

# Our Children, Our Future:

## An Awakening Call in the New Millennium

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Children are our most valuable resource, as they are the leaders of our future! What we give to them today shapes our tomorrow. We should make sure that we give them our very best, not just monetary but spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical. “Childhood shows the man as a morning does the day”. Although we hope and pray that our children become the joy and pride of our eyes, most of us fear how our children will turn out, a future that we have so heavily invested in for the new millennium? The two most important concerns that most parents have about their children are: education and marriage. Will they graduate as professionals and hold influential and decision making positions? Who will they chose as their spouses and how do they plan to raise the next generation? These are all pertinent questions that need serious attention as we enter the new millennium.

Although most of us may have spend more than two decades in the United States, it seems it was just yesterday that we migrated to the West in search and hope of a better life for ourselves, and more importantly, for our children. Most of us came with the intention of getting higher education and may be later on returning to our homelands; but this is no longer the fact. We have established mosques, schools, families and communities and do not plan to return to our countries of origin. Now we have begun to realize the many challenges and problems associated with raising our children in the West. As we see the kind of atmosphere our children are living in, we cannot help but ponder about what type of communities our future holds and what will be the condition of the Muslim ummah in our new homeland.

A community is established by the collective efforts of its people, and each one of us is responsible to contribute into this effort. How many of us realize the great responsibility we are faced with other than just trying to raise our children and give them the monetary pleasures that many of us may have lacked back home? How many of us are involved in taking a collective action, as one Ummah supporting the cause of establishing an Islamic community to the model of the Quran and Sunnah of the prophet Muhammad (sws)?

If we take a closer look we may see that many among our future generation are being lost to society yet it is not the children who have to be blamed but their parents for not

providing them with the tools of Islam and an environment that can nurture the Islamic values and morals. A collective effort can only help the Muslims in their efforts to raise a just and balanced community. But how can we achieve this gigantic task?

To answer the above question we need to critically analyze the culture and environment that our children are being raised in. We need to look through a magnifying glass at the current educational system, social system, the media, and the surroundings that affect our children. As with treating any disease, a physician needs to carefully consider the symptoms, diagnose the problem, and offer a treatment leading to a promising prognosis. If any of these key ingredients are missing, then we will fail in trying to save our future generation.

First, let us discuss the educational system. Many of us do not realize the contradiction between the present system of schooling and the Islamic perspective of education. As another millennium begins, schools around the nation are left to wonder where we went wrong. Why the curriculum and instruction of today's schools does consists of preventive measures for violence, drugs, sexual promiscuity and low values and morals? Why are schools in the era of technological marvel equipped with metal detectors to detect guns and knives? Schools are constantly patrolled by security officers, many of them who cannot figure out how children commit such vile acts? Schools and educational institutions nationwide are taking a drastic step in correcting the problem that has cost our children to lose their sense of direction.

For the last half-century, faith has been torn out of the educational system resulting in the abolishment of the sound foundation of morality and dignity in schools. Islam defines education as "taleem" and "tarbiyah" meaning knowledge and action. Today, only "taleem" remains, as "tarbiyat" has no place in many schools. An educator can teach a student about chemistry, biology, and other medical sciences, but without someone to further use this knowledge and put it into actions, physicians would be unheard of today. Parents and teachers blame each other for the negative result the education system is producing. Regular education is unable to produce graduates who have self-discipline, strong character, and a unique ability to find solutions to real-world problems.

Self-discipline is the cornerstone of Islam, as every aspect of Islam demands it, from offering prayers on time, to spending money in the cause of Allah. Schools around the world, especially in the United States, are clueless on how they can combat the temptation of drugs, violence, immorality, and disrespect. Education singly, can no

longer empower students to become the adults of strong character and moral dogma we, today, only dream of.

As the century is coming close to an end, educators around the world are mindful of the steady decline of the educational system. Billions of dollars are being spent on programs such as Character Education, Say No to Drugs, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and Abstinence so that students can shift their focus from societal ills to excellence in education. Several gun shootings in schools around the United States have set-off an alarm indicating the rapid decline of the education system. As we hear the cry for help, it is an opportunity for Muslims around the world, and especially in the United States to present the Islamic model, one which can successfully save future generations. As Muslims, we need to be conscious of our responsibilities not only to save our Muslim children but also to save all children. If we carefully diagnose the reason for this deterioration, we will be able to prescribe its curing medication. The lack of religious or moral education in schools is the most obvious symptom of this crippling and potentially life-threatening disease. By removing religion from schools, the leaders of the West have removed the most essential ingredient of children's success from their lives. Schools do more than teach reading and writing, they mould personalities and build the future. The mind of a child is like that of Jell-O. Before it sets, educators, with the correct tools, have the opportunity to mould it correctly.

Islam has very clear and specific guidelines on raising children. These guidelines are the same throughout history and are universal. In Chapter 31, verse 16 of the Holy Quran, Prophet Luqman advises his son: "O my son, establish the Salaat, enjoin good, forbid evil and bear with patience every hardship that may befall you. These are the things, which have been strictly enjoined and do not speak to the people with your face turned away, nor walk proudly on the earth, for Allah does not love any self-conceited, boastful person. Be moderate in your gait, and lower your voice, for the most disagreeable of all voices is that of the ass." This simple, yet thorough advice was powerful enough to please Allah and be recorded in His Book for all of us to learn a valuable lesson from.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was a perfect example of good behavior and morals, as Allah says in the Holy Quran "You have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is to meet with Allah and the Last Day and who engages in the remembrance of Allah." (Al-Ahzab: 21) Today, children have lost the connection between the role models that provide them with the practical application of religion in their daily lives. Education is left with a body, without a soul, as taleem is left without tarbiyat. It is like a patient in a vegetative state, whose basic bodily functions are occurring with the aid of a machine, but the most important organ, the brain, is void of life.

What are some of the causes of decline in the educational system? Due to the financial demands of society, both parents are forced to work. Furthermore, the ever increasing lack of an extended family, technological advancement, a fast-paced world, and increased social activity are threatening the familial nucleus. As the gaps between the two generations widen, more blame is being placed on schools and education. Often the question asked is who should teach children values? Unlike the past, where every individual took the responsibility of raising children upon themselves, children today are being self-raised, with minimum or no guidance from their parents. With the advancement of technology, children today have easier access to the Internet, email, and the media. Media and technology, not parents, have become the driving force behind the upbringing of our children.

Schools and businesses around the world will be focussing their attention and resources on how to compete and promote successful means of technology. Media can be defined as a means of communication, and technology can be defined as the tool that allows this communication. "In this sense, media include symbol systems as diverse as print, graphics, animation, audio, and motion pictures; and technology includes phenomena as diverse as books, films, television, and the Internet." Media is becoming a powerful influence in schools, and regardless of the approach used, it is being introduced into education with the hope that it can have a positive effect on teaching and learning.

There is no doubt about the positive effect concerning the rapid advancement of technology is allowing in various parts of the world. As we raise a generation of technologically oriented children, we need to realize the great responsibility we hold. It is not unusual to hear youth talk about the generation gap between them and their elders. With the exponential advancement in technology, the gap seems to grow even wider. We do not need the media to learn how teens are in grave danger. From violence in schools, to drugs, gangs, and sexual promiscuity, these social ills have become the norm of the day. The Public Agenda's most recent report, Kids these Days '99: What Americans really think About the Next Generation, says that teens lack values, character, and basic civility. The educational media also portray a new deterioration of teen values. It is not uncommon to find the media reinforcing the negativity of this generation as documented in the "Generation of Cheaters" in The American School Board Journal, or about "School cheating up as stakes rise" in the headline news of The Christian Science Monitor newspaper.

Learning through the use of media and technology is becoming very common. Schools around the United States are spending billions to improve their computer education.

Thomas Reeves (1998) talks about two major approaches to using media and technology in schools: learning “from” media and technology, and learning “with” media and technology. In schools where technology such as instructional television, computer-based instruction, or integrated learning systems is used, it is referred to as learning from technology. On the other hand, learning with technology, though less widespread, is referred to as “cognitive tools and constructivist learning environments”. Computer-based cognitive tools are being used to help students become capable enough to adapt or develop to function as “intellectual partners” to enable and facilitate critical thinking and higher order learning. Schools and colleges are reinforcing the use of cognitive tools such as databases, spreadsheets, networks, and expert systems. Communication software such as teleconferencing programs, on-line collaborative knowledge construction, multimedia/hypermedia construction software, and computer-programming languages are helping students get ahead in the world.

In spite of the many advantages, technology is widening the gap between generations. The children of today seem to be spontaneous learners of technology and the adults find it hard to keep pace with them. Although technology has become the prerequisite of worldly success, there are some serious concerns that parents and educators have regarding its usage and time. What are the effects of media and technology on the personality and moral development of children? What are the parameters regarding the censorship of immoral issues prevalent on the Internet? Will children learn the skills of intercommunication and interdependence with humans through technology as well as they would on a personal level?

One can only respond with confidence to the above questions after a decade passes by, when the youth of today will become the adults of tomorrow. Children spend hours and hours playing games on the computer and the Internet, visiting chat rooms, and e-mailing others. Many times they are assigned schoolwork where they are required to do research on the Internet. How safely can children surf the Internet without being introduced to inappropriate sites is a question that every parent asks? Unless adults educate themselves with the expanse of material available on the Internet, they cannot caution their children from visiting inappropriate sites.

Homosexuality, drugs, sex, profanity, pornography, and recipes for devising weapons, and much more are just the “click of a mouse away”. Restrictions on the use of technology is not the only solution, but combined with guidance and assuring children that they can make choices as to the advantages and disadvantages of the use must be emphasized. Youth need to have a support group of youngsters, advised by elders, where they can find positive peer influence. They need to be provided with recipients of emails and chat-

rooms who can be within the Islamic parameters. It is not sufficient to monitor the messages our children send, but more so, the messages they receive.

As one ummah, we should take a collective approach on combating the ills of society from entering our children's minds. The world of technology is so fascinating that it has become an addiction for the youth. Restrictions or limitations on its use may lead to incompetence and lack of technological skills. As a community, we need to pull our resources together in order to provide alternatives for our children. Computer programs and web pages that would be as attractive, yet Islamically competent are in great need. They should be programs that would produce high moral thinking and strong character development, programs that could produce constructive and productive results rather than destructive consequences.

A recent Presidential report in the United States recommends that "at least five percent of all public K-12 educational spending in the United States (or approximately \$13 billion annually) should be assigned for technology-related expenditures. If the Muslim Ummah does not take the impact of technology seriously on the personality development of the children, it will destroy the young generation as an epidemic and damage the future generation before we even realize the seriousness of the problems. It is a problem comparable to that of AIDS. As you all know, this terrible disease attacks the immune system, enabling a simple cold or infection to prove potentially lethal. The ills of society act as this devastating virus, and our human vulnerability is ever so susceptible to the simple things that we should fight to destroy our children's lives.

With all that said, how can we help save a generation from its decline? We need to return to the basics of Islam that we hold so dear. Islam is not just a religion, it is a complete way of life. We should revive the spirit of Islam in ourselves as individuals and collectively, as a community and the world at large. Our individual responsibility as a Muslim is to practice Islam as a way of life and be good role models for our young generation. As a collective action we should extend ourselves beyond our immediate children to our children's friends and children of the extended family. As a responsible community member we should support the Islamic institutions such as Mosques and schools in whatever manner possible. We should encourage those who work for these institutions so that they may become strong in resources and means and meet the social and religious needs of the young Muslims. We need to become actively involved in these institutions so that they may provide activities that may preserve the Islamic cultural identity in the children. It is important to receive criticism, however, if valuable advice or action on the part of the criticizer does not follow that criticism, it is essentially useless. As a worldly responsibility we should promote a positive image of Muslims and Islam in the world either by providing financial support to the television and media or by doing dawa at the individual and institutional levels.

Islamic schools, can be a powerful catalyst for change. Schools should return to the unique Quranic model of curriculum and instruction. The main characteristics of the

unique Quranic model is as follows: First, the curriculum should be based on the Quran in its pure form. Second, the method of instruction should be solely for seeking knowledge and the understanding that instruction is for action. Third, once knowledge is gained and followed by action, then there should be a total detachment from the jahilliyyah society. The true Islamic values can never enter the hearts when the whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws are non-Islamic. Fourth, the purpose of education should lead to a greater vision in life. The vision of Islam was the vision of life, reality, and the world. The mission of the prophet and his companions, peace be upon them all, did not stop at changing themselves but it was more deeply and wider, it was to change the community and the world.

Finally, Islam was not a national, economic or political movement but was a dynamic movement built solely on faith. It was faith not knowledge that provided the criteria to create values. "Islam never was an abstract theory devoid of practical existence" but it was the only divine movement. (Sayid Qutb, 1990)

Islamic schools, like the Muslim Academy of Central Florida in Orlando, are at its conception in establishing such a model. Islamic schools can be the answer to all the problems in education. As we are stepping ahead towards the new millennium there is an awakening call to save the future generation. We should provide an environment that can preserve the cultural identity, and form Islamic personalities that can be high in morals and values. Our Children, Our Future, is an Awakening Call in the New Millennium. Beware of the decline of the future Ummah, let us unite and pull all our resources, time, and strength in saving a generation. Let us prepare them to be better Muslims in the new millennium. With the help of Allah, and by following the Sunnah of our beloved prophet, we can achieve our goal with accuracy and a sense of completion. InshaAllah.

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