

Unique program aims to educate Muslim teens on HIV prevention

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Cultural taboos may leave Muslim American adolescents uninformed about romantic relationships and sex, placing them at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). A sex education program

designed specifically for Muslim teens—with a foundation in Islamic morals and values—is reported in the November/December issue of *The Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care (JANAC)*.

Titled "Sex Education in the Mosque", the [program](#) "addressed sex [education](#) and HIV prevention with a primary focus on abstinence and making self-empowered choices," according to the new research by Shaakira Abdullah, DNP, FNP-BC, of Widener University, Chester, Pa., and colleagues. They report on the development and initial evaluation of their program: the first evidence-based curriculum to address [sexual education](#) in the Muslim community.

Teens Learn About Sex and Relationships—With a Focus on Muslim Values

Islamic teachings focus on the value of chastity and forbid having sex before marriage. But many Muslim parents do not talk about sex with their children. "Refraining from discussing issues of sexuality in the home in an effort to prevent promiscuity often backfires and leads adolescents to learn from unreliable sources and engage in risky behaviors, potentially exposing themselves to HIV/STIs or teen pregnancy," Dr. Abdullah and coauthors write. They cite statistics showing that Muslim adolescents have risky sexual behaviors similar to their non-Muslim peers.

Sex Education in the Mosque was designed as a comprehensive sex education program for Muslim youth and adolescents, grounded in the framework of Islamic teachings. The authors report their experience with initial implementation of the program in New Jersey, home to the second-largest Muslim population in the United States, with 18 adolescent Muslim females, average age 16 years, at a mosque in Newark. Mosques were targeted to recruit participants because of their

integral role in lifelong education in Muslim communities. The program was implemented with the full support of mosque Imams and administrators.

On pretest questionnaires, the young women had low understanding of HIV, STIs, and pregnancy. Posttest questionnaires showed significant gains in knowledge, which were well-maintained at three months' follow-up.

"There was also an increase in [positive attitudes](#) and intentions to abstain from sex before marriage on the posttests," the researchers write. All of the [young women](#) gave the program positive ratings; one teen wrote that she appreciated learning "many methods on how to be true to ourselves and cool at the same time!"

The program was adapted from an established curriculum that uses social and behavior theories to educate young people about their sexuality. Dr. Abdullah and colleagues integrated Muslim values and a focus on having a strong Islamic identity to strengthen teens' self-confidence and ability to make healthy decisions. "The program distinguished itself from typical abstinence-based programs because it portrayed sex as a pleasurable and natural experience," according to the authors.

"This project laid the groundwork for creating an effective curriculum that can address Muslim youth's unique needs," Dr. Abdullah and coauthors write. They also discuss important lessons for future implementations: many parents felt their daughters didn't need sex education or misunderstood the purpose of the program. The researchers plan to incorporate parental education sessions into future programs.

In response to interest in [sex education](#) and HIV prevention from other communities, Dr. Abdullah has initiated a nonprofit organization called

Love Beyond Love, dedicated to strengthening and expanding the program. She and her coauthors conclude: "Muslim youth have the power and potential to hold themselves to a higher standard when given the opportunity to access knowledge, confidence, and skills needed to meet today's challenges."

More information: Abdullah, Shaakira et al. Sex Education in the Mosque: An HIV Prevention Initiative for Muslim Adolescents, *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*. November-December 2020 - Volume 31 - Issue 6 - p 693-700, [DOI: 10.1097/JNC.000000000000187](https://doi.org/10.1097/JNC.000000000000187)

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