

Caring for Muslim children in out-of-home 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 booklet outlines key guidelines to assist professionals in the out-of-home care (OOHC) sector to work with Muslim children and young people.

It is designed to complement existing resources as well as the advice you may seek from suitably qualified community organisations or professionals. There is a wealth of information available on young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD). Some of these resources are listed at the end of this publication.

How to use this guide

Like all young people, Muslim youth will come to you with a complex array of needs and challenges. This booklet provides background information you may need to consider in working with Muslim youth, and outlines specific requirements and questions that may arise.

While this content draws on the experiences, issues, challenges and questions that professionals have encountered in their work with youth, it is important to remember that these guidelines are general. Every child is an individual, with a unique understanding of her or his cultural and religious background.

You may encounter questions and challenges different to those discussed here. In such instances it is always important to seek advice from a professional community organisation.

Why should religious and cultural identity be considered?

When working with young people and their families, there are professional obligations and benefits to including cultural and religious background as an important consideration.

It may not be possible to meaningfully support and engage a young person and/or their family without consideration of 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 in stature and character. Basic human needs are not limited to the physiological needs of food, water, warmth, and rest. 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 professionals 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. Additionally, identity and belonging are essential elements in a child's development. Children separated from their birth families struggle with issues of heritage, identity, and their understanding of where they 'belong'. The struggle tends to 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, a child is more likely to cope with the loneliness, insecurity and confusion inherent to OOHC. An awareness and understanding of Muslim belief and practice enhances professional confidence and facilitates professional intervention and support.

Culture is at the core of family and community life. It stems from memories, common experience, background, language, racial identity, class, religion, and family attitudes. It is manifest in the practical aspects of everyday life – communication, food, and everyday rituals. Both families and children entering OOHC will adapt more readily to their new situation if they retain key elements of who they are. Culture and religion are core to this.

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

Religion, parenting, power and abuse

Because of the diversity inherent in Muslim identity, generalisations about the parenting styles of Muslim families can be misleading. It is also important to be aware of stereotypes that permeate our society of Muslim men/fathers as patriarchal and domineering, and Muslim women/mothers as weak and permissive.

Islam does have great reverence for mothers in particular. At times, Muslims generalise this reverence to both parents and all parental figures.

Difficulties arise for some Muslim parents when they believe their culture and religion allow them complete authority and power over their children. Further, that as parents they have the best understanding and are most committed to the welfare of the child. It can be intensely confronting for parents to have their authority over the child challenged, especially for Muslim parents who feel that being a parent is part of their religious identity and their obligations as a practising Muslim.

There are also intersecting issues of using religion to justify abuse and neglect, or using abuse and violence to fulfil a perceived religious obligation.

Working with Muslim young people: An overview

Language

Avoid terms that stigmatise Muslim children and youth. Choose your language carefully and sensitively and avoid language that implies judgment from a cultural perspective. Terms like 'barbaric', 'backward'

or 'despicable practice' are often used in our experience to describe traditions and practices that are culturally foreign or personally challenging. No matter how problematic a practice is, professionals should avoid the use of emotive language. Such language is inflammatory and should be avoided. It does not further your understanding of the issues and significantly risks alienating young people and their families.

Avoid assumptions

Sometimes superficial or swift assessments of cultural/religious influences on families disregard other contributing factors to families' vulnerability such as the socio-economic factors that place many migrant families at a disadvantage. Poverty, marginalisation, lack of access to resources, and trauma associated with the migration process puts significant strain on families and must be accounted for in assessments of children's vulnerability.

The failure to correctly identify family stressors means that culture/religion might be blamed when in fact it is a source of strength and wellbeing for children. It is also essential to remember that racism is strong and present among all societies and cultures. At the heart of racism is the belief that one's own race and culture is superior to others.

Varying degrees of racism and discrimination are a reality for many migrants and refugees, further impacting their mental health, wellbeing, relationships and overall participation in society.

Since the events of 11 September 2001 reports of racial discrimination and abuse towards Muslim migrants and refugees, especially those who are visibly Muslim, have consistently emerged. The

psychosocial ramifications of such racism include increased fear, mistrust and a sense of alienation, which has been especially noted among youth.

Islam and Muslims are often portrayed in the media and in the public space as inherently violent, both within and outside of the home, and there are many forms of misrepresentation of what is a highly diverse community. It is important therefore to remain mindful and self-reflective in your dealings with Muslim youth and families to ensure that your perception and understanding of your client is not affected by the stereotypes and misrepresentations in the media and public space.

Additionally, avoid comparing Muslim families, children and young people to those from other cultures. For example, it does not help to say that 'in Australian culture, this would never happen' or 'Australian young women are given a lot more freedom by their families'. Comparisons can leave affected individuals feeling that their personal situation is being disregarded; it can leave people angry, and it may make some young people feel inferior. Racial/cultural comparisons also trivialise what is a harmful experience by framing issues simply as a comparison between two cultures. Comparisons stigmatise an already disenfranchised community.

Finally, be aware that where there are traditions or practices that are, for example, harmful to young people or women, such as early and forced marriage, they are being actively challenged by women's groups and NGOs, both here and overseas. It is important to remember that affected communities have always been the primary instigators of change.



Consider your position of power

Consider the potential influence and power you wield as a professional who has the capacity to affect a young person's life. As a responsible professional, be aware of the impact and influence of your own cultural biases on how you respond to their needs.

You also need to be aware that these children possibly come from environments where they have had no opportunity to independently make decisions and may also have a fear of 'authority'. Parents may have a fear of statutory authority because of experiences in their country of origin, or a host country in their migration process. Indeed, this fear may also stem from negative or disempowering experiences they have had since their arrival in Australia.

Ensure that such factors are taken into consideration before making assumptions around agreed plans.



Consult reputable specialist services and organisations

Consult reputable specialist services and organisations for information, advice, training and secondary consultation. Professional Muslim and community organisations in the welfare sector bring extensive expertise to their work with Muslim families and young girls in particular.

It is imperative to consult expert agencies when cultural or faith-based supports are needed. These services are a good first point of contact because they are easily accessible, they are a reliable source of information and they work directly on issues of specific relevance to Muslim young people, Muslim families and OOHC.

Consulting specialist services will assist in dealing with differences of opinion, and contradictory or inaccurate information that might be provided by different community sources.

However, do not assume that all community organisations have the relevant expertise. Community organisations can serve a wide variety of functions; they don't all work within the relevant framework or have the appropriate experience.

Issues to consider for young Muslims in an OOHC setting

Young Muslims will face a range of challenges in being removed from 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 throughout this guide, there is an enormous diversity among Muslims and therefore Muslim youth. It is 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 potentially 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
- highly value their daily religious observances; those observances are crucial to who they are and mediate their sense of meaning
- 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.

It is therefore important that the needs of each child are considered individually and that the assessment is made thoughtfully.

It's also 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, most 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 attend mosque, or observe Ramadan? Are they interested in attending Eid festivals? Are there community events that are important?

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's also important to be aware that it may be difficult for Muslim children and young people to speak about personal family matters outside their community.

Many cultures place significant restrictions on discussion of personal or family matters. These restrictions are applied more stringently on females. Respecting privacy is crucial. Remember that you are speaking to young people not only about the trauma that has led to their separation from family.

You may also be expecting them to discuss matters that would be difficult for anybody to speak about, much less young people from cultures in which such discussions are not held in the public space.

Issues to consider for Muslim parents in an OOHC setting

One of the most important things to remember in working with Muslim families that have come into the OOHC system, is that most of these families come from countries where the government either does not place limits on the power of parents or only places those limits in very extreme circumstances. For many reasons, governments across the Western world have a much more proactive and interventionist role in ensuring the welfare of children living with their families. This reality means that some Muslim families may feel particularly bewildered or frightened by the power of the state and potentially angry about the intervention.

It is for this reason that Muslim families may struggle to work with or understand the requirements placed on them in the OOHC system. If they are recent immigrants they may not fully understand what is expected of them and, therefore, fail to comply with unwritten cultural expectations.

Language and cultural barriers may also make it difficult for families to access resources and services and comply with treatment plans. These issues are further exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the social welfare system, which may be different or non-existent in their country of origin. There may also be a shortage of interpreters and translated material, and perceived or actual racism

and discrimination. Many immigrant families are reluctant to seek or accept formal assistance from social service institutions, given past experience of mistreatment and a general distrust of authority figures.

Additionally, parents may struggle with notions of family privacy. Taboos related to the disclosure of intimate family matters may make it difficult to disclose any issue related to violence, and the placing of children outside the home.

Some families will feel a great deal of anxiety about their cultural or religious community becoming aware of the removal of their child. For these families, it may not only be about the potential shame and loss of standing in the community, but there may be additional concern about the welfare and status of their child in their community once they have left; they may be worried that their child may become marginalised if they return to the community.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is essential to remember that for many Muslims, being a successful parent, part of a family and rearing happy and religiously observant children is core to being a decent Muslim. In some ways, this adds to the difficulty of accepting the intervention of the OOHC services, because some parents feel that they have not only failed as parents but they have also failed in their practice of their faith.

Practical approaches to working with parents

If possible, gather information from the family around their religious practices and cultural understandings, using an appropriate interpreter if required.

Explain to families that this information is gathered to ensure that their child's religious and cultural needs are met as much as possible while in out-of-home care. However, it is important to explain to parents that they may not be able to make such decisions while the child is in another family's care. This may become an issue when children in care lose interest in their culture and religion, and possibly transgress religious/cultural rules that parents have ordinarily imposed.

Here are some approaches to parental issues and concerns you might encounter.



1. Lack of awareness of the role, statutory power and limits of protective services.

It is important that this is clearly explained; consider using an interpreter, providing written information and updating the family regularly if necessary.

2. Worries concerning the involvement of an interpreter.

In organising an interpreter it is essential that they are of the same sex as your client, that you share the name of the interpreter with the client and that you secure their consent prior to discussions taking place. This helps to maintain confidentiality. In the discussion process, all questions and answers should be directed to the client, not to the interpreter. Maintain eye-contact with the parent you are interviewing. Direct the interpreter to interpret word-for-word rather than summarising the client's responses. You may need to insist on this and if the interpreter is not able to comply, another interpreter should be organised. This is because summarising responses for the sake of proficiency or speed can radically change the meaning of what is being said.

3. Fear that professionals in the OOHC system do not understand the rights and role of parents in their culture/community and that OOHC professionals do not understand the importance of keeping families together.

It is crucial to effectively counter such perceptions of cultural differences: families in all cultures experience crisis and require intervention and support, and all cultures seek to

support families to stay intact. Seek advice from relevant community professionals on this.

4. Misconceptions and misunderstandings about the rights of the child.

This can be a difficulty for some families, especially if attitudes around family in their culture of origin differ to those in Australia. Some parents may need assistance and support to further develop their understanding and to learn different parenting styles.

It is important to note that sometimes abusive parent/s may use religion and culture to justify their behaviour and abuse of children. It is important not to confuse parental violence and abuse for cultural/religious practice. Seek out information and advice from suitably qualified community organisations.

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. 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.

Muslim diversity

There is significant diversity within Islam that comes from ethnic, cultural, regional and linguistic differences in the Muslim community. But like Christianity, there is also diversity within the religion because of the historical development of the religion

and community itself. The most obvious difference evolves out of sectarian differences, notably differences between Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, but there are also other sects, and there is variation that comes from significant differences in Muslim jurisprudence and textual history.

Like many religious and cultural groups, some Muslims believe that there is clarity and consensus on the values, practice and traditions among members of their community. The reality, however, is that significant diversity can exist between individual Muslims and between communities of Muslims.

Australian Muslims

The precise number of Muslims in Australia is unknown because some Muslims do not register their religion for fear of persecution or due to a lack of understanding of the purpose of data collection by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Some Muslim minority sects do not identify with mainstream Islam because of a history of persecution. The number of Muslims registered by the ABS in 2011 was 476,300 Australia-wide. Australian Muslims make up about 2 per cent of the Australian population, with 40 per cent of Australian Muslims born in Australia, making them the single largest category among an otherwise extremely diverse community. Around 60 per cent were born overseas in countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Bangladesh, Iran, Fiji, Cyprus, Somalia, Egypt and Malaysia. Less than 20 per cent of Australian Muslims were born in Middle Eastern or Arab countries.

Muslims belong to a diverse range of language groups, including Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Bosnian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Malay, Dari, Albanian, Hindi,

Kurdish and Pashto. It is important to note though that English is the most common language among Muslims.

Muslim migration to Australia is a complex phenomenon. It is important to note that while some Muslims have migrated to Australia as skilled and economic migrants, the vast majority of Muslims have arrived in Australia because of war, civil strife, natural or man-made disasters, and from varying degrees of persecution because of race, ethnicity, religion, politics and/or gender.

Muslims who have migrated to Australia as refugees and humanitarian entrants, may have an additional set of needs and may be more vulnerable in a system like the out-of-home care system. It is not only important to be mindful of their experiences in their country of origin, but also of their experience of the migration process itself and any experiences they may have had in host countries on their way to Australia.

Muslim families

As in other communities, marriage and the family are considered extremely important social institutions. Marriage is seen as a means to harmony, stability, security and the satisfaction of mutual needs. For many Muslim families, marriage is the gateway to adulthood, and for some Muslims, adulthood is only obtained by marrying.

In many Muslim families, marriages continue to be 'arranged' by parents; even when this is not the case, parental consent and approval are generally considered important. Theoretically, even with arranged marriages, the willingness of both parties is considered essential.

Sexual relationships before or outside marriage are socially disapproved of and religiously proscribed.

Traditionally, the Muslim family is extended, with children, parents and grandparents sometimes living together. The advantages of this system include stability and economic, physical and psychosocial support, particularly in times of need. Today, however, with the cultural changes brought about by globalisation, migration etc, nuclear families are increasing in number, although many Muslim families continue to live as extended or semi-extended families, even in Western societies.

Starting a family is considered an important goal of marriage, and it is considered unusual not to have children. Children are a central part of the family in most Muslim cultures.

Parental approval and consent is considered important in life decisions. In many Muslim migrant cultures, academic and career achievement is encouraged and highly valued.

Early Islam and children

Like most other religions, Islam sees procreation as the basis for marriage. Love, affection and caring for children play a crucial role in Islam.

At the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, there were a considerable number of orphans in Muslim society. Consequently, there is a great deal of emphasis on the protection of children, particularly orphans, who were fostered by families. In the Qur'an, children are seen as a vulnerable group, who require additional care and protection by adults and society.

Apart from the above prescription, very little is said about children in Islam that reflect our understanding

of childhood today. In 7th century Arab tribal society, childhood was a very small period of an individual's life and ended at puberty. Historically, adulthood began in the early teens for Muslims without the period of adolescence we recognise as important today.

Tools and resources for working with CALD youth in OOHC settings

Culturally Sensitive Practice in Out of Home Care – A good practice guide to supporting children and young people from CALD backgrounds in OOHC

Developed and prepared by Ms Jatinder Kaur, JK Diversity Consultants, August 2014, for Life without Barriers and PeakCare Queensland

www.jkdiversityconsultants.com.au/PracticeGuide/Culturally-Sensitive-Practice-in-Out-of-Home-Care-Practice-Guide-Kaur-2014.pdf

(Practice tool) *Assessing needs and supports for migrant and refugee children, young people and families in OOHC*

Multicultural Service Unit, NSW Department of Family and Community Services

www.community.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/322252/assessingneedsandsupportformigrant.pdf

(Information Sheet) OOHC CALD assessment checklist

Multicultural Service Unit, NSW Department of Family and Community Services

www.community.nsw.gov.au/___/out_of_home_care_cald_assessment_checklist.doc

(FCAV Information Sheet) Caring for Children from Diverse Backgrounds

Foster Care Association of Victoria

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

Culturally appropriate service provision for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and families in the New South Wales (NSW) child protection system (CPS): Interim Report/Literature Review
Pooja Sawrikar, July 2009 – A report prepared for the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS)
www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/media/SPRCFile/20_Report_Cald_Families_LitRvw.pdf

Children and young people from non-English speaking backgrounds in out-of-home care in NSW
Research report 2008, NSW Department of Community Services, Centre for Parenting & Research Service System Development Division
www.community.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/321723/research_cald_oohc_review.pdf

Australia's commitment to children's rights and reporting to the UN
Australian Human Rights Commission 2007
www.humanrights.gov.au

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

