



Raising Resilient Muslim Youth: Strategies for Building a Strong Muslim Identity in Children

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I. Case Study

Hanan, a first generation Muslim American whose parents immigrated from the Middle East, remembers her struggles as a teen. She loved her parents and appreciated the struggles they went through to adapt to a new country and raise her and her siblings; however, she struggled with their rigid and strict approach to parenting. Hanan was rarely given the freedom to spend time with friends, and was not allowed to attend school events. This caused her to develop feelings of resentment towards her parents and their overprotectiveness as she got older. Her parents had a forceful attitude about religious practice, particularly concerning the way Hanan dressed. Whenever she wondered about why she was required to do certain things or prohibited from doing other things, Hanan's parents would respond with some version of "Because I said so."

Hanan went to public schools her whole life and struggled to belong. She always felt that she wasn't quite "American enough" for her friends nor "Muslim enough" for her parents. When with her family, she prayed and wore a hijab, but at school, she didn't feel comfortable wearing her hijab or stepping aside to pray. She didn't feel that she could share this with her parents. No matter who she was with, she felt like she couldn't be her real self, and had to decide which version of her would be the best fit for each circumstance.

After getting married and having children, Hanan decided that she didn't want her children to experience the same confusion she felt growing up. In response to her parents' overbearing attitude about religion, Hanan shifted toward the opposite end of the spectrum and hesitated to offer explicit directions surrounding faith to her children but also worried that they wouldn't feel proud of their identity as Muslims unless she addressed it head on. She often wondered: How can I help my children to develop strong Islamic identities so they don't struggle the same way I did?

II. Goals of this chapter

- What is the importance of establishing a healthy identity in children and how can it affect resilience?
- What do the Qur'an and Sunnah teach us about identity?
- How can parents foster a strong Muslim identity in children?
- What role do I play as a parent in my child's identity development?
- What are concrete everyday actions I can take to help my child develop a strong Islamic core, confidence, and identity as a Muslim?
- How can I navigate obstacles that may impact my child's ability to create a healthy identity?

III. Introduction

The development and maintenance of a healthy identity is key to promoting emotional, mental, and spiritual resilience. While identity formation is usually associated with adolescence, in reality it begins early in life and develops in stages. Thus, as Hanan recognized, one must address the question of identity in children's early and formative years. Children constantly explore questions about who they are and who they will become physically, relationally, socially, emotionally. Our children will face difficulties at every stage in their lives, so prioritizing their identity development is one of the greatest services we as parents can provide to help them weather the inevitable storms, and—even more—grow through them.

Psychological research has found that religious identity provides a sense of continuity across time and place, and allows an individual to develop a sense of internal consistency despite the unavoidable changes that time brings to society, relationships, and self.¹ Societal standards are constantly in flux, so if our children's sense of self stems solely from their surroundings, confusion is inevitable. Instead, our goal as parents is to help our children forge a durable identity through the stability offered by Allah's guidance—an identity based on the truth of Islam. The Prophet ﷺ said, “No child is born but that he is upon the

¹ Jane Kroger, *Identity Development: Adolescence through Adulthood* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007).

natural instinct. His parents make him a Jew, or a Christian, or Magian.”² We are each born upon an innate disposition (*fiṭra*) to worship Allah alone, but the *fiṭra* will only blossom if we take active steps to preserve it. We must allow our children to fulfill their natural hunger for meaning by finding it in their relationship with Allah.

“Identity” is a contentious concept,³ and theorists have offered a number of competing definitions.⁴ Many psychotherapists understand identity as the way people see themselves, a unique combination of their beliefs, drives, values, and abilities, all of which come together to form an overall image of the self.⁵ To put it simply: Identity is how you reconcile the various parts of yourself into a collective whole. Given that our goal here is to focus on the aspects of the self needed to build resilience, particularly for Muslim children, this is the definition of identity we will be using in this paper. A large part of this also includes the importance of action. Islamic identity requires Islamic action, which is another facet that will be emphasized throughout this paper.

Many theories of identity are derived from a secular Western framework, and while we ourselves draw from this framework, we challenge some of its core principles. For instance, whereas some theories suggest all “identities”—religious, racial, professional—are equivalent and exist in parallel, we argue that only our Islamic identity is central and informs various *roles* we have, such as being a mother or a husband. Each of our social roles is conditioned by this core identity, as are the sets of *behaviors* informed by the identity. While a role can contribute to one’s identity, a role is what someone *does* whereas an identity is who the person *is*. Embracing a Muslim *identity* allows us to acknowledge and fulfill the responsibilities bestowed by Allah and strive for excellence (*iḥsān*) in the *roles* He has given us.

² *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1358; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2658.

³ Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, “The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2000): 284–97.

⁴ James D. Fearon, “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?,” manuscript draft, November 3, 1999. Some social scientists define *identity* as identification with a social category, the culture of a group, or the significance attributed to a collection of roles negotiated in a complex and modern society. See also Jacquelynne Eccles, “Who Am I and What Am I Going to Do With My Life? Personal and Collective Identities as Motivators of Action,” *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (2009): 78–89, <http://www.doi.org/10.1080/00461520902832368>.

⁵ H. M. Kasinath, “Adolescence: Search for an Identity,” *Journal on Educational Psychology* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–6.

Identity formation is not a linear process, but rather, a continuous one that unfolds through our deliberate choices. Those choices both inform and are informed by our values, and so our choices slowly but surely shape a coherent sense of self. Our *roles* and *behaviors* exist in a feedback loop with our core identity. While we strive for a stable sense of self based on our Islamic identity, it will necessarily fluctuate. Just as *īmān* (faith) increases and decreases, our Islamic identity is susceptible to changes as well.⁶ Our roles are impacted by our identity and our identity can also be affected by the roles we adopt in different stages of life. A person who struggles to integrate different aspects of their identity into a consistent image of self can suffer from role confusion, a weak sense of self, and sometimes even mental illness.

You can see the subtle interplay of identity, roles, and behaviors in these common examples:

- The sheltered Muslim teenager who moves away to college and becomes friends with his non-Muslim roommate. The teenager may have a good Islamic identity which his friend respects, but sometimes seeing his friend engage in what appear to be fun but unIslamic social behaviors makes him feel tempted and weak.
- The loyal husband who moves his aging mother into his home, trying to balance his role as a husband and son in accordance with his Islamic identity, but finds it challenging when the two roles appear to be in competition due to different expectations of his mother and wife.
- The devout Muslimah who loves reading Qur'an, fasting, and praying *sunnah* prayers throughout the day and night, and so struggles with her new role as a mother because these acts of worship are now suddenly replaced with different kinds of worship behaviors she is not yet accustomed to, such as caring for her infant's basic needs.

⁶ Abu Ja'far reported: 'Umayr ibn Habib, may Allah be pleased with him, said, "Faith increases and decreases." It was said, "How does it increase and decrease?" 'Umayr said, "If we remember our Lord and fear Him, it will increase. If we are heedless and we forget and we waste our time, it will decrease." *Shu'ab al-īmān*, no. 55.

Throughout this paper, you will find suggestions to help nurture a stable Islamic identity for your child, in part through how your child approaches their various social roles such as student, friend, and athlete. Each of those roles, and their associated actions, may appear “secular” or “non-religious,” but what we do in those roles can be forms of worship. Even our familial roles as parents or professional roles as doctors, for instance, should build up and be built up by our Islamic identity. Our worldly activities do not fall outside of our Islamic identity; they are in fact part of it. An employee, a baseball aficionado, a hiker, a roller coaster enthusiast—we are all these people as Muslims first and foremost.

We see this in the example of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ as well. The companion, Ḥanzala (rA), said:

Allah’s Messenger, when we are in your company, we are reminded of Hell-Fire and Paradise as if we are seeing them with our own eyes, but whenever we go away from you and attend to our wives, children, and business, these things go out of our minds.” Thereupon Allah’s Messenger ﷺ said: “By Him in Whose Hand is my life, if your state of mind remains the same as it is in my presence and you are always busy in remembrance (of Allah), the angels would shake hands with you in your beds and in your paths but, Ḥanzala, there is a time for this and a time for that.”⁷

As seen in our [introductory paper](#), our model of Islamic resilience takes the form of a pyramid, with the base being the most important and foundational—although all levels are essential and needed in building resilience from a psychospiritual perspective. [Our second paper](#) delved into the importance of building an attachment to Allah first and foremost, followed by attachment to parents, the prophets, the Qur’an and the *ummah* at large. After attachment, the next level in the pyramid is the significance of connection to one’s self. The current paper discusses this layer and protective factors related to identity and self-esteem.

Our Islamically Integrated Resiliency Model (IIRM) asserts that the development of an identity with Islam at its foundation is essential in fostering mental, emotional, and spiritual health in Muslim children. A healthy Islamic identity

⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2750a.

allows children to build resilience in the face of daily challenges and provides a sense of stability. In this paper, we explore research findings as well as Islamic principles that will help us as parents (with the guidance and will of Allah) to raise children whose actions and ambitions ultimately rest on their connection with Allah and their pursuit of Paradise (*jannah*).

Islamically Integrated Resiliency Model



Our parenting paradigm is based on the beautiful *āyāt* (sing. *āya*) in which Luqmān the Wise gave his son profound advice that we must still heed today. Among Luqmān’s gems is the following verse, which inspired our exploration of the crucial role of identity development in resiliency:

But if they (i.e., your parents) pressure you to associate with Me what you have no knowledge of, do not obey them. Still keep their company in this world courteously, and follow the way of those who turn to Me in devotion.⁸

Staying true to oneself and one’s purpose of worshiping Allah, even in the face of pressure, is a core component of our identity as Muslims. Such steadfastness is a necessary component in building resilience among Muslim children, especially those living in the West. Allah tells us, “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”⁹ Helping our children to live in accordance with their

⁸ Qur’an 31:15.

⁹ Qur’an 51:56.

purpose of worshiping Allah allows them to face struggles with the resilience inherent in a solid Muslim identity.

In the following sections, we have divided the paper into two main parts: 1) the importance of identity development in raising resilient children; and 2) practical ways to foster identity development through nurturing self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-trust.

IV. Foundational concepts: The importance of identity development

The role of identity in resilience

Resilience is the capacity to effectively adapt when confronted with adversity or stress.¹⁰ The relationship between resilience and identity is bidirectional. Resilience can come from a strong identity eliciting both determination and motivation.¹¹ In marginalized communities experiencing discrimination, a shared identity can help build unity and resistance when experiencing systemic injustice, boosting positive self-image and self-acceptance.¹² Identity can also be shaped by adverse life experiences, newfound purpose, and a sense of belonging and self-worth.¹³ Successfully navigating difficult experiences can foster introspection, highlight inner strengths, and uncover values and beliefs that further enhance one's sense of self.¹⁴

Resilience can be of different types,¹⁵ including:

1. Surviving setbacks and challenges with as little damage as possible;

¹⁰ Gang Wu, Adriana Feder, Hagit Cohen, Joanna J. Kim, Solara Calderon, Dennis S. Charney, and Aleksander A. Mathé, "Understanding Resilience," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 7 (2013): 10.

¹¹ Santiago Sevilla Vallejo, "The Interplay of Identity and Resilience: Unleashing Inner Strength in the Face of Adversity," *Mental Health and Human Resilience International Journal* 7, no. 1 (2023), 1–2.

¹² Vallejo, "The Interplay of Identity and Resilience."

¹³ Vallejo, "The Interplay of Identity and Resilience."

¹⁴ Vallejo, "The Interplay of Identity and Resilience."

¹⁵ Darko Marčinko, Miro Jakovljević, Nenad Jakšić, Sarah Bjedov, and Aleksandra Mindoljević Drakulić, "The Importance of Psychodynamic Approach during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Psychiatria Danubina* 32, no. 1 (2020): 15–21; Samuel Dickinson, "Post-Traumatic Growth in the Twenty-First Century: How Current Trends May Threaten Our Ability to Grow after Trauma," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2021): 503–11.

2. Remaining firm in the face of setbacks and challenges and developing the ability to return to a default state of equilibrium after setbacks;
3. Growing from setbacks and challenges. This is the highest form of resiliency, and has been termed *antifragility* or *post-traumatic growth*.

For children growing up as minorities, like Muslim children in the West, solidifying a healthy Islamic identity against peer and societal pressures is essential for spiritual health.¹⁶ Religiosity in Muslim teens is associated with well-being, self-worth, and low anxiety.¹⁷ A strong Islamic identity provides the beliefs and values that contribute to resilience by shaping the core of who your child is—a worshiper of Allah and a beloved creation of the Almighty. This sustains your child with the perspective that this *dunyā* is temporary, that hardship comes with reward, and that we are rewarded based on our efforts, not results. The Qur'an and Prophetic biography (*sīra*) can be used to teach perseverance and resilience through real-life examples.

When a child is able to maintain a stable sense of self in the midst of struggles, uncertainties, and life changes, their ability to bounce back from these difficulties increases.¹⁸ A middle schooler who chooses to wear the hijab to please and obey Allah, with absolute belief in the reward that comes from this choice, will be better equipped to thrive despite criticism from peers as opposed to a student who lacks similar conviction.

In this paper, we focus on three elements that can help nurture the beliefs, values, and behaviors that our children need to develop a healthy identity:

1. **Self-Esteem**: Healthy self-esteem allows children to acknowledge their inherent, God-given worth. This allows them to face difficulties with a stable sense of self and a clear purpose, understanding that Allah has granted them the strengths and qualities needed to navigate challenges.

¹⁶ Gloria T. DiFulvio, "Sexual Minority Youth, Social Connection and Resilience: From Personal Struggle to Collective Identity," *Social Science and Medicine* 72 (2011): 1611–17, www.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.02.045; Anisa N. Goforth, Evelyn R. Oka, Frederick T. L. Leong, and Daniel J. Denis, "Acculturation, Acculturative Stress, Religiosity and Psychological Adjustment among Muslim Arab American Adolescents," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 8, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁷ Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, "Religiosity, Subjective Well-Being, Self-Esteem, and Anxiety among Kuwaiti Muslim Adolescents," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2011): 129–40.

¹⁸ Breakwell, "Identity Resilience."

2. **Self-Efficacy:** Healthy self-efficacy involves the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or cope with a difficulty. This empowers children to strive toward their goals with the understanding that, while they must do their part in working toward the outcome they want, relying on Allah's help is necessary every step of the way. Healthy self-efficacy allows children to face challenges with a feeling of safety in knowing that Allah is our Protector and Provider in every circumstance, while also encouraging their own capabilities to handle difficult situations.
3. **Self-Trust:** Healthy self-trust involves the belief in one's ability to act in a way aligned with one's best interests and personal values. This allows children to feel capable of exercising their God-given free will in a manner that benefits them in this life and the next. It empowers them to view challenges as manageable due to confidence in their capacity to make positive decisions even in difficult moments, and it nurtures trust in Allah that He has not tested them with more than they can bear.

All three of these concepts are intertwined and build upon one another. For example, nurturing a healthy sense of self-esteem allows children to feel capable of striving toward what they want in life, while a healthy understanding of their capabilities allows them to make positive decisions and stand up for themselves when needed. While not an exhaustive list, these are some of the foundational elements that can help children feel a sense of strength in their Muslim identity, allowing them to feel worthy as worshipers of Allah, capable of achieving their purpose as His servants and able to make choices that align with their values.

The importance of nurturing a strong Muslim identity

The stronger one's identity, the more potentially resilient. That resiliency ensures consistency in our worship of Allah, thereby enhancing our betterment in both this life and the hereafter. Allah promises us that we will face tests, which can be divided into two categories based on their Qur'anic descriptions:

- 1) *Tests of Destiny:* These are the tests of fate that Allah has written for us. This includes things in life over which we have no control, including when we are born, when we die, an unexpected diagnosis, an accident that befalls a loved

one, etc. Though these tests can superficially manifest as “good” or “evil,” everything that comes from Allah is good despite our personal perceptions of certain struggles. Allah promises that we will be tested in these ways:

Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned.¹⁹

And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.²⁰

2) *Tests in Worship*: These are tests of revelation and how we choose to respond to the legislation and limitations revealed by Allah, including fulfilling prescribed acts and refraining from prohibited acts. We see this test in the following verses:

For indeed, We created humans from a drop of mixed fluids, [in order] to test them, so We made them hear and see. We already showed them the Way, whether they [choose to] be grateful or ungrateful.²¹

We have indeed made whatever is on earth as an adornment for it, in order to test which of them is best in deeds.²²

Resilience is necessary to effectively respond to both types of tests, as well as the ability to stand firm in faith and obedience to Allah when following commands that run counter to our personal desires. Helping our children to build a strong Islamic identity can facilitate resilience by allowing them to align their beliefs, values, and behaviors.

V. Fostering healthy Islamic identity development: Practical approaches

¹⁹ Qur'an 21:35.

²⁰ Qur'an 2:155.

²¹ Qur'an 76:2–3.

²² Qur'an 18:7.

The remainder of this paper will explore what we, as parents, can practically do to enhance and nurture our children's Islamic identity. The following suggestions encourage enhancing an attachment with Allah, first and foremost, as well as healthy attachment to parents and other caregivers (for more on this, please read [our paper on the first layer](#)). These suggestions do not constitute an exhaustive list but should help parents nurture a healthy Islamic identity in their children.

The following suggestions are focused on the importance of nurturing: (i) self-esteem; (ii) self-efficacy; and (iii) self-trust. They offer practical ways to foster these qualities in our children to build their resilience through a strong, healthy, and stable Islamic identity. In order to help readers digest the content more easily, given that the upcoming sections are dense with information, we start each subsection with a text box on what to expect and close each subsection with a summary.

I. SELF-ESTEEM

How To Build Self Esteem

- I. Labeling
- II. Strengths-Based Approach
 - a. Verbalizing observed strengths
 - b. Helping your child identify strengths
 - c. Paying attention to what your child is doing right
- III. Conveying a Sense of Importance
 - a. Showing interest in what your child enjoys
 - b. Making space for your child in discussions
 - c. Investing in the magic ratio

Self-esteem, identity development, and resilience

Self-esteem, which like identity has been defined differently by social scientists, generally refers to an individual's subjective judgment of their worth as a person.²³ High self-esteem also predicts success and well-being in relationships, work, and

²³ M. Brent Donnellan, Kali H. Trzesniewski, and Richard W. Robins, "Self-Esteem: Enduring Issues and Controversies," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbooks of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. T. Chamorro-Premuzic, S. Von Stumm, and A. Furnham, pp. 718–46 (N.p.: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

health.²⁴ Furthermore, individuals whose self-esteem or life satisfaction are reactive and erratic are more vulnerable to mental health challenges.²⁵ In particular, frequent fluctuations in self-esteem are associated with higher rates of depressive symptoms.²⁶

While there is research supporting the benefits of high self esteem, working on self-esteem in isolation from other aspects of self-development can be harmful.²⁷ For example, cultivating self-esteem alone can lead to narcissism.²⁸ As such, it is important for Muslim parents to help nurture healthy self-esteem within an Islamic framework, teaching children that ultimately all honor, success, and accomplishment come from Allah and not just our individual effort.

The Islamic importance of healthy self-esteem

Research has found that our self-esteem and perception of God are intertwined. In one study, researchers found that adult self-esteem was positively related to loving-accepting God images.²⁹ This suggests a link between a sense of self-worth and an understanding of Allah as a loving, forgiving, and merciful God. Thus, nurturing healthy self-esteem can make an image of God as loving and forgiving seem intuitively plausible to our children.

Core beliefs: The foundations of healthy self-esteem

Self-esteem can be cultivated in a variety of ways, but at the root of healthy self-esteem are healthy **core beliefs**.³⁰ Core beliefs are beliefs that people hold

²⁴ Donnellan, Trzesniewski, and Robins, “Self-Esteem.”

²⁵ Peter C. Clasen, Aaron J. Fisher, and Christopher G. Beevers, “Mood-Reactive Self-Esteem and Depression Vulnerability: Person-Specific Symptom Dynamics via Smart Phone Assessment,” *PLoS One* 10, no. 7 (2015): e0129774.

²⁶ Julia Friederike Sowislo, Ulrich Orth, and Laurenz L. Meier, “What Constitutes Vulnerable Self-Esteem? Comparing the Prospective Effects of Low, Unstable, and Contingent Self-Esteem on Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 123, no. 4 (2014): 737–53.

²⁷ Jesse Singal, “How the Self-Esteem Craze Took Over America and Why the Hype Was Irresistible,” *The Cut*, 2017, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/05/self-esteem-grit-do-they-really-help.html>.

²⁸ Singal, “How the Self-Esteem Craze Took Over America.”

²⁹ Peter Benson and Bernard Spilka, “God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12, no. 3 (1973): 297–310.

³⁰ Silvia Casale, Giulia Fioravanti, Sara Bocci Benucci, Andrea Falone, Valdo Ricca, and Francesco Rotella Casale, “A Meta-Analysis on the Association between Self-Esteem and Problematic Smartphone Use,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 134 (2022), 107302.

about themselves, others, and the world; for example, believing that people are inherently untrustworthy, or believing that you can handle the challenges that come your way, or believing that Allah only decrees what is best for you.³¹ The specific core beliefs that undergird our self-esteem include who we are (philosophy on life), what we do (our job or purpose), what we have (inherited or acquired quantities or qualities), how we appear to others (looks, reputation, and personality) and to what or whom we are attached (God, a particular person, group, or thing such as power or money).³²

Key to any set of core beliefs is a person's archetype: their "ideal guide for maneuvering through the maze of life."³³ Having a God-centered archetype, in which one sees oneself as created by God for a purpose—to live in accordance with God's expectations—provides grounding, honor, and a sense of inherent worth. People with a materialist archetype have a more fragile self-esteem and lack the same security or life satisfaction.³⁴ When our children possess an unshakeable core belief that they are loved and worthy in the eyes of Allah and their parents, they are able to ride the rollercoaster of life's ups and downs with resilience and authenticity, not caring if others disagree with their choices.

Core beliefs, particularly those related to one's purpose, can become *self-fulfilling prophecies*; e.g., if a person has a false expectation, they take actions that confirm that expectation. If someone assumes they will not succeed, they will not take the appropriate steps to become successful. The view children have of themselves as well as the people around them powerfully impacts their choices.

Practical ways to cultivate healthy core identity beliefs

I. Labeling

The labels we assign our children affect the ways they see themselves. Do they feel intelligent and valuable, with the sense that they have important input to offer? Do

³¹ Judith S. Beck, "Cognitive Therapy," in *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2010), 1–3.

³² Joseph A. Bailey II, "The Foundation of Self-Esteem," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 5 (2003): 388–93.

³³ Bailey, "Foundation of Self-Esteem."

³⁴ Bailey, "Foundation of Self-Esteem."

they feel like time spent with them is worthwhile and enjoyable? Do they overhear words of criticism or love when we talk about them with others? How we perceive and speak about our children shapes their self-view. Even if labels are inevitable in everyday communication, it behooves us to exercise caution with the “you are” statements we say to our kids. The labels we use may make the difference between our children developing healthy or unhealthy core beliefs about themselves.

Labeling and faith

The Qur’an teaches core values and offers reminders that, when internalized, can positively contribute to Islamic identity development and resilience-building.³⁵ The Qur’an also offers healthy, strength-focused labels we can strive toward, helping us and our children to feel a sense of belonging and honor in identifying as Muslims. Allah tells us in the Qur’an,

And strive for Allah with the striving due to Him. He has chosen you and has not placed upon you any difficulty in your religion. [It is] the religion of your father, Abraham. He [i.e., Allah] named you “Muslims” before [in former scriptures] and in this [revelation] that the Messenger may be a witness over you and you may be witnesses over the people...³⁶

Allah gifts us with the most honorable of labels in this verse by calling us “Muslims”; i.e., those who submit to Him. Here it is important to note that there is no complete Islamic identity without Islamic action. Allah has elevated us over other nations, and He has created a way out for us from our difficulties, based on our actions as believers.³⁷ Identifying ourselves as Muslims allows us to acknowledge Allah’s blessings, which can help us to face life’s challenges with patience and resilience.

Consider the following verses, which are just a small selection of verses in the Qur’an that highlight the character of the believers (*mu’minūn*, sing. *mu’min*):

³⁵ Visser-Vogel, “Religious Identity Development.”

³⁶ Qur’an 22:78.

³⁷ Ismā‘īl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, ed. Sāmī ibn Muhammad al-Salāma (Riyadh: Dār Tayba, 1999), verse 22:78.

The [true] **believers** are only those who believe in Allah and His Messenger—never doubting—and strive with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah. They are the ones true in faith.³⁸

Say, “Nothing will ever befall us except what Allah has destined for us. He is our Protector.” So in Allah let the **believers** put their trust.³⁹

The **believers** are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy.⁴⁰

They are those who establish prayer and donate from what We have provided for them. It is they who are the true **believers**. They will have elevated ranks, forgiveness, and an honorable provision from their Lord.⁴¹

Verses such as these highlight the qualities we seek to emulate in order to strengthen our identities as Muslims—and the values, actions, and characteristics we should highlight as we raise our children. When your child is struggling to make a decision about how to respond to a situation, verses like these can be referred to as a guide to solidify their identity as worshipers of Allah, encouraging them to adopt not just the label of “believer,” but also the actions needed to earn that label. For example, when your child recounts an argument he had with a friend, encourage him to reflect on the meaning of the verse, “The **believers** are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy.”⁴² Discuss how this verse can be implemented to encourage actions and intentions that align with Islamic values.

How to cultivate positive labeling of our children

If we struggle with negatively labeling our children, what are some antidotes?

The first step is to create awareness. This is two-fold: create awareness of the labels you assign to your child and the labels you assign to yourself, particularly as a parent. For example, if you view yourself as an angry mom, you will naturally assume that there is a lot of negativity in your relationship with your child, leading

³⁸ Qur'an 49:15.

³⁹ Qur'an 9:51.

⁴⁰ Qur'an 49:10.

⁴¹ Qur'an 8:3–4.

⁴² Qur'an 49:10.

to a core belief that you are a “failure” in this role. How might that impact your relationship with your child? And how about your perception of your ability to improve your relationship with your child? Try this: Create a list of labels you use when describing yourself, particularly as a parent (“I am _____.”). The more critical we are of ourselves, the more critical we tend to be of those around us, including our children. Creating awareness around this tendency of self-criticism can be transformative.

To build awareness of the labels you assign to your child, create a list of labels you associate with your child. Reflect on the labels inspired by various situations that have come up over the past couple of weeks. For example, when your son threw a tantrum because he did not get the candy he wanted at the store, did that prompt a label of “spoiled” or “difficult”? When he ran to give you a hug when you picked him up from school, did you view him as “loving”?

The second step is to separate your child from their mistakes. We see this in the way that Prophet Joseph (Yūsuf) attributed his brothers’ cruelty (i.e., leaving him in a well as a young boy) to Satan (Shayṭān) rather than to some essential aspect of their character.⁴³ Describe behavior rather than issuing labels. For example, “He failed a test” vs. “He is a failure.” Or, “He is throwing a tantrum because he wants a lollipop” vs. “He is a spoiled brat.”

The third step is to reframe our observations of our children. Consider the positive flipside of every negative trait you observe. For example, if you view your child as “stubborn,” what is the positive side of this trait? Maybe they are also persistent, determined, and not easily influenced by others. Viewed in this light, labels encourage positive action and higher self-esteem.

Summary of Cultivating Positive Labeling

To enhance this activity, write out your thoughts and feelings on paper.

⁴³ “Then he raised his parents to the throne, and they all fell down in prostration to Joseph, who then said, ‘O my dear father! This is the interpretation of my old dream. My Lord has made it come true. He was truly kind to me when He freed me from prison, and brought you all from the desert after Satan had ignited rivalry between me and my siblings. Indeed my Lord is subtle in fulfilling what He wills. Surely He [alone] is the All-Knowing, All-Wise.’” Qur’an 12:100.

Step 1: Create awareness of the labels you use for yourself and your child. Pay attention to how you label yourself and your child throughout the day, and especially when under stress.

Step 2: Separate yourself and your child from your mistakes. Remind yourself that everyone makes mistakes and mistakes do not define you.

Step 3: Positively reframe negative attributes of you and your child. An easy way to do this is to fold a sheet of paper in half vertically, and write the negative attributes on one side with the positive reframes parallel on the other side.

I. Adopting a strengths-based approach

You may have heard your child say things like, “I’m the worst!” or “I’m not good enough” or “I’m the dumbest person in my class.” As a parent, hearing remarks like this can be painful and leave you wondering what you are doing wrong. Realize that the core beliefs we hold come from a combination of our experiences and our innate temperaments, and it is natural for kids (and adults) to be hard on themselves sometimes. However, parents also need tools to address demoralizing self-talk.

One of these tools is taking a **strengths-based approach**,⁴⁴ which emphasizes a child’s individual resilience and ability as opposed to flaws and deficits. Challenges can blind people to their many virtues. A strengths-based approach facilitates a perspective shift, transforming difficulties into opportunities for growth. This approach creates positive expectations that things can be different and opens the way for the development of competencies.⁴⁵

The strengths-based approach in our faith

Consider the way Allah encourages us to see ourselves at our best, as He sees us: “Whoever acts in righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer—We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give

⁴⁴ Wayne McCashen, *The Strengths Approach* (Victoria, Australia: St. Luke's Innovative Resources, 2005).

⁴⁵ Wayne Hammond and Rob Zimmerman, “A Strengths-Based Perspective,” *Resiliency Initiatives*, 2012, 1–18.

them their reward [in the hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do.”⁴⁶

We see a beautiful example of strengths-based language in the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his wife, Khadīja (rA). When he returned from the Cave of Ḥirā’ after the intense experience of receiving the first revelation, he was trembling in fright. He asked Khadīja to cover him and said, “O Khadīja! What is wrong with me? I was afraid that something bad might happen to me.” Khadīja reassured him: “Allah will never disgrace you, for by Allah, you keep good relations with your kith and kin, speak the truth, help the poor and the destitute, entertain your guests generously, and assist those who are stricken with calamities.”⁴⁷

Here, Khadīja (rA) comforted the Prophet ﷺ during a moment of fear by invoking the strengths of his character she knew to be true. Imagine how relieving it must have been for him in that moment to be reminded that he had qualities and actions that are beloved to Allah. In the same way, reassuring our children by reference to their strengths is a powerful way to encourage positive self-talk and a healthy self-concept.

How to use a strengths-based approach with your child

Verbalize their strengths

Note how Khadīja (rA) attached the strengths of the Prophet ﷺ to qualities that are pleasing to Allah (e.g., maintaining family ties, truthfulness, and caring for the poor, downtrodden, and guests). We can do the same for our children as a way of solidifying their Islamic identity. For example, when your child chooses to share something they love with a friend, label the quality you notice by saying, “You’re such a generous person to share your favorite candy with your friend. Allah loves people who are generous and He loves you!”

As mentioned earlier, children tend to behave in ways that meet others’ expectations of them. Therefore, if we speak to our children as though they are capable, strong, hardworking, and worthy servants of Allah, their actions and

⁴⁶ Qur’an 16:97.

⁴⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4953, bk. 65, hadith 475.

choices are more likely to reflect this. For example, when your child is struggling with something difficult, notice their persistence and label it, saying something like, “I can tell that math problem is hard. You’re such a hard worker to keep trying even when you’re frustrated!” or “It’s so frustrating that your tower keeps falling. You’re a trooper to keep trying. You’ll get there!”

Help your child identify their own strengths

It is also important to help your child identify their own strengths. While it’s wonderful for children to hear about their positive qualities from others, they themselves must acknowledge those qualities for them to truly translate into healthy self-esteem.

Questions to Help Your Child Identify Their Strengths_

These questions are great to ask casually when driving or eating a meal together. Limit your discussion to one question per sitting to go into depth.

- Which of Allah’s Names has been on your mind lately? When do you tend to think about this Name of Allah? How do you feel when you remember it?
- What is something you’ve done recently - or a quality you have - that you hope Allah especially loves?
- What’s your favorite thing to do?
- What makes you feel super energetic and excited?
- If your best friend described you, what do you think they’d say?
- What do you think a successful day looks like? What made it successful?
- What are you good at?
- What feels hard for you right now? How are you dealing with it?
- What’s your favorite thing about school?
- Tell me about something you achieved that you’re really proud of.
- What’s your least favorite thing to do?

- How do you stay motivated when you feel like things are getting difficult?

Pay attention to what your child is doing right

A strengths-based approach requires that we pay attention to even minute details about our children and their behaviors. As parents, we often highlight the things our children need to correct: *Clean up that mess. Have you brushed your teeth? Don't hit your sister!* This is a common complaint children make in therapy: “The only things my parents talk to me about are all the things I’m doing wrong. Can’t they see how hard I’m trying?”

Anas ibn Mālik described the Prophet’s tendency to de-emphasize mistakes, saying, “I served the Prophet ﷺ for ten years. By Allah, he never even said to me, ‘Uff!’ He never said harshly, ‘Why did you do that?’ or, ‘Why did you not do that?’”⁴⁸

Consider the way the Prophet ﷺ dealt with an uncomfortable situation when a young man requested permission to commit adultery (*zinā*).⁴⁹ While many people might have labeled him shameless or sinful for even asking this question, the Prophet ﷺ viewed him as someone striving toward good. He told him to come closer and sit down. He spoke to the young man gently, helping him consider the situation from a different perspective, and ended their back-and-forth discussion with a supplication (*du‘ā*) asking Allah to forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity. From that day forward, the young man no longer struggled with that desire. That is the power of seeing the good in a young person rather than assuming the worst.

While parents naturally must advise and guide their children, focusing on what they are doing right is just as important. *Thank you for putting your plate in the sink. I love how diligently you’re doing your homework! Great job getting your morning routine done quickly!* Focus on the good rather than on what is lacking, and when your child does something that brings you joy, tell them. Consider the

⁴⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5691; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2309.

⁴⁹ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 22211.

advice of the Prophet ﷺ: “When one of you loves his brother, let him know.”⁵⁰ This is an acknowledgment of Allah’s blessings and a reflection of gratitude. Allah tells us, “If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more.”⁵¹ Imagine the blessings you will find in your relationship with your child once you consciously shift to expressing gratitude and acknowledging the good you see in them.

Summary of Using a Strengths-Based Perspective

1. Catch your child doing good *behaviors* (helping someone, diligently completing homework, praying without being asked, etc.), identify the behaviors, and then reinforce them through verbal praise or affection.
2. Identify positive *traits* in your child as you see them and highlight them. Tie those traits to positive role models if possible. For example, “When you and your brother stood up to that bully at school it reminded me of when Moses (Mūsā) stood up to Pharaoh when he was trying to make everyone do what he said.”
3. Tie the positive qualities you see in your child back to Allah. For example, if your child is doing great in math, say something like, “Isn’t it wonderful that Allah blessed you with such a strong brain and made you into such a hard worker? I’m so proud of you.” In this way, your child’s strengths are emphasized but always connected back to Allah, thereby creating a stronger connection between your child’s self-concept and relationship with Allah.
4. Consider working with your child on a strengths poster, identifying their skills, positive attributes, and overall virtues. Have your child decorate the poster and make it a work of art that they can hang on a wall in their room.

III. Help your child feel important

You cannot develop self-esteem if you do not believe yourself to be inherently valuable. When children feel that they are significant, loved, and valuable members

⁵⁰ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2392.

⁵¹ Qur’an 14:7.

of the family, their self-esteem increases alongside their sense of belonging.⁵² A sense of rejection produces the opposite result.⁵³

Keep in mind that telling your child that they are important does not mean telling them that they are the *most* important person in the world, and that therefore their every interest, whim, and desire must be accommodated. Limits and boundaries are necessary and healthy; a child should understand that they are not the center of the universe and that they need to accommodate others' needs and wants as well. This balance between humility and self-esteem is important for spiritual, psychological, social, and emotional development. An example of what this balance might look like: *It's time for the sunset (Maghrib) prayer. I know it's hard to stop playing Minecraft, but nothing is more important than making time for what Allah wants us to do. After prayer, I'd love to hear about what you've been building.*

Conveying a sense of their value and importance to Allah

Conveying a sense of value to our children allows them to internalize the idea that they are also valuable and important to Allah (swt). In a beautiful hadith, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar (rA) reported:

I saw the Messenger of Allah circling the Kaaba and saying, "How pure you are and how pure is your fragrance! How great you are and how great is your sanctity! By the one in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, the sanctity of the believer is greater to Allah than your sanctity, in his wealth, his life, and to assume nothing of him but good."⁵⁴

This hadith clearly conveys the importance of internalizing the inherent value of a believer. As parents, conveying our children's value in our interactions with them can be a means of raising their self-esteem and further nurturing their resilience.⁵⁵ Children naturally feel more comfortable embracing Islamic values and living by them when they know that they are valued by those closest to them. It allows them

⁵² Lisa Zadro, Kipling D. Williams, and Rick Richardson, "How Low Can You Go? Ostracism by a Computer Is Sufficient to Lower Self-Reported Levels of Belonging, Control, Self-Esteem, and Meaningful Existence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, no. 4 (2004): 560–67.

⁵³ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

⁵⁴ *Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 3932, and graded authentic (*sahih*) by al-Albani in *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥah* no. 3420.

⁵⁵ Baidi Bukhori, Zahraa Hassan, Ibnu Hadjar, and Rifa Hidayah, "The Effect of Spirituality and Social Support from the Family toward Final Semester University Students' Resilience," *Man in India* 97, no. 19 (2017): 313–21.

the safety to make choices that distinguish themselves from non-Muslims because they are reassured by the sense of belonging they experience at home.

How can I show my child they are valued?

Show interest in what your child enjoys

One way to convey that we value our children is to show interest in what they enjoy. People try to maintain or increase self-esteem by seeking out people who see them in a positive light and who solidify those aspects of themselves that they most prefer.⁵⁶

One characteristic of the Prophet ﷺ that made him beloved to so many, especially children, was his interest in what they enjoyed. Anas ibn Mālik (rA), who spent much of his youth in the company of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, narrated:⁵⁷ “The Prophet used to mingle with us to the extent that he would say to my younger brother, ‘What did your sparrow do?’”

Noticing our children’s interests shows them that we consider their thoughts and ideas worthwhile. Consider ways to let your child know that their interests matter to you because *they* matter to you. When your son is programming code for his robotics competition, ask questions about his strategy and nod along to show you are invested in his responses. When your daughter keeps borrowing the same book series from the library, ask her about the characters and plotlines that seem to captivate her.

Make space for your child in discussions

Ibn ‘Abbās (rA) was a young companion who had a great deal of knowledge. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (rA) once included him in a gathering of veterans of the Battle of Badr. When some expressed displeasure about the inclusion of the young Ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Umar highlighted the depth of Ibn ‘Abbās’s knowledge of the Qur’an relative to the older men around him. When Ibn ‘Abbās offered his interpretation of a *sūra* that differed from the understanding of his seniors, ‘Umar signaled his agreement by replying, “I do not know anything about it other than what you have

⁵⁶ William B. Swann, Alan Stein-Seroussi, and R. Brian Giesler, “Why People Self-Verify,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62, no. 3 (1992): 392–401, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.62.3.392>.

⁵⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6129.

said.”⁵⁸ Imagine how valued Ibn ‘Abbās must have felt in not only being allowed a space in such a lofty gathering, but also in being asked to offer his thoughts on the subject of discussion.

Ensure that children have a space to share their thoughts. This might be at the family dinner table, on car rides to and from school, or as part of their bedtime routine. Ask open-ended questions about your child’s day and show interest in what they share by following up with additional questions. Include your child in adult conversations and ensure that no topics are off limits. It is important for children to have space to be curious and get answers to difficult questions.

Invest in your relationship: The “magic ratio”

Research has found that a key factor in maintaining a healthy, happy relationship is a “magic ratio” of at least five positive interactions for every negative interaction.⁵⁹ While this research was focused on successful marriages, the findings are relevant to parent-child relationships as well. Showing your child that you notice the good in them and see their strengths will naturally foster a higher sense of self-worth.

Summary of Ways to Demonstrate Your Child is Important

1. Convey that Allah made every person for a purpose and that each person is unique. Highlight Allah’s love and mercy for the believers.
2. Show interest in what your child likes. Ideas on how to show interest:
 - I saw ____ today and it reminded me of you so I wanted to share it with you.
 - What’s been going on lately with ____?
 - How are you progressing with ____?
 - When was the last time you did ____? I would love to join you next time.
 - I have 15 minutes before making dinner. Can I play ____ with you?
 - I would love to get your thoughts and insights about ____.

⁵⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4970.

⁵⁹ John M. Gottman, *Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1999).

3. Ask for your child's input on age-appropriate discussions in the home and in community spaces.
4. Invest in the magic ratio:
 - Ask open-ended questions to show interest in your child's day (e.g., What was the hardest thing about today? How did you deal with it?)
 - Verbalize your favorite things about your child (e.g., I love how thoughtful you are; you give the best hugs, etc.)
 - Small acts can demonstrate your care in powerful ways and can make your child feel important (e.g., surprising your child with something small; letting them know you missed them while they were at school, etc.)
 - Intentional appreciation helps your child focus on their successes and strengths. Keep an ongoing note on your phone about the small things your child does that you appreciate to share with them.

II. Self-Efficacy (Competence)

Self-Efficacy (Competence)

- I. Providing Opportunities for Mastery
 - a. Set goals
 - b. Reframe challenges
- II. Normalizing Making Mistakes
- III. Vicarious Modeling: Show Children that Success is Possible

Self-efficacy, identity development, and resilience

What does your child tend to do when struggling with a task? If your child gets stuck on a difficult math problem, does she say things like, "Forget it. It'll never work," or "I'm just not good at math"? Or does she keep plowing forward,

declaring, “This is hard but I’ll figure it out,” or “I think I need some help understanding how to do this.”

Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s capabilities to produce a certain outcome or goal, and belief in one’s capacity to cope with difficult situations.⁶⁰ Self-efficacy and competence are defined slightly differently⁶¹ but will be used interchangeably in this section. Self-efficacy is a basic psychological need for people to manage new experiences, cope with difficult ones, and reach their full potential.⁶² Competency beliefs influence how people think, feel about themselves and the world around them, and how they motivate themselves and the choices they make.⁶³ The sense that you can exert influence over your life fosters striving toward goals, while the sense that you cannot or are unable to exert influence over your life can lead to hopelessness, anxiety, or apathy.⁶⁴

How children perceive their competence can influence the activities they choose to engage in, the environmental settings they feel most comfortable in, and the peer group they choose to surround themselves with.⁶⁵ For example, a child who views himself as incapable of shooting a basketball will not typically play on the basketball court after school, will not want to sign up for basketball classes, and will consequently not spend much time with peers who enjoy this sport. One thought about himself and his inefficacy in a certain arena can influence countless choices about his life and, therefore, his identity.

Thus, as a determining factor in decision-making, self-efficacy naturally impacts identity formation.⁶⁶ A lower perceived self-efficacy may lead a child to avoid experiences that would offer them the chance to develop their potential, and may

⁶⁰ Albert Bandura, “Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change,” *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 191.

⁶¹ John Kremer, Aidan Moran, Graham Walker, and C. Craig, *Self-Efficacy and Perceived Competence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446288702>.

⁶² Sander L. Koole, Caroline Schlinkert, Tobias Maldei, and Nicola Baumann, “Becoming Who You Are: An Integrative Review of Self-Determination Theory and Personality Systems Interactions Theory,” *Journal of Personality* 87, no. 1 (2019): 15–36.

⁶³ Albert Bandura, “Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy in Changing Societies,” *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*, ed. Albert Bandura, pp. 1–45 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Bonnie Benard, *Resiliency, What We Have Learned* (San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2004).

⁶⁴ Bandura, “Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy,” Benard, *Resiliency*.

⁶⁵ Breakwell, “Identity Resilience.”

⁶⁶ Breakwell, “Identity Resilience.”

inform how much effort they will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles. Your son might refuse to attend Qur'an classes because he has already determined that he won't be able to memorize at the same pace as others. The opposite is also true: A child with a higher perceived competence may choose to challenge themselves despite the obstacles before them, allowing them to develop skills that would not have otherwise been nurtured. This can lead a child to initiate new friendships with people at the mosque (*masjid*) because they feel capable of initiating a conversation, or joining an unfamiliar game because they feel capable of learning the ropes. Self-efficacy opens new avenues for our children to explore skills and opportunities that can positively impact their growing identities.

Self-efficacy builds resilience. A “can do” attitude naturally improves how children perceive their capacity to deal with various stressors.⁶⁷ A strong sense of self-efficacy can also give our children confidence in their ability to successfully practice Islam, no matter the difficulties that come their way.⁶⁸ In a world that will inevitably challenge their faith, feeling capable of facing these challenges can prove essential in establishing a strong Islamic identity.

The Islamic importance of self-efficacy

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ encouraged us to “tie your camel and trust in Allah,”⁶⁹ showing the importance of knowing that Allah helps us while also insisting that we help ourselves. Our faith can increase our sense of personal empowerment in moments of high stress,⁷⁰ wrapping us in the safety of knowing that Allah is our Protector and Provider in every circumstance, while also fortifying our own ability to handle difficult situations.

Consider the difference between two adolescents who have both gotten into an argument with a friend:

⁶⁷ Ralf Schwarzer and Lisa Marie Warner, “Perceived Self-Efficacy and Its Relationship to Resilience,” in *Resilience in Children, Adolescents, and Adults: Translating Research into Practice*, pp. 139–50 (New York: Springer, 2012).

⁶⁸ Jihad Saafir and Osman Umarji, “How to Raise Religious Teens: A Self-Determination Theory Approach,” *Yaqeen*, October 24, 2022, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/how-to-raise-religious-teens-a-self-determination-theory-approach#ftnt11>.

⁶⁹ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2517 and graded fair (*hasan*) according to Al-Albani.

⁷⁰ René Hefti, “Integrating Religion and Spirituality into Mental Health Care, Psychiatry and Psychotherapy,” *Religions* 2 (2011): 611–27, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel2040611>.

One teen thinks: We're done. Our friendship is over. I know I'll never get her to listen to my side of the story so I'm not going to bother talking to her again.

The other teen thinks: I'm really angry and sad about this. But I'm good at talking things out with people so maybe this can be fixed. And, regardless of what happens, at least I've done my part, which is all I can do and all that Allah asks of me.

The same can be seen in terms of religious practice and embracing a strong Islamic identity in the face of challenges:

One teen thinks: Looking different is just too hard. I can't imagine being able to deal with wearing the hijab and sticking out like a sore thumb.

Another teen thinks: I know wearing the hijab will be hard, but I also know I can do it, inshā' Allāh. I can handle what comes my way because I know this is what Allah wants me to do.

Allah created us with the tools we need to manage our circumstances. When we embrace this, we are able to feel competent because we acknowledge that Allah will grant us what we need in every situation.

This mindset also helps children in situations in which their natural capabilities may differ from those of others. For example, if your child is experiencing difficulty in memorizing the Qur'an while their sibling finds it easy, remind them that Allah's gifts are outside of their control,⁷¹ and that our job is to do our best. Even if they struggle, they can realize that they have the tools to worship and please Allah; and the greater the struggle, the greater the reward.

It is also helpful to reinforce the idea that you may not be able to achieve a goal on your own, but Allah can facilitate it for you in ways beyond your imagination.⁷²

⁷¹ "This is the favor of Allah. He grants it to whoever He wills. And Allah is the Lord of infinite bounty." Qur'an 62:4.

⁷² "And whoever is mindful of Allah, He will make a way out for them, and provide for them from sources they could never imagine. And whoever puts their trust in Allah, then He [alone] is sufficient for them." Qur'an 65:2-3.

This concept, called proxy efficacy,⁷³ refers to an individual's level of trust in the ability of someone else to assist them to achieve their goals. Proxy efficacy can play an important role in increasing a person's faith in the attainability of their goal. Thus, increasing our children's trust in Allah to help them through difficulties can strengthen their overall sense of efficacy.

Consider this powerful example of how Allah responds to a situation in which the Prophet ﷺ called people to mobilize to fight in the Battle of Tabūk (9/630),⁷⁴ but instead they lagged behind:

[It does not matter] if you [believers] do not support him, for Allah did in fact support him when the disbelievers drove him out [of Mecca] and he was only one of two. While they both were in the cave, he reassured his companion, "Do not worry; Allah is certainly with us." So Allah sent down His serenity upon the Prophet, supported him with forces you [believers] did not see, and made the word of the disbelievers lowest, while the Word of Allah is supreme. And Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.⁷⁵

Knowing that Allah's help is always near,⁷⁶ and that reliance on Him always supersedes depending on people, can provide our children with a sense of hope and agency in times of difficulty.

Practical ways to nurture self-efficacy

A. Provide opportunities for mastery

Many psychologists believe mastery experiences to be the most effective method for creating a strong sense of self-efficacy because they seemingly provide the most objective evidence of one's capability.⁷⁷ Keep in mind that opportunities for mastery are not the same as easy successes. A stable sense of self-efficacy is established through the experience of overcoming adversity through perseverance

⁷³ Albert Bandura, "Exercise of Human Agency through Collective Efficacy," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9, no. 3 (2000): 75–78, <http://www.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00064>.

⁷⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Sūrat al-Tawba, 4:154.

⁷⁵ Qur'an 9:40.

⁷⁶ Qur'an 2:214.

⁷⁷ Bandura, "Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy;" Benard, *Resiliency*.

and effort. Mastery experiences provide people with concrete evidence of their skills, which bolsters their faith in overcoming similar challenges in the future.

How can you create mastery experiences for your child?

I. Set goals

Help your child to set realistic, specific, and actionable goals slightly above their current level of experience and skill. For example, if your child enjoys building Lego structures or completing puzzles, purchasing a set with more pieces than usual can offer an appropriate challenge. Next, help your child create a plan of action to achieve their goal. This might involve helping them devise a system for organizing the puzzle or Lego pieces to make the task more attainable. Throughout the process, prompt your child to reflect on their results and make changes where necessary, celebrate their achievements, and encourage them to continue even if it is initially difficult.

The same principles can be employed for faith-based goals. Help your child formulate realistic, actionable goals for religious practice. For example, consider what a realistic prayer goal might be for a 6-year-old. Perhaps it is having them choose one prayer to be their “special prayer” that they pray each day without fail while the other four are temporarily optional. Help them formulate a plan to make this happen and consider what challenges they might face (e.g., when we’re out of the house at that time, when soccer practice conflicts, etc.), and how they might overcome that obstacle. After a few months of consistently praying their “special prayer,” add an additional one, gradually building up to five daily prayers and allowing them to experience a sense of mastery in being able to prioritize this important act of worship. This type of consistency allows children to internalize this behavior as a part of their identity.

The Prophet ﷺ himself highlighted the link between consistent action and identity development: “You must be truthful. Verily, truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man continues to be truthful and encourages honesty until he is recorded with Allah as truthful. And beware of falsehood. Verily, falsehood leads to wickedness and wickedness leads to the Hellfire. A man

continues to tell lies and encourages falsehood until he is recorded with Allah as a liar.”

II. Reframing challenges and difficulties

Encouraging our children to regard challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as failures can encourage them to improve their skills and view themselves as capable of accomplishing their goals, yielding higher levels of self-efficacy.⁷⁸ This also cultivates healthy identity development by teaching children to view setbacks as challenges to overcome rather than indications of inherent deficiency, thereby fostering a belief in their ability to persevere in the face of challenges.⁷⁹

Tips on Reframing Challenges and Difficulties when Skill Building

- Validate the frustration: “It’s so hard when you work so hard and it doesn’t turn out the way you hoped.”
- Help them to consider what they gained despite the end result being disappointing: “Can you tell me something you learned? Is there something you’d do differently next time?”
- Help your child to consider the factors in their control and outside of their control.
 - Ask questions to illuminate what about this situation cannot be changed as well as what about this situation can be changed. For example: “You can’t control what your friend says to you at school but you can control how you respond to her.” “You can’t control the grade you get on your test but you can control how much you study for it.”
 - Help your child to consider small steps they can implement to create change (e.g., have a plan for how to respond when someone says something hurtful; create a study schedule to prepare for an exam, etc.).

⁷⁸ David Scott Yeager and Carol S. Dweck, “Mindsets That Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed,” *Educational Psychologist* 47, no. 4 (2012): 302–14.

⁷⁹ Yeager and Dweck, “Mindsets That Promote Resilience.”

- Use faith to reframe the situation in a way that increases their resilience and solidifies an Islamic identity:
 - Remind them that Allah is the Most Appreciative (al-Shakūr) and that He sees and appreciates their efforts.
 - When your child does something pleasing to Allah, ask, “Did you know Allah is so proud of you and loves what you just did?”
 - When something doesn’t work out as hoped for, ask your child, “How many good deeds do you think you got because of how hard you tried?” (e.g., If your child is struggling to memorize a verse in the Qur’an, remind them that they get ten good deeds for every single letter recited so the more they repeat it, the more good deeds they get;⁸⁰ if your child is struggling with a friend who is upset with them and is rejected when they try to fix things, emphasize how much Allah loves people who try to mend relationships,⁸¹ etc.)
 - When your child is feeling anxious because of the uncertainty of the results despite their effort, use this as a starting point for a discussion on trusting (*tawakkul*) in Allah for the things that are outside of their control based on the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ encouraging us to “tie your camel and trust in Allah.”⁸² Explore with your child how they can do their part in this situation and what they have to leave to Allah.

B. Normalize making mistakes

Helping children to see mistakes as part of the learning process and as a stepping stone toward success allows them to increase their resilience in the face of challenges. This also allows children to put mistakes in proper perspective, rather than defining themselves based upon these errors. This is essential in worship as well. Acknowledging that imperfection is part of being human and that mistakes can actually be a path to Allah when followed by repentance helps children to

⁸⁰ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2910, and graded authentic (*sahih*) by Al-Tirmidhi.

⁸¹ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2509, and graded authentic (*sahih*) by Al-Tirmidhi.

⁸² *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2517, and graded fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albani.

solidify a realistic Islamic identity. The Prophet ﷺ said, “All of the children of Adam commit sins, and the best of those who commit sins are those who repent.”⁸³

Notice your own attitude toward mistakes and how you respond when you struggle with something. Do you tend to be very hard on yourself? Does a small detour tend to lead to self-doubt? Are you able to brush yourself off and try again? The way we model coping with perceived failures can greatly impact how our children approach them. A study revealed that babies as young as 15 months can learn about persisting with difficult tasks solely based on the way adults in their lives deal with struggle. Researchers found that babies who watched an adult struggle with accomplishing a task before succeeding tried harder and were willing to try longer at their own difficult task, compared to babies who saw an adult succeed effortlessly.⁸⁴

Tips for Normalizing Making Mistakes

- Make an effort to forgive your child for their mistakes, particularly as a way to highlight redemption and mercy in Islam.
- Discuss mistakes of successful individuals and how this did not undermine their path toward success and achievement. Every child is different so different examples will resonate (e.g., athletes, scientists, etc.).
- Discuss repentance and its virtues, particularly emphasizing how beloved this action is to Allah to further help your child in reframing their mistakes, even when it comes to worship:
 - “Say, [O Prophet, that Allah says,] ‘O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not lose hope in Allah’s mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins. He is indeed the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’”⁸⁵
 - The Prophet ﷺ said, “If your sins were to reach to the heavens and then you repented, Allah would still accept your repentance.”⁸⁶

⁸³ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2499, and graded strong (*qawī*) by Ibn Hajar.

⁸⁴ Julia A. Leonard, Yuna Lee, and Laura E. Schulz, “Infants Make More Attempts to Achieve a Goal When They See Adults Persist,” *Science* 357, no. 6357 (2017): 1290–94.

⁸⁵ Qur’an 39:53.

⁸⁶ *Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 4248, and graded fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albani.

- The Prophet ﷺ said, “By the One in whose hand is my soul, if you did not sin, Allah would replace you with people who would sin, and they would seek forgiveness from Allah and He would forgive them.”⁸⁷

III. Vicarious modeling: Show children that success is possible

Vicarious experiences (witnessing someone else’s experience) can be powerful in promoting self-efficacy by nurturing hope in the possibility of change. Studies have found that youth benefit from role models not only as examples to follow but also as a means to expand their sense of possibility. One study found that this effect was even true amongst adults, showing that a group of participants with a role model at work reported significantly higher perceived self-efficacy than a group of participants who did not have a role model.⁸⁸

Share examples of personal struggles from your own life and talk about how you overcame them.⁸⁹ For example, if your child struggles with reading, let them know how hard it was for you to become a proficient reader when you were a child. Recall your own experiences and stories about persevering through difficulties to get to where you are today. Vicarious experiences through modeling can open up a world of possibility for our children. When they see that someone else was able to achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle, it gives them hope that they can do the same, thereby increasing their resilience in difficult situations.

Vicarious modeling: Share stories of the prophets

The way we view ourselves dictates the way we view and respond to struggles. When we view Islam, rather than our transient interactions with the *dunyā* as the

⁸⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2749.

⁸⁸ Adedotun R. Adejare, “Assessing the Impact of a Role Model in the Construction of Professional Identities,” *Wharton Research Scholars* 173 (2018).

⁸⁹ Xiaodong Lin-Siegler, Janet N. Ahn, Jondou Chen, Fu-Fen Anny Fang, and Myra Luna-Lucero, “Even Einstein Struggled: Effects of Learning about Great Scientists’ Struggles on High School Students’ Motivation to Learn Science,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 108, no. 3 (2016): 314.

core of our identity, our responses to difficulty will be accordingly different. We will start to see difficulties as opportunities to grow closer to Allah. God's prophets show us how a strong Islamic identity is a resilient one, because they grew through their struggles in the worship of Allah. We must take as edifying examples the stability of their faith no matter the difficulty or the context.

Consider the example of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when he was driven out of Mecca. He mourned leaving the only place he had ever called home, but he also knew that his identity as a servant of Allah was not tied to his surroundings. When he and Abū Bakr (rA) made their way to Medina, the murderous Quraysh close on their heels, they sought shelter in a cave. Abū Bakr expressed his concern saying, "If one of them were to look down, they would see us under their feet!" The Prophet said, "O Abū Bakr, what do you think of two with whom Allah is the third?"⁹⁰ This absolute trust in Allah is what allowed the Prophet and Abū Bakr to leave everything behind, because it allowed them to hold onto something that was even more important: their ability to worship and proclaim their identities as Muslims.

Consider the example of Prophet Joseph (Yūsuf) (AS). When the wife of the Chief Minister ('Azīz) of Egypt, with whom he lived, attempted to seduce him, Prophet Yūsuf responded, "Allah is my refuge!"⁹¹ And when the pressure and temptation to sin mounted, Prophet Yūsuf prayed to Allah: "My Lord! I would rather be in jail than do what they invite me to."⁹² How could Prophet Yūsuf prefer the difficult conditions of a jail cell to the pleasure of succumbing to temptation? We all have different parts of ourselves that vie for dominance, but part of a healthy, solid identity is the ability to make choices that align with our personal values despite trying circumstances. We see here, in this beautiful example, that pleasing Allah was more important to him than the temporary pleasures he could gain in this life. Through this manifestation of his identity as a worshiper of Allah, Prophet Yūsuf made a choice that we still admire thousands of years later.

⁹⁰ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3096.

⁹¹ Qur'an 12:23.

⁹² Qur'an 12:33.

In the prophetic stories that Allah narrates in the Qur'an, we witness the power of striving in difficult circumstances and the blessings that come from such effort. These stories prepare our children for a variety of stressors—from illness (Prophet Job (Ayyūb)), to being bullied for being different (Prophet Noah (Nūḥ)), to the loss of a loved one (Prophet Jacob (Ya'qūb)) to accidentally hurting someone (Prophet Moses (Mūsā)), to feeling scared and alone (Prophet Muhammad ﷺ)—and so many more. These stories also teach our children that change is possible and that our efforts are meaningful, thereby promoting self-efficacy in a very powerful way. For an example of one of these stories to share with your child, see Lesson 2 in Conversation Starters (the story of Mūsā AS).

Summary on Ways to Increase Self-Efficacy

1. Provide opportunities for mastery through identifying your child's strengths and exposing them to related activities, classes, and materials that can help them improve.
2. Help your child to set realistic, specific, and actionable goals that are slightly above their current level of experience and skill. Provide support and encouragement to help your child meet their goals especially when they feel challenged.
3. Show your child success is possible by sharing your own experiences and stories of the prophets and other heroes. Experiences should inspire motivation and encouragement, not negative comparisons.

III. Self-Trust (Autonomy)

Self-Trust and Identity Development

- I. Encouraging an Independent Relationship with Allah
- II. Allowing Opportunities for Your Child to Make Decisions
- III. Encouraging Positive Distinctiveness
- IV. Nurturing Your Child's Talents

V. Nurturing Positive Social Circles & Support

Self-trust, identity development, and resilience

Autonomy is one of the building blocks of resilience.⁹³ Self-trust is a core component of autonomy and plays a significant role in shaping a person's sense of self and identity.⁹⁴ When we think about the concept of trust, consider the example of two good friends. When you trust a friend, you have positive expectations of them and believe they will act in a way that is kind, helpful, and aligned with your personal interests. Self-trust functions similarly but involves your view of yourself and your ability to act in a manner aligned with your best interests and personal values (i.e., actions that you perform to achieve the best possible outcome for your life here and in the hereafter).

Self-trust and autonomy, which will be used interchangeably here (despite slight differences in meaning), influence one's ability to make decisions and self-advocate.⁹⁵ When a child trusts their own ability to self-advocate and act autonomously, challenges become less intimidating, thereby contributing to higher resilience⁹⁶ and an ability to deal with challenging situations, uncertainty, and stressful transitions.⁹⁷ Furthermore, being able to identify yourself as an autonomous human being, as someone capable of making good choices, and as someone whom Allah has blessed with the ability to exercise free will in a positive way, will facilitate the development of a healthy Islamic identity.

To nurture a strong identity, a belief in your ability to act in a manner consistent with your identity is essential. Self-trust and autonomy can manifest in a child in a variety of ways such as: speaking up when you see someone being bullied if you believe yourself to be someone dedicated to fair treatment and justice; saying “no”

⁹³ Edith H. Grotberg, “Countering Depression with the Five Building Blocks of Resilience,” *Reaching Today's Youth* 4, no. 1 (1999): 66–72.

⁹⁴ Marla Clarice Sharp, “The Self in Crisis: Using Self-Trust to Enhance Therapeutic Practices for Patients with Chronic Suicidal Ideation” (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2016).

⁹⁵ Sharp, “Self in Crisis.”

⁹⁶ Trudy Govier, “Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 1 (1993): 99–120.

⁹⁷ Michelle L. Dawson and Julie Ann Pooley, “Resilience: The Role of Optimism, Perceived Parental Autonomy Support and Perceived Social Support in First Year University Students,” *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 38–49.

when someone pressures you to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable because living in accordance with your values is meaningful to you; or dedicating time, effort, and interest to a science project because you view yourself as a budding scientist, etc.

The Islamic importance of self-trust and autonomy

Pressure to fit in and assimilate can make seeming “different” and standing out a stressful experience.⁹⁸ This may lead children to develop an inconsistent identity, meaning that they think and behave differently in different environments. Meyers, a researcher in the field of self-trust and autonomy, argues that personal autonomy requires a “touchstone.”⁹⁹ For us, as Muslims, this touchstone is Islam and aligning our sense of self with the stable standards it provides. This allows us to navigate the different roles we have and reconcile them in a way that highlights the core of who we are: servants of Allah.

Research has shown that promoting autonomy support can lead to the intergenerational transmission of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The link between family religiosity and individual spirituality is stronger in families with higher warmth, structure, and autonomy-support.¹⁰⁰ A degree of autonomy is essential for religious identity development as it allows children to choose actions that align with their personal convictions and encourages individual identity based upon their faith.

As Muslims, self-trust is founded upon trust in Allah and the truth of Islam. Self-trust without faith is often merely arrogance—and one characteristic of arrogance, as described by the Prophet ﷺ, is “to disregard the truth.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, anything that obstructs embracing the truth of Islam’s prescriptions, including excessive reliance on one’s own judgment, can hurt a person in this life and the next.

⁹⁸ Zeenah Adam and Colleen Ward, “Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing in Acculturating Muslims,” *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 10, no. 2 (2016).

⁹⁹ Diana T. Meyers, “Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 11 (1987): 619–28.

¹⁰⁰ Sam A. Hardy, Jennifer A. White, Zhiyong Zhang, and Joshua Ruchty, “Parenting and the Socialization of Religiousness and Spirituality,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3, no. 3 (2011): 217–30.

¹⁰¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 91.

We should cultivate our children's self-trust and autonomy by simultaneously encouraging their abilities and teaching them to thank Allah for granting them those abilities. For example, you could express happiness when your child does something positive (e.g., donating some of their personal savings to charity) followed by reminding them to say “*alḥamdulillāh*” for the blessing of being able to do such a good deed. You might tell your child, “I know it was hard to wear your hijab to soccer class for the first time but I knew you could do it. It's a blessing that Allah gives us the strength to do what He loves.”

Always stress that even our choice to worship Allah is a gift from Him. Allah says, “This is a reminder. Let whoever wishes take the way to his Lord. But you will only wish to do so if God wills—God is all-Knowing, all-Wise.”¹⁰² Consider also the supplication of Prophet David (Dāwūd) (AS): “O Lord! How can I ever thank You enough, when my thanking You is also a favor from You to me.” Allah the Exalted answered him, “Now, you have thanked Me sufficiently, O Dāwūd.”¹⁰³

Practical ways to nurture self-efficacy

Encourage an independent relationship with Allah

Helping our children nurture an independent relationship with Allah is essential for their development of a Muslim identity. Worship done solely to appease parents does not allow children to develop an autonomous connection with Allah. In this case, they may struggle to maintain their worship when parental supervision and encouragement ceases.

A recent study found that feeling independently motivated is linked to religious practice.¹⁰⁴ It can be difficult to strike a balance between encouraging our children in their relationship with and worship of Allah while simultaneously allowing them a degree of autonomy. One example of balancing explicit direction with autonomy

¹⁰² Qur'an 76:29–30.

¹⁰³ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Sūrat Ibrāhīm, 4:512.

¹⁰⁴ Nadia Barberis, Marco Cannavò, Danilo Calaresi, and Maria C. Gugliandolo, “The Mediational Role of Autonomous and Controlled Motivation in the Relationship between Perceptions of God, Self-Esteem, and Religious Practices,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 2022.

would be sometimes encouraging your children to pray alone in their room so that prayer is not only associated with you telling them to do it but, rather, as their choice to connect to Allah. Allowing children to separate their relationship with their parents from their relationship with Allah is helpful in building their personal ability to connect with Allah independently.

It can also be helpful to encourage a variety of ways for children to connect with Allah depending on their personal strengths and interests. Some children will find their faith is strengthened through attending gatherings that incorporate a social element along with an Islamic talk while others may prefer reading books with Islamic themes on their own. Some children may crave initiating and organizing an effort to do something of benefit to others (e.g., organizing a garage sale and donating the proceeds to charity) while others may prefer to give back face-to-face (e.g., visiting a nursing home, distributing school supplies to refugees, etc.). Based on your child's strengths and interests, explore different opportunities for them to develop a relationship with Allah.

Allow your child to make some decisions

A common issue that often arises within religious communities is the struggle parents face in allowing their children space for autonomy, thereby stunting their ability to develop self-trust. This struggle is based in fear and can have negative consequences. When parents offer autonomy support, they help their children feel a sense of agency, which in turn promotes healthy social behaviors. Psychological control, in contrast, fosters risky and detrimental behaviors.¹⁰⁵ Children denied autonomy may eventually choose to disconnect from family and religion in order to gain some semblance of independence. Furthermore, when we infantilize our children, restricting their autonomy and making all decisions for them, they may feel incapable of making informed decisions for themselves in the future.

Permitting children the chance to practice the essential skill of decision-making sets them up for success later in life and in the hereafter as well. When children are not given opportunities to do things for themselves, they have no way of knowing how to navigate the world. They have only been taught to follow, not to think.

¹⁰⁵ Hardy et al., "Parenting and the Socialization of Religiousness and Spirituality."

In many verses of the Qur'an, Allah encourages us to be from amongst people who ponder and reflect, as when He says, “[We sent them] with clear proofs and written ordinances. And We revealed to you the message [i.e., the Qur'an] that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them and that they might give thought.”¹⁰⁶ Our children need to learn how to think for themselves, and how to make decisions that prepare them for when we will not be by their side to dictate the best path forward.

Encourage positive distinctiveness

Navigating societal norms in tension with Islamic values can be a point of discomfort for children and adults alike. As the Messenger of Allah ﷺ reminded us, however, “Islam began [as something] strange and it will return to being strange, so blessed are the strangers.”¹⁰⁷ Embracing rather than fearing distinctiveness can help children solidify rather than shun their Islamic identity. However, societal distinctiveness does not necessitate societal rejection. When the Muslims moved to Medina, the Prophet ﷺ encouraged them to differentiate themselves in certain ways (e.g., growing a beard, shortening their mustache) while also engaging courteously with society at large.¹⁰⁸

Positive distinctiveness is established by emphasizing the difference between oneself and others based on valued criteria.¹⁰⁹ This is an inherent part of identity development and the way that children cope with difficulties and build resilience.¹¹⁰ Helping our children make value-based choices in the face of opposition from their surroundings can allow them to maintain a consistent Islamic identity as they navigate different environments and expectations. Societal standards constantly change, so we hold on to the one standard that never does: the standard of Allah. In our tradition, we see praise given to those who embrace the

¹⁰⁶ Qur'an 16:44.

¹⁰⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 145.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn 'Umar reported: The Prophet ﷺ said, “Be different from the idolaters. Let the beard grow and trim the mustache.” Whenever Ibn 'Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, performed the major and minor pilgrimage (hajj and 'umra, respectively), he would grab hold of his beard and cut what was beyond his grasp. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5553; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 259.

¹⁰⁹ Breakwell, “Identity Resilience.”

¹¹⁰ Breakwell, “Identity Resilience.”

fact that we, as Muslims, will oftentimes be different from the majority of people around us:

And few of my servants are grateful.¹¹¹

But none believed with him, except a few.¹¹²

In the Gardens of Bliss, a [large] company of the former people, And a few of the later peoples.¹¹³

[It is] a Book whose verses are perfectly explained—a Qur'an in Arabic for people who know, delivering good news and warning. Yet most of them turn away, so they do not hear.¹¹⁴

And most people will not believe—no matter how keen you are.¹¹⁵

Those who do extraordinary things are not like everyone else. Actively living as a Muslim is something special. A study conducted with refugees from Syria who had resettled in the United States found that their Islamic faith strongly contributed to their resiliency and provided them a source of comfort, strength, pride, and empowerment.¹¹⁶ Embracing one's distinctiveness often cultivates higher self esteem, which correlates with a higher sense of mastery, fewer risk-taking behaviors, and better physical health.¹¹⁷

Knowing the blessings of choosing a different path from the majority does not negate its difficulty, and it definitely does not mean it will not be hard for our children. As parents, we can support our children in navigating these challenges. Discuss stories of people who embraced their uniqueness (Muslim and otherwise) and reflect on how their stories would have been different if they had succumbed to social norms instead. Encourage open discussion about difficult situations you

¹¹¹ Qur'an 34:13.

¹¹² Qur'an 11:40.

¹¹³ Qur'an 56:12–14.

¹¹⁴ Qur'an 41:3–4.

¹¹⁵ Qur'an 12:103.

¹¹⁶ Nabiha Hasan, Diane B. Mitschke, and Kristen E. Ravi, "Exploring the Role of Faith in Resettlement among Muslim Syrian Refugees," *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 37, no. 3 (2018): 223–38.

¹¹⁷ Erol and Orth, "Self-Esteem Development from Age 14 to 30 Years."

have faced and how hard it was to feel different (e.g., stories from when you were younger, recent situations with colleagues, etc.).

It is also powerful to model prioritizing Allah despite discomfort in daily life. This can include finding a place to pray when on an outing so the time for prayer is honored, dressing differently from the crowd while on a beach vacation, and making time for daily Qur'an connection in the midst of a busy day. Identifying these moments and having a conversation about your thought process with your children can model healthy decision-making skills.

Nurture your child's talents

Nurturing your child's individual strengths and talents reinforces the idea that their Islamic identity can enhance various aspects of their life. It is important to show our children how their faith need not be insulated from the unique interests, talents, and abilities gifted to them by Allah. These do not have to be conventional talents such as intelligence or athleticism. An entrepreneurial spirit, emotional awareness, a passion for baking, or an affinity for puzzles are all talents we can nurture in children. Demonstrating to our children how their hobbies align with and can even follow from their Islamic identity, such as ziplining through a forest while reflecting on the beautiful creation of Allah, can leave a powerful impact.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Be keen to do that which gives you benefit.”¹¹⁸ Consider your child's interests and talents and find opportunities to nurture them. When you nurture your child's talents, you signal to them that their ideas and interests are worthwhile, giving them confidence in their holistic selves. This allows them to develop social support and hone different facets of themselves. If your child thrives in nature, join a hiking group; if they enjoy a particular sport, find them a team; if they love reading, reach out to your local library about a book club. Tie participation in these different activities and social groups to their faith, helping them see that their Muslim identity can and should positively contribute to every area of their life. For example, a child who plays soccer will find that practice improves their skills and that good sportsmanship and patience during moments of

¹¹⁸ *Sahīh Muslim*, no. 2664.

disappointment are all part of the game (see footnotes for hadiths and Qur’anic verses that can be referenced in these discussions).¹¹⁹

The Prophet ﷺ noticed the talents of those around him and encouraged them. One young companion, Zayd ibn Thābit (rA), was appointed to learn Hebrew due to his sharp intellect and desire to contribute to the community. Zayd narrated, “I was able to master the language within half a month. After I learned it, whenever [the Prophet ﷺ] wanted to send a letter to the Jews, I would write it for him, and when they wrote to him, I would read their letter to him.”¹²⁰ Later in life, he was put in charge of the effort to compile the Qur’an, a gift we are still benefiting from 1400 years later.¹²¹ Imagine what a different trajectory Zayd’s life would have taken had his talents not been noticed, acknowledged, and nurtured?

Nurture positive social circles and supports

Experiencing a sense of belonging is a natural human need.¹²² Youth who feel pride in their identity, which can be facilitated by community belongingness, were found to engage in fewer risky behaviors (that is, behaviors that are counterproductive and can lead to negative life outcomes).¹²³ At the end of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (the Opening), we ask Allah to “guide us along the Straight Path, the Path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor.”¹²⁴ This idea of companionship along the path of guidance is so important that it is mentioned in a *sūra* we are required to recite 17 times a day.¹²⁵ Humans are social creatures and the human soul naturally seeks companionship. Al-Fudayl ibn ‘Iyād (d. 187/803) said, “Do not feel lonely on the

¹¹⁹ For a hadith encouraging practice, see “The best deeds are those done regularly even if they are few.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6465 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 782. On the importance of sportsmanship, see “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.” Qur’an 49:11. For patience during disappointment, “Verily, Allah Almighty says: When I put one of my faithful servants to trial and he praises Me despite his trial, he will rise from his bed free of sin like the day he was born from his mother.” *Musnad Ahmad*, no. 17118, and graded *Saḥīḥ li ghayrihi* (authentic due to external evidence) by Al-Arna’ut.

¹²⁰ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 3645, and graded *Hasan Saḥīḥ* by Al-Albani.

¹²¹ Abdul Wahid Hamid, *Companions of the Prophet* (London: Muslim Education and Literary Services, 2003), 2:70.

¹²² Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, “Self-Determination Theory,” in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 1–7.

¹²³ Fatima Y. Mirza, “Understanding American Muslim Youth of Arab and South Asian Ancestries: An Exploratory Study on the Factors Related to Risk Behaviors among Child Immigrants and Children of Immigrants” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2014).

¹²⁴ Qur’an 1:6–7.

¹²⁵ The five obligatory daily prayers are dawn (*Fajr*), noon (*Zuhr*), afternoon (‘*Aṣr*), sunset (*Maghrib*), and evening (‘*Ishā’*) prayers. They are a total of 17 rounds or cycles (sing. *rak’a*).

paths of guidance because their people are few, and do not be deceived by the great many who are ruined.”¹²⁶ Those who want to follow the straight path in this life may find that the majority of people around them do not.

Allah describes the believers as allies of one another and emphasizes the role of community as encouraging good deeds that bring us closer to Allah and His mercy.¹²⁷ As the Prophet ﷺ said, “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.”¹²⁸ Cultivating strong bonds of care and belonging is not only necessary, but also a form of worshiping Allah and strengthening our identity as Muslims.

A strong core identity stabilized by faith can be complemented by a variety of interests and social circles. Ethnic affiliation, for instance, can positively impact resilience, particularly in managing the stress of discriminatory experiences.¹²⁹ We should encourage and create opportunities for our children to build a variety of social circles, given that increases in resilience are associated with perceived group belonging.¹³⁰ Social support can be a protective factor in the mental health of youth.¹³¹ It can also promote higher self-esteem, resilience, and a positive self-image.¹³²

We all have had experiences in our youth (and, for many, in adulthood) of conflict within friend groups. When a child has only one social circle, conflict can feel catastrophic and lead to self-doubt and loneliness. When a child has a variety of friend groups, conflict might still be uncomfortable but will not cause them to question whether they are worthless as a person or friend. This allows them to be

¹²⁶ Abu Zakariyya Muhyi al-Dīn Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *al-Adhkār* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr lil-Tibā‘a wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘: 1994), 160.

¹²⁷ Qur’an 9:71.

¹²⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5665.

¹²⁹ Seungbin Oh, Stacey Diane Arañez Litam, and Catharina Y. Chang, “Racism and Stress-Related Growth Among Asian Internationals: Ethnic Identity, Resilience, and Coping During COVID-19,” *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 45, no. 2 (2023): 226–48.

¹³⁰ Damian Scarf, Saleh Moradi, Kate McGaw, Joshua Hewitt, Jillian G. Hayhurst, Mike Boyes, Ted Ruffman, and John A. Hunter, “Somewhere I Belong: Long-Term Increases in Adolescents’ Resilience Are Predicted by Perceived Belonging to the In-Group,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 55, no. 3 (2016): 588–99.

¹³¹ Qiaolan Liu, Min Jiang, Shiyang Li, and Yang Yang, “Social Support, Resilience, and Self-Esteem Protect against Common Mental Health Problems in Early Adolescence: A Nonrecursive Analysis from a Two-Year Longitudinal Study,” *Medicine* 100, no. 4 (2021).

¹³² Liu et al., “Social Support, Resilience, and Self-Esteem.”

more objective in how they perceive issues that arise, and to address conflict in healthier ways. Furthermore, this allows them to feel more secure in who they are since the approval of and pressures from one particular friend group do not feel as weighty; they have other friends to fall back on if one social circle does not embrace them.

Having a variety of social circles, particularly diverse ones (in terms of faith, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, etc.), also allows children to learn how to navigate different relationships and increase their comfort level with people unlike themselves. Of course, balance is key. While some exposure to people with alternative values can help children in holding onto their beliefs amidst differences, constant bombardment by messages contrary to their Islamic values can undermine self-trust.¹³³ Therefore, nurturing friendships with people whose values align with theirs can supply children relief, validation, and the strength to navigate difficult situations they encounter.

As parents, being aware of the peers with whom your children are spending their time is essential in nurturing healthy identity development. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, the parable of good and bad company is that of a seller of musk and a blacksmith. The seller of musk will give you perfume, you will buy some, or you will notice a pleasant smell. As for the blacksmith, he will burn your clothes, or you will notice a bad smell.”¹³⁴ You cannot spend time with a person without them leaving some trace on you—good or bad, small or huge. Allah informs us that on the Day of Judgment, people will say, “Ah! Woe to me! If only I had never taken so-and-so as a friend! He indeed led me astray from the reminder after it had come to me!”¹³⁵

Therefore, invest in positive relationships with friends that encourage good in your child. Point out their positive traits while also emphasizing the positive traits your child contributes to these relationships. One way to actively explore the influence of your child’s current friend group is to encourage your child to create a list of all the qualities (positive and challenging) they notice in their two closest friends and then circle the ones they see in themselves. Oftentimes, we are a combination of the

¹³³ Andrew D. Spear, “Epistemic Dimensions of Gaslighting: Peer-Disagreement, Self-Trust, and Epistemic Injustice,” *Inquiry* 66, no. 1 (2023): 68–91.

¹³⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5534; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2628.

¹³⁵ Qur’an 25:28–29.

qualities we see in the people with whom we spend our time and this exercise is a simple way to bring this point to life.

Helping our children to gain the skills to critically consider their friendships and identify which friends to spend time with can help them to develop a sense of autonomy in their relationships as well as solidify a strong identity. The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the importance of making these choices: “A man is upon the religion of his best friend, so let one of you look at whom he befriends.”¹³⁶ Notice changes in your child after spending time with a particular friend and reflect this back to them saying something like, “I noticed you’ve been saying/doing _____ more frequently lately. What do you think that’s about?” Consistent communication helps our children to build awareness of the choices they make regarding friendships.

Summary of Ways to Nurture Self- Trust, Autonomy, and Identity Development

1. Encourage an independent relationship with Allah.
2. Give your child the opportunity to make age-appropriate choices on a daily basis (e.g., what to wear, ideas about the next family trip, etc.).
3. Allow your children to practice this essential skill of decision-making, and weighing the pros and cons of different choices. Practice this with them verbally and through writing.
4. Give your child age-appropriate tasks to give them an opportunity to develop a sense of independent accomplishment and contribution (e.g., picking up toys for a 2-3 year-old; emptying the dishwasher for a 6-7 year-old, etc.).
5. Help your child make value-based choices in the midst of opposition from their surroundings. Help foster an Islamic identity as they navigate different environments (home, school, neighborhood, etc.) and expectations (Muslims don’t backbite, Muslims don’t eat pork, Muslims practice prayer throughout the day, etc.) by actively identifying being Muslim as something special.

¹³⁶ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2378.

6. Help your child become comfortable with differences. Don't shy away from discussions about the differences they notice between themselves and others (e.g., religion, physical ability, race, etc.). At the same time, have discussions about the different choices people make (e.g., something their friend does that doesn't align with your family values, the fact that people worship differently, the fact that people dress differently, etc.). Emphasize the fact that your child is striving to make choices that align with their identity as a Muslim and how wonderful that is in the sight of Allah.
7. Nurture positive support by assessing your child's various support groups, and increase exposure to those that support healthy self-development and expand on your child's strengths (example: a brothers' *halaqa*, soccer team, math club, neighborhood community service group).

VI. Important considerations

Identity development is a lifelong process but is best nurtured from early on in a child's life. Younger children are more impressionable and tend to spend more time with parents, so these early years offer a great opportunity for parents to influence their child's identity development. During the preteen and teen years, peer interactions become more salient. As such, it is especially important to nurture social circles that complement your child's faith and identity development during early childhood.

Another factor on which to reflect while nurturing your child's healthy identity development is your own personal identity journey. When we have not nurtured conviction and confidence in our identity as Muslims, children pick up on this ambivalence. Reflect on your personal journey in figuring out who you are and the struggle of making different choices than those around you. How do you feel in these situations and how do you tend to navigate them (e.g., when your young daughter wants to experiment with wearing a hijab to the grocery store; when the time for prayer conflicts with another commitment)? Many current parents are first-generation Muslims living in Western countries and have experienced some difficulty in establishing a stable identity. Self-awareness and introspection are

powerful tools in exploring your own (past, present, and future) identity development to determine what may be inadvertently conveyed to your child and, more importantly, any work you would personally like to pursue in establishing a strong, healthy Islamic identity for your growth in this life and the next.

Finally, remember: when reading a paper like this, it can be easy to criticize yourself and highlight any mistakes you have made in the past with your children. Parenting is one of the hardest tests we will face and it will be *filled* with stumbles and falls. None of us will be able to reach perfection as parents; there is always room for growth and there is always hope for change. Remember that Allah is with you every step of the way and will give you the tools you need as you work toward the relationship you yearn for with your children.

VII. Case study revisited

When Hanan realized that her negative experiences with the way religion was enforced in her childhood and her struggles with solidifying her identity were impacting her ability to instill an Islamic identity in her children, she realized she needed to work on strengthening her own identity first. She decided to make some changes.

She began to reflect on how she labeled herself and the language she tended to use in her self-talk, as well as when describing her children. She became more cognizant of reminding both herself and her children of the love of Allah and began to verbalize the positive qualities she noticed in her children, while tying them to Allah. Although it was uncomfortable for her at first, Hanan also began to discuss Islam with her children more. She realized that a balance could be struck so that she wasn't being forceful but was still providing some guidance and knowledge to her children. They began to read stories of the prophets together and discussed what they learned. Hanan found her own faith and pride in her identity as a Muslim strengthening as she engaged with her children. She began to value a new side to her faith that she had never explored—one that made her feel loved by Allah and honored by Islam, rather than constantly restricted and fearful as she had felt in her youth. She began to realize the ways that her faith intertwined with

and complemented her daily life, which she shared with her children, helping her to begin healing from her disjointed identity.

VIII. Conversation starters

Sometimes translating theory into practice can feel like a daunting task. Please note that if you try to implement everything in this article at once, it will feel unnatural and overwhelming. Forming a relationship with Allah is a long-term journey. To help you in this journey we have made a list of *conversation starters*. These prompts can be a great supplement to preexisting family rituals. For example, if like many families you do a movie or game night every Friday to help unwind and kick off the weekend, you can use one of these prompts for a mini-lesson beforehand. Perhaps, before talking about your week and weekend plans, you can establish a habit of discussing one weekly question as a family. These questions can help open up the doors to important discussions, and build family bonding within the psycho-spiritual context.

Basic Tips for Conversation Starters:

- Tailor the duration of the mini-lesson to the audience. If these conversations are too lengthy, neither you nor your children will look forward to them because they are draining. About 15-20 minutes is a good length.
- Make the mini-lesson appropriate for the audience in terms of content. Small children are naturally drawn to arts and crafts so drawing related pictures or making visuals with markers can be appealing to them. If there is a wide age gap between your children, consider assigning one parent to the older children and the other parent to the younger children.
- Don't make this activity/conversation burdensome to prepare. Otherwise, you most likely will not follow through. Prepare for 5-10 minutes max by pulling relevant *ayāt*, hadith, or material from this article.
- If you ever get stuck with a tough question or topic from your child, don't panic. Tell your child that you will look into it and get back to them. This can be a spiritual learning moment for you both.

IX. Conversation starters and stories

LESSON 1

Āsiya: Finding an anchor in the storm

The story below shares the journey of one of the strongest, most admirable women in our tradition: Āsiya bint Muzāḥim, the wife of the Pharaoh. In it, we see that her incredible conviction and her sense of self-worth never wavered despite her difficult surroundings. Her story illustrates the power of relying on Allah as our source of stability and safety, no matter the circumstances, and emphasizes the Names of Allah the First (al-Awwal) and the Last (al-Ākhir) as our ever-present source of strength.

This is a wonderful story to share with our children. Faced daily with a reality out of step with their religious values, they may need stories like this one to remind them that they are capable of maintaining a strong sense of self despite the challenges they face.

And do not invoke any other god with Allah. There is no god [worthy of worship] except Him. Everything is bound to perish except He Himself. All authority belongs to Him. And to Him you will [all] be returned.¹³⁷

There once lived a remarkable woman, described by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as one of the four best women of paradise¹³⁸ and one of the four women to have achieved perfect faith.¹³⁹ Have you ever met someone who clearly knew who they were, and never let anyone shake that? Someone who, no matter how many haters spewed their hate, stood firm in themselves and their values? This woman was the epitome of such strength—and it's one of the main reasons she achieved such an amazing status in the eyes of Allah.

¹³⁷ Qur'an 28:88.

¹³⁸ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "The best of women among the people of Paradise are Khadāja bint Khuwaylid, Fātima bint Muḥammad, Mary the daughter of Joachim (Maryam bint 'Imrān), and Āsiya bint Muzāḥim, the wife of the Pharaoh." *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 2896, and graded authentic (*sahih*) according to Al-Albani.

¹³⁹ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "There were many men who achieved perfection and none were perfect among women except Āsiya, the wife of the Pharaoh, and Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān." *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3230.

Āsiya bint Muzāḥim (AS) lived in ancient Egypt during the reign of one of the most oppressive rulers in history. She wasn't just a citizen who lived under his rule; Āsiya was married to him! She lived in the home of this tyrant as his wife. This pharaoh was incredibly cruel. After dreaming that a child from among the Children of Israel would one day overthrow him, he ordered the mass slaughter of their first-born baby boys. His cruelty was matched only by his egomania, as he forced all of his subjects to proclaim him an all-powerful god. Can you imagine what life as the wife of this pharaoh must have been like?

One day, something changed that brightened Āsiya's days and made living in the home of a tyrant more bearable. In the river alongside her home, Āsiya suddenly saw a basket floating along. As she peered closer, she saw that the basket was moving—and that there was a baby boy inside! As she gently picked up the child, she noticed his perfect tiny fingers and toes. Love overwhelmed her. But her husband was on a mission to kill any baby boys who could threaten him! How was she going to keep him safe?

Āsiya knew there was no way she could keep a baby hidden. She tried to persuade her husband to keep him: “[This baby] is a source of joy for me and you. Do not kill him. Perhaps he may be useful to us or we may adopt him as a son.”¹⁴⁰ Imagine the sigh of relief exhaled and the happiness felt when her husband agreed. She loved this baby as her own son. His name was Mūsā.

When Mūsā grew older, he began preaching that there is one true God, the only One worthy of worship. Āsiya believed this fully; she could feel in her bones and deep within her soul that this was the truth. However, she had to keep her faith a secret. She knew that if the Pharaoh found out, he could become dangerous.

As Āsiya tried to hide her faith from her husband, she witnessed his violence against innocent people—even women and children. She watched in horror as Pharaoh publicly executed anyone he discovered did not worship him, yet her faith only grew stronger. Soon she could no longer keep it a secret. The Pharaoh's violence had brought her closer to Allah rather than turning her away from Him,

¹⁴⁰ Qur'an 28:9.

and she decided to speak up against her husband's injustice. She revealed her true beliefs; she declared that she believed in the One true God, Allah.

When the Pharaoh found out about Āsiya's faith, he began torturing her in an attempt to get her to renounce her beliefs. His violence knew no bounds but no matter how he attempted to hurt, demean, and degrade her, Āsiya refused to relinquish her faith. While being tortured by the Pharaoh, her own husband, she prayed to Allah:

My Lord, build for me near You a house in paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people.¹⁴¹

These words have been immortalized in the Qur'an as a reminder of the power of one amazing woman's faith. As she made this prayer, Allah opened the skies above her and revealed her beautiful house in paradise. In the midst of the torture she endured, Āsiya laughed with joy when she witnessed her new home. She died with a smile on her face, knowing that she would be with her Lord in a place filled with peace, serenity, and immeasurable joy.

Allah is the First and the Last

Allah has always existed and always will; He existed before everything and will exist after everything and everyone has died. There will never be and there never has been a time without Allah.

The First (al-Awwal) is the Name of Allah that means the One who existed before all of creation, the One who preceded any thing or any one. Allah is the cause of all worlds and every creation.

The Last (al-Ākhir) is the Name of Allah that means the One who remains after all of creation is gone. He is the ultimate, the One beyond whom there is nothing. Allah tells us in the Qur'an that, "Everything is bound to perish except He."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Qur'an 66:11.

¹⁴² Qur'an 28:88.

When the world ends and the colossal seas are gone and even the mighty mountains have turned to dust, Allah remains.

These Names illustrate the true meaning of stability and security. Nothing and no one can promise *always* to be there for us, except Allah. He was here before you and He will be here after you. The pressures and struggles you face cannot outlast al-Awwal and al-Ākhir. Just as the days pass and the sun sets, your pain will fade. Everything will perish, everything will end except Allah—including the darkness you may be facing.

These Names of Allah and the story of Āsiya show us that the people you're surrounded by don't determine who you are. Despite being married to the worst man in history, Āsiya knew that Allah was her source of strength, stability, and security. Thousands of years later, she is still an example for us. She did not let her circumstances define her. She allowed her purpose and self-worth to be defined only by the One who would always be by her side—Allah. Do not assess yourself by standards other than those of Allah. Other people's standards are always changing so if you strive to please others, you'll always be disappointed. Allah is al-Awwal and al-Ākhir; his standards are unchanging. Āsiya's identity, based on those standards, was the same.

Questions for discussion

- Have people ever made you feel badly about your choices? How did you cope with that?
- Self-esteem is confidence in your own worth or abilities, the ability to respect yourself. How do you see this in the story of Āsiya? What was the source of her self-esteem? How about yours?
- How is the fact that Allah is a source of security and stability reflected in the story of Āsiya?
- Have you ever struggled with people pushing you toward something you weren't comfortable with? What happened? How can we resist pressure from people who encourage us to do something we don't agree with?
- Have you ever done something because the people around you made it seem normal and then felt badly about it? Have you ever made a choice you felt good about even if the people around you didn't like it? How did it feel?

LESSON 2

Prophet Moses (AS): An example of strong identity

Imagine the scene: A ragtag group of people, fleeing to safety with whatever belongings they could carry, beholding a horizonless, boatless body of water ahead and hearing the deranged screams and battle cries of a tyrant's army close behind. This is the impossible situation in which Prophet Moses (Mūsā) (AS) and his people found themselves, after having already suffered for generations under the despotic Pharaoh. In order to escape this torture, Allah had inspired Prophet Mūsā to take his people and leave Egypt. But now, after a treacherous trek under the cover of darkness had brought them to the shores of the Red Sea, with nowhere left to turn, the prison break seemed to have failed. Already they could hear, if not see, the Pharaoh's massive army bearing down upon them.

Confronted with this terrifying sight, Mūsā's people saw only defeat:

When the two groups came face to face, the companions of Moses cried out, "We are overtaken for sure."¹⁴³

Yet look at how Mūsā viewed the same sight:

[Moses] said, "Absolutely not! My Lord is certainly with me—He will guide me."¹⁴⁴

While his people despaired of salvation, defeated by the barrier before them and the army behind them, Mūsā never wavered. He knew his purpose and, more importantly, he knew his Lord. He never doubted for a second that the help of Allah would come.

So We inspired Moses: "Strike the sea with your staff," and the sea was split, each part was like a huge mountain. We drew the pursuers to that place, and delivered Moses and those with him all together. Then We drowned the others.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Qur'an 26:61.

¹⁴⁴ Qur'an 26:62.

¹⁴⁵ Qur'an 26:63–66.

Prophet Mūsā and his people were in the same situation, but their perspectives were oceans apart. Prophet Mūsā's people could perceive only defeat and humiliation; Prophet Mūsā, meanwhile, stood secure in his self-understanding as a worshiper of Allah, al-Qadīr and al-Mu'izz, the Strengthener.

Then We saved Our messengers and those who believed. For it is Our duty to save the believers.¹⁴⁶

Self-worth is not synonymous with self-sufficiency. Self-worth in fact stems from the precise opposite: dependence on the Divine. As Prophet Mūsā exemplified, self-worth is knowing that you're strong because Allah has told you that He doesn't burden you beyond what you are capable of handling.¹⁴⁷ It means knowing that you're loved because Allah tests those who He loves.¹⁴⁸

The All-Capable, The All-Powerful and The Bestower of Honor and Strength

Allah is the All-Capable, The All-Powerful (Al-Qadīr), and the Bestower of Honor and Strength (al-Mu'izz). These beautiful Names help us hold onto our relationship with Allah as the core of our identity.

Al-Qadīr is the One who possesses the power and ability to decree and determine anything and everything. He prevails over everything and grants us the abilities we need to face the challenges of every day. He is the One who ensures that our lungs continue to take in air and that everything that happens in our lives has a purpose.

Al-Mu'izz is the One who grants us honor and power. He is the One who strengthens us and allows us to be respected and cherished. Al-Mu'izz is the One source of every bit of respect and esteem we, as human beings, naturally desire.

These Names of Allah are a powerful reminder that the abilities, honor, and accolades we strive for to feel a sense of worth and esteem are all in His Hands.

¹⁴⁶ Qur'an 10:103.

¹⁴⁷ "Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity." Qur'an 2:286.

¹⁴⁸ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "If Allah wills good for someone, He afflicts him with trials." *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5321.

Everything we desire and everything we need comes from Him. To realize this is to realize the importance of having the core of our identity be in our relationship with Allah and in our role as His servants. The Prophet ﷺ emphasized this saying,

When Allah loves a servant, he calls Gabriel and he says: Verily, I love this person so you should love him. Then Gabriel loves him and makes an announcement in the heavens, saying: Allah loves this person and you should love him. Thus, the dwellers of the heavens love him and he is honored on the earth.¹⁴⁹

Whenever you feel worried about what others are thinking about you, remember that Allah is al-Qadīr and al-Mu‘izz, the One who gives you the capability to handle things in your life. He is the One who gives you honor. Remember that everything you need and everything you want are in His Hands, so prioritize Him and you’ll find the success you’re looking for in this life and the hereafter, *inshā’Allāh*.

Questions for discussion

- When you know that Allah is always taking care of you, how does that make you feel?
- How can you see the Names of Allah, al-Qadīr and al-Mu‘izz, reflected in the story of Prophet Mūsā and the Red Sea?
- Have you ever felt stuck and felt there wasn’t a way out of a hard situation? What happened and how did you deal with it?
- Can you name three moments when you achieved something difficult? How did you feel? Turn those moments into a *du‘ā* to Allah to thank Him for the ability to do this and for the dignity you experienced in that moment.

¹⁴⁹ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 3037; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2637.