
RAMADAN

A Guide for Schools



Ramadan: A Guide for Schools

Overview

This guide about Ramadan seeks to encourage schools to utilise Ramadan as an opportunity to promote the understanding of different faiths in schools and for teaching pupils about Islam, to foster diversity and engagement and to support schools in recognising and building upon the essence of Ramadan without compromising the normality of everyday school life.

Owing to the lunar calendar, Ramadan falls approximately 11 days earlier each year, and will fall during the peak periods of exams and the summer months in the coming years (please see the Hackney Religious Education Calendar or visit the email cited below for dates). This guide hopes to support schools in acknowledging pupils' needs and to contribute to nurturing good relations, and promoting understanding between different groups.

This guide outlines considerations that schools may wish to take during the month of Ramadan, along with suggestions at the end on features of best practice in schools.

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar; Muslims believe this was the month during which the Qur'an was first revealed. Muslims approach Ramadan with enthusiasm and it is customary for Muslims to offer greetings to one another on its arrival.

What is fasting?

Fasting is an act of worship of great spiritual, moral and social significance to Muslims. It involves completely abstaining from drinking, eating, smoking and sexual activity; from dawn to sunset - for the whole month.

The spiritual and moral dimension of fasting involves God-consciousness, exercising self-control, patience, appreciation of food & drink, empathy towards the poor, having appropriate dealings with others, and giving charity.

Ramadan is therefore a time when Muslims try to spend more time in prayer and religious contemplation. Muslims also regularly offer extra prayers every night during the month of Ramadan, called *Taraweeh* prayers. Many Muslims, including some children, will stay up late saying prayers and reading the Qur'an.

Who fasts during Ramadan?

Fasting is prescribed for all healthy males and females once they attain the age of puberty (this is relative based on the physiological and psychological make-up of each individual, and is usually agreed upon by the family, often with advice from their local Imam).

However, it is a common practice for Muslim children to begin fasting before they attain puberty, to become progressively accustomed to the act. Although fasting for the entire month is not prescribed until the age of puberty, many children aged 10 and 11 (years 5 & 6) may be seen observing the daily fast for the entire month. Some children may be encouraged by their parents to fast only on certain days of the week, especially the weekends. It is also important to be aware that young children are more likely to fast when Ramadan falls in the winter months, when the days are shorter, and the climate is cooler.

There are certain circumstances and conditions in which Muslims are exempt from fasting, which include menstruating women, those pregnant or breast-feeding, those for whom fasting has a detrimental effect on their overall well-being, those who depend on medication for their health, and a traveller facing hardship due to fasting. Any missed fasting days are made up by fasting on days outside of Ramadan, or feeding the poor if one is unable to fast.

What is Eid ul-Fitr?

The day after the month of Ramadan marks the celebration of *Eid ul-Fitr*. It is one of the two yearly 'Eid' celebrations for Muslims*, commonly marked through exchanging gifts and visiting friends & relatives on this joyous occasion. This day is also accompanied by a congregational prayer at the mosque, held in the morning, giving Muslims the opportunity to benefit from a short reminder, along with embracing the amicable community spirit of the day. Muslims generally cannot be specific in advance regarding its date - as it is generally dependent on visual moon sighting.

Embracing Ramadan in school

Schools can play a pivotal part in the development of the spiritual, moral and social aspects of their pupils by recognising and building upon the spirit of Ramadan. This will help in promoting diversity, and in enhancing mutual understanding on respective faiths.

Learning in school

Pupils who fast and engage in extra charitable activities during Ramadan may be seen positively and their achievements acknowledged for their efforts. Schools can value and build on this spirit by having themes based on Ramadan at collective worship or assemblies, or by inviting pupils or guest speakers to share their knowledge and experience in fasting Ramadan during classes and assemblies. This will in turn boost pupil confidence and positive self-image, while also nurturing mutual understanding and respect amongst one another.

For example, some mosques in Hackney have previously provided speakers or welcomed schools to visit the mosque

Supporting pupils during Ramadan

There are various levels and areas of support that schools can provide for their pupils during the month of Ramadan.

Pupil health during Ramadan

Schools may need to confirm which pupils will be fasting with parents and carers in advance. Schools are encouraged to liaise with parents to reduce any subsequent impact on their children's academic performance during the day, and to perhaps offer guidance on the best way to avoid dehydration, eating nutritious food, getting appropriate rest periods, organising appropriately timed revision sessions and extra-curricular activities. Anyone needing regular medication during fasting hours is exempt from fasting, and families will likely seek guidance from local Muslim organisations on specific issues where necessary. Families and students will normally look to make a decision thereafter on whether fasting would be manageable in such circumstances. The school should be aware of this. Of note, a sensitive approach is advised when asking girls if they are fasting as it may cause some embarrassment if on their period.

*Eid ul-Adha commemorates the devotion of Ibrahim (Abraham) to God (Allah) and is celebrated on the last day of the Hajj pilgrimage, which falls on the tenth day of the last month (12th) in the Islamic calendar.

Examinations during Ramadan

As this year's GCSE/A Level examinations fall during the month of Ramadan, secondary schools may need to anticipate in advance to prepare the pupils in achieving their best. Having to take examinations on top of long hours of fasting over the summer period may be a challenge for some students. Providing quiet/rest areas between examinations may support fasting pupils.

In the event that the school notices any indications of dehydration in a child during statutory exams, such as fatigue or drowsiness, the child should be asked if they are fasting and advised to drink water immediately. The child should be reassured that in their current situation, they can break their fast and make it up later.

Schools may wish to inform parents of this protocol in advance, and particularly for those pupils sitting examinations, to perhaps incorporate it into their exams instructions.

Prayers during Ramadan

Schools are encouraged to set aside a quiet space for personal reflection, prayer, or worship, for pupils with any spiritual or religious beliefs. This will help support the spiritual, moral and social aspects of their development.

Since during the month of Ramadan fasting pupils have plenty of spare time during lunch break, schools should encourage use of this space, particularly for mid-afternoon 'Dhuhr' prayers (during lunch break). This prayer changes its time to reflect different seasons. In winter-time this is likely to be between 12.00pm - 1.00 pm, whilst in summer it is likely to be between 1.00 pm - 2.00 pm. Students will also typically need to use washing facilities to prepare for the prayer, known as ablution. This includes washing the visible parts of the body like the face, hands and feet.

Schools should also be sympathetic to pupils' desire to offer prayers at prescribed times. This opportunity for offering prayers during school time is encouraged to be available throughout the year.

A full prayer timetable for the year outlining timings for a Muslim's five daily prayers can be found at www.al-emaan.org.uk

Physical Education during Ramadan

Whilst the discipline and the challenge of fasting is to continue with the normality of everyday life, staff should exercise a degree of understanding, by encouraging pupils to avoid excessive exertion in Physical Education to prevent dehydration. Strenuous activity during fasting may make some children feel tired or drowsy, or possibly develop headaches due to dehydration. Some pupils may need to reduce physical exercises during fasting while others may wish to continue as normal, according to their tolerance levels.

Swimming during Ramadan

Participation in swimming is an acceptable activity whilst fasting. The potential for swallowing water may be an issue for some, while others will deem accidental water as acceptable. It is advised that schools should take an understanding approach where an activity might be construed by the pupil or their parents as breaking the fast, and may want to seek permission from their parents in advance.

Absence from School

The day after the month of Ramadan marks the celebration of the Islamic holiday of *Eid ul-Fitr*. As previously mentioned, Muslims cannot be specific in advance regarding its date - as it is generally dependent on visual moon sighting. It is advised that schools follow their own policies on holidays for religious and cultural needs, and at the same time consider those parents/carers who request further days. Schools could further support these pupils by providing/collating any lesson materials that they will be missing.

Features of good practice in schools

- ✓ A policy (or addendum to current policies) outlining the specific support for their fasting pupils during Ramadan
- ✓ Opportunities for all staff to be made aware of the key issues, facts and features about Ramadan and the school's actions in support of fasting pupils
- ✓ Plans for teaching and learning opportunities during lessons and assemblies, including visits and speakers for all pupils to acknowledge, appreciate, and build understanding
- ✓ Space and provision for prayers, rest and reflection during Ramadan
- ✓ Provision of alternative arrangements relating to physical activities, examinations and pupil absence to minimise impact on pupil performance during Ramadan
- ✓ Communication opportunities with parents to clarify concerns and areas of support

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Further information

1. <http://www.religionlaw.co.uk/MCBschoolsreport07.pdf>
2. Al-Emaan Centre – www.al-emaan.org.uk
3. SACRE advisor: Stacey Burman - Stacey.Burman@learningtrust.co.uk