

## Muslim Children with Autism Learn to Pray

Outside the kitchen of the Khan family home, a brilliant, saffron sun descended between green trees and lampposts, signaling the time for evening prayers. Inside, Mrs. Khan laid prayer mats in the direction of *Ka'bah* (the house of God in Mecca), while her husband performed his ablutions. "Jalil," called out Mrs. Khan, "It's *Namaaz* [prayer] time." The child, in a squatting position, bumped himself down the staircase. He flashed a smile at his mother and made a buzzing sound through slightly parted lips and clenched teeth. His new sound of the week!

Arriving on the landing with a thud, 6-year-old Jalil handed his prayer cap to his mother, who firmly pushed it on his head, saying, "Get up! Go stand with *abba* [father] now. He is waiting for you." Jalil skipped to his father, stood beside him, fidgeted with his cap, and continued buzzing, making circular motions with his hands. His father gently held his hand for a split second. His touch meant "Shhhh, prayers are starting." Jalil paused. He briefly looked sideways at his father and quickly bent his body, imitating his father's posture. His father took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and began the call to prayer, "*Allahu Akbar*" (*Allah* is the Greatest). Swaying his body in rhythm with his father's recitation, Jalil glanced briefly under his armpit at his gently twirling hand.

In much of the literature on autism, there is an implicit assumption that having a child with autism is a profound misfortune. I learned a different view from the South Asian Muslim immigrant families whom I studied in a midwestern city between 2002 and 2004. I write here about the Khan and Yoosof families who came to the United States from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Their sons were diagnosed with autism at age 2 and 3, respectively. They were nonverbal and placed in a self-contained public preschool classroom for children with autism. Jalil received two months of speech therapy at age 4, and Raqib received sporadic speech therapy at age 5.

These families regarded children with autism as gifts from *Allah* and felt blessed that God chose them to raise His child. They believed that *Allah* chose them because He knew they would be responsible, loving parents. Mr. Khan explained, "I think *Allah* found that we have the capability to handle it. We have the strength to deal with it. Not to be rude to him . . . not to blame the child. *Allah* knew all of us in the family will love His child very much. Jalil gets more attention, more love than anybody else in the family."

Their Muslim faith provided the primary framework within which these parents raised their children with autism. Their religious perspective stressed the child's full inclusion in every aspect of life and called on Muslims to remove societal barriers that marginalized individuals with disabilities. As a result, these children were incorporated into the ordinary practices at home and in the community just as any child would be. Children with autism were not cocooned in a quiet, secluded, or simplified world. They inhabited highly stimulating and noisy households of extended families, multiple languages, television, and music.

In counterpoint to this dynamic complexity, prayer provided a powerful source of structure and predictability. Parents believed that every child should be taught to pray because God hears the prayers of children first and because praying involves a one-on-one communication with *Allah*, in which the child can ask directly for blessings and forgiveness.

Jalil and Raqib were brought into the practice of praying through participation in prayers and ceremonies at home and in the mosque. As in the opening vignette, fathers prayed with their sons, performing the entire prayer to completion. At home, such prayers might last 15 minutes, in the mosque 30 minutes. The children followed along and rarely, if ever, disrupted the prayer. Additionally, relatives and the wider community supported the children's religious education. Children would be dressed in their native clothes with fuss and ceremony and taken to the mosque for their weekly prayer lessons.

Mothers also played a critical role by overseeing the child's informal instruction in prayer, ensuring that he acquired the minimal level of Qur'an recitation. They were assiduous in conducting behind-the-scenes rehearsals that prepared the child to pray with his father. Lessons were simple but lengthy, involving short, frequent repetitions. Mothers wove the teaching of prayers into their daily life, making time between chores and while transporting their son to school and therapy.

In the following example, Raqib, 5 years old, clambered into a swing in his favorite park. Laila, his mother, began to push him from behind and Raqib giggled excitedly. Laila then walked to the front and stood still. "More!" Raqib shouted, "More please." Laila looked at him, "Okay, how about we sing together. I push you, you say what mommy says, and you will go up and UP! Okay?" Raqib giggled. Laila grabbed the swing from behind, "READY Raqib? Okay say, '*Bismillah Al Rahman, Al Rahim*' [In the name of *Allah*, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind] . . . come on, '*Bismillah*.'" Raqib shouted out in excitement, "*Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim*." In this manner, Raqib rehearsed the entire prayer. His mother said to me, "The to and fro motion soothes and calms him. He loves it and learns the best here."

From age 3 onward, Jalil and Raqib experienced an enormous amount of this kind of rehearsal. They became accustomed to having their activities interrupted as their mothers initiated yet another lesson in prayer and to being distracted, coaxed, or bribed when their interest waned. But they also became accustomed to the importance of prayer and to its central place in everyday life. By the time Jalil and Raqib were 6 years old, they were able to recite lengthy prayers in Arabic, participate in formal prayer sessions in the mosque, and take part in Qur'an recitation competitions with their typically developing peers. They were also able to communicate in Bangla, Urdu, and English with family members.

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**FURTHER READING:** Brinda Jegatheesan, *Ways of Being at Home and Community: Language Socialization of Children with Autism in Multilingual South Asian Immigrant Families*, PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005.