Prayer is better than sleep”. Instead of brushing off his mother when she tries to wake him up in the morning, he is hopping out of bed on time and waking up the entire neighborhood to boot.

One wonders what could have caused this abrupt change. Was it the softness of the Prophet’s palm – as Anas ibn Malik once described? Was it the scent of musk that Jabir ibn Sumerah referred to? Or simply the Prophet’s kindness and respect towards children? Whatever the case may be, what was remarkable was Abu Mahdhurah would not have the hair of his forehead cut, nor would he separate them because the Prophet had wiped his hand over them (*Abu Dawood*).

Now look at this learning of the *adhan*, which is a form of *ibadah*, that was associated with a touch. So, the point here is when you teach or train your children *ibadah* , give them a positive association. Teach with love, care, a nice compliment, a gift or whatever would create a positive association with the act you are teaching. Say “May Allah bless you”, “May Allah rewards you”, “I am proud of you”. You might reward him with a prayer mat and a fragrance you spray on this prayer mat, then when he smells it, he remembers the prayer and longs for it.

The final example of how the Prophet used positive associations is with prayer at the mosque. Abdullah ibn Masoud – who you remember became a Muslim when he was a young boy – narrates this hadith.

He said: “The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, used to gently pat our shoulders (to make sure the row was straight) at the time of prayer, and he would say, ‘Keep (the rows) straight; do not differ from one another lest your hearts would be afflicted with discord. Let the elders stand closest to me, then the younger, then the younger.’”

The Prophet, therefore, used to check the prayer rows to make sure they were straight. He would pat on the shoulders to make sure that each shoulder was touching the next shoulder in a straight line. He would do this through each row.

Now imagine, every time children came to pray, they expected the Prophet to pat on their shoulders, especially those on the edges of rows. We can assume they would smell the fragrance of musk and the touch of silk. Wouldn't they like coming to the mosque five times a day, including at dawn to hear the voice Abu Mahdhurah calling the *adhan* and the Prophet reciting the Quran?

Compare this to the relationship between children and the mosque today. I read a letter in *Q News*, a now defunct British magazine focusing on Muslim issues, in October 2000. It was a letter written to the imams and community leaders in Britain:

“Yes, you have set up halal meat. Yes, you have built mosques. Large, huge mosques. Yes, you did do that, and you've succeeded in that. Yes, you have taught us Urdu. But you have also built mosques that were alien, hostile and irrelevant to our needs and requirements. Mosques that are full of squabbles and fights not love and compassion. Mosques full of notices. Don't do this and don't do that. Mosques whose doors are closed to the destitute, the poor and the orphan.”

Obviously, the letter is in contrast to the experience of Ibn Masoud or Abu Mahdhurah, who had received compassion when entering a mosque, even if not a Muslim. Can you imagine words such as “alien, hostile and irrelevant” being used by a young companion to describe his experience with the Prophet's Mosque? I don't think so. A mosque should be a warm place that welcomes children, not scares them away.

In a hadith narrated by Anas ibn Malik, then a young boy:

“A Bedouin came and urinated in one corner of the mosque and the people shouted at him. The Prophet stopped them, and when the Bedouin finished urinating, the Prophet ordered for a bucket of water which was spilt over it. He then said, ‘You have been sent to make things easy and not to make them difficult.’” (*Bukhari*)

Imagine if the Prophet allowed the companions to berate the man. Do you think he would have returned to the mosque again? The Prophet let him

finish because he didn't want to terrify him; he wanted him to feel unthreatened. Wasn't this an attempt to create a positive association?

This story isn't saying we can go to the mosque and deliberately be disrespectful. What it's saying is that everyone who goes to a mosque should be treated with dignity. Those who make a mistake are corrected respectfully. Our children today surely know not to urinate in a mosque, yet they are treated more harshly by their elders than the Bedouin man in the hadith, which if anything creates a negative association with the mosque.

It's certainly not the case that Muslims today never show the open-mindedness and tolerance of early Islam. One example was highlighted in a beautifully written article in *The New York Times* on August 26, 2017, "*The Two Americans* ."

Abraham, a young man with a rough upbringing in Fort Smith, Arkansas, made a bad decision late one night that landed him in jail with felony charges after he helped a friend spray-paint a swastika on a local mosque. Not expecting any response but wanting to get his own guilt off his chest, Abraham wrote a heartfelt letter of apology from prison, saying: "I'm so sorry about having a hand in vandalizing your mosque. It was wrong and y'all did not deserve to have that done to you. I hurt y'all and I am haunted by it."

What he completely did not expect was for the local Muslim community to weigh in on his behalf during the trial, arguing for felony charges to be dropped.

As one of the mosque leaders said, "If one of my kids did something stupid like that I would want them to be forgiven."

After Abraham was released on probation, he posted on his Facebook page thanking "the guys at the mosque who have been supportive and helpful."

A Muslim classmate of his from high school replied saying, "I speak for the whole Muslim community of Fort Smith we love you and want you to be the best example in life. We don't hold grudges against anybody!"

The Muslims of Fort Smith, Arkansas, showed the true nature of Islam – they were forgiving and understanding, even after their mosque was defaced with a symbol of pure hatred.

Likewise, the Prophet condemned those who would make the mosque an unwelcoming place.

A man came to the Prophet and said, “O Messenger of Allah, I keep away from the morning prayer only because so-and-so prolongs the prayer when he leads it.”

The companion was complaining to the Prophet about those imams who deliberately read long selections from the Quran when they lead the prayer. The Prophet was certainly disappointed by the complaint because he wanted mosques to be inviting places. He said, “O people, among you there are those who repel and scare away the people.”

There are a couple of different narrations of his statement, but they all support the same underlying message about creating positive associations: “O people, some of you are scaring people away,” or “Some of you create hatred among the people against faith.”

Then he said, “Whoever of you leads the people in prayer, he must be brief, for behind him the old men, youngsters, and those who have some urgent work to do.” (*Bukhari*)

Note the “youngsters” in the hadith? It’s those children whose attention spans are fading during the prayers, who are giggling with the kid next to them, and who want to go and play. Don’t make it too long for them, or you might turn people off who genuinely want to come for prayer and make them deliberately join the prayer late or even skip it. Don’t read Al-Baqarah (2:1-286) but shorter chapters, so that the children want to come back.

Rewarding

We saw how the Prophet rewarded Abu Mahdhurah by making him the *Muezzin* of Mecca. Rewarding was one of the Prophet's ways to develop the child's love for worship. Sometimes he rewarded them with a gift or praise.

In this next example, the one who is narrating the hadith is Abdullah ibn Abbas:

Once, the Prophet went to the lavatory and Abdullah ibn Abbas placed water for his ablution.

“Who placed this?” the Prophet asked when he came out. He was told that it was Ibn Abbas. The Prophet then prayed for Ibn Abbas saying, “O Allah! Make him a learned scholar in religion.” (*Bukhari*)

In another narration, the Prophet said, “O Allah, teach him wisdom and the interpretation of the Book.” (*Ibn Majah*) We are not sure how old Ibn Abbas was when this incident occurred, but we do know he was 9 years old when he was riding with the Prophet, and the Prophet was teaching him about Allah:

“Be mindful of Allah and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, then ask Allah [alone]; and if you seek help, then seek help from Allah [alone]. And know that if the people were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would not benefit you except with what Allah had already prescribed for you. And if they were to gather together to harm you with anything, they would not harm you except with what Allah had already prescribed against you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

This shows that even a 9-year-old boy can understand concepts that we might think are too complicated for a child to comprehend.

When the Prophet found out that the water had been brought by Abdullah ibn Abbas, he immediately rewarded him with this *dua* : “O! Allah teach him wisdom and teach him the interpretation.”

This was the hadith I mentioned at the beginning of the book; how Ibn Abbas became a very knowledgeable companion, even though he only spent two and a half years with the Prophet before the Prophet passed away. This was because of this boy's initiative; it was as simple as bringing water for ablution to the Prophet without being asked to do so.

Imagine if Ibn Abbas had not undertaken this little initiative. Would everything else in his life have been possible if the *dua* had not been said? And would it have been possible for Abdullah ibn Abbas to become as famous? It's because of this initiative in something related to worship that he was rewarded with this special prayer. This *dua* helped create Ibn Abbas' legacy and reputation as a scholar, as an interpreter of the meanings within the Quran, and as a jurisprudent.

There is a much greater reward in store for your child if you sincerely pray for him: May Allah make you knowledgeable in your field, May Allah grant you a happy life, anything that makes the child feel proud of what he did.

In another narration of this hadith, Ibn Abbas said, "The Prophet then patted on my head and said the *dua* that I be granted wisdom."

Note how, again, the act of patting is repeating itself throughout the book.

Another way of rewarding a child is making him feel welcomed and accommodated in acts of worship. Abdullah ibn Abbas, again, is the narrator of this hadith:

"Once", he said, "I spent the night at my aunt Maimuna's house. Allah's Messenger offered the *isha* prayer [in the mosque], then came to the house and prayed four *rak`at* and slept. Later on, he woke up and stood for the prayer and I stood on his left side. He drew me to his right and prayed five *rak`at* and then two." (*Bukhari*)

This was the same young boy the Prophet prayed for and asked Allah to give him wisdom and teach him interpretation.

Once Ibn Abbas saw the Prophet wake up to perform his voluntary night prayer, he woke up straightaway and stood next to him. Ibn Abbas wasn't obliged to pray this voluntary night prayer, in the same way he wasn't required to bring water to the Prophet for ablution, but he was already showing signs of the initiative, wisdom, and understanding the Prophet prayed he'd have.

What did the Prophet do when the little boy stood next to him? He welcomed him. He didn't say, "Oh! This is between me and Allah," or "It's past your bedtime." No! He allowed the young boy to join him. The Prophet's voluntary night prayer became a congregational voluntary night prayer, composed of a child and a Prophet. And thanks to the Prophet's accommodation, Ibn Abbas was able to narrate this hadith about the Prophet's night prayer and its different jurisprudential implications.

Another way of rewarding a child is to empower him with a task, a responsibility, or ownership that makes him value worship all the more. So, in the same way the Prophet appointed the young Abu Mahdhurah to be the *Muezzin* of Mecca, he appointed another talented boy - Amr ibn Salamah - to be the imam (leader in prayer) of his people.

Like Abu Mahdhurah, Amr ibn Salamah is the narrator of the hadith:

He explains that he went with his father and a group from his clan to visit the Prophet, and when they intended to return, they said, "Messenger of Allah, who will lead us in prayer?"

"The one of you who knows most of the Quran, or memorizes most of the Quran," he said.

There were none in the clan who knew more of the Quran than Ibn Salamah "Therefore, they put me in front of them when I was only a boy," concludes Ibn Salamah. (*Abu Dawood*)

Amr ibn Salamah used to live on the outskirts of Medina. He didn't see the Prophet on a daily basis. However, he was a devout Muslim and loved to memorize the Quran. Whenever someone from Medina passed through his

town, they would inform him of new knowledge the Prophet had imparted. He was a boy with a good memory and had memorized a large portion of the Quran.

So once his father and a group from his clan went to meet the Prophet, the Prophet taught them prayer and asked that they pray in congregation.

They asked him, “Who should lead them in prayer,” and he said the one who knew the most Quran. (*Bukhari*)

They put Amr as their imam. Can you guess how old Amr was then? He was somewhere between 6 and 8 years old.

Okay, what is special about this hadith? Everything! First, isn't it fascinating that one learned the Quran first and then learned how to pray? It shows how those companions were connected to the Book of Allah even before they began to practice the rituals.

Secondly, this was a deeply tribal society, in which leadership was based on seniority, not how many verses of the Quran one knew. For the Prophet to redefine the terms of religious leadership was somewhat revolutionary and empowered children. One would imagine that the leader of Amr's tribe was in his late sixties or early seventies. Yet, thanks to the Prophet, he and other elders would refer to Amr on matters related to the Quran.

In [Chapter 2](#) , we saw how in a patriarchal society, where girls used to be buried alive, the Prophet deliberately honored girls; how he used to stand up for Fatima, his daughter, kiss her forehead and seat her in his place; how he used to allow his granddaughter, Umamah, to climb over his back while prostrating in congregation. Now he is doing the same thing in a tribal society: empowering children based on merit rather than age. In a tribal society, where seniority is a source of legitimacy, we now see new leadership, a new leadership based on its knowledge of the Quran, allowing a boy under the age of 10 to be appointed as the imam of the tribe.

Amr was so young there is actually a funny incident related to his status as an imam: He used to lead the prayer while wearing a shirt he was

outgrowing, so much that when he bent in prostration, part of his backside was revealed. A woman politely passed on word that perhaps Amr should cover up a little more.

They specially made a longer shirt for him. Amr swears: “I had never been as happy with anything before as I was with that shirt.” (*Bukhari*)

Why? Because it was that shirt that gave this young boy an enormous sense of purpose, it was his “uniform” as an imam. And who appointed him as an imam? It was the Prophet, rewarding his credentials as a memorizer of Allah’s words.

Initially, we had difficulties with Hadeel, my daughter, in getting her to pray with us. She was only 4 or 5 years old, but we wanted to train her as early as possible. One day, my wife tailored a small pink hijab for her to wear when praying.

“This is for you, Hadeel,” her mother said. “I tailored it especially for you to wear during prayer.”

We showed her the sewing machine and the remains of the threads used to make the hijab. We engaged her in the making of the hijab.

Like Amr ibn Salamah, Hadeel was extremely excited about the hijab and consequently looked forward to prayer. She felt valued and empowered. Whenever she saw us pray, she rushed to her bedroom, brought her little pink hijab and joined us.

I know that this initial excitement might fade after a week or two, but the point is to reward the child by empowering her. You are training the child. You are creating enjoyable memories that will later turn into positive habits.

Practical Tips: How to Train Your Child to Worship Allah

1. Be aware that you are a role model for your child, whether you like it or not. If they see you pray on time and read the Quran regularly, they will like doing so too.
2. Encourage your child to memorize verses from the Quran, sayings of the Prophet, and short prayers, and reward him when doing so. Ibrahim ibn Adham, a pivotal figure in Islamic history said, “My father told me ‘Every time you hear a hadith and memorize it, I will give you a dirham [a coin],’ so I learned hadith that way.”
3. Teach her the five pillars of Islam. Don’t just list the pillars; rather speak about them in a way that your child comprehends, enjoys, and values.
4. Encourage him to join you whenever he sees you pray. Be creative when asking him to pray once he reaches 7, or earlier if you like. Tell him the prayer is his way of saying “thank you” to Allah for everything He gave him.
5. Train him to fast. The companions used to do this; remember the hadith describing the wool toys to distract children until it was time to break the fast. Notice how creative the companions were in the training of their children to fast. However, don’t force him to fast the full hours – if not obliged – as this is too much for younger children and could backfire in his attitude towards fasting.
6. Connect your child to the mosque. Take him whenever you can and train him in mosque etiquette. Make him love the experience until it becomes a habit.
7. Train your child to give to charity. Let her see you give to charity, encourage her to give money from her own savings.

Chapter 5

S DEVELOPING MORALS

So far, you have read about how the Prophet developed a very sophisticated generation. Children are not expected to be rational creatures. They are not expected to be logical in their thinking, behavior, or attitude. They are more driven by their immediate desires and wants. They need someone – parents, teachers, and mentors – with understanding and patience to help them grow and develop. The Prophet, despite his other demanding responsibilities, had patience and understanding when dealing with children.

The Prophet wasn't just given the responsibility of developing children alone. He was also building a community, society, and a nation. The Prophet wasn't just dealing with you and me. He was also dealing with the unseen; with the jinn (spirits). He wasn't only dealing with creatures on earth but also those in heaven. He received revelation from the angel Jibreel and ascended to heaven during the Isra and Mi'raj (Miraculous Night Journey). Yet, he had the time to interact with children and address their concerns.

In developing children, the Prophet wasn't in a hurry. He was carefully laying his building blocks. His first block was the block of love and trust. It's the block that must be firmly cemented in place before the other blocks. On the top of this brick was the block of faith, or *aqeedah*. This brick also needs to be firm. If weak, it will crumble when exposed to slightest pressure: temptation, trial, or sedition. Next to *aqeedah* is the brick of worship or *ibadah*. If that was weak, it might also break at any time. The child might start praying but neglects his prayers when he gets to school.

He will worship as long as his parents are watching, but outside the house, he will do things that have nothing to do with *ibadah* . She may wear her headscarf but takes it off at her first job. Why? Because the brick was not placed properly or wasn't solid enough. That's why the Prophet spent time developing in children the various aspects of love and trust ([Chapter 2](#)), faith ([Chapter 3](#)), and worship ([Chapter 4](#)).

In this chapter, we will discuss how the Prophet developed the morals and character of children. This is one of the most challenging bricks for us. We are concerned about our children because we worry that what we teach at home is lost when they go to school and are exposed to peer pressure.

The children around the Prophet were blessed and fortunate to have the Prophet outside the house. The children around the Prophet saw him and lived in an environment that reinforced what they had learned at home. But today, not only do we have to build bricks, but we have break others that aren't in harmony with our own values. Our building process today is more difficult than during the time of the Prophet because we lack the emotional and physical support children around the Prophet received.

But don't worry; in recognition of this difference, the Prophet gave us, his beloved ones, good news:

"I miss my beloved ones," he said.

The companions asked him, "Aren't we your beloved ones?"

He answered, "You are my companions, my beloved ones are those who will come by the end times, the one of them who holds on his religion is just like a torchbearer and their reward equals that of seventy men!"

The companions asked again: "Seventy among us or among them?"

The Prophet replied, "Among them."

"Why?" they asked.

“Because you have a supporter for good deeds while they do not,” the Prophet answered.

Now, make no mistake, the companions are more honorable than all of us; they are the best generation of Muslims. But the Prophet is referring to another kind of reward, because of the hardship we go through in bringing up decent children in a more complex and challenging social environment.

Therefore, as a builder, you need to educate yourselves about parenting. Even those who are not yet parents need to be educated in this. Reading about parenting is as good for you as it is for your children and shapes your future in this world as well as the Hereafter. How come? In a hadith:

“He who is involved (in the responsibility) of (bringing up) daughters, and he is benevolent towards them, they would become protection for him against Hellfire.” (*Bukhari*)

I have daughters, and I am very fond of this hadith. I think to myself, “That will be my mission in life: to take proper care of my children as my path to *Jannah* . The route to *Jannah* is not hard in the physical sense but can be as enjoyable as taking your children to the playground.

Hearing this hadith, one of the companions it seems had only two daughters. So, he asked, “What if he had only two daughters?”

This is the beauty of having inquisitive companions in such hadiths; they get to ask the questions we wish someone had asked on our behalf!

“Even if he had only two daughters,” the Prophet replied.

“What if he had only one daughter?” another companion asked.

The Prophet said, “Even if he had one daughter only.”

The Prophet is saying it’s not about numbers; it’s about the principle of quality parenting. So, I think to myself, “Why shouldn’t my mission in this

life be to take care of my daughters and do my utmost best as a father and seek *Jannah* through quality parenting?”

I always picture this in my mind: I am struggling to go to *Jannah* , and on my way, I encounter my daughters standing at the gate of *Jannah* .

“Please open the door of *Jannah* for your father and allow him in,” I cry.

I imagine them recalling my efforts in bringing them up when young, then looking at me and saying: “Welcome in, Baba! Come on in.”

I always visualize this scenario and when I do, I become ever more committed in making them better girls. But it’s not about gender; it’s about good parenting. It’s not about girls or boys; it’s about quality marriages, quality families, and quality communities.

In this chapter, we will also read about the fourth building block, which is the block of morals or character. When the child begins to love and accept you, you can begin to talk to him or her about belief (*iman*). This block is built next to the block of worship or *ibadah* . The two blocks – *iman* and *ibadah* - are not built on top of each other, but simultaneously and adjacent to each other. Why? Because it’s on top of both blocks that the child’s character must be developed. If the concept of *ibadah* isn’t well ingrained in the character of the child, his manners will be shaky and superficial. His character will fail in any real test and any peer pressure or bad company will destroy it.

This is why Allah says: “Indeed, prayer prevents immorality and wrongdoing.” (29:45)

Great Moral Character

A child is a product of the people who brought him up. Children around the Prophet, as far as morals were concerned, were the product of the one who Allah praised in the Quran as having a great moral character (68:4).

To comprehend what “great moral character” really means, let me make a simple comparison here. Islam expects Muslims to have “good morals” – *khuluq hasan* :

“The heaviest thing which will be put on the believer’s scale [on the Day of Judgment]) will be good morals”.

The Arabic word *hasan* is used whenever Allah or the Prophet speak about Muslim morals. Good morals, or *khuluq hasan* , is the level of behavior expected of a Muslim. However, when Allah praised the moral character of the Prophet, he used a more exalted Arabic word – which is *azeem* . *Azeem* – also one of the names of the Allah – connotes greatness, magnanimity, dignity, honor, esteem, and pride.

The word *azeem* in the Quran is mentioned 25 times to express greatness. For examples, Allah is *azeem* , the Quran is *azeem* , and the Day of Judgment is *azeem* . When Allah described the behavior of the Prophet, he used the same word: “*Wa innaka la’ala khuluqin azeem* ,” because the Prophet’s character deserves no less expression.

Azeem is a higher level or rank than *hasan* ; Allah is telling us that the moral character of the Prophet is much higher than those with *khuluq hasan* . Any person on this earth now, yesterday, or tomorrow, who you think has the best of *khuluq* , be sure that the Prophet was of a greater and higher moral standard.

Such was the character of the one who was developing the morals of the young companions. Surely, the quality of production wouldn’t be less than *khuluq hasan* . The Prophet’s great moral character impacted everybody, especially children.

Let’s now talk about the behavioral dealings of the Prophet with children, as told by the children themselves: “I served the Prophet for ten years,” said young Anas ibn Malik. “He never once told me ‘uff’. When I did something, he never told me, ‘why did you do that?’ And ‘why didn’t you do this?’ when I didn’t do it.” (*Bukhari*)

Imagine someone talking about his work experience in a firm or company. He might complain about the pay or the manager. Anas worked for the Prophet for ten years since he was 10 years old. As an employee, he spent his childhood and teenage years with the same boss. Yet, when speaking about his work experience with the manager, he is effectively saying: the manager was awesome. He never did what most managers usually do. He never reproached me, blamed me, exploited me, made fun of me, or bullied me. Obviously, if Anas did something religiously wrong or haram, the Prophet wouldn't tolerate it. But in worldly matters, he was pretty easygoing. He valued relations more than tasks.

“He never told me ‘uff’,” Anas said in the same hadith. “‘Uff’ is an Arabic expression of disgust or exasperation. The Quran cites it as an example of disrespect and forbids its use when dealing with parents.

Allah says: “And your Lord decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents good treatment. If one of them or both of them reach old age in your life, say not to them ‘uff,’ nor shout at them but speak to them in terms of honor.” (17:23)

To have good morals or *khuluq hasan*, Allah is forbidding us to use the word “uff” when talking to our parents. This is what we could do to be well-mannered, but the Prophet can do better than this. For ten years and more, he never used the expression with anybody, including when dealing with his 10-year-old servant. Surely, this is the difference between *khuluq hasan* and *khuluq azeem*.

In another hadith, Anas said, “Allah’s Messenger is one of the best men of character. One day he sent me to do something, and I swore by Allah that I would not go. But in my heart, I felt that I should go to do what the Prophet had commanded me. So, I went out and came across children who were playing in the street. All of a sudden, the Messenger of Allah, who had come up behind me, caught me by the back of my neck.

When I looked at him he was laughing. He said, ‘Unais [a nickname for Anas], did you go where I commanded you to go?’ I said, ‘Yes, I am going,

Prophet of Allah.”” (*Muslim*)

Note, whenever Anas tells a personal encounter with the Prophet, he first gives us a complimentary statement about the Prophet: “The Prophet was one of the best men of character.” You will read this statement in other hadiths, regardless of who told the story. It’s as if Anas is saying, it’s not about the story – the narrative is just an example – but about the moral of the story.

“One day,” Anas says, “the Prophet sent me to do something.” Anas doesn’t tell us what this thing was; this isn’t the point. He tells us that initially he didn’t intend to go. He is being honest.

It’s important that children learn to be honest. This would only happen if they felt secure – a feeling that parents should nurture. If the parents continuously blame, judge, ridicule, or abuse, the child will grow up to be insecure and dishonest. Anas was honest because he felt secure, and he felt secure because his mentor had never once blamed, judged, or ridiculed him.

Anas then changed his mind and went to do that errand. But on the way, he came across some children playing. Unsurprisingly for a child, he got sidetracked and started playing with them, forgetting about his task. When the Prophet saw Anas playing, he started laughing. To me, this is an unexpected gesture.

If it was me, I would have been upset. Imagine if a husband asks his wife (or vice versa) to do something and an hour later dinner isn’t ready, the dishes aren’t clean, and the baby’s diaper hasn’t been changed! But the Prophet was different. He valued relations more than tasks:

“He would come home and ask: is there anything to eat? ‘No,’ his wife would respond. ‘Then I shall be fasting,’ he would say.” (*Muslim*)

In the case of Anas, he laughed because he knew this was normal of children. Children love to play, and in the process forget what grownups asked them to do, without intending any disrespect. Because he understood children so well, the Prophet was amused rather than losing his temper.

Do you know when one becomes angry? One usually becomes angry when they are shocked or surprised. One becomes angry when they expect something and never anticipate it's opposite. If one asks his wife to clean the dishes - or vice versa - and when they come home from work, the dishes are still dirty, they become mad. But if one came home also expecting the alternative, he might not lose his temper.

This was why, when the Prophet came home and asked if there was anything to eat, he was asking simply in a matter-of-fact way, not in order to nag his wife. So, the fact that he was laughing and smiling shows he knew the true nature of children.

This is what we as parents should learn and understand. When we know and that this is how a 3 or 6-year-old behaves, we will never be angry with them. This doesn't mean being indifferent or abandoning your role as a parent or mentor, but rather you don't overreact in a way that hurts your relationship with your children and shatter the emotional brick of love and trust that you took years to nurture.

The Prophet laughed because he wanted to assure Anas that it was okay to play. That genuine and caring gesture had an impact on Anas. He continued to remember it for years after the Prophet passed away. Also, because of the Prophet's understanding and trust, Anas, in this incident, was more committed to doing whatever the Prophet had asked him to do: "Yes, Prophet, I'm going."

Anas ibn Malik served the Prophet for 10 years. We know this by now. But Anas tells us this fact in various narrations; In every narration, he reveals another dimension of the Prophet's dealing with children. It's as if he is holding the camera and is shooting from a different angle every time.

In one narration, he says, "The Prophet never blamed me for not doing something he ordered me to do." (*Ahmad*)

So, there were incidents, Anas is confessing, when he didn't do what the Prophet told him to. Yet the Prophet never blamed the boy for this:

“Even when the wives of the Prophet do blame me for something I was supposed to do, and didn’t,” Anas tells us, “the Prophet intervened to defend me.” The Prophet would say, according to Anas, “Leave him alone. If it was predestined, then it would have been done.” (*Ahmad*)

The Prophet is saying: don’t blame him for something that Allah did not will to happen. Do you know what the Prophet is doing? He’s protecting the child and discouraging the habit of blaming. Blaming is a bad parenting habit. It destroys the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence. Children who are blamed by their parents or teachers, later grow to pass this attitude of blaming to their children. The Prophet is also teaching children about predetermination. Obviously, he’s not encouraging Anas not to do what he is being asked to do, but that once things happen we shouldn’t nag or stress about them.

Nurturing Compassion

Compassion or mercy is a major component in developing a child’s morals. I do think that many of our relationships today, especially among spouses and families, are lacking in compassion or *rahma* . In dealing with children, the Prophet radiated *rahma* that may be absorbed, internalized and radiated by children when they become adults.

In a hadith narrated by the young Abdullah ibn Jafar, who was with the Prophet in this incident, he said:

The Prophet entered a fruit garden, where there was a camel. When the camel saw the Prophet, it began to groan, and its eyes shed tears. The Prophet came to it and patted it on the hump and the base of its head until it quieted down.

Then he asked, “Who is the owner of this camel? To whom does it belong?”

A young boy stepped forward and said, “It is mine, Messenger of Allah.”

The Prophet said, “Don’t you fear Allah with respect to this beast which Allah has given in your possession? The camel is complaining to me that you starve it and load it heavily, fatiguing it.” (*Ahmad*)

The Prophet was a mercy to the worlds, including to plants and animals. In the hadith of *Bukhari* , there was a trunk of a palm-tree which the Prophet used to lean on while delivering his sermon or *khutbah* .

When a pulpit was placed in the mosque, the narrator says, “We heard the trunk crying out like a child [in another narration, “like a pregnant she-camel”]. The Prophet came down from the pulpit and put his hand on the trunk until it became quiet.”

The camel did the same thing; once it saw the Prophet, it started weeping. Surely, the camel had seen other people before, but it never chose to weep except to the Prophet. The trunk was leaned upon by others before and after the Prophet, but never missed – and hence cried to – anyone other than the Prophet.

The hadith about the camel illustrates the point that children around the Prophet par excellence. Accompanying the Prophet was Abdullah ibn Jafar, as a child, and the owner of the camel was also a child. If Abdullah ibn Jafar had not been with the Prophet when he entered the garden, Abdullah would never have seen a camel weeping.

This is what you witness when you are hanging around with extraordinary people. When a child hangs around amazing people, he will experience amazing things. As a child, Abdullah learned to treat Allah’s creatures – including animals (pets) and plants – with mercy and respect. Someone like Abdullah wouldn’t be a bully in school or on social media.

Abdullah learned that patting on the head is not done only to children, but to any troubled creature – camel or tree – that needed consoling. Abdullah is seeing “And We have not sent you, except as a mercy to the worlds.” (21:107) in action.

“Who is the owner of this camel?” the Prophet enquired. “It is mine,” a young boy said.

The Prophet could have reproached the boy, ordered him to treat the camel well then left. But that wasn't his style; that wasn't how he dealt with children or otherwise.

First, he worked on developing the child's block of belief or *aqeedah* : “Won't you fear Allah in this animal, which Allah made you own?” So even if there were no parents or teachers watching and even if there were no CCTV cameras, the child would still be conscious and, *inshallah* , behave accordingly.

Secondly, by talking about the camel's feelings, the Prophet was working on developing the child's emotions or emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a trendy concept which simply means being aware and conscious of your own as well as the emotions of others.

“The camel is complaining to me that you starve it and load it heavily, fatiguing it,” said the Prophet. The Prophet, while wiping the camel's tears dry, wanted to show both children – the narrator and camel-owner – that animals have feelings and emotions; they speak, praise, or complain. This is what emotional intelligence is about; it is having understanding, empathy, and compassion.

I suggest you memorize this hadith and share it with animal rights activists. You should certainly narrate it to your children. As I said in [Chapter 2](#) , children do appreciate animal stories and will enjoy a story about a camel talking to the Prophet. Stories like this allow you to be creative and animate the animals as human beings:

“... and the camel wept and said ‘O Messenger of Allah, this young boy makes me hungry. He doesn't give me any vegetables for lunch or breakfast.’”

Imagine Abdullah ibn Jafar growing up, having children, and narrating this story to them. Imagine his children asking him: “Father, did you see the

tears coming? Did you actually hear the camel complaining?”

Thirdly, the Prophet is inculcating the sense of responsibility in children. Whether you own a pet, a toy or anything, it's your responsibility to take good care of it. Because it's your cat, you can't abuse it or forget to feed it on time. When the child grows with this sense of responsibility, he will grow up to be a mature person. He will not mistreat his wife, because she is his wife, nor will he abuse his children, because they are his children. By abuse, I don't mean just physical abuse, but in the broader sense of not raising them properly.

It's important that we read and understand the literal meaning of the sayings of the Prophet. But it's equally important that we pray for Allah to give us the wisdom to understand beyond the literal meaning; to understand the broader meaning which will make it relevant to somebody living in London, New York, Delhi, or Cairo. It's important to feel the intimacy and relevance of every hadith, even if one never had or saw a camel before.

This is how we should encourage our children to read the sayings of the Prophet and Islam in general. If done properly, religion wouldn't be a straitjacket. It wouldn't be the mere rituals of Friday Prayers, fasting in Ramadan, and wearing new clothes for Eid. It becomes the oxygen I breathe, and the light with which I see.

So far, I have discussed two things: First, the Prophet was someone with the highest standard and most exalted character; he had *khuluq azeem* as opposed to just *khuluq hasan*. This high standard of character ensured the moral quality of the children he was developing.

We too, as parents, should make sure we develop the highest quality of ethical and moral children. Second, we looked at real examples of the Prophet's *khuluq azeem* when dealing with children. The first example was that he never reproached or blamed children, and the second was how he acted mercifully, including with animals.

Kindness to Parents

Parents are the most important people in a child's life. This was why teaching the child manners (or *adab*) with parents is a priority in the Prophet's list. We call good manners with parents "*birr al-walidain* ", which translates to "being dutiful and good, treating them with respect and kindness."

I know you have been probably taught about *birr al-walidain* or kindness to parents in talks and books. In fact, the Quran says:

"And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and to parents, good treatment. If one of them or both reach old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them, but speak to them a noble word." (17:23)

There is still a struggle or tension between daughters and sons and their parents. For example, the son wants to marry a girl, but the father doesn't agree because the girl isn't from this tribe, village, or country; there all sorts of generational issues and problems.

One of the reasons for tension, I think, is the lack of this harmonious or synergic process in developing the blocks we've been talking about. The son, say, is suddenly becoming religious or otherwise, and wants to change the course of his life in a non-conciliatory or aggressive way. His parents might not be as educated or understanding, and a serious clash of values arises between the two. There are all kinds of parent-child issues, but this is not my subject here.

What I am going to discuss is how the Prophet inculcated and nurtured kindness to parents among children, not through the rhetoric of talks and books but real-life cases and examples. Let me begin with this dramatic story narrated by a companion:

A man came to the Prophet and said, "O Messenger of Allah, there is a boy who is dying. He was reminded to say: *laa ilaaha illa Allah* [there is no god

but Allah], but he can't say it." (*Al-Tabarani*)

Now, imagine you were taken back in time to the 7th century to witness this incident. You just saw this tree trunk crying out like a child and the Prophet putting his hand on it until it became quiet. Now you are witnessing a no less amazing incident – A young Muslim boy who was dying yet can't utter *laa ilaaha illa Allah* .

In another hadith, it says: "If anyone's last words are 'There is no god but Allah' he will enter Paradise." (*Abu Dawood*)

Yet the dying boy, for some reason, can't utter the words. "Did he not say it during his lifetime?" the Prophet asked.

"Of course, he did," the man said.

"Did he used to pray?" the Prophet inquired. This is a very worrying question. The question immediately after "Did he not say, 'There is no god but Allah' during his lifetime?" was the question "Did he used to pray?" Prayer is not our topic here, but if I wanted to talk about prayers, I would refer to this hadith.

"He did pray," the man answered.

This was a strange situation: the young boy is a Muslim who prayed and believed there was no god but Allah, yet he can't utter the words. The Prophet himself needed to attend to this situation. He stood up and went to see the boy, escorted by the companions; the "cameramen" who would record every detail for future generations.

The Prophet went and met the boy and said to him, "Say *laa ilaaha illa Allah* ."

"I can't," said the boy. The boy can't utter it. He knew it. He understood it. He lived for it. He said it times and times again in his daily prayers. But, now, when he needed to say it most, he can't!

“Why?” asked the Prophet.

“Because he used to disobey his mother,” the Prophet was told.

We don’t know what his mother used to ask him to do; that wasn’t the point. The point was that he didn’t listen to her. He disobeyed her. Now, look at the next question that follows.

The Prophet wanted to rescue the boy like he once rescued a Jewish boy when he was ill and uttered in his death-bed *laa ilaaha illa Allah* . Imagine: the Jewish boy could say *laa ilaaha illa Allah*, but the Muslim boy couldn’t. Why? Because he had a troubled relationship with his parents - his mother especially.

“Is his mother still alive?” asked the Prophet.

“Yes”, they said. That was good news; the boy was lucky that his mother was still alive. So, the Prophet sent for her.

Now, you are witnessing the conversation between the mother and the Prophet. Note how the Prophet dramatized the situation - It’s not just me who is dramatizing the story.

He says to her, “What do you think, if a fire was lit and it was said to you: if you do intercede for him, we’ll let him go. If you don’t intercede for him, we will throw him into this fire?”

A powerful, scary scenario to a mother: imagine that a terrible hellfire was being lit especially for your estranged but still beloved son, and within seconds he will be thrown in that hellfire. Then imagine someone giving you the option to save his life. How could you not intervene?

Do you see this? The Prophet didn’t ask her what the boy used to do to her. He didn’t inquire about past incidents. That was not useful now. What was needed was to save the boy’s soul. If you don’t want to intervene, then it’s up to you. But be aware, the result will be burning him in hellfire.

In the hadith, the Arabic expression is: “*wa illa ahraqnah .*” *Ahraqnah* in Arabic has a scary tone on ones’ ears, not to mention on a mother’s heart. So, which option would you pick?

“I would intervene for him, Messenger of Allah,” she said.

The boy had disobeyed his mother. He might have been disrespectful or shouted at her. But when it came down to her son being in danger of eternal damnation, the mother had to forget the past, to embrace and forgive him. She might even throw herself in hellfire to protect him.

“Then call upon Allah to witness, and call upon us to witness with you, that you are pleased with him,” said the Prophet.

She said, “I am pleased with my son.”

The Prophet turned to the boy and asked him to say: *Ashhadu an laa ilaaha illa Allah wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan abduhu wa rasuluhu* [I testify and witness that there is no god other than Allah and that Muhammad is His Messenger]. Finally, the boy was able to say it.

The Prophet then said, “Praise be to Allah, who has saved him from the Fire.”

This was exactly what the Prophet had said when the Jewish boy became a Muslim. Only now, can the boy say: I used to pray; I am a good Muslim, who used to do good work and was, say, an active student at the university’s Islamic society, etc. Only now can I say all this, but not before, when my mother was upset with me, nor when my father was angry with me.

This was a dramatic narrative that I wanted to begin with when talking about *birr al-walidain* . I think with this narrative we don’t need other narratives. Do we? Well, why not – you might say - give us something a little lighter. You made us cry, now make us smile.

I spoke about how disobeying parents can lead to hell. Now I would like to show the opposite: how being kind to them leads to heaven.

When the Prophet was taken on the Night Journey, he saw Heaven. In it, he heard someone reciting the Quran. “Who’s this?” he asked.

It was a companion called Harithah ibn Al-Nu’mān. Harithah might not be the most famous companion, but to the rest of the companions he was famous for one thing: he was obedient to his mother. That’s amazing! Five minutes ago, we read about a young boy who was about to be thrown in Hellfire because of his mother, and now we have someone who’s happily reading Quran in Paradise because of his mother. Opposite destinies, both hinging on the mother.

Once a man asked the Prophet, “What are the parents’ rights over their child?”

He said, “They are your Paradise and your Hell.” (*Ibn Majah*) In another hadith, the Prophet says, “The pleasure of the Lord lies in the pleasure of the parent.” (*Bukhari*)

“The anger of the Lord lies in the anger of the parent.” I think the two contrasting stories above are a vivid illustration of this.

Now, imagine Harithah is among the companions who heard from the Prophet this good news. Imagine how happy he would have been to hear himself called out by name. Imagine him rushing to his mother, warmly hugging her and saying: “Thank you, mother! It’s because of you that I will enter Paradise. It’s because of you that Allah will bless me with a nice voice to recite the Quran in Paradise.”

Imagine when Harithah gets married and narrates the story to his children. Imagine what they might say: “*Mashallah* , father. So, you will be in Paradise because of Grandma? That’s really cool.”

Imagine how the children of Harithah will treat their parents from now on. They will do no less for their mother than Harithah did for their grandmother. They will treat their father, Harithah, no less well because they learned from the Prophet that one’s destiny is also decided by how one treats his/her father.

“The father is the middle door of Paradise [i.e. the best way to Paradise], so it is up to you whether you take advantage of it or not,” taught the Prophet. (*Ibn Majah*)

Building the blocks effectively is an inherited job. It’s carried forward from father to son to grandson. It is inherited in the community and in the broader society.

In another hadith, a man came to the Prophet and said, “O Messenger of Allah, I did a major sin.”

When the companions say it’s a major sin, then it’s major. When someone says I did a major sin, you might suspect what he did. Don’t imagine too much because we don’t know but can only suspect. Some companions did make major sins because they were human beings like anyone – we Muslims tend to assume they led perfect, whitewashed lives. They did not; some committed adultery and some drunk alcohol. The difference was that the companions regretted what they did and repented immediately.

This was the companion’s question: “O Messenger of Allah! I did a major sin. Is there any repentance for me?”

The Prophet, you might think in situations like this, will ask him to give to charity, or pray and ask for forgiveness. No! Instead he asked him whether his mother was still alive.

“No,” the man responded.

“Do you have any maternal aunts?” the Prophet inquired. It seems the mother is so important that anyone associated with her is magnificent; the mother is so honorable that anyone who’s associated with her assumes the honor.

“Yes,” the man replied. That’s good news.

The Prophet said, “Then be dutiful to her.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

So, be good to your mother's sister and this is your repentance. Wonderful!

But how well you treat your parents doesn't only decide your destiny in the Day of Judgment, but in this world as well:

“Whoever is pleased to have his provision expanded and his lifespan extended, then he should keep good relations with his parents.”

What does one really wish for other than enjoying a comfortable and healthy life?

We live in a time when proper respect of parents is fading. The Prophet was eager to maintain children's respect of parents, even in ways that we might view as “too much”.

When the Prophet saw a boy walking in front of a man, he asked the boy: “Who's this?”

“He's my father,” said the boy.

The Prophet said, “Don't walk in front of him, and don't do something that will cause him to curse you.”

Meaning, don't make your parents commit sins because of your irritating behavior. In the same way that parents can help you go to Paradise, you can help them too.

There is a discussion among the Islamic jurists (*fuqaha*) with regards when to walk behind or in front of one's parents. Some say you walk in front of him at night and behind during the daytime. Basically, be like a “bodyguard” to them, who shows humility as well as respect.

“But I don't walk with my parents”, you might say, “I drive with them.” Don't take it literally; the point is to show them respect. Don't deal with them as you deal with your buddies. They might be your best friends, but they are also your parents.

Courtesy to Neighbors

Other than with parents, the Prophet also taught children to have good manners with their relatives, friends, and neighbors.

In a hadith, the Prophet warned, “The angels invoke a curse upon whoever points a piece of iron at his brother.”

So, it’s unacceptable to point a weapon against another brother with the intention of scaring, threatening, or even joking. You are not allowed to scare, intimidate or tease even your blood brother from the same father and mother, for the angels will curse you.

Next to this hadith, I have written a question: What about a brother who pulls the hair of his sister to torment her? Or beats up his younger brother or is otherwise abusive or bullying? Surely the angels wouldn’t be pleased with them.

Please, don’t take the hadith too literally. It isn’t that the Prophet is against the use of iron as a physical material; he is waging an awareness campaign against anything that intimidates, terrifies, or offends another person. He wants children to be well-mannered and considerate. Being considerate was what the Prophet was also inculcating in children when he asked young Umair about his deceased pet. Now he is doing the same thing by talking about the piece of iron. The piece of iron was a mere example of a tool that could be used to intimidate or terrorize. The Prophet used many examples to internalize and build the simple character of mercy (*rahma*), kindness, and courtesy.

This concept of courtesy is what one shows towards his neighbors. The Prophet was nurturing a high culture of empathy among neighboring children.

He said about the neighbor: “If you buy some fruit, offer him some; otherwise take it secretly to your home, and don’t let your child go out with it, just to tease his children.” (*Al-Tabrani*)

The neighbor here could be a Muslim or non-Muslim, and the fruits can also be anything else – veggies, chips, sweets, biscuits, cookies, or bread. Now, unless you're in a country suffering through famine or extreme poverty, anyone can go out to the supermarket and buy some oranges. The hadith isn't just talking about food; it's talking about common courtesy. When you buy fruits, offer some to your neighbor, not because he needs it, but to show you care. If, for whatever reason, you don't want to or can't offer, then there is no need to show off that you have something your neighbor might not.

To appreciate this hadith, we need a little context here. When the Prophet said this, he was in the city of Medina. In Medina, houses were tightly clustered together and neighbors were almost literally on top of each other. Houses were very humbly built, to the extent that Hassan al Basri, a great tabi'i says: "I used to enter the rooms of the Prophet's house during the caliphate of Othman and I would touch their ceilings."

The houses of 7th century Arabia were very modest buildings, so your neighbor was bound to see you. It was out of courtesy that you offered some of what he saw, or otherwise you quietly smuggle it into the house. Also, don't let your son or daughter take the food outside to vex or show off to the son or daughter of the neighbor. They can't go out to show off that they have imported organic pomegranates or whatever and just eat in front of them. Are you physically harming them? No! But you are hurting their feelings, and that is enough reason not to do it. Children need to be taught courtesy.

The Prophet, in addition to nurturing courtesy, is also building unity among members of society. He doesn't want to encourage envy or animosity; instead he wants to cultivate good company. He wants the neighboring children to be best friends, to go to the mosque together, and play football together. To do this, they must not create petty resentments because of material or financial inequalities like an orange, a piece of candy, or a toy: If this toy is going to hurt this friendship and make us lose each other, then we don't want it.

I think that was what the Prophet was doing; he was building relations. He was building community relations. Remember, the neighbor could be Muslim or non-Muslim. It wouldn't matter; you would still be expected to share and care.

The young Ibn Amr was a companion raised by the Prophet. Whenever he cooked some meat, he presented it as a gift to his Jewish neighbor. To justify the act, he said, "I heard the Prophet say, 'Jibreel kept recommending treating neighbors with kindness until I thought he was going to assign them a share of inheritance.'" (*Bukhari*)

Matters of Identity

There are other manners that the Prophet nurtured in children, a lot of which were related to identity. Today, we live in difficult times; some are ashamed of expressing their Islamic identity. Since 9/11 and more recently ISIS, Muslims are struggling with their identity, and Muslim children are even more confused. Forces like peer pressure, social media, globalization, and fashion impact their choices. I am aware of the social pressure to conform, of wanting to be stylish, cool, and fashionable - wanting to look no different from others, and not wanting to be singled out because of their appearance. However, when I talk about a distinctive identity, I don't mean it in an aggressive way, but in a decent and dignified way.

In raising children, the Prophet was keen to maintain a distinct and proud identity. He once saw a boy who had shaved one part of his head and left the other parts unshaven. The boy was either following a certain hairstyle or trying out a new look.

The Prophet, however, told him: "Shave it all or leave it all." He gave him a choice, yet within the framework of a distinct identity.

I gave the example of hairstyle. But you could extrapolate this to attire, words, and overall attitude and behavior. As a parent, you need to ask yourself: What identity am I building in my child? Can I build someone

who is a proud Muslim yet open-minded and cosmopolitan? Can I nurture a child who is confident and proud of his religion, yet courteous and considerate to his neighbors? The answer is yes.

These are the questions you need to think about when, say, you buy clothes or toys for your children. Personally, I wouldn't buy my daughter a Barbie doll. It's nothing personal, believe me! If I did, then I would have to buy everything to go with the doll: the bikini, and the boyfriend; the whole cultural package.

Practical Tips: How to Develop Manners in Your Child

1. When entering the house, greet your children with *salam* and kisses. This should help develop their sense of love and mercy.
2. Be good to your neighbors and never gossip. Don't even speak ill of other drivers when on the road. Your children listen, absorb, and emulate.
3. When calling your parents, encourage your children to speak to them.
4. When visiting your parents, take your children with you. The more they see you take care of your own parents the more they will learn to take care of you.
5. When driving them to school or elsewhere, don't always put on, say, an audio of Islamic stories. Rather, tell them the stories yourself. This will have a greater impact – trust me!
6. Read them a short hadith each day – it doesn't take much time, but it's very effective in creating strong bonds and wonderful memories.
7. Comb your hair, clean your teeth, and wear presentable clothes even if you're not going out for the day. They need to learn that being clean and tidy is a religious duty and isn't about going out!

8. Try not to blame or comment on every word or action of theirs. Learn to overlook and let it go sometimes. This certainly builds their self-confidence.

9. Ask your children's permission before entering their rooms. Don't just knock and enter but wait for a verbal permission. They will learn to do the same when wanting to enter your room.

10. Apologize to your children if you made a mistake. Apologizing teaches them to be humble and polite.

11. Don't be sarcastic or make fun of their views or feelings, even if you mean it as a joke. It can hurt deeply.

12. Show respect to your children's privacy. It's important for their sense of value and self-esteem.

13. Don't expect them to will listen or understand the first time. Don't take it personally; Muhammad never did. But be patient and consistent.

Chapter 6

DISCIPLINING SEXUAL DESIRES

Chapter 6 is a doozy. I ask Allah to help me with this sensitive topic - disciplining the sexual desires of children. You might think: children's sexual desires? Isn't that a contradiction? I would like this chapter to be useful for the later stage of a child's development. So, what is said here is obviously not applicable for very young children; we are talking about someone who is on the cusp of puberty.

Remember what I said at the beginning: the entire nature of the interactions between the Prophet and children, and between you as parents and children, is a process of training. It's a preemptive measure. Ask them to start praying at the age of 7 and be stricter about it at the age of 10. Why? Because it's training them to love praying and to get into the habit. Lowering their gaze and covering themselves and seeking permission before they enter their parents' bedroom might not necessarily quell the development of sexual desire, but it will certainly train him or her to be prepared when reaching puberty.

Parents around the world struggle to discuss matters related to sexual education with their children. I will show you that the Prophet never felt embarrassed, because this was a normal reality. This was a fact of life, and they are going to encounter this reality with or without you, even behind your back. If you are not guiding them, they will seek advice from elsewhere, and you know what that might lead to.

When discussing sexual desires, I want to divide this chapter into two parts. First is the role of the household in disciplining sexual desires, and second

is the outcome of this discipline on the child when outside the house.

I am aware of the problems. I am aware of the real challenges in the West and elsewhere. I am aware that you might invest a lot of time and effort in disciplining your child inside the household, but because some live in a non-Muslim society, some of this investment might be in vain. It's outside the household which is a problem. But I still believe that this process of disciplining the child in the household first will hopefully make the child 60, 70, or 80 percent better than if they came out from a household with unlimited access to the Internet, no restrictions on the programs they watch on TV, and access to the latest fashion magazines on the living room table.

In my book, *Muhammad: How He Can Make You Extraordinary*, I say that technology has wiped out the dividing lines between the home and the outside world; the Internet and smart phones allow a youngster to do in his own bedroom what he could only previously do outside. The challenges of parenthood are no longer the same as those of the 7th century, because bad friends can exert an influence not just in the street or school, but at home through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and countless other means.

Nonetheless, the principles of parenting are the same, and how to deal with teenagers is essentially unchanged and still starts by building youngster's character at home from early childhood to make him able to handle temptations outside the home, even if those temptations come in different, more advanced forms.

Also, be aware that we live in a global world dominated by Western culture. I'm not trying to downplay the seriousness of the challenges we and our children encounter but raising children in the West (or elsewhere) is unique, although not necessarily an unprecedented experience.

Think for a moment about the children who became Muslims in the non-Islamic environment in Mecca, not in Islamic Medina. Think about those who became Muslims in Mecca; think about Ali ibn Abi Talib; think about Zaid ibn Harithah; think about Abdullah ibn Masoud; think about Al-

Arqam ibn Abi al-Arqam and all the young people who were born and brought up in Mecca and not, like Anas ibn Malik, in Medina.

There was no mosque, no large Muslim community, no Quranic *surahs* like *Al-Baqarah* or *Al-Mai'dah* yet revealed, or any Madani culture and legislation. Yet there was an Islamic, Meccan cultural attitude that included lowering the gaze and protecting one's chastity. This was because the teacher and the master in a little house owned by the young Al-Arqam was sufficient to morally discipline those children and even the companions.

I am not trying to say the situation now is anywhere near identical. In fact, I might argue that it's better today than the situation of the children in Mecca. Now we have Islamic schools and Islamic organizations. We are able to hold a two-day course on the Children around the Prophet, say, at the University of London, rather than holding it in a mosque. I'm saying we are in a better situation. Yes, the challenges are there and by narrating some of the verses from the Quran and some of the hadith, as we will do later, we will ease the impact of that challenge or better manage dealing with that challenge.

Let's discuss the first part which is the household. At this stage, I would like to focus on and emphasize the importance of the role of parents. I don't want to give you a talk on marriage and how to choose your future wife and how to select your future husband, if you have the luxury of choosing. Most of you are married now, anyways! But I do want to say that this marital bond or relationship is crucial and sacred. Based on this bond, everything else, including household values, will be built.

In my courses, *The Four Great Imams* and *Life of Imam Bukhari*, I spoke about the role of the household in bringing up great people such as Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi'i, Imam Malik, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Imam Bukhari.

The impression that many people have is that Abu Hanifa was born as the great Abu Hanifa. No! Abu Hanifa was once a child and later a teenager. He grew up and was raised in a society that was in some ways going through a

moral decline. Ahmad ibn Hanbal was tortured and imprisoned. Bukhari lived in one of the worst political, social, and economic periods of Muslim history. He lived in Bukhara, away from Mecca and Medina. He traveled alone at the age of 18 and settled in Mecca, still a politically divided society. I'm not saying it was a cesspool of drugs, sex, and rock and roll, but at the same time the locals were struggling to maintain their identity. But it was because of their households that they were able to do so. It was because they were carrying the memory of their father, the memory of their mother and of course, the Quran, the hadith, and the blessing of Allah. But first and foremost was the parental influence which stayed with them wherever they traveled.

Imam Malik always talked about his mother. Likewise, Imam Abu Hanifa was deeply devoted to his own. His students, including Abu Yusuf, used to say: "We were never jealous of anyone other than the mother of Abu Hanifa because whenever he sees her, he stops the lesson and says I'm going to be in the service of my mother." – So, he stopped the lesson, and thus denied us the opportunity of learning. Abu Yusuf didn't say this literally, but this was why he said, "We were jealous of the mother of Abu Hanifa."

This is why I want to focus on the household and its role in disciplining the sexual desires in the character of a child and how the parents can facilitate this.

The Role of Prayers

The first thing is that if a household is a decent, Muslim, believing household, then there is an immediate sexual education for the child based on this fact. Let me tell you how: If a child grows up in a household where he sees his parents praying, then he is also seeing his parents covering certain parts of their body in preparation to pray. This is building awareness at an early age that there are things which in the holy contexts of prayer that should not be visible. Imagine a child encountering the hijab through his mother inside the household while she is praying. The child's encounter

with the hijab doesn't begin when outside the house, when there are male strangers. No, it begins inside the house when the mother wears it to pray.

Imagine at the age of 7, your son witnesses his mother wearing hijab. Imagine your daughter, at the age of 7, wanting to wear the hijab. You don't have to wait until she is 20. You don't have to wait until she becomes more observant of her own accord while at university. You don't have to wait until she is employed or gets married. Why not? Because since the age of 7, she had a friendly relationship with hijab. Isn't this a form of sexual education?

What is sexual education? To some, it's about the use of condoms, safe sex, and avoiding underage pregnancy. Sexual education is connected with changeable social norms, but nothing else. I'm sorry to say this, but no, sexual education is to know that I have parts of my body that I shouldn't show to everybody, certainly not in public.

You have probably noticed how aggressively corporations promote their lingerie and underwear in public. I would argue there is no real underwear now, in the strict literal sense, because the fashion now is that everyone is walking the street showing the brand of their underwear! Where is the "under" in this underwear if it's already out there for everyone to see? The child must grow up in a household that respects certain parts of the body. That is the number one step: the role of prayers in disciplining your child's sexual desires.

One can now see how the building is growing and can see the blocks cementing together to make a stronger and more stable building. You can see how the block of worship or *ibadah* (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)), is helping build the block of sexual desire. You can see how the block of belief or *aqeedah* (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), that Allah watching them, is helping to lower their gaze. You can see the building growing up, and you can see the jigsaw puzzle being completed in the mind and heart of the child.

Have you ever thought about prayer from this broader and practical perspective before? Do you appreciate the verse which says: "Prayer

prohibits immorality and wrongdoing” (29:45)?

The Importance of Knocking

Prayer illustrates another, no less fascinating role in disciplining a child’s sexual desires. Prayer creates awareness of certain time slots within the day and the need to knock and ask for permission before going into the parents’ bedroom. So, I must first knock and seek permission to enter and cannot just enter into the bedroom at any time.

Notice how Islam deals with this sensitive matter with regards to children going into their parents’ bedroom. Before the age of puberty, Allah knows that children are wandering around and it would be extremely difficult or impractical for the child to be restricted at all times, so asking permission to enter especially during three specified times a day is enough.

Do you know how Allah dealt with the early Muslim community with regards to alcohol? How he banned it gradually? At first, drinking was allowed but not before prayer time. Do you know what this is telling us? It’s telling us that dealing with human beings is a very difficult process and things have to be taken slowly and gradually. Someone who is below the age of puberty has to be trained, and this is part of his training. Knock during three times of the day before the age of puberty, but then at all times after the age of puberty; he must then knock at any time of the day. The remarkable thing is the nature of these three times; they are linked with the times of the prayers.

In the Quran, Allah instructs those who have not yet reached puberty “to ask permission of you [before entering] at three times: before the dawn prayer and when you put aside your clothing [for rest] at noon and after the night prayer.” (24:58)

The three times, therefore, are very much linked to prayer times. Now, wouldn’t it be a contradiction if you asked your child to seek permission

three times a day, before and after a particular prayer, if you don't even pray? What a contradiction!

That's why I said from the beginning I am expecting the household and the parents who have reached a certain level of understanding and practice to enact all these disciplining procedures, and if the parents are not aware of the overarching framework then these procedures would not exist anyway.

Now think about the bedroom and think about why Allah does not want children to go in the bedroom at all times. It's because he might accidentally see what he shouldn't. However, if you understand the bedroom to be strictly a physical space, then I think you have missed the point. It's not the bedroom, but it's about what goes on in it. Isn't this right?

What if I respect the norm of what goes on in the bedroom but not elsewhere? What if I ask the child to knock and seek permission before entering the bedroom but then transport what happens in the bedroom elsewhere in the house. Do you want me to give you examples or to make it more explicit?

What if I ask the child to seek permission so that they avoid seeing unsuitable things, but then allow them to see similar things taking place in an uncensored picture, TV show, movie, or Internet site? Nowadays, indecent programs don't have to be late at night, partly because many TV channels have become 24 hours. What a child misses at night, they get to see during the daytime.

What if things they are not supposed to see in the bedroom are accessible through their unsupervised smartphones and social media? I'm talking about the indecencies a child encounters without needing to go outside the house. This is why I said technology has wiped out the dividing lines between the home and the outside world, as the Internet and smartphones allow a youngster to do in his own bedroom what he could only previously do outside. The children now can see what happens inside a bedroom without entering his parents'. This is why parenting has become a real

challenge that needs deeper understanding and wisdom to be managed. Knocking and seeking permission however remains a must.

What I want you to think about here is that the verse mentioned above is not just talking about the bedroom. The verse is talking about whatever could be happening in the bedroom and should not happen elsewhere in the household. So, you miss the point of the verse when you ask your children to seek permission before entering your bedroom, but you still put them in testing situations by making them encounter what they could have seen in the bedroom.

The proverbial bedroom could be a TV. The bedroom could be the Internet. The bedroom could be an adult magazine. The bedroom could be the mother not wearing proper clothes while she's in the kitchen or the backyard, or it could be the father eating popcorn and watching TV in his underwear. You want to have popcorn in your underwear? Fine, go to your bedroom. Your bedroom is where whatever you want happens, not your living room.

Training the child continues after puberty. But with regards to knocking, it's now upgraded to 24/7. Because now they have reached a level where they can understand. They have been praying since the age of 7. They have developed the habit of knocking on the door three times a day. Now it's easy for them to knock at all times. I genuinely think that Islam – with this common sense and piecemeal approach – is easy to apply. That's why Allah says:

“We have not sent down to you the Quran to cause you distress.” (20:2)

The problem, I think, is we apply it too late and that's why we find it difficult.

Separate Beds

The other thing that should happen in the household when children are close to puberty is to have each one in a separate bed. Some Islamic jurists say if the bed is large enough, the financial situation is tight, or the rooms are smaller than normal, then they can share the same bed provided each has his or her own blanket. This is because when people are unconscious, they are not in control of themselves and anything could happen.

That's why the Prophet said, "When one of you wakes up from his sleep, he must not put his hand in a utensil till he washed his hand three times, for he does not know where it was while he was asleep." (*Muslim*)

A child, therefore, might wake up in their middle of the night to go to the bathroom or drink water and accidentally see his sister uncovered. Surely you wouldn't want him to see what would disturb everyone.

Also, doesn't a hadith say that when you look at a female stranger it is as if you have been hit with an arrow by the devil? A lot of us feel that sensation. You feel as if the level of your *iman* just got smacked down. You don't feel like going to the mosque, praying, or reading the Quran. Straightaway, the *iman* goes down because of that look. When you are a child, Allah is protecting you from what might hurt or offend you. He tells you to knock on the door first. Yes, it might be difficult to always remember to do so. Yes, he knows how much you want to see your father or mother, but he knows how knocking is also good for you. Yes, your bed will be separated from the bed of your beloved brother, but the separation is symbolic and he's still nearby, a bed or a blanket away.

Again, this is only to protect you, so that when you go outside the house, you will not struggle as much. These procedures are not to restrict you or make life difficult for you; in fact, they are to liberate you.

In a hadith, it says: "Command your children to pray when they become 7 years old and punish them for it when they become 10 years old; and arrange their beds separately." (*Abu Dawood*)

There are two opinions on this hadith, as far as the age of the children when beds should be separated. One suggests that it should start at the age of 7. It

seems that the age of 7 is a significant turning point both in prayer and in sleeping. The other opinion says it is the age of ten. Here we are not just talking about brother and sister, but any two siblings; two sisters or two brothers.

But like knocking on the parents' bedroom, the issue here is not just about having two blankets or beds. No, that's not the point. The point is that this should be in coherence and synergy with an entire culture that is taking place within the house. So, the living room cannot turn into a bedroom; for instance, a girl should not wear inappropriate clothes around the house in front of her father or brother. So again, don't take the bed to mean just the bedroom. Take the bed as an example of a broader culture enveloping the whole house.

Sleeping on One's Right Side

Another procedure which is quite simple if the child is being trained is to get him into the habit of sleeping on his or her right side. I'm talking about children who have reached the age of puberty; I am not talking about a baby. I'm talking about someone you're anticipating him or her to reach the age of puberty within a couple of years.

Now, don't worry what happens when the child is fast asleep – whether on their stomach, back, or sleepwalking. Just get the child to sleep on his or her right side at the beginning of the night when he or she is in bed and getting ready to sleep. This is so he or she knows that when you go to bed it's on the right side, and make sure you explain why. Tell the child there are medical findings that say sleeping on the side, compared to sleeping on your stomach, is a healthier and more comfortable sleeping position. Say this is what the Prophet has advised. There are several hadiths – directed mainly at boys - where they are discouraged from sleeping on their stomach. The parents themselves should also be practicing what they preach, of course.

Also, it's a good idea to teach the children *azkar al-nawm* (the words of remembrance before going to sleep) such as:

“In Your Name I have laid down on my side. If You take my soul, then have mercy on it. If You release it, then preserve it in the manner in which You preserve those of right action.” (*Bukhari*)

Teach them to recite certain verses from the Quran that the Prophet used say before going to sleep, such as *Surat Al-Ikhlās* (The Purity), *Surat Al-Falaq* (The Daybreak), *Surat An-Naas* (Mankind), and the verse of *Al-Kursi* (The Throne) (2:255).

Reciting these verses before going to sleep will teach the child to seek Allah's protection from anything frightening – at that stage, it will probably be the dark or monsters, but later there will be more real threats in life. Don't think the prayers (*dua*) or these words of remembrance are difficult to learn or memorize. They are not difficult if they are explained and continuously repeated. If repeated daily, even your 3-year-old child will remember it.

I know of parents who, when they forget to say the night or morning remembrance or forget parts of them, their child reminds them. In a way, children are like parrots. They have an incredible ability to absorb and memorize things, good or bad. So, if you insult or swear at your spouse, they will memorize what you said it and later on might direct the same words at you. It was stored in their memory – thanks to you – and instantly prompted to come out.

Outside the House

I have explained what you might do inside the house. What about when the child goes outside the house?

What was happening in the household? First, he got used to knocking and seeking permission before he entered the bedroom. Since a young age, the

child was trained that certain parts of the body shouldn't be visible, except to you or your spouse. He was also taught that he is expected to restrain his gaze if his eyes accidentally fall on what he should not have seen. He is aware that during the prayers these certain body parts should be covered. He is aware that he should be knocking and asking for permission during times that are linked to the prayers and prayer times.

Second, when he sleeps in a shared bedroom with his sister or brother, he doesn't share the same bed, or at least not the same blanket. He lies on his right side and recites the *azkar al-nawm* or the night words of remembrance.

This was the household. That's it. That's your mission as a parent. Of course, the boy or the girl is seeing you pray, treating your spouse with the utmost respect, etc. I'm not going to talk about this right now. I'm just talking about the manners related to sexual desires and sex education.

Now, the child goes outside and sees a big advertising poster of someone wearing something revealing. Now think about this child that has been trained in the household to respect privacy – it then becomes easier for him or her, upon seeing an indecent image, to lower their gaze. I know practically this does not always happen. I know that it's far more difficult than this. I know that a lot of us are not brought up in a religious way, but there is certainly a difference between a child who has grown up inside a household that taught him all the things we discussed above and a child who has not.

Even when he or she does look, what is your role here? The children, or more accurately, teenagers at the time of the Prophet did undoubtedly check out members of the other sex. Attraction to the other sex is a natural instinct, but the question is how to manage it.

The following hadith is an example of how parents can deal with temptations outside the house as far as their children are concerned. The hadith below is told in many narrations, and the key character is Al-Fadl ibn Abbas, the younger brother of the famous young companion, Abdullah ibn

Abbas. Both are related to the Prophet. When you hear the name “Abbas”, it’s the Prophet’s uncle. Not only this, but anyone who was closely related to the Prophet, especially from his father’s side, as was Abdullah and Al-Fadl, was good-looking.

Al-Fadl ibn Abbas and Abdullah ibn Abbas were handsome, as was the Prophet, of course. The hadith is narrated by Abdullah ibn Abbas, his brother, who probably took some delight in relating a story where his young brother was misbehaving:

Al-Fadl was riding behind the Prophet and a woman from the tribe of Khath’am came up. Al-Fadl started looking at her and she started looking at him. The Prophet turned Al-Fadl’s face to the other side.

She said, “My father has come under Allah’s obligation of performing Hajj, but he is very old man and cannot ride a mount. Shall I perform Hajj on his behalf?”

“Yes,” the Prophet said.

“That happened during Hajjat-ul-Wada’ of the Prophet,” Abdullah ibn Abbas concludes. (*Bukhari*)

The hadith has many narrations, one in which is narrated by Al-Fadl himself. He said every time he was looking at her, the Prophet turned Al-Fadl’s face to the other side; he did this three times. (*Ahmed*)

So, Al-Fadl ibn Abbas was with the Prophet on the back of his camel or mule. Can you imagine the Prophet taking the children for a ride on the back of his camel or mule? It’s like when you as a parent take your child for a stroll or a drive just to have a heart-to-heart talk with him. The action of taking your child out to the park and talking to him or her about lowering their gaze is better than the two of you staying at home with one eye on the TV or your smartphone.

So, Al-Fadl ibn Abbas was behind the Prophet sitting with him on a camel or a mule, and a beautiful girl came to ask the Prophet a question about

Hajj. But while she's asking the question, her eyes started wandering off to the fine look of Al-Fadl ibn Abbas, sitting at the back of the Prophet's camel.

Can you believe anyone blessed with the great privilege of talking to the Prophet could be distracted by anything else? This goes to show that, completely unsurprisingly, teenagers across history and different cultures have consistently been attracted to one another. So even while you're talking directly to the Prophet, you'll still be checking out young men like Al-Fadl, and Al-Fadl himself while blessed with the opportunity to take a ride with the Prophet, is still interested in young women.

Both the boy and the girl were flirting with one another – we know Al-Fadl was straight-out staring at her, while she was presumably being a little more discreet. The Prophet, even though he was looking for the right answer to the girl's question, was not oblivious to the sparks flying dangerously around him. As a mentor, he was keeping an eye on Al-Fadl ibn Abbas; he gently turned Al-Fadl's face the other way.

The Prophet then said to him, "*Ibn Akhi* (the son of my brother)!"

You see, whenever the Prophet gives an advice to a young person, he usually begins with a term of endearment such as "my beloved", such as with his conversation with Mu'adh ibn Jabal when he said: «O Mu'adh, by Allah, I love you and advise you not to miss supplicating after every prayer." (*Nassa'i*)

Is it easy for male platonic friends today to tell each other "I love you"? The word "love" today has unfortunately been so contaminated with the assumption that its meaning is romantic or sexual, that we instead use more casual, mild expressions like "I like you" or "You're a pretty cool guy." Many people rarely even express themselves this much with their own brother. But here the Prophet is saying: "O Mu'adh, by Allah, I love you."

The Prophet wants to give advice, but he wants to emphasize the emotional block first. Hence: "*Ibn Akhi* ." The Prophet is talking to Al-Fadl ibn Abbas now. He says, "Son of my brother, this is a day that whoever lowers his

gaze and guards his private parts and tongue, will be forgiven.” (*Ibn Khuzaimah*)

By the way, this was a day of Hajj, hence, the girl’s question in relation to Hajj and the question was asked close to the Kaaba. This is amazing. It shows that even with the presence of the Prophet and during Hajj, teenagers are still attracted to a good-looking girl or boy. So, what if you were living in an environment with more temptations, such as Miami or Madrid?

“This is a day that whoever lowers his gaze, and guards his private parts and tongue, will be forgiven.”

Note how the Prophet wasn’t harsh or punitive towards the boy, because this was a process of training. Second, the Prophet didn’t ignore the boy or let the incident slide by without mention, but rather gave a few words of advice.

The Prophet spoke about private parts while the boy was just looking; it was nothing to do with private parts. But what was the Prophet actually doing? He was training Al-Fadl, and anyone listening at the time, to seriously consider the long-term consequences of looking.

Why does the hadith refer to the tongue? Well, the look could lead to a conversation and a date, which in turn leads to the real trouble. This was the Prophet’s sex education lesson.

But sex education today has a different meaning: Yes, you can sleep with a girl as long as you don’t get her pregnant. Sex education today is how to have safe sex. But the Prophet was linking sex education to the fear of Allah. If you lower your gaze, guard your private parts and tongue, you will be forgiven by Allah.

The Prophet did not say if you look at a girl again the police will arrest you and charge you with indecency or sexual harassment. The Prophet said Allah would forgive the young man, knowing that mentioning the Divine would have an impact. This was because there was on an ongoing process of training which his parents had undertaken in the house. So, the Prophet

said it in this context and within this expectation. The context being: if you knock on the door, guard your gaze, tongue, and private parts during the prayer, you can continue to do so outside the house. No matter how attractive the young man or woman is or how strong the temptation.

Learning the Chapter of An-Nur (The Light)

So far, I have spoken about the steps parents must take inside the house to manage the child's sexual desires. I discussed the importance of lowering the gaze and the serious consequences of not doing this outside the house. Let me now link the two together – the house and outside it – with a general advice or a third thing that parents can do: teaching their children *Surat An-Nur* (The Light).

It's said the earlier generations of Muslims used to teach *Surat An-Nur* to their children and memorize it before the age of puberty. Omar ibn Al-Khattab, when he was Caliph (634-44), used to encourage parents to teach their kids *Surat An-Nur*, especially to girls. This is because, if you look at the entire *Surat An-Nur*, you will find that it is all about the social ethics and morals, particularly in relation to sex.

To understand why a child should learn this chapter, you have to first know why it was revealed. This chapter is the main element contributing to sex education in the Prophet's community. An entire chapter is concerned with the relationship between men and women, and the Prophet was reciting these chapters to everyone within the community, including children. What more sex education do you want?

Don't think that Islam hides things from children; don't think that Islam is waiting for the child to grow up to understand things through real experience. No! He will learn first through the Quran and through training by responsible parents. He or she will be introduced to these things as early as possible, not to avoid early pregnancy, but to avoid what displeases Allah. From as young an age as possible, they should become responsible and decent citizens in their respective communities and societies.

Surat An-Nur was revealed after gossip that claimed the Prophet's wife, Aisha, had committed adultery. The rumor was an extremely serious one. Don't forget, Aisha was in her teens at the time, and the Prophet was quite old. The Hypocrites of Medina, who had always resented the Prophet, found it easy to take cheap shots at a young girl's honor. Have you thought about the severity of such an accusation and how disturbing to the community it might have been? Think about the boys and girls in the community, including Safwan ibn Al-Muattal, who was specifically accused of having an affair with Aisha. The gossip spread like wildfire in the community, so much so that even trusted companions fell into the trap of judging Aisha. Aisha was so devastated when the rumors reached her that she asked to leave the Prophet's house and stay with her parents, Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq and her mother. It was a very dark situation, but the light (*nur*) of Allah was revealed to clear things up. At the beginning of *Surat An-Nur* we read:

“The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse - lash each one of them with a hundred lashes...” (24:2)

When the chapter begins with that, you might think it is a very harsh beginning. The beginning might have been: “Don't attack the honor of girls” or “Never abuse the innocent,” etc. But why did it begin in such a stern tone? Because Allah wanted to put the ceiling first and say this is your limit. If you exceed the limit, you will be punished, but before you are forced to go to this limit, I'm going to protect you from the outset. The entire chapter of the Quran talks about preventive measures to stop adultery before it starts. What are these preventive measures?

Firstly, you have to start with training, which is why children should be taught this chapter of the Quran in particular. Recall how children start by seeking permission before entering the bedroom – so they will be trained to also avoid fornication and adultery. Secondly, it's talking about getting the youth married early on:

“And marry the unmarried among you and the righteous among your male slaves and female slaves. If they should be poor, Allah will enrich them

from His bounty, and Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.” (24:32)

So, at the beginning, seek permission. Then if you can afford to, get married when you reach the age of maturity.

Thirdly, there are verses that talk about lowering the gaze:

“Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is acquainted with what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment.” (24: 30-31)

So, the third measure: lowering the gaze.

The fourth measure in the chapter is wearing the headscarf or the hijab.

The fifth measure is not to speak ill of anyone’s honor, especially when there is no evidence. You know, sometimes I feel we do that. Now there is a global culture of following celebrity scandals and gossip. Some magazines are nothing but following and spying on celebrities when they go to the beach, travel, shop, etc. All the while trying to create scandals and invading their privacy. People in some western countries don’t speak to strangers. We are told that this is a cold society, but in reality, they are hungry for gossip and scandals. In the UK, they are perpetually hungry for Royal news. They are ready to intrude on any private house via a paparazzi photo or gossip in the tabloids.

Allah prevented all this culture based on the incident of Aisha. The Quranic message is that if you don’t really know what had happened or you have no evidence, then – to liberally paraphrase – you should keep your mouth shut. Sometimes you see sisters talking about brothers and brothers talking about sisters: rumors, gossip, and hearsay. This is all addressed and condemned in no uncertain terms in this chapter:

“Indeed, those who like that immorality should be spread among those who have believed will have a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter. And Allah knows, and you do not know.” (24:19)

Allah knows the consequences of gossiping on social media and the Internet, sending or looking at indecent images, chatting among yourselves and gossiping about things that can lead to besmirching people’s honor. All of this is *haram* , forbidden.

“Indeed, those who [falsely] accuse chaste, unaware, and believing women are cursed in this world and the Hereafter; and they will have a great punishment.” (24:23)

This is another measure. So, you are asked to lower your gaze, wear hijab and do not speak ill of anyone unless you produce evidence, otherwise you will be lashed 80 times. Are you serious? Yes! And I want to dramatize this a little bit.

Do you know that Omar ibn Al-Khattab, when he was Caliph, witnessed a case of adultery with his own eyes – we don’t know whether it was in the street, in the market, or off in a palm grove. Regardless, he went to Ali ibn Abi Talib and told him, “I’m going to lash both the girl and the boy.”

But Ali ibn Abi Talib said, “O Caliph! You can’t do that. By Allah, if you utter the name of the girl, you will be lashed 80 times.”

Do you know why? It’s because even though Omar bin Al-Khattab witnessed the act of adultery himself, this was insufficient – he needed another three witnesses to have the minimum requirement of four witnesses. What Ali is saying is that even the Caliph, even Omar ibn Al-Khattab, has to abide by the rule of law. Because the law required four witnesses, Omar could not and did not utter the name of the two adulterers, who remain anonymous till today. Omar might have seen one of them many times afterwards, in the market, greeting him with “Peace be upon you, Caliph” and he wouldn’t have been able to do or say anything, except return the *salam* .

Can you imagine this just community? A just community does not necessarily mean a totally pure community, but it has just laws and the rule of law. There was adultery and fornication taking place in the early Islamic community. The Prophet saw a young man and woman blatantly flirting with each other and during the Hajj to boot, but all he did was turn the boy's face to the other side. Omar, as Caliph, witnessed an unmarried couple having sexual relations in his community yet neither one was lashed.

So, when you take the chapter and read the first verse: "The [unmarried] women or [unmarried man] found guilty of sexual intercourse..." (24:2) you'll see how practically difficult it is to establish the evidence.

With lowering the gaze, with seeking permission before you enter, with wearing the hijab, with bringing four witnesses, the path to fornication becomes difficult. The need for the four witnesses means that this person who is committing fornication is probably doing so in public, to the extent that he was seen by at least four people. It means that he or she reached a level that they don't care about social norms and sensibilities anymore. This person has been given permission to get married and the society has been encouraged to get him married. Yet he is challenging the sensibilities and the norms and values of the society by committing fornication in front of everyone. Doesn't he or she deserve 100 lashes?

Think about all this talk about protective measures with a child. Wouldn't he then take premarital sex seriously? Wouldn't he then take it seriously when he goes to school and the other boys are talking about watching porn, but he refrains from joining them? He wouldn't even listen to gossip about who's dating whom, because he has more important things to care about in his life. Why wouldn't he do what other boys are doing? Because he was brought up in a house that taught him *Surat An-Nur* since he was 7 years old.

This is the child we are talking about. Not a child who knows everything about girls and brags about having dated this or that girl. It's not that he is naïve – he is aware of sex, sex education and sexual desires, but he is also aware that these are desires which can and should be overcome through

discipline. He is aware that sexual desire is an energy that needs to be properly channeled. It should be managed, neither suppressed nor fully liberated. He sincerely asks Allah to one day bless him in marriage to a good girl, and their kids will turn out just as good.

Chapter 7

I DEVELOPING A SOCIAL CHARACTER

In this chapter, we will be looking at the last block the Prophet built, at least for the purposes of this book. That doesn't necessarily mean this was the final block in the entire process of building that grand edifice called the young companions. If you want to continue learning more on your own, you can research how the Prophet built the children's physical fitness and health. I also will not delve into how he worked to build children's minds.

Our Afterword will be on the children the Prophet raised, and how, as adults, they passed on the values they had acquired to their own descendants and society at large. This final block is building and developing the social dimension in the character of the child.

How do you bring up someone who is sociable? I left this subject until the end because this is where the society will now see the fruits of a lengthy process that has been taking place inside the house. Society will see the manifestation of an emotionally-fulfilled and stable child and will see the manifestation of belief (*iman*) and worship (*ibadah*) in the child's interaction with society.

This is a counterpoint to the "failed child" development stories which often come to light after terrorist or criminal acts. It is society that will be the real audience to the entire performance that has been rehearsed with the parents over the past 10 or 15 years. That's why I wanted to see how the Prophet built children who would later have to function outside the house. Many of the incidents I will narrate take place outside the home, as we move with

the children from inside the house to outside the house and witness their actions from different perspectives.

It is a very broad subject, and there is no way I can exhaustively address the social dimension in a single chapter. Instead, I will focus on three important components which constituted the framework of how the Prophet functioned with children and built their social skills.

An important disclaimer first: some of what I am claiming is my own opinion reached through *ijtihad* (independent reasoning).

I am also deliberately leaving a gap for you, and you should fill this with your own *ijtihad*. You might read these hadiths in a new light and take away your own lessons from them. You and I still share and agree upon the same events narrated in the hadith, but the lessons we draw from them can be different, and this is our creative contribution. As long as you are being logical in your conclusions, this is not my or anyone else's problem.

Here I will be sharing my interpretation of events, but I want to be perfectly clear that by no means am I forcing you to believe in or adopt my own interpretation.

Now, let's take a look at the three components which constitute our framework for how the Prophet developed children's social aspects.

Developing a Sociable Child

Firstly, the Prophet wanted Muslims to be sociable and actively engaged in their societies. A famous saying goes: "There is no monasticism in Islam." This is because Islam doesn't want Muslims to withdraw from society. Islam as a religion is not meant to be kept isolated, but rather encourages its followers to be active and engaged. Another hadith is even more illustrative of the central point here.

The Prophet said, “The believer who mixes with people and bears their annoyance with patience is better than the person who does not mix with people and doesn’t put up with their annoyance.” (*Bukhari*)

Allah wants Muslims to interact with others in their society, whether those people are Muslims you know from the mosque, your non-Muslim neighbors, mildly annoying friends of friends, or your downright obnoxious co-worker. It wants you to interact with all of them, greeting them, being polite with them, and building friendships with them. Islam is all about building social connections and human relationships, which is why the hadith says to mix with people – not just with Muslims or practicing Muslims as some people unfortunately do.

Greetings

Now, how did the Prophet go about fulfilling this attitude of mixing with people? How did he realize this social framework of encouraging children to get outside the house and interact with people? The first thing he did was encourage greetings, or *salam* . We always say that Islam is a religion of peace, simply because of this expression of greeting: *Assalamu alaikum* . Peace be upon you.

You begin by talking and connecting with society at the outset through saying *salam* and shaking hands. That’s why the companions used to say *salam* when they saw each other. You might find it difficult to imagine this, but they used to say *salam* to each other; they would be taking a walk together in an orchard, and when their paths briefly diverged around a tree, and they would say, “*Assalamu alaikum*,” again on the other side of the tree.

If the companions would say *salam* to each other after being separated for a few seconds, what would we say today about a son who has not spoken for days, weeks, months, or years to his own parents? Even with the remarkable developments in communications technology over the last two decades, people in some respects are less connected than in the past. We are living in

a time when the barriers for physical travel and long-distance communication are far less than at any other time in the past, thanks to modern transportation, smartphones, and the Internet. So, why do we feel more isolated?

Over two billion people in the world have smartphones, yet no one says “*Assalamu alaikum*” as much. No one today says, “just called to say I love you,” as Stevie Wonder crooned, unless it’s a lover (even then, usually only one in the early stages of the relationship). With the proliferation of technologies to connect people, no one connects meaningfully anymore. Islam wants you to connect with your fellow human beings for your own spiritual health. In a hadith, it says:

“A man before your time was called to account [in the Day of Judgment], and nothing good was found with him, except that he was a wealthy man who used to mix with the people. He would tell his servants to be easy and lenient with people who were in difficulty. Allah Almighty said, ‘We are more entitled to be more lenient than he is, and so forgive him.’” (*Bukhari*)

So, how did the Prophet train and encourage children to greet and say “*Assalamu alaikum*” ? Through being a role model and showing an example. The young Anas narrates that the Prophet “when passing by us young boys, used to greet us.” (*Ibn Majah*)

I’m always picturing the Prophet walking by a group of kids absorbed in their game: playing, laughing, or yelling at one another. In the middle of all this, the Prophet gives *salam* . When you enter into the room and your child is absorbed watching *SpongeBob SquarePants* , do you say *salam* or just not bother interrupting her from her trance? Or do you raise your children to come and say *salam* , even if they are in the middle of their favorite TV show?

My point is that whatever the context, the Prophet - like a referee whistling for a game to stop - wants those children to stop briefly to reply and say, “*Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmat allahi wa barakatuh* .” For the children, this is a brief but key teaching moment. When you read this quick one-line

hadith, you need to stop and think. You need to freeze this moment – the children stopping playing to respond to the *salam* – and think about it.

One other detail to note in this incident: think about who is first offering the *salam* . We are taught that it's always the younger in age who must first begin the *salam* . But the Prophet here – acting as a role model – sets the example. There is no ego here regarding who is more senior in age and/or the ranks of society.

That's why, when Anas ibn Malik, who reportedly outlived all the other Companions until the ripe old age of 103, would see children playing, he would likewise greet them with, “*Assalamu alaikum wa rahmat allahi wa barakatuh* .”

When someone asked Anas why he did that, he said, “The Prophet used to do the same.” (*Bukhari*)

This is how these children internalize these values – through role models. When he was a child, Anas ibn Malik might have said to himself: *inshallah*, when I become an adult, I will say *salam* to the children, because that was what the Prophet used to do. This is how social values are developed and are passed down across the generations.

In another incident, again narrated by Anas:

The Messenger of Allah said to Anas, “Dear son, when you enter your house, say ‘*Assalamu alaikum*’ to your family, for it will be a blessing both to you and to your family.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

The Prophet here is giving advice to a child, and one who works as a servant for him. This hadith is directed at Anas ibn Malik and nobody else. Since Anas' family was effectively the Prophet's family, the Prophet could have said: “When you come home, say *salam* to your Prophet.” But he said it in the abstract because he knew that every word that he utters is a hadith, a word of wisdom to the Muslim community.

When you go home, don't start off by saying "I'm starving, when is lunch going to be ready?" Say, "*Assalamu alaikum*, " not "Hey, what's up?" or "Alright, mate?" It's important that you begin the human interaction with peace, with *salam* .

Visits

In developing a sociable child, the Prophet also encouraged things like visits and sleepovers. The Prophet was not sitting at home waiting for people to visit him as a respected community leader and elder, to say nothing of his religious status. Instead, he was also visiting people, even children, in their own houses. He was known to visit anyone who extended an invitation to him. The hadith says he wouldn't turn down any invitation even if the invitation was a simple dinner, in one case just bread and oil.

Imagine I invite you to lunch and offer you pita bread and olive oil as the first and only course. You would probably be deeply insulted, or at the very least keep peeking around the corner expecting the kebab and chicken tandoori and the other real food to appear.

This is how social norms work in most societies, and there is a particularly strong expectation in Asian and Muslim societies that you will go all out for a guest. But the Prophet was saying that these social norms are not life-and-death. He would accept any invitation and not ask people to break their budget to fulfill social expectations, because for him it was the human interaction that was the point, not the quantity and quality of the food. I will come and visit you despite and irrespective of what you have at home – this was the message. I want to meet you. I want to see you and get around the barriers separating us, even if it's a tree.

The Prophet sometimes paid visits with children in his company, in order to train them to be sociable. Do you remember the hadith I mentioned in a previous chapter about the gourd or the pumpkin? Who began to overcome a distaste for pumpkin because of him? It was once again the young Anas Ibn Malik. Now a similar incident was happening. Think about the famous

hadith which I have already mentioned earlier in the book, about the Messenger visiting a sick young worker who happened to be Jewish.

The hadith is narrated by Anas ibn Malik, who was in the company of the Prophet during the visit to this young Jewish boy. In the hadith, Anas said: “A young Jewish boy used to serve the Prophet and he became ill. So, the Prophet went to visit him. He sat near his head and asked him to embrace Islam. The boy looked at his father, who was sitting there; the father said to his son: ‘Obey Abul-Qasim,’ [i.e. the Prophet] and the boy embraced Islam. The Prophet stepped out saying, ‘Praise be to Allah Who has saved him from the hellfire.’” (*Bukhari*)

So, there was a Jewish boy who used to serve the Prophet and he had become ill. Actually, aren't you fascinated by something? We have two young people, one Jewish and one Muslim, serving the same employer, and surely, they must have known each other. Think about the relationship between these two servants. When one of them converted and they were then in the same religion, this probably strengthened their relationship as well. Let's focus on the hadith itself. The Prophet entered into the house of that Jewish boy and asked him to become a Muslim and he did.

This was in contrast to that dying Muslim boy who could not bring himself to utter “*laa ilaaha illa Allah*” , despite the fact he was a Muslim and was praying.

Now, what was Anas ibn Malik learning here? Many things. He learned the importance of paying visits. He learned that it's perfectly fine to visit non-Muslims in their homes. He learned something about the *Sunnah* of visiting those who are sick: when doing so, make it a quick visit to give the patient a chance to rest.

I remember when we were young, and we used to visit my father in the hospital, we used to eat the food the hospital brought for him. He was actually hungry, but we were kids and he would offer us his food, which we would devour before going home to snack some more. This was wrong on our part. Don't eat the patient's food. Don't drag the visit out over hours to

watch TV with the patient at the hospital. Say kind things to him, such as “May Allah reward you,” “*Inshallah*, Allah will forgive your sins,” etc. Be positive, optimistic and brief: 5-10 minutes, a small thoughtful gift, and go. Who told you this? It’s the Prophet through Anas ibn Malik.

Sleepovers

There is another item that constitutes this process of developing the social character. That is for the child to sleepover or to spend the night outside of his house, in the home of another trusted family member. There is nothing wrong with the child sleeping outside the house, assuming you know the family and their moral character well. But the principle of sleeping outside the house could turn out to be a worthwhile experience in developing social skills.

Let me just say this hadith first and then we will look at it from the social dimension. It is the hadith I mentioned in [chapter 4](#) :

Abdullah ibn Abbas said, “Once I spent the night in my aunt Maimuna’s house. Allah’s Messenger offered the *isha* prayer [in the mosque], then came to the house and offered four *rak`at* and slept. Later on, he woke up and stood for the prayer and I stood on his left side. He drew me to his right and prayed five *rak`at* and then two.” (*Bukhari*)

It is only because Abdullah ibn Abbas was sleeping outside his house and in the house of the Prophet that we learned that at that moment the Prophet had woken up, made ablution, and made *tahajjud* (night prayers).

Maimuna would not have reported this hadith; we needed a child. Not only a child to witness and describe but a child to participate in it. Because when he participated, he stood on the left side of Prophet. The Prophet took him while he was praying and turned him to the right side. It is because of Abdullah ibn Abbas that we know that in congregation if you are alone praying next to the imam, then you should stand next to his right side. This

is because it so happened that Abdullah ibn Abbas spent the night outside his house.

That's why I think that sleepovers could be amazing experiences. If you are hanging around with the right company, if you are hanging around with amazing people, you'll witness amazing things. But you will also learn to be away from your mother, away from your father; when you go to nursery you will not cry as much; when someone, such as your aunt or your uncle, says come and stay with me, you're not crying. It's not that we want the child to be ungrateful to his mother, but that the child needs to know the world is bigger than his parents.

Self-confidence

Another aspect of the social development of a child is building the child's self-confidence and self-esteem. This is through encouraging him to interact with society and not be paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes.

Abdullah ibn Omar narrates this hadith in *Bukhari* :

The Prophet said, "The example of a believer is like a green tree, the leaves of which do not fall."

The people said, "It is such-and-such tree: It is such-and-such tree."

"I wanted to say that it was the date palm tree," Abdullah ibn Omar tells us, "but I was a young boy and was too shy (to answer)."

The Prophet then said, "It is the date-palm tree."

Ibn Omar told Omar who said, "Had you said it, I would have preferred it to such-and such a thing." (*Bukhari*)

The hadith showed that the Prophet sometimes quizzed his audience to engage them. He questions to make people think rather than just stating the hadith: Do this... Don't do that. No, he elicited interaction from the

audience. He spoke about a tree with a strong trunk, leaves that don't fall easily, and has certain features similar to the characteristics of the Muslim. And no one knew the answer except this young boy, Abdullah ibn Omar, who was the son of Omar ibn Al-Khattab. No one guessed the right answer. Then the Prophet said: it's the palm tree.

After this, Abdullah ibn Omar told his father what had happened – note the strong relationship between the two, making him feel comfortable in confiding in his father – and his father said he wished his son had shouted out the answer. I am imagining this son-father conversation:

“Dad, you know what? I knew the answer was the palm tree,” Ibn Omar might have said.

“Why didn't you say it then?” Omar ibn Al-Khattab might have asked.

“Dad, I was shy to speak” he might have said. “When I looked at you, you were quiet. When I looked at Abu Bakr, he was quiet. So, who am I to speak?”

That was remarkable! Omar and Abu Bakr were great even at that time. They were recognized as living legends even by their own sons and daughters. When they spoke, everyone stopped and listened. But Omar was talking to him as a father instilling confidence in his son's mind and encouraging him to speak up next time.

In another hadith related in the book *Az Zuhd* by Ibn al-Mubarak, *al-Mustadrak* by Al Hakim, and in Ibn Jarir's collection, Omar ibn Al-Khattab as Caliph once asked about this Quranic verse:

“Would one of you like to have a garden of palm trees and grapevines underneath which rivers flow in which he has from every fruit?” (2:266)

He asked the companions around him about the interpretation of this verse, and they said, “Allah knows best,” indicating they didn't know the answer.

Omar ibn Al-Khattab started to lose his temper, saying: “Just answer me. Do you know what it means or don’t you?”

Abdullah ibn Abbas, who was still a young man, said: “Oh Leader of the Faithful, I think I can say a few words on this verse.”

For such a young man to know an answer which his elders didn’t was particularly impressive, because he stayed only two and a half years in the company of the Prophet. Yet, look at his manners and humbleness.

It’s a very interesting hadith in a number of respects, but most relevant to our subject was the statement of Omar ibn Al-Khattab that will follow the comment of Abdullah ibn Abbas. Omar said, “Speak my son, and don’t underestimate yourself.”

I would like every parent to write out this statement in beautiful golden calligraphy, frame it, and hang it on the wall in your child’s bedroom. This is the message Omar ibn Al-Khattab gave to Abdullah ibn Abbas: Don’t be afraid to speak your mind. Never think that you are unable or too young to be significant. If you know something, teach us.

What is Omar doing here? He’s helping raise brave young people, responsible young people, confident young people, and intelligent young people. Young people who are proud to be Muslims in the midst of difficult times. People who are proud to be Muslims in the midst of times when everyone is saying Muslims are terrorists: I am proud I am a Muslim, and I am not belittling or demeaning myself. This is the attitude Omar ibn Al-Khattab was encouraging.

But why did Omar say these words; what was his inspiration? It was in the spirit of the Prophet encouraging the children to think and more importantly to express themselves and speak their minds.

I believe the best gift parents can give to their children is not a toy, money, or candy, but to believe in them like Omar believed in his son and the young Ibn Abbas. Believing in your child and telling him so is the best gift you can offer.

The Prophet Muhammad's mother, grandfather, and uncle had all believed in him. They believed that one day he would have a great future, and they told him this. They told him: one day you will be somebody important. Neither his mother, nor his grandfather lived long enough to see him become a Prophet. But if they did, they would not have been surprised! Muhammad constantly heard his mother's praise and felt her genuine concern for him. He received the same love and care from his grandfather.

Compare this to a child who is constantly put down by her parents. Compare this to a child who is told by his elder siblings or teachers that he will never amount to anything. A child builds up his self-esteem from his parents, and what they say to him becomes his inner voice about his potential. So, believe deeply and passionately in your child. Choose your words carefully. Instill a firm belief in her that she is important and one day will be someone great. This is the best gift you can give to your child!

Buying and Selling

Another thing the Prophet was doing to encourage this confident interaction between the child and society was getting children to work at a young age, by engaging in some form of business or buying and selling. I don't want to spend too much time on this because I know in this day and age middle-class families have very few options for their sons and daughters to work from a young age to help pay for their college tuition and expenses. If this book were aimed primarily at readers in the Gulf, I might spend more time speaking about the importance of making teenagers learn the value of work and become responsible earlier in life.

To briefly emphasize this dimension more, let me share a story with you:

When the Prophet saw young boys selling goods in the marketplace, he would pray for blessings for them, express his happiness with them, and encourage them. He once passed Abdullah ibn Jafar selling goods along with other boys, and said: "Oh Allah, bless his trade!" (*Al-Tabarani*)

What can we get out of this hadith? First, the Prophet was not embarrassed that one of his close relatives was selling and buying in the public market. Abdullah ibn Jafar was a Hashemite, he was a Quraishite, and from Muhammad's extended family. Nonetheless, it was a source of honor and pride to buy and sell because that is how children learn to be mature and responsible.

Secondly, the child himself – Abdullah, in this case - begins to know how to handle money: how to count it, save it, spend it responsibly. Also, interpersonal skills: how to interact with people, communicate, bargain, and negotiate.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the child acquires a sense of belonging and citizenship in the community/society or country he lives in. He gets to know this old man living next door, this child with special needs, and this older widow living in the neighborhood. He might know that this man bought something yesterday but returned it for a refund the next day. And - in the case of Abdullah – he can learn and benefit from being around the elder companions. He would interact with companions with a background in trade – Abu Bakr, Othman, and Abdulrahman ibn Aouf. Not only would he acquire business skills, but also people skills and leadership skills. Who knows, he might grow to become the next Abu Bakr, Othman, or Abdulrahman ibn Aouf among his generation.

Accompanying Seniors

I mentioned there were three components of our framework: The first was building a sociable character through interacting with society; through greetings, paying visits, and sleepovers, being an active and confident participant in society, and acquiring people skills and gaining responsibility through activities like selling and buying.

We now move to the second part of the framework—encouraging children to be in the company of elders. In the case of the children around the Prophet, it was the Prophet befriending children and helping them interact with

society through his own interactions. This is again something that could make the child more sociable. Making friends with a kind, wise, and trustworthy elder – in this case, the Prophet – does many things. At the beginning, it strengthens more the bond of love between the child and the Prophet. One of the things it also does is trains the child in social skills, including leadership skills.

You are walking with the Prophet; the young companion is walking with a leader, a judge or *qadi* , a father, and a comprehensive role model. So, imagine you are witnessing the girl that came and asked about Hajj – like Al-Fadl or Abbas were. You even witness a boy come and ask the Prophet to grant him permission to commit adultery! Not only did you witness all these situations, but more importantly, you witnessed, in person, how the Prophet dealt with them.

You witnessed when he laughed, when he smiled, and when he was serious. When he spoke in a loud voice, and when he spoke in a low one. When he sat and when he stood. When he looked in one direction or another. You witnessed all that with your very own eyes. Can you then behave in a way that is not compatible with the way of the leaders? So, this is another thing that the Prophet was doing.

Good Company

The final and third component of the framework was the Prophet creating a good and healthy environment based on a network of good friendships.

This is a point that cannot be overstated because the real challenge for parents today is peer pressure. All the blocks that we as parents built inside the household might be smashed by a bad influence your son or daughter meets in school, the neighborhood, or on social media. He will make fun of her for doing what her parents tell her to do and make her feel pressure to go with the flow and act like the other kids in order to conform. He will chip away at these blocks, and if the blocks were not well placed or well cemented, the child will fall. You will fall.

So, the Prophet wanted to complement the role of the parents and mentor by providing good companionship. That's why the Prophet encouraged group plays; playing together under some sort of a friendly supervision. Yes, you are playing together; that's fine. I'll just say, "*Assalamu alaikum*" in passing, like he did when Anas was playing with those boys.

In the book of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abdullah ibn al-Harith, who's a young boy, narrates this hadith:

He says, "The Prophet used to bring Abdullah, Obaidullah, and Kathir; three boys who are the sons of Ibn Abbas, and he would line them up straight as if he is lining them for prayers and the Prophet then would go and stand at a distance and say 'whoever races and wins and comes to me, I will give him a reward.'"

We don't know what the reward was. In this case, it might be some sweets or another small gift. But the point, the essence, is to make the children enjoy playing with each other without you – as an elder – directly taking part in the playing. Why? To me, it's a psychological reason: to make them feel they could enjoy themselves without their parents and yet in a permissible way. I could be sweating out of joy, while not doing anything that might displease Allah or my parents.

It seems there is a culture among some young people that one can't have fun without doing something wrong. To enjoy myself, I need to somehow hurt myself or others. The cultural norms in some societies endorse such an expectation: to have fun or enjoy yourself, you need to do something that is against the teachings of Islam.

Allah says:

"And is one who was dead, and We gave him life and made for him light by which to walk among the people like one who is in darkness, never to emerge therefrom? Thus, it has been made pleasing to the disbelievers that which they were doing." (6:122)

I know that this is not appealing to children, but what I'm saying is that these concepts need to change. I can play football. I can work out at the gym – as long as my goal is to be strong and healthy or protect my family, but not in order to impress girls with my muscles.

The perception of entertainment has to be changed, because there is a perception in the West that entertainment is for the consumer culture to prevail. Entertainment has to be linked with desires, especially sexual desires. What the Prophet was doing here was that he was creating a culture that had nothing to do with consumption but rather with the production and development of strength and health.

Whoever races to me I will give him sweets? Yes, there is candy, or whatever he promised them. But the greater, longer-lasting enjoyment was for them to play with friends. This is the sort of character that the Prophet wanted to have.

So, this was the social dimension; the dimension that started with advocating and helping and creating a sociable character that the Prophet himself had: to be friends with children without the barrier or social hierarchy between him and them. The third component of the framework was to actually step back and allow the children to play together in a positive and healthy environment.

I think there is a promising development in the mosques today. In the mosques, they are starting to build recreation centers with a gym, table tennis, snooker, and so on, creating a healthy alternative for youth and bringing them closer to the mosque. The more difficult step to take is to change the entire culture in the mosque to be more oriented towards youth and children, not just bringing in a ping-pong table in the basement. But it is a good start anyway.

Practical Tips: How to Change a Child's Behavior

1. Be specific. Decide what specific behavior you want to change and focus on it.
2. Talk to your child about the new behavior to expect.
3. Show how this new behavior could practically be gained.
4. Recognize and compliment the new behavior until it becomes a habit.
5. Never resort to violence. The Prophet never hit a child, even though he lived in an age where corporal punishment was very commonplace. Instead of coercion, be creative by using more fun-oriented means (e.g. games and stories).
6. Don't constantly bring up past mistakes or misbehavior. Recall how the Prophet never said to his young servant, "Anas why did you do this or not do that?" Blaming or continuously reprimanding a child annoys, embarrasses, and frustrates her.
7. Show – don't just tell – a good example. The Prophet showed children how to pray rather than lecturing them. When showing, you become a role model to the child.
8. Be present in your child's life. Don't just be there when there is a problem or crisis!
9. Don't try to give advice when you are overly tired or in a bad mood. The Prophet always chose the right time and place for both sides when advising. If you don't, the child switches off!

AFTERWORD

From the outset of *Children around the Prophet* , I have sought to make it like a narrative. I opened this narrative by identifying our main characters such as the Prophet, whom I have re-identified in a way that is appropriate from the children's point of view. I spoke about his appearance, behavior, physical mannerisms, and way of interacting. I also identified the main characters among the children. Since there are many important actors in this narrative, let's briefly run through a few whom we didn't have time to address in depth.

In Mecca, there were people like Ali ibn Abi Talib, who, according to one narration, became a Muslim at the age of 8. A more famous narration says he became Muslim at the age of 10, but in either case he converted while still a child.

There is Al-Zubair ibn Al-Awwam, the son of Safiyya ibn Abdulmutallib, the Prophet's aunt. He also became a Muslim around the age of 8.

Talha ibn Ubaydullah who protected the Prophet in the battle of Uhud, was a very powerful and strong companion who became a Muslim at the age of 11.

Al-Arqam ibn abi al-Arqam, the owner of the very house where the Prophet used to meet with the few companions that constituted the vanguard of the Muslim community in Mecca, converted at the age of 12.

These people all lived in a non-Muslim society and began their success as children or in their early teenage years. Whenever you think about the success of Islam in its early years, think about those children, and say to yourself, "This is what children or young teenagers could do. Children

could be so powerful to take Islam across the desert from Mecca to Medina and from Medina to the whole of Arabia.”

Remember that virtual bridge between Mecca and Medina? The first person to walk on the top of that bridge, the ambassador sent on a diplomatic mission to spread Islam in Medina, was Mus‘ab ibn ‘Umayr. When he became Muslim, he was still quite young, in his 20s.

Omar ibn Al-Khattab, when he became a Muslim, there is one narration that says that he was 32 and another that says that he was 27.

The oldest person was probably Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq. The rest were younger than Abu Bakr and many were recruited by him.

Abdullah ibn Al-Zubair is the son of Al-Zubair ibn Al-Awwam, who had become Muslim at the age of 8. Abdullah ibn Al-Zubair was the first Muslim baby to be born in Medina. He was a physically powerful companion, much like his father Al-Zubair ibn Al-Awwam, and his father taught him from an early age how to swim and fight.

The last child was called Abu Tufail, the last child on my list. He was the last companion to pass away, many years after the death of the Prophet. When Abu Tufail died, they said, “This is the end of the Companions era.”

I’ve tried to visualize things for you - building the emotional foundation, building the creed and faith, building the worship, building good manners and a positive attitude, and disciplining sexual desires. Now, we are going to see the building in action. We are going to close our narrative but with the same children that we’ve identified in the first session as children. Now, we will see them as adults and how they turned out.

All of them got married and had children of their own. We’ve been thinking of Anas ibn Malik as a 10-year-old boy, but now he’s approaching 103 and sharing stories with the second, third, fourth, and fifth generations of Muslims.

That handsome little boy, Hassan ibn Ali, who was holding on to his brother, Hussein, out of fear as a huge snake coiled up near them, ended up living for 47 years and getting married and divorced several times, so much so that Ali ibn Abi Talib reportedly said, “Don’t give your daughters to my son because he will divorce them.”

But the fathers of the girls were so eager for their daughters to get married to Hassan that they replied, “Ali, we will marry our daughters to your son whether you like it or not.”

Hassan was only 7 when his grandfather, the Prophet, passed away. He was asked once: “Do you remember the Prophet? Do you remember anything that he used to say or do?”

He said, “Yes, I remember that once dates from the *sadaqah* (charitable donation) came. I took one date as a child or the family put it in my mouth. I was just about to swallow it and the Prophet put his finger forcefully into my mouth and took the date away.”

They said to the Prophet, “He’s your grandson, and it’s only a date.”

He said, “We the Hashemites (the relatives of the Prophet), we do not consume the *sadaqah* .”

So, from a young age he felt belonged to a special family with special procedures and rules. But what is more significant, I think, in his memories when he was a young boy he says, “I remember once the Prophet said ‘*Da’ maa yuribuka ila maa laa yuribuka.*’” Accept the fact that some matters are out of your control; don’t worry about those and focus on the rest.

This, I think, is something that, with our golden ink, we should write it out for our children. Not just in our children’s bedroom, but in our entire lives; when we’re eating; when we’re walking in the streets of Europe which have been tragically hit by terrorist attacks; just remember “*Da’ maa yuribuka ila maa laa yuribuka.*”

This hadith has possibly the most important lesson we can learn from the Prophet who was so successful in raising the children around him, as evidenced by their subsequent lives as adults.

At the time of Ali ibn Abi Talib, you are probably aware of what happened: Othman ibn Affan was assassinated by fellow Muslims who misunderstood him and his actions. A relative from his tribe, Muawiya ibn Abi-Sufyan, the governor of Damascus, wanted revenge for Othman's assassination and promised to pledge allegiance to Ali as Caliph if he captured the killers. But Ali said he had to prioritize order and stability over a wild goose chase after the assailants, who had already scattered in the direction of Egypt, Damascus, and the Hijaz. Ali demanded the governor of Damascus recognize him as Caliph, triggering a succession war. Muslims in their thousands were killed between Ali and Muawiya before Ali himself was fatally stabbed by a fellow Muslim while he was praying.

Mosques can sometimes witness not just arguments, but even killings. Ali, don't forget, is the father of Hassan and Hussein, who were now grown adults. Ali's supporters argued the Caliphate should remain in the lineage of the Prophet, meaning the next Caliph would be Hassan.

Hassan remembered the words of his grandfather, the Prophet: "*Da' maa yuribuka ila maa laa yuribuka.*" Don't worry about that which you cannot control. He went to Muawiya and gave him the Caliphate, resigning from his position. Muawiya became the Caliph but was quickly challenged by Hassan's younger brother, Hussein, who was then unfortunately killed by fellow Muslims.

But I want you to think about "*Da' maa yuribuka ila maa laa yuribuka* " and think about this big political decision that lessened the bloodshed between Muslims. Hassan's decision, although it hurt his own political power, saved Muslims' lives.

During one speech, Hassan said that he had decided to concede on the points of contention with Muawiya for the sake of minimizing bloodshed within the Muslim community: "I am certain that this is the right decision,

and I am doubtful if I deserve to be the Caliph on the top of Muslims' dead bodies."

Anas ibn Malik is another child we've seen through this book. Recall the stories about the pumpkin, the visit to the sick Jewish boy, and playing with a group of kids when the Prophet came up and laughed lovingly at him for forgetting his errands. Remember Anas, because one of the objectives of this book is to link you emotionally, not just with the Prophet, but also with the children that were Companions of the Prophet; these children went on to make history.

Anas was an eyewitness to over a century of early Islamic history, living to the ripe old age of 103. Helping his longevity was the fact that his mother, Um Saleem, had brought him to the Prophet when he was only 10. "Prophet, I am bringing you my son to be in your service," she said, "Please Prophet, pray for him."

The Prophet immediately responded with, "Allah, may he have more children and wealth."

Anas became one of the wealthiest companions after the Prophet's death and had over one hundred children and grandchildren. Such is the power of prayer.

In a hadith recorded by Al-Tabarani, Anas heard the Prophet say: "Teach your children three manners."

He replied, "What are these three manners, Prophet?"

"Love your Prophet."

He replied, "This is easy, Prophet."

"Love the members of my household."

"And what is the third manner?"

“Read the Quran.”

“Why?”

“Read the Quran, because those who read the Quran in the Day of Judgment will be in the shade of Allah, the shade of the throne of Allah. In that shade will be no one other than the prophets and those who love the prophets and emulate and imitate the *Sunnah* of the prophets.”

How did Anas ibn Malik internalize that? He memorized the Quran, but more importantly as a father he also passed on Quranic values to his entire family. Whenever he finished reciting the entire Quran, Anas ibn Malik brought his massive family over for a communal prayer and celebration. Imagine the memorable impact on the children and grandchildren seeing the example Anas was setting.

Abu Hurairah was homeless and often stayed overnight at the mosque, so he saw the Companions praying frequently. He said, “I have never seen anyone whose prayer resembles the Prophet’s prayer more than Anas.”

The reason is pretty obvious; Anas constantly witnessed the Prophet praying, not just in the mosque but in the household as well, and he memorized every minute detail of how the Prophet would pray.

Anas would later say, “Not a night goes by without me dreaming of my beloved Prophet and crying.”

Dreaming is your subconscious. If you, dear reader, are stressed about finances, that’ll come out in your dreams. If you’re obsessing about a cute classmate, chances are good you’ll dream about him or her. But every night, Anas ibn Malik dreamed about the Prophet. It wasn’t just due to him having lived with the Prophet. It goes beyond that. In fact, he loved him so much, he was looking forward to being reunited with him in heaven.

The *Muezzin*, Bilal, had a similar attitude. When Bilal was on his deathbed, his wife was quite naturally sobbing, because she knew he was dying. He

said, “Why are you crying? Don’t you know who am I going to meet tomorrow? I’m going to meet Muhammad.”

Bilal had been the *Muezzin* until the Prophet’s death and overcome with grief, he resigned from his job. Only once more did he ever give the call to prayer – when Omar ibn Al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem in 634, he went to Bilal and begged him to give the *adhan* just once more. Bilal resisted at first but eventually consented. When he stood on the top of Jerusalem and made the *adhan* with his beautiful, melodious voice, many of the Companions were overcome by tears, because they associated Bilal’s voice so strongly with the Prophet and felt as though Muhammad were present with them in Jerusalem.

How was Bilal confident that he was going to meet the Prophet in heaven? Well, the Prophet had told him so. When the Prophet went to heaven, besides hearing Harithah ibn Al-Nu’mān reciting the Quran, he also heard someone’s footsteps. The angel with him told him those were Bilal’s footsteps. The Prophet asked Bilal, “What do you do that led you to *Jannah*?”

Bilal replied, “Prophet, whenever I go to the restroom, I make sure that I do ablution whether it’s the time of *salah* or not. Every time I go to the restroom, I do ablution. Whenever I make ablution, I have to pray 2 *rak’at* , whether or not it’s the time of *salah* . I have to pray 2 *rak’at* or more.”

So, he knew when the Prophet told them this hadith, he knew he was going to *Jannah* , to heaven.

Abdullah ibn Abbas was only 13 when the Prophet died, but he grew into a tall, strikingly handsome man and lived into his late 60s. Abdullah ibn Abbas was notable for his eagerness to always actively learn, even after the Prophet passed away. After the Prophet’s death, he suggested to a friend of his that they take advantage of their age and strong memories to learn as much about the Prophet’s life and the Quran as they could from older Companions.

Abdullah ibn Abbas reasoned that the Companions who knew the Prophet intimately were still abundant, but with time there would be fewer and fewer of them, so he had to take advantage of the golden opportunity before him. He displayed remarkable ambition, as well as an unusual awareness of his historical surroundings.

His friend didn't see the point. He said, "Ibn Abbas, do you hope to teach the people one day? Who are you to do that? There are lots of companions. How are you going to compete?"

This is a defeatist attitude which I'm sure many of you have seen before, and it is easy to unconsciously adopt. But Ibn Abbas remembered Omar ibn Al-Khattab's "Don't underestimate yourself" comment and was confident that he, too, could fulfill his ambitions to serve his community with distinction.

So, Abdullah ibn Abbas said, "I left my colleague alone. I wanted to accompany him in the seeking of knowledge, but we departed ways."

Abdullah ibn Abbas' thirst for knowledge served him well as an Islamic scholar, as he proved to be remarkably detail-oriented and persistent, often interviewing up to 30 Companions to record a single hadith as accurately as possible – Some were in-depth interviews and it might have taken him most of the day to find the Companion in the desert then another couple of hours to talk to him.

The companion whom he wanted to interview would sometimes be taken aback to come out of his house to find a teenaged boy, a relative of the Prophet, patiently waiting there for hours simply to ask him a question but not wanting to disturb him by knocking on the door.

Ibn Abbas became more knowledgeable by the day. Some of the Companions passed away, and as Abdullah ibn Abbas grew up, he became an expert on Islam and the Prophet's life.

And guess who was watching all this? The very friend who had originally scoffed at Abdullah ibn Abbas' idea, now saw this rising star of Islamic

learning, and said, “This child was wiser than me.”

No one went to that friend, because he hadn’t acquired any particular knowledge. He hadn’t spent long days pursuing a single drop of knowledge from a companion who had interacted with the Prophet. Instead, he stayed at home thinking he had no chance to compete.

Abdullah ibn Abbas’ story is clearly relevant across the ages. The moral is that you need to always stay on the move and push yourself to make progress or else you will be left behind. Don’t make excuses, saying you’re too young or you’re facing discrimination on whatever basis. If you do, you will always be like the colleague paralyzed by his own defeatist attitude, and you will never be like Abdullah ibn Abbas.

Finally, we end with that child, Abdullah ibn Omar, who was about 22 years old when the Prophet passed away. Abdullah ibn Omar, who lived to the age of 85, was a hulking, dark-skinned companion who suffered from very poor vision, which according to legend, was attributed to him frequently crying from his pious fear of Allah. Abdullah had ten children, all of them boys except for his daughter, Sawda, who got married to Urwa ibn Al-Zubair.

Urwa ibn Al-Zubair is the brother of Abdullah ibn Al-Zubair – does that name ring a bell? He was the first Muslim baby born in Medina, and his father converted to Islam at the age of 8 in Mecca.

Do you see how closely linked all of these figures are in the tight-knit early Muslim community? Good parents raised good children who married other good people in the community to create their own families. Think back to the Prophet’s prayer for Allah to spare the young boys jeering and throwing rocks at him, even as he was bleeding from their stones: “Allah, save them. I don’t want the mountains to kill them because there will be one day Muslim offspring.”

This is exactly the generation the Prophet worked so hard for and anticipated would carry on his tradition.

Abdullah ibn Omar, again internalizing the values of *adab* and manners, has a famous saying: “Teach your children manners, for you are responsible for them.” On the Day of Judgment, you are going to be asked about them. Parents need to understand their enormous responsibility. You are responsible for what you tell them and the good or bad manners and habits you teach them.

Abdullah ibn Omar added: “One day they will be responsible for being dutiful to you. But they will not be dutiful to you unless you teach them to be so.”

Like Anas ibn Malik brought his family and prayed for them whenever he finished reciting the entire Quran, Abdullah ibn Omar did something in the same spirit of connecting faith and family. Whenever he broke his fast, he would bring his ten children and many grandchildren. At the moment of breaking the fast, he would pray for his family. This shows the importance of internalizing strong values and building solid blocks among children.

Imagine when the children are brought to their father and grandfather when they break their fast and they are blessed with his *dua* . Something, again, similar to Anas ibn Malik, which shows this coherency in the outcome in the product. All of these early Muslims were far from exact replicas of each other, but they had a shared quality in the essence of their characters.

You have Anas ibn Malik seeing the Prophet in his dream and crying. Abdullah’s grandson, Mohammed ibn Zaid ibn Abdullah ibn Omar, narrates that his grandfather never mentioned the Prophet without crying. We cry from our hearts when remembering our dearest loved ones we have lost, but usually for a few years after they have departed. Here we are talking about half a century later, and Abdullah’s love for the Prophet is still so strong it brings him to tears.

What does honoring the Prophet’s memory mean? In Friday prayers, remember to say “*Salla allahu alaihi wa sallam* ” after every mention of the Prophet’s name, and during your own prayers, say, “*Allahumma salli ‘alaa muhammad.*”

There are other quotations from his sons like Hamzah, for example. He says, “I never witnessed my father have ever fulfilled his stomach with food.”

The quotation is long, but just in a nutshell, Abdullah ibn Omar never ate alone. If anything, it shows the product of a sociable character. By the way, there is a small story link in it which I omitted from the last section regarding teaching children to be sociable.

Once, the Prophet wanted to fast. So, he said to Anas ibn Malik: “I want to fast today. Go and find me a companion who would join me.”

So, Anas went and looked and brought Zaid ibn Thabit. Zaid was young at the time. When Anas went, he brought a child like him. The Prophet said to Zaid ibn Thabit, “Zaid, I’m going to fast tomorrow. Come and join me.”

Zaid said, “Prophet, I’m also going to fast tomorrow,” and they made plans to break the fast together.

Who was standing there watching them and learning from their example? Anas ibn Malik.

One lesson the Prophet was passing on was that it is preferable to get into the habit of never eating alone, which is how Abdullah ibn Omar got used to not eating alone and also not filling himself when he was eating.

His son, Hamzah, passed this down to us, saying: “If there was lots of food in front of my father’s table, he would never fill his stomach with it, unless someone was with him or unless after someone joined him in eating, and he would eat the leftovers.”

Hamzah went on to say that a friend of Abdullah ibn Omar named Ibn Muti’ came over to their house, and noted with concern that Abdullah was very thin, saying: “You’re getting old. You need to eat to keep up your strength.”

Abdullah ibn Omar, who was not afraid of his inevitable death, replied: “I have never filled my stomach since I was young. Now, when I am close to dying, you want me to break this habit? No! I will continue to invite people to join me for food.”

Another interesting fact about Abdullah ibn Omar. Even though he wasn't homeless like Abu Hurairah, he chose to sometimes sleep overnight in the mosque. And he said that whenever a companion had a vivid or meaningful dream, he would go to the Prophet to ask for help interpreting its meaning.

What do you think is the dream of our children today? For too many, it is to become fabulously wealthy, or buy a new Play-Station 3 or a Tesla, or anything else materialistic. But Abdullah ibn Omar wasn't living in a consumer culture. He is living in a context where his aspirations were to have a beautiful dream that the Prophet would interpret for him.

Allah fulfilled his wish to have a vivid dream, but it was closer to a nightmare. Abdullah said, “I dreamed one day that I was taken by two angels. I saw a large gate and inside that gate was the hellfire. I felt terrified in the dream.”

“A third angel appeared,” Abdullah continued, “and it said, ‘Don't worry.’” -and the dream ended.

Obviously, he was relieved by the reassuring news at the end of the dream, but still disturbed by his vivid vision of hell.

The following day he wanted to tell the Prophet about his dream, but he was shy. His sister, Hafsa, was married to the Prophet, so he went to Hafsa and asked her to relay his dream to the Prophet and ask for its meaning.

The Prophet told Hafsa that Abdullah ibn Omar was a good man, but that he had seen the vision of hell because he wasn't doing his *tahajjud* night prayers – not even one of the five obligatory daily prayers! After that, Abdullah was very careful to not miss his prayers.

Abdullah ibn Omar also had a close mentoring relationship with his servant Nafi', who in turn was the teacher of the famous jurist Malīk ibn Anas (no relation to Anas ibn Malik), who founded one of the four major schools of Sunni Islamic thought: the Maliki school. The Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence drew some of its inspiration from Abdullah ibn Omar.

The servant-turned-scholar Nafi' says when Abdullah ibn Omar missed his *isha* prayers, he would perform *tahajjud* prayers the entire night out of repentance.

Recall that the Prophet was trying to make Muslims be sociable and connected to one another, including by teaching them to say, "*Assalamu alaikum*."

Abdullah ibn Omar, when he was an older man, famously said: "I go out on a daily basis outside my house. I have no business. I have no intention to buy anything. My only intention is to meet people and for people to meet me and we say *salam* to each other."

What a simple but profound example of a sociable person. He goes out for the sole purpose of exchanging *salams* and getting to know the people around him in his community. This shows that the blocks which the Prophet Muhammad carefully laid in place were strong and held throughout his life.

Throughout this book I have tried to introduce you to people that you might have not known about before; I introduced you to Anas ibn Malik, to Abdullah ibn Abbas, to Abdullah ibn Omar. I hope that you love them more now. I hope that one day you might want to know about the other young companions I didn't delve into, such as Al-Dhahack, Salma or Abdullah ibn Al-Zubair, as each of them has their own story to tell with good memories of the Prophet and values they internalized from his example.

Another goal of this book has been to give you an account of the Prophet's biography that did not focus on military exploits, which often receive disproportionate attention. I wanted to focus more on the smaller day-to-day events which made up the vast majority of the Prophet's time, only from the perspective of the children around him. Hopefully a future book can shed

more light around women in the early Islamic community – how the Prophet dealt with marriage, divorce, family problems, and a thousand other daily issues.

Most importantly, in this book I have sought to make you understand that in order to have successful parents in our communities, we must have successful individuals first. An individual decides to get married and can then shape his or her own future and those of his or her children. I also hope the building blocks illustrate how complex it is to deal with children. There are no easy overnight solutions. Raising good kids, even for the Prophet, took patience, wisdom, and time to address their concerns and problems. I would argue that the challenges for Muslim parents are more complicated in the West.

I'm going to end with a hadith which says that the most beloved act in Allah's view is that which is a small but consistent act. Meaning that to pray regularly for years is better than to offer optional *tahajjud* night prayers once in a while.

I want to look at this hadith from another angle. When my wife and I first got married, we made an agreement with each other. We both felt strongly about needing to have as good a family as possible in order to positively affect our society.

I said to my wife, "I am an individual. I come from my father and my mother. I have a list of good things that I have learned and a list of bad things I have inherited from even my parents and the same for you. Let's draw up a list of the negative and the positive aspects we've each learned and try to get rid of the negative and pass on only the positive to our kids."

In a way, it's like genetics, where we are choosing the genes we want to pass down in order to have healthier offspring and a happier family.

The thing is, this was an agreement my wife and I made at the beginning of our marriage but never really fully implemented. When I read this hadith about small, consistent actions, something clicked in my mind and reminded me of our unfulfilled agreement. It's easy to have grand

aspirations at the beginning of the marriage, kind of like the ambitious exercise plan we all draw up as a New Year's resolution, but which is gathering dust by February.

At the beginning of our marriage, we both thought we would constantly be reading books together, praying together, and actually did so for the first couple of months. Then I started coming home from work tired, while she was pregnant and exhausted, and it was easier for both of us to forget the list we had drawn up.

You need to focus on a simple, doable action that you have the discipline to continue doing. That action could be small. It could be kissing your daughter every day before she gets on the school bus or bringing home a different surprise for your family every Friday after work – it could be anything. The important thing that you are consistent about it. Don't let this long period of your marriage diminish the passion you feel – as spouses towards each other, but just as importantly as parents towards your children.

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