

Parents' Role Before and During Infancy: An Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: The infants depend on their parents for growth and survival during the early years of life. Therefore, the parents play a key role in the preservation and improvement of the infants' physical and psychological health. Religion is one of the most influential factors that affect parenting. Regarding this, the present study aimed to investigate the Islamic perspectives on parents' role during infancy.

Methods: This study was conducted within August 2014 to July 2016 (i.e., 24 months) using a qualitative content analysis. All the Shiite Islamic documents (i.e., Quran and Ahadith), which had Persian translation, were surveyed without any time limitation. Documents were in electronical and printed formats. Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA 10 software.

Results: The results of analysis led to the emergence of three main categories. These categories included parents as the founders of infant's physical and psychological health, parents as God's representatives in nurturing the infant, and infant as part of parents' flesh and God's trust. The three obtained categories indicated the dimensions of Islamic perspective on parents' role during infancy.

Conclusion: Based on the Islamic thought, God is the main carer and nurturer of the infants, and parents as the nurture way pavers can achieve the best outcomes by fulfilling their duties and invoking God for his assistance and grace. According to the findings of the study, since the infant is the sign of God's trust and grace to the parents, the parents should make their best to raise a healthy and righteous child. The nurses' awareness of religious beliefs may improve the quality of care. In this regard, the nurses can help the parents by training, counseling, and supporting them to have a healthy and righteous child.

Keywords: Infancy, Islamic perspective, Parents' role

Introduction

There is now considerable evidence demonstrating that the care received during pregnancy and the first two years of birth is vital for the child's future health, wellbeing, development, and life chances (1). This is the most important period in brain development and can be a key determinant of intellectual, social, and emotional health and wellbeing (2). Children depend on their parents for growth and survival during the early years of life. During this period, the parents are responsible for preparing the children for the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations

characterizing the environment and culture in which the children must survive and thrive (3).

Parenting has long-term implications for children's developmental adaptation. Researches have shown that the quality of parenting that the adults provide for their children is shaped by their prior interpersonal experiences with their parents. In this regard, children, whose parents have played their role more effectively, will be successful parents in adulthood (4). Religion plays a central role in shaping the core values and beliefs regarding family life, and aspects of

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religion affect the parenting styles (3).

parents' religiosity seems to be positively associated with an authoritative parenting style, especially with more positive parent-child relationships (5). Psychologists have discussed the relationship between religion and children's well-being since the beginning of the discipline. Empirical studies on children and religion began in the 1950s, rendering remarkably consistent findings, emphasizing that religiosity in families is positively associated with child and youth well-being (6).

In a national longitudinal study, Henderson et al. (2016) found that religiosity was associated with higher parenting satisfaction, and differences across religious traditions were observed for parenting stress (7). In another study conducted by Weyand (2013), it was demonstrated that the use of positive religious coping strategies led to the improvement of the parents' sense of competence, particularly when parenting the children with significant behavioral problems. The parents who use positive religious coping strategies seem to perform better when facing with challenging parenting situations (8).

The position and function of religion in the family offers important insights into several antecedents and consequences of religious commitment. In addition, it helps the people to achieve a more profound understanding of religion by enabling them to disentangle from specific family and sociocultural factors for explaining religion (5). Although there is a large number of empirical research investigating the religion and parenting relationship, it could be argued that they have merely uncovered some general trends that have the potential to inform the health care professionals (9).

The western contemporary medicine has been increasingly recognizing the significance of the influence of religion and the necessity of health specialists' awareness about their patients' religious beliefs (10). As one of the divine religion across the world, Islam is present in all cultures and races (11). The awareness of health care professionals about the Islamic perspectives towards health-related issues will empower them in providing quality services to patients and community (12).

However, the literature review shows that no effort has yet been made to examine the Islamic perspectives regarding parents' role before and during infancy. With this background in mind, the present study was conducted to investigate the Islamic (specifically Shiite) perspectives on

parents' role before and during infancy.

Methods

For the purpose of the study, the Islamic sources, including the Holy Quran and Hadith books (13), were surveyed. To the end, inductive qualitative content analysis method was applied as described by Graneheim and Lundman (14). Among the large number of research methods, content analysis is an appropriate qualitative technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text data to their context. The aim of this analytic approach is to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon; in this respect, the outcomes of the analysis are concepts or categories describing the phenomenon (15).

Data collection

The data were collected through an extensive literature review. To this aim, the Islamic texts, including the Quran and Shiite Hadith books, were extensively and precisely studied. Quran contains the revelations of God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, to mankind. It is the message from God to man, and therefore of utmost importance to Muslims (16). Hadith (Pl: Ahadith) as the second source of Islamic law after the Quran is referred to the holy narrations in form of words or deeds coming from the Prophet Muhammad and twelve infallible Imams (i.e., the successors of the Prophet) (17).

In order to examine the verses of the glorious Quran, first, the entire Quran was read, and the verses related to the research topic were selected. Then, the explanation and interpretation of the verses were studied using the Quran interpretation books, such as Al-Mizan, Nemooneh, and Noor. During the process of studying Quran and interpretation books, the paragraphs and phrases related to the subject of study were extracted and entered into a Word file.

The investigation of the Hadith books was accomplished by using the Comprehensive Ahadith software, version 3.5, which includes the full text of 431 Shiite authentic Hadith books in 1,115 volumes. During the research process, 132 volumes of books were removed from the study since they were duplicated in Persian and Arabic languages. In this regard, 688 books were in Arabic language, and they were not the main sources of Shiite hadith books. In addition, 80 books were excluded due to their irrelevancy to the subject of interest.

Eventually, 215 Hadith books were examined. The flow diagram of literature review is depicted

in Figure 1. Therefore, the searching process was performed using the proper keywords, including 'infant', 'infancy', 'neonate', 'neonatal', 'pediatric', 'child', 'offspring', 'care', and 'caring' in the Comprehensive Ahadith 3.5 software. The process of review literature lasted 18 months (i.e., from August 2014 to January 2016).

Data analysis

To perform content analysis, the paragraphs and phrases related to the subject of study were extracted and entered into a Word file during the process of studying the literature (i.e., Quran interpretation books and Hadith books), resulting in a total of 2,393 pages (1-inch margins, 14-point font: B Lotus). These excerpts of text, which are considered as the unit of analysis by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), were read for several times to get a general understanding of the entire concept.

The analysis was continued by dividing the unit of analysis into meaning units (i.e., a part of the text with the same meaning). In this study, data management was performed through

MAXQDA 10 software (verbi GmbH, Berlin). The meaning units were entered into MAXQDA 10 and reviewed carefully and repeatedly to be condensed. The condensation of the meaning units was performed by reducing the text while preserving the core concept.

The condensed meaning units were subsequently coded according to the content of the material. The coding structure was revised several times throughout the process. The codes were then compared and grouped under relevant subcategories based on their similarities and differences. This reduction and abstraction process was continued, and then the underlying meanings were interpreted as main categories (14). An example of one emerged subcategory and its condensed meaning units, codes, and sub-subcategories are presented in Table 1. Table 2 presents the main categories and the relevant subcategories.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the qualitative research was described by four concepts, namely

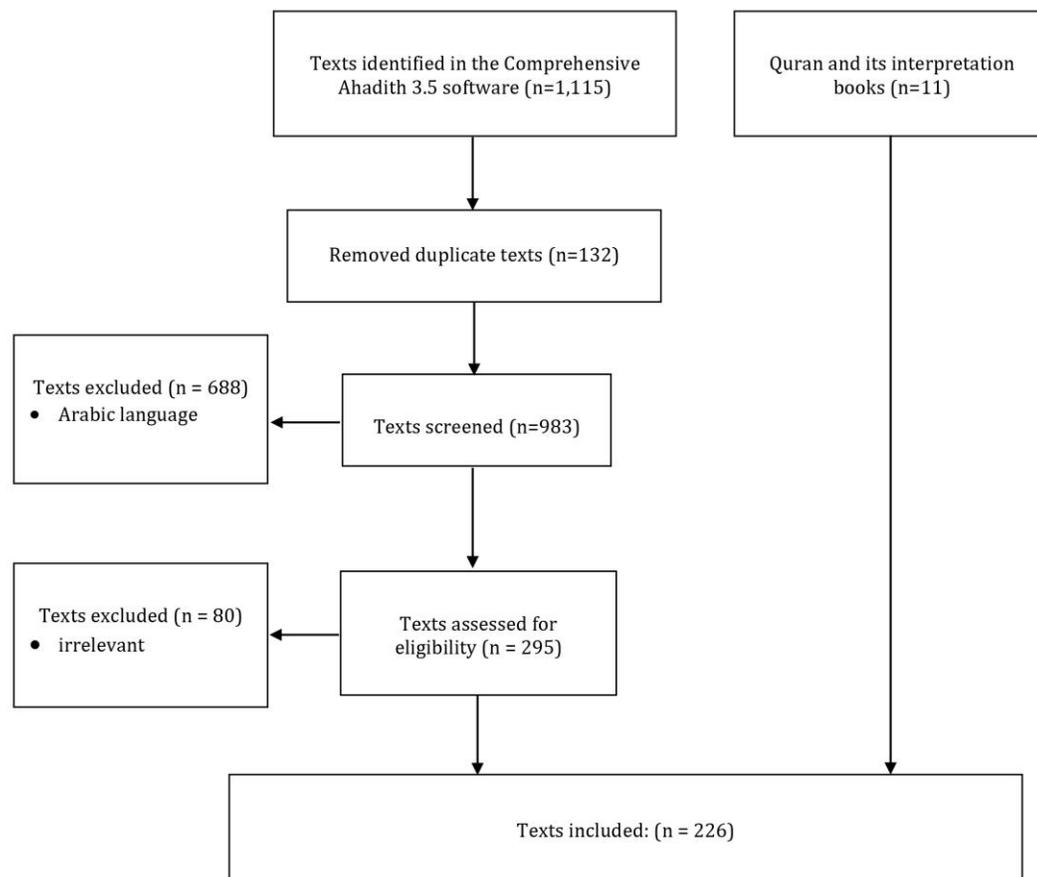


Figure 1. Flow diagram of study selection process

Table 1. Example of condensed meaning units, codes, sub-subcategories and a subcategory

Condensed meaning unit	Code	Sub-subcategory	Sub-category
Children stay safe and sound because of parents' righteous deeds	Child injury prevention due to parents good deeds	Parents' actions are effective in children's protection or harm	Effects of parents' actions on the present and future of the infant's life
God preserves the child because of her/his father's good actions			
parents' cruelty to others may result in child harassment by others	Damage to the children caused by incorrect actions of parents		
Child disease is a kind of parents' atonement of sins			
Children's behaviors re affected by their parents actions	Effectiveness of parents' deeds on child's behavior and personality	Parents' actions are effective in children's character and destiny	
The good and evil of the child is attributed to the parents			
Children's goodness and badness is belonged to the parents			
Being righteous results in having righteous children	Impact of parents' actions on the future children's lives		
Child redemption is associated with parent redemption			
Parents' good actions affect the children			
Parents' incorrect actions affect the children			

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of parents' role during infancy in Islam perspective

Main categories	Subcategories
Parents as God's representatives in nurturing the infant	Parents as the middle link and the executor of God's care for the infant
	Parents endowment with God's mercy by giving birth to the infant
	Parents deserving of God's wrath and punishment in case of committing negligence in taking good care of the infant
	Mother as the primary caregiver and father as the provider of welfare and safety
Parents as the founders of infant's physical and psychological health	Effects of legitimate marriage on the infant
	Effectiveness of parents' nutrition on the infant
	Effects of the moment of conception on the infant
	Effects of parents' actions on the present and future of the infant
Infant as part of parents' flesh and God's trust	Child as God's gift and trust from heaven
	Child as the creator and remover of parents' sorrows
	Child as part of the parents' flesh

credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. To enhance the credibility of the study, all Shiite texts related to the topic of interest were studied, and the meaning units were selected in such a way that was neither too broad nor too narrow (14). Decisions on codes and categories were based on agreements among all members of the research team (including a health specialist, a research methodology expert, and an Islamic issue expert).

The researchers had been working with research data for more than a year, which is a favorite factor to increase credibility. To strengthen dependability, in addition to several revisions conducted on the data, the coding process and the process of developing the main categories were continuously evaluated and controlled by the research team (18).

The confirmability of the data was achieved through reviewing the data by three religious science experts and four nursing professionals outside the research team. Furthermore, the

transferability of the research was accomplished by giving details about the methods of data collection, data analysis, and result achievement. Moreover, the fact that the present study was solely based on the Islamic texts would enhance the transferability of the study (14).

Results

The findings regarding the Islamic perspectives on parents' role during infancy were arranged into three main categories, namely parents as the founders of infant's physical and psychological health, parents as God's representatives in nurturing the infant, and infant as part of parents' flesh and God's trust.

Parents as God's representatives in nurturing the infant

This category was comprised of four subcategories, including parents as the middle link and executor of God's care for the infant, parents' endowment with God's mercy for giving

birth to the infant, parents deserving God's wrath and punishment in case of committing negligence in taking good care of the infant, as well as mother as the primary caregiver and father as the provider of welfare and safety.

Based on the Islamic thoughts, God is the main carer and nurturer of the infants. The Holy Quran introduces God as the merciful cherisher of all creatures (Quran 1:1, 2; 6:164; 21:112; 23:118). God is the owner and planner of all creatures and gradually perfects everything. As the creator and the teacher of the creation, God is responsible for the improvement of human affairs (19). Caring is therefore an act of God. He introduces himself as the protector and guardian of the creations in the glorious Quran (Quran 4:1; 11:57; 12:64; 33:52).

God takes care of the infants before and after their birth through his contrivance in the creation and by providing them with caregivers. He nurtures the tiny embryo in the mother's womb (20). God has instilled in the parents a love for the infant and has made them compassionate and careful toward him/her (21). The parents are indeed the agents of God for taking care of and nurturing the infant and paving the way for his/her proper nurturance.

In the Islamic perspective, children are considered as the continuance of parents' lives, even after their death. Having children is considered as the grace of God, and parents deserve divine rewards due to giving birth to children, taking care of them, and behaving them in a kind manner (22). This viewpoint, on the other hand, proposes God as the protector of the infant against parents' negligence of their duties in taking care of the infant properly (23).

Like God, parents and child caregivers should be good and kind to the child and nurture him/her on a basis of tolerance, mercy, and compassion (24). In Islam, being good and kind to the infant is as important as being good and kind to the parents, and cruelty to children is strictly prohibited. In case of child abuse by parents, they will suffer from a divine retribution in the next world and a hard life in this world (23).

The provision of the child with happiness is another issue that is highly recommended. This view urges the expression of the affection and compassion in practice. Therefore, kissing the child and embracing him/her is highly rewarded by God; accordingly, the parents who do not kiss their child are far from God's mercy (25).

From the Islamic viewpoint, the mother is the

main and unmediated caregiver of the child. She is the prioritized caregiver of the child (26), who reserves this right to herself and her child, even if she is divorced. The separation of the child from his/her mother is not permitted, even by the father (19); moreover, the individual who separates the child from the mother is punished by God (27).

Despite the strict prohibition on separating the infants from the mother, they should be taken away from the mother and handed over to a kind and compassionate caregiver in case their own mothers are unkind and incompetent (21). The father also plays a key role in supporting the mother and the child. In taking care of the infant, it is the parents' duty to provide care and support to each other, cooperate and consult with one another, and refrain from disturbing each other (19).

Parents as the founders of infant's physical and psychological health

This category entailed four subcategories, namely the effects of legitimate marriage on the infant, effects of the conception moment on the infant, effectiveness of parents' nutrition on the infant, and effects of parents' actions on infant's protection or endurance. According to Islam, the parents have a significant role in the establishment of a comprehensive health foundation in the child. Accordingly, parents have a duty to carry out certain actions during different stages, namely before and upon marriage, before and upon conception, during pregnancy, and after birth.

The parents have an undeniable effect on the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health of the child's current and future life. Regarding this, the selection of a proper spouse, who is enjoying good health in all dimensions and is capable of becoming a suitable father or mother, should be taken into account prior to marriage (24). Given the fact that the mother has the greatest impact on the infant's physical and psychological aspects during pregnancy and breastfeeding, men are advised to choose a wife that can handle motherhood responsibilities properly and transfer good personality characteristics to the child (26).

Another important notable point that parents should consider is legitimate marriage. One of the reasons for recommending legitimate marriage is to prevent the damage exerted on the child's physical and spiritual dimensions caused by illegitimate birth (24). The parents' nutrition

before proceeding to having a child is also crucial in achieving the goal of rearing a healthy and righteous child. The parents' type of nutrition affects the child's appearance and gender, and its permissibility (halal food) or non-permissibility influences the formation of the child's spirit and soul (23).

The maternal nutrition has the most significant role in the child's physical and psychological aspects during pregnancy. In this regard, the consumption of special plants and fruits during pregnancy can result in a beautiful appearance and admirable moral traits in the child. In addition, the use of halal food by mother during this period is of particular importance (24). Another issue that makes Islam consider the parents as the founders of the child's physical and psychological health is the importance given to the moment of conception in this religion.

Islam emphasizes the time, place, rituals, and even the thoughts of the parents at the time of conception (26). There are stipulated special instructions for this moment, the observation of which helps prevent many disorders and promote the physical and spiritual health of the child. For example, conception is prohibited in certain times, since it may increase the risk of abortion or physical disorders in the fetus (23). Furthermore, father's mental health at the time of conception is a crucial factor in a way that even a temporary insanity or unethical thoughts can affect the infant's mental health and personality (28).

Post-birth period is the next important stage in the promotion and preservation of the neonatal health. Some rules have been ordered to be implemented on the first and seventh days of birth that prevent physical disorders and promote spiritual health in the newborn. A number of these rules include washing the baby right after birth, shaving the baby's head, uttering the name of God in the child's ear, and circumcising boys on the seventh day of birth (29).

Another issue that has been emphasized is exclusive feeding of the newborn by the mother's milk. In case the mother is unable to breastfeed her infant, a qualified wet nurse should be selected (30). The protection of the child against harm and injury under any conditions is another important point in having a healthy child (19). The fulfillment of all needs of the baby must be a priority for the parents or other people responsible for the infant. Therefore, no hesitation

or negligence is allowed in this case (31).

Observing the child's rights and dignity, following the ethical principles, and giving love and affection to him/her play a significant role in the child's mental health (23). In Islam, being good and kind to the infant is as important as being good and kind to the parents. Therefore, a care delivery based on mercy and compassion is another fundamental principle of nurturing the infant (21). Parent caring for their own body and soul is another issue that is considered as an important factor affecting infant nurturance in Islam. The parents are able to provide a good foundation for the development and persistence of their child's physical and spiritual health by maintaining their own physical and spiritual health and taking care of their actions, behaviors, and moral character (32).

Infant as God's trust and part of parents' flesh

This category consisted of three subcategories, including child as the God's gift and trust from heaven, child as the creator and remover of parents' sorrows, child as part of the parents' flesh. In the Islamic perspective, the child is the God's gift entrusted to the parents (30). It is parents' responsibility to take care of this entrusted gift as ordered by the merciful God, his owner, through his instructions.

The revered prophet introduces children as the flowers of paradise sent by God to parents (27). The child is the apple of their parents' eyes as well as the fragrant flower of their hearts. The parents forget about their sorrows and concerns after cuddling and kissing their children. However, the child could also be the very source of jealousy, fear, worry, and sorrows in the parents (22).

According to Islam, the child is the parents' own body and soul; therefore, the parents get sad with the child's sadness and get happy with his/her happiness (31). The actions of the parents not only protect or damage the child, but also affect his character and destiny (32). According to the Islamic narrations, children join their parents in doomsday (26), and it is part of the children's rights to be considered by parents as an inseparable part of their being (32).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of Islam about the parents' role during infancy. The uniqueness of the role of the parents in infant caring and nurturing is undisputed. However, the way this role is fulfilled

is of an undeniable importance. The results of this study revealed that the parents are the founders of the children's physical and mental well-being, which deserves consideration and attention before the childbirth.

In a study, Case and Paxson (2002) reported that parents' behavior in both prenatal period and childhood affect children's health. They mentioned that the health status of the infant at birth is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including the maternal health and nutritional status, reception of medical care during pregnancy, and use of nutrients affecting fetal development (33).

In the current world, advices about child care often revolve around the post-birth period (34). The issues considering the pre-birth period are only limited to pregnancy care and measures for preventing physical disorders and mental retardation (35). In Islam, a legitimate marriage, selection of a proper spouse, and observation of the conception conditions have been widely discussed among other things with relevant instructions.

The findings of the present study indicated the direct impacts of parents' actions and conduct on all existential aspects of child's wellbeing. If the parents want their children to enjoy complete body and soul wellbeing, they should act and behave in an appropriate manner and take the right way in this regard. Today, as part of care recommendations, the parents are requested to exercise caution in their behaviors and act as if they are readily noticed and learned by the children (36). In addition, Islam has well addressed the consequences of the parents' actions and behaviors on children's health and fate.

According to the Islamic point of view, God is the protector of all creatures, including human being. This protection is initiated from the very moment of conception. Accordingly, the parents are God's representatives on the earth to fulfill this duty as children's caregivers. A parenting that involves positive affection, high levels of warmth, and cognitive fulfillment of the child's needs provides a range of support necessary for multiple aspects of infant's life (37). In order to prevent child injury and assure that children have reached their full potential, it is essential to establish safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments. The provision of such environments and establishment of such relationships are among the most important parents' duties (38).

In the Islamic perspective, the child is a sign of God's grace entrusted in the hands of parents. Therefore, the parents and all caretakers should consider the rights and dignity of the child. Various laws and rules have been framed to protect the children from the oppression and abuse (39). Child's rights in Islam begins after conception. Moreover, the Islamic school of thought introduces God as the primary advocate of the children's rights. Those committing crimes against children will not manage to escape the divine punishment in both worlds.

Taking this point into the account not only prompts the parents to behave more carefully and attentively with their children, but also encourages them to nurture their children out of knowledge and kindness and act as good trustees. In addition, this requires the treatment teams to adopt the best care and treatment methods for children.

Conclusion

There is a growing body of evidence revealing a correlation between religious belief and practice and mental and physical health and longevity (40). It is extremely important for the nurses, health workers, and primary care providers to be aware of multiple cultures and religious beliefs. The investigation of the religious instructions and their application in professional practice can improve the quality of care.

The current study provided information regarding the Islamic perspectives on parents' roles before and during the infancy. According to the findings, since the infant is a sign of God's trust and grace to the parents, they should make their utmost effort to nurture a healthy and righteous child. To this end, essential considerations need to be made before marriage, upon conception, during pregnancy, and after birth.

A nurse can help the parents through these stages by providing them with training, counseling, and support. In the light of the current study, it could be argued that only by becoming genuinely interested in the religious (here Islam) perspectives on parents' role and its impacts on the conceptualization of parenting would the practitioners be able to truly engage and perfectly work with the families.

One of the limitations of the present study was that the researchers were not proficient in Arabic language so they utilized the Persian translation of the glorious Quran verses and Ahadith from prophet and infallible Imams (peace be upon them). Further studies are recommended to

compare the Islamic view about parents' role before and during infancy with other religions and cultures.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

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