

# MUSLIM PARENTS *and* CYBERCULTURE



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## FOREWORD

All praise is due to Allāh; and blessings and peace upon the Messenger of Allāh and upon his family, his companions, and all those who follow his guidance until the Day of Recompense.

At present, most of humanity lives crowded together in an increasingly small world. It is no longer possible for the majority of Muslims to isolate themselves from influences of secular trends or the impact of corrupt environments. Long ago the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) expressed concern for his *ummah* in future times when he said, "*I do not fear for you from poverty, but I fear for you from competition in worldly increase. And I do not fear for you from error, but I fear for you from deliberate intent.*"<sup>1</sup>

As foreseen by him, the *ummah's* religious perspective gradually lessened with each successive generation, while love of the world engulfed Muslim hearts. Our own generation of Muslims has seen large scale acceptance and adoption of the materialistic outlook so aggressively promoted by the West. The great aspiration for eternal reward in the Hereafter has been regulated to a position secondary to that of keeping up with modern trends and becoming successful in worldly life. In fact, the social changes that took decades to occur within western societies have been accomplished almost overnight by those in the East who blindly revere their way of life.

Along with material progress many new perspectives and priorities have emerged for today's citizens of the world, the young in particular. Unfortunately, an overall lack of Islamic awareness and *taqwā* has lowered the ordinary Muslim's resistance to many temptations of modern society. With its deceptive atmosphere of freedom and advancement, the current global culture (some have called it non-culture or anti-culture) has undoubtedly become a dominant influence in the modern world.

There are those who consider this secular culture and the technology which serves it as something to be rejected altogether; but that is a position reflecting a certain unawareness of Islamic principles. For while the scholars consider most social aspects of non-Muslim societies as dangerous and contrary to Islamic teachings, they do not prohibit the acquisition of particular benefits, such as the scientific and technical knowledge essential for improvements in our own Muslim *ummah*. Indeed, their acquisition may well be seen as a community obligation. However, there is a pressing need to differentiate between the beneficial and the detrimental and to apply Islamic standards of *taqwā* to our daily lives.

Our upcoming generations are not in need of new principles or even new interpretations of old ones. The Qur'ān and Sunnah contain comprehensive guidance for all mankind up to the Last Day of our existence. We need only to become fully aware of the essence of that guidance and learn how to utilize it in

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<sup>1</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad and al-Ḥākim – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

an increasing number of new situations. The next generation and those beyond it can continue to relate to Islam as long as it is presented to them in terms they can understand and appreciate.

It is incumbent upon Muslim scholars and then upon ordinary people within their own capacities to clarify the positive and negative aspects of everything new.<sup>2</sup> This was the kind of *ijtihād* practiced conscientiously by our pious predecessors in the days when the Islamic *ummah* was prospering and expanding. We are well aware that its later decline was associated to a significant extent with the rigid sanctification of past traditions at the expense of thought, study and assessment of changing situations.

Many of the concerns currently expressed by Muslim parents about their children are no longer dispelled by reading books on the subject of traditional Islamic upbringing. Undoubtedly, those same books contain much good advice for teaching children their religious obligations and the acquisition of Islamic morals and manners, and are still beneficial for purposes of general education. However, the fact remains that today's anxious parents simply cannot find answers in the writings of early scholars, or even those of the fairly recent past, for problems which did not exist during their times. Today, one major concern for all conscientious parents, and in particular Muslim parents, is the relationship of our kids with the internet.

Cyberculture is internet culture – the new environment into which we have been drawn, willingly or unwillingly, in recent years. While most of us entered it as adults, feeling our way along in uncharted territory, the upcoming generation was born into a world of flourishing computer technology, which in some way pervades almost every modern home. Young children now learn to type as easily as they learn to walk or ride a bicycle. And many of them quickly surpass their parents in computer skills and knowledge of the internet.

Parents sometimes feel helpless when it comes to guiding their children's internet use. They can find themselves overwhelmed by the idea of trying to protect their kids from something as big, and perhaps unfamiliar, as the worldwide web. True, it is very likely that our kids are more internet-savvy than we are, but there are still some real and manageable steps we can take to help children stay safe. This book is an attempt to present guidelines which are compatible with Islamic principles, in the hope that it will be of benefit to both parents and their children who make up the next generation of our Muslim *ummah*. And Allāh is the protector and provider of success.

*"O Allāh, let not our misfortune be in our religion and let not the world be our greatest concern nor the sum of our knowledge."*<sup>3</sup>

**Ṣaḥeeḥ International**

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<sup>2</sup>Unlike innovations in the religion itself (which are strictly prohibited), new inventions and discoveries pertaining to worldly matters are ruled to be permissible in aspects that have not been proven harmful nor expressly forbidden in the texts of the Qur'ān or the authentic Sunnah.

<sup>3</sup>An authentic supplication of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) narrated by at-Tirmidhi and al-Ḥākim.

## BEGINNING WITH BASICS

The way of life ordained by Allāh (*subḥānahū wa ta'ālā*) is a mercy for all people; in fact for all living things. That is what He revealed to His Messenger (ﷺ) in the Qur'ān:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

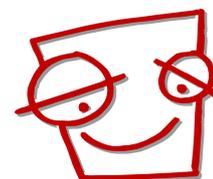
**"And We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds."<sup>4</sup>**

It is something parents often forget to impart to their children, but is an essential foundation for all future instruction. Kids need to understand that the purpose behind Islamic legislation is not to place unnecessary restrictions on people; it is rather to help them achieve long-term benefits far superior to immediate gratifications. And this means not only in the Hereafter but in the present life as well.

Islam is deeply concerned with the welfare of human society, and the family is considered the foundation upon which a principled society is built. Every Muslim parent is advised to raise his or her children well and properly. Providing them with a happy home, comfort, care, love, the necessities of life and a good education are some of the responsibilities parents are required to fulfill. Islamic education is to be understood in the comprehensive sense, which includes everything that assists one to become a righteous human being devoted to Allāh, with good manners and moral character.

The Muslim child absorbs Islamic values (or possibly other values) from his parents, teachers, peers, friends and environment. And his current environment increasingly includes those two screens found in almost every modern home: the television and the computer. As children grow, all of the aforementioned exert considerable influence on their character. TV and internet, in addition to peer pressure, affect the behavior of children and youths and constantly erode the Islamic character that conscientious parents are trying to build. It takes continuous effort on the part of parents and caretakers to keep our youth on the path of Islamic values.

Raising children in this modern culture and expecting Islamic ethics and ideals from them is a unique and very tough challenge. Once a young person develops undesirable habits and unethical values, it becomes extremely difficult to make him or her into a good Muslim. Because parents play a vital role in the education of their children, they must set the best examples for them to follow and must seek to provide an Islamic environment for their children as much as possible. It is unreasonable and even hypocritical to expect a child to have Islamic values when the parents themselves do not live by them or practice their religion. One



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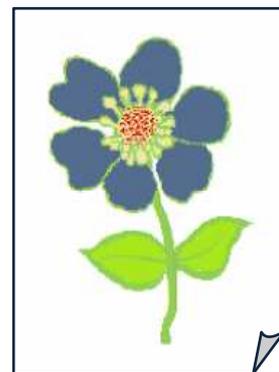
<sup>4</sup>*Sūrah al-Anbiyā'*, 21:107.

of the common complaints from Muslim youth today is that parents have double standards; they say something and do something else. And they are often more loyal to their culture than to Islam.

But giving more religious teachings to children is in itself not enough. It is particularly important for parents to spend quality time with their children. Note the word "quality" rather than "quantity." Both parents have a responsibility to take parenting as seriously as they would any fulltime job. This means they must understand that their children are a trust from Allāh, and He will hold them accountable for how they raised them. If children grow up ignorant of Islamic teachings as a consequence of their parents' negligence, it will be difficult for all concerned in the present life and ruinous in the next.

The most essential element at the very beginning is to establish an open channel of communication between parents and children. They should be taught from their earliest years to love Allāh and to know that He is aware of all deeds, words, thoughts and intentions. They should be taught about responsibility; that it is necessary as an agent of Allāh upon the earth to transform themselves into Muslims living in true submission to the will of Allāh; that it is a duty to strive to transform their society into an Islamic society living in true submission to Allāh, and to transform the physical world of space and time into a place of justice and prosperity for the cause of Allāh.

So at all times parents must be the model of a good Muslim for their children. They must teach them to love Allāh, their Prophet (ﷺ) and Islamic principles. And children must learn to see and understand all things in their world from the perspective of Islam. They should develop into courageous Muslims, willing to struggle against evil, both in the private and public domain. Parents can discuss with their sons and daughters ways to do this on a practical level and how to deal with various obstacles and overcome them.



Contemporary Islamic educators have told us that while we should love our children unconditionally, that love should be expressed at times when it is beneficial. Parents should never let affection and feelings of tenderness for their child prevent them from doing what is right – for example, neglecting to correct the child when he or she makes a mistake and does something sinful.

At every age appropriate rights and duties should be given to the child and necessary limits set upon his behavior. This will permit children to fully explore their human potential while not allowing them to harm themselves, harm others or damage their surroundings. Whenever there is a conflict of interests, for example, if the child would rather play than pray, the requirements of Islam must take priority over the desires of the child.

Children should be encouraged to memorize as much as possible of the Qur'ān. The benefits of that are many and much wider in scope than is often

believed in these modern times. Memorization of a few selected *ḥadīths* about Islamic character and the conduct of the Prophet (ﷺ) is also beneficial.

Parents can also read some books on positive parenting. Even books written by non-Muslims can be of help on the condition that one is able to identify what is Islamically acceptable in them and bypass what is not. Do your best to know and understand all the influences upon a child's development. Ultimately, it is Allāh who guides or leaves someone in error.<sup>5</sup> But when you have done your job conscientiously, keeping your child a prudent and practicing Muslim as he or she grows older will be easier to do than if you had neglected this duty. Try to help children understand the power of positive influences that bring them nearer to Allāh and the danger of negative influences that distance them from Allāh. Strive to increase the power of those positive influences and to shield them from the negative ones.

Make *du‘aa’* constantly, praying for Allāh's guidance and His help in making you a capable parent. Supplicate for your children often and in their presence. This will remind them how much you care for them and will show them the extent of your concern for their best interests, not only in this life, but more significantly in the eternal one to come. The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) advised, *"Whoever would like Allāh to respond to him during hardship and disaster should make much du‘aa’ in times of ease."*<sup>6</sup> And he (ﷺ), who was the best of creation, never failed to augment his most intensive efforts in life with *du‘aa’* out of certainty that nothing can succeed except by the aid of Allāh. He would say, *"O Allāh, set right my religion, which is the safeguard of my affairs; and set right my world, wherein is my livelihood; and set right my hereafter, to which is my return. And make life for me an increase in all good, and make death for me a relief from every evil."*<sup>7</sup>

## THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO ISLAMIC GUIDANCE AND EDUCATION

Just as our parents have rights over us, so too our children have rights over us; and among those rights is that they be protected from harm and taught their Islamic obligations and manners. The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said: *"Each of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The ruler who is in charge of people is a shepherd and is responsible for them. The man is the shepherd of his household and is responsible for them. The woman is the shepherd of her husband's house and child and is responsible for them. The slave is the shepherd of his master's wealth and is responsible for it. Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock."*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>By reason of His justice and complete knowledge of what that person prefers and deserves.

<sup>6</sup>Narrated by at-Tirmidhi – *ḥasan*.

<sup>7</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>8</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

It is clear from this *ḥadīth* that both the man and the woman are responsible for those entrusted to their care, and foremost among them is their own children. So parents must teach their children all the obligations of Islam as well as those good qualities of character ordained in Islam, and this is beneficial knowledge. The Prophet (ﷺ) confirmed, "*For whomever Allāh wishes good, He gives understanding of the religion.*"<sup>9</sup> So when parents wish good for their child, they



need to give him that understanding. Islamic knowledge begins with a correct *'aqeedah*, free from all forms of *shirk* and *bid'ah*. Muslim children must also be taught good manners and characteristics as a central part of their religion from an early age, and they must learn about worship, particularly how to pray.<sup>10</sup> In addition, parents must teach children the worldly matters they will need to know in order to live a good and decent life on this earth.

To convey Islamic knowledge and values to their sons and daughters is a religious obligation, and it is the undeniable right of every child – something all guardians and caretakers will be asked about on the Day of Resurrection. The vast majority of Muslims imagine that Islamic education is limited to memorizing Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* and learning some basic *fiqh*. Yet among the greatest objectives of this education is what should be derived from those subjects: the development of Islamic character and qualities of leadership. It is imperative that the younger generation be trained to become leaders of the Muslim *ummah* rather than followers of alien ideologies, which include those of cyberculture. They must become fully conscious of their responsibility to their Creator and to their fellow human beings.

While parents are required to bring up children according to the Qur'ān and Sunnah in all their affairs, they need not be scholars to transmit basic knowledge. Begin by teaching the most important things first, then the next most important and so on. When you show love and affection during interaction with them, children will respond in a positive way to whatever information is imparted.

To motivate the emotional and spiritual development of a child, the parents must instill in him a deep love for his Creator and devotion to Him, and then respect for his family members, his society, humanity at large and all of creation. He must be programmed to look upon life from a positive perspective

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<sup>9</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

<sup>10</sup>Children are not held accountable for acts of worship. But based on a sound *ḥadīth* narrated by Aḥmad, they should be taught to pray by the age of seven; at age ten they may be disciplined or lightly smacked for refusal. The latter measure should not be necessary, however, when the child has been taught from an early age to love Allāh and desire His approval.

and to dislike all the destructive thoughts and evil desires which lead to sin and conflict. And he should be gently reminded from time to time that Allāh, the Most Merciful, is always aware of what we are doing and saying, even when mom and dad are not – and that Allāh is even aware of our thoughts.

Too often, parents are busy providing "the good life" for their children on a material level – a nice house, good food, expensive clothes, etc. In order to do this, they are often working at more than one fulltime job. This does not allow them to spend enough time with their children or to provide them with the basic foundation of their belief system, morality and Islamic identity. If an intimate relationship does not develop between parents and children in the years before puberty, they will begin to seek relationships outside the home. And they will seek enjoyment with little consideration of what is *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, doing as they please while seeing their parents as no more than providers, if not obstacles in their lives.



It might be necessary to reduce or change work hours in order to spend extra time with the family. Undoubtedly, it is better to have a father with one job and a mother at home when circumstances permit. And it is better for families to have fewer luxuries and more time together with growing children than to have many material things and absent parents. This pertains especially to the years when kids are developing their outlook on life. Parents can't instill values in their children if they are not there for them.



Parents, teachers and all Muslim adults are required to cooperate in the effort to teach children commendable qualities and a good attitude toward Allāh and His Messenger (ﷺ), toward the Muslim *ummah* and toward everyone they know, especially those who have rights over them such as relatives and neighbors. They need to instill in them the attributes of righteousness, such as assistance to others, giving fellow Muslims preference over one's self, sacrifice,

chivalry and generosity – all for the acceptance of Allāh. The obligations of Islam take precedence over worldly objectives whenever a conflict of interests should arise.

Similarly, parents must deter children from negative characteristics and conduct such as dishonesty, cowardice, stinginess, lack of ambition, etc., so often promoted by cyberculture. And they must protect them from everything that could lead them to the Hellfire. Allāh, the Exalted, ordered:

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قُوًا أَنفُسِكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ غِلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

**"O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is people and stones, over which are [appointed] angels, harsh and severe; they do not disobey Allāh in what He commands them but do what they are commanded."<sup>11</sup>**

So just as they teach children to do acts of worship, their guardians must also prevent them from doing what is *ḥarām*. If a child performs a good deed, the reward will be for him and for the one who taught him and encouraged him to do it. As for acts of disobedience and sin, a young child is not accountable, but the one who enables him to do it is sinning. And one who encourages him to do it is the same as one who commits that sin himself.

In his commentary on *Ṣaḥeeḥ Muslim*, al-Imām an-Nawawī said, "The father must discipline his child and teach him what he needs to know of religious duties. This is obligatory upon the father and upon the guardians of children before they reach the age of adolescence. Such instruction is also obligatory upon the mother in the father's absence because it is part of the child's upbringing, and she has a share in that responsibility. The wage for teaching him may be taken from the child's own wealth; and if the child has no wealth, then whoever is obligated to spend on him should spend on his education because it is one of his basic needs."

As a parent, you have the final say when it comes to your children's safety and welfare. You have the right to know where they are, who their friends are, and what they are doing when on their own. And you have the right to control their activities and set limits in cyberspace as well as in the physical world.



But in addition, do not forget to be a friend to your child. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) declared, "*He is not of us who is not merciful to our young...*"<sup>12</sup> You can note some of the positive things the child does or says, and tell him how much those things are appreciated by Allāh and also by his parents. Try not to say anything negative; when you have to correct wrong behavior, find constructive ways to do it. Listen to his problems, discuss them and help him to solve them Islamically. Help your child to take an active part himself in finding solutions to his problems. You cannot always shelter kids from the harshness of reality, and sometimes it is better not to try.

You need to establish parental authority gently and wisely – to be accessible, tolerant and helpful in dealing with their problems. Otherwise, they will look around for someone who is, and that someone might be a peer who is himself immature and does not have a balanced Islamic perspective.

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<sup>11</sup>*Sūrah at-Taḥreem*, 66:6.

<sup>12</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad, at Tirmidhi and al-Ḥākim – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

## NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE MUSLIM PARENT

In the past, protecting our kids from negative influences was much less difficult. The avenues of negative influences were few and more easily blocked. Children might previously have been affected by negative pressures from the neighborhood or school. The sources of information were limited to movies, TV or printed materials such as books, newspapers and magazines. Parents had fairly good control over the type of information their kids obtained by choosing where to live, the schools they attended, the friends they associated with, and the programs they watched. They did not bring controversial materials into their homes or allow their kids to do so.

With the introduction of the internet, the former physical boundaries of the home environment expanded into the unlimited horizons of cyberspace. The web is something no one business, government or group can control – a frontier where anyone with particular interests can go out and connect with those who share them, a community of people exchanging ideas, working together and supposedly accomplishing things – a domain with its own culture: cyberculture.



Many Muslims were among the net's original builders, software engineers and programmers. Muslims also began mailing lists, newsgroups, chatlines and web pages about Islam. Here, they thought, was a place where they could get the message of Islam across to the outside world and influence those who would never encounter the truth otherwise, or who had only obtained their information from the media, the western orientalists or anti-Islam propagandists. They could now make contact with others to share and discuss ideas and help unify the *ummah*. It would offer new avenues and methods for sharing knowledge.

Indeed, some excellent Islamic sites materialized, but so too did those of every deviant sect, all posting their own agendas. A search for any Islamic topic will provide links to hundreds of sites expressing different views, not to mention a host of anti-Islam sites offering false information and distorted arguments. Newsgroups formed to discuss and promote Islam are often overrun by hostile non-Muslims whose aim it is to attack the religion and mislead the uninformed.

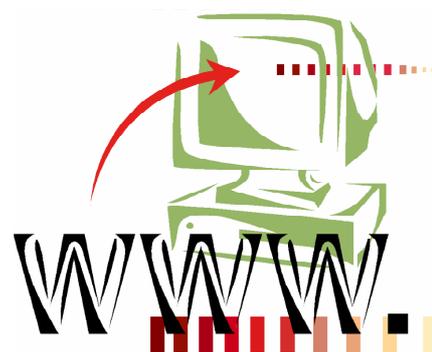
So-called "Muslim" blogs and chat rooms are often frequented by high school and college-age Muslims who find opportunities to communicate with brothers and sisters from all over the world. And for many, it may have the benefit of being an alternative to un-Islamic activities. However, this medium is also highly addictive and unregulated. Flirting and private online relationships are common. Another current problem is that of cyber marriages. A young

couple becomes emotionally involved through web correspondence, and the Muslim youth, intending to keep the relationship lawful, proposes marriage. Even when their families willingly or unwillingly agree to it, such marriages usually end in failure seeing that the two parties had not sufficient time and means to know about one another properly in advance.

In addition, much of the advice and the *fatwās* given out are dangerously lacking in scholarly wisdom and source references. A growing number of "cyber-muftis" answer people's questions, but it is difficult for Muslims to always determine who speaks with legitimate authority.<sup>13</sup> Some of them harshly criticize anyone who disagrees with their own position on an issue, and bitter disputes have left many people confused and fed up. Such extensions as the social networks, YouTube and individual blogs all emphasize showing and sharing, but what is defined or perceived as correct and incorrect is often a matter of culture or politics rather than serious research. Seldom are qualified scholars or *shaykhs* present on these mediums, and most of them are not controlled by any recognized Islamic authority.

Clearly, the absence of competent, reliable Muslim scholars and educators leaves a negative vacuum in cyberspace. What's more, the huge volume of data and information available on the internet has begun to take the place of the human educator, eliminating his role in developing the student's Islamic attitudes and morals, not to mention methodology and scientific precision in research. Almost anyone can write on any subject, express any opinion, support, criticize or attack any belief and any fact. And this includes Muslims who discuss various aspects of Islam, with or without adequate knowledge.

Admittedly, the internet has helped the religion grow and has given millions of Muslims unfettered access to primary texts and new perspectives, nurturing religious discussion online. But educated Muslims are still not using the web to its full *da'wah* potential. Muslim programmers and computer professionals should be drawing on their knowledge to improve its content and to build outstanding Islamic programs. Islamic organizations and scholars need to get more involved and establish a presence on the net. Although an impressive tool, the current internet reality dramatically highlights many weak spots in our *ummah*.



The education our kids receive through the internet can ultimately influence what kind of Muslims and human beings they will become. While we cannot isolate them from all the negative influences, as Muslim parents we need to be more actively and intimately involved in their education and make sure that it is in line with correct Islamic teachings.

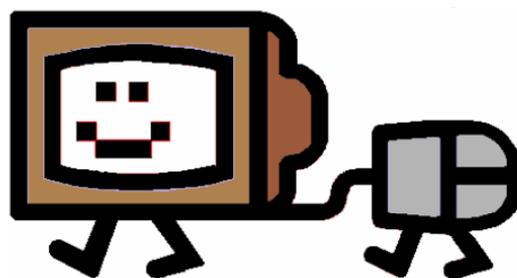
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<sup>13</sup>Legitimacy is associated with accountability, and the internet tends to dilute accountability.

## ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

Despite all that has been said, there are certainly constructive aspects to Muslims being on the internet. In fact, it has influenced many in good ways, from increasing faith and knowledge to leading people to embrace Islam. The internet is a vast expanse that is full of innumerable opportunities, an unprecedented gateway to a great wealth of information, and its uses are virtually unlimited. Millions of people benefit from the abundance of information available on countless websites. We can communicate with each other instantaneously, and we can now access rich educational and cultural resources in the form of text, sounds, pictures, and videos that would otherwise be unavailable. The worldwide web has become part of our everyday lives; it is a source of news, facts, and figures – a communication tool that allows millions to connect with others any time of the day or night.

This new technology has been a breakthrough in communication for Muslims like everyone else. We can obtain up-to-date information and keep up with news concerning Islamic issues. We can download many Islamic e-books, digital Qur'āns, educational games and materials, prayer time reminders and other useful tools. Hundreds of articles and books are available online in numerous languages, and those who live in remote communities or places where Muslims are few can get the information they need and stay in touch with Islam.



Thoughts and ideas can be exchanged and discussed. Conferences and other events can be publicized, and organizational logistics have been enhanced significantly and economically. News can be obtained directly from Muslim sources rather than the western media. We can communicate instantly with family, friends, teachers, community leaders and others. We can learn educational skills useful in our jobs. And we can find educational websites which improve our ability to understand and evaluate all kinds of information.

The internet is one of the modern means of conveying the message of Islam and is an ideal medium for its propagation. It will surely be among the means for fulfillment of Allāh's promise:

سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۗ

**"We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth."<sup>14</sup>**

The web has become indispensable for *da'wah* since it accommodates dialogue as well as all kinds of articles. It is imperative that we rectify our current

<sup>14</sup>*Sūrah Fuṣṣilat*, 41:53.

deficiency in utilizing it. We need not view the net as something evil devised by the West to corrupt Muslim youth. Experience has shown that it is something we can use to our advantage. If we turn our backs on it, we will be wasting a golden opportunity for calling people to Islam.

We may also note the significant advantages internet offers our young people, such as access to educational and research materials, publications, news updates, communication with family and friends, and yes, correct information on Islam from a few reliable websites. Internet users between the ages of 12 and 17 have more than doubled in recent years. Undoubtedly, many of today's kids benefit enormously from online access – often in ways quite different from those of their parents.

The internet is a reflection of society with all its good and bad aspects, and Muslims in cyberspace are at a turning point. Modern technology has created situations unlike any we have had to face in the past. But as an extension of Muslim society, the net can be a means for appreciating our differences, understanding the problems we face as an *ummah*, and learning how to resolve them.

## MUSLIM KIDS AND THE INTERNET

It's not at all uncommon today for kids to know more about computers and the internet than their parents and teachers. If that's the case in your home, don't despair. You can make use of it to have your child teach you something about the internet and about his interests. Ask him or her where he likes to go on the web and what he thinks you might enjoy there. Get him to talk with you about what's good and not so good about his internet experience. But remember, no matter how web-literate your child may be, you should still provide continual guidance because you can't automate good parenting.

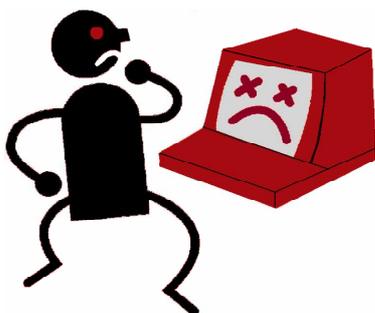


Adults often assume that their children use the internet in the same way as they themselves do. But kids use it in different ways and for different reasons, depending on their ages and particular circumstances and interests. Most are about seven or eight when they begin to benefit from the internet on a practical level through activities such as searching online encyclopedias, downloading pictures for school reports, or writing to friends and relatives.

Whereas most adults use the internet primarily for work-related activities, adolescents tend to use it more for entertainment and socialization purposes. For them, the internet is a popular communication tool akin to the telephone, and it is an environment where they can develop their identities, relieve boredom and deal with emotional issues or other personal concerns.

Apart from research and communication, kids often turn to the media because they're bored. Unless supervised, they will spend long periods of time on the internet, where they may be exposed to a barrage of negative influences such as invitations to gambling, meeting unknown people, dating, gay associations, religious cults, sensational misinformation about Islam – the list is endless and ever increasing. With minimal control over the net, parents remain anxious about what their children are seeing and doing. Their exposure to unlimited sources of information on the web leaves the conscientious Muslim without much peace of mind.

Kids may communicate via chat rooms, instant messages, Usenet newsgroups, and peer-to-peer connections. All of these can be utilized as beneficial tools, but like any tools they can also be misused. Because they carry and transmit all types of information, they can receive and deliver inappropriate content which makes the online world often unpleasant and potentially dangerous. Harassment, hate speech, intimidation and stalking all exist in cyberspace. Particularly alarming to parents is the abundance of pornography.



A parent might think, "Maybe it's just better to keep my kids offline entirely." That might be the best guarantee of safety at home, but is it a practical solution? Kids can still access the internet from a number of places outside the home. Commercial establishments and internet cafes provide access to anyone willing to pay the hourly access fee. And at a friend's house, supervision

and regulation might be less than in your own home. On the other hand, the internet remains a useful educational resource, and denying them access to it could put young Muslims at a disadvantage in school as they prepare for their future. The solution lies in immunizing children without depriving them. This means providing them with the standards according to which they can judge what they see and hear from an Islamic perspective and differentiate between good and evil, *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*. You can balance concerns about exposure to inappropriate and harmful sites with reminders of benefits gained through exposure to the many positive things available on the net.



Although there is no specific method to be followed, one critical element is essential in the protection endeavor: the presence of a responsible parent or guardian. You might be relieved to know that despite today's massive media presence and constant peer pressure, parents still have the greatest influence on their children when it comes to internalizing fundamental values and learning how to make good choices; and this applies to choices made on the internet.

The challenges posed by the internet can be positive when there is consciousness of Allāh. Muslim parents should be teaching this in relation to every issue, so that by the time children begin to do things on their own, they can gradually replace the fear of getting caught by an adult with fear of displeasing Allāh, who is never absent. We find some good reminders for users of all ages in the Qur'ān:

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ تَحُولَ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَأَنَّهُ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ

**"And know that Allāh intervenes between a man and his heart and that to Him you will be gathered."<sup>15</sup>**

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي الصُّدُورُ

**"He knows that which deceives the eyes and what the breasts conceal."<sup>16</sup>**

وَإِن تَجَهَّرَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَإِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ وَأَخْفَى

**"Indeed, He knows the secret and what is [even] more hidden."<sup>17</sup>**

Awareness that their Lord is ever observing them and knows their innermost thoughts helps young Muslims to make better choices. And learning to make good decisions on the net will serve them well by enabling them to think critically about the choices they will face throughout life. Today they can learn to avoid *ḥarām* on the internet; tomorrow they will know how to reject *ḥarām* in dealing with people, in finances, in job options and in every aspect of life. Learning to make the right choices is a skill that will last them as long as they live.



As in all areas of life, children need adults to guide them during internet use, and to intervene when necessary. Apart from setting hours for internet use, you need to make clear what kind of material is acceptable to view and what is not. Kids will at times show frustration over your involvement in their internet activities, so they should be made to understand that there is a considerable potential for harm out there. Keep in mind that your efforts are likely to be more successful if you maintain an open dialogue with your kids. Encourage honest discussions about what they have seen and done on the web and offer some gentle reminders:

قُلْ لَا يَسْتَوِي الْخَبِيثُ وَالطَّيِّبُ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ كَثْرَةُ الْخَبِيثِ

**"Say, 'Not equal are the evil and the good, although the abundance of evil might impress you.'"<sup>18</sup>**

<sup>15</sup>Sūrah al-Anfāl, 8:24.

<sup>16</sup>Sūrah Ghāfir, 40:19.

<sup>17</sup>Sūrah Ṭā Hā, 20:7.

<sup>18</sup>Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:100.

وَإِنْ تُطِيعْ أَكْثَرُ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ يُضِلُّوكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۗ

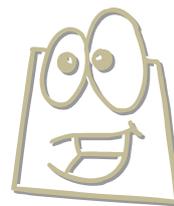
**"And if you obey most of those upon the earth, they will mislead you from the way of Allāh."<sup>19</sup>**



Occasionally when surfing the internet, something unwanted pops up. It may be noticed in e-mails despite the use of filters. You can reassure your kids that as long as they did not mean to see those things and moved away from them immediately, it was not a sin. Allāh does not hold us accountable for what is unintentional. The unintended glimpse is not blameworthy if one looks away as soon as he or she realizes it is *ḥarām*. Kids can be trained to do this, and it will soon become a habit to avoid looking at *ḥarām* things.

Keeping children safe on the internet ought to be the concern of every Muslim. As our Prophet (ﷺ) observed, "*Religion is sincerity.*"<sup>20</sup> He meant sincerity in advice, counsel and conduct, desiring the best outcome for the one advised. Parents need to stay in close touch with their kids as they explore the net. Teachers need to help students use it appropriately and safely. Schools and community groups should help educate the public about safe surfing. But above all, kids and teens need to learn to take responsibility for their own behavior with guidance from their families and Muslim communities. While we are teaching our children the difference between right and wrong, between *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, and between ethical and unethical behavior, we don't always take time to let them know that the same rules apply to cyberspace. We should not forget to remind them of this.

Our kids need a careful explanation of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior and why. Parents can use the new situations that come up online to reinforce basic standards of conduct and to discuss values. They can use online experiences as a way to teach responsibility and good conduct, especially with older children. Some common questions and suggested answers are mentioned below:



- **"Is it all right to download software programs that are available at some online sites?"** Only when the source of the information gives you explicit permission to do so. Stealing information is like stealing other things; it is illegal and *ḥarām*. Additionally, you must be sure that the content itself is permissible.
- **"Can we copy computer programs?"** If the owners and inventors of the program have stated that it is copyrighted and not permitted to make copies of it for personal or public use, then those conditions must be upheld;<sup>21</sup> but if there is

<sup>19</sup>*Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:116.

<sup>20</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>21</sup>Because the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*Muslims are bound by their conditions.*" Narrated by Abū Dāwūd – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

no statement that it is not allowed to make copies, then it is permissible to make copies for personal use only, but not for profit.

• "Can I take information from the internet and use it as my term paper?" No. It is dishonest and illegal to copy information from a source and represent it as your own. It is important to state who or what the original source was.

• "Sometimes students are told by teachers to take the information for a school report from the internet. Is it still *ḥarām*?" It is permissible for a student and those involved in research to benefit from the research of others and to take things from the internet. But taking a complete report from someone else on the internet is deceitful and dishonest, and a teacher who approves of that or encourages it is sharing in the sin.

• "Is it all right to pretend to be somebody else when you're online?" The online world allows you to create a name that enables you to keep a degree of anonymity; there is nothing wrong with that. However, pretending to be someone you are not and deliberately misleading others who presume you are truthful is a kind of cheating.

• "Is it permissible to watch videos that contain background music if the information in them is beneficial to Muslims?" There is a difference between hearing something and listening to it. A Muslim who hears unlawful music is not sinning if it is not his deliberate intent to listen. Therefore, if the program is lawful in itself, background music will not make seeing or using it unlawful.

But parents should note here that downloading music is dangerous for computers and for kids. Cyber-criminals are increasingly scouring P2P (peer to peer) networks for personal information, opening your children up to the risk of identity theft as well as child predators. P2P networks also run on many servers at once, increasing the distribution of virus and malware-infected files. Moreover, encrypted P2P technology is designed



to bypass the firewalls that normally block these computer threats. Illegal downloading from file-sharing sites can also expose your children to civil and criminal prosecution. It is important for you to converse with your children when these kinds of questions come up. They can actually provide one of your best teaching mechanisms.



Past experience has taught us that media has a powerful influence on youth and that their best interests have never been its priority. Muslims were still debating the subject of perceived dangers from television and its *ḥarām* aspects when TV was suddenly overtaken by the worldwide web. Now Muslims are asking the same questions about the internet. But the answer has not changed: it isn't the technology itself that's *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām*; it's the way people use it.

## THE OBVIOUS DANGERS

رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

**"Our Lord, make us not [objects of] trial for the wrongdoing people."<sup>22</sup>**

‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb is reported to have said, "I am not evil, but I know about evil." This knowledge was an essential factor in his ability to prevent evil. To teach our children effective methods for avoiding inappropriate content and communications, we must be aware of the potential threats.

Non-Muslims as well as Muslims have expressed anxiety over some of the internet's more negative aspects. Among the risks being discussed worldwide are:

- Easily accessible sites promoting hatred, bigotry, violence, drugs, cults, sexually explicit images and other things not appropriate for children – While pornography and sexual predators are undoubtedly a great concern, there are other dangers lurking in cyberspace. These include sites that foster hate crimes, that teach how to make weapons and bombs, that endorse the use of drugs, and even discuss the best ways to commit suicide. The internet may not explicitly advocate these things, but it can be an encouraging or enabling factor.
- An enormous amount of inaccurate, misleading and untrue information – It is easy for kids and even adults to be dazzled by all the sights and sounds of the online world. Unlike books, magazines and other sources that are scrutinized by editors, much of the information online is not. Individuals with internet access can post almost anything they wish. Make sure your children understand that they shouldn't believe everything they see or hear online.
- Marketing strategies that deceptively collect personal information from kids in order to sell products to them or their parents – In some cases marketers use free merchandise and familiar characters to encourage children to provide personally identifying information. And there are no restrictions on marketing such products as alcohol and tobacco to children.
- Requests for personal information for contests, surveys, etc., which are used in unauthorized ways – You may wish to consider using a software tool to block the transmission of sensitive personal information from leaving your computer. The basic rule of safety – not giving out personal information – applies to e-mail as well as other areas of the internet. Children should never send a photo of themselves via e-mail to anyone without checking with their parents to be sure it's safe.
- Easy access to games that include excessive violence – Children are likely to be interested in games they can download from the internet to play either online or offline. Some of these games may have content that is unacceptable, so it's

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<sup>22</sup>*Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:85.

important to be aware of what your kids are doing on the computer, even when they're not connected to the internet.

- Cyber bullies use text messages, e-mail, instant messages, social networking blogs and web pages to harass, embarrass and intimidate other kids. The bullying can take many forms, from spreading false rumors and posting embarrassing pictures to sending offensive messages, repeated harassment (sometimes sexual), stalking, threats, and even extortion. The cyber bully can use technology to spread offensive messages to many people very quickly. For instance, an embarrassing photo taken with a cell phone can be sent to dozens of classmates in minutes. Also, the internet tends to give the cyber bully a sense of anonymity, which emboldens him toward increasingly offensive behavior.



When any Muslim knows that an environment is filled with *fitnah* and is unable to remedy it, he should keep away from that place. He should never be deceived into thinking his faith is strong enough to protect him, or that he knows what kind of people they are so he won't be affected, or that he is just having some fun. Shayṭān is just around the corner; and the cyber environment is no exception.

Many youths have been tempted to use chat rooms to get to know members of the opposite sex – it starts with *da'wah* and ends with becoming preoccupied with someone. Though not without their legitimate benefits, these chat rooms have also corrupted people's morals; they have caused rifts between friends, men have divorced their wives because of them, women have lost their honor because of them, and those who are weak in faith and lacking in knowledge have been deceived by the false arguments and myths circulated in them, and many have been misled regarding their religion.



Cheaper and more accessible technologies have broken down barriers to multimedia production, and they have also broken down psychological barriers to self-expression. Posting a profile of one's self and sending messages and files to friends has become widespread. For kids of this generation, social networking sites give unrestricted opportunities to share stories, pictures, videos and other files with anyone on the net. Parents and children should certainly discuss safety concerns related to the posting of personal information, inappropriate content and whom they contact online.

Instruct children never to send pictures of themselves or reveal personal information to anyone online without your permission. Personal information

includes their age, address, telephone number, your work address or phone number, the name and location of their school, or the teams of which they are members. This information should strictly be kept out of personal web pages, online profiles, chats, e-mails and instant messages. And warn them never to agree to meet in person someone they met online.

If your child is being harassed on a social network site, you need to take action. First, check the message box or comment area of the social networking site and print copies of all harassing content or inappropriate messages, especially those that threaten harm to your child. Report these incidents to the social networking site. Until the issue is resolved, you should remove the child's name and profile from the site. Contact local authorities and provide as much information as possible about the harasser. If you know that he attends your child's school, consider involving school officials, such as the principal.

## INTERACTING WITH VARIOUS AGE GROUPS

Each child is unique in his mental development, social environment, psychology and religious awareness. And each phase of childhood has its particular level of understanding and assimilation, as well as its biological and psychological needs. The approach adopted to protect children should take into account the characteristics of their level of maturity. Obviously, younger children need more direct supervision on the computer than do older children, and more restricted access.

### BELOW AGE 6

Preschool children should not be spending a lot of time at the computer. It ought to be limited to a very few selected programs or educational games. Parents at this stage must not only be supervising their children, but actively and constantly teaching them about the world around them from an Islamic perspective.



As this is the period of life when children absorb all kinds of information like a sponge, it should not be misused or neglected. It is important to address the mental capabilities of this age group with consideration and tenderness. Full-time interaction with a responsible Muslim adult is of the essence, but there are some specific computer programs that can be beneficial to the young Muslim and support parental efforts, such as those which aid in memorization of the Qur'ān.

### AGES 6-11

This is when a child's information needs begin, such as for school projects which require reference materials; and parents can help children to find what they need on the internet. However, decision-taking skills are not yet well

developed and supervision is essential. Sex differences become interesting to children at this stage, and their curiosity can tempt them to follow an inappropriate link. It is a sensitive period necessitating precaution against online exposure.

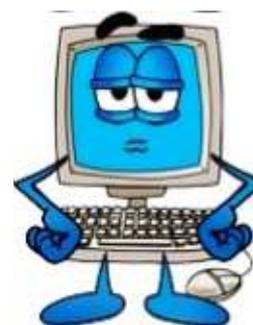
While children are young, access to the internet should be controlled with the use of a password. The only people who should have this password are their parents. The password may need to be changed periodically to be on the safe side.

Spend as much time as you can with your kids while they use the computer. Have them show you their favorite websites so you get a better idea of where they like to hang out online. From their first use of e-mail, share the addresses of your children so you can oversee and discuss their correspondence. Set unambiguous rules for online use and make clear the consequences of breaking them. The same types of rules that parents establish for their kids in the real world can also apply to cyberspace. These rules along with increased consciousness of Allāh will help kids overcome the uncertainties that arise when trying to figure out what's best on their own.

Discuss both the benefits and dangers of the internet, providing clear guidance about which materials and activities are good and which are not. Ask them for feedback and listen closely to your children's opinions. Instruct them to inform you if they encounter anything scary or unusual online. Remind them that they can always walk away from the computer or turn it off if they're uncomfortable with something they have seen or heard.

### **AGES 12-14**

In this age group, decision-making and reasoning skills are better developed than in preadolescence, but the child is often swayed by impulse. A child's faith in his own decision-making skills – especially when confronting parental judgments – might exceed his actual competence. Be aware that some children might be unrealistically confident in their ability to handle themselves online. Puberty brings a growing awareness of sexual development and curiosity about one's own sexuality. It's best to keep the computer in a central part of the house so you can keep tabs on what they're viewing.



Too much time online limits a child's well-rounded development by taking the place of reading good books, study, hobbies, friends, sports and other activities. It can make them forgetful of prayers and other responsibilities. Limits need to be set on time as well as on content.

Chat rooms, instant messaging and e-mail are places your children have the opportunity to see objectionable content. Because children of this age are more likely to explore on their own, set clear rules and limits, and implement periodic

check-ins. Clarify which sites are acceptable and how much time your kids can spend in them. Make sure you know who they chat with online and that they understand their recourse in case they are harassed or experience anything inappropriate. Pay particular attention to games that kids might download or copy because some of them are extremely violent or have sexual undertones.

### **AGES 15-18**

Information needs are extensive in range and depth for older teens, and they often require access to a wide range of resources. Decision-making and reasoning skills are now better than in early adolescence. The young person is physically and cognitively mature and highly aware of sexual issues. As you provide internet guidance, some children, older adolescents in particular, might resist your attempts to exert influence on them. But part of parenting is encouraging children to live up to high expectations of trust and responsible behavior, while at the same time recognizing that making mistakes is a natural part of growing up. When it comes to guidance about any issue, an atmosphere of trust and open communication is essential.



When children reach puberty, they become accountable, but this does not mean that the parents are no longer obligated to advise them and enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil. Spend time with them as they surf the web. Ask questions about what they're doing and why they're doing it. Notice how their age and maturity levels influence their surfing. Be aware of any problems that arise and address them straightforwardly. Good communication is essential for opening the doors to a youth's heart and mind. A parent's willingness to discuss issues openly and with patience results in the young person eventually trusting and confiding in the parent. Talk to your teenager about new things online and encourage discussion of new experiences.

### **PARENTAL INTERACTION DURING TEENAGE YEARS**

According to Islam, the child becomes an adult accountable for his or her behavior and worship at the onset of puberty,<sup>23</sup> or in the absence of its signs, by the age of fifteen. Prior to the modern era there was no concept of adolescence where teenagers expect to have the privileges of adulthood and childhood simultaneously. From the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) teenagers were given adult responsibilities and expected to carry them out. In the early generations of Islam youths participated in councils and scholarly gatherings along with the elders.

There is no reason why Muslim kids today should not be prepared to take on responsibility for their own conduct as they do for their obligatory acts of worship at the age of puberty. At this stage they will still need some rules; however, indirect reminders which appeal to their maturity and intellect are

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<sup>23</sup>Menstruation for girls and ejaculation for boys.

likely to be taken to heart. Through gentle persuasion young Muslims can be encouraged to wage *jihād* against temptations and negative impulses.

For example, in the course of a conversation a parent might casually remark: "Remember, whatever is *ḥarām* to do is *ḥarām* to look at. Would entering one of those indecent sites be anything that benefits us, or is it something we should seek in life? A smart Muslim fills his time with beneficial deeds, and that includes nonstop efforts to resist harmful inclinations with lots of patience. The most effective method is to steer totally clear of evil places because successful self-control is based on avoiding tempting situations. That's why a rule of *fiqh* says that anything which leads to *ḥarām* becomes in itself *ḥarām*."



إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

**"Indeed Allāh is ever, over you, an Observer."**<sup>24</sup>

Or consider this exchange:

"Did you know that Allāh (*subḥānahū wa ta'ālā*) gave us guidance even for using the internet?"

"You can't be serious."

"I am! Didn't He say in the Qur'ān: **'O you who have believed, do not follow the footsteps of Shayṭān?'**<sup>25</sup> It's a command to resist all the tactics designed by Shayṭān to lead us astray. He and his agents are everywhere you know, including cyberspace."

"Well, I guess I've noticed that."

"And Allāh warned: **'Indeed, Shayṭān is an enemy to you; so take him as an enemy.'**<sup>26</sup> He's reminding us not to let down our guard. While Shayṭān takes the form of a friend, he's really a sneaky enemy who has to be opposed forcefully and persistently. **'He only invites his party to be among the companions of the Blaze.'**<sup>27</sup> And that means we've got to beware of his approach. His technique is to make wrong things seem sooo cool that we forget Allāh and do something we'll regret later on."

"Got the point."

"He'll make those evil websites appear interesting, exciting and fun, but if we follow his footsteps into them, we're only accepting his invitation to the Hellfire. A Muslim should strive to be completely honest with himself in recognizing his true motive in everything he does, don't you think?"

<sup>24</sup>Surah an-Nisā', 4:1.

<sup>25</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:21.

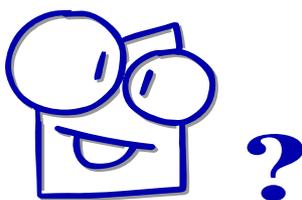
<sup>26</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:21.

<sup>27</sup>Sūrah Fāṭir, 35:6.

When kids express doubt about whether or not a particular site is appropriate, we can share with them this little secret disclosed by the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ). He said, "*Righteousness is good morals, and wrongdoing is that which wavers within yourself and you would not like people to discover.*"<sup>28</sup>



Why is it that some parents have a positive relationship with their teenage kids and others do not? There are at least two important factors: time spent and the quality of that time. Did the parents spend time with their children as they were growing up? Were they role models for them of good Islamic conduct? Did they make a practice of asking them about their school, their friends, their opinions on various matters and then listening to their answers? Was the time parents spent with their children based on positive reinforcement, or did the child expect to hear angry, negative comments whenever he or she spoke? Allāh revealed to His Messenger (ﷺ):



وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَأَنْفَضُوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ<sup>ط</sup>

**"And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you."**<sup>29</sup>

Muslim youths, like any others, will stay attached to their parents and homes when they feel loved, accepted and listened to, not ridiculed, criticized or treated harshly.

If you have not established a positive relationship with your kids by the time they reach puberty, you will most likely have a problem on your hands because they will have many questions to ask and problems to discuss but they won't come to you for that. Instead, they'll seek answers from their friends; and if the friends are not active, practicing Muslims, they may be getting opinions and advice contrary to Islamic principles or even against common sense.



On the other hand, if you have already established a positive relationship with your child, then your teenage youth will continue to come to you with his questions and concerns. Do not mistake those questions and uncertainties for rebellion against you or against the religion. Be pleased that he feels comfortable coming to you with these issues and continue to strengthen the bond of mutual trust.

Parents must acknowledge that they sometimes make mistakes and that they may be ignorant of certain matters, particularly those of the cyber world. Your children have the right to expect you to give an honest and open response to their questions. But they cannot expect you to know everything or to be able to explain the purpose behind every Islamic injunction. You can say, for example,

<sup>28</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>29</sup>Sūrah Āli 'Imrān, 3:159.

"That's an important question and I'm not really sure of the answer. Let's see if we can find out what the Qur'ān and our Prophet (ﷺ) have to say about it." Thus, you create the atmosphere for an open, honest exchange of thoughts.

Often, parents need to explain why they cannot or should not provide every new computer accessory their teenager thinks he or she needs at the moment. While all responsible parents endeavor to fulfill the reasonable desires of their offspring, they also have to impart to them that certain things are not in their best interests and that there is something greater for which to aspire beyond this material world.

قُلْ مَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ مِنَ اللَّهِوِ وَمِنَ التِّجَارَةِ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرُ الرَّزَاقِينَ

**"Say, 'What is with Allāh is better than diversion and than a transaction, and Allāh is the best of providers.'"**<sup>30</sup>

There is something else to consider as well. Many internet safety experts are now cautioning parents against letting their kids have computers in their bedrooms. That is because kids are increasingly being lured by predators through chat rooms and have even been persuaded to do inappropriate things in front of webcams. So it's important to realize when setting the rules that even if your young son or daughter is usually responsible, he or she could still be approached and manipulated by people online.

There are a few warning signs that can alert parents to a problem:

- The child stays up chatting online late at night.
- The child quickly changes what is on the screen when you enter the room.
- You notice links to sexually-explicit or inappropriate sites in the history section of the browser.

It is of the utmost importance that kids are clear about what is *ḥalāl* and what is not.

قُلْ إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ رَبِّيَ الْفَوَاحِشَ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَمَا بَطَّنَ

**"Say, 'My Lord has only forbidden immoralities – what is apparent of them and what is concealed...'"**<sup>31</sup>

In particular, all scholars of Islam agree that pornography is absolutely *ḥarām* and clearly a sin. However, some kids and even some parents might have the idea that only hard-core pornography is what's prohibited. The truth of the matter is that looking at improperly dressed women or men and people in unlawful situations is also *ḥarām* and is included in the prohibition.

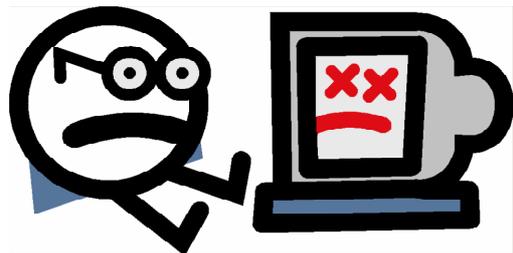
The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) disclosed, "*Among that which people knew from the words of former prophecy is: When you feel no shame, then do whatever you wish.*"<sup>32</sup> Those who feel no shame or shyness before Allāh will disregard

<sup>30</sup>Sūrah al-Jumu'ah, 62:11.

<sup>31</sup>Sūrah al-A'rāf, 7:33.

<sup>32</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri.

everyone including Him and do whatever they please. Western type societies are engulfed in an atmosphere of sex – on the internet as well as in movies, on television, in the streets – virtually everywhere. A Muslim teenager facing this



barrage daily is in a tough position: either succumb to temptations or try really hard not to. As you spend more time with your teen, you will be more able to sense if there is something bothering him or her. Don't brush this feeling under the carpet – address it straight on.

If you suspect that a young person has actively sought off-limits material, remember that it's common and normal for kids to be curious about sex, especially as they get older. Your careful guidance can be essential to helping your children understand themselves and what they might find on the internet. Some youths have confided that they kept quiet because they were more nervous about the potential overreactions of their parents than they were about the scenes they saw on the web. Suspicions should be managed wisely and without emotion. As Allāh instructed in the Qur'ān:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا اِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فٰسِقٌ بِنَبَاٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوْا

**"O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate..."<sup>33</sup>**

It's critical to keep communication channels open so that your kids are not afraid to talk about experiences or feelings associated with viewing distasteful material. You'll also have to be sensitive to the fact that if those materials came from someone he knows, a child might feel reluctant to tell on his "friend."

If you notice one of your children looking at something objectionable, don't respond by losing your cool; it could be due to an error. Instead, first gather the proof that he has gone on those sites. This can be done by checking History on the menu bar of your browser to see which sites he has been viewing. Once you've discovered for sure what he has been up to, speak to him frankly but without accusations. Confront him with the information you've found and ask why he was looking at those sites. If he gives the excuse that it was not deliberate and they just came up while surfing, take his word for it and assume the best. But remind him that trust can be broken when these things happen more than once and about accountability to Allāh.



<sup>33</sup>Sūrah al-Hujurāt, 49:6.

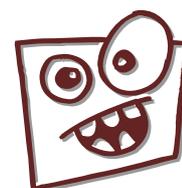
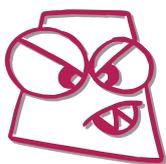
If, after all your counsel and reminders, immoral sites continue to show up when you check on the kids, you might consider and warn them of a hard penalty such as grounding while removing the internet, at least for a temporary period of time. Encourage them to think deeply about the long-term consequences of such behavior and to repent sincerely to Allāh.

## INTERNET ADDICTION

Internet addiction has been classified as a mental health problem since the mid-1990s with symptoms similar to other addictions. Many studies have reported associations between internet addiction and psychiatric symptoms among adolescents. Symptoms of internet addiction include feelings of depression, nervousness and moodiness when not online which disappear only when the addict is online once again. Sleep patterns are often disrupted; the addict typically stays up past normal bedtime hours and may report being online until 2 or 4 am – even in the face of having to wake up for school or work at 6 am. Sleep deprivation causes excessive fatigue and often impairs academic and occupational performance.



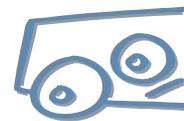
Kids who become internet addicts experience serious problems in interpersonal relationships. Because the internet combines accessibility, anonymity, low cost and a lack of inhibition, it provides young people with an artificial refuge when problems occur at home. A study conducted in 1996 showed that 58% of students reported a decline in study habits, a significant drop in grades, missed classes or being placed on probation due to excessive internet use. Although it can be utilized as a research tool, these students often surfed irrelevant websites, engaged in chat room gossip, conversed with internet pen pals and played interactive games at the expense of productive activity. Although no study on internet addiction is known to have been undertaken specifically within the Muslim world, observation indicates that many of our own youth may have fallen into the same trap.



Generally speaking, internet addicts tend to form an emotional attachment to the online friends and activities they create inside their computer screens. They enjoy those aspects of the internet which allow them to meet, socialize, and exchange ideas with new people through highly interactive applications such as chatting, playing online games, or being involved with several news groups. These virtual communities create a vehicle by which they escape from reality and seek out a means to fulfill unmet emotional and psychological needs.



Due to the fact that a person can conceal his true name, age, occupation, physical appearance and facial response during online encounters, internet users who are lonely or insecure in real-life situations readily take to cyberculture, pouring out online their deepest feelings, darkest secrets and greatest desires. This produces for them an illusion of intimacy, but when reality exposes the limitations of relying on a faceless community for love and compassion, internet addicts can experience sudden disillusionment, disappointment and anguish.



Teenagers are particularly susceptible to emotional attachments, especially those of them whose family relationships are deficient or somewhat strained. The net provides this option for them, and some Muslim youths have been deceived into thinking of cyber acquaintance as an acceptable alternate to the *ḥarām* social contacts they have to avoid in the real world. But it's merely another of Shayṭān's tricks that lead to misery. When kids are not mature enough to set reasonable limits for themselves, parents will need to step in.

## FROM THE WISDOM OF THE QUR'ĀN AND SUNNAH

أَفَمَنْ كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِ كَمَنْ زُيِّنَ لَهُ سُوءُ عَمَلِهِ وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ

**"So is he who is on clear evidence from his Lord like him to whom the evil of his work has been made attractive and they follow their [own] desires?"<sup>34</sup>**

Islam calls for reform and purification. It has directed everyone who adheres to it and believes in its principles to strive hard to eliminate evil and warn people against it. This is enshrined in one of the great principles of the religion: *al-amr-bil-maḥrūf wan-nahi 'an il-munkar* (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong).<sup>35</sup>

In today's secular societies it has all but become an alien concept, for the modern world is driven more by interests than by principles. Nevertheless, Muslims are required to prevent *munkar* (wrongdoing) to the best of their ability. As the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) ordered, "*Whoever of you sees a wrong – let him change it by his hand; and if he is not able, then with his tongue; and if he is not able, then in his heart – and that is the weakest of faith.*"<sup>36</sup>

Opposing *munkar* by one's hand (physical means) is for those in authority who are able to deal with the problem directly. Opposing it by the tongue is for those who do not have direct access to abolish the evil themselves or their

<sup>34</sup>Sūrah Muḥammad, 47:14.

<sup>35</sup>Allāh has said: **"Let there be [arising] from among you a community inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and it is those who will be the successful."** Sūrah Āli 'Imrān, 3:104.

<sup>36</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

knowledge is of something which cannot be changed by the hand. Such persons can only warn and advise the offending party or the public at large. Opposing it in the heart is an obligation upon every Muslim without exception, for even if one is unable to correct the wrong by means of his hand or his tongue, he cannot accept it in his heart and remain a believer. Without disapproval in the heart, faith does not remain. So Muslims cannot allow themselves or their children to accept any form of wrongdoing on the rationalization that it is currently very common and widespread. This is among the excuses most frequently recommended by our arch-enemy, the Shayṭān.

The healthy heart contains a conscience that continues to disturb its owner until the day he returns to Allāh. But a person addicted to something sinful often remains oblivious to his condition. A symptom of this disease is that the afflicted one is not aware of the damage and harm that results from his wrong action and is unperturbed by it. Those who forget Allāh can easily fall into transgression, so He warned:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا اتَّقُوا اللّٰهَ وَتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ وَّاتَّقُوا اللّٰهَ ۚ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ خَبِيْرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ ۙ وَلَا تَكُوْنُوْا كَالَّذِيْنَ نَسُوْا اللّٰهَ فَاَنْسٰهُمْ اَنْفُسُهُمْ ؕ اُولٰٓئِكَ هُمُ الْفٰسِقُوْنَ ۙ

**"O you who have believed, fear Allāh. And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow – and fear Allāh. Indeed, Allāh is Aware of what you do. And be not like those who forgot Allāh, so He made them forget themselves..."<sup>37</sup>**

وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا

And whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good.  
(Qur'an 2:169)

Forbidding *munkar* must be conducted properly in a way that the one being advised is likely to accept. This is especially true when one advises young people who are apt to be sensitive. The advisor should take care to avoid embarrassing comments and sharp criticisms, and this constitutes Islamic wisdom. Otherwise, the result could be an increase of the *munkar* that he or she is trying to prevent. It is one's intellect that suppresses the tendency to follow his inclinations and desires, and if the mind has not been adequately convinced to fulfill that role, its owner can easily fall prey to Shayṭān's deceptions.

Remembering Allāh during tempting situations will prevent all of us, young and old, from following the footsteps of Shayṭān. The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) observed, "The comparison of one who remembers Allāh and one who does not

<sup>37</sup>Sūrah al-Ḥashr, 59:18-19.

is like that of the living and the dead."<sup>38</sup> And he would supplicate, "O Allāh, help me to remember You, to be grateful to You, and to worship You well."<sup>39</sup>

The Qur'ān instills in Muslim believers a sense of responsibility, accountability and fear of Allāh, as well as love for Him and a strong desire to please Him and earn His approval through obedience to His commands. Parents should not only encourage a daily reading of the Qur'ān but also, and most importantly, the study of its meanings, for that is what will develop in the young Muslim reverence for Allāh and the will to avoid His displeasure.

In particular, we can remind our kids to think about some of the relevant verses from *Sūrah an-Nūr*. The *sūrah* begins by declaring:

سُورَةٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهَا وَفَرَضْنَاهَا وَأَنْزَلْنَا فِيهَا آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

**"It is a *sūrah* which We [Allāh] sent down and made obligatory and revealed therein verses of clear evidence that you might remember."**<sup>40</sup>



Allāh, the Exalted, has imposed the rulings stated in this *sūrah* upon all believing Muslims for their own benefit. He wants to keep us safe and pure with the least amount of psychological difficulty by closing the avenues to sin well before we reach the point of irresistible temptation. And He warned:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحِبُّونَ أَنْ تَشِيعَ الْفَاحِشَةُ فِي الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

**"Indeed, those who like that immorality should be spread among those who have believed will have a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter. And Allāh knows and you do not know."**<sup>41</sup>

Allāh knows the hidden aspects of all things – what is beneficial and what is harmful. Although many people may now regard unlawful sex as okay and subject to personal discretion, Allāh knows the extent of damage it causes to individuals and societies. That is why He promised a painful punishment for all those who are pleased to spread or publicize this sinful behavior, those who would like to see Muslims corrupted by immorality and contribute toward that objective. In modern times the media has become the most effective means for the propagation of irresponsible and immoral behavior. Today, even some who call themselves Muslims are in various ways involved in the spread of poisonous films, pictures, literature and information on the internet without giving it a second thought. And many more spend their time visiting disreputable

<sup>38</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri.

<sup>39</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

<sup>40</sup>*Sūrah an-Nūr*, 24:1.

<sup>41</sup>*Sūrah an-Nūr*, 24:19.

entertainment sites and participating in chat groups where people with no purpose in life misuse their time, energy and talents to spread immorality. Allāh tells us that those who are happy to encourage sin and corruption are deserving of painful punishment in this world and the next. And He then commands:

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ وَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْ خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ

**"O you who believe, do not follow the footsteps of Shayṭān. And whoever follows the footsteps of Shayṭān – indeed, he enjoins immorality and wrongdoing."**<sup>42</sup>

The first of those footsteps is a quick glance; Shayṭān reassures you that it's harmless. The next is a second look; he tells you that you need to know what is out there to warn others. Little by little you are deceived into believing that what you are doing is okay, and maybe even necessary. Eventually you are hooked. So Allāh tells us to stay clear of Shayṭān's path from the very start.

Someone asked the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) about what is seen unexpectedly and unintentionally. He told him to turn his eyes away.<sup>43</sup> And he told 'Ali, "Do not follow up one glance with another, for the first is [excused] for you, but the second is not."<sup>44</sup>

Then our Lord instructed:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ. وَقُلْ  
لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ

**"Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allāh is [fully] Aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts..."**<sup>45</sup>



Allāh ordered His Messenger (ﷺ) to teach all believers, male and female, to limit their gazes, meaning to avoid looking at everything that is unlawful to see. Ibn al-Qayyim said, "Restricting one's gaze in obedience to the command of Allāh brings happiness to man in this world and in the next. There is nothing more beneficial to a person in this world or the next than obeying the commands of his Lord, and those who are happy in

this world and the next attain that happiness only by obeying His commands, while those who are ruined in this world and the next are ruined only because

<sup>42</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:21.

<sup>43</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and at-Tirmidhi.

<sup>44</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd and at-Tirmidhi.

<sup>45</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:30-31.

they ignore His commands. Allāh will reward him who restrains his gaze with enlightenment, and He will open to him the doors of knowledge, faith and true insight. Undoubtedly, between the eyes and heart is a connection, which means that one of them is affected by the other. So if one of them becomes good, the other will also become good; and if one becomes corrupt, the other will become corrupt. If the heart becomes corrupt, the gaze will become corrupt; and when the gaze becomes corrupt, the heart will also become corrupt. Similarly, when one of them is sound, the other will also be sound."

Allāh then commanded:

وَلْيَسْتَعْفِفِ الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّى يُغْنِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ

**"And let them who find not the means for marriage keep chaste until Allāh enriches them from His bounty."<sup>46</sup>**

Muslims are ordered to keep themselves away from tempting surroundings until the time Allāh enables them to marry. Restraint and patience are required until then. Keeping chaste includes keeping the eyes, ears and all parts of the body chaste. The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) informed us, "*Paradise is surrounded by difficulties, and the Hellfire is surrounded by desires.*"<sup>47</sup> But he directed, "*O company of youths, whoever of you is able to marry should marry, for it is more restricting for the gaze and protecting for the private part; and whoever is not able to marry should fast, for it suppresses desire.*"<sup>48</sup> Unmarried youths are advised to fill their time with serious work, study or other *ḥalāl* diversions until the opportunity for marriage arises.



And the Prophet (ﷺ) added, "*No person has been provided with anything better or more comprehensive than patience.*"<sup>49</sup> For the believer, patience to endure difficulties and the temporary restrictions of this world, deferring immediate indulgence for a greater aim, will result in the attainment of complete satisfaction and happiness in the Hereafter. However, we all need to be reminded of this from time to time.

The whole of *Sūrah an-Nūr* contains clear instructions regarding the social manners to which a believer must adhere in both his public and private life to insure protection of the home and general environment. Muslims will be held accountable before Allāh for failing to teach these obligations to their children.

<sup>46</sup>*Sūrah an-Nūr*, 24:33.

<sup>47</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad and Muslim.

<sup>48</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

<sup>49</sup>Narrated by al-Ḥākim – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

The upcoming generation of Muslims is indeed a trust which Allāh has placed in the hands of parents, teachers and the *ummah* in general. The first undertaking of a Muslim educator must be the effort to save those under his authority from the ignorance that could lead them to the Hellfire. The next is to prepare them intellectually and spiritually to become righteous members of the community who will benefit themselves and others. This can only be accomplished through a sympathetic attitude and sincere concern for their safety and well-being. Good advice in a congenial manner should never be spared.

It's likely that from time to time kids will come across materials that you don't want them to see. Your child might run a harmless search which turns up links to sexually explicit pages. Then he may proceed while knowing or guessing what the content will be, for sometimes the line between accidental exposure and deliberate access becomes blurred.

We must always remember and remind our kids that even if no human eye is watching us, our ever watchful Lord is constantly monitoring the innermost regions of our hearts. Our tongues, eyes, ears and limbs will all testify for us or against us on the Day of Resurrection, and not an atom's worth of our deeds will remain unexamined.

إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

**"Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart – about all those [one] will be questioned."<sup>50</sup>**

The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) told us, "*From the excellence of a person's Islam is his leaving alone what does not concern him.*"<sup>51</sup> And he also said, "*Whoever gives something up for Allāh – Allāh will compensate him with something better than it.*"<sup>52</sup> This includes both the one who gives up something *ḥarām* and the one who gives up something concerning which there is doubt, for avoiding a matter when one is not completely certain it is *ḥarām* is also an Islamic virtue.

We can also remind our kids that avoidance of sin is considered by Allāh as a good deed and rewarded as such. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*If one intended a bad deed and did not do it, Allāh records it with Himself as a complete good deed; but if he intended it and did it, then Allāh records it as one bad deed.*"<sup>53</sup> Self-control becomes a good deed when it results from the remembrance of Allāh – fear of His anger or displeasure, and desire for His approval. The Prophet (ﷺ) informed us that Allāh, the Exalted, has said, "By



<sup>50</sup>Sūrah al-Isrā', 17:36.

<sup>51</sup>Narrated by at-Tirmidhi – *ḥasan*.

<sup>52</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

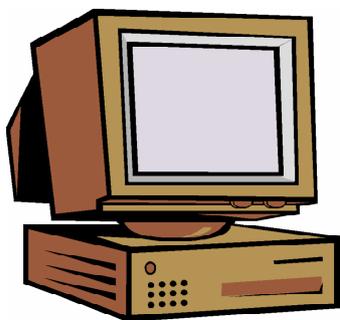
<sup>53</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

*My might and My majesty, I will not combine for My servant two securities nor two fears. If he feels secure from Me in this world, I will make him fearful on the Day I gather My servants; and if he fears Me in this world, I will make him secure on the Day I gather My servants."*<sup>54</sup> And he added, "*Fear Allāh wherever you are, and follow up a bad deed with a good one; it will erase it.*"<sup>55</sup>

Help kids establish criteria of what are acceptable and unacceptable pastimes and types of entertainment, and establish ground rules for use of the computer. While parents remain in charge, teens and younger children may voice opinions and suggestions which the parents will consider while making a final decision. Set time limits for internet use to ensure that they pursue a well-balanced set of activities and make sure that older children know the legal implications of online behavior. You can encourage them to help the younger children with their online explorations, emphasizing their responsibility to ensure the younger child isn't exposed to anything inappropriate. And they might even be able to help the younger ones build a webpage full of bright colors, games, quizzes and cool *ḥalāl* stuff to share with other kids.

*"O Allāh, we seek refuge in You from knowledge that does not benefit, from a heart that is not humbled, from a soul that is not satisfied, and from supplication that is not answered."*<sup>56</sup>

## PRIVACY ONLINE



While many kids are more computer savvy than their parents and can easily sign up for a game or subscribe to a chat room service, they don't always understand the consequences of revealing personal information to strangers. As a rule, children should not reveal personal information about themselves online without a parent's permission. This includes their name, e-mail address, postal address, phone number, photo, school name or address, etc.

You can help children protect the family's privacy and protect themselves by teaching them to be privacy conscious. It's never a good idea to give out the password to an e-mail account to any person or company. Teach your children about some of the risks involved if they reveal their name, address, phone number, school or e-mail address online. Draw up a family policy of general rules for your children to follow as they surf online. Print it out and place it near the computer as a reminder. Warn kids not to reply to any messages or click on any links sent to them from someone who is not on their contact list. And keep a close eye on anyone unknown who tries to contact your child online.

<sup>54</sup>A *ḥadīth qudsi* narrated by al-Bazzār – *ḥasan*.

<sup>55</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad and at-Tirmidhi – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

<sup>56</sup>A supplication of the Prophet (ﷺ) narrated by Muslim.

According to security researchers, children's passwords are often obvious or easy to figure out. Phrases such as "123456," "password," a family name or a pet's name are common. Your child's password might be easily guessed by an online "friend" who has been gathering other information. Help him or her to find and use a less easily detectable password.

There are a few other things you can do to make social networking more private. Use privacy settings to restrict who can access and post on your child's website. Some social networking sites have settings to limit the information you share with others. Help your children to choose their online names carefully. Don't allow them to use actual first names as any part of a screen name or to use a screen name that reveals age (for example, "brainy2003") or one that reveals the child's gender.

Rehearse with children the actions they should take if they view off-limits content or if someone contacts them in an inappropriate manner. Above all, they should never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or threatening. Get a copy of any such message and forward it to your internet service provider (ISP).

Filters can be configured to deny access to a substantial amount of adult-oriented sexually explicit material from commercial websites. Software filters can help screen out adult content from the net. Some commercial products are sold in stores with easy instructions on how to install and set perimeters for what to block. These programs allow you to block by the type of content: adult content, gambling sites, or sites that promote hatred or intolerance. But the use of filters doesn't allow children, including older adolescents, the opportunity to develop their own decision-making skills, which are what kids rely on when they surf away from home.



Unlike filtering, which is a prevention strategy, monitoring relies on deterrence and the possibility that a child misbehaving on the internet will be caught. Monitoring technologies allow parents to surreptitiously or openly track their children's internet activities. They can show the information a child has revealed about his name, age, school and location of the home. The software will also update parents if information in a child's profile has changed. But there is one drawback. If they find out about it, your children might feel their privacy has been invaded and that you don't trust them. This could in turn make them less willing to trust you.

When it comes to protecting your kids, technology can help boost your efforts, especially at times when you can't be around. But technology isn't a cure-all. A safe cyber kid is one who knows how to make informed decisions about what to do and not do online. Children gain this wisdom primarily from the guidance of a responsible, religiously committed adult.

## DRAWING UP A POLICY

The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) instructed, "*Strive to do what will benefit you and seek the help of Allāh.*"<sup>57</sup>

Parents should consider creating an internet use agreement that can help formalize talks with their kids and prevent misunderstandings. One way to avoid misunderstandings is to create an explicit policy regarding internet behavior. This is also known in schools as an "acceptable use policy." Such a policy should be in writing and signed by both the children and their parents. It should be tailored to the age, maturity level, and particular circumstances of the child. This might mean having to create a separate agreement for each of your children. When drafting a family policy for internet usage, make it clear that you want everyone to benefit online, but benefit also means they need to be conscious of Allāh and respect the rules. Allow children to participate in creating this policy so that they will consider it a mutual agreement and be more inclined to abide by it.

Here are the most important points to include when drafting it:

- How long and under what circumstances your children can use the internet – For example, an hour a day, but only after schoolwork is completed.
- What type of content is allowed – Examples of appropriate content include educational materials, reference websites, news services, selected Islamic sites and so on. Revise the list as your children mature.
- What content is off-limits – Be clear about what is objectionable. Parents ought to be concerned primarily about sites that offer sexually explicit material, encourage violence, distort the teachings of Islam, or anything else they feel could be threatening to the child's religious commitment and general well-being.
- What kind of messaging is permitted – Are the kids allowed to use e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms? For what purposes? And who is acceptable for them to communicate with?
- Under what circumstances you would be compelled to read your children's e-mail or use their passwords for online access
- What children should do if they experience something disturbing online – Be clear about this and reassure them that they can come to you for advice. You want your children to continue to confide in you, so it is important to be reasonable when it appears that off-limits content was accessed unintentionally.
- What happens if rules are broken – Be clear on the consequences a child must face when rules are not followed, such as loss of internet privileges, grounding, etc. And remember, for a policy to be effective it must be enforced.

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<sup>57</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

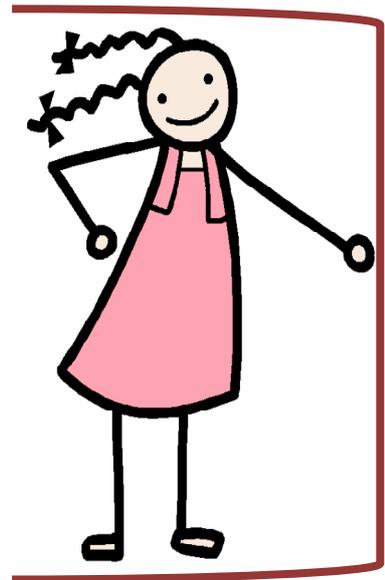
## REMINDING OUR YOUNG SISTERS

Islam is particularly concerned with the protection of women and girls from all kinds of harm, both to their persons and to their reputations. Thus, Allāh has enjoined upon all Muslims, male and female, modesty and decency in their behavior and dress during everyday activities. Due to innate differences in the physical and psychological makeup of each of the two genders, women need a greater degree of care and privacy than men. This is not only reflected in the woman's additional dress requirements but also in her own prudence when it comes to dealings with the opposite sex.

There is nothing wrong with Muslim sisters making use of the internet so long as it does not lead to anything that is forbidden in Islam. Muslim women currently run businesses, advocacy groups and education centers on the internet.<sup>58</sup> Sisters isolated by geography or custom can download information, communicate with other Muslim women all over the globe, and find educational Islamic sites for their children.

But due to the increase of evil in modern times, it is imperative for them to be aware of the dangers to themselves and their daughters from what experience has shown to be ever present in cyberspace. Many young girls are quick to believe what others tell them and are susceptible to sweet words. They become easy victims for the predator who sets his trap. He poses as a sincere advisor, a victim crying out for help, or a sick man seeking cure; then he becomes a lonely man looking for someone with whom to share his life... but he is a wolf in sheep's clothing, a devil in disguise.

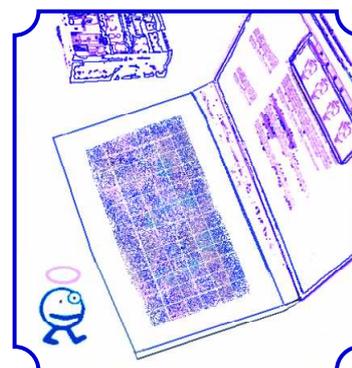
Shayṭān deceives people and leads them toward sin. He mixes the acceptable with the unacceptable and mixes truth with falsehood. He comes to each person through something that he or she likes; so the girl who likes music will be attracted to musicians and one who loves Islam will be attracted to men who share that sentiment. Shayṭān has a strategy for everything. He encourages people to find friends online – just sharing common interests or cooperating in *da'wah* efforts, he tells you. But then he makes each person imagine attractive qualities in the other, inducing them to develop emotional attachments detrimental to both their worldly and spiritual welfare.



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<sup>58</sup>During the first quarter of the year 2000 and for the first time in history, statistics showed women outnumbered men online. 50.4% of the web audience in the USA was female, and the fastest growing group was that of teenage girls.

These things happen to people with the best of intentions. One young sister expressed confusion about a seemingly harmless domain with the following question: "I am a sister who goes to Islamic rooms in a certain network to gain some knowledge related to our religion. Sometimes while I am in one of them, a Muslim brother in the room says he is looking for a wife<sup>59</sup> and asks me to have a private written chat with him so that we get to know one another. Some of the things he asks are where I live, my age, whether I am married, if I am planning to marry, whether I live with my parents, and so on. My problem is, I don't know whether I am allowed to give brothers that kind of information about myself. Is it a sin to talk to a brother in writing?"



Obviously, a young man who spends his time approaching girls and forming relationships through chat rooms is in fact one without religious commitment, modesty or manners; and he cannot be trusted. By contrast, a man who is of overall good character and pious in his religious observances will be attentive to all of Islam's teachings, including proper etiquette when seeking a wife. Sisters, beware.

Fatin Khairallah is a licensed social worker who specializes in counseling troubled youth and is the founder of Muslim Youth Social Services in New Jersey, USA. She says, "As a counselor, I handle numerous cases whereby Muslim youth have been harmed by socializing on such sites as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and Xanga. When asked why they are so fond of these websites, girls in particular respond emotionally, explaining that they feel this is the 'safest' way to vent their feelings. They claim their parents are clueless about how they feel so they want to reach out, even if it means talking to strangers through the internet. These sites provide a window to the outside world without their having to leave the home or face disapproval from parents; and it often appears that they are using these sites as a form of attention seeking."<sup>60</sup>



But how often has chatting led to disastrous results, caused people to lose money, to fall in love, and to do regrettable things. Hence, it is essential for our daughters and young sisters to strictly avoid all unnecessary communication with men who are not their *mahram* relatives.<sup>61</sup> And when communication does become necessary for a valid

<sup>59</sup>A growing number of single Muslims are resorting to matrimonial websites in their search for life partners, seeing cyberspace as a more accessible way to find a compatible spouse. However, deception is also rampant.

<sup>60</sup>From [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net).

<sup>61</sup>Those related by blood, breastfeeding or marriage to whom marriage is permanently prohibited.

reason, we should remember that while every person is destined to die and leave this world, whatever he has done, spoken or written during his lifetime remains. Hence, we should take care not to say or write anything we would not be pleased to see in our records on the Day of Judgement.

Shaykh Salman al-Oadah has provided us with valuable instruction to keep sisters safe on the internet. Some might consider this extra caution misplaced; however, those who understand how people are seduced and are experienced in dealing with these problems know that nothing is improbable. Persons with sick hearts can imagine and even convince others that something totally wrong is somehow beneficial and that they are motivated by sincere, noble intentions. In addition to the rules which apply to children in general, every mother should be sure that her young daughters implement the following recommendations.

1. Never display photographs under any circumstances. To start with, they are simply not necessary; the written word is more than sufficient. We must also appreciate how photographs can provide a great opportunity for Shayṭān to tempt people and make their foul deeds seem fair to them.
2. Use typing and avoid audible means of communication.
3. Maintain a serious tone and focus during discussions and dialogues. Do not get involved in talking at length about things that are unnecessary and unjustified. Our manner should remain serious, and we should avoid all that is superfluous and frivolous.
4. Stay vigilant at all times. Those we meet on the internet are, for the most part, apparitions. Men come online posing as women and women as men. There is so much we do not know about that other person. What is his ideology? What is his background? What are his real intentions? All of this is unknown.
5. Muslim women who work with the internet should keep in close contact with one another. They need to develop strong channels of communication so they can lend a degree of support to each other in this important but possibly dangerous field of endeavor. They need to cooperate closely and share their experiences and expertise. A person standing alone is weak, but with others she will be strong.
6. Muslim sisters should be using this valuable medium to assist and serve their sisters in Islam and to reform them. It should be done indirectly, tactfully and with wisdom, as this makes the recipient more likely to accept advice. But during *da'wah* efforts aimed toward mixed groups of people, it is wiser for sisters not to use an online name that reveals their gender.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>From [www.islamtoday.net](http://www.islamtoday.net).

## CORRECTING WRONGDOING

Something has happened! What do we do now?

Just as adults need to help kids stay safe, they also need to learn not to overreact when they find out a child or teenager has been exposed to inappropriate material or has broken a rule. Don't blame or punish your child if he tells you about an uncomfortable online encounter. Your best strategy is to work with him, so both of you can learn from this experience and figure out together how to keep it from happening again. If it becomes necessary to correct your child for some wrongdoing, it must be done according to a proper method.



First explain to your child in a gentle way how he has overstepped the limit of permissibility into wrongdoing. When you find him doing something wrong, it is usually sufficient at this time and more positive only to mention how much you like the correct behavior (which is the opposite of what has been done) rather than dwelling on the wrong itself. If it must be discussed more directly, it is best that this be done in private. You should not expose your child's wrongdoings in front of others.

If gentle instruction does not result in the child correcting the wrong behavior, indicate your disapproval of it by withdrawing your favor. For example, do not smile, hug him or say kind words at such times. You can also deprive him or her of access to the computer for a temporary period of time. This is usually a sufficient lesson. You also might want to inform him that you will be monitoring his activities from time to time, but also review the surfing rules you've agreed upon as a reminder.

Physical punishment in such cases is seldom beneficial.<sup>63</sup> It is important to realize that this measure is only resorted to when there is no other alternative and when the good that comes from being punished will outweigh the harm done to the child.

If you know or suspect that your child has accessed or received off-limits content or has been harassed or approached in an inappropriate manner online, consider the situation thoroughly in order to take proper action. Don't take matters into your own hands by responding to or retaliating against the source. Retain any pertinent information that's in text form, such as e-mails or instant message chats. Contact your internet service provider (ISP) or the source provider. If your child is being harassed online with abusive, threatening or obscene e-mails or by the use of his or her identity in inappropriate newsgroups or mailing lists, contact your local law-enforcement agency. And if online activities have moved offline with harassing phone calls or letters or any other such activity, contact the law-enforcement agency immediately.

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<sup>63</sup>The Prophet (ﷺ) never struck a child, a woman or a servant for any reason.

Help them to repent. Mistakes are an unavoidable part of life. However, they can also prove to be a blessing from which we derive benefit. Even when the mistake entails disobedience of Allāh, it becomes a positive factor if it directs one to amend himself thereafter and turn back humbly to his Lord in repentance. Sins can lead a person to an understanding of his own limitations, causing him to be more cautious in the future and to consistently seek the guidance of Allāh. And his Lord's acceptance and forgiveness removes the sin completely from a person's record of deeds. In the words of Allāh's Messenger (ﷺ), "*One who repents from a sin is like one who had never sinned.*"<sup>64</sup>

When you perceive that a child who has broken the rules is uncomfortable about having been found out, gently remind him that we should be more concerned about dishonor before Allāh on the Day of Judgement. Even though they may not yet have reached the age of accountability, children should be encouraged to repent from their misdeeds. We shouldn't forget that among the people Allāh loves are:

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَجِيسَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ  
وَلَمْ يُصِرُّوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

**"Those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allāh and seek forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except Allāh? – and who do not persist in what they have done while they are knowing."**<sup>65</sup>

The child who has done something wrong should also be taught the requirements for an accepted repentance that enables one to return to the favor of his Lord. These are (1) deeply regretting failure to live up to the trust placed upon him by Allāh and then by his parents, (2) being sincerely determined never to do it again, and (3) apologizing to Allāh and begging His forgiveness. He may do this in his own words or in words taught by the Prophet (ﷺ), such as: "*O Allāh, forgive me what I have done and what I have delayed, what I concealed and what I revealed, the excess I have committed, and that of which You are more knowing than me.*"<sup>66</sup>

Reassure him that Allāh will accept heartfelt repentance, as He said in the Qur'ān:

قُلْ يٰعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ  
الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

**"Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allāh. Indeed, Allāh forgives all sins; indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.'"**<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup>Related by Ibn Mājah – *hasan*.

<sup>65</sup>*Sūrah Āli 'Imrān*, 3:135.

<sup>66</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

<sup>67</sup>*Sūrah az-Zumar*, 39:53.

And His Messenger (ﷺ) said, "*Allāh extends His hand at night to forgive the one who sinned during the day, and He extends His hand during the day to forgive the one who sinned at night.*"<sup>68</sup>

Remind the child that true repentance includes standing firm against future temptations to return to the same offense or to a similar one, as well as firmly resisting pressure from wrongdoers. The Qur'ān tells us:

وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَيُرِيدُ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الشَّهَوَاتِ أَنْ تَمِيلُوا مَيْلًا عَظِيمًا

**"Allāh wants to accept your repentance, but those who follow [their] passions want you to digress [into] a great deviation."**<sup>69</sup>

Among the immediate benefits of repentance is a lesson learned, a renewed awareness, and an improvement in character. And the troubled soul is relieved by Allāh's forgiveness and feels at peace once again.

## MAINTAINING OUR RELIGION

*"One who invites to right guidance will have reward equal to the rewards of all those who follow it without it lessening anything from their rewards. And one who invites to misguidance will have sin equal to the sins of all those who follow it without it lessening anything from their sins."*<sup>70</sup>

There are other perils in the cyber world, somewhat more subtle but no less dangerous. All Muslims, and parents in particular, need to be alert to what kind of information is floating around out there concerning Islam and Muslims. As noted earlier, hundreds of sites expressing different opinions can be found at the click of a mouse – many of them offering false information and distorted views. As our Prophet (ﷺ) informed us, "*Near the end of time there will be people from my ummah who will speak to you of what you have never heard, neither you nor your forefathers, so beware of them.*"<sup>71</sup> Note that he said, "*from my ummah.*" This too has become a reality.

Many fabricated *ḥadīths* and false tales have spread among Muslims who do not understand their religion properly. Modern technology has allowed these stories to spread and circulate farther and faster than ever before. The internet, among other advancements in communication, has exposed to us how weak many of us have become in regard to sorting out and verifying information, and how easily we are willing to accept myths, false reports and superstitions as teachings of Islam, and then pass them on without a second thought, unchecked by any authority.

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<sup>68</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>69</sup>*Sūrah an-Nisā'*, 4:27.

<sup>70</sup>A sound *ḥadīth* narrated by Aḥmad and Muslim.

<sup>71</sup>Narrated by Muslim.

Ibn al-Jawzi said, "The common people obtain many false notions which they discuss among themselves. If a scholar should denounce this, they say, 'We heard it; it was reported to us.' What a bad practice it is for a man to merely say, 'I heard' or 'they said.'"

We must not pass on these fictitious reports and should advise those who are transmitting them to all their contacts with the best of intentions not to do so. Whenever possible we should present them with the true facts and not choose to spare their feelings at the expense of our reason and our religion.



The Qur'ān establishes an approach to knowledge founded on factual information and evidence. Allāh commanded:

قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

**"Say: 'Bring your proof, if you should be truthful.'"**<sup>72</sup>

And He ordered us to confirm the validity of any information we obtain before we pass on what we have received from others. He said:

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهْلَةٍ فَتُصِيبُوهَا فَمَآ فَعَلْتُمْ تَدْرِمِينَ

**"O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful."**<sup>73</sup>

The type of information alluded to in this verse includes:

- What is said about Allāh – This is clearly the most important area wherein we must ascertain the truth before speaking.<sup>74</sup>
- What is attributed to the Prophet (ﷺ) – Spreading falsehood about the Prophet is much worse than spreading it about anyone else because he conveyed Allāh's guidance to humanity.<sup>75</sup> When the Prophet's teachings are misrepresented, the divine message is also misrepresented.

<sup>72</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:111.

<sup>73</sup>Sūrah al-Hujurat, 49:6.

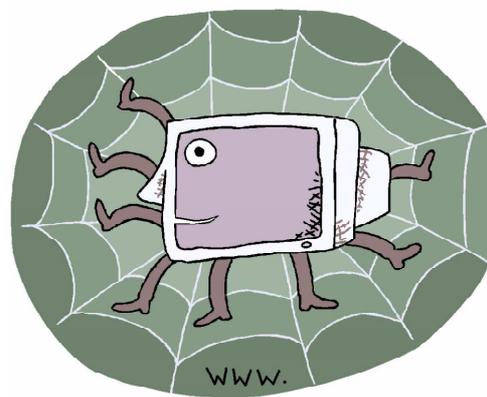
<sup>74</sup>Allāh instructed His Prophet (ﷺ): **"Say, 'My Lord has only forbidden immoralities – what is apparent of them and what is concealed – and sin, and oppression without right, and that you associate with Allāh that for which He has not sent down authority, and that you say about Allāh that which you do not know.'"** Sūrah al-A'raf, 7:33.

<sup>75</sup>The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said, "Lying about me is not like lying about anyone else. Whoever tells a lie about me deliberately, let him take his place in Hell." Narrated by Muslim in the introduction to his "Ṣaḥeḥ."

- What is attributed to religious scholars of the past and the present – The mistakes made by people in this regard have led to much confusion and countless misunderstandings.
- What is said about other people – The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*Sufficient it is as a lie for one to speak of everything he hears.*"<sup>76</sup>

A Muslim should never take information about any matter except from reliable and trustworthy sources. We need to be particularly cautious when it comes to information about the beliefs and practices of our religion, for it is something which will affect our eternal condition in the life to come. How much precious time is wasted on incorrect and unacceptable religious practice due to false information spread on the internet? Will those deceived online not have a valid complaint before Allāh against the ones who misled them? We should definitely be suspicious when no source has been given. And even if one is cited, it might well be unauthentic or fabricated. The safest rule to follow is: whenever in doubt, delete.

In recent years cyberculture has contributed to the upsurge of a major sin, which is the circulation of narrations falsely attributed to the Prophet (ﷺ) without checking or verifying them. Most of those who do this are otherwise good Muslims with good intentions. However, they may not be aware of the gravity of this deed as they forward by e-mail whatever they receive, and it is read by increasing numbers



of people with every new mailing list. We and our children need to be aware that propagating unauthentic *ḥadīths* and supplications is among the practices that corrupts religion, and the one who fabricated a *ḥadīth* and the one who spread it will each bear the sin of all those who do so after him until the Day of Resurrection. This is something to think about.

People who wish to engage in Islamic work online are expected to be honest and to possess a reasonable degree of Islamic knowledge. They should have the ability to discuss matters in a convincing and amiable manner. The position of most early scholars was that weakness in certain opinions must be pointed out, so we should explain which view is more likely to be correct based on sound evidence. It might be necessary at times to correct misinformation encountered on the net, but there's a proper way to do it which needs to be demonstrated to the younger generation. While we are supposed to correct one another's mistakes, insolence and disrespect when correcting others is in itself a mistake that needs to be corrected.

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<sup>76</sup>Narrated by Muslim. A case in point is illustrated in *Sūrah an-Nūr* where Allāh admonishes some Muslims who carelessly passed on malicious gossip about the Prophet's wife, 'Ā'ishah. Refer to 24:11-17.

It is unfortunate that some Muslims have become exceedingly harsh and arrogant in their online criticisms of other Muslims whose opinions differ from their own. Some are even involved in undermining the legitimate efforts of others in Islamic work, efforts which are neither deviant, misguided or contrary to the principles of Islam; efforts that are generally correct. Such individuals are of no benefit to Islam while rudely criticizing and causing dissention. It is highly irresponsible conduct, and impressionable kids pick up all kinds of bad habits and bad attitudes from the kind of behavior they see and hear on the net. This is especially disturbing when the site is represented as an Islamic one.



Alas, the web has now provided cyber Muslims with a new way to insult and discredit one another with little accountability. Such abuse of the electronic media is unscrupulous and unprincipled. Those who engage in such behavior are openly exhibiting their sinfulness, while the Prophet (ﷺ) has said, "All of my ummah can be pardoned except those who publicize [their sins]."<sup>77</sup> And the Qur'ān confirms:

لَا تُحِبُّ اللَّهُ الْجَهْرَ بِالسُّوِّءِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ إِلَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ سَمِيعًا عَلِيمًا

**"Allāh does not like the public mention of evil except by one who has been wronged."<sup>78</sup>**

Imām ash-Shāfi'ī observed, "He who admonishes his brother privately has advised him and honored him, but he who admonishes him publicly has exposed him and shamed him." Because this medium provides the opportunity to remain anonymous, it allows a slanderer to abandon all his inhibitions.<sup>79</sup> And because sensible, balanced speech is often not much of an attention-getter, the electronic attacker is encouraged by the attention he earns, both from those who support him and those who criticize him. These inept Muslims seem to have forgotten the injunction of Allāh:

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا يَسْخَرُونَ قَوْمٍ مِّن قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَاءً مِّن نِّسَاءٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا بِاللِّغَابِ بِسِسِّ الْإِسْمِ الْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ الْإِيمَانِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

<sup>77</sup>Narrated by al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

<sup>78</sup>*Sūrah an-Nisā'*, 4:148.

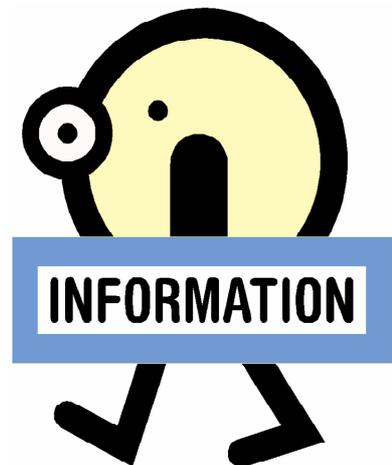
<sup>79</sup>Those who disregard Islamic ethics should be reminded that they will not remain anonymous at the time of Judgement.

**"O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule another people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule other women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the mention of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent – then it is those who are the wrongdoers."**<sup>80</sup>

Persons who demonstrate this conduct expose themselves as being bereft of values, and if they think that they are upholding truth or defending Islam in this way, they are all the more disillusioned. The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) warned, *"Do not backbite Muslims or pursue their faults. For he who pursues the fault of his brother Muslim – Allāh will pursue his fault; and when Allāh pursues his fault, He will expose him even if he should be inside his own house."*<sup>81</sup> Correcting mistakes is indeed an obligation, but in Islam it is confined to an ethical methodology.

The Muslim who makes a mistake should not be accused of having bad intentions or an evil motive. It is wrong to exaggerate the importance of the person's error or emphasize the fault too much, especially when it might have been an honest mistake or a matter where the truth is not entirely clear. Kids readily observe their own reactions to sarcasm, ridicule and harsh criticism and have no problem understanding that when dealing with someone's mistake or even his sin, these are not acceptable Islamic manners.

Children often pose questions to their parents about various issues of religion. They may ask about things they have read or seen on the internet that pertain to Islam and related subjects. Some of what they have encountered in the media could be quite negative, such as the allegation that Islam is responsible for terrorism, and similar misinformation. Their remarks and questions might reveal misgivings, skepticism or the secular influence of cyberculture to an alarming extent. It's best for parents not to express shock at these expressions but instead respond with clear answers which appeal to reason rather than emotion. They should not hesitate to seek correct answers from any reliable source, including the few trustworthy websites supervised by recognized Muslim scholars. In the words of the Qur'ān:



يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَكُونُوا مَعَ الصَّادِقِينَ

<sup>80</sup>Sūrah al-Hujurāt, 49:11.

<sup>81</sup>Narrated by Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd – *ṣaḥeeḥ*. On the other hand, he (ﷺ) said, *"Whoever covers the fault of a Muslim – Allāh will cover his faults in this world and the Hereafter."* (Muslim)

**"O you who have believed, fear Allāh and be with those who are true."<sup>82</sup>**

The tendency to overemphasize minor details in Islamic teachings has been another negative aspect of recent decades. This too has entered cyberspace, and it is something which has caused a number of us to lose sight of fundamentals. Muslims who preoccupy themselves online with hair-splitting debates about secondary issues contribute nothing of consequence. And at the other end we find people who would completely disregard the very same issues as trivialities and even crack jokes about them. But the truth remains that all these matters, major and minor, are part of the faith and none can be excluded. Nevertheless, each one of them should be given the amount of attention warranted according to its importance. Islamic sites and blogs need to give priority to the major issues upon which society's welfare depends and avoid pointless disputes about secondary matters. ‘Amr bin al-‘Aaṣ once said, "It doesn't take a perceptive mind to tell good from bad, but it takes such a mind to tell good from what is better, and to tell bad from what is worse." In any case, Muslims should never take whatever religious knowledge they have as a cause of contention and strife.

We ask Allāh to guide us to appropriate balance and proper understanding. In the meantime, parents who wish to keep their kids on the straight path in Muslim cyberspace need to do the following:

1. Teach them that if they cannot advise one who shows improper Islamic behavior, they should leave the site or at least ignore him. The Qur’ān tells us:

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ

**"Hold to forgiveness, enjoin what is right, and turn away from the ignorant."<sup>83</sup>**

And Allāh describes Muslim believers thus:

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا اللَّغْوَ أَعْرَضُوا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا لَنَا أَعْمَلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَلُكُمْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَا نَبْتَغِي الْجَاهِلِينَ

**"And when they hear ill speech they turn away from it and say, 'For us are our deeds and for you are your deeds; peace be upon you, we seek not the ignorant.'"<sup>84</sup>**

2. Teach them to respond with something better. In cases where we are compelled to mention another's faults, it is best to mention his or her good points as well. And we can counter a bad word with one that is good. This is an approach recommended in the Qur’ān:

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<sup>82</sup>Sūrah at-Tawbah, 9:119.

<sup>83</sup>Sūrah al-A‘rāf, 7:199.

<sup>84</sup>Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ, 28:55.

أَدْفَعِ بِأَلَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ السَّيِّئَةِ

**"Repel evil with that which is better."<sup>85</sup>**

وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا

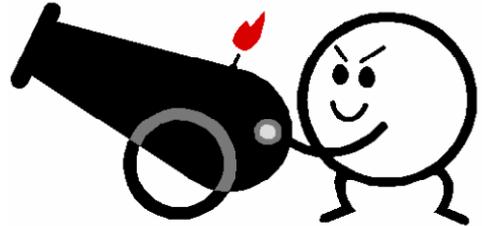
**"And say to the people what is good."<sup>86</sup>**

The default assumption we should have about people in any matter is that they are free of blame. There is a lot of good in Muslims, even if they commit some violations, so we should not accuse them of being corrupt or immoral.

But then there are the anti-Islam sites that attack the religion openly, such as those of Christian missionaries or those which insult our Prophet (ﷺ) or spread pictures that are designed to hurt and enrage Muslims. And there are other sites through which unscrupulous people pretending to be Muslims deliberately spread misinformation. What are we to do in such situations?

The first reaction of a sincere young Muslim might be to dish it back to them and consider this a form of *jihād*. But emotional and possibly violent reactions are exactly what our enemies seek to provoke.

They will then waste no time in capitalizing on our errors with sensational accounts of them in their media. This is a lesson learned from past experience. Muslims must be smart enough to avoid falling into this kind of trap.



Another natural reaction might be to warn the largest number of people possible against these sites. But web-savvy Muslims are telling us something different. They are saying it's better to ignore these things and let them die out. That's because one of the most effective ways to promote sites and circulate



things is by advertising banner campaigns, which tell you: "Reach the precise audience you want with relevant targeted ads." Any site might stay obscure, nameless and unknown even when financially supported by thousands of dollars until it is correctly channeled through the search engines. When Muslims remain inattentive and disregard them, these sites will continue to be obscure, nameless and unknown. Subsequently, the sponsors of such sites will lose interest and they will inevitably fade away.

But the reverse is also true. One Muslim brother summed it up as follows: There are countless e-mails floating around containing information about anti-Islamic websites, for example, you might see...

<sup>85</sup> *Sūrah al-Mu'minūn*, 23:96.

<sup>86</sup> *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:83.

**www.\_\_\_\_\_.com**

*To all Muslims*

**BEWARE!!**

*This site is against Islam!!*

Please tell everyone to include this warning in their e-groups.

Instantly e-mail this to all your friends.

===== or =====

**www.\_\_\_\_\_.com**

**To everyone concerned**

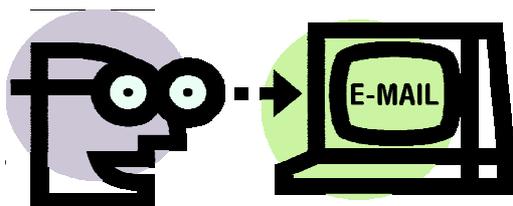
**ABUSE AGAINST ISLAM AND MUSLIMS!!**

If you sincerely love Almighty Allah and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) send this warning immediately to all Muslims without exception.

To be sure, these sites are definitely against Islam; their aim is obvious and it can easily be seen. So what is the purpose behind circulating them and drawing the attention of Muslims to them?

Some might answer, "To denounce them and caution people because a Muslim might not be aware at first browse." Not at all; these sites clearly testify for themselves. There's no need for you and me to promote them. And if it had not been for alarmed but ignorant Muslims, such sites would have never seen our inbox folders or any others. They are actually promoting the very thing they alert others to beware of – distributing a free invitation to everyone on their list by shouting out: "Beware!! This is against Islam!"

Those sites you warn against will have the first priority the next time your e-mail recipients come online. When you forward abusive links on an e-mail message, instead of a warning, it becomes the successful outcome of a promotional trick. By forwarding the message you are effectively contributing to the promotion of those sites. Forbidden fruit is sweet... so you are inviting others in a roundabout way to have a look at them out of curiosity. And what's



more, your e-mailing automatically activates the search engines to mark these sites as popular. As a result, they will top the list when "Islam" is entered as the key search word. And many people are searching for Islam these days...

So parents can advise: Whenever you receive any offensive pictures or warnings against un-Islamic sites, delete them immediately. For besides helping to promote this abusive material, what benefit is there in showing it to other Muslims who will be hurt and offended by it? We are in no need of evidence

showing what our enemies think of us or what they are doing to us; we are aware of that already. So let's not assist those who hate us in spreading their poison, for that is exactly what they intended to do when posting it on the internet.

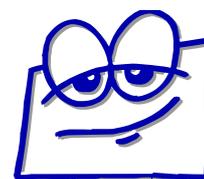
## A SUMMARY OF GUIDELINES

Internet safety experts all agree that kids and teens should never have complete unfettered access to the web. A family meeting which allows the younger members to participate in drafting a reasonable internet use policy gives them more incentive to abide by rules and even to add some of their own. Parents have on occasion been pleasantly surprised when their offspring proudly take the initiative toward their own self-discipline, for it shows a good level of maturity, wisdom and religious commitment.

With this point in mind, our summary includes guidelines for kids who are prudent and sensible, as well as for adults. That's because assumption of responsibility on the part of Muslim youth is the true objective of this study, and it is the only real fortification that can protect them in cyberspace as well as in the real world.

### Points for parents:

In general, it's wise to treat the internet as you would any other public space your children could access and set proper boundaries to protect them. While children can access the internet from other locations, at home you can better control their environment and help them learn safe surfing habits. The lessons learned at home will remain with them wherever else they go.



- Set up the computer in an area that's used by the entire family. This not only discourages children from misbehaving on the web, but it keeps you or another adult close by to provide help when they need it.
- Decide what activities are acceptable, for example, using it for aiding in homework, creative projects, Islamic awareness, and other specified activities and games. And be sure to clarify what is *ḥarām*.
- Negotiate time limits. Decide together how long each child will be able to use the computer on a daily basis according to his age and school requirements. Set a specific shut-down time.
- Find some websites that are inspiring or educational, like those that encourage Islamic activities or teach them about interesting topics. Muslim kids should be assisted to choose sites that are sound and useful and cautioned about those propagating innovations in the religion and questionable beliefs. Directing them to what's good on the internet is as important as forbidding what is wrong, so offer them appealing, age-appropriate websites that they'll enjoy.

- Keep general tabs on what your kids are exploring online just as you would oversee their schoolwork. Find out what kind of content on websites and in chat sessions attracts your children's attention. Teach kids to stay away from sites which propagate falsehood and not to contribute to their spread by forwarding messages containing links to those sites.
- Advise students and enthusiastic Muslim kids to beware of wasting time with prolonged discussions on the web. It is not necessary to refute every single error or foolish notion. The Prophet (ﷺ) said: "*From the excellence of a person's Islam is his leaving alone what does not concern him.*"<sup>87</sup>
- Limit your child to specific chat groups or consider blocking out chat entirely. Misuse of chat rooms can lead to disturbing consequences, and Muslims should not waste their time and energy on unnecessary, risky pastimes.
- Know whom your children talk to and write to online, whether through an instant message, e-mail or chatting. Explain that anyone who enters chat rooms is dealing with a large number of unknown persons, and the margin of trust when dealing with people not using their real names is very thin indeed; they are not always who they say they are.
- Let them know some of the dangers that exist. You can also warn them that things posted on the internet might be found by future employers or colleges, or even get them expelled from school. And when this is the case, how much more serious it will be in front of Allāh and all creation at the time of Judgement.
- Urge kids to alert you if they encounter someone or something on the internet that makes them feel uncomfortable, whether through an image or a message. And make sure they understand that they should never arrange to get together with any person they've met online.
- Learn about some tools and programs that promote internet safety. However, although you can install filters to block out certain websites, the best defense against offensive online content is communication. Discuss with your kids what is and isn't alright for them to view online and come to a mutual agreement.
- Talk with other Muslim parents or teachers who can share their experiences and knowledge with you. Ask your children's school administrators about how they teach information literacy and internet safety. Confirm that the school's website does not post student names or photos.
- Finally, continue to advise your kids from an Islamic perspective and remind them of Allāh's words:

وَلَا تَقْرَبُوا الزَّيْنَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

**"And do not approach zinā. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way."**<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup>Narrated by at-Tirmidhi – *ḥasan*.

<sup>88</sup>*Sūrah al-Isrā'*, 17:32. In this verse Allāh has warned against approaching unlawful sexual intercourse, which means to avoid everything related to it.

وَلَا تَرْكَبُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا فَتَمَسَّكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ مِن أَوْلِيَاءَ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ

**"And do not incline toward those who do wrong, lest you be touched by the Fire, and you would not have other than Allāh any protectors; then you would not be helped."<sup>89</sup>**

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُم بِالْغَدَاةِ وَالْعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ ۗ وَلَا تَعْدُ عَيْنَاكَ عَنْهُمْ تُرِيدُ زِينَةَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَلَا تُطِع مَن أَعْفَلَنا قَلْبُهُ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرْطًا

**"And keep yourself patient [by being] with those who call upon their Lord in the morning and the evening, seeking His countenance. And let not your eyes pass beyond them, desiring adornments of the worldly life, and do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desire and whose affair is ever [in] neglect."<sup>90</sup>**

### Points for kids:



Remember that your parents are constantly striving for your welfare, and your best interests are at the top of their list. They wouldn't deprive you of anything you like except out of knowledge that it is harmful in some way. Their concerns for you are not limited to this world but extend to your eternal life as well. By following these instructions you can put their minds at ease and keep yourself safe.

- Always abide by your parents' rules regarding computer use.
- Never give your password out to anyone other than your parents, no matter who they say they are.
- Never give out identifying information such as your address, phone number, school name, town, etc. in chat rooms, forums, forms or questionnaires.
- Don't order anything or give anyone credit card information without your parent's permission.
- Never send information or pictures to anyone over the internet that you don't know.
- Never click on links in e-mails from people you don't know.
- Be aware that people may not be who they say they are. Someone saying he is a 12-year old girl might really be an older man.
- Never agree to meet anyone in person that you have met online.
- Never reply to any e-mail, chat message or forum item that makes you feel uncomfortable.

<sup>89</sup>Sūrah Hūd, 11:113.

<sup>90</sup>Sūrah al-Kahf, 18:28.

- Always tell your parents if someone online offends you or makes you uncomfortable.
- Surf the web when others are around. The temptation to sneak a look at something *ḥarām* is more when you're surfing alone. Avoid late night surfing and don't keep a computer in your bedroom; a family room is better since others are nearby and can see what you're looking at.
- Surround yourself with good influences. Join a study circle, volunteer for a good cause, become active in a Muslim youth group that is likely to have good influence on you.
- If you have younger brothers and sisters, think of the example you're setting for them. What kind of message are you sending them if they should catch you looking at something *ḥarām*?
- Remember that if no one else is watching, Allāh sees everything you do. Seek refuge in Him from any evil suggested to you by Shayṭān.
- Be regular in your five daily prayers. Allāh has said:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ

**"Indeed, prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing, and the remembrance of Allāh is greater. And Allāh knows that which you do."<sup>91</sup>**

- Remember the return to your Creator and the account of the Hereafter. You can't presume looking at *ḥarām* stuff is no big deal. The angels are recording all your deeds, and your eyes will also testify about what you looked at on the Day of Judgement.
- If you should end up watching something *ḥarām*, repent to Allāh. Seek His forgiveness, reaffirm your faith in Him, and do good deeds to compensate for the bad ones. He will forgive you as long as you are sincere about giving up the sin.
- Make *du'aa'* continually for Allāh's guidance and protection.

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<sup>91</sup>*Sūrah al-'Ankabūt*, 29:45.

## CONCLUSION

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ

**"Indeed, Allāh does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."<sup>92</sup>**

The noble task of salvaging and rebuilding our *ummah* requires the same spirit of cooperation, contribution, patience and sacrifice which is essential to any collective endeavor. This is what was taught by Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) and is as fundamental today as ever before. Serious study must be aimed at correction, amendment and reform before moving on to anything else.

Muslims must educate themselves well – first individually, then as families, communities and citizens of the world. In spite of its misuse by much of mankind, the internet offers a means of education as well as countless other benefits for Muslims. Undoubtedly, it can be a useful tool when used with religious commitment and consciousness of Allāh. While it is incumbent to pass up the negative aspects of cyberculture, we can't afford not to seize upon every advantage its technology offers. This is all the more true for our upcoming generation of Muslim youth; but they must have the will and awareness of how to use it responsibly and avoid the pitfalls which lead one to destruction in this life and the next. *"O Allāh, we ask You for useful knowledge, lawful sustenance and deeds acceptable to You."*<sup>93</sup>

We ask our generous Lord to provide us with the means and ability to benefit ourselves and our *ummah* through correct and appropriate adherence to His Book and His Prophet's teachings for every situation in every time and place. And we supplicate Him with the *du'aa*' of His final Messenger (ﷺ): *"O Allāh, inspire us to rational conduct and protect us from the evil of ourselves."*<sup>94</sup>

رَبَّنَا لَا تُرِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ

**"Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower."<sup>95</sup>**

الحمد لله رب العالمين

**And all praise is due to Allāh, Lord of the worlds.**

<sup>92</sup>Sūrah ar-Ra'd, 13:11.

<sup>93</sup>A *du'aa*' of the Prophet (ﷺ) narrated by Ibn Mājah – *ḥasan*.

<sup>94</sup>A *du'aa*' of the Prophet (ﷺ) narrated by Abū Dāwūd and at-Tirmidhi – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

<sup>95</sup>Sūrah Āli 'Imrān, 3:8.

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