

## Islamic approach towards caning

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LAST RESORT: It must be done with parents' permission.

IT is due largely to the al-Quran's emphasis on learning (ilm) that Muslim scholars explored child education and discipline at an early stage and made significant contributions to the subject. A great deal of stress is also placed on amal saalih (virtuous conduct), which is seen as a concomitant aspect of Islam's outlook on education.

Leading Muslim scholars have in principle permitted caning as part of child discipline, but assert that this should only be for a beneficial purpose, and that parents should also be involved in the decision to cane. When both the parent and teacher agree that physical punishment is the only option they are left with, they may proceed to take that step. They are reminded, however, that the approach so taken should be disciplinary rather than punitive. Before making such a decision, teachers and parents should reflect on the purpose of caning. If they resort to caning, let them also make it their last resort.

In his Adab al-Mu'allimin (The Etiquette of Teachers), Ibn Sahnun al-Tanukhi (d. 854) took the view that caning should be restricted to three strokes.

Caning the child must also be with the permission of parents and should be moderate. Exceeding that number should be restricted to specific instances of mischief, and caning should in all cases apply only to safer parts of the body such as the feet and should in no case exceed 10 strokes. Parental involvement in child discipline will help the child understand that the purpose is not to inflict pain for its own sake but to curb recurrence of deviant behaviour.

Abu'l Hasan al-Qabisi (d. 1012), who authored a book on pupil-teacher relations, wrote that the best approach to discipline was to communicate with the child, with kindness and concern, in an effort to identify the causes of the issue and try to appeal to the child's understanding. For the child, despite his immaturity, is a human endowed with the gift of reason and the ability to know the causes of things. One should not mix anger and emotion in the decision to cane.

Ibn Sina (d. 1037) also advocated persuasive approaches to child discipline, which should include not only reprimand but also encouragement and praise whenever appropriate. Yet, when all else fails, recourse may be had to physical punishment that is preceded by a stern warning. Ibn Sina also took the unusual view that when the need arises to punish the child, let the teacher make the first punishment painful so that it acts as a deterrent and generates enough fear to prevent repetition.

Parents and teachers are role models for children. They are, therefore, advised to examine and refine their own methods in line with the socio-cultural attainments of their generation. If they don't change for the better, they should not expect their offspring and pupils to improve. Hence negative behaviour patterns of the past are likely to persist.

Abu Uthman Al-Jahiz (d. 869), a renowned scholar, recounts that when the veteran Uqbah Ibn Abi Sufyan took his son to the teacher, he said to the teacher: "Before you start teaching my son, refurbish yourself first. This is because the students' eyes are tied to your vision. Good to them will be what you see as good, and bad to them will be what you see as bad. And be for them like a physician who does not rush in medication before diagnosing the sickness."

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) advised that parents and teachers should not rebuke children frequently. For recurrent admonition and rebuke affect the child's ability to respond to "gentle advice and normal communication".

The basic purpose of punishment is to deter repetition and create fear through infliction of some pain. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) endorsed this view and stressed the harmful consequences of severity in child discipline: Severity suppresses the child and robs him of the joy of childhood, just as it is likely to encourage laziness, recourse to lying and making excuses. Parents and teachers should not overwhelm children with education such that they are deprived of time and opportunity to play games that relax and relieve them of the fatigue of schooling.

Both al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun advise parents and teachers to take a minimalist approach to punishment. Yet, when persuasive methods fail, the teachers and parents of young children should limit physical punishment to three strokes.

Stress management is also a factor which can help curb deviant child behaviour. When parents and teachers are able to relax, they are in a better position to contain their stress. Children and students are in even greater need of relaxation, recreation and refreshment.

Reports indicate that the Prophet Muhammad and his leading Companions conducted their own study circles and sermons at suitable intervals, and reduced the frequency so as to avoid weariness. The Prophet said "the most precious gift a father/teacher can give to a child/student is good education".

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