

The Muslim Fostering Project

A review of practice and legislative frameworks and existing literature

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Contents

1 Introduction	4
1.1 The Muslim Fostering Project	4
1.2 Fostering context	5
2. The role of foster care in England	7
2.1 Overview of fostering in England	7
2.2 Fostering legislation, regulations, statutory guidance and standards	8
3. Islam in Britain	12
3.1 The place of religion in Britain	12
3.2 The Islamic faith	12
3.3 The Muslim community of Britain	13
3.4 Islamic Mandate for the care of children	14
3.5 The forming of identity	16
4. Delivering culturally aware practice	19
4.1 Identity and the looked after child	19
4.2 Religious practice	20
4.3 Social worker matching	21
5. Summary	24
6. Conclusion	25
7. Bibliography	26
Publications, journals and media articles	26
Online sources	29

1. Introduction

1.1 The Muslim Fostering Project

This literature review was conducted as part of The Muslim Fostering Project which was delivered by The Fostering Network in 2018/19 and funded by the Better Communities Business Network (BCBN).

This was a national programme which aimed to highlight areas of challenge in the current system and encourage greater emphasis on elements of faith and identity when placing a child, with a focus on providing the right support to children and young people from the Muslim Community.

As a foundation for the project, The Fostering Network first completed a full literature review of existing research and publications exploring family, cultural identity and fostering within the Muslim community. This report summarises The Fostering Network's findings and forms part of the final suite of documents presented on conclusion of the Muslim Fostering Project.

This report does not aim to be a definitive guide to issues relating to fostering and the Muslim community and indeed the exercise has highlighted the significant lack of research previously conducted in this area.

The report shares key research and data on some elements of this complex area where data and research exists to encourage further discussion and academic exploration. The key themes, pertinent to the Muslim Fostering Project, which we have identified from existing literature are:

1. The experience of the Muslim community in the UK
2. Understanding the Islamic mandate for the care of children
3. Childhood and the forming of identity
4. Identity and the looked after child
5. Religious practice and culture
6. Social worker matching.

These themes are explored in the following report. A more comprehensive summary of the key practice issues, and the findings from the Muslim Fostering Project, are provided in the main project report.

1.2 Fostering context

On any given day in England, there are 53,000 children living with approximately 43,700 fostering families. These children are formally 'looked after' by their local authority who act as their 'corporate parent' and it is their responsibility to find a 'placement' for these children which is best matched to their needs. Three-quarters of these children will be supported in foster families, with approved foster carers who can meet their emotional and practical needs.

Children can enter the care system for a number of reasons, but most commonly this will be due to abuse and neglect. A small but growing number need care because they are seeking asylum in England from countries such as Albania, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria. In 2017, 2,206 unaccompanied children applied for asylum, down from a peak of 3,290 in 2016¹. These children often arrive without basic information relating to their identity, name, background and age and often with very limited English language. Regardless of the reason for entering care, ensuring stability and security for these children and young people is absolutely crucial, as is ensuring that they are placed with a foster family best matched to their needs.

Local authorities, who retain corporate parenting responsibility, maintain records of all children and young people in their care, some of which is part of their statutory requirement. While recording ethnicity forms part of this statutory requirement, faith is not and therefore fostering services are not mandated to record or report how many of these children identify as Muslim. The Muslim Fostering Project has highlighted this as a significant barrier to fully understanding the identity and needs of the care population. This lack of source data is echoed by the scarcity of comprehensive research into the needs of Muslim looked after children in England and the wider UK.

The Fostering Network estimates a further 6,800 new foster families are needed in England in the next 12 months² to ensure there are enough foster families to meet the assessed needs of children and young people and provide sufficient placement options to find the best match for the child. Successful matching relies on a strong understanding of the needs of a child and of the characteristics of the local foster carer population. All fostering services aim to recruit a diverse range of foster carers which reflect their community and the needs of the children in their care. While the ethnicity of foster carers is recorded at local level, again faith is not always and therefore the nationally available data does not capture how many of these carers identify as Muslim.

At The Fostering Network we understand the importance of stability for children and young people and the detrimental impact of making the wrong match between a family and child. We also know how important cultural and religious understanding and support is as part of making the right match first time, which can include either matching within a child's own faith or with a family with the knowledge and ability to encourage them to explore their culture and faith fully.

¹ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/3376/Asylum_Statistics_May_2018.pdf, 2018.

² <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets>

For Muslim children who are placed with a foster family, settling into a new home and maintaining individual identity can be even more challenging if they are placed in a home where foster carers are without the knowledge or confidence relating to their culture, language, food, and religion. In addition, with concerning trends including a reported rise of Islamophobia, increased race-related hate crime and compounding factors including social deprivation have caused Muslim children to potentially feel more isolated and socially ostracised than other fostered children of different racial and religious groups³.



³ E.Daniel, *Fostering cultural development: Foster parents' perspectives*, Children and Youth Services Review, Elsevier, 2011.

2. The role of foster care in England

2.1 Overview of fostering in England

Children and young people come into care for many different reasons. Sometimes a child will become looked after by a local authority because of a parent's short-term illness or a temporary problem within the family that requires the child to receive alternative care. Some will have experienced domestic violence or witnessed drug and alcohol misuse while others have been abused or neglected.

Fostering is one of a range of care options that provides safe accommodation when a child enters the care of the local authority in which they reside. Around three-quarters of looked after children in England live with foster families, who offer them stability, security and often their first experience of a positive family life.

Foster carers in England are trained, assessed and approved to look after fostered children by a fostering service. They are child care experts working as part of a team of professionals providing children with the highest standard of care.

Fostering differs from other types of care, such as adoption, as it can allow fostered children to maintain links with their birth family – including extended family – through regular 'contact' meetings as appropriate. Foster carers often play a key role in making these contact arrangements happen and ensuring young people can maintain these relationships. This contact and the retention of family links plays a significant part in supporting young people explore their identity.

For all children and young people entering the care system, the immediate priority is for every local authority⁴, as the corporate parent, to provide them with a safe environment. Long-term planning, beyond the emergency placement, is though paramount for the wellbeing of the child; the long-term success of a placement is reliant upon careful assessment of each child's suitability for any particular placement and formal care planning⁵.

Local authorities aim to place each child with a family that can meet their assessed needs – health, education, proximity to family and school, hobbies and interests – and which can support them in terms of their identity – ethnicity, religion, language, and culture. Making the 'right' placement will help the child to feel a sense of familiarity and of being at home, helping them to settle and grow within their new setting. But finding a family

⁴ Or other formal 'alternative operating model' where corporate parenting responsibility is retained, e.g. Children's Services Trusts. However, for the purpose of the report the 'local authority' is used.

⁵ J.C. Barber and P.H Delfabbro, *Children in Foster Care*, 1st Edition, Routledge, 2004.

that addresses every need can be virtually impossible, and authorities therefore must prioritise the needs identified and make choices about where best to place children.

The overarching principle for matching is that children are at the very centre of the decision regarding which fostering household can best meet their assessed needs. It is important to note that there is no standard hierarchy of needs that covers all children. Rather, these needs (and therefore the matching criteria) will be prioritised differently for each individual child. These should be decided on a case-by-case basis by social workers and the wider team around the child who know them best.

Matching a child with a foster carer most suitable to meet their needs can help ensure stability within the placement, providing the safe, secure and nurturing environment the child needs to achieve positive outcomes. The success of a placement is determined by a whole array of factors and it is a complex interplay between (foster) carer, child and social worker⁶. Ongoing support and training for foster carers should be tailored to areas where they need increased skills and confidence to support the child in their care.

2.2 Fostering legislation, regulations, statutory guidance and standards

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

'...the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children...no child should be treated unfairly on any basis⁷.'

This requirement is further supported in later legislation, including the Human Rights Act 1998 and Equalities Act 2010, with the latter including race, religion and beliefs as a 'protected characteristic'⁸.

Foster care in England is governed by the following legislation and guidance:

- The Children Act 1989⁹
- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 as amended¹⁰
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services¹¹
- The Care Planning Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 as amended (Statutory Guidance Volume 2)¹²
- Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (NMS)¹³

6 J.G. Barber, P.H. Delfabbro, *Children in Foster Care*, 1st Edition, Routledge, 2004

7 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3, https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

8 Equality Act, 2010, Chapter 1: Protected Characteristics, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

9 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>

10 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2011/581/contents/made>

11 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-fostering-services>

12 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/959/contents/made>

13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards>

All local authorities have a "sufficiency duty" to provide a range of placement options, through direct provision or commissioned services, to meet the assessed needs of their looked after children population. Having a diverse range of placement options helps the local authority to match a child with the foster carer best suited to meet that child's individual needs, as identified within their care plan.

Standard 15 of the NMS stipulates:

'The responsible authority has information and support from the fostering service which it needs to facilitate an appropriate match between the carer and child, capable of meeting the child's needs and consistent with the wishes and feelings of the child, so maximising the likelihood of a stable placement¹⁴.'

The responsible local authority is required to produce a child's care plan to inform and formally record the type of care suitable for the child and the subsequent matching decision, taking into account such factors as the child's health and education needs, identity, family relationships and hobbies.

The Care Planning Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 specifically states that the care plan must include a record of,

'...identity, with particular regard to (the child's) religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. This must be completed before the child is placed by the responsible authority, or within 10 days if in an emergency, for example in the case of an unaccompanied asylum seeking child¹⁵.'

Local authorities are required to provide foster carers with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively, prior to placement. This should include information on the cultural and religious needs of the child. The responsible authority or trust is required to follow up on any gaps in the information in order for the foster carer to provide a "safe caring environment". This directly supports the outcome detailed in the NMS that ensures that

'...children have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background¹⁶.'

Further, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 state that:

'(1) The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.'

14 Op.Cit, NMS, Standard 15

15 Op.Cit, Care Planning and Placement and Case Review Regulations, Part 2.

16 Op.Cit. NMS, Standard 2



'(3) The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations¹⁷.'

Should a child identifying as having the Muslim faith become known to a local authority, and it is assessed that the child needs to be looked after by the authority, the child's care plan will include information on their faith, religion or cultural needs. The authority is then required to identify potential foster carers who have the requisite skills to best meet the needs of the child, including these factors.



¹⁷ Op.Cit. The Fostering Service (England) Regulations, Regulation 17.

3. Islam in Britain

3.1 The place of religion in Britain

Over the past few decades, and contrary to the forecasted 'secularisation' of modern Western societies that was expected to lead to a decline in individual religious commitment and in the prominence of religion in social life¹⁸, religious beliefs, practices and membership are still commonplace in Britain.

While 'British Christianity' has been in decline, religion practiced by other communities such as Catholicism within the Polish community and Islam within Muslim communities, are thriving in Britain¹⁹. Becher argues that indeed world events and public debates over the last 50 years indicate that religion remains a strong source of personal and social identity, of political mobilisation or conflict, a resource in times of need and a source of social capital and integration into civil society²⁰. In 2001, in recognition of this changing religious picture, the British Government reintroduced a specific faith question in the 2001 Census. This changing picture of British identity makes an ever stronger case for greater awareness, understanding and targeted activity within public sector services to ensure they are representative of those they support.

3.2 The Islamic faith

To be a Muslim is to be a follower of the Islamic faith. Originating in the 7th century in south west Asia, Islam translates in the English language to "surrender" (to God). It is estimated that there are over 1.8 billion followers of Islam across the world, approximately a quarter of the global population.

While Muslims believe in only one God, Allah, there are many different branches to Islam. This can be given as one of the main reasons why there is not a homogenous Muslim community in the UK, and why British Muslim experiences are more diverse than is often assumed²¹. Research in this area, conducted by the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life, which collected experience of Muslim lives in modern Britain is pertinent to the fostering community and to the matching process. The learning from this research supports the view that fostering services need a better understanding of the diversity, the experience and the potential within the Muslim community.

18 D.E. Sherkat, C.G. Ellison, *Recent Developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion*, Annual Review of Sociology, 1999.

19 A. Brown, *Faith no more: how the British are losing their religion*, The Guardian, 2015.

20 H. Becher, *Family Practices in South Asian Muslim Families: Parenting in a Multi-Faith Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

21 *Missing Muslims Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All*, Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life, Citizens UK, 2017.

While there is a broad agreement on the core tenets of Islam, Muslims differ vastly in their levels of commitment to practicing the religion and there is a rich diversity when it comes to interpretations of the Islamic faith. Consequently, different forms of worship and the acceptance of the act vary from one group to another²². Muslims can therefore be adherents of a number of different ideological and theological understandings of Islam.

Muslims are largely divided by two main branches: Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. Both these groups have developed their own methodologies to interpret the Qur'an and other primary texts, which has given rise to a rich and vast understanding of Islam. The Sunnis, who form the majority of the Muslim world (90 per cent of all Muslims), developed into four main schools: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali – dating back to 800 CE. The Shia developed into three main schools: Ja'fari, Zaydis and Isma'ilis. The Isma'ilis further branch out to another two schools called the Dawudi Bohra and the Nizaris. There is another practice of Islam that exists in most branches of Islam, the mystic practices known as Sufi or Erfani Islam and they too have their own subdivisions²³.

3.3 The Muslim community of Britain

Coverage in the national media can often present a very negative picture of British Muslims and this touched directly on the fostering community in 2017 with two high profile media stories relating to cross-faith placements involving Muslim children and foster carers. While there was a recorded rise in the references to Islam in the British media between 2000 and 2008, 36 per cent of media stories about British Muslims in this period were about terrorism²⁴. By 2008, while these types of stories decreased in volume (27 per cent), they were replaced by stories on the difference between Islam and British culture or the west in general²⁵. It is against this backdrop that fostering services will undertake recruitment and training of foster carers, suggesting a greater need to ensure a strong sense of shared understanding and respect between cultures within their local community.

Research conducted in 2009 into the feelings of British Muslims concluded that one third felt more in common with Muslims in other countries than with fellow citizens²⁶. Despite a sometimes expressed perception of the lack of integration by Muslim communities, research demonstrates a 'wealth of positive community work by British Muslims (as well as other groups) at a local level, across ethnic and religious lines' most powerfully illustrated by the Missing Muslims report²⁷.

22 J. Bell, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, Pew Research Center, 2012.

23 H.P.G bin Muhammad., *A thinking Person's Guide to Islam*, White Thread Press, 2017.

24 K. Moore, P.Mason, J.M.W.Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008*, Cardiff University, 2018.

25 Ibid.

26 C. Joppke, *Limits of Integration Policy: Britain and Her Muslims*, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2009.

27 Op.Cit, *Missing Muslims*.

For Muslim communities, integration is often cited as a challenge, particularly in communities with areas of relative deprivation and a backdrop of other societal pressures. Loneliness can be a key factor to those Muslims new to the UK, many citing loneliness as their biggest challenge when it comes to integration, creating a barrier in terms of reaching out to faith and community groups. This is an inevitable barrier in the way of making more significant life choices, like the decision to foster, as existing links with local authorities and others within their community are potentially less developed.

Family however is the central building block for Muslim society, based on a belief that families provide greater stability, continuity, love and support for each other. Islam argues that the family is a divinely inspired institution with marriage at its core²⁸. Therefore messaging about the importance of offering stability and love in a family setting for children who are looked after can be a powerful and resonant message for Muslim families.

Due to the strength of relationships and shared responsibility within traditional Muslim families, care of each member is the responsibility of the extended family. Many second-generation Muslim families in Britain have however grown up in smaller nuclear families more akin to western cultural norms²⁹. While still adhering to Islamic teaching and retaining membership to the Muslim community or *Ummah*, these subtle changes are relevant to unlocking potential barriers to fostering.

Family experience, the community's traditional response to family members in need and the reduced likelihood of seeking outside or statutory intervention to provide family support can all create barriers to the understanding and acceptance of more formal or statutory family support services – either in accessing them personally or supporting their delivery through areas such as fostering. With the adaptation and development of the traditional family model within the British Muslim community, these barriers may begin to be removed.

3.4 Islamic Mandate for the care of children

'Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to your parents. If one of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect... and act humbly to them in mercy.' Qur'an 17:23-24

Muslim children are born into a state of *fitra*, meaning purity and awareness of God. Parents have the responsibility of developing their child's spirituality. This may be achieved through teachings and daily life, but also by enrolling a child at a madrasa.

One of the commonly cited reasons for Muslim families being uncertain about their ability to foster is a misunderstanding within their own community that the act of fostering is inconsistent with the Islamic faith. This is a misconception; to the contrary Islamic teachings promotes fostering.

28 S.Dhami, A. Sheikh, The Muslim Family: Predicament and Promise, The Western Journal of Medicine, 2000.

29 Ibid.

In 2005 an important step was taken by one of the highest authorities in Islam, the Al Azhar University, in conjunction with UNICEF. They collaborated to put together a manual that lays out the rights children have in Islam – rights to health, education and protection. Professor Tantawi of Al-Azhar University stated:

'...if we see a child lacking in care or attention, responsibility for that omission lies on the shoulders of his or her parents, family and society. This is so because Islam encourages providing good rearing and care for the child, and keeping them away from whatever may harm their health, psychological and social conditions, so the child can grow into a righteous citizen who has a sense of belonging to his or her people, society and homeland³⁰.'

Research and scholarship was undertaken by the Al-Azhar University team, supported by UNICEF, drawing on the Qur'an and other classical sources. The team concluded that Islam affirms the following:

- The right of the child to a healthy start in life
- The right of the child to a family, kindred, name, property and inheritance
- The right of the child to health care and proper nutrition
- The right of the child to education and the acquisition of skills
- The right of the child to lead a dignified and secure life
- The right of the child to have society and the state play a role in supporting and protecting children's rights³¹.

By making these rights universal it affirmed the role and responsibility of all those within the Islamic community to support children from their faith and others, regardless of family connection and opened up the debate about fostering and adoption.

Islamic law mandates protection of children who are deprived of parental care. One of the basic rights that every child must enjoy is the right to live inside a family; a family that provides a child with the necessary parental care, and experiences of love, kindness and safety. This particular right is the first line of defence in the protection of children from attempts to violate their other rights. Traditionally, many Muslims actively uphold this instruction by sponsoring orphans in the developing world.

Despite these developments and the principles enshrined in Islamic law, it is important to understand how misconceptions have developed regarding fostering in the Muslim community as these continue to play a role and fostering services therefore need an understanding of them.

According to Islamic jurisprudence, adoption in Islam is forbidden and all forms of care given to children other than your own must be done via sponsorship of orphans through proxy or through the means of fostering³². Imam Faizul Khan noted that across Muslim cultures, adopting and fostering children takes different forms and that many

30 F. Ali, A. Belembaogo, S. Hegazi, N. Khaled. *Children in Islam - Their care, upbringing and protection*, 1st edition, UNICEF, 1985.

31 "UNICEF and Al-Azhar University present new manual designed to underscore importance of children in Islam," 2005 (https://www.unicef.org.uk/media/media_30158.html)

32 E. Desai, *Is foster care of children allowed in Islam? What is the proper method of adoption?* IslamQA, n.d..

Muslims do not always understand the differences between fostering and adoption, often conflating the two³³. Fostering in Arabic is Kalafah and Imam Faizul Khan explains why adoption is forbidden (*haram*) in Islam and restates the highly regarded place of fostering in Islam:

‘Fostering means to assume partial or complete responsibility for a child who has been temporarily or permanently deprived of parental care...adoptions where the child assumes the family name of the foster family is forbidden in Islam, whereas fostering is highly recommended³⁴.’

Indeed, Muslims have an inherent predisposition for fostering, as the Prophet Muhammed himself was fostered three times in early childhood. Throughout the period of Prophecy, Prophet Muhammed emphasised the immense reward of taking care of children deprived of parental care³⁵.

Despite these strong links between Islamic tradition and fostering in Islam, there remains a perception that there are low numbers of Muslim foster carers in England in relation to the size of the community³⁶. The lack of statistical data on the faith and identity of the existing foster carer population make this hard to test, but the frequently cited view does little to remove barriers. Yet, as previously stated, in the Muslim charitable sector, orphan sponsorship is a widely undertaken activity funded through Zakat. In fact the saying of the Prophet is commonly seen in almost all Muslim charity literature: ‘*I and the person who looks after an orphan (includes fostering) and provides for him, will be in Paradise like this.*’ putting his index and middle fingers together. Figures from 2018 from Islamic Relief Worldwide, the largest Muslim charity in the world, suggest that they have over 50,000 orphans under their care.

3.5 The forming of identity

At the centre of both the experience of Muslim looked after children and young people and that of the role of Muslim foster carers, lies the key question of identity.

A recent study of British Pakistani communities drew on the work of late 20th century social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his theories on social identity to better understand the interplay between faith, culture and country as it is experienced by young Muslims in modern Britain³⁷. The underpinning theory has much to offer as we explore the role of faith and identity in fostering. When analysing the Muslim faith specifically, being faithful to Islam carries a number of identities and practices, often binding oneself to other followers of the faith to form one single unit. In the British context, Muslims are

33 H. Zuberi, *Lack of Muslim Foster Families Resulting in Children Losing Islam*, Muslim Link, 2013.

34 Ibid.

35 A.T. Hijazi, *Halima: The foster mother of Prophet Muhammad*, Arab News, 2014.

36 T. Jiva, *Muslim fostering row: Careless press must be held to account*. The Guardian, 2017.

37 J. Jacobson, *Islam in Transition - Religion and identity among British Pakistani youth*, Routledge, 1989.

going through a process of re-identifying with religion in a different way to their parents, creating their own sense of identity as ‘British Muslims’³⁸.

The Oxford University Professor and Islamic intellectual thinker, Dr Tariq Ramadan states that a Muslim’s essential identity is their religion:

‘Above and beyond the diversity of their national cultures (Muslims), the essence of their faith, their identity, their being in the world, is the same; they define themselves on the basis of points of reference that explain their sense of belonging to the same community of faith, and at the same time, more profoundly, root them in the universe of Islam³⁹.’

The ideals set out by the prominent preacher Dr Tareq Al-Suwaidan articulate this notion that being Muslim is accepting a particular way of life, a code that dictates how one is to function in the world and this may be the code that allows Muslims in England to have a sense of anchor. Without this code, Muslims are confronted with multiple identities; it therefore gives a sense of structure and a reference point to which one can refer when the need arises.

As noted by McPhee, identity means that Muslims practice their faith by association with a particular community, how family life is conducted, how they eat, how they engage in a social setting and how they split their day up due to the five prayers⁴⁰. This reinforces the need for careful matching of children and young people with families who can help them practice, explore and develop their faith and identity, and keep them rooted within their communities.

A Muslim child therefore may have a number of identities with which they will associate themselves. As Jacobson noted from the young Pakistani Muslims she worked alongside, young Muslims operate in a world where these multiple identities are being constantly balanced. They have an ethnic identity; this will connect them to values and feelings in relation to a membership of an ethnic minority, such as being Pakistani or Bangladeshi. Their religious identity will connect them to values and feelings to the Muslim community as a minority in England. This also then connects them to a wider Muslim identity not linked solely to the country they live in⁴¹.

Muslim children’s identity is an area where there is currently significant investment made and publicly available media channels and resources are plentiful. Media outlets such as Muslim Kids TV, which cultivates a young people’s community celebrating Islamic beliefs, and books such as the Noor Kids series which encourage pride in Islamic identity are rich sources for Muslim and non-Muslim parents and foster carers to draw from.

The complexity of this identity and the support needed, as this forms during childhood and adolescence, is an area that fostering services must consider and develop awareness of to support both Muslim and non-Muslim foster carers to create home environments in which young people can flourish.

38 Ibid.

39 S. McPhee, *Muslim identity - The European context*, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, 2005.

40 Ibid.

41 Op.Cit., Jacobson.



4. Delivering culturally aware practice

4.1 Identity and the looked after child

It is essential in any foster placement that the foster carer is able to develop and sustain relationships with the children they look after and, as appropriate, enable the child to maintain contact with their birth family, friends and community. As part of this, foster carers need to understand a child's identity, culture and faith and help them to explore and understand these, taking the lead from the child or young person where possible. Where this does not happen it can put a placement under strain, compound the trauma already experienced by the child as well as affecting the longer-term cultural development and formation of the child's identity.

As highlighted, a child's identity should be one of many factors considered in the matching process. In the case of a Muslim child in care, there are a variety of factors that will need to be considered, not least the branch of the Muslim faith with which they identify. By not exploring a child's identity to its fullest, services risk placing children together who may share the Muslim faith, but from different perspectives; not every (Muslim) family in England will have a common thread in culture and tradition⁴² This may place significant strain on the placement and pressure on a foster carer to manage potentially significant conflict.

Appreciating the complexity of the Muslim identity of a child can be the key element that determines the success or failure of a placement. Issues of race and culture play a vital role in self-esteem, confidence and resilience and Daniel suggests that children experience childhood very differently depending on their experience of issues relating specifically to their culture and race⁴³. It is crucial for the foster carer to be able to support the needs of a Muslim child should the child identify as Muslim, or support them if they wish to explore their Islamic identity. Significant evidence suggests that ethnic matching may facilitate the child's long-term positive ethnic identity⁴⁴. In addition, individuals identify themselves ethnically based on a number of factors, including appearance and group membership, with this sense of belonging giving confidence.

Numerous international studies have identified ethnic identity development as a key phase during adolescence and emerging adulthood and particularly so from young people from ethnic minority communities. In addition, many of these studies in various

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Op. Cit. Daniel

⁴⁴ M. Anderson, L.O. Linares, *The role of cultural dissimilarity factors on child adjustment following foster placement*, Children and Youth Services Review, Elsevier, 2013.

different ethnic and faith communities have concluded that family networks are the key driver of identity. These general trends, taken alongside recent evidence which suggests that a stronger connection with ones' ethnic group can have a positive impact on self-esteem, academic achievement and crucially lower levels of depression and loneliness, are of interest to us when looking at long term outcomes for looked after children and young people and are worthy of further research.

4.2 Religious practice

Observing and encouraging religious expression and cultural practices are a central element in ensuring young people can explore their faith fully and freely. Specifically, there is significant existing research showing that food can play an important role in exploring a culture and establishing a relationship with a child⁴⁵. According to a study of South Asian Muslim families in Britain, families' choices related to food and the organisation and performance of meals emerged as important expressions of how they 'placed' themselves culturally and religiously⁴⁶.

For Muslim households food is not only a necessity but there is a deeply religious element to it that defines an observant Muslim household. Religious eating and importantly, religious abstinence, involves following the rules for eating halal (permitted) and avoiding haram (forbidden) food. Within a range of animals that are permissible to be eaten, they must be slaughtered in a prescriptive manner. Due to the similarities in method, most Muslims believe that they are permitted to eat Kosher meat. Similarly in both Islamic and Jewish law, there is a strict prohibition of carrion, swine, rodents and blood. Additionally, Islamic law prohibits any preparing, selling, purchasing and consumption of alcohol.

Looking after a child from another faith therefore requires foster carers to be aware of this and adhere to the relevant practices of religious eating. Of course, there are circumstances where both the birth parents and the child are not concerned with the practice of eating in accordance with religious rules. However, where both biological parents and the child prescribe to religious eating, this would be a key factor to take into consideration for both the child and wider family. Not adhering to these practices could impose a way of life that may be discriminatory to a child of another faith or no faith, for example the eating of forbidden foods such as pork. The reverse is also true; for example if a fostered child comes from an upbringing where pork is a familiar part of their diet, going without it can bring about discomfort for the child, a sense of loss and may compromise attachment.

Evidence suggests that many children in care feel a general loss of individuality and respect⁴⁷ and religious and cultural practices are a powerful way of rebuilding this. This sense of loss of course can be heightened for those unaccompanied asylum seeking children alone in England. Food anthropologists have shown that carers and the

45 R. K., Kohli, H. Connolly, A. Warman, *Food and its meaning for asylum seeking children and young people in foster care*. Children's Geographies, Volume 8, 2010.

46 Op.Cit. Becher.

47 E. Chase, S. Jackson, A. Simon, (Eds.), *In Care and After*, Routledge, 2006.

children they care for can co-construct environments that make it more friendly and welcoming through familiar food. This experience not only triggered pleasant memories by the sensorial experience of cooking and eating, but it was an important component in the construction and management of identity⁴⁸. However, Kohli et al also warn that conversely, if these children have no choice with regard to food, and culturally or socially permissible foods are not provided for them, it can reinforce their previous experience of trauma.

Food is just one factor of living and developing Muslim identity and other aspects of Muslim daily life and the experience of looked after children would be worthy of additional research. McPhee already identifies the powerful sense of belonging for Muslim children that establish from 'how family life is conducted', with prayer, religious discourse, shared values and meal times playing a significant role in creating meaning⁴⁹. Foster carers can obviously play a significant role in creating or recreating this environment, whether they themselves identify as Muslim or not.

Scourfield et al identified that a significant difference in religious practice for young Muslims, compared to non-Muslim peers was the amount of 'out-of-school' learning Muslim children are involved in as part of their religious and spiritual development⁵⁰. This is significant for foster families as it relates not only to formal learning, prayer and worship but also story telling, creative activities and reading, with elements of faith and culture running as a theme through family and individual activities that a child experiences. The Home Office Citizenship survey of 2003 identified that Muslim parents were more successful than any other faith group in passing their culture, traditions and faith to their children⁵¹ and that faith was "central" to children's routines and activities. This therefore is something that needs to be considered within a foster family.

What can be drawn from these studies is the potential significance of food, faith-based activities and religious observance for looked after Muslim children and the importance of this in the preparation, planning and training for foster carers with young people whose faith requirements differ from their own. Diet and nutrition is for this reason a specific section within The Skills to Foster™ pre-approval training and should be a topic discussed with all foster carers when supporting them in planning for a new placement.

4.3 Social worker matching

Recent research by Sawrikar suggests that with the number of Muslims in England increasing and with ever distinct communities of those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, matching between the child and their social worker becomes an increasingly important factor⁵². This is a less explored factor when considering foster

48 Op. Cit. Kohli et al

49 Op. Cit. McPhee.

50 J. Scourfield, S. Gilliat-Ray, A. Khan, Oti, S., *Muslim Childhood: Religious Nurture in a European Context*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

51 Home Office Citizenship Survey, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919214135>, 2003.

52 P. Sawrikar, *A qualitative study on the pros and cons of ethnically matching culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) client families and child protection caseworkers*, Children and Youth Services Review, Elsevier, 2012.

carer recruitment and matching but can play a significant role in ensuring young people and foster carers have access to cultural and religious information and support, particularly for placements that cross faith, religion or culture.

Building on this, a study in Montreal conducted qualitative interviews with 45 health care and social service professionals of non-British and non-French ethnic origin. It concluded that the three main advantages of ethnic matching of social work staff were language competence, cultural competence and trust; all of which were beneficial in building relationships between social worker, foster family and child⁵³.

Communicating Islamic and cultural ethics to someone from a different background may pose as a significant challenge for some foster families, for example the implications and challenges of male and female interaction or the implications of puberty with regard to standards of dress and behaviours. A difficulty in expressing issues and concerns due to a lack of cultural understanding between foster carer and social worker can make it harder to resolve these issues within the home environment and place strain on a placement⁵⁴. Direct cultural experience or high levels of cultural awareness within social work teams can ensure these practical and ethical issues do not become a barrier to successful placements or indeed fostering itself.

This may be compounded by a sense of shame felt by Muslims who have immigrated to the west who are faced with a fear of losing their culture in the face of 'western' or 'foreign' values⁵⁵. Conveying preference over these issues without being judged requires significant sensitivity and delicacy.

There are of course circumstances where cross-cultural social worker matching can help overcome barriers to fostering. Studies have identified in some communities there is a fear that active engagement with social services in their own community will risk a breach of confidentiality, bringing their private lives and those of others into the public domain. For ethnic minority carers from close-knit communities there is fear at times that a social worker may know someone who will be linked to their family or that of the child in their placement. As an example, a group of researchers conducted a qualitative study with 29 children of ethnic minority heritage in London, and recruited south Asian support workers to work with families of a similar ethnic and cultural background. They found that *'...despite valuing their ability to speak the same language and understand their culture and religion some (families) experienced their support as intrusive and were concerned about possible lack of confidentiality⁵⁶'*. The loss of privacy is a cultural factor common in collectivist cultures where family name and standing in the community are important, especially when the community is very close.

Given that ethnic matching has the potential to both enhance and compromise accuracy in risk of harm assessments, this review proposes that the advantages and disadvantages of ethnic matching to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Indeed this principle of good practice is supported by the fact that the needs of culturally and

53 Ibid.

54 H. Zuberi, *Lack of Muslim Foster Families Resulting In Children Losing Islam*. Muslim Link, 2013.

55 Kugle, S.S. al-Haqq, *Sexual diversity in Islam*, Muslims for Progressive Value, Human Right's Campaign, 2010.

56 Op. Cit. Sawrikar.

linguistically diverse families should not be generalised, and that individual differences matter in the provision of a service tailored to a particular family's needs. However, when managing the challenges of finding placements to meet a child's religious and cultural needs, fostering services are encouraged to consider the composition of the team around the child and how this can be fully utilised to support the developing identity and cultural for the child.



5. Summary

This report has summarised some of the key research and literature available to those exploring the role of faith and identity in fostering, specifically in relation to the Muslim community. The diversity of the existing research and, more significantly, the gaps in existing data mean that the research itself gives neither a comprehensive or coherent overarching message to guide work in this area. It does however provide a foundation to support fostering services in developing their recruitment; planning, matching and training processes and some of these themes will be further explored in the partnership work with fostering services as part of the Muslim Fostering Project.

However, we would also encourage further research in this area to better understand the needs of Muslim children in the care system and those that care for them. Specifically from this literature review we have identified some broad themes where we believe work is needed to better build this national picture:

Understanding the experience of Muslim looked after children

There is surprisingly limited literature detailing the experience of Muslim children in foster care in England, particularly from the perspective of the children themselves. This is not an issue linked specifically to Islam, with little research generally undertaken on the importance of faith for looked after children, but with significant research detailing the particular challenges around Islamophobia and isolation experienced by the British Muslim community. The specific experience of Muslim looked after children would be of benefit.

Understanding the outcomes for Muslim children in foster care in England

Linked to the area above, more data on the outcomes specifically of Muslim children in foster care in England, compared to non-Muslim peers would be of interest in assessing whether the system helps these children to negotiate the additional challenges identified around managing multiple identities and exploring their faith.

Supporting non-Muslim foster carers who care for Muslim children and young people

While the existing data illustrates the importance of providing Muslim young people with the environment in which to explore and observe their faith, the level of support and targeted training for non-Muslim carers in this area is mixed. Accepting that not all children will be placed with foster carers from their own faith and culture, specific evaluation of existing training and support initiatives would be helpful to identify the best way to support foster carers in this area and help to better understand the impact of cross-cultural and cross faith or religious placement.

Rejecting or rebelling against a culture or identity

Existing literature and the analysis provided here focus on children and young people for whom their identity and culture is clear and is something they wish to continue to develop. The challenges of supporting a looked after young person who is rebelling against their culture or challenging their identity are complex, particularly for foster carers who share their faith. Identifying ways of supporting families to work through these challenges would be beneficial.

6. Conclusion

This academic exercise has offered us the opportunity to explore a complex, interesting and, at times, challenging topic facing our fostering communities.

The existing research and the evidence gaps have raised questions to be explored more fully through the experience and practice of our delivery partners as part of the Muslim Fostering Project.

The Fostering Network is committed to working to ensure that looked after children and young people have the very best outcomes. We have made a commitment to further exploring identity and its role in fostering both for children and young people and those who care for them.

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About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

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