**“Transitions: An Introduction to a Human Development Curriculum”**

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***Abstract: Youth today are bombarded with conflicting messages about sexuality; therefore, it is imperative for Muslim educators and parents to create a safe space for providing accurate information within the context of Islamic values regarding reproductive health. The purpose of this session is to introduce a comprehensive human development curriculum for middle school students. The presenters have applied this program in an Islamic middle school in Southern California for over ten years and will also provide insight from their experiences teaching this subject.***

# Introduction

In Islam, Allah (SWT) has provided us with a complete way of life that teaches us that everything we do is related to our worship and love for Him. As a result, Muslims discover that no subject is off-limits when it comes to the Qur’an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who willingly (and unflinchingly!) answered many challenging questions posed to him by the community of believers. For example, the Qur’an talks about exemptions related to the menstrual cycle of women1 while the Prophet had no problem discussing matters of an intimate nature with women and men alike2*.* Later, Muslim scholars and jurists continued the conversation, often going into great detail such as in *The Etiquette of Marriage* by Abu-Hamid Al-Ghazali, written in the eleventh century3. B.F. Musallam’s important work, *Sex and Society in Islam*, which reviews the historical background on a range of issues, including contraception and abortion, for example, dating back to the earliest commentators and jurists4. It is within this spirit of frank and open discussion about matters of great importance to human beings throughout their life cycle that we approach the topic of sex education from within a classroom setting at a Muslim middle school for children who are just beginning to enter the phases of puberty and adolescence.

# Developing a Curriculum for Middle School Students and Beyond

1 Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation*, Surat-al-Baqarah, verse 222 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 39.

2 Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, *Translation of Sahih Muslim*, Volume 1, Book III-Book on Menstruation (Lahore: Ashraf

Printing Press, 1976), 173-205.

3 Madelein Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: A Translation of al-Ghazali’s Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the Ihya,* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984).

4 B.F. Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

While most Muslims are aware that human sexuality is a natural part of our humanity, many of us are not certain how to approach this issue when it comes to educating our children. Misconceptions about sex education and whether or not it will encourage premature sexual behavior exist among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, despite evidence to the contrary5 .

Based on our 20-year history of teaching this subject to Muslim students, it is clear that children as young as the age of 10 are getting information from different sources and that many parents feel uncomfortable talking about sensitive issues, especially if they had no role-modeling from their own mother and father. When searching for books and websites that approach the topic from a Muslim perspective, many share a common criticism of the “Western” approach to sex education often considering it to be overly permissive and antithetical to Muslim values6. As a result, there is some agreement that Islamic-oriented education regarding puberty and sexuality is required with a general consensus that it should start with the parents.

In the meantime, Muslim teens are looking to social media and the internet for answers they are too embarrassed to ask the adults in their lives. Some online resources have helpful sections on health related to normal menstrual cycles, eating disorders, etc. while other sites provide access to live chats.7 HEART Women & Girls is another important website that focuses on reproductive health, offering culturally sensitive health information and programming including a step-by-step guide for initiating a program for reproductive health education for Muslim youth although it does not include actual course content8. One of the strengths of that website is the focus on dealing with sexual violence. Social media, websites and other forms of digital communication are important for helping to disseminate accurate information. In addition, in-person interaction with knowledgeable adults provides an indispensable opportunity for us to role model appropriate behavior and respect towards one another that will have a positive impact on young Muslims’ lives.

A comprehensive faith-based human development and sexual education curriculum that is age-appropriate will serve the following needs of Muslim children:

* Provide an Islamic perspective as a framework for decision-making as the student progresses through adolescence;
* Assist parents who may be unable to approach this topic with their children and therefore look to the Muslim school and community for help;
* Address areas of confusion and misunderstanding that result from the inevitable exposure of Muslim children and youth to adult themes in the media; and

5 R.C. Rabin, “Why Parents Should Have the Sex Talk with Children”, *New York Times,* November 4, 2015. 6 See, for example, Dr. Shahid Athar, “Sex Education for Muslim Youths and Their Parents” at <http://www.missionislam.com/family/sex_ed.htm>

7 Such as <http://muslimgirl.net/>or <http://www.muslimyouth.net/>

8 <http://heartwomenandgirls.org/>

* Equip young people with an appropriate level of self-knowledge and awareness of what their body is going through to help them navigate the complex emotional and physical changes they are experiencing. Knowledge is also power and provides a strong motivation for ethical decision-making.

***Transitions* Curriculum Overview**

The *Transitions* curriculum was written with the above goals in mind and was piloted in a middle school program serving ten to fourteen year olds. It covers a range of topics that give students a basic knowledge of anatomy and physiology and an Islamic context for understanding the psycho-social and physical aspects of male/female relations.

The curriculum provides flexibility to educators in choosing age-appropriate topics for different grade levels. For example, students in the upper elementary grades (e.g., fourth and fifth grades) could delve into the topics of Healthy Living and the Physical and Emotional Changes of Puberty for their human development program. However, at the middle or high school level, teachers could advance the discussion with topics such as Male and Female Anatomy and Physiology, Sexuality, and Pregnancy and Childbirth. Schools will have to decide the best timing for more difficult topics. [Sample syllabi will be provided as a handout].

The first unit addresses Healthy Living and emphasizes the importance of cleanliness and maintaining good hygiene habits and includes two lessons on Self-care and Personal Hygiene and Body Image and Healthy Habits. In these lessons, students are guided to adopt healthy habits in taking care of one’s skin, hands and nails, teeth, and body. In addition, there is a lesson on proper hygiene when using the bathroom (*istinja*). Instructors can show students various health products to better educate them about options for items like deodorant, shampoos and conditioners, toothpaste and dental floss, lotions, and soaps. This unit provides guidelines for hair removal as well. There is also a lesson on body image and how students can exercise and eat nutritional foods to maintain a healthy body.

Unit 2 covers the Physical and Emotional Changes in Puberty. These lessons provide basic physiological information on what kinds of physical changes boys and girls will go through during puberty. For a fourth or fifth grade classroom, boys can learn about boys and girls about girls. As they get older, we believe that each group will need to learn about the other for further discussions on the reproductive process. This section also tackles the emotional changes in puberty brought on by hormonal changes and provides students with guidelines for coping with the challenges of moodiness, need for independence, stress from school, tendency to argue, peer pressure, etc. The unit includes gender specific approaches such as a lesson on Islamic Perspectives on Boys (or Girls) in Puberty which address Islamic guidelines related to boys’ and girls’ development during this stage. For both boys and girls, the unit includes a lesson on how puberty marks the beginning of a new phase of maturity and accountability to

God. A comparison of “rites of passage” in other faiths and traditions allows students to compare the Islamic perspective on puberty with other points of view.

Any book on human development would be incomplete without a chapter on the basic biology showing how the reproductive system works. The unit on the Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Reproductive System goes into detail on the inner workings of the reproductive organs and how this body system will affect their lives. Diagrams can be accessed digitally through the internet’s NeoK12 website to reinforce the learning9.

In the unit on Menstruation, teachers ask students to share what they know and then proceed to differentiate between common myths and actual facts. Following the unit on female anatomy, the lessons on menstruation are based on the expectation that students have an understanding of the essential elements of the female reproductive system. This unit, however, goes into more detail on menstruation and provides advice to students on how to prepare for the period and how to deal with its side effects. One lesson is devoted to the Islamic guidelines for girls in terms of personal hygiene, prayer, and *ghusl*.

For older students, age and maturity necessitate further clarification as to how reproduction actually occurs. This requires an explanation of sexual intercourse from a biological viewpoint but also from a religious one as well. Thus, this book offers the Islamic context with which to approach this subject covering the topics of modesty in dress and behavior, self-control, appropriate male/female interaction, and abstinence. A unique feature of this unit allows students to examine various real-life scenarios and discuss what kinds of decisions they might make in upholding their modest lifestyle.

Even though students are initially counseled on the value and mandate of chastity in their faith, it is also instructive to share with them the possible consequences of pushing the limits and violating the Islamic guidelines of abstinence before marriage. This leads to a discussion on STD’s and AIDS. The book also tackles the subject of the Islamic viewpoints on contraception in the context of sex during marriage.

A natural extension of the topic of sexual reproduction is pregnancy and childbirth.

Covered in Unit 6, the lessons include the stages of pregnancy from fertilization to childbirth. Teachers may use the diagrams included in the book, access them online, or use other resources. 10 For older students, this unit also covers the controversial subject of abortion. (See Challenges in Teaching this Subject).

The final unit in the book complements the physical with the psychosocial issues.

Teachers lead students in a focused discussion on self-esteem and its role in mental health and sound decision-making. Providing guidance on how to communicate with family members and

9 Such as <http://www.neok12.com/>

10 One example is Patricia Rizzo Toner, *Sex Education Activities*, (West Nyack:The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1993). Another book with activities for children from grades 6-12 is Sandra McTavish, *Life Skills: 225 Ready-To-Use Health Activities to Use for Success and Well-Being* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Education, 2010).

friends while going through the difficult adolescent years should help students navigate this period more successfully. An essential component of the human development program is a lesson on personal safety and how students can protect themselves from situations that could potentially cause harm. This lesson empowers young people to recognize inappropriate behaviors and learn how to respond effectively. Students will also receive instruction on digital etiquette as a further means of protection and safety in the complex world we live in today.

A section on Qur’anic and Hadith References concludes the book with verses and hadith on a variety of topics that relate to the human development curriculum. From menstruation to modesty to childbirth and marriage, these texts can be used to further bolster the lessons. A glossary also provides definitions on many terms found in the curriculum.

# Logistics for Presenting the Curriculum

Scheduling adequate time for the human development program is a challenge. With a weekly format, schools can allocate at least 45 minutes per week for six to eight weeks in order to meet the goals of the curriculum. Though most lessons are designed for a 45-minute to 1- hour time frame, it is important to also build in flexible scheduling in case students need more time for a particular topic or just for more Q & A. Since these classes take place in gender- specific (boys only-girls only) classroom settings, it is especially important to make sure the classes are taken simultaneously.

Before getting started with the human development curriculum, schools must inform parents of the program and the specific topics to be covered for each grade level. This can be done in the form of an electronic communication or through a grade level parent meeting.

While most parents are relieved that the school is taking on the task of tackling this difficult subject matter with their children, some may wish to approach the topic differently. Therefore, parents should be able to opt their student out of the classes, and this option should be given when sending the introduction letter and syllabus. (Sample letters will be provided as a handout).

Choosing the right teacher to lead the human development program will make a significant difference in the reception of the material by the students. Several key factors in selecting the right teacher are a level of comfort in teaching the material, some familiarity with the Islamic perspectives, and an ability to relate to the specific age group. Ideally, the instructor should be able to create a safe and comfortable environment for students to ask questions and explore these topics within the context of their faith. Since the curriculum is actually designed to be taught by a non-health professional with every lesson including detailed background information on the subject and activities which can be easily followed, the options for instructors are not restricted to physicians or other healthcare providers. However, bringing in experts to help augment the educational experience is often very helpful.

In order to establish a comfortable place for students to learn and grow, teachers should be prepared not to be judgmental at the kinds of questions students ask but to look at all questions as opportunities for understanding, and perhaps dispelling wrong information. Some techniques such as anonymous questions on index cards can be helpful for students to not be afraid to ask delicate questions. Setting the stage with all students about the importance of respecting the privacy of the discussion and creating a safe environment will help develop the right classroom culture for this program. The website HEART has an excellent guide for educators and leaders on how to establish such an environment.11

# Challenges in Teaching this Subject

Throughout the implementation of the curriculum, we have encountered a range of challenges especially related to questions and issues that arise from the students themselves. Some advanced topics that are more suitable for older adolescents require an open discussion of the difference between culture and religion. One example is that of female circumcision and the extent to which it is practiced in some Muslim countries. In the classroom setting, it is possible to address the issue from a health perspective and also within a religious context.

With other topics such as contraception, students are made aware that there can be a range of opinions on the permissibility of different methods of birth control within marriage. The same can be said regarding pregnancy termination where the majority opinion is presented as being opposed to abortion in any circumstances other than to save the life of the mother.12 However, older students can appreciate a more nuanced view where scholars have had differences of opinion in cases, for example, of rape or incest. Despite reservations educators may have about approaching such difficult topics, they must be prepared for the fact that young people are more than likely talking about these matters outside of our community setting.

This brings up another challenge we have faced which is that young people of the same age and, therefore, in the same classroom may have vastly different levels of exposure to issues related to sexuality and human development. So, while some are more advanced in their knowledge, others are still quite naive. In general, the topics should be addressed in an age- appropriate fashion. For the younger students, the focus is on puberty and the changes they can expect their bodies to undergo over the next few years. Since girls are starting puberty at younger ages in the US with some starting as early as age 9, it’s important to begin the conversation at that age. There are numerous books that are designed for children at that stage that can serve as a useful guide for parents as a supplement to what the children are learning at school( such as *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual*

11 <http://heartwomenandgirls.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/HEART_Guide_sexed_programming.pdf>

12Hassan Hathout, *Islamic Perspectives in Obstetrics and Gynecology* (Kuwait: Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences, 1986).

*Health (The Family Library)* by Robie Harris and Michael Emberley, 2014). Once most children reach the middle or end of sixth grade, they are already talking to each other or finding out about sex. They have access to an unlimited amount of information and graphic images, especially if they are not well-supervised while on their smartphones or computers. As a result, they think they know more than they actually do, and having educators who can address things like masturbation or pornography with a calm demeanor will move young people away from a sense of secrecy and shame that can potentially get them into trouble in the future.

Finally, especially through exposure to what is happening in the society around them, students have questions about homosexuality, gender reassignment and other issues that can be discussed within an Islamic framework. Teachers can address these sensitive subjects in the secure environment of a confidential and comfortable setting focused on elucidating an Islamic perspective on such controversial issues.

# Questions / Discussion Session

Throughout the program, teachers should offer students the chance to ask candid questions to ensure the opportunity to affirm facts, dispel myths, and clarify Islamic viewpoints. While some students are shy about openly discussing the topics in the human development curriculum, it is particularly important to develop a rapport that permits them to ask the difficult questions and receive the appropriate answers.

# Conclusion

A comprehensive human development curriculum with an Islamic perspective is a necessity in helping students navigate the challenges of the world in which they live. The Transitions program offers educators a resource to guide the process of enlightening students on this subject matter through the lens of Islam. With access to a wealth of accurate and appropriate information, students can gain a better understanding of themselves and their faith.

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# Presenter Bios

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Amira Al-Sarraf is the Head of School at New Horizon School in Pasadena, California, a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Dept. of Education and fully accredited by CAIS and WASC. As a teacher and administrator at NHS for over twenty-five years, she has played a pivotal role in the development and growth of New Horizon. Amira has a B.A. in Middle Eastern Studies from UC Berkeley and an M.S. Ed. in Educational Leadership from Walden University. In her tenure as a teacher and administrator at NHSP, Amira developed an Islamic and Qur’anic Studies curriculum for elementary and middle school students.

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Laila Al-Marayati, MD is an obstetrician-gynecologist who has been practicing in Southern California for over 15 years. She received her BS in Psychobiology from UCLA and her MD from UC Irvine. She is Board Certified in her specialty and is a Fellow of the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. In 2007, she became the Medical Director of Women’s Health at the Eisner Pediatric & Family Medical Center in downtown Los Angeles where she currently oversees a large outpatient and hospitalist practice that includes physicians and midwives. Dr. Al-Marayati is an Assistant Clinical Professor at the USC Keck School of Medicine in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.