

Foreword by Dr. Ingrid Mattson



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Foreword

By Dr. Ingrid Mattson

Children know things. Word quickly spreads among them about the ‘creepy’ relative, the ‘grabby’ coach, the ‘overly-chummy’ teacher. Children joke, because joking helps them manage their fear. They whisper warnings and avoidance strategies with each other or, with bravado, share what they would do if only they could overpower the predator.

But children do not have that power, so they mostly keep this knowledge among themselves. Most think they won’t be believed if they say anything, because they have heard other children greeted with disbelief when they have disclosed abuse.

I lived this experience as a child, navigating, with other children, a world of unsafe adults who were our teachers, priests, and guests in the home. Ever since I joined the Muslim community as a young adult, I have heard from children in the community about similar experiences of unsafety and strategies they have used for mutual protection.

They have disclosed to me how they and their friends had been abused at religious boarding schools, where their initial enthusiasm and excitement for intensive learning were destroyed by predatory teachers. They shared how, when they traveled with their families to visit certain relatives, they insisted on sleeping crowded in the same room so they could protect each other throughout the night. They told me how, when they complained about a certain teacher’s disturbing conduct, they were ignored and labeled troublemakers by the school administrator who was married to, or friends with, that teacher.

When I heard such disclosures, I was saddened, but was not surprised, because I have never believed that Muslims are immune from sin and corruption or that Islamic institutions offer a perfect refuge on this earth. What I do believe, indeed, what I know, is that Muslim communities can do better than we are doing today because the Quran and the Sunna provide all the teachings, values, and principles necessary to identify children as endowed with the same sacred inviolability – *hurma* – as adults, and to affirm that the abuse of children is a sin and a crime.

The Islamic ethical system, when properly activated, not only encourages, but requires the community to take responsibility for the safety of children. As a community, we have a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) to put systems of knowledge, oversight, and care in place to prevent abuse when possible, to stop it when it is ongoing, and to provide paths for healing and support for those who have been harmed.

It should not be necessary to state that children are no less human than adults and that they are endowed with the same sacred inviolability as others. Yet children are too often treated with less than the respect and dignity that they deserve, even by the adults who care for them. All too often, when children are assaulted, their health and welfare are treated as secondary to the interests of adults and their institutions.

In too many cases, leaders act as if their duty is reputation management, rather than a duty of care. Are we to be Muslims—submitting ourselves to the limits and commands Allah sets for us—or are we to be idol-makers—focused on creating a compelling image that conceals a grave falsehood?

For eight years now, the [Hurma Project](#) team has consulted with diverse professionals and those with lived experience to understand what enables spiritual abuse, how to prevent it, and how to respond with justice when it occurs.

In our research, including in the forthcoming *Hurma Project Handbook*, we address the abuse of children, but not at the level of depth that is required to establish effective processes and procedures, especially when our social and technological systems are always changing and presenting new challenges. For this reason, we are grateful to be part of this important collaboration with the [Islamic Schools League of America \(ISLA\)](#) and [Maʿruf Commons](#).

We pray that it will be accepted by Allah SWT as our contribution to the yet unfulfilled collective duty we all have to protect children in our Muslim spaces. To be clear, sound Islamic scholarship is only a small part of what is needed to fulfill this collective duty.

Most of the work needs to be done by you: parents, guardians, teachers, directors, and others who are the members and leaders of Muslim institutions and communities.

Dr. Ingrid Mattson





Introduction

By Dr. Mariam Sheibani

Muslim parents, educators, and community members are increasingly aware of the widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in our homes, schools, and communities. While statistics vary among studies, an estimated 1 in 10 children, and possibly as many as one in four girls and one in 13 boys, experience sexual abuse before the age of 18.¹

When child sexual abuse occurs in Muslim spaces, especially when committed by those entrusted with care, authority, or religious instruction, it raises urgent questions about our individual and collective responsibility to safeguard children and hold abusers accountable.

Yet many of the religious ideas that circulate in our community about child sexual abuse, while mostly well-intentioned, are often incomplete or misapplied and can unintentionally obstruct protection, silence survivors, or delay necessary action.

My first sustained engagement with the topic of sexual abuse began in November 2023, in the aftermath of the [FBI investigation into allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by Wisam Sharieff](#), a Texas imam, Quran teacher, and AlMaghrib Institute instructor. The ensuing firestorm within Muslim communities exposed widespread misunderstandings about child sexual abuse prevention, in addition to troubling misuses of Quranic verses, hadith, and Islamic legal principles in public responses by prominent preachers.

In the week of Sharieff's indictment, I participated in a [learning circle](#) and wrote [an essay](#)—later republished by [Al Jazeera](#)—that offered correctives to these misapplications. In the months that followed, I collaborated with two leading Muslim sexual health educators, Sameera Qureshi and Angelica Lindsey-Ali, to develop and teach a [course on safeguarding children](#) from abuse in Muslim communities. The misconceptions addressed in this resource emerged directly from these engagements.

Around the same time, Islamic school leaders were asking the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA) for support in safeguarding students from the kinds of harms and abuses of power perpetrated by Wisam Sharieff.

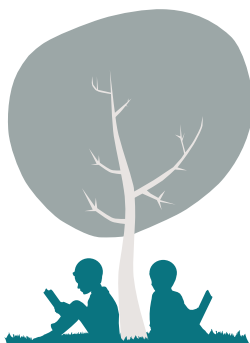
Many sought stronger grounding in the religious principles that should guide the development of school policies and procedures on child sexual abuse, as well as resources to help educate parents, caregivers, and children about protecting themselves from abuse. In response, ISLA initiated their [Sexual Abuse Prevention Toolkit](#).

This guide is produced through a collaboration between Maʿruf Commons, Hurma Project, and ISLA to specifically address the core Islamic principles needed to ensure children’s safety from sexual abuse in Muslim spaces.

Specifically, it addresses eight recurring religious misunderstandings that must be confronted and corrected if Muslim communities are to recognize, prevent, and respond effectively to child sexual abuse in Islamic schools, Muslim families, and communal spaces.

This resource serves as a foundational guiding document for ISLA’s *Sexual Abuse Prevention Toolkit* by offering faith-rooted guidance that supports professional safeguarding standards and trauma-informed practice. It also supplements the Hurma Project’s forthcoming *Handbook for Preventing and Responding to Spiritual Abuse in Muslim Spaces* by focusing specifically on child sexual abuse and drawing on the foundational insights of the Hurma Project.

Finally, it forms part of Maʿruf Commons’ [Islamic Law Literacy Initiative](#), which was established to improve public understanding of Islamic legal and ethical principles, address common misconceptions, and mobilize that literacy to confront urgent communal challenges, such as preventing and responding to child sexual abuse.





Purpose of This Resource

This resource is intended for all members of the Muslim community, because every Muslim who may be in the vicinity of children—whether in a masjid, playground, store, or other communal space—has a Shari‘a-based duty to be aware of abuse, recognize its signs, and know how to respond (discussed in Misconception #1). It is especially intended for parents, educators and administrators in Islamic schools, community leaders, imams, board members, and youth leaders who hold particular responsibility for creating environments that safeguard children.

This resource in no way replaces child-protection policies, legal procedures, or professional expertise. Rather, it seeks to highlight their importance and provide the theological and ethical language to help Muslim communities:

Identify and unlearn common religious misunderstandings that hinder child safety.

Apply Islamic principles to the problem of child sexual abuse with moral clarity, contextual wisdom, and a trauma-informed approach.

Cultivate a communal ethic of safeguarding grounded in Islamic values.

Balance competing Islamic values while prioritizing preventing harm and protecting the vulnerable.

At its core, this document affirms that protecting children is a religious obligation on each and every believer, and that the Islamic principle of harm removal (*ḍar’ al-ḍarar*) takes precedence over other considerations that we sometimes misprioritize.





Approach

From Misunderstanding to Corrective to Application

The research team at Maʿruf Commons conducted a landscape analysis of online Muslim discourse between November 2024 and April 2025 and identified the **eight most common misunderstandings** of child sexual abuse prevention. These misunderstandings are organized around a **three-part analytical framework** that reflects Islamic legal reasoning as well as pedagogical clarity. Each section addresses a religious misunderstanding that frequently appears in Muslim discourse around abuse and safeguarding and blocks our ability to fulfill our religious obligation to protect children from abuse.

**Common
Misunderstanding**
well-meaning but misleading

**Islamic Principles
for Correction**
what Islamic tradition teaches

**Grounded
Understanding**
faithfully applying principles

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

Each section begins by naming a religious idea or instinct that is often expressed with good intentions, such as appealing to modesty, sin concealment, or trust in religious authority. These important Islamic values become misleading when misapplied as an absolute principle or without regard to research-based facts about child sexual abuse. These misunderstandings are not treated as evidence of bad faith, but as partial truths that require correction or are trumped by greater imperatives.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

In part two, we identify the relevant Islamic principles, drawn from the Quran, Sunna, legal maxims, and established ethical reasoning that are necessary to properly address the misunderstanding. Rather than just offering isolated prooftexts, this section emphasizes how principles are weighed in Islamic moral reasoning, especially when values such as reputation, forgiveness, or privacy come into tension with protection and accountability. Honing these principles will enable you to reason through many other issues in your everyday life and community; they are relevant to many other topics and concerns beyond child sexual abuse, both personal and collective.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

This section shows how applying these Islamic principles corrects the common misunderstanding and replaces it with a grounded understanding of what faithful practice looks like in real institutional and communal contexts. This step is critical because it moves the discussion **from abstract ideals to responsible action**, showing how Islamic ethics guide prevention, reporting, and accountability in ways that are both religiously sound and practically effective.

The guide ends with a conclusion and a list of resources that point readers toward deeper learning and support the implementation of safeguarding practices.





How to Use This Resource

A central theme emerges from this resource:

Islamic values are not undermined by transparency, accountability, or safeguards. Rather, they are realized through them.

Concepts such as trust, forgiveness, modesty, and good opinion of others retain their importance. However, they must be placed in the balance assessing relative harms and benefits and applied in ways that neither obscure harm nor shift burdens onto the vulnerable.

This framework aims to help Muslim communities and educational institutions move beyond reactive debates and toward a shared moral language that enables decisive, principled action to protect children, uphold trust, and respond to abuse with integrity before God and responsibility toward one another.



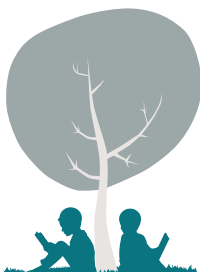


Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the ISLA team, especially Dr. Shaza Khan and Qur'an Shakir, for the invitation to contribute to ISLA's Sexual Abuse Prevention Toolkit and for their feedback on this framework. Special thanks to Dr. Ingrid Mattson for her pioneering work in safeguarding Muslim spaces through the Hurma Project and for her invaluable feedback on this resource.

I also wish to thank Shaykh Rami Nsour, and Dr. Omar Reda and Nura Elmagbari of the [Healing Trauma Institute](#) for generously reviewing the draft and offering helpful feedback that meaningfully strengthened this resource. Thank you also to Sameera Qureshi, Angelica Lindsey-Ali, and the April 2025 cohort of our co-developed Safeguarding Children course for helping me refine the ideas shared in this resource. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Ma'ruf Commons team for supporting the research, writing, and development of this resource.

Dr. Mariam Sheibani





Misconception

“I would never abuse children, so I’m not part of the problem and I’ve fulfilled my Islamic responsibility.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception frames child sexual abuse (CSA) as a problem limited to perpetrators alone. It assumes if one does not abuse children, one is not implicated in the problem and bears no further responsibility to address it.

This view often appears in Muslim discourse that resists communal accountability, rejects institutional scrutiny, or redirects responsibility for abuse toward an individual caregiver (most often a parent), rather than examining systemic failure to protect children in Muslim spaces.

While this view may stem from a desire to avoid unjust suspicion or collective blame, it misrepresents how responsibility functions in Islamic law and ethics.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

There are three foundational Islamic principles that correct this misunderstanding and place CSA prevention firmly within the spheres of both personal and communal religious responsibility:

1. The elimination of harm (*al-ḍarar yuzāl*) is a central objective of Islamic law and a fundamental obligation on the Muslim community. Harm that is widespread and inflicted upon those unable to protect themselves, such as children, takes the highest moral and legal priority.
2. “Whatever is necessary to fulfill an obligation becomes obligatory itself” (*mā lā yatimm al-wājib illā bihi fa-huwa wājib*). Measures such as awareness, training, and institutional safeguards that are necessary to fulfill the obligation of protecting children therefore become religiously obligatory to acquire and implement.

3. Addressing and preventing child abuse has elements of both an individual and a communal obligation (*farḍ ‘ayn* and *farḍ kifāya*). The individual obligation includes active education, vigilant awareness, and intervention measures wherever children are present. Individuals are not discharged of this duty solely by personal innocence. The communal obligation entails a shared responsibility among community members to ensure strong safeguarding practices are in place in spaces where children are present.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A grounded application of these principles to the problem of CSA recognizes that it is a widespread harm and that every Muslim has an individual obligation to act as an active “upstander” prepared to recognize, prevent, and respond to harm in families, schools, and community spaces. Given the prevalence of CSA, every believer will very likely encounter it within their extended family, social networks, or community. For this reason,

every Muslim who may be in the vicinity of children—whether in a masjid, school, playground, store, or other communal space—has a Sharia-based duty to be aware of abuse, recognize its signs, and know how to respond. One may not be an abuser and still be part of the problem through inaction, and thus fall short of this religious obligation.

Believers also contribute to this communal obligation by raising awareness in their communities, advocating for stronger safeguarding practices in Muslim institutions, and ensuring that any programs for which they are responsible or involve children under their care meet proper safeguarding standards.

Acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfill these individual and communal obligations is itself an act of worship that earns Allah’s pleasure and constitutes a religious duty, because “whatever is necessary to fulfill an obligation becomes obligatory itself.” In contexts where communal obligations remain unmet, as is the case with CSA, undergoing training and contributing to child protection can take precedence over purely individual devotional practices.





2

Misconception

“My family member, Quran teacher, or Imam would never abuse my child. I know them, they are pious and have rare ijazas and credentials.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception assumes that familiarity, kinship, piety, or religious credentials reliably guarantee safety. Using this logic, our good assumptions (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) of others or respect for their scholarly training becomes a substitute for preventative safeguards. This mindset creates precisely the kind of low-protection environment in which abuse is most likely to occur.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

Addressing this misconception requires attention to four core principles of Islamic theology, law, and ethics that clarify the following key points:

1. Islamic teachings affirm that infallibility (*ʿiṣma*) belongs only to the prophets. No individual, regardless of piety, reputation, or religious learning, is beyond the possibility of committing sin or causing harm. For this reason, religious standing, perceived righteousness, or communal respect cannot be treated as guarantees of moral conduct or child safety.
2. Religious knowledge and credentials indicate the quality of education that a teacher received, and, possibly, are able to transmit. Unfortunately, in our day and age, it in no way signals moral uprightness or child safety. While classical ideals of Islamic learning emphasize moral formation and careful scrutiny of a scholar's integrity (*ʿadāla*), such vetting is rarely present today and cannot be assumed of religious teachers.

3. Islamic law consistently relies on lived reality (*al-wāqī'*) and empirically grounded facts to determine the most appropriate means of preventing harm and realizing the objectives of the Sharia. Studies of CSA have established that:
 - a. The vast majority of CSA (90%) is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child, including family members and religious educators.²
 - b. Abusers usually cannot be identified until after abuse has taken place.
 - c. Abusers seek out vulnerable individuals and situations where children are unprotected.
4. Islamic teachings establish maintaining a good opinion (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) of others as the default posture. At the same time, they obligate believers to balance this presumption with careful vetting and intentional consultation before entering religious, business, or marital relationships. This type of prudent caution (*ḥadhar* or *sū' al-ẓann*) is not blameworthy suspicion, but a form of religiously grounded inquiry that the tradition encourages, and, at times, obligates when entrusting others with responsibility or entering into consequential relationships such as marriage or business.³

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A faithful application of these principles to CSA requires maintaining a good opinion of individuals while simultaneously applying universal safeguarding precautions for all children, without exception.

Institutionalizing consistent safeguarding practices—like conducting criminal background checks and acquiring references for every adult working or volunteering in an educational setting—removes reliance on subjective judgments and guesswork about a person's character.

Instead, it establishes standard and impersonal rules that express responsibility rather than individualized assessments of trustworthiness.





Misconception

“I trust my pious and learned religious leader to address the problem of child abuse in our community.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

In moments of crisis, communities often look to imams or scholars to lead responses to abuse, expecting religious authorities to resolve what is, in fact, not a Muslim-specific issue, but a human-wide phenomenon that is rooted in pathology, exploitation, and violence, and requires expertise beyond the scope of religious scholarship.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

Every believer has a responsibility to address child abuse in their community as part of their duty of removing wrongdoing (*munkar*). This responsibility is not contingent upon scholarly status or personal piety, but upon one’s awareness of harm and ability to act. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established this duty through teachings like: “Whoever among you sees a wrongdoing, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; and if he cannot, then with his heart, and that is the weakest of faith.”⁴

At the same time, it is important to recognize that effectively addressing CSA in Muslim communal settings requires deferring to the forms of expertise most relevant to the problem at hand. While imams and scholars play an essential role in providing moral guidance and religious framing, religious learning alone does not qualify a person to lead in the prevention, identification, and response to abuse. These responsibilities require specialized expertise in fields such as child protection, psychology, law, and institutional governance.

There is a core principle emphasized throughout the Sunna that recognizes the importance of specialization and the obligation to defer to those with the appropriate expertise in both religious and worldly matters.

Throughout his life, Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ modeled this principle by carefully delegating responsibility according to a person's expertise and capacity, not piety or scholarly knowledge alone.

Legal reasoning and interpretation were cultivated in figures such as Ibn ʿAbbās and ʿĀʿisha, whose intellectual aptitudes made them authoritative teachers of the community. Administrative competence was entrusted to Zayd b. Thābit, whose literacy and precision suited the demands of record-keeping during the revelation of the Quran. Military leadership was assigned to those with strategic skills, such as Khālīd b. al-Walīd and Usāma b. Zayd, even when their appointments challenged prevailing social expectations.

At the same time, the Prophet ﷺ explicitly withheld authority from individuals whose dispositions made leadership harmful, even though their piety was unquestioned, as in his counsel to Abū Dharr that governance was a trust he was not suited to bear. Taken together, these examples demonstrate a Prophetic ethic that distinguishes religious authority from technical, political, and administrative competence, emphasizing the importance of deferring to appropriate expertise.

While this is a defining feature expressed and modeled across the sīra, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ also made it explicit in a hadith that clearly distinguishes between religious guidance and worldly expertise and affirms that some people are more knowledgeable in technical domains. The Prophet ﷺ passed by some people in Medina who had been busy pollinating the date-palm trees, a practice used to propagate new trees with specific traits. The Prophet ﷺ said: “If they had not done it, it would have been fine.” The people were informed that the Prophet ﷺ had said this and they abandoned the practice, resulting in a decline in the yield. When he passed by them later, he noticed this and asked: “What has gone wrong with your trees?” They said: “You said so and so.” Thereupon he said: “You are more knowledgeable about the affairs of your worldly life.”⁵

Applying this Sunna in our communities today means distinguishing between religious expertise and other forms of specialized knowledge.

Religious training qualifies a scholar to (1) lead in religious domains of life and (2) provide general guidance to other subject-matter experts to lead in their respective fields.

Significant harm is done when religious leaders advise on matters beyond their expertise that contradict or override the professional judgment of other subject-matter experts.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A grounded application of these principles to the problem of CSA recognizes that it is a widespread harm and that every Muslim has an individual obligation to act as an active “upstander” prepared to recognize, prevent, and respond to harm in families, schools, and community spaces. Given the prevalence of CSA, every believer will very likely encounter it within their extended family, social networks, or community. For this reason,

1. **Religious leaders** gain foundational training about CSA to enable them to provide sound moral framing to address CSA. They defer to CSA prevention experts for empirically grounded best practices.
2. **CSA prevention experts** consult with religious leaders to ensure safeguarding practices align with religious values and norms.
3. **Institutional leaders** defer to the expertise of appropriate experts in child safety, psychology, law enforcement, and institutional governance to fulfill their responsibility to protect children under their care. They should also communicate transparently with their communities about these consultations—clearly identifying the experts involved and their qualifications—so that community members can understand and trust the processes used to develop safeguarding policies and procedures.
4. **Community members** clearly understand expertise and its limits. They defer to religious authorities on religious matters about which they require guidance, and to other subject-matter experts in non-religious domains like medicine, complex trauma, marriage counseling, and child safety. They also play an important role in accountability by asking informed questions and ensuring that institutional and religious leaders are drawing on appropriate expertise and implementing safeguarding measures responsibly.





Misconception

“If we have more taqwā and stricter gender segregation, children would not be sexually abused.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception frames CSA primarily as a failure of piety, modesty, or gender boundaries, and therefore proposes heightened spiritual discipline or stricter gender segregation as the principal means of prevention. Within much Muslim discourse, CSA is causally linked to free mixing, liberal social norms, or feminism, implying that moral laxity—particularly around gender—creates the conditions for abuse. As a result, proposed solutions often emphasize heightened spiritual discipline, stricter dress codes for women, expanded gender segregation in communal spaces, and rigid divisions in teaching and mentorship (for example, women teaching only women and men teaching only men).

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

While this misconception is often motivated by a sincere desire to uphold Islamic moral values, it fundamentally misconstrues both the causes of CSA and the mechanisms through which abuse occurs. As discussed in Misconception #2, Islamic law consistently looks to empirically grounded facts to determine the most appropriate means of preventing harm and meeting the objectives of the Sharia.

Research about CSA establishes several key facts that are especially relevant here:

1. CSA occurs in highly conservative and strongly segregated societies, including religious communities and families that emphasize modesty and gender boundaries.

2. In roughly 90% of cases, the abuse is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child or the child's family.⁶ Even classical Muslim jurists recognized the reality of abuse within the family, considering it the gravest type of sexual transgression.⁷
3. Boys may be abused by older boys or men; girls may be abused by older girls or women.
4. A significant proportion of abuse, often estimated at 60-70%, occurs between peers, rather than across gender or age hierarchies as commonly assumed.⁸

Taken together, these realities demonstrate that gender segregation does not meaningfully reduce access to children in the overwhelming majority of abuse cases.

Consistent with these findings, research shows that CSA is most likely to occur in environments marked by power imbalances, unsupervised or poorly supervised interactions with children, the absence of institutional protections, and the misuse of trust—conditions that can exist just as readily in highly religious or segregated settings as in any other.⁹

Framing CSA primarily as a problem of immodesty or insufficient gender segregation misidentifies its causes and diverts communal energy away from preventative measures that actually reduce the abuse of children.

This misconception also reflects a deeper confusion about the nature of CSA itself. Sexual abuse of children is not typically or primarily driven by the abuser's unmanaged sexual desire, nor is it an inevitable result of excessive desire.

Empirical research indicates that abuse frequently involves factors such as a desire for power and control, antisocial or criminal tendencies, cognitive distortions that normalize harm, unsupervised access to children, and, in some cases, the abuser's history of having been abused.¹⁰

Many perpetrators are married and have licit sexual outlets, yet still abuse children, underscoring that access to lawful sexual relations does not interrupt the underlying dynamics of power, control, and entitlement that drive CSA.

While Islamic teachings on *taqwā*, modesty, and gendered interactions remain vital moral disciplines, their primary function is the ethical self-regulation of believers, or the cultivation of restraint, responsibility, and God-conscious conduct. They are not structural safeguards against abuse in and of themselves. The Prophet's ﷺ instruction to observe modesty even in contexts where temptation is absent, such as his directing his wives to maintain *ḥijāb* even in the presence of a blind companion, illustrates that these teachings are aimed at cultivating each believer's moral character, not at preventing criminal harm through environmental control.¹¹

When general Islamic teachings are presented as a panacea for CSA, the result is a dangerous misalignment of responsibility. Attention is shifted away from the wrongdoer's accountability and from the absence of institutional protections, and instead redirected toward victims by implying that

they could have or should have acted differently to avoid the abuse. This not only fails to prevent abuse but also fosters a false sense of security in religious spaces, where abuse may be harder to recognize and believe, and less likely to be reported, precisely because the religious character of a setting is taken as evidence of safety.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A faithful application of these Islamic principles refuses false binaries. It neither abandons moral cultivation nor treats it as a substitute for protection. Rather, it insists that spiritual formation and structural responsibility operate together, each in its proper domain.

Such an approach recognizes that:

1. **Taqwā-based practices and modesty norms matter, but they are not a panacea that will eradicate abuse.** The spiritual disciplines and gendered social guidelines of Islam play an essential role in regulating the *nafs*; they foster ethical conduct and sustain healthy communities. However, they do not automatically prevent abuse, nor can they replace concrete safeguarding measures.
2. **CSA is not primarily a problem of excess desire and therefore cannot be solved by spiritual discipline or marriage alone.** Because abuse is driven by factors such as power, access, coercion, and institutional silence, effective prevention requires additional layers of protection, including supervision protocols, reporting pathways, accountability structures, and child-centered education.
3. **Islamic ethics demand both moral cultivation and institutional responsibility.** Over-reliance on moral exhortation risks neglecting the material and procedural measures necessary to protect children. Therefore, a faithful application requires holding perpetrators accountable, designing systems that reduce risk, and treating child protection as a communal *amānah*, not merely an individual moral failing.





Misconception

“Teaching children about their bodies or safety is immodest, takes away their innocence, and risks sexualizing them.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception associates age-appropriate education about bodies, boundaries, and safety with sexualization or moral corruption. It often draws on critiques of contemporary sexual education that conflate all forms of bodily or safety education with inappropriate exposure, and expresses a nostalgic preference for a perceived simpler past.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

Rather than treating knowledge of the body or personal boundaries as corrupting, the Quran and Sunna model a pedagogy of bodily awareness and instruction that is gradual, purposeful, and developmentally and culturally appropriate.

The Islamic tradition frames children’s bodily education as a necessary preparation for moral responsibility (*taklif*), empowering young people to fulfill core religious obligations related to purity, prayer, modesty, and sexual ethics.

The Quran offers a clear example of this graduated moral education in its instructions regarding privacy and consent within the household:



“O believers! Let those [bondpeople] in your possession and those of you who are still under age ask for your permission [to come in] at three times: before dawn prayer, when you take off your [outer] clothes at noon, and after the late evening prayer. [These are] three times of privacy for you. Other than these times, there is no blame on you or them to move freely, attending to one another. This is how Allah makes the revelations clear to you, for Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.

And when your children reach the age of puberty, let them seek permission [to come in], as their seniors do...”

[Q. 24: 58-59]

These verses reflect a pedagogical logic that distinguishes between stages of moral and bodily awareness, instructing parents to teach children about privacy and to ask for and receive consent in ways appropriate to their developmental stage, while increasing expectations as they approach maturity.

We see the same logic in the Sunna. The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ instructed parents to teach children to pray at seven, to discipline them for neglecting prayer at 10, and to separate them in their beds.¹² Classical jurists understood the instruction to separate beds as a precautionary measure aimed at cultivating modesty and appropriate bodily boundaries as children mature sexually.

The Prophet ﷺ also modeled open, values-based, and age-appropriate engagement with questions of sexuality. When a young man (*shāb*) openly asked for permission to commit *zinā*, the Prophet ﷺ neither silenced nor shamed him.

Instead, he guided him through moral reasoning grounded in empathy and relational responsibility, asking whether he would accept such harm for his mother, daughter, or close relatives—questions to which the young man replied in the negative. The Prophet ﷺ concluded by placing his hand on the young man’s chest and supplicated: “O Allah, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.”¹³ Through this ethical reflection, the Prophet ﷺ cultivated an internal, values-driven aversion to *zinā* within the young man. The encounter exemplifies a pedagogical model that treats sexual impulses as natural yet morally disciplinable through reflection, deepening values, and formative mentorship.

In addition to these specific examples from the Quran and Sunna, a core Islamic teaching derived from numerous scriptural sources is that moral responsibility (*taklīf*) presupposes knowledge. Children approaching maturity cannot meaningfully fulfill certain obligations related to purity and prayer, the avoidance of the unlawful, or sexual restraint without an understanding of their bodies that is grounded in Islamic values. For example, even before they reach puberty, children must be taught about the types of bodily discharges and sexual fluids they will experience, the purity rules

associated with each, and the proper way to cleanse themselves, including how to perform the ritual bath (*ghusl*). Without this knowledge, children may be confused by bodily experiences as they arise or apply the wrong purity rulings, leaving them unable to properly fulfill the obligations that begin at puberty.

Finally, since preventing harm is a foundational objective of the Sharia (as discussed in Misconception #1), then educating children about their bodies using accurate anatomical language is among the most effective means of preventing abuse. Perpetrators often rely on secrecy, shame, and children's lack of clear knowledge about their bodies to groom and control them. Research shows that children who are familiar with accurate anatomical language are more confident and effective in disclosing abuse, whereas vague language may cause confusion, miscommunication, or delays in disclosing abuse.¹⁴

Using correct terms for body parts is not immodest, but necessary, because it clearly defines the boundaries that must be protected.

This practice is consistent with the Quran and Sunna's use of clear and direct anatomical language when needed to clarify rules of modesty, ritual purity, and sexual ethics. For instance, the Quran commands believers to guard the *farj/furūj*, often translated as “chastity” or “private parts,” but which quite literally refers to the bodily orifices whose sanctity must be preserved (Q. 23:5). Likewise, the Sunna employs explicit references to sexual anatomy—for example: “If one of you touches his penis (*dhakar*), let him perform *wuḍū*”—demonstrating that precise language is used when clarity is required for religious understanding and practice.¹⁵

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A grounded application of these Islamic principles recognizes that:

1. It is Sunna to provide children with age-appropriate knowledge to fulfill their religious duties with clarity and sincerity, which also enables them to protect themselves and to recognize inappropriate behavior.
2. Faith-based education about bodily changes, boundaries, and safety that uses anatomically-correct names of body parts strengthens rather than erodes *ḥayāʾ* (modesty) by grounding it in internalized values and understanding.
3. Avoidance does not preserve innocence; it leaves children vulnerable to abuse, misinformation, and external influences, undermining precisely the values it seeks to protect.

While this education supports children and may prevent abuse, adults and institutions still carry the full responsibility for protecting children.





Misconception

“We should not speak about accusations or charges of abuse because Islam commands us to conceal sins, presume innocence, and avoid gossip.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misunderstanding draws on well-established Islamic moral teachings, like avoiding gossip (*ghība*), concealing sins (*satr al-ʿuyūb*), and presuming innocence to argue that members of the Muslim community should not discuss allegations of abuse, even when they involve children or are directed at trusted leaders. This position is frequently reinforced through selective Quranic and hadith references or generalized teachings. For example, believers are commanded to “think good of one another” (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) and refrain from engaging with accusations until guilt is conclusively proven.

The desire to shut down communal discussion of child abuse allegations may stem from understandable concerns that public scandal could erode trust in religious leadership or the safety of our institutions, or be weaponized by Islamophobes. In practice, however,

this framing silences concern, discourages reporting, can result in additional victims, and shuts down communal responses to credible harm. When the truth eventually emerges, as it often does, the resulting scandal of concealment or institutional cover-up further erodes trust in leadership.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

Islamic ethical principles do not operate in isolation; they are weighed against other imperatives to assess harm and benefit in each context. This weighing applies to the three principles invoked in this misunderstanding: concealing sin, avoiding gossip, and presuming innocence.

It is true that the principle of ‘**concealing sin**’ is an important religious teaching emphasized in the Sunna. The Prophet ﷺ said: “whoever conceals a Muslim’s sins, Allah will conceal his sins on the Day of Resurrection.”¹⁶

Scholars tell us that this hadith does not apply to all sins in all circumstances; rather, its application is limited to concealing the “private” sins of ordinary believers and religious leaders (e.g. missing a prayer or engaging in backbiting).¹⁷

Like most religious principles, sin concealment is balanced against other imperatives and prioritized in relation to them, such as preventing harm, forbidding wrongdoing, prosecuting crimes, and holding leaders accountable.

This distinction is well established across the Islamic tradition. For example, in hadith criticism, individuals who put themselves forward as transmitters of the Prophet’s ﷺ words were subject to detailed public scrutiny of their personal conduct, integrity, and reliability. Similarly, in matters of marriage, business, or leadership, Muslims are obligated to disclose known harms and past conduct when asked about a particular person, even though this involves speaking of them critically.

The specific steps that should be taken when a sin involves harm to others or is committed by someone entrusted with a communal responsibility are case-dependent and should correspond to the severity or potential severity of harm. In addition, the probability of the allegations being true should be assessed based on the available evidence.

Violent crimes, particularly violent sexual crimes against children, must not only be exposed but reported immediately to legal authorities.

The over-expansion and misapplication of the sin concealment principle has resulted in a culture of secrecy that protects perpetrators of abuse and enables them to repeat their abuse in multiple communities, as documented in several [Facing Abuse in Community Environments \(FACE\)](#) reports.¹⁸

Like the principle of concealing sin, the prohibition on ‘**gossip**’—that is, speaking about others in ways that may harm their reputations—is not absolute but must be evaluated in light of other harms and benefits. Exceptions exist in situations where speaking about someone is necessary to prevent harm or seek counsel, such as when considering someone for marriage or a business partnership.

Similarly, circulating warnings about an accused individual establishing a complete record from other victims, and facilitating solution-oriented discussion in the community are not the slander and rumor-mongering that the Quran warns against (e.g. Q. 24:15-16).¹⁹

As for **presuming innocence**, this is rooted in the principle of **default non-liability** (*al-aṣl barāʾat al-dhimma*) that is an important procedural principle in Islamic judicial practice and is paired with the principle that the burden of proof rests on the accuser (*al-bayyina ʿalā al-muddaʿī*). When applied together, these principles mean that anyone making an accusation must provide evidence to support it, while the accused is presumed innocent of wrongdoing before the court until proven otherwise.

It is crucial to understand that these rules govern formal adjudication in courts and determine when legal liability may be established by a judge (*qāḍī*). In cases where accusations entail abuse of power, Islamic oversight and accountability procedures teach us to suspend the individual from duty while the complaint is investigated. In her paper, “[Accountability in the Islamic Tradition](#)”, Dr. Mattson explores this principle and offers numerous examples of how it was theorized and applied in Islamic history. She explains:

When it comes to individuals holding public positions of power and authority, the Islamic tradition is quite clear on the steps to be taken when there is an accusation of abuse of power (rather than personal wrongdoing). The principle is not, “innocent until proven guilty,” but rather, “suspended until investigated.” This is a widespread, perhaps universal administrative practice... We have many reports of ‘Umar doing this with his governors, judges and military leaders.²⁰

Historically, Muslim judges supervised those working in the endowments (*awqāf*) under their authority, while governors and their administrative officials could suspend appointees during ongoing investigations. In contemporary institutions, this responsibility rests with governing authorities and those who have supervisory authority—boards or institutional leaders—who have an obligation to place an accused individual on interim suspension while an investigation proceeds. At the same time, the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” requires them not to impose punishment before due process is complete.

Suspending the accused helps to reduce the risk of harm to others while the investigation is underway.

If proven innocent, they may be cleared of wrongdoing and reinstated. This approach is an enactment of harm removal.

There is, however, an important distinction between how allegations of wrongdoing are investigated in courts and how they are addressed in communal life. The rules of default non-liability and the

burden of proof that guide judges in determining legal responsibility do not set the standard for how individuals, communities, or institutions should respond to credible concerns in everyday life. In communal settings, responses are administrative or protective, and misapplying courtroom standards to communal life—something that often occurs in public discourse, including among scholars—can lead to inaction in situations that require prudence, inquiry, or protective measures. The level of proof required for a judge to establish legal liability is therefore not the same as the level of information that may reasonably guide communal judgment, precaution, or accountability.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A faithful application of these principles recognizes that:

1. **Harm is not concealed:** Abuse of children is not a private sin that should be hidden; it is a harm to others and a crime. Concealing abuse creates the conditions that enable perpetrators to continue violating others. When harm is ongoing, systemic, or involves abuse of power—all three of which typically apply to the abuse of children—concealment is preceded by the greater imperatives. Accordingly, the moral imperative shifts decisively toward preventing further harm to the vulnerable, investigating wrongdoing, and holding perpetrators accountable.
2. **Warnings and documenting harm are not gossip:** Warnings about abusers are not gossip; they are necessary to remove immediate harm, inform the community, hold perpetrators accountable, and prevent further abuse. Sharing information is also necessary for documentation. Speaking with others may reveal additional victims or witnesses and help establish a fuller record of harm, which is essential for determining appropriate next steps, including institutional accountability or criminal prosecution. These discussions should prioritize clarifying facts and evidence, lessons from experts about how abuse typically unfolds, and the testimony of trusted leaders who may possess relevant knowledge of the situation.

When warnings about an abuser are stifled, rumors and misinformation inevitably spread to fill the vacuum. To prevent this, warnings should take the form of structured, fact-based, trauma-informed, subject-matter expert-led discussion that is authorized and limited to safety-relevant information. Warnings should also prioritize the testimony from trusted leaders who may have knowledge of the situation and be carefully managed to avoid unnecessary public disclosure that could compromise investigations or expose survivors.

The goal should always be community safety and harm prevention.

3. ***Court standards ≠ communal response standards:*** The principle of “presuming innocence” and the rule that “the burden of proof rests on the accuser” govern judicial determinations of legal liability, not how communities respond to credible concerns about harm. The evidentiary threshold required for a judge to establish guilt does not govern administrative or protective decisions outside the courtroom. Criminal conviction carries a high evidentiary bar, whereas safeguarding decisions operate on lower thresholds because their aim is not punishment but prevention and maintaining trust in the safety of the community space or institution.

In situations involving credible allegations of abuse—particularly when the accused holds a position of authority—Islamic traditions of oversight and accountability call for precautionary measures, which include temporary suspension from duty while the matter is investigated.

Such suspension is a protective and administrative measure aimed at preventing further harm rather than a declaration of guilt. Credible allegations, patterns of testimony, investigative reports, or formal charges may all generate a religious and institutional responsibility to document concerns, implement precautionary measures, and safeguard the vulnerable while due process unfolds.





Misconception

“Without four witnesses, we can never know what really happened. The child could be making it up or it could be a set up; we can’t trust law enforcement.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception reflects a widespread but inaccurate belief that Islamic law requires four eyewitnesses to establish *any* sexual wrongdoing. In cases of CSA, this claim is often used to cast doubt on disclosures, downplay allegations, or argue that no action should be taken if the case does not meet the evidentiary requirements for the fixed Quranic punishment (*ḥadd*) for *zinā*. It is frequently accompanied by distrust of secular legal systems and exaggerated fears of false accusations, resulting in inaction that leaves children unprotected.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

The following three correctives are needed to address this misconception:

1. *The four-witness requirement is narrow and exceptional.*

Muslims often mistakenly treat the four-witness requirement as a standard rule of all Islamic criminal law proceedings. In reality, this requirement applies **only** to the *ḥadd* for *consensual zinā*, a narrowly defined offense with intentionally stringent evidentiary thresholds. Historically, the four-witness requirement was rarely enforced and functioned primarily as a deterrent against public sexual accusation rather than as the primary mechanism for addressing sexual harm.

Beyond the *ḥudūd*, the overwhelming majority of Islamic criminal law cases historically operated through *taʿzīr* (discretionary punishment). In these cases, *qadis* relied on multiple forms of evidence, including testimony, circumstantial indicators, physical evidence, medical findings, and patterns of behavior. In cases of coercion, assault, or abuse, particularly involving women or

children, *qadis* routinely imposed discretionary penalties even when *ḥadd* evidentiary standards were not met.

Once again, these evidentiary standards apply to judicial determinations in court and do not set the standard for how communities respond to allegations of harm. Misapplying courtroom evidentiary thresholds—such as the four-witness rule—to communal decision-making can result in inaction in situations where precaution, inquiry, and protective measures are religiously mandated to safeguard the vulnerable.

2. The use of existing legal systems is an obligation and safeguarding protocols are not solely dependent on convictions.

As a formal system, Islamic criminal law is not operative in contemporary Muslim-majority states or in Western contexts.

In cases of CSA, Islamic ethics unequivocally requires recourse to the law of the land because it provides the primary means for protecting vulnerable populations and holding perpetrators accountable.

Despite legitimate critiques of contemporary legal systems, American and Canadian child-protection regimes use evidentiary standards that align with core Islamic commitments to justice, harm prevention, and safeguarding the vulnerable.

Mandated reporting is therefore not a betrayal of Islamic law but an enactment of its legal and ethical obligations.

Research consistently shows that criminal conviction for CSA is rare due to steep attrition at every stage of the justice process. Approximately one in three cases are reported to authorities.²¹ Of those investigated, roughly 14–18% are referred for prosecution, and among prosecuted cases, only about one-half to two-thirds result in conviction.²² Taken together, these statistics indicate that only a very small fraction of CSA cases, often estimated in the single digits, ultimately result in criminal conviction.

These facts make clear that **safeguarding protocols cannot depend solely on convictions** and should operate on lower thresholds of credible concern. Such protocols can include measures like the removal of access to children where risk is reasonably indicated.

3. Children rarely fabricate allegations of sexual abuse.

A final corrective addresses a persistent but empirically unfounded fear: that children frequently lie about sexual abuse. Studies consistently show that false allegations by children are extremely rare, and that delayed or inconsistent disclosures are usually a reflection of trauma, not deceit.²³ The far greater risk is failing to believe a child who is telling the truth, thereby allowing ongoing harm to continue.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A grounded application of these principles requires:

1. ***Rejecting the claim that four witnesses are required to address sexual abuse.*** The evidentiary standard associated with the *ḥadd* of *zinā* does not govern how abuse disclosures are evaluated for purposes of protection, reporting, or institutional response.
2. ***Taking children’s disclosures seriously*** and interpreting them in light of expert knowledge about how abuse is typically disclosed. Speculation about false accusations should not be elevated above the concrete risk of ongoing harm, especially given the overwhelming evidence that children rarely fabricate allegations of sexual abuse.
3. ***Complying with mandated reporting laws while distinguishing between criminal conviction, safeguarding, and community care.*** Criminal conviction rightly carries a high evidentiary bar. Safeguarding decisions, by contrast, operate on lower thresholds because their aim is prevention rather than punishment. Even in the absence of criminal conviction, substantiated investigative findings, credible patterns of testimony, or reliable institutional review warrant decisive safeguarding action, which includes the permanent removal from positions of trust and child-facing roles. Finally,

communities should have trained people in place to support families through the reporting process, help reduce isolation, and connect them with culturally responsive advocates.





Misconception

“If the abuser repents, the victim should forgive and move on.”

Common Misunderstanding

well-meaning but misleading

This misconception frames repentance and forgiveness as automatic mechanisms for resolving abuse. It often draws on general Quranic verses and hadith encouraging forgiveness and places moral pressure on survivors to forgive in order to secure Allah’s mercy.

In family and communal contexts, this framing is frequently used to restore harmony, avoid accountability, and minimize disruption, often at the expense of the victim’s healing and safety. It also compromises the prevention of abuse to potential future victims.

Islamic Principles for Correction

what Islamic tradition teaches

The following two correctives are needed to address this misconception:

First, repentance (*tawba*) does not erase the victim’s rights. In Islamic theology, sins against God (*ḥuqūq Allāh*) and harm against people (*ḥuqūq al-‘ibād*) are distinct. While Allah may forgive our devotional shortcomings, abuse and harm to others establish rights owed to the victim that remain unless the harmed person chooses to release the perpetrator from responsibility.

Second, Islam gives the aggrieved person three legitimate options:

1. *To forgive and reconcile.*

The Quran strongly encourages forgiveness and reconciliation: “Yet if you pardon, forbear, and forgive, then truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Q. 64:14) and “The recompense of an evil (*sayyiʿa*) is an evil like unto it. Yet whosoever pardons and sets matters aright, his reward is with God. Truly He loves not the wrongdoers. And there is no blame upon those who defend themselves after having been wronged (*ẓalimū*).” (Q. 42:40)

Forgiveness is strongly encouraged in Islam, but it is never mandated, nor is it required as a precondition for divine mercy. Crucially, these Quranic teachings address the everyday, unintended harms, slights, and interpersonal grievances (*sayyi'a*, *sū'*) that arise in ordinary human relationships. **These teachings may not be the most appropriate teachings to apply to deliberate oppression, abuse, or acts of gross violence (*ẓulm*), where the Quran instead emphasizes the right to name harm, seek accountability and justice, and prevent further oppression** (e.g. Q. 4:148; 42:40-41).²⁴

2. To forgive while setting new boundaries and terms for the relationship.

The Prophet ﷺ consistently embodied the Quranic virtue of forgiveness and overlooking personal injuries throughout his life. However, in some exceptional scenarios, his forgiveness was paired with setting boundaries and specific terms for that relationship. This is evident in his response to his uncle Ḥamza's assassin, Waḥshī Ibn Ḥarb, who converted to Islam. While the Prophet ﷺ accepted his conversion, he also asked him, "Can you hide your face from me?", indicating that Waḥshī should not remain in Medina because his presence remained a source of pain for the Prophet ﷺ.²⁵

3. To withhold forgiveness and pursue justice.

In some circumstances, the Prophet ﷺ did not forgive but instead pursued justice, refusing to repeatedly absolve individuals who continuously caused harm. We see this ethic in the Prophet's ﷺ response to Abū Ghurra, who fought against the Muslims at Badr. When he was captured, he begged the Prophet ﷺ to release him because he was poor and had daughters to care for. The Prophet ﷺ released him on the condition that he would not fight the Muslims again. When Abū Ghurra was captured again after Uḥud, the Prophet ﷺ did not accept his plea, responding: "A believer is not stung from the same hole twice."²⁶ In holding Abū Ghurra accountable, the Prophet ﷺ demonstrated that firmness and responsibility are required when ongoing harm is perpetrated or may potentially be perpetrated against the community.

Grounded Understanding

faithfully applying principles

A faithful application rejects spiritual coercion and "forgiveness pressure" and instead recognizes that:

Survivors are not required to forgive to be righteous or deserving of Allah's mercy. Forgiveness is not a prerequisite for healing, and survivors of trauma do not have to forgive if they are not ready or if they choose not to do so.

1. The aggrieved are given three legitimate options that are suited to different circumstances, from slight personal grievances to ongoing harm, oppression, or abuse.

- forgiveness and accountability are not mutually exclusive: a survivor may forgive, *and* their family, the community, or the state still bears an obligation to pursue justice and accountability to prevent harm from coming to other potential victims.

3. As a community, we often put too much pressure on the aggrieved and oppressed to forgive and relinquish responsibility, instead of holding perpetrators accountable, confronting the macro and micro injustices in our community, and addressing the structural causes of harm.





Conclusion

Where do we go from here?

CSA is among the gravest violations of human dignity and trust. When it occurs within Muslim families, schools, and religious institutions, the harm is compounded by the betrayal of spaces that should embody safety and care.

**Our tradition does not permit complacency in the face of such harm;
protecting children and preventing abuse is a religious obligation
that demands more than good intentions or individual piety.**

It requires knowledge, vigilance, and institutional safeguards. It also requires a willingness to confront difficult realities within our own communities and refer to the expertise of those trained in child protection, psychology, law, and institutional governance, alongside the guidance of religious scholarship.

This framework has addressed eight recurring misconceptions that frequently arise in Muslim discourse around CSA. In nearly every case, these misconceptions emerge from Islamic values that are real and important—like trust, modesty, forgiveness, privacy, and maintaining a good opinion of others—but that can become harmful when applied without attention to context, evidence, and more important Islamic values. When these values are properly understood and placed in balance with the overriding imperative to remove harm and protect the vulnerable, Islamic teachings consistently direct us toward prevention, accountability, and responsible action.

Moving forward, Muslim institutions and communities can translate these principles into action by:



Educating themselves and their communities about the realities of CSA and the religious obligation to prevent it.



Addressing and correcting the misconceptions highlighted in this guide when they arise in families, institutions, and communal conversations, helping cultivate a more informed and responsible communal discourse about abuse and safeguarding.



Implementing robust safeguarding policies and reporting procedures in mosques, schools, and community programs.



Supporting survivors with compassion and justice, recognizing their dignity and prioritizing their safety and healing.



Holding leaders and institutions accountable when harm occurs, recognizing that accountability strengthens rather than weakens trust.



Cultivating a culture of collective responsibility where safeguarding children is understood as a shared religious duty and disclosures are met with belief, protection, and competent care.

It is my hope that the principles shared in this guide will not only shape how Muslim communities prevent and respond to CSA, but also shift the tone and elevate the substance of our communal discourse more broadly. When we learn to reason through ethical tensions with care—balancing mercy with justice, privacy with accountability, and good opinion with prudent caution—we develop a moral language capable of confronting harm wherever it appears. A community that understands these principles well will be better equipped to recognize and address other forms of wrongdoing that can arise in families and institutions, including parental and elder abuse, spiritual abuse, sexual harassment, and other abuses of power.

Protecting children is not only a policy issue; it is a religious trust (*amānah*) and a communal obligation.

May Allah make our homes, mosques, and institutions places of safety, protection, and care for every child entrusted to our care.





Resources for Further Learning

The resources listed in this section provide pathways for deeper learning, practical training, and continued reflection. We encourage readers—especially parents, educators, institutional leaders, and community members—to engage these materials and to take concrete steps toward building safer Muslim spaces for every child.

A. Safeguarding Courses and Practical Resources:

[Safeguarding Children from Abuse: Fulfilling Our Islamic Responsibility](#)

A collaborative course offered by Angelica Lindsey-Ali, Dr. Mariam Sheibani, and Sameera Qureshi that teaches actionable strategies for fostering safer environments in homes, communities, and institutions.

[“Soulful Sexual Health for Muslims”](#)

A book offering a holistic approach to Muslim sexual health, rooted in Islamic traditions of the soul and grounded in compassion, self-accountability, and spiritual alignment.

[Darkness to Light - End Child Sexual Abuse](#)

A nonprofit that empowers adults to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to CSA through awareness, education, and stigma reduction.

[Buddy Speaks](#)

A Muslim-led nonprofit founded by Shariea Shoatz that offers CSA awareness and preventative education.

B. General Education Lectures on Child Sexual Abuse in Muslim Communities:

“How to Protect Your Child from Spiritual & Sexual Abuse”

A lecture by Dr. Ingrid Mattson and Henna Khawja that offers practical guidance for parents and community members on recognizing spiritual and sexual abuse, understanding common grooming dynamics, and creating safer environments for children within religious communities.

Prophetic Virtues Off the Page: Balancing Sunna in Our Lives

A free course offered by Dr. Mariam Sheibani that highlights key principles for applying Prophetic teachings responsibly in real-world contexts, including balancing virtues such as forgiveness with accountability and sin concealment with the obligation to prevent harm.

“Learning Circle on Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence”

A facilitated discussion with Dr. Ingrid Mattson, Dr. Rania Awaad, Dr. Mariam Sheibani, Sh. Rami Nsour, and U. Zaynab Ansari that helps Muslim community members understand the dynamics of spiritual abuse and sexual violence, offering space for education, reflection, and learning practical approaches to prevent and respond to abuse.

“The Child Predator’s Playbook: What Muslim Parents Must Know”

An article written by Danish Qasim that explains common grooming tactics used by child predators and outlines practical steps parents can take to recognize warning signs, educate their children, and create safer family and community environments.

“An Evil Scourge: Spiritual Abuse in the Muslim Community”

A lecture by Sh. Rami Nsour and U. Shaan Mukhtar that examines the nature of spiritual abuse within religious settings, including how authority and trust can be manipulated, and how communities can recognize warning signs and establish healthier systems of accountability.

C. Research on Islamic Principles Relevant to Addressing CSA:

“Fard Kifayah: The Principle of Communal Responsibility in Islam”

A research paper written by Sh. Yousef Wahb that provides an accessible explanation of the Islamic legal concept of *fard kifāya* (communal obligation), exploring how communities collectively bear responsibility for addressing social harms and fulfilling essential duties.

“Collective Duties (fard kifaya) in Islamic Law”

A scholarly examination written by Dr. Adnan Zulfiqar that explores communal obligations in Islamic law, outlining how responsibility is distributed within a community and how these duties apply to public welfare and social harms.

“The Islamic Secular”

A scholarly monograph written by Dr. Sherman Jackson that examines the relationship between religious authority, moral reasoning, and the management of worldly affairs in Muslim societies, including the limits of religious authority in non-religious domains.

Hurma Project Research Papers

A series of research papers from the Hurma Project that examine sexual abuse, safeguarding, and ethical accountability in Muslim communities, drawing on legal and ethical frameworks within Islam alongside contemporary safeguarding scholarship. Especially relevant are these three papers:



“Accountability in the Islamic Tradition”

A research paper written by Dr. Ingrid Mattson that provides a historical and substantive analysis of the Islamic tradition’s emphasis on accountability, particularly the higher moral and ethical expectations placed on religious leaders and those in positions of trust.



“On Concealing the Sins of Religious Leaders”

A research paper written by Mairaj U. Syed on the principle of concealing sin (*satr*) in Islamic teachings, demonstrating the clear limits of this principle, especially when wrongdoing causes harm to others or involves an individual who holds religious authority.



“Sexual Misconduct and the North American Muslim Community: Towards a Paradigm of Prevention and Accountability”

A research paper written by Dr. Mohammad Fadel that provides an analysis of how Muslim institutions can respond to sexual misconduct with greater transparency and accountability through a commitment to responsible self-governance and more robust misconduct policies.



Footnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About Child Sexual Abuse,” accessed March 13, 2026, <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>; Darkness to Light, “Child Sexual Abuse Statistics,” accessed March 13, 2026, <https://www.d2l.org/child-sexual-abuse-research-and-statistics/>; Mama Bear Effect, “Statistics,” accessed March 13, 2026, <https://www.themamabeareffect.org/understand/statistics>; National Children’s Alliance, “National Statistics on Child Abuse,” accessed March 13, 2026, <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/national-statistics-on-child-abuse/>.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About Child Sexual Abuse,” last modified May 16, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>.
3. See, for example, Muḥammad Mawlūd b. Aḥmad Fāl al-Ya‘qūbī, *Nukhbat al-maṭlūb min sharḥ maṭharat al-qulūb*, 2nd ed. (Casablanca: n.p., 1422/2001), 81–83. I’m grateful to Shaykh Rami Nsour for this reference.
4. Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 49.
5. Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2363.
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About Child Sexual Abuse,” last modified May 16, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>.
7. See, for example, Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Zawājir ‘an Iqtirāf al-Kabā’ir*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1407/1987), 2:226.
8. Darkness to Light, “Child Sexual Abuse Research and Statistics,” accessed April 25, 2026, <https://www.d2l.org/child-sexual-abuse-research-and-statistics/>.
9. Stephen Smallbone, William L. Marshall, and Richard Wortley, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy and Practice* (Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, 2008).
10. Michael C. Seto, *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tony Ward and Theresa Keenan, “Child Molesters’ Implicit Theories,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 14, no. 8 (1999): 821–838.
11. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, no. 4112.
12. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, no. 495.
13. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 22265.
14. See, for example, M. C. Kenny and S. K. Wurtele, “Toward Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Preschoolers’ Knowledge of Genital Body Parts,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual College of Education Research Conference*, ed. M. S. Plakhotnik and S. M. Nielsen (Miami: Florida International University, 2008); S. K. Wurtele and M. C. Kenny, “Partnering with Parents to Prevent Childhood Sexual Abuse,” *Child Abuse Review* 19, no. 2 (2010): 130–152; Michele Elliott, Kevin Browne, and Jennifer Kilcoyne, “Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: What Offenders Tell Us,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 19, no. 5 (1995): 579–594.
15. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, no. 181.
16. Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2590.
17. Mairaj Syed, “Concealing the Sins of Religious Leaders,” Hurma Project, <https://hurmaproject.com/research/>.

Footnotes

18. Face Together, “Investigations,” <https://facettogether.org/investigations>; for a similar pattern in the Catholic clergy abuse scandal, where a culture of secrecy and concealment enabled perpetrators to continue abuse across multiple locales, see Stephen Johnson, “The ‘Culture of Secrecy’ and the Blackmail That Perpetuates Abuse in the Catholic Church,” Big Think, August 16, 2018, <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/the-culture-of-sexual-secrecy-and-blackmail-that-perpetuates-abuse-in-the-catholic-church/>.
19. “When you rumored it with your tongues and spoke with your mouths what you had no knowledge of, and you considered it trivial; but according to God, it is serious. When you heard it, you should have said, ‘It is not for us to repeat this. By Your glory, this is a serious slander.’” (Q. 24:15-16).
20. Ingrid Mattson, “Accountability in the Islamic Tradition,” 14, Hurma Project, <https://hurmaproject.com/research/>.
21. David Finkelhor, Anne Shattuck, Heather Turner, and Sherry Hamby, “The Lifetime Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Assessed in Late Adolescence,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 55, no. 3 (2014): 329–333.
22. Theodore P. Cross, Wendy A. Walsh, Mary Simone, and Lisa M. Jones, “Prosecution of Child Abuse: A Meta-Analysis of Rates of Criminal Justice Decisions,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 4, no. 4 (2003): 323–340.
23. Kamala London, Maggie Bruck, Stephen J. Ceci, and Daniel W. Shuman, “Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: What Does the Research Tell Us About the Ways That Children Tell?” *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 11, no. 1 (2005): 194–226.
24. “God does not love the public utterance of harmful speech—except by one who has been wronged. And God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.” (Q. 4:148) and “The recompense of a wrong is a like wrong; but whoever pardons and reconciles—his reward is with God. Indeed, He does not love the wrongdoers. And whoever vindicates himself after being wronged—there is no blame against them.” (Q. 42:40-41).
25. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4072.
26. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6133; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2998.

