

Dear Prairie Academy Faculty,

The Importance of Characters in the Stories:

We are delighted that you all liked the characters as role models in the stories. We really aimed to show what well-behaved children are like, and also show that by having Haj Abdullah come from different cultures in each of the books (5-6, he is from Senegal) that a mentor can be from anywhere. By having the school teacher, the grandparents, and parents answer the childrens' questions, with an emphasis on mother and grandmother being wisdom keepers, the aim is to show children that they're surrounded by sources of information and role models for good character.

Involvement of Parents:

You mention the collaboration between school and parents, and this is very important. In an ideal world, the parents would all have the books at home which could be used as bedtime stories for the young. The parents could also be emailed the chapter from the book that is being studied at the time so that they may support their children continuously. If bragging is being studied, the parent can point out where this is going on in their own social circles, in films, and so on, to help the children start to recognize these realities outside of classroom materials. Obviously, there are endless opportunities the parents can point to as the vices and virtues are being discussed and understood. Ideally, the parents will also exemplify the very virtues which the children are being expected to realize in themselves. This really is a community project.

Your idea of bringing in guest teachers and scholars from the community is a wonderful idea. Even older children or teenagers will be very good!

QUESTIONS

To Open the Class & Begin:

First explain to the class that life is a spiritual journey and that we are all on this journey together. The Special Learning explains how. It should be explained that Islamic education is composed of *ta'lim* and *tarbiyyah* - that is, teaching and character development. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said "I only came to teach good character." This is an aspect of Islamic education which is often overlooked in favor of data input. In Ghazali's life, when the thieves steal his notebooks, he cries out, "If you steal my notebooks, I have lost everything I know!" After that, he realized that it is only by *being* what you know that you have something that can never be taken away and is the true treasure. If knowledge doesn't become your state of being, it's just so many words.



Q. (a) How to include and engage 3-5 year olds?

On two occasions at local homeschools here in Louisville, I sat at a dining room table with children ranging in ages from 3 to 9. I think when you first introduce the program, it would be good to simply do the following:

a) Hold up pictures of Ghazali's life and let them know how he overcame showing off, arguing, hypocrisy, and pride, and how he became such a great person in Islamic history because he was willing to face up to these spots on his own pure Heart. Then you can explain to them how he wrote his famous *Ihya*, which is considered in a manner of speaking to be like the Quran in a usable order. A basic solid foundation is provided and built upon systematically, supported by Quranic and hadith passages which relate to each stage of the journey. You could explain to them that Imam al-Ghazali had been very sad because when he was alive the Islamic religion was only 400 years old, and already people were only looking at the outer elements of it, the do's and the don'ts, and had neglected the inner part, the state of the human Heart. Workbook I, page 7-15, is Ghazali's life made simple, which can also be colored in with crayons. His story is also told in comic book form from 105-116. The children could look at all of these and then be asked to draw something they love most about the story of al-Ghazali's life. I notice all the children really like the part where he has become a janitor in the mosque in Damascus. Let them act out his life story.

Maybe this is a good time to explain the centrality of the human Heart in all the world's sacred traditions.

b) I usually simply condense the first several chapters of the Book of Knowledge into a few simple ideas and use Workbook I. held up to illustrate what is being said.

1. There are two kinds of learning - the regular, day-to-day learning, and the Very Special Learning. This attracts attention.
2. The Very Special Learning teaches us how to polish our Hearts.
3. Did you know you have two hearts? The physical one that pumps blood and the Real Spiritual Heart. At this point, hold up the workbook and open to page 21.
4. The children can discuss the two types of hearts.
5. This is the time to help them identify that their True Hearts/Selves, which is called the *fitrah* in Arabic (you could point out that in other traditions, it is called Christ-nature, Buddha-nature, *adamah*, and the Self so that they can better understand and respect other faith traditions). Everyone has the same pure, innate essence. The children can be told they don't have to *become* good because they already *are* - they simply have to take care of their precious, pure nature. It is very important to establish in children that this is who they *really are*. If they are often told they are naughty, they might identify with the lower self if they don't understand that that is only the false self, which they are polishing away continuously. Once, my five-year-old granddaughter took away the toys of her baby sister, who went screaming off. I asked Sophia who took the toys: your Real or false self? She put her hand over her heart and stated: "NOT my Real Self." She could see the difference. And since this project is aimed at providing a beautiful and true lens through which children may see the world and themselves, nourishing the reality of their Real Selves, understanding the pure, Shining Heart, is foundational. What parents are finding is that this image works really well. Children can identify with it and draw it and talk about it. Once, I corrected a grandchild for being silly, and she just took her hand and started rubbing it on her heart.
6. Then the question arises about Polishing the Heart - keeping it clean. The children can contribute a few ideas of what puts dust on the Heart - not helping mommy, being moody, being loud and disturbing everyone, etc. The question then must be asked - but *why* would we need to polish the Heart?



7. Because there are two worlds. This is the other key factor for giving children a sense of security and a sense of how life is meaningful. Because children are so close to their natural state of *fitrah*, when they are informed about the spiritual Heart and the two worlds, they immediately recognize these truths which then become part of their worldview from that moment on. The teacher may explain that *this* life we are in is very short, and we are promised by God that everyone will have three kinds of losses: a loss of what they thought would happen, a loss of health, and finally a loss of the body and life. But then, talk to them about the Next World and how it is forever and everything they love and want will be there always. In the Semitic traditions, this has been called 'Heaven' or 'Paradise,' but in the Asian world, it is referred to as a state of enlightenment, joy, and bliss. Whatever it is, there is *no* metaphor great enough to explain what this might be. I have found that when a child loses a pet and can imagine that the rabbit or cat is in the Next World, it takes away from the sadness. So many of Ghazali's stories and metaphors are based on the journey from this brief life to the Next One, the eternal one. So, if you give children this quick overview at the beginning, they can grasp life's purpose and what they have to do, how trials can polish their hearts; while having no fear of death because they acknowledge The Next World, and knowing their Real Selves are pure and noble.

8. After establishing the importance of polishing the Heart in order to go to the Next World (and by the way, we are not making this project fear-based, so we're not talking about Hell or the devil, in general), we must tell the children, "This is *your* Heart. You will have great fun polishing and taking care of it. Different problems and trials you will have in your life will be very useful for you in polishing your Heart. When there's a difficult problem, you can practice patience and, by doing so, strengthen your Heart. If there is a disappointment (read the story of the ants and the pen, chapter 18), this can be transformed into trusting that God has your best interests in Mind, and so on, and so on.



c) The next thing I do in an introductory class with children of all ages is let them stand up in pairs play act a vice like not sharing, bragging, lying, etc., followed by

acting out the correct version of each. This really gets the children's attention because they are involved actively rather than just passively taking everything in. Getting them moving around will also get them to pay attention to the next section of teaching. This is a lot of fun and we want them to look forward to classes and enjoy them. Then, I ask the children to open the workbook accompanying the Book of Belief (Book 2) and go to page 23. An illustration on page 22 shows a child polishing laziness, anger, and envy from his Heart. On page 23, there are five large circles, and the children are asked to silently consider these to be five dots of something on their own hearts that they would wish to work on polishing off. By now, the children get it and can do this. The three year-olds also know what they're doing wrong but can't write yet, so they whisper what it is to a mother or older child to write it in for them. Later, in all of the activities in all of the booksets, there are continuous opportunities for drawing Hearts and assessing their current situation. One of the aims of the Ghazali Children's Project is self-observation and self-correction. Obviously, this is something that is asked of all people of all faith traditions to do at all times, but sometimes it's a little abstract and comes in the form of a fleeting thought of guilt, but usually little more. However, with the continuous use of the Heart image, it is much easier to visualize and can be concretely worked on.

d) At this point, it is very effective and a lot of fun for the children to go to ghazalichildren.org (under Things to Do) and see the videos sent in from children all over the world where they are play-acting the vices and virtues. Some are quite professionally produced: <https://ghazalichildren.org/things-to-do/>. This makes everything clear.

So, the above is what I have found works when you are introducing the whole project to children of all ages. If you look at the curricula in the workbooks of all of the Ghazali sets, you will find plenty of fun ideas for engaging all children. The workbook activities also have things for small children; I suggest you print out workbook pages from the PDFs which are available for all Pilot Schools.

We would be delighted for the Prairie Academy to tackle this same question and share with us what you discover. I am sure there are many creative, successful and effective approaches.





Q. (b)
Availability of books?

Books 5-6 are combined and are available as the Books on the Mysteries of Charity and Fasting. The Book on the Mysteries of the Hajj is underway to be followed by Books 8-10. It has also occurred to us to make a children's version of *A Portrait of the Prophet as Seen by his Contemporaries* (the Shama'il of Tirmidhi: here is the adult version:

<https://fonsvtae.com/product/a-portrait-of-the-prophet-as-seen-by-his-contemporaries/>). Also, we are working on a children's book on symbolism to appear in 2019. If you use the website, you will find that there are many flip books available:

<https://ghazalichildren.org/things-to-do/>. You will be happy to know that we have for teenagers downloadable Books 3-6. People are constantly sending us ideas for children's books which support what we are doing. If we can't afford to print them, we will at least put them on the website as downloads or flip books.

Q. (c and d)

Books 3, 4, 5, and 6 have the workbook, teacher's manual and school curriculum in the same hardback volume. We found people were only buying the storybook, and we hated for them to miss the whole system of reading the story, doing workbook activities to help establish the ideas, and the curriculum activities which help to make the lesson virtues become reflex actions in the lives of the children.

Q. (e)

Although the Templeton grant has been completed, we plan to have a film finished soon which would include all of the Prairie Academy's findings and contributions. We are aiming also to make a presentation in Toronto at the annual RIS (Reviving the Islamic Spirit) Convention. This does not mean that you must have finished all of the books in the Series. Even doing one or two well and recording what you are doing is what we are looking for. We want to be sure that what we are doing is really helping the character development of children. This is a difficult thing to determine, of course. With something like *wudu* or prayer, you could have the children do their *wudu* they way they do normally, pretty quickly, and pray the way they normally do, pretty rote, and then start introducing the interior dimension of each. The children could be asked what it's like to be consciously rinsing out the mouth and asking God's forgiveness and guidance. What is it like doing the *takbir* and prayer while, for that moment at least, being totally present to God. Ask the children if they are noticing how much more fun it is to pray and do *wudu* when it is filled with meanings and states of being. Ask them if it feels like a whole inner world has opened up, filled with light.

We did have an example from a little girl whose mother phoned us. She said that at a ladies' party, her 7 year-old daughter whispered in her ear, "Mother, are you backbiting?" I spoke with this little girl on her phone, and she said that before her mother had read to her the Ghazali chapter on backbiting, she hadn't realized it even existed.

Q. (f)

Honestly, I think these same book sets can be reviewed every single year. Imagine even for adults being able to incorporate the levels of conscious generosity into their charity that Ghazali describes. There is an Islamic school here in Louisville uses spiral teaching. They have a collection of books from a company which provides the same material every year, but with increasing depth. This might be something we could all work on creating together. The major effort so far has just been to get these books out of the very difficult-to-read adult versions into more accessible language - not only for children, but for ourselves, making the ideas usable rather than out of reach.

Q. (g)

Regarding the order--

I find that Ghazali is a master of order. One could nearly do an outline of what he is presenting. His teachings flow one upon another, and what you have just learned before becomes a platform for the next teaching. So for myself, I would teach it in his own order.

I am so deeply, deeply honored that you and your wonderful school are taking this on fully and helping to record your findings, which can help other schools throughout the world, and also help us show the John Templeton Foundation the kind of gratitude they deserve for believing in this momentous effort.

Love, Gray

