

Caring for Muslim children in foster care





AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Equality without Exception

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) is an organisation of Muslim women working to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia. We believe Muslim women must be the impetus for change in their status as citizens.

The Australian Muslim community is characterised by diversity and hybridity, and not by a binding vision of Islam or what it means to be Muslim. We are therefore a non-religious organisation reflecting the sectarian, cultural and linguistic diversity within the Muslim community. We take a non-religious, non-sectarian approach to our work and adopt a social justice lens to Islam when it is used to justify any infringement against women. This allows us to work with all Muslim women. We believe that there is not one view of Islam that represents all Muslims in Australia and, further, that the diversity of Muslims in Australia is a strength.

We work for the rights of Muslim women by:

- empowering women's self-determination
- bringing a human rights approach to bear on issues of inequality and disadvantage
- working with individuals, the community, and government to advocate for equality within the Australian context

We aim to inspire positive action by others and aspire to continuously enhance the quality, impact and effectiveness of our work.

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This pamphlet provides introductory information for foster carers who have taken Muslim children into care, or are considering doing so.

It is designed to complement existing information provided by out-of-home care (OOHC) service providers and by Foster Care Association of Victoria.

Some of these resources are listed at the end of this publication.

How to use this guide

While the content of this guide draws on the experiences, challenges and questions that professionals have encountered in their work with Muslim young people, it is important to remember that this information is introductory only and therefore general. Every child is an individual, with a unique understanding of her or his cultural and religious background.

Like all young people, Muslim youth will come to you with a complex array of needs and challenges. You may encounter questions and challenges different to those discussed here. In such instances it is always important to seek advice from the child/young person's caseworker or from a professional community organisation.

Why should religious and cultural identity be considered?

Understanding a young person's cultural or religious background will assist you to care for the child who has come into your care and assist them to understand and adapt to the new environment.

It is not possible to meaningfully support and engage a young person without considering their cultural and religious background.

The role of OOHC is to give the child a 'home' — a safe, secure and nurturing place where the child can grow. A child's needs in the home are not limited to the basic human needs of food, shelter and safety. They extend to esteem arising from intimate relationships, friends, prestige and accomplishment, and then to self-actualisation through the achievement of full potential¹. It is to this end that carers should respect and value the child's cultural heritage and identity.

Cultural maintenance is crucial to a child's sense of wellbeing, identity and psycho-social and emotional development. Struggles around identity and belonging can be more pronounced for children in cross-cultural OOHC placements, adding yet another element to an already difficult and complex experience.

With the help and support of professionals who are sensitive to cross-cultural issues, you may be able to assist a child to cope with the loneliness, insecurity and confusion inherent to OOHC. An awareness and understanding of Muslim belief and practice will enhance your confidence in supporting a Muslim child.

1 A generally accepted hierarchy of human needs developed by the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970).

Islam: Some background information

It is believed that Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (whose name will be followed by the initials PBUH – standing for ‘Peace Be Upon Him’ – a common blessing given to him by Muslims) just outside the city of Mecca (or Makkah), which is part of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia, around AD 610. Islam has its lineage in Judaism and Christianity, and Muslims believe in the same God as Christians and Jews. It therefore acknowledges and pays respect to all of the prophets of the Old Testament and names Jesus as the most beloved of the prophets. Jews and Christians are described as ‘People of the Book’ in the Qur’an because they are considered recipients of the same revelation of the One God.

Islam’s relationship with Judaism and Christianity is complex. On one hand it reiterates and supports many of the beliefs and practices of both religions; on the other it introduces new doctrines and significantly different practices, sometimes leading to tensions with its predecessors.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the monotheistic faiths surpass their differences.

The Holy Book

The Qur’an is the holy scripture of Islam. It comprises the complete collection of revelations by God to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), beginning around AD 610 and ending with Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) death in AD 632. The word Qur’an literally means ‘that which is recited’.

Pillars of Islam

The key duties required of Muslims form the five pillars of Islam. Although different levels of importance may be placed on them by Muslim individuals and communities, most will recognise them as Muslim practices:

1. Bearing witness to the oneness of **God (Tauheed)** and to Muhammad PBHU being his messenger.
2. **Prayer (Salat)** — all Muslims who have attained puberty are required to perform prayers in a prescribed manner five times each day.
3. **Almsgiving (Zakat)** — this is an obligatory religious tax, generally estimated at 2.5 per cent of a Muslim's annual savings and is to be used to assist the poor and needy.
4. **Fasting (Sawm)** — all Muslims who have reached puberty and whose health permits are required to abstain from eating, drinking and smoking from dawn to dusk in Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year.
5. **Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)** — in the twelfth month of the lunar calendar all Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to do so.

Australian Muslims

There is significant diversity within Islam that comes from ethnic, cultural, regional and linguistic differences in the Muslim community.

Almost half of Australian Muslims are born in Australia; other Muslims were born overseas in countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Bangladesh, Iran, Fiji, Cyprus, Somalia, Egypt and Malaysia.

Muslims belong to a diverse range of language groups, including Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Bosnian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Malay, Dari, Albanian, Hindi, Kurdish and Pashto. However, English is still the most common language among Muslims in Australia.

Muslims have migrated to Australia as skilled and economic migrants, but they have also come as refugees from war, civil strife, and natural or man-made disasters.



Working with Muslim young people: An overview

Avoid assumptions

There are a great number of misconceptions and stereotypes that surround Islam and Muslims. Much is said in the public space about who Muslims are, what they believe and if they belong in Australia. Media often portrays Muslims and Islam as connected to conflict and violence around the world. Because a significant majority of Australians have not met a Muslim, much of their information on Islam and Muslims comes from such sources.

It is important therefore to be especially self-aware and vigilant about any misconceptions you might have acquired from mainstream media about who Muslims are and what they believe.

It is important to be informed about Australian Muslims and Muslim tradition.

In addition to providing information and support to the Australian community, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights has developed a range of written resources on Islam, Australian Muslims and Muslim tradition. These can be found on our website and may further your understanding.

Consult reputable specialist services and organisations

There may be times when you need additional information or advice about cultural or religious practices. Consult reputable specialist services and organisations for information and advice. Professional Muslim and community organisations in the welfare

sector bring extensive expertise around working with Muslim youth and families.

These services are a good first point of contact because they are easily accessible, they are a reliable source of information and they also work directly on issues of specific relevance to Muslim young people, Muslim families and OOHC.

Community organisations serve a wide variety of community functions and not all organisations will have the relevant experience and expertise to assist you. We have listed organisations below which might be of help.

Issues to consider for young Muslims in an OOHC setting

Young Muslims will face a range of challenges in being removed from home and settling into a new foster home. Firstly, as with any young person in this situation, it is important to reassure them that they are not responsible for what is happening, and that they have a right to be treated with love and care. This is likely to be a confusing and emotional time.

Concerns and questions commonly expressed by Muslim young people:

- Am I the only Muslim kid to be removed from home?
- I feel bad, like I have done something terrible to my family.
- I'm worried I will never see my family again.
- Will I be able to see my community and friends again?
- Does my religion say I am bad for leaving my family?

- Is it true that the Muslim community does not want Muslim youth who have left home?
- Can I still be Muslim if I have left my family and community?
- Can I still practise my faith while in out-of-home care?
- What if I no longer want to be Muslim?
- Is it safe for me to identify as Muslim in OOHC?

AMWCHR has produced a separate brochure for young Muslims which directly addresses some of their typical questions and worries about OOHC. The *Information for Muslim youth in out-of-home care* brochure may also be helpful for professionals in the field.

Practical approaches to working with Muslim youth

As emphasised in this guide, there is enormous diversity among Muslims and therefore Muslim youth. It's difficult to make generalisations about who they are, how they relate to their culture and religion, and, importantly, how that is impacted by the stress of having been abused by family and removed from home.

It is important to ensure that no assumptions are made about the religious observance of Muslims. Among this diverse group will be young Muslims who:

- have no interest in their religious background
- consider themselves to be culturally Muslim but are not observant
- choose aspects of religious practice that are important to them but ignore other practices that they deem unimportant



- want their religious identity to be left in the past, either because it has no meaning for them or because they see religion as the cause of their abuse
- revolve their daily life around their religious observances, which are crucial to who they are and mediate their sense of meaning

It's important to be aware that cultural identity and religious practice may take on a heightened meaning when children are removed from home as a way of maintaining a sense of identity and dealing with the stress of their situation.

The most obvious aspects of culture and religion that need to be considered include:

- daily religious/cultural requirements: clothes (does modesty matter and does the young person wish to observe Muslim code for modest dress?), and food (is halal food a requirement for the child?)
- gender norms: many Muslims live within varying levels of gender segregation, especially when it comes to children. Sometimes this might be obvious in relation to dress and modesty; other times, however, young people may simply display a discomfort at sharing domestic/living space with someone of the opposite sex who is not directly related to them
- religious observance, festivals, traditions: does the child observe Ramadan? Are they interested in attending Eid festivals? Are there community events that are important?

With such considerations, it is always important to seek advice. You can also ask the young person in your care to guide you as to their religious and cultural requirements.

Be aware that some children and young people may want to continue to have contact with their community and their social circle with all the usual social rules and norms (if safety is not an issue).

It is also important to be aware that it may be difficult for Muslim children and young people to speak about personal family matters outside their families.

Resources for working with Muslim youth in foster care

(FCAV Information Sheet) *Caring for children from diverse backgrounds*

Foster Care Association of Victoria

www.fcav.org.au/images/carers-resources/information-sheets/Cultural_Awareness_for_Carers.pdf

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights has a range of publications which you can access for free. Publications can be found at: ausmuslimwomenscentre.org.au/category/resources/publications

Organisations to contact



THE AUSTRALIAN
MUSLIM WOMEN'S CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

Email: reception@muslimwomenscentre.org.au

Phone: (03) 9481 3000

Open times: Monday – Friday
9:00am – 5:00pm



BENEVOLENCE

Benevolence Australia

Email: info@benevolenceaustralia.org

Telephone: (03) 9913 8262

Open times: Monday,
Wednesday and Friday
10:00am – 4:00pm



ROSS HOUSE
ASSOCIATION

Care with Me, Ross House Association

Email: melmasri@cwme.org.au

Telephone: 0413 127 595

Open times: Monday – Friday
9:00am – 5:00pm



ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

Islamic Council of Victoria

Email: admin@icv.org.au

Telephone: (03) 9328 2067

Open times: Monday – Friday
9:00am – 5:00pm



