



AHMADIYYA  
MUSLIM COMMUNITY

United States of America

*Muslims who believe in the Messiah,  
Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani<sup>ra</sup>.*

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious Ever Merciful

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## **PREPARING YOUTH FOR CHALLENGES OF TODAY & TOMORROW**

By Harris Rahman Zafar

they said, ‘Our Lord, bestow on us mercy from Thyself, and furnish us with right guidance in our affair.’

رَبَّنَا آتِنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ  
لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا ﴿١﴾

Mr. Chairman. Distinguished guests of Hazrat Masih-e-Maud (as) and dear brothers in faith. Asalaamo Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuhu.

With the passage of time, Muslim youth are facing a growing number of challenges in this society. I know this because I have gone through many of these challenges myself not long ago and understand the pressures, temptation and the confusion many of our youth are facing. I will highlight what I see as the major challenges and propose measures both parents and we as youth can take to address them.

There’s a reason why we are discussing this together, with youth and parents in one room. Use this opportunity to spark a continued dialogue between the two in order to help our parents understand these challenges and to help our youth face these challenges. Being the youngest of my family, I was the one to always get myself in trouble, as I seemed to push the envelope a bit more than my two siblings. And having that image of being the innocent baby, once confronted by these challenges, I internalized them instead of sharing them with my family. And just like that, I sent myself alone into a battlefield day-in and day-out without sharing with my parents the challenges, the difficulties, the pressure and the questions I faced everyday. I am fortunate that Allah Ta’ala did bless me with a friend within the Jama’at whom I could turn



to and share these stories with and who helped me remain grounded and remain focused on the guidance and teachings my parents had and were giving me about my faith. And although I entered this battle alone, I listened to the lessons my parents taught me about being an Ahmadi Muslim. In that way, I didn't ever feel I was "alone" in the battlefield.

The reason I use these words is to make it clear to parents that everyday, your child enters a battlefield. And it is a battle that they are expected to win every day. And although we are grateful to Allah Ta'ala for all those days we win, what we fear is the day we don't. Today's world has become increasingly complex, making the pathways to adulthood less clear yet more numerous. We need to create clarity and focus for our youth. To reach the youth and help us achieve our potential, we all have to admit these challenges exist and then identify ways to address each of them.

It's not easy to be a teenager to begin with, as this is the period in which we face the most change and face major social issues that can ruin our lives. For example, alcohol (40% of ninth-graders reported they consumed alcohol before age 13), drug abuse (about half of the high school seniors in the class of 2010 have tried an illegal drug), crime, violence, and sexuality. American youth have to battle all these social pressures every single day.

On top of that are additional pressures faced by Muslim youth because we are different. Being different introduces additional challenges that may not ruin lives but can ruin our connection with our faith, especially in an environment where conformity to the norm is expected.

What I consider one of the foremost challenges we face is an identity crisis, where our youth often feel conflicted (consciously or subconsciously) on how to identify themselves as a Muslim and an American because we are pulled in opposite directions by our family and by the peer pressure we face from friends.



One of the most challenging times in the life of a Muslim child is the preteen and teenage years. From the age of ten until about twenty, Muslims are constantly challenged by their peers. Pressure to go against our faith, our parents and our beliefs are constant struggles we as Muslim youth regularly have to face, which often leads to an identity crisis among some youth.

The challenge we face today is determining who we really are and – although we may not realize it – who we will associate with that will shape us as an adult.

The peer pressures Muslim youth may encounter range from other youth questioning our faith, pressures to do drugs, steal, or engage in premarital sexual activities (asking are you gay if you don't have sex or at least date). 75% of teenagers have had sex by the time they turn 20. Temptation of the flesh is one of the more difficult pressures our young men face. And although our sisters have that difficult decision to make whether or not to follow Islam's instruction to cover their heads, in a way I think they've got it easy because once covered, their *pardah* serves as protection from such temptation. But for us, we're exposed. We don't have that outward covering to protect us. So we must rely on other means to protect us. Growing my beard had a lot to do with following the guidance of our *khulafa* to use the beard not only as a demonstration of the strength of our faith but as our *pardah* to protect us from exposure.

But some Muslim youth fear ridicule for an outward display of our beliefs. We face subtle and seemingly benign pressures from our peers to look and act like them. And when positioned as something harmless that everyone is doing, it naturally leads our youth to question why we can't do it. Why do we have to be different?

Parents, by encouraging us to ask questions about our concerns and hold fast to our faith, you can provide us with a stronger foundation. All foundations are susceptible to becoming cracked, but the more reinforcements there are, the less likely it is that this will happen.



If you cannot or do not do so, you risk putting us in a situation where we are sure to lose the battles of peer pressure, or even becoming the target of ridicule as we're not able to defend ourselves properly. This leads to a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. We need to inculcate self-esteem in our youth! A youth who is not empowered to stand, will fall for anything.

This truly is one of the largest challenges facing our youth: self-confidence. Generally speaking, a lack of self-confidence leads to many bad habits such as eating disorders, drugs and alcohol, or even drastic changes to one's appearance in response to peer pressure.

The challenge youth face in this society is the pressure of being westernized to the extent that Islam is secondary to the Western culture. There's great danger in doing that. My young brothers, we are continually being asked to give up certain family and social values that are an integral part of our identity, and become a self-estranged imitator of everything "modern."

There is strong pressure to conform to friends and classmates, and understandably so because of the desire to fit in. It's very easy for kids to lose sight of who they are in exchange for the desire to fit in and be accepted by others.

If adults find it difficult to ignore the pressures of the world, imagine just how rare it is to find a young person confident enough in himself to do what he thinks is right and ignore the pack mentality which demands conformity. In this society, we are bombarded from every side by temptation, by the life of this world.

The Holy Qur'an gives us guidance here when it tells us *"And worldly life is nothing but a sport and a pastime. And surely the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are righteous. Will you not then understand?"* (6:33). If we become engrossed in this world, we risk becoming negligent about the next world. This worldly life as noted by Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (sa) is just a little sustenance in a much longer journey.



This is why I have called this a battlefield that every one of us is sent into everyday. Middle school and high school is a very hostile environment for all youth. Just look at the data.

Two months ago, a CNN poll indicated that slightly more than one-third of teens personally have been a target of a bully and more than two-thirds of teens said their friends had been bullied. Yet a majority of adults believe bullying is a minor problem or not a problem at all.

The National Education Association and National Association of School Psychologists estimate that in the United States, 160,000 children skip school every day because they fear attacks or intimidation by other students. If this is not a war, a battle being fought by kids everyday, then what is it? This is why parents need to provide their kids the armor we need for this battle so that we can face such severe peer pressure that hasn't existed before. And my young brothers, this needs to open your eyes to see how much pressure is put on youth in this society, and you must develop the self-confidence and ability to listen to advice in order to face these pressures.

Our society has trivialized religious devotion and made moral commitment relative, making it hard to find the balance between Islamic values and American values and to identify which code of ethics we will use to consistently determine right from wrong or deciding what our relationship will be between Islam and the mainstream culture.

And the phenomenal advancement in technology proliferates this problem. Technology influences the way we think about life and interpersonal human relations and now follows us wherever we go. In the past, despite peer pressure at school, kids would be safe at home, but now these pressures follow us everywhere we are online. Not only has cyber-bullying become an issue but now youth face ongoing pressures from other youth online and are simultaneously bombarded by ads that degrade our sense of morality.

Various programs online and on TV appeal to destructive instincts, provoke greed, unlimited self-gratification, and absence of moral restraint in its young audience. A study of 5th and 6th-grade students found that those who simply had an awareness of beer ads held more favorable



beliefs about drinking and intended to drink more frequently when they grew up. Such is the power of television that often glorifies alcohol consumption, the pursuit of vanity and the pursuit of women.

In this society, people have their mind pre-occupied by sport & play. Whether it's Guitar Hero, Need for Speed, Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, games on computers, internet, XBOX, DS, Playstation, youth can play games for hours at a time if uninterrupted by parents or teachers.

I'm not saying that games are forbidden or outright haraam. But everything must be done in moderation and within the boundaries of decency. The amount of time you spend playing games, and the types of games you play, will inevitably have an impact on you. Personally, I would not want my son to play games like Grand Theft Auto, which numbs our senses to ideas of theft, violence, gangs, drugs, women, etc. And an exposure to such forms of entertainment will influence you as a person. I don't say TV is haraam, but be reasonable about it. If your desire to watch a game or show on TV prevents you from going to the Masjid for a meeting or a Waqar-e-Amal event, then you have chosen this worldly life over the Hereafter.

So, looking at all these challenges youth face, what is my message? What we become in our youth influences how we become as an adult. We cannot wait until getting older before taking these things seriously. They have a saying: Your ideas become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits create your destiny. So my young brothers, your time is now. This is the time for you to prepare for the battlefield by arming yourself with spiritual weapons. If you don't, it will only get harder as you get older.

The words of Promised Messiah (as) also tell us not to wait before making these changes in our lives: *"Treat this day as if thy life had already been spent, and this were an extra day granted thee by special favor of the Almighty. What can be greater folly than to lose it?"*



Hazrat Khalifat-ul-Masih al-Khaamis (aba) has called on us youth to take this time seriously: *“if God’s commandments are not put in practice in the prime of one’s youth one will be held accountable. This is the age when one is capable of doing one’s best, however, this is also the time when Nafse Ammara (the self that incites to evil) attacks one most frequently.”*

Turn to prayer. Salaat is one of our strongest weapons. The Promised Messiah (as) wrote: *“The prayer which produces a sweetness and a zeal for more of worship and which strikes a communication with God and is offered in all humility brings about a change in the life of a man...This change makes him realize that he is not what he was before.”* (Malfoozat vol. 6, pg. 378). Waking up for Fajr and Tahajjud had a profound effect on my life.

We can and certainly should be able to enjoy the liberties of this society but must rely on the values of our Islamic identity. After graduating from college, I celebrated with a one-month guided tour around Europe through a company specializing in group tours for people between 18 and 35 years old. The “party” years. Here I am alone; my parents not watching me. No Jama’at member to hide from. “I’m free.” This is the time – when among those seeking the carnal pleasures on this trip – when I was sure to buckle under the pressure, but I didn’t. Why? Why was I able to avoid all alcohol, opportunities with women and drugs (especially in Amsterdam where people were participating in all of these)? It’s because I kept my identity and my faith on my mind. I was fortunate to have a Mulaqaat with Huzur at the very beginning of my trip, which began in London. I made sure to do my salaat. In Paris when the entire group was going to a cabaret show, I was in a taxi and train finding my way to our Masjid. Did I have fun on that trip? Absolutely!! But I didn’t have to sacrifice my identity & values to make it happen.

Hazrat Masih-e-Maud (as) delivered this same message:

*“I do not wish to stop you from worldly good, but you should not follow the ways of those who think that this world is everything...What is this you seek from those who are of this earth?...Those who are not satisfied in their own minds, how can they give you satisfaction?”*



So I am not asking you to live a life of isolation. Rather, be firm in your faith and be strong. Do not prepare yourself to be followers, imitators and conformists. Prepare to be leaders, innovators and problem solvers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said it best: *“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”*

Seek inspiration from the Holy Qur’an when Allah Ta’ala speaks of youth who had confidence and relied on their religious identity for strength when they uttered the prayer I recited at the beginning of my presentation: *“Our Lord, bestow on us mercy from Thyself, and furnish us with right guidance in our affair”* (18:11).

And what does Allah say happened to these youth? Allah says: *“We will relate to thee their story with truth: They were young men who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance. And We strengthened their hearts, when they stood up and said, ‘Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any god beside Him’”* (18:14-15)

So go out in this world, be proud of who we are; be proud of what sets us apart from others while also understanding what binds us together as fellow countrymen of this nation.

Parents, our youth are good kids. I’ve seen them. I’ve spoken with them. More than anything, they need your love, support, advice, willingness to listen and your prayers. Empower them with the skills and advice they need to return home successfully everyday from the battlefield.

Encouraging your children to seek advice from members of the Jama’at will help. Other Jama’at members may be able to offer advice from an insight of love that will be helpful to your child.

Acknowledging the challenges we are wrestling-with, relating teachings to the issues we face, and even praying more specifically for us are ways of retaining and even deepening the relationship while providing us with practical assistance.



Have your kids be engaged in the Jama'at. Living close to the Masjid matters. Coming every Sunday and to every event is where the parent invests in the future of their child. Avoid hypocrisy as your child knows what you preach at the Masjid and do at home. And if you tell your child they can skip Juma once in a while, you are taking away from their future.

To my young brothers listening to me, you live in the pivotal period when you need to gain the attitudes, competencies, values and social skills that will carry you forward to a successful adulthood. It is the time when you need to avoid choices and behaviors that will limit your future potential. Open your heart and eyes to your calling. We are the answer to the prayers of our parents, grandparents, our Khulafa and Hazrat Masih-e-Maud (as) himself. Do not mindlessly follow the crowd and do not isolate yourself from others. Be confident in yourself.

Hazrat Khalifat-ul-Masih Khaamis (aba) gave great insight when he stated that Tabligh is one of the best ways to increase our confidence in our identity as Muslims. Our nationwide "Muslims for Peace" flier distribution program has given young Muslims across the country a renewed vigor and zeal for their faith. Many who were initially hesitant later expressed that they enjoyed the experience and would do it again. Work with your local Qaid to hand-out these fliers. Have the confidence to walk up to someone's home or stand in a crowded area and share with them the message of Islam. There are no debates. No arguments. It does not require you to have the knowledge of our elders. This is just about confidence.

When you are open about your faith, you earn an advantage on the battlefield. Why else do you think people in college eventually stopped trying to get me to drink beer or smoke pot? They knew I would say no and they knew why I would say no. Countless efforts over years and years proved to them they would not win that battle.

So my closing message to my fellow young brothers is simple: gain an understanding, a comfort and a confidence in your faith. This is our ultimate shield in the battlefield. And the stronger we hold-on to this shield, the more we will be protected from negative external influences. And



remember that we need not fight on the battlefield by ourselves. Seek support from family – and friends within the Jama'at. And seek others on the battlefield who may need your help.

I will leave you with the invigorating words of Hazrat Khalifat-ul-Masih IV (rm) that he directed specifically to Ahmadi Muslims of North America during the Jalsa Salana in 1992:

***“O’ Ahmadis of America and Canada, for how long will you remain in sheep’s clothing? Wake up, stand up, and discard that clothing! You are the lions of Allah, and like lions, with might and tenacity, you must conquer the jungles ahead of you. May Allah be with you. May Allah be with you. May Allah be with you.”***