

A Social Obligation of Parents Regarding the Upbringing of their Offspring:
An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to analyze the proper attitude of parents towards their offspring in the light of the Holy Quran and Ahadees (Traditions of the Holy Prophet). The translation of the verses and their interpretations are mainly taken from the well-known commentary books on the Holy Quran, such as, *Tafseer-Ibn-Khateer* (English version), *Tafheem-ul-Quran*, entitled, '*Towards Understanding the Quran*' (English version) by Syed Abul A'la Maududi, and *The Meaning of the Holy Quran with Explanatory Notes* by Mufti Taqi Usmani. A fair approach and treatment towards offspring by the parents is one of their main **social responsibilities/obligations** that would turn the new generation into assets rather than liabilities. This study shows that every sane person begins to aspire for offspring the moment they have tied the knot. The Muslims should have a firm belief that, like all other matters in life, Allah's will prevails in the matter of offspring as well. Therefore, the believers should always seek Allah's help in the matter of offspring and their being on the right track, and should make wholehearted supplications to the Almighty in this regard. The parents should adopt an Islamic outlook and treat their male and female children alike. In the light of the Quranic injunctions, it is crystal clear that offspring are beauty as well as test for parents in their temporal life. Their upbringing, according to the tenets of Islam, would turn them into a soothing balm for the parents not only in this world but would benefit their parents even after their death and on the Day of Judgment as well. It would transform the children into positive and productive human beings for the world around them.

Keywords: Offspring, Islamic, Perspective, Parents, Quran, Ahadees, Social Obligation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. ABSOLUTE POWER BELONGS TO ALLAH

The desire to have offspring and love them is something deeply rooted in human nature. One, having strong faith in Allah, knows that it is none but Allah Who has the power to bestow offspring or let one remain barren. To bless a couple with a male or female child or grant them both male and female children totally belongs to Allah, without the least interference from

anybody else. In this regard, the Holy Quran says:

The dominion of the heavens and earth belongs to Allah. He creates whatever He pleases. He grants females to whomever He pleases and males to whomever He pleases or grants them a mix of males and females and causes whomever He pleases to remain barren. He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful (1).

Interpreting this verse, Maududi (n.d) says that it's Allah's absolute power which works in the matter of children for everyone. To have daughters or sons is also under the control of the Divine Wisdom. In the reproduction process, nobody, no matter how powerful and influential they are, can interfere, even in the least degree. If Allah doesn't will a child for a person, no treatment works for them. Similarly, to whom Allah decides to grant only male, only female, or both, no worldly effort can change this Divine Scheme (2).

Ibni-Khateer (n.d) interprets this verse as:

Allah tells us that He is the Creator, Sovereign and Controller of the heavens and earth. Whatever He wills happens, and whatever He does not will does not happen. He gives to whomsoever He wills and withholds from whomsoever he wills. None can withhold what He gives and none can give what He withholds, and He creates whatever He wills (3).

1.2. DESIRE FOR RIGHTOUS CHILDREN

To have offspring and, especially, virtuous ones, is what Allah's prophets have wished all along and supplicated for. For instance, Zakria the prophet (peace be upon him) prayed to the Almighty, even in the older stage of his life, as:

O my Lord! Grant me good offspring, that is, righteous ones. You are indeed the All-Hearer of invocations (4).

Ibn-al-Khateer interprets this verse as:

When Zakaria saw that Allah provided sustenance to Maryam by giving her the fruits of winter in summer and those of summer in winter, he began to aspire for a child of his own. By then, Zakaria had become an old man. His bones were feeble, his head was full of grey hair and his wife was an old woman having no power to bear children. Still he supplicated to Allah and called Him in secret (5).

Maududi says that, until then, Zakaria had no offspring. By witnessing that Mary the Virgin was receiving fruit miraculously, he, too, prayed to the Almighty for righteous offspring. The way Mary was provided sustenance was proof enough to convince him that Allah could grant him offspring, as well, even in the advanced stage of his life (6).

Usmani (7) says that, as per the verse of the Holy Quran (19: 4-4), he (Zakria) was in the elderly stage of his life and his wife also had no hope of bearing children. But, after witnessing the phenomenon of fruits being provided to Maryam out of season, he was made firm in his belief that if Allah willed, he could also be granted a son, even in that feeble stage of his life. This prompted him to pray to his Lord for offspring (8).

His supplication was accepted and he was bestowed a son. As the verse says, 'And We bestowed favour upon Zakria, when he cried out to his Creator: "Lord! Leave me not solitary. You are the Best Provider." (9). Likewise, in the Quran, we come across the invocation of the prophet as saying, "My Lord, grant me (a child) from among the righteous" (10).

1.3. KILLING OF ONE'S CHILDREN

One of the evil practices prevalent in the days of ignorance before the Islamic Era was that people had longing for male children, while female children were killed before birth, soon after their birth or, if kept alive, considered a lesser human and despicable and treated as dirt. The final revelation has described that scenario as, "And when the girl-child, buried alive, shall be asked: for what offence were you killed?" (11).

Maududi, in this regard, writes that Allah would be so angry at the parents who had committed the heinous crime of burying their daughters alive, that they would be ignored altogether and the innocent girl, buried alive, would be asked why she was meted out such a brutal treatment which sends a shiver down one's spine even today, provided one has the least degree of civility. And she would then publically narrate her story on the Day of Judgment before Allah. Maududi has cited abject poverty, the chaotic environment where the male children could support the family in times of war, while daughters were to be protected and, if captured, would be made slave-girls or sold to others etc, were the ostensible reasons behind this barbarous act in the pre-Islamic Arabia (11).

Usmani explains this verse by saying that the birth of a baby girl was, for the people of perverted nature, a matter of shame or curse. Therefore, if their wives gave birth to a girl, they would resort to the extreme brutality of burying her alive. The question was, in fact, posed to the fathers of the buried girls, who committed such a barbaric act (12). Ibne-Khateer goes on to say:

And when the female infant (Al-Maw'udah) buried alive is questioned for what sin she was killed, the majority interpret it as 'Su'ilat' (she is questioned), as it is here. Al-Maw'udah is the female infant that the people of the pre-Islamic time of ignorance would bury in the dirt due to their hatred of girls. Therefore, on the Day of Judgment, such a female infant would be asked what sin she had committed that caused her to be murdered. This can be construed as a means of frightening her murderers for, verily, if the one who was wronged is questioned, what does the wrongdoer (the one who is guilty of the oppression) think then (13).

The killing of children was also a deeply rooted practice among people in the pre-Islamic Arabia due to abject poverty. As Allah says, "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty; it is We Who provide for them as well as for you. Killing children is surely a grave sin" (14).

Maududi says that this verse strikes at the very root of the practice of birth control, which has been in vogue throughout human history. The fear of want has always compelled people to reduce the number of their children either by killing them or by practicing abortion. Islam does not support reducing the number of mouths by using artificial means: it rather emphasizes the increase in the means of production through natural means. Therefore, in an Islamic state, no scarcity of resources has been witnessed in relation with the expanding population - rather, the more people were born, the more resources were developed to cater for them (15).

In this regard, Ibne-Khateer quotes Abdullah bin Mas'ud:

'Abdullah bin Mas'ud stated: "I said to the Holy Prophet (PBUH), 'O the Messenger of Allah, which sin is the worst?' He said, 'To appoint rivals of Allah who has created you'. I asked, 'Then what?' He said, 'To kill your child lest he should eat with you.' I asked again, 'Then what?' He said, 'To commit adultery with your neighbor's wife.'" (16)

However, some of the people in Arabia did not fall in with this inhuman practice - for a human

society, however corrupt, always has a few fair-minded people in it. For instance, in the light of *Tabarani*, Sasaah bin Najiyah al-Mujashi, grandfather of the poet, Farazdaq, told the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that, in the days of ignorance, he had saved as many as 360 girls from being buried alive! Allah's Prophet (PBUH) gave him the glad tidings that his manifest reward for that was blessed with his entry into the fold of Islam (17)

1.4.FATE OF FEMALE CHILDREN IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

The Holy Quran thus unveils the plight of female population in the pre-Islamic Arabia: When any of them is told about the birth of a female, his face turns dark, and he is filled with suppressed anger. He hides himself from people because of the bad news, thinking, 'Should I keep the child despite disgrace or should I bury it in the dust?' How evil is their estimate of Allah (18).

Allah's Prophet (PBUH) brought about 180 degree shift in their outlook through his powerful, transformative, divine message. This message was to bring people out of the darkness and let them enter into the light, as Allah says: 'Alif. Laam. Ra'. This is a Book which We have revealed unto you so that you may bring forth mankind from every kind of darkness into the light and direct them, with the leave of their Lord, to the Way of the Mighty, the Innately Praiseworthy (19).

Commenting on this verse, Maududi says that it shows the purpose for which the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was sent: that he (the Holy Prophet) was assigned the duty to bring mankind out of evil thinking and evil practices through the light of Qur'an. He further says that anybody deviating from Allah's way is, in fact, on the wrong track, i.e., the way of darkness and ignorance, though they may be labouring under the delusion that they are on the right path (20).

Some of the authentic Ahadees show how Allah's Prophet (PBUH) guided his followers to treat their daughters kindly. Such Ahadees carry great weight. According to the Holy Prophet (PBUH), treating one's daughters kindly and generously will serve as a shield protecting such a person from the fire of hell (21). In this context, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: 'Paradise is obligatory for the one who brings up two or three daughters or sisters and treats them well until they stand on their own two feet' (22). The reporter of the Hadith, Ibne Abbas, says: 'It seems that it applies to a single daughter as well (23)'. Such a person is bound to enter into paradise who neither buried his daughter alive nor disgraced her in any way nor preferred his son to his daughter (24). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: 'The one who got three daughters from Allah and did not show any reluctance and provided them everything as per his capacity and means, they (the three daughters) will protect him from the fire of hell (25)'. Similarly, the Muslims having two daughters and looking after them well must enter into Paradise (26). Once exhorting Suraqah bin Jusham, Allah's Prophet of Allah (PBUH) said: 'One of the greatest of charities is that you spend on your divorced or widowed daughter, considering she is dependent on you (27).'

These are the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) which completely changed the mindset of the people about girls not only in Arabia but among all the other nations of the world which later become blessed with the light of Islam.

1.5. OFFSPRING AS TEST AND BEAUTY

In the light of the Islamic teachings, offspring may land you either in Paradise or hell fire. Though the hell fire belongs to the hereafter yet, in this world as well, ignoring their proper training grounded in the principles of the Quran may turn our earthly life into a veritable hell for the parents and others. In this regard, the following verses of the Holy Quran provide us valuable guidance.

1.5.1. CHILDREN BEING THE BEAUTY

'Wealth and children are the adornment of the worldly life. But the enduring good deeds that you do in this world are better liked by your Lord. They make you entitled to a rich reward from Him and give you hope for redemption in the Hereafter (28).'

'Beautified for men is the love of things they covet - women, children, piles of gold and silver, branded horses, cattle and well-tilled land. This is the pleasure of the present world's life; but Allah has much better return for good deeds (Paradise with flowing rivers, etc.) with Him (29).'

The above verses clearly show that to have love for offspring is deeply entrenched in human nature. However, this love should not manifest itself in the ways forbidden by Allah. So, the parents should strive hard to provide best guidance to their children so that they may perform good deeds, entitling them to the everlasting pleasures of the Hereafter.

1.5.2. CHILDREN BEING THE TEST

'And know that your properties and your children are but a trial and that Allah has with Him a great reward for those who perform good deeds (30).'

Maududi explains the above verse by stating that the love of wealth and children may drive people off the right path. Hence, it is a tough test for them. The people are being tested whether they cross the limits of Allah in the love of their children and resort to dishonesty, hypocrisy, corruption and other evil practices or stay confined to the limits set by the Almighty and remain Allah's obedient servants (31). In another verse of the Holy Quran, Allah the Almighty admonishes us in the following words:

'Know well that the life of this world is merely a sport and diversion and adornment and an object of your boasting with one another and a rivalry in the multiplication of riches and children. It is like rain. When it produces vegetation, it delights the tillers. But then it withers and you see it turn yellow and then it crumbles away. In the Hereafter, there would either be a grievous chastisement for the sinners or forgiveness and good pleasure from Allah the Almighty. The life of this world is a mere delusion (32).'

According to the following tradition of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), the righteous offspring will benefit their parents even after their death:

Abu Huraira reported: "The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, "When a human being dies, his deeds end. However, three good deeds will exist and benefit him, and they are: 1. His ongoing charity. 2. His beneficial knowledge, and 3. His righteous child who prays for him (33)."

2. GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS REGARDING TREATMENT OF THEIR CHILDREN

2.1. SUPPLICATIONS FOR RIGHTEOUS CHILDREN BEFORE BIRTH

Once a man and a woman tie the knot, they begin to aspire for children. The Holy Quran exhorts them that they should pray for righteous offspring. The natural feelings arising in the

hearts of the married couple after sexual contact are described by the Holy Quran in the following words:

'It is Allah the Almighty Who created you as a single person and out of it He created your mate so that you may find comfort in each other. When you have mated with her, she bears a light burden and goes about with it. Then, when she grows heavy, you both pray to your Creator: 'O Lord, if Thou bestowth upon us a healthy child, we surely will be amongst the grateful (34).' Interpreting this verse, Salahuddin Yousuf, a renowned Islamic scholar, states that as the time of birth draws nearer, the parents' hearts are filled with apprehension and superstition regarding the forthcoming child. So, they supplicate to Allah that if He blessed them with a sound child, they would be very grateful. But, a majority of such parents don't prove true to their word after a child is born to them (35). In this context, Maududi, says that due to the fear and firm belief in Allah, the married couple at pre-birth stage, pray to the Almighty for the grant of a sound and healthy baby (36). In this regard, the glorious lives of the Prophets of Allah serve as a beacon of light for all the parents (vide notes 37, 38 and 39).

3. SAFEGEGURDING CHILDREN FROM EVIL INFLUENCES AND KEEPING THEM ON THE RIGHT TRACK

By the grace of Allah, when a couple gets children, it is incumbent upon them to continuously pray for their being righteous. Supplications do have a magical effect and they would certainly save the children from all sorts of negative influences. For instance, 'And call to mind when Abraham prayed: "My Lord! Make this city safe for me and my sons and keep us from worshipping the idols (40)".

Allah's Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself would commit his grandsons to the care of the Almighty through special prayers. Hence the faithful are exhorted to follow the Holy Prophet in this regard. These are the words of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) while praying for his grandsons: "I seek protection for you in the perfect words of Allah from every devil, every beast and every evil eye" (41).

The last three chapters of the holy Quran - *Surah Al-Ikhlāq*, *Surah Al-Falaq*, and *Surah An-Nas* coupled with *Ayat ul-Kursi* - serve as a protective shield against all the negative forces for us and for our children. Before going to bed, we should repeat the practice of Allah's prophet. Hazrat Aisha (May Allah be pleased with her) narrates:

When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) went to bed every night, he would hold his hands together and blow into them and recite into them 'Qul Huwa Allah Ahad, Qul a'oodhu bi rabb il-falaq and Qul a'oodhu bi Rabb in-nas.' Then he would wipe them over whatever he could of his body, starting with his head and face and the front of his body, and he would do that three times. (42)

According to An-Nasai, Ibn Abi Al-Juhani was told by Allah's Prophet that the best words he should seek refuge with are, "Say: 'I seek refuge with the Lord of Al-Falaq.'" and "Say: 'I seek refuge with the Lord of mankind.'" "These two Surahs provide the best protection." (43). Similarly, **Ayatul kursi**, the 255th verse of *Surah Al-Baqarah*, is also one of the most powerful shields to take refuge with, for yourself and for the rest of your family members, particularly children who are more vulnerable to satanic influences. It is specially recommended when one goes to sleep. In this context, Abu Hurayrah said: "Once I was taught a few words by a

stranger, who was caught red-handed by me, while stealing. I informed Allah's Prophet (PBUH) that the thief had told me about *Ayatul kursi* to safeguard myself with from satanic temptations and influences. Allah's Prophet said: "Although he (the thief) was Satan – an inveterate liar - yet he spoke the truth (44)."

Surah Al-Baqarah is what a person should recite to make oneself and one's family safe from satanic temptations. Abu Hurayrah reported the Messenger of Allah having told him: "Do not make your houses like graves, for the Shaytan runs away from a house in which Surat al-Baqarah is recited." (45).

4. PERPETUAL ADMONISHING TO CHILDREN AND ADVICE AT DEATHBED

The parents should frequently admonish their children so as to keep them on the right track. Moreover, when one is on one's deathbed, it is their prime responsibility to advise one's offspring to follow the right path until their last breath.

In this context, the exhortations of Hakeem Luqman serve as guidelines for the whole humanity. He (Luqman) instilled into his son all the good habits and moral values through his effective admonishing. The good principles he exhorted his son to stick to included, belief in the oneness of Allah, kindness and obedience to his parents, gratefulness to Allah, belief in Allah's attribute of being the Knower of the seen and the unseen, establishing prayer, enjoining all that is good and forbidding all that is evil, desisting from arrogance and hatred, keeping his tongue under his control and exercising patience (46). In the Holy Quran, the advice given by Prophets Abraham and Jacob to their children is quoted thus: 'And Abraham enjoined the same upon his children and so did Jacob, "My children, behold, Allah has chosen this religion for you. Remain till death in submission to Allah."' (47). In Talmud, Jacob's will to his progeny at the time of his death is reported in the following words:

'Serve the Lord, your God, and He will deliver ye from all troubles even as He delivered your fathers..... Teach your children to love God and carry out His commandments in order that their days may be prolonged, for God will guard those who dispense justice and walk in righteousness through all His ways.' The sons of Jacob responded: 'All that you have commanded us, our father, we will do. May God be with us!' And Jacob answered by saying, 'The Lord will be with you if ye depart not from His ways to the right hand or left.' (41)

4.1. EMPHISIS ON SALAT (PRAYER)

All the Prophets of Allah have directed their progeny to establish prayer, which is a potential tool to prevent them from deviation and make them firm-footed on the right path. For instance, the praying of the prophets for their offspring also includes, "My Lord! Enable me and my offspring to establish Prayer, and do accept, our Lord, this prayer of mine" (49). The Holy Quran warns the faithful that the first step of deviation is missing the prayer which is then followed by other acts of evil. As the verse goes, "They were succeeded by a people who neglected their prayers and pursued their lusts. They shall presently meet with their doom" (50). Explaining this verse, Maududi says, "The journey of moral downfall of all the previous communities started from missing the obligatory prayers. Once they became careless and neglectful of their prayers, they fell deeper and deeper into the abyss of degeneration (51)". Therefore, Allah's Prophet exhorted the parents to ensure that their offspring don't miss the obligatory prayers so as to sustain their journey on the right path. In this regard, the faithful

are commanded that once their children attain the age of 7, they are to be admonished to say their five-time prayers daily and, on reaching the age of 10 years, the parents should scold and even lightly beat their offspring, if they miss their prayers (52).

5. MONITORING YOUR OFFSPRING

One of the prime duties of parents is to keep their children under their watchful eyes. It doesn't mean to clip their wings, but to let them fly within the permitted boundaries, lest they fall down, more specifically in the ethical and moral sense. Therefore, Islam has a set of principles for the guidance of all parents. In this context, the Holy Quran says:

'Believers, guard yourselves and your kindred against a Fire whose fuel is human beings and stones, a Fire held in the charge of fierce and stern angels who never disobey what He has commanded them, and always do what they are bidden (53).'

Interpreting this verse, Maududi says:

This verse lays down that a person's responsibility is not confined to making effort to save themselves from the wrath of Allah but it is also their responsibility that they should educate and train to the best of their ability the members of their family who have been entrusted to their care in the natural process of life so that they become Allah's favourite servants and if they are following a path to hell, they should try, as much as they can, to correct them. Their concern should not only be that their children lead a happy and prosperous life in this world but, more than that, they should be anxious to see that they do not become fuel of Hell in the Hereafter (54).

In this context, Abdullah bin Umar has quoted the following tradition of the Holy Prophet (PBUH):

'Each one of you is a herdsman - accountable and answerable for their herd. The man is the herdsman of his family - the woman is responsible and accountable for her husband's house and her children. Similarly, the rulers are responsible for the ruled and all of you are answerable for those who are under your charge (55).'

5.1. COMPANY OF GOOD PEOPLE

In fulfilling the role of being guardians and watchers on their children, the parents should ensure that their children are associated with good friends and companions. Needless to say that good and bad company of friends and associates has a lasting impression on the character of children. **Good companionship** is, therefore, greatly valued in Islam. For instance, it's been described that one would have to face the music in the life hereafter if they have bad company in the worldly life as the verse, "Close friends, that Day, will be enemies to each other, except for the righteous ones" (56). The Holy Prophet (PBUH) has elucidated this point by giving the following example:

"The example of a good companion (who sits with you) in comparison with a bad one is like that of the musk seller and the blacksmith's bellows. From the first you would either buy musk or enjoy its good smell while the bellows would either burn your body or your clothes or you would get a nasty smell thereof." [57].

Elaborating this point, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said, "A person is upon the religion of his close friend. So, beware whom you befriend." [58]

An old Spanish proverb says: "Tell me who your friends are, and I'll tell you who you are".

Another old saying goes thus: 'Do not ask about a person and about his friend *** for each person imitates his friend.' Harrel, therefore, has quoted Nido Qubein having said: "Who you spend time with is precisely who you become. So pick your friends carefully." (59) J.Macionis says, "Considering the importance of peer group, parents are often concerned about the company of their children. They prefer such a peer group for their children which reinforces the values they have learned at home (60)".

6. ENGAGEMENT OF OFFSPRING IN CONSTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES

It is the responsibility of parents to keep themselves and their children engaged in positive, constructive and productive activities. This will improve their children's capacity to work and make them positive contributors to the wellbeing of their society. For instance, when Prophet Abraham was assigned the task of erecting the building of Ka'ba, he was accompanied by his son, Ismail. They both, working together, accomplished the divine mission successfully. In this regard, the Holy Quran says: 'Recall when Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House of God, praying, "Our Lord! Accept this from us; You are All-Hearing, All-Knowing"' (61). This shows that engagement of the offspring in a constructive, productive and sacred task is the responsibility of all parents and guardians.

7. CONCLUSION

In the foregoing lines, it has been proved in the light of the Quranic verses, authentic Ahadees and comments and exegeses by renowned scholars that the desire for having offspring is ingrained in the nature of parents. Having offspring, endowed with moral probity, is indeed a great blessing of the Almighty. This is why parents have been advised time and again to pray to the Almighty for the grant of righteous offspring. When Allah bestows a person with offspring - son, daughter or both - the parents should supplicate regularly and wholeheartedly that their children may remain steadfast on the path of rectitude, that they carry out the commandments of Allah the Almighty and stick to the code of ethics and moral values. The parents are admonished that they should not adopt discriminatory attitude towards their female offspring even in the least degree. They should accept, with good grace, the birth of their male and female children and pay gratitude to the Lord for this kindness.

Besides offering supplications and offering gratitude to the Lord, the parents should take practical steps to enable their children to lead a successful life in this world and the Hereafter. The first step in this direction is to admonish them to say their obligatory prayers regularly when they have attained the age of 7 years, and beat them lightly, if they miss their prayers at the age of 10 years. Regular exhortations as given by Allah's prophets like Abraham, Jacob, and the sage, Hakeem Luqman, should serve as gospel truth for all parents. At the time of one's death, one should gather one's children and inculcate into them, even under oath, that they would worship none but Allah and that they would remain righteous throughout their lives, and even after the death of their parents.

According to the injunctions of the Holy Quran, monitoring the activities and companionship of their offspring and keeping them engaged in positive, constructive and productive activities are the responsibility of all parents. This will enable them to keep their children on the right track.

Following the above steps in letter and spirit would enable the parents to turn their progeny

into devout Muslims, a soothing balm for their parents, beneficial for them in this world and the Hereafter and law-abiding and responsible members of the society who would be an asset rather than a liability for the nation.

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