How To Talk to Kids About Islamophobia

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The recent news cycle covering the conflict between Israel and Palestine has spiked Islamophobic sentiments within the US The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the "largest grassroots Islamic civil liberties organization" in the country, has reported an appalling 245% increase in reported anti-Muslim instances since then. In fact the rampant increase in Islamophobic incidents, including the highly-publicized stabbing of 6-year-old Palestinian-American Wadea Al Fayoume, resulted in President Joe Biden announcing the first US National Strategy to Counter Islamophobia on November 1, 2023.

Islamophobia has a long history within the United States. Muslims have been systematically denied citizenship in the United States, both historically in the 1930s and 1940s, and post-September 11. Their communities have been heavily surveillanced and profiled, and they have often been villainized by those holding the highest offices in the country.

After the Palestinian militant group Hamas attacked Israel and took hostages, Israel responded by launching airstrikes in Gaza, resulting in mass civilian casualties, including more than 4,000 children since early October. These events are the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been ongoing for more than 75 years, marking decades of violence and bloodshed since the 1948 "Nakba," or mass displacement of more than

700,000 Palestinians from their homes to create Israel. Understanding the history of this conflict and these particular anti-Palestinian prejudices is critical to understanding the current spike in Islamophobic rhetoric and attacks.

It can seem overwhelming when speaking about and explaining these situations to your children. But discussing Islamophobia with your kids is the first step to helping them navigate these difficult topics, whether it's in relation to the current news cycle or just to help them maneuver through life.

How To Talk to Kids About Antisemitism and Why It's Important

What Is Islamophobia?

To be able to engage your kids in conversations about Islamophobia, it's important to understand what it is.

Islamophobia is a strong aversion to and animosity against Islam and its followers (known as Muslims), frequently resulting in the propagation of hateful rhetoric, acts of hatred, and societal and political bias.

Alternate Summer Reading List: Samira Ahmed Shares Must-Read Muslim Middle Grade and YA Stories

How Present Is Islamophobia Today?

After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Islamophobia around the U.S. increased at an alarming rate. Even 20 years later, Muslims in America face instances of anti-Muslim violence every day. But it isn't just the post-9/11 world that spurs these discriminatory feelings. Former President Donald J. Trump's entire 2016 election campaign heavily invoked anti-Muslim sentiments.

Since October 7, plenty of anti-Muslim hate and propaganda has been spread not only by mainstream media but by celebrities as well. *Stranger Things* star Noah Schnapp liked an Islamophobic video mocking Muslims and pushing dangerous anti-Muslim stereotypes. Amy Schumer posted a satirical comic where a pro-Palestine protest goer is holding up a sign that reads "Stab Jews for Allah." In these instances, like many others, stereotypes of Muslims being terrorists and barbarians are perpetuated.

Is Islamophobia Considered a Form of Racism?

While Islam is a religion and not a race, it is argued that Islamophobia can be categorized as racism. This is mostly because anti-Muslim violence or rhetoric that occurs is often a result of stereotypes that are assigned to those who are perceived as Muslim, frequently based on skin color. Aside from identifying religious garb like the hijab or taqiyah/kufi, it's impossible to know that someone is a practicing Muslim based on appearance. So when Islamophobia

takes places outside of religious settings, it's often because Islam is being conflated with certain races (typically Arabs or South Asians). Aside from being problematic in and of itself, Islamophobic ideals also typically create the "othering" of Black Muslims who happen to take up 20% of the American Muslim population.

When Islamophobia is experienced by individuals, it's typically because they may have Arab/South Asian features, wear religious headdresses, or speak Arabic. This can lead to those who aren't even Muslim experiencing effects of Islamophobia.

Anti-Brown Violence as a Result of Islamophobia

Like any type of prejudice or discrimination, Islamophobia is often a result of perpetuated stereotypes—race and religion are frequently conflated, which can mean Islamophobia is linked to violence against Brown people, regardless of their religion. This is often seen with the Sikh community.

Because of ignorant prejudices, some people assume that any brown man with a turban and a beard must be Muslim, while in actuality the turban is religious garb worn by men who practice Sikhism, as well as within other communities. Nevertheless, members of the Sikh community end up being victim to acts of Islamophobia. This compounds the bias and violence Sikhs face based on their own race and religious beliefs, including cases like 1923's US vs Thind, which challenged the Naturalization act of 1790, the American law which created the legal basis for exclusion of people based on religion.

How To Address Islamophobia as a Muslim Parent

No one wants to have to tell their children that they may be treated differently or negatively because of the religion they practice. And depending on how old your kid is, it can be a difficult concept to grasp. But the reality is that in the age of social media, your child may be witnessing—if not directly experiencing—instances of Islamophobia online.

In 2018, CAIR's California chapter found that 35% of Muslim students (ages 11-18) reported their peers making anti-Muslim comments online. This doesn't even account for the physical or in-person bullying that young Muslim kids can become victims to.

While you might wish that you could shield your kids from prejudice and discrimination, at the end of the day the best thing you can do is make sure you're having open and honest conversations with them about what Islamophobia is, how to spot it when it's happening, how to express how these instances make them feel, and of course how to stay safe in the face of anti-Muslim acts.

How to Start the Conversation

Farida Mallah, mother of three and assistant director of Teaching While Muslim (TWM), an organization aimed at providing teaching resources on topics of discrimination and bias against Muslims, explains that she's spoken to young students about heavy topics including slavery, segregation, and apartheid. "They can feel like really big topics but our kids [...] are smart," she says. "They can grasp big issues if you talk to them in simplified terms."

When explaining to kids that there are people out there who might treat them badly because of the color of their skin or the religion they practice, you might find that it doesn't make much sense to them and that's OK. Even as an adult, it's sometimes hard for me to grasp why someone might hate me just for being Muslim. The most important thing is to remind your kids that if something ever feels off to them, they should feel comfortable speaking to you about it. And whether your kid is 4 years old or 14, this can be done in a way that they understand. "The only way to empower kids is to educate them on their level," Mallah says.

But above making them aware of Islamophobia, Mallah explains that a great way to help tackle anti-Muslim rhetoric is to remind your kids to take pride in their identities. Through the media, Muslims are often portrayed as dangerous, oppressed, and barbaric. Remind your little ones that no matter what they might hear about Islam, they should be proud of their religion and culture. Teaching your kids to love who they are is one of the best forms of defense against a society that is determined to make them feel less than.

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Guidance for Non-Muslim Parents

While Muslim parents can do their part to prepare their children for potential experiences with Islamophobia, non-Muslim parents can aid in creating a safer environment for Muslim children as well. It's important to remember that while Muslim parents must play their role in having these discussions with their children, the onus is not on them to fight Islamophobia. As a Non-Muslim parent, you can be an ally by first and foremost checking your own biases and making sure you don't repeat any Islamophobic rhetoric, especially in front of your children.

"They have a responsibility to do the research before they read or address propaganda perpetuated by the media and the government," Mallah says of non-Muslim parents. "And they need to build bridges with our Muslim community members in order for them to understand how [Islamophobia] directly affects us."

You should also communicate with your children by breaking down the problems with discrimination. Along with her experience with TWM, Mallah has also taught K-4 elementary school special education. She says she often leads these kinds of conversations by making them as interactive as possible. Often, she'll begin by telling her students there are groups of

people who are judged by the color of their skin, what they wear, and what they believe in, and then following that by asking the kids if they think that's fair. The children almost always can understand that it's not.

At the end of the day, the most important guidance you can give your non-Muslim children is that the same way they would not want someone to judge them without knowing them, they shouldn't do that to others. Always encourage your children to not only seek out the truth but to defend it — and stand up for their peers who may be victims to Islamophobia.

[7 Tips for White Parents Raising Diversity-Aware Kids](#)