

# **What is keeping the youth away from the Masjid**

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## **What is the problem?**

According to a study published by the Council on American-Islamic Relations in 2001 entitled “The Mosque in America, A National Portrait,” only 41 percent of mosques have regular youth activities.

It's happening whether we are ready or not. Today, there are more Muslims in the precious age group of 15- to 25-year-olds than in any other age group. This is true in the United States, England, France, and almost all of the Western countries. This is also true of the countries in Africa and Asia.

However, with this group being the fastest growing their presence in the masjid and participation in different Islamic activities is minimal. This conclusion is mostly based on observation as well as reports by different groups around the country.

Every time one travels through the US, one finds a common theme in the masjid: the majority of the attendees are mostly older immigrant males. That in itself is not a problem, however, when one learns that 60% of the Muslims in the US are natives one would have to ask a very logical and obvious question: where are the rest and

## **why are they not in the masjid?**

It is true that most, if not all, masjids in the US were initiated and built by immigrants. These were either immigrant who came in permanently as refugees or temporarily as students who came for a short period of time to finish their education then go back to their countries. In other words, the strong presence of immigrants is understood; however, it is the absence of the youth that is questioned.

By means of observation there seems to be about 13 reasons for this phenomenon.

- 1- Immigrants, who are mostly in charge of these centers, are still stuck in the third stage of immigration, i.e. trying to make peace with the "new home". A good number of immigrants have not made peace with the fact that America is home. This has resulted in the creation of the "back home mentality". In this stage, immigrants try to bring what was happening back home to the US. As a result of this most mosque activities cater only to the immigrants. The mosque, to a good number of people, is seen as a place that reminds them of back home, a place that has not being fulfilled by the corrupted outside world. It is the safe haven that we can go to and get a sense of being back home.
  
- 2- Language barriers between the Imam or those who are in charge and the youth. A good number of Imams are themselves immigrants and face a great deal of language challenges. Since the median for communication is lacking, communications are mostly kept to the minimum. By extension of the first reason, again, the centers are catering to the immigrant community.
  
- 3- Cultural barriers between the immigrants and the youth. This is a natural result for any group of people in this situation. A good number of the youth have never been back home. It is even more difficult for those youth who come from a biracial or bi ethnic background, were back home is not defined. The lack of language has resulted in the creation of this barrier as well. And even if language is not an issue, the recent technological advancement has created a new culture that most older people cannot relate to. This has led to the alienation of the youth Elders cannot relate to youth. Youth not respecting elders. "Us" vs "Them" mentality is created. Bridges being destroyed and

- youth are becoming alienated from Muslim community as no programs or services that cater to them are being made.
- 4- Khutbas and other lectures don't necessarily address youth issues, and if it does it is usually to address what is wrong not what is right or can be right. This can many times be the consequence of all previous reasons listed above.
  - 5- Lack of belonging and ownership to the masjid. The centers are usually run by a small group of people with little room for participation. Youth come in and feel they are guests in someone's house. This may not be true, however, this is the impression that the youth have about the masjid.
  - 6- Lack of activities that are age appropriate. A good number of activities revolve around lectures, speeches, seminars, conferences and similar activities, though they are needed, they can't be the only activities held at the masjid, especially for the young ones.
  - 7- Lack of clear vision as to what is desired and expected. Most centers consider it a success to just bring the youth to the masjid and once they are in, there is no clear idea as to what is supposed to take place.
  - 8- Limited facilities in the masjid have resulted in few activities that appeal to the youth and youngsters. Most centers are bought or rented to accommodate mainly two activities: Fridays and Ramadan. Other than this, few masjids are equipped with other facilities.

- 9- Lack of understanding as what the challenges of the youth are. We can't really address the needs of the youth if we don't know what their challenges are. There is more to their challenges than just boyfriend, girlfriend, alcohol, drugs, music and other vices.
- 10- Rigid gender-related rules that may or may not be explicitly verbalized. Youth do not know how to interact with the opposite gender and people using "Eastern" techniques in a North America setting fail to adapt properly to this society. Marriage process is difficult. Multiple personalities are created: one for the masjid another for outside the masjid.
- 11- All masjids are known for having board conflicts which is a huge turn off for many Muslims of all ages. It automatically gives the perception that masjid is a 'typical Muslim organization'; meaning they aren't organized and there is a drama all the time. People want to stay away from that.
- 12- The youth lack a foundation until their later years. Most of the first generation Muslim kids here have parents that come from Muslim countries where religion is intertwined with the culture. When the parents left their countries behind, they left both culture and religion as well. Many Muslim youth do not search for their 'Muslim Identity' until much later in their life.
- 13- Many Muslim youth who come to the masjid feel judged and therefore feel uncomfortable to return another time. For example, they are questioned why

they dress a certain way, they are not praying properly, or for girls ‘why don’t you wear hijab?’ etc.

## **Give them a role**

To borrow the words of Altaf Hussain "These days so many youth are excelling in public schools; giving speeches; making daw'ah (invitations to Islam); being recognized for their talents; and being appreciated for who they are. Unfortunately, when they enter our masjids, they become sullen, morose creatures, who would rather be anywhere else but the masjid. They are not to blame.

Chicago Tribune recently had an article on Muslim youth: "The future of Islam in America may well be in the hands of a new generation of Muslims who were born here. Now in college and experiencing the challenges that life in America poses to their religion, young Muslims balance spirituality with socializing, the call to prayer with the latest CD. Their Islam is not necessarily the religion of their parents. They are striving for an Islamic identity that can navigate the complexities of modern life in a secular world. Such challenges are part of daily student life for Muslims at Loyola University Chicago. A Tribune reporter spent time with them for the 12th and final installment of the series examining the struggle for the soul of Islam. They are negotiating the sometimes complex path between Muslim faith and American culture. Is it acceptable to watch MTV? To listen to music? At what point does makeup cross the modesty line?"

How much should they avoid contact between men and women? That issue flared into an angry conflict in the fall over who would get to use the MSA's lounge. Is America the land of opportunity, temptation or both?

## **Where can you go?**

<http://www.muslimyouth.net/>

<http://youth.ibn.net/>

<http://www.masnet.org/youth.asp>