

# Improving Participation of Muslim Girls in Physical Education and School Sport

Shared Practical Guidance  
From Birmingham Schools 2008



# Acknowledgements

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# Improving Participation of Muslim Girls in Physical Education and School Sport

## Shared Practical Guidance From Birmingham Schools 2008

**Purpose:** To improve the access and participation of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport.

### **Introduction**

In offering support to improve the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education, the intention of this guidance is to be sensitive to the needs of the city's diverse Muslim population and to the realities of resourcing and practice in schools. Local solutions are required because the needs, resources and feasible solutions are unique to each school. While Health and Safety legislation and the Education Act is fixed, in most instances negotiation can determine a more satisfactory outcome than a mandatory framework. This document contains clarifications and recommendations that have grown out of city-wide research including multiple contributors from schools (headteachers, parents and pupils), community practitioners, providers and related national associations.

The Birmingham guidelines emerged from the challenges, realities and successes in the city. Many schools are already using different support approaches to the inclusion of Muslim girls. Each school offers different opportunities and constraints, mainly related to facilities available, for example there are primary schools with their own sports halls and secondary schools with their own swimming pools

but this is uncommon. Headteachers and staff have shown creativity in finding positive local solutions to issues raised and characteristics of good practice are shared to further clarify and improve issues surrounding the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport.

Good practice is evident in schools that have an ethos based on inclusion and respect for diversity, and where leadership establishes a culture that promotes personalised learning, high expectations and high self-esteem. Positive relationships enhance trust and ensure that learning and teaching takes place enabling every student to have equal opportunities to achieve their potential. The Leadership Teams of such schools set high standards and model best practice by ensuring that all school policies and practices are regularly monitored and evaluated to achieve their stated outcomes.

The Muslim Council of Britain Guidance (2007) "Meeting the Needs of Muslim pupils in state schools" starts with recognising the high importance of education in Islam and the need for all to pursue knowledge and learning. Inside the document there is much support for children's participation in a broad and balanced physical education programme, with regard for Islamic requirements.

The guidelines presented here both support and challenge some aspects of that document and negotiations are taking place that will bridge areas of dispute which surround withdrawal of pupils from participation in physical education, derogatory conceptions of dance, and the challenges in swimming.

*New national curriculum for physical education –*

The new key stage 3/4 curriculum due to be implemented from September 2008 brings with it a new focus. The content is no longer driven by activities, but by overarching concepts that are more outcomes focused. Primary curriculum change is likely to follow. The development of a

healthy active lifestyle is reinforced throughout the curriculum and a key part of this is teaching pupils how to exercise safely and effectively through physical education.

*“Physical education is a very important part of school life and full participation is to be encouraged, in order to develop a healthier lifestyle. Physical education is a compulsory part of the national curriculum at all key stages. There are some basic Islamic requirements for modesty which need to be considered in order to remove any unnecessary barriers for Muslim pupils to participate fully in physical education and swimming in particular.”*

<sup>1</sup> (MCB 2007, p 36)

<sup>1</sup> Muslim Council of Britain (2007) “Towards greater understanding: Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools: Information and guidance for schools, London: MCB.



# Clarification on religious and cultural requirements

Muslims worldwide find their own ways to express and live their lives, in diverse contexts, to meet Islamic requirements. Since religious requirements can impact on structures and practices in physical education it is important to know that:

- Islam supports the rights of all children to education and the right to participate in physical education.
- Islam encourages attention to physical health alongside spiritual health in the holistic upbringing of Muslim children.
- There is equal attention to health and the importance of exercise for boys and girls.
- Attention to modesty in dress codes relates to both boys and girls of all ages but predominantly following puberty. *(There are different interpretations depending on cultural and educational backgrounds of communities but the predominant interpretation is for women to cover hair, arms and legs, men from waist to knees.)* None of that should preclude participation in physical education where dress codes accommodate both Islamic requirements and safe practice.
- Mixed-sex participation should be possible in non contact activities such as badminton, orienteering, tennis and fitness activities, if appropriately dressed. *(Again there are different interpretations, some*

*Muslims will see no need to 'cover' or seek separate spaces, others, if appropriately covered, will feel able to participate in physical activity in mixed-sex groups from puberty.)*

## Cultural Differences

1. It is a cultural preference in some communities to introduce stricter modesty codes with younger children, for example the wearing of hijab (headscarf) before puberty and indeed peer pressure often operates at this level. The approach proposed here is for flexibility to accommodate local needs wherever possible, without compromising health and safety regulations, in order to encourage participation.<sup>2</sup>
2. More serious tensions are created by cultural views in which physical activity and exercise can be deemed inappropriate to expected roles and behaviours for girls and women. Such views need to be challenged because they deny the rights of girls and women to life, health enhancement and empowerment through physical education, sport and physical activity, and to their entitlement that is on the global agenda for equality.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> afPE (2008) Safe Practice in Physical Education and School Sport, Leeds: Coachwise. Range of information on subject association website - [www.afpe.org.uk](http://www.afpe.org.uk)  
Health and Safety at Work Act (HaSWA (1974)

<sup>3</sup> ICSSPE World Summits on Physical Education (1999, 2005) [www.icsspe.org](http://www.icsspe.org)

# Characteristics of existing good practice

Good practice in the area of inclusion of Muslim pupils in physical education and school sport at primary and secondary levels has been achieved in schools where there is:

1. Commitment to the Every Child Matters (ECM) government agenda and finding solutions to meet the needs of individuals,
2. Commitment of senior management and whole-school to embedding of health and well-being agenda, of which physical education is a respected part,
3. Ethos of celebration of different cultures and religions,
4. History of stability in local community,
5. Flexibility of approach, respect for and accommodation of needs as far as is reasonably practicable in relation to statutory health and safety requirements Policy with clarity of school provision and expectations (eg range of provision, kit, participation),
6. Clear communication of expectations in prospectus, on inductions and through constant reinforcement with parents,
7. Knowledge of Islamic requirements and clarity on extent to which school is able to embed these in provision,
8. Pupils' engagement in school-life in related ways such as kit design, problem-solving and open discussion of issues eg School Council / Islamic society,
9. Consistency of approach amongst staff,
10. Clear procedures for managing issues when they did arise, through head / co-ordinator of subject, head of school and / or community liaison personnel,
11. Good relations with local community, Imams, parents into school (often for community fitness programmes or engagement with specific projects), home / school liaison staff with language skills, where required, to ensure good communication on home visits.



# Recommendations for schools

Accommodate needs wherever possible within health and safety boundaries to maximise pupil participation.

## 1. Physical Education Kit

**All schools should have within their physical education policy, a dress code that is produced in consultation with the young people.**

### Indoor & Outdoor

- Allow the wearing of tracksuits/ leggings to enable Muslim pupils to participate without concern for bare arms or legs.
  - Give all children the same choice as equitable practice. For example, T-shirt and shorts or T-shirt and tracksuits for all.
  - Allow long-sleeved tops and leggings to meet Muslim requirements for modesty where requested, especially in pools and gymnasiums. Some pupils who have reached puberty might consider the tighter fit of Lycra garments inappropriate.
  - Apply the same flexibility to meet requirements for modesty of dress code for physical education lessons outside.
- Encourage adoption of latest, safest hijabs. Currently, there is much competition between leading international sports clothing firms to design Islamically appropriate sportswear. Modern sports hijabs are being designed in flexible, breathable fabrics. They do not require tying and do not slip or move around. Some schools are encouraging girls to adopt this type of hijab because it is much safer and more comfortable for physical activity than the tied version.
  - Be flexible. If girls are unable to adopt the modern sports versions, the wearing of headscarves should be permitted, where requested, provided they are safely secured (tied not pinned), tight-fitting, with ends tucked in and are not a hazard or a distraction. A properly secured hijab should be as safe as properly secured long hair.



## 2. Changing

**The principles of dignity, respect and decency for all pupils are paramount.**

- Ensure young people change into appropriate clothing for physical education. Such practice is hygienic and ensures greater safety.
- Recognise gender segregation and privacy sensitivities. Gender segregation provision is possible in secondary schools because they have separate sex changing rooms. Many lack privacy in showering facilities but where showering is optional this is less of a problem.
- Be creative in approaches to gender segregation for changing in primary schools as children mature and request such provision. Where there is adequate room and adult supervision, girls should be allowed to change in separate spaces to boys, especially in the top years of primary schools when puberty can begin. Creative solutions at local level have included use of screening, spare classrooms, and towelling changing covers.
- Engage school and sports-space designers in the issue of privacy in changing. Where new-build school and community sports facilities are being designed or refurbished,

for example through current government secondary plans 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF), a more creative use of space in communal changing rooms, which would afford greater privacy for individual boys and girls is recommended. The major barrier to personal privacy created by open communal changing and showering areas in schools and community centres needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency for the benefit of all.

## 3. Swimming

**Every possible avenue should be explored to find a solution to enable children to learn to swim for obvious life saving reasons.**

Also because:

“where it is a statutory experience in the national curriculum, and in order to ensure the development of a genuine life skill, the option for a pupil to be excused the activity cannot be implemented other than to place the school and possibly the individual teacher in contravention of laws of the land.”<sup>4</sup>

(Health and Safety Project Manager, afPE)

<sup>4</sup> Education Acts 1996 and 2002 regarding schools' and parents' responsibilities to provide and ensure children's participation in the national curriculum.

In Birmingham it is a damning indictment that in a recent survey only 19 per cent of 11 years olds in the city could swim the required national curriculum standard of 25 metres. This means many young people are at risk of drowning and the wealth of water-based opportunities to enhance life and health are denied. A positive approach to inclusion is the best start to improving these figures:

#### **For Schools and Pools**

- Allow flexibility in the wearing of costumes that cover the body more fully, when preferred. Sportswear designers have started to find attractive solutions.
- Encourage wearing of the swimming cap, it covers the hair and protects the pool.
- Reassure children who become anxious having accidentally swallowed water during Ramadan. This is never intentional and is indeed unpleasant and undesirable.
- Provide all-female environments where requested by parents and schools. This has proved highly successful in enabling Muslim children to learn to swim. Pool and school flexibility have brought solutions, for example amalgamation of classes or co-ordination with other schools. (additional recommendations for pool providers see page 10).

## **4. Dance/Creative Movement**

**Dance in education has a long history (over one hundred years) in the English state education system and is recognised as a valuable facet of human experience, as demonstrated through its many cultural forms of expression.**

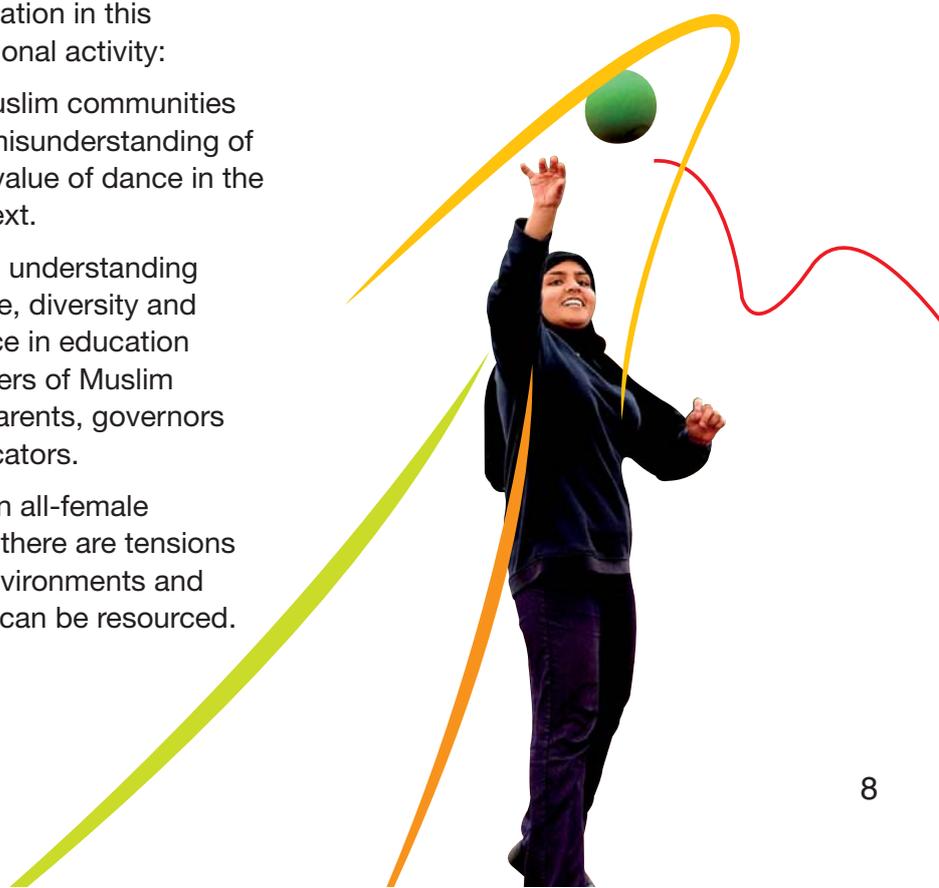
Teachers will meet different attitudes towards dance in Muslim communities, some parents and pupils will have no difficulties with full participation. Some parents/carers will be comfortable with their children's participation in certain cultural dance forms and others will prefer their children not to participate in the activity at all. It appears the strongest opposition is rooted in misunderstandings of the nature and potential of dance in education.

Dance is seen as a distinctive and important part of the national curriculum in schools. Many children enjoy the activity area because of its diversity and aesthetic/creative learning environment. Its value lies in knowledge, skills and understanding gained through creative movement experiences that develop artistic and aesthetic capabilities. Its value as a discipline is reflected in advanced academic studies in Dance from GCSE to A-Level and indeed to PhD level, with 518 higher education courses at 60 UK Universities (UCAS 2007).

Dance stands alongside other art forms such as music and drama as a worthwhile human endeavour in most countries of the world and through all historical periods. It exists in many different forms for example as high art, folk, creative and social forms. The problem related to the negative impression documented in the current Muslim Council of Britain Guidance (2007, p39) suggesting that most Muslim parents would see no value in dance after early childhood or find it problematic on moral or religious grounds, appear related to social dance forms associated with popular culture. Mention of movements of “sexual connotation” would not be intended or condoned in any school. More positively, the following provide ideas for inclusive actions that will encourage participation in this worthwhile educational activity:

- Consult with Muslim communities where there is misunderstanding of the nature and value of dance in the education context.
- Increase shared understanding of aims, purpose, diversity and benefits of dance in education between members of Muslim communities, parents, governors and dance educators.
- Provide dance in all-female environments if there are tensions in mixed-sex environments and such a solution can be resourced.

- Show sensitivity in teachers’ choices of the multitude of types and styles of dance experiences through which they teach.
- Use variety in accompaniment. The teaching of dance is not dependent on the use of music. Teachers can use a variety of forms of accompaniment such as percussion, poetry, words, stories and music and each can add enjoyment and atmosphere to the lessons.
- Be imaginative on ways to secure interest and confidence in the first instance. Some teachers introduce children to ‘creative movement’ and others have found keep fit routines to be an acceptable and successful starting point for transition to dance.



## 5. Ramadan

### Where pupils choose to fast:

- Keep them involved and engaged in physical education.
- Teachers can place emphasis on valuable learning experiences in physical education that reduce intensity level of physical activity demands.
- In consultation with the young people adaptations can be made in relation to need.

## 6. Out of hours learning through physical activities

### Where non-participation of Muslim girls is causing concern:

- Consult with young people on possibilities and preferences, for example of activity type and timing of provision. (This is voluntary time).
- Where necessary develop parental trust through improved communication of purpose, organisation and safeguards for those participating in extra curricular activities or travelling with related sporting events.

## 7. Information and Communication with Parents

### Good practice in schools happened where details of curriculum content, organisation and expectations were shared with parents.

- Ensure parents are fully informed of policies, activities and provision before registering their child with a school.
- Provide clarity of expectations, organisation and requirements in physical education activities on the induction of pupils into schools.
- Publish relevant physical education / school sport information for parents in the school prospectus. *(One example of trying to ensure mutual understanding and acceptance of provision possible in a school has been through contracts between parents and school).*
- Ensure on-going communication with parents to keep them fully informed of changes in provision, organisation and expectations.

# Recommendations for local authority pool providers

Sometimes an impasse is reached where schools can do no more to meet the needs of Muslim pupils in swimming because of structures and systems beyond their control. In these cases it is suggested that local authority personnel with responsibility for management of pools continue to work with schools and the local community to seek positive solutions, for example:

1. Consider separating times for public access and schools' access to pools. This would give schools greater control over the changing and swimming environments.
2. Prioritise the recruitment, training and retention of female pool staff, and more creative ways of using current expertise. (Evidence indicates insufficient female staff to provide an all-female pool environment. Some good initiatives are starting with training in all-female environments enabling Muslim women to participate.)
3. Improve policy and practice on separate-sex swimming times where there is demand, and publicise with the help of schools to attract more members of the public.
4. Involve stakeholders in problem-solving, including city council staff, teachers, parents and pool staff, in order to share difficulties and seek solutions.



## Final comments

No guidance can ever cover all issues that could emerge but it is hoped the above is of some value in supporting decisions to improve the inclusion of Muslim pupils in physical education. Many of the ideas would be welcomed by all young people as their bodies grow and develop in these important years. The overriding emphasis throughout is about making changes to facilitate participation wherever possible.

Zahida Hussain, Head of Strategic Development, Al-Furqan Primary School, Birmingham Muslim Liaison Committee:

*"The document will help schools to meet the needs of every child in their school in an informed way. With co-operation from the personnel at the local authority swimming pools every child will be able to take up their entitlement to swimming as well..... I think that would be a fantastic achievement!!*

afPE:

*"The Association for Physical Education warmly welcomes this guidance. It is a well informed and sensitive resource, which should help schools and parents to ensure that all children can benefit from the full range of physical education."*

Tahir Alam, The Muslim Council of Britain:

*"The Muslim Council of Britain welcomes this initiative to produce this most comprehensive guidance in the subject area to date and we welcome the continuing dialogue for better accommodation of Muslim pupils needs in our schools."*

Photographs used with the kind permission of QCA



Matthew Scarratt - Headteacher  
Golden Hillock:

*"I find the guidance both informative and clear in its advice - something that has not always forthcoming in other literature. In particular, I welcome the specific information regarding the wearing of hijab, the value and nature of dance in the curriculum and the list of good practice. The document sets out clearly religious and cultural requirements and also notes differences of interpretation which may have to be considered in individual contexts. However, it also is clear that 'views need to be challenged when rights are denied.'*

*I believe that the document positively achieves both recognition of religious and cultural values, whilst delivering firm advice to achieve its aim of improving participation of Muslim girls in PE."*

Governor Support (Birmingham):

*"Governor Support receives a number of queries around this issue. I and colleagues in School and Governor Support think the guidance is balanced, sensitive, sensible, reasonable and practical and will be useful for supporting governors, schools and parents."*

QCA – Curriculum Division:

*"This is really useful material that fits well with our goals to promote inclusion and equalities through the new curriculum."* [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)

*Photographs used with the kind permission of QCA*

National Dance Teachers  
Association (NDTA)

*"A very helpful guidance document to support teachers in making dance accessible to all young people."*  
[www.ndta.org.uk](http://www.ndta.org.uk)

Amateur Swimming Association

*"The ASA endorse this document as a valuable contribution to inclusive opportunities for all children"*

[www.birmingham.gov.uk/childrenservices](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/childrenservices)

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