Self-control

Some students, when asked why we should fast, answer that it is “so that we will feel what the poor feel.” This is indeed a most laudable reason. I then ask the students, “if this were the only reason, then, if one is poor and often hungry, then one would not need to fast, right? In other words, fasting is only for the rich.”

The logic is obvious. I do not intend to launch onto a theological discussion. But I love studying the commandments that Allah SWT gives us because, interestingly, they contain a lot of principles about education.

Let’s look at the two most obvious pillars that we all perform daily and annually: praying and fasting. What is the common denominator here? Self-control. No matter how sleepy in the morning, how busy in the day or how tired in the evening, one must interrupt whatever one is doing to put time and energy aside and perform that short ritual. Telling a child to stop watching a favorite program, stop playing a computer game, or stop romping around with friends, and go pray is indeed a great test of self-control. This is harder for us living in non-Muslim countries since the world and all its attractions do not grind to a stop when prayer time comes.

Still, most prayers have quite a long range of time in which they can be performed on time, and so the amount of will power needed is not so great as for fasting. When I was in Jordan during my teen years, I once was in the midst of a discussion among other teenage girls, who all had a problem maintaining their weight. To my great surprise, most of them had no problem at all following various diets, something which is always a matter of struggle among teenage girls in other countries. The reason? Muslim girls find it pretty easy to eat only certain foods and avoid others because during Ramadan, they have to abstain from all foods and all liquids despite hunger and thirst.

Now, we all know this already, so what is the connotation with education? This is where I find that we as parents and educators have missed the message that our Creator has sent us. If self-control is part of a command that every single adult must achieve, then why is it that we as parents do not teach it to our children to prepare them for adulthood?

What could be the starting point of such a “self-control” education program? We know that the Qur’an tells us not to even say “oof!” to our parents (mother in particular). This means that the first thing we need to control is our attitude. How many teenagers today say more than just “oof!” to their parents when disagreeing on something? How did they reach that stage? Had they been taught not to frown, or sigh, or pout from early childhood onward, how could they become a teenager that retorts or shouts at his/her parents?

Not surprisingly, if you train your young toddler that a disrespectful attitude and a total loss of self-control are bad things, they will later be well-behaved and easily disciplined. How early should you start? I don’t think it’s ever too early. As a mother, I found that if you miss the 2nd birthday window, well, you have a handful of work coming up. Here in the West, that period of time is known as the “terrible twos”. I did the “self-control boot camp” at around 18 months for all my 7 children. If you take care of that at that time, you pretty much have a smooth sailing afterwards.

Here’s how to go about it. Identify a “time out” place in your home. This place should be safe, but the child should not be able to leave it on its own. The first one I used was my sitting-room, in our then small apartment. That room had a sliding door that was forever stuck, so one had to physically lift it up and put down the entire door panel with its frosted glass and all. A child cannot hurt himself on armchairs and carpet. My first son started getting tantrums around one year of age. Soon these started getting out of hand. So one day, my husband took the matter into his own hands. He physically carried our son into the sitting-room, put him on the carpet, closed the door so the frayed mom (me) would not interfere, and proceeded to go to sleep on the couch. My son bawled and screamed for around 45 minutes. Finally he stopped out of sheer exhaustion.

The lesson learned was: a) no one will respond to you if you do not behave yourself; and b) this is not an acceptable behavior. The next time it happened, it took about 10 minutes for him to stop crying. The third time, he stopped crying the minute he crossed into the sitting room. Thereafter, I only had to say: “Enough! Stop it.” And he would. Eventually, I only had to glare at him, lift a finger and point slowly at him for him to stop howling.

It is very important to train the first-born well. Because he becomes the living example for all subsequent siblings. The “time out” place changed with the years, according to our circumstances. But as long as the basic principle is there, anything will work. For my first daughter, I used a large flower pot I had purchased for an indoor tree, but never planted the tree. It was so large that I could put her in there and only her head and shoulders would show. She would peer out over the edge holding onto the rim with her little hands. I could continue doing my work and make sure she was safe while pointedly ignoring her cries until she quietened down. Today, family members joke about the “trash can”, but I must straighten the records and state formally that it never was a trash can. It was a ceramic flower pot.