



Fostering Muslim Children and Youth in Canada

Canada's growing Muslim community needs to pay more attention to developing foster care and social services

BY SYED IMTIAZ AHMAD

FOSTERING OCCURS WHEN A NON-RELATED family takes in a child or a youth to provide him/her with life's necessities and emotional support. Canada's Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) defines foster care as placing a child or young person in the home of someone who is compensated for caring for him/her, despite not being the child's biological parents.

"Foster care" and "adoption" are often used interchangeably, despite two fundamental differences between them. Foster care is a temporary measure that may be acceptable if there is an expectation of ultimate return to the biological parents; adoption is permanent. Funding agencies don't favor indefinite foster care because of potential complications, although technically no limitation has been placed on its duration. In addition, the child's biological parents retain parental rights while he/she is in foster care. Adoption terminates all such rights, even to the point of giving these children new names and telling them nothing about their biological parents.

Fostering may take place in families or "group homes," such as orphanages. While orphanages exist in many parts of the world, particularly in Muslim countries, in the U.S.

"orphanage" has been replaced by "group home," which indicates the lack any family setting. In Canada, the number of children and youth involved in family fostering is over 500,000. The fact that more than 20 percent of them live in group homes is considered unsatisfactory, because research shows that children placed in foster families have a better chance of success.

A common thread running through all religions and community cultures is the core importance of being good to others and doing good to them. In Islam, these terms are *ihsan* and *khayr*, respectively.

Muslims have fostered children ever since the advent of Islam, most notably the future Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*), who was fostered by his uncle and then his grandfather. The Arabic phrase for this arrangement is *re'aya at-tifl*, or simply *re'aya*: taking in an orphaned child who continues to be known by his/her biological father's name. The Quran uses *tabanni* for adoption.

In February 1853, a group of Canadian social reformers established the Children's Aid Society (CAS) with Charles Loring Brace as its secretary. The founders were motivated

by the desire to inform policy and provide social services to poor, disabled and homeless children and impoverished families.

In 1988 President Reagan proclaimed May to be "National Foster Care Month" to recognize those parents who open their homes to children in need and care. Every year a new theme is chosen. This year's theme is "Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents."

This year, Foster Care Month coincides with Ramadan. The purpose of fasting is to cleanse oneself spiritually and to rejuvenate oneself by striving to live more in accord with Islam's teachings and ideals. There is a heightened focus on proper practice, for belief has no value if it is not manifested in practice. Ramadan asks us to focus on cleansing our souls by reflecting on what we pray for and cleansing our possessions by seeking ways to be responsive and proactive when it comes to meeting the needs of those around us. Being a foster parent is clear need.

Four years after Canada's founding in 1867, the 1871 Canadian census recorded 13 Bosnian Muslims among the population. Even before the country's founding, there is evidence that Muslims were moving to areas known today as "Canada" since 1851, even as far back as 1492, when Columbus reached the "New World."

The 2011 Canada National Household Survey counted 1,053,945 Muslims, or about 3.2 percent of the population, making Islam the country's second largest religion. Perhaps the same or a higher proportion holds true



today. More than half of these Muslims reside in Ontario; however, every Canadian province and territory contains Muslims.

As Canada's Muslim population continues to grow, we can see that many of their needs have not been met, as is the case for the population at large. Just as social reformers established CAS in 1853, Muslim social reformers need to follow their example — with the added consideration of living an Islamic lifestyle.

For example, the community has more than 100 organizations, many of which are local mosques serving as places of worship and services as well as sites associated with food banks that serve thousands of *all* Canadians. Some also provide shelter to the homeless, as is the case with the 45-bed Muslim Welfare Centre facility in Whitby, Ontario.

However, the participation of Muslim organizations in foster parenting is quite limited. One reason for this is that the required skillset is demanding, for such children have often experienced trauma that requires professional training. The situation is further exacerbated when a child has to be moved from one home to another.

According to clinical neuropsychologist Dr. Saadia Ahmad, who assesses the mental health status of children removed from their homes allowing a child familiarity with culture, religion, and fundamental day to day practices can minimize trauma for the child. It allows the child to hold on to aspects of her/his identity in order to maintain as much of a stable sense of self as possible. It assists

with reassuring a child that his/her needs will be met in familiar ways.

Parenting invariably requires communication skills, empathy, patience and a commitment to support the child's proper growth — requirements that may vary from one child to another. It is often difficult to raise your own children, and likely much harder to provide care to the children of others.

call. A qualified Muslim family will likely be more successful in fostering a Muslim child. In fact, Muslims should regard providing such care as their responsibility. Muslim organizations should also seek to resolve familial conflicts, dysfunctions, and support issues because success in these areas will allow Muslim foster care children to rejoin their biological parents.

MERCY MISSION OF CANADA, A NATIONAL MUSLIM DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION, HAS LAUNCHED FOSTER LINK ([HTTPS://FOSTERLINK.CA](https://fosterlink.ca)) TO ENCOURAGE MUSLIM CANADIANS TO BECOME FOSTER PARENTS. ITS DIRECTOR SHAHZAD MUSTAFA BELONGS TO A MUSLIM FOSTERING FAMILY.

As formal foster care is highly regulated, it is hard to qualify for becoming foster parents. In Canada, Muslim fostering has a long way to go before becoming an organized operation. Informal fostering of the children of relatives and friends is taking place, and Islamic organizations are being asked to find foster parents. An informal arrangement can be made without involving the regulatory agencies. This approach has some benefits, but some risks may arise in complicated situations.


Any organization that supports foster care arrangements must have an ongoing setup to ensure success, as well as a registry of potential foster parents based on scrutiny, evaluation and professional training. Sometimes foster placements don't work, and the arrangement's end leads to various difficulties, among them trauma for the child, the family or both.

Mercy Mission of Canada, a national Muslim development organization, has launched Foster Link (<https://fosterlink.ca>) to encourage Muslim Canadians to become foster parents. Its director Shahzad Mustafa belongs to a Muslim fostering family. This project focuses on making the community aware of fostering, determining the family's demographic and support needs, connecting with CAS and similar agencies, facilitating placements and providing ongoing support to foster families.

The alert sent out by CAS about the scarcity of Muslim foster homes is a wake-up

Canada has nationwide service organizations such as ISNA-Canada, the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Muslim Association of Canada (MAC) and the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM). However, none of them have made any organized effort for fostering Muslim children. ISNA-Canada's Shaykh Abdalla Idris Ali, senior community and religious advisor, says that the only sustained activity is giving advice on specific requests for fostering. He feels that there is a need for training programs.

MAC executive director Dr. Sharaf Sharafeldin indicated that MAC provides support to those involved in fostering but does not have any dedicated setup. ICNA Relief Canada offers counseling and training to anyone willing to be a foster parent, whereas NCCM's priority is civic engagement.

The Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) stands out for its work in Muslim fostering. In 2009 it published "Caring for Muslim Children: A Guide for Foster Parents." In addition, its work was recognized and funded by Manitoba's General Child and Family Services Authority. It can be ordered by clicking the "Publications" button at www.issacanada.com. 

Dr. Syed Imtiaz Ahmad, emeritus professor at Eastern Michigan University, has served as ISNA vice president and president, ISNA Canada vice president and president, president of Computer Science Association of Canada, president of Association of Pakistani Scientists and Engineers of North America, president of Pakistan Canada Association, president of Windsor Islamic Association and chair of the ISNA Canada School Board.

