



# The Nurture and Protection of Children in Islam: Perspectives from Islamic Sources



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*Islamic texts command affection, care, and education* ☆

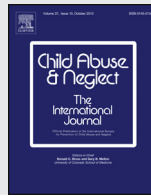
What exactly do we mean by *Islam* when referring to the nurture and protection of children in Islam? Do we mean the beliefs and practices of the approximately 213 million Muslims constituting 88% of the population of Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world? Is it the religious world view of the about 380 million Muslims living in the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh)? Is it the beliefs and practices of the 73 million Muslims in Egypt, the 70 million in Iran, the 33 million

in Morocco, or the 65 million in Nigeria? Is it the Islam of the 26 million inhabitants of Saudi Arabia or that of the members of the Muslim communities in Great Britain (1.5–2 million), France (3–6 million), or the United States (5–8 million)? What, if anything, is the common denominator uniting 1.5 billion Muslims spread across five continents and found in disparate population groups such as city dwellers, villagers, and nomads?

Islam has developed in diverse cultures around the world during its 1,434 year history,

☆ This essay builds heavily on the following publications by Avner Giladi: “The Child in Islam,” in *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts*, edited and introduced by Don Browning and Marcia J. Bunge (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2009); *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society* (Houndmills and London, 1992); “Herlihy’s Thesis Revisited: Some Notes on Investment in Children in Medieval Muslim Societies,” *Journal of Family History* 36 (2011): 235–247; and “*Ṣaghīr*” [“Minor”], *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New edition (*E.I.*<sup>2</sup>), vol. VIII, pp. 821–827. Thanks to Marcia J. Bunge for helping to edit this article. All quotations from the Qur’an are translated by A.J. Arberry.

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and its views on the protection and nurture of children are thus highly complex. The complexity of Islamic views of children is evident in the many debates and controversies regarding children found within and across diverse forms and strands of Islam. For example, in some areas of the Muslim world, child marriages (or adults marrying children) are common and defended by religious leaders; in other areas, it is outright rejected and illegal; and in still other areas, it is illegal yet practiced, and laws against it are not enforced. Another example involves female circumcision. Although most Muslim communities reject it and understand it to be an expression of pre-Islamic tribal practices, those that do practice female circumcision argue it is in line with Islamic law. Also, differences exist within and between Islamic communities in regards to education of girls. Although Islamic law supports the education of girls, Muslims around the world disagree about the proper level and specific form it should take.

Furthermore, although all Islamic states except Somalia have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits children under 15 years of age from taking part in armed hostilities, diverse militant strands of Islam actively recruit or forcibly enlist children as soldiers. Indeed, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Iran argued that children under 15 could be sent to war because Islamic law regards children who reach puberty as adults.

Despite and amidst these controversies, Muslim communities express particular common values and principles that serve to protect and nurture children. These values and principles date back to medieval interpretations of authoritative Islamic sources, especially the Qur'an, *hadith* (collections of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and other early Muslims), *furu'* (compilations of positive law), and *fatawa* (collections of responses).

Building on these and other Islamic sources, medieval Muslim scholars prescribed methods of childrearing, medical-hygienic treatment, and education, thereby developing a system of rites of passage through which children were incorporated into their communities. They put laws into place to safeguard the lives of children, ensure their proper care and welfare, and secure their rights.



The aim of this article is to outline a few of the common values and principles that provide the foundation for Muslim understandings of child–adult relationships and approaches to child protection and nurture.

## Sacredness of Children's Lives

The sacredness of children's lives is a central value found in various strands of Islam.

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