

Teaching your Child about Islam (*Freda Shamma, PhD*)

Iman is three years old and has a baby brother, Samir, who is one. She gets out her blocks to play with and of course Samir crawls over to get involved. She gives him a red block and then proceeds to build a tower. Samir grows tired of his one block and tries to get more. In the process he knocks down the tower. Iman reacts angrily and grabs all the blocks and tells her brother that he can't play with any of the blocks.

Her mother hears her and shouts at her angrily, "Iman you are a bad girl not to share with your brother. Give him some blocks!"

Iman did two actions concerning her brother: 1. She gave him a block and 2. She took the blocks away. She received attention from her mother for the bad actions. This teaches her that if she wants attention from her mother, she should NOT share.

How else could the mother have handled it? If she had praised Iman when she first shared: "Iman, what a nice sister you are, to share with your brother. I'm so happy to see you do that.", then Iman would remember that her doing 'good' resulted in her mother's attention.

When her brother knocks over her blocks, her first inclination will probably be to grab all the blocks but if her mother is there to console her and encourage her to try again: "Oh Iman, it's too bad that Samir knocked over your blocks. He was trying to play with you, but he is too little to be good at making towers. Why don't you build a little tower for him to play with, and then you can build a big one for yourself.", then she will happily give him more blocks. She will want to share next time as well because that action got her mother's attention.

Children are born in a state of *fitra* (purity) and then their parents teach them to be believers or unbelievers. According to the *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, "The children of the unbelievers are better than you grown-ups. Every living creature is born with a righteous nature." It is our obligation and duty as parents to teach our children so that they grow up to be believing, practicing Muslims. Sending the child to an Islamic weekend school or to a full-time Islamic school is an important but minor part of their Islamic education. The major 'institution of learning' for each child is his family, and the major 'professors' of this institution are the parents.

ROLE MODELING

The most effective way to teach anything to anybody is to be a role model. This is why Allah sent human beings as prophets to all peoples. Whether we willingly accept this job or not, it is a fact that your child learns how to function in life by watching what you do. Even the absent parent is role modeling to the degree that a boy, whose father abandoned his family, will probably treat his own children the same way.

Every time we deal with our children, we are teaching them, whether we intend to or not. There is a famous poem by an anonymous author that depicts this vividly. It begins:

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.
If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.

Therefore we must examine carefully how we deal with our child in order to have a desirable end result. This same poem continues:

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.
If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice.
If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

As the above poem indicates, negative comments and treatment result in negative attributes in our children, and positive comments and treatment result in positive results. The term 'positive and negative reinforcement' is popular in modern psychology, but it was advocated by the Qu'ran and the actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (May Allah's peace and blessings be upon him), 1400 years ago. How do we use positive reinforcement to teach our children?

Young children are basically good. Furthermore they want to please their parents. When you praise them for their good behavior by telling them that Papa and/or Mama is happy with their action, you are using positive reinforcement. Unfortunately many parents ignore their child's good actions and only comment on the bad actions.