

Ramadan in 2023

In 2023, Ramadan – a month-long period of Islamic prayer, fasting, self-control and goodwill to others – is predicted to start on the evening of **Wednesday 22 March**, depending on the sighting of the moon, and it will end at sundown on **Friday 21 April**.

Ramadan and its relevance for schools (mainly but not exclusively secondary schools)

While bringing many benefits, strict fasting throughout Ramadan is likely to impact on pupils' overall well-being and their cognitive performance.

It's important to note that no child younger than 'the age of puberty' is obliged or expected to fast – there are, however, two views on this issue:

1. The 'biological maturity' view holds that children should begin the practice of fasting at the age of 15 (ie the age of puberty)
2. Under the 'intellectual maturity' view, children should begin fasting between the ages of 16 to 19 (ie the age of intellectual capacity).

However, younger children (ie those at primary or secondary schools) may practice short periods of fasting to prepare them for adulthood.

School staff need to recognise that unless there are genuine safeguarding concerns, they should not interfere with how young Muslim pupils observe Ramadan. That said, Islamic law does offer children the opportunity to delay or exempt themselves from fasting and late-night prayers if they believe it may adversely impact their performance at school, especially if they are facing the prospect of taking exams.

A word about fasting, prayer and safeguarding

During Ramadan, those fasting can have one meal just before sunrise and another just after sunset. While fasting may bring about many benefits, the practice of fasting may also bring about greater levels of tiredness, lower energy and dehydration, and reduced focus, memory and concentration.

During Ramadan, young Muslims may also take part in prayer events, often held in mosques and that finish late at night. Prayer sessions should be kept short on school nights or, preferably, held on weekends when the impact of late nights or long prayer sessions on pupils could be better managed.

If there are safeguarding concerns about a pupil, schools have an overriding safeguarding duty and should apply professional judgement and common sense in each case. The Department for Education's statutory guidance Keeping children safe in education defines safeguarding as "protecting children from maltreatment; preventing impairment of children's health or development; ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care; and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes".

With this overriding duty in mind, if you notice signs of dehydration or exhaustion in a pupil, you should ask the pupil if they are fasting. If so, encourage them to drink some water and reassure them that, in this situation, Islamic practice allows them to break their fast and make it up later. Muslim authorities agree that if there is a risk to a pupil's health, pupils can break their fast and, indeed, they should do so immediately.

The NHS advises the following: "If you produce very little or no urine, or feel disorientated, confused or faint due to hydration, you must stop fasting and have a drink of water or other fluid. Islam doesn't require you to harm yourself in fulfilling the fast."

A note for primary schools

No child younger than the age of puberty is obliged or expected to fast. However, primary school-age children may be encouraged by their families to do a partial fast, but ideally, such types of fasting should be under parental control and outside of school hours.

If fasting is happening in your primary school, school leaders and staff need to know so that they can safeguard against any risk to the health and welfare of pupils in their care.

A note for secondary schools

A thoughtful approach is needed, especially if you ask pupils whether they are

fasting. We recommend that schools ask parents and carers to let them know if their child is fasting. If the pupil is presenting with poor health, it is also entirely appropriate to ask the parents and carers if their child is fasting.

Practical tips for schools

In this final section, we set out several practical tips for school leaders.

We strongly advise that you delegate a member of your school's leadership team with the task of ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place to balance the school's statutory safeguarding duties with its wider moral obligations.

Observing Ramadan is, of course, a particularly effective way of engaging pupils (Muslim or otherwise), staff, parents and carers. Schools should produce some information (eg a leaflet or flyer) that helps to cover all the issues outlined in this advice note, and it may become a useful template for subsequent years. You may also use the information in communications with all stakeholder groups (for example, to raise awareness among non-Muslims, create a resource for the school or become a topic for an assembly or an INSET day).

Our tips

1. Inform fasting pupils of the allowances Islam gives them for breaking their fast – for example, making it up later if fasting jeopardises their welfare or performance at school
2. Provide a quiet, supervised space with activities for fasting pupils, especially during the lunch period
3. Check room temperatures to ensure they are no higher or lower than they need to be
4. Check whether it's best to hold learning or revision lessons in the mornings or afternoons
5. Consider putting a bag together for fasting pupils who receive free school meals to take home
6. Make allowances for fasting pupils who may need to reduce their overall levels of physical activity, say during PE lessons, and consider alternative activities on such occasions
7. Consider the impact of Ramadan on the setting of dates for other school activities, such as sports days, trips and end-of-year celebrations

8. Intervene to provide care for a pupil only when there's a risk to their health, welfare or safety
9. Ensure rooms are shaded, well-ventilated and have water available for fasting pupils
10. Provide an additional room or space where fasting pupils can take rest breaks if needed.