145050 - Is Favouritism among One's Children Allowed in Islam?

the question

There is no doubt that each individual has his own character that Allah has given to him. Although there are characteristics that are common to all human beings, people vary with regard to the way those characteristics are combined.

My question is with regard to children: how can a father deal fairly with those differences and treat his children – male and female – equally when each of them has a different attitude and character that make the parents more favourably inclined towards some rather than others?

Summary of answer

A father should not favour any child over another. This does not mean that he should have the same feelings towards all of them, because that is something that the father does not have control over. Rather he has control over being fair towards them in outward matters.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

- Allah, may He be Exalted, created His creation and caused them to vary in characteristics, nature and attitude. This is something real and visible, and these differences are common throughout the world. Even within one family differences may be seen between the children. There is great divine wisdom in that and it is indicative of Allah’s great power.
- It cannot be denied that a father will feel more inclined towards the child who has good characteristics, whether physical or in his attitude, or is of a nature to which people are attracted, such as if he is cheerful, easygoing and kind. The fact that a child is male does not necessarily mean that a parent will be inclined towards him; rather we find that many fathers

are more attached to their daughters, and so on.

- The father cannot be blamed for such inclinations, but it is not wise to express that in front of the children, because of the negative results that stem from that. But if he has only one child, then he may express all his feelings and no one will blame him for that.
- Many parents do not realise that showing preference to the child who is distinguished by good and attractive characteristics may be harmful to that child who is so distinguished. That may lead to making him proud and big headed, or it may lead him to become lazy or idle and rely on others to meet his needs. There is no doubt that such a child will never be of benefit to himself or to his parents or the rest of his family.
- The family in which the parents -- especially the father -- favour one of the children over the others cause many negative consequences, such as the following:

1. The other children will be discouraged from succeeding or advancing in both religious and worldly terms
2. It may cause them to suffer psychological or physical illness.
3. It may lead to resentment against the favoured sibling, which may go as far as murder!

Parents who favour some of their family over others are playing a role in the break-up and destruction of that family, because that favouritism sows the seeds of enmity, resentment and destructive envy among their children. So those who are less favoured may gang up on the one who is favoured over them, and even against their parents. The one who ponders the story of Yusuf (peace be upon him) and sees what they did to him and his other brother will clearly see that what we are saying is true. Allah, may He be Exalted, has told us the reason why they did that to their brother Yusuf. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“When they said: ‘Truly, Yusuf (Joseph) and his brother (Benjamin) are dearer to our father than we, while we are a strong group. Really, our father is in a plain error.

‘Kill Yusuf (Joseph) or cast him out to some (other) land, so that the favour of your father may be given to you alone, and after that you will be righteous folk (by intending repentance before

committing the sin.)’” [Yusuf 12:8-9]

There is no doubt that Ya`qub (peace be upon him) was not mistreating those other sons of his; the only thing that made them do that was his feelings of love towards his son Yusuf (peace be upon him). So how about the case of brothers whose father has wronged them by giving to one of their brothers what he did not give to them?

- One of the most well-known ways in which parents favour some of their children over others is with regard to gifting, which is something that is forbidden according to the laws of Allah. Among the bad effects that result from this kind of favouritism is that it causes children to be disobedient towards their parents, so that they do not all treat their parents with the same level of respect and kindness. Our Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) drew attention to that and clearly stated that favouritism in giving is wrongdoing and unfair.

It was narrated that An-Nu`man ibn Bashir (may Allah be pleased with him) said: My father took me to the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and said: “O Messenger of Allah, bear witness that I have given such and such of my wealth to An-Nu`man.” He said: “Did you give to all your children the same as you have given to An-Nu`man?” He said: “No.” He said: “Let someone else bear witness to that for you.” Then he said: “Would you not like all your children to honour you equally?” He said: “Yes.” He said: “Then no (I will not bear witness).” (Narrated by Muslim, 3059)

Just as Allah, may He be Exalted, has forbidden this favouritism among children in gifting, He has also forbidden something else, namely making a bequest to any one of them. He has forbidden making a bequest to an heir (one who automatically inherits according to Shari`ah). All these rulings are in the best interests of the family and lay the foundations for family unity, not division.

- The father should realise that not one of his children is perfect. If he favours one of his children for some reason, if he is fair-minded he will also find that the child has some other, negative, characteristics. The opposite may also be said of those whom he does not favour:

many of them may have many positive qualities. A child who is loved for the way he moves and speaks may not be able to help the family by buying groceries from the store, and he may not be good at welcoming and serving guests. Parents should pay attention to that. They should encourage the good characteristics of their children and help them to develop them, and not expect the others to be the same. Each person will be helped to do that for which he was created. One of them may love to work, another may love to seek knowledge; a third may love to deal in trade. Some of them may have characteristics that are not found in others. The wise father tries to develop that and makes them complement one another. If he praises the positive characteristics in one child, he should also praise the positive characteristics in others, so that there will be no destructive envy or resentment among them, by Allah's leave and with His help.

- By the same token, parents should also beware of scolding children for their mistakes and demanding that one child be like his brother so and so. Rather he should mention to him the good qualities of his relatives or neighbours of the same age, or encourage him to develop good characteristics whilst discouraging bad characteristics, without mentioning anyone [from his siblings] in particular, because comparing him with a sibling who is better than him in this case would generate enmity and resentment between them.

- It is not fair for the father to treat the disobedient one among his children the same as he treats the one who obeys him, otherwise the obedient one will not have any advantages. He has to make it clear that the one who does good -- such as helping his mother in the house or memorising Quran -- will have a reward, whereas the one who behaves badly will be deprived of it or penalised -- according to whatever misdemeanours the children may commit. Of course, we do not mean here that he should give him a gift -- we have explained above that doing that is prohibited; rather we mean that he should praise him by saying good things, or giving him more pocket money, or he can let him play a permissible game for longer than the one who misbehaved, and so on. This is the fairness that we encourage in parents; not treating all of them -- those who behave well and those who behave badly -- in the same manner, otherwise it would be unfair to the one who is obedient.

The father has the right to withhold from the one who is stubbornly disobedient the money with which he commits sin; in fact it is obligatory for the father to do that, so that he can prevent his child from doing that which angers his Lord, may He be Exalted.

Shaykh `Abdullah Al-Jibrin (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I will not bear witness to unfairness,” meaning that if the father was more inclined towards one of them, then he may be called unfair or unjust, but it may be that doing that is permissible if the one whom he favours is righteous and the other one is an evildoer and sinner. If he tries to set him straight and fails, and the child becomes disobedient and defiant towards his parents and disobedient towards Allah, turning away from Him and from worship, and indulging in consuming intoxicants and committing evil deeds and sins, and his parents cannot set him straight --- in that case, there is nothing to stop the parents (treating their children differently). In that case it is permissible for them to overlook the issue of equality and not treat him the same as others. Rather they should be strict in dealing with him, even if they deprive him of their care or spending on him, or they penalise him in a way that will bring him back to the right path, with the help of Allah.” (Durus Ash-Shaykh Ibn Jibrin, 1/23)

- Another matter we advise parents with is to direct their children’s feelings towards the one among their siblings who deserves compassion and love. For example, one of the children may have a disability, so the parents should direct their children to show compassion and love towards their sibling before themselves. In this way they will ensure that the one who has the disability will be given his share of compassion, and they will ensure that there will be no ill feeling between them and their sibling.
- No matter what the differences in the characters and natures of the children, fairness between them in visible matters is something that is prescribed in Islam. If the father pays the marriage expenses for one of them, he should also do that for each of them who wants to get married. If he pays for the medical treatment of one of them who falls sick, he should do the same for whoever needs treatment. If he contributes to the education of one of them, he

should do the same for the others too -- so long as it falls within the category of permissible education. The same may also be said with regard to maintenance and clothing. He should treat all of his children fairly with regard to this matter. But we do not say that it should be the same; rather it should be fair. What we mean by that is that he should give each of them what is sufficient for him. Indeed, some of the Salaf (pious predecessors) were of the view that it is preferred to be fair with children in the matter of kissing them!

Imam Al-Baghawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said, commenting on the Hadith of An-Nu`man ibn Bashir (may Allah be pleased with him) quoted above:

“There are many lessons to be learned from this Hadith, such as: it is recommended to treat children equally in gift-giving and in all kinds of kindness, even kisses, whether they are male or female, so that there will not be anything in the heart of the less-favoured one that will keep him from honouring the parents.” (Sharh As-Sunnah, 8/297)

It was narrated that Ibrahim An-Nakha`i (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “They regarded it as recommended for a man to treat his children equally even with regard to kissing.” (Musannaf Ibn Abu Shaybah, 11/221)

Similarly, he should not favour any child over another. This does not mean that he should have the same feelings towards all of them, because that is something that the father does not have control over. Rather he has control over being fair towards them in outward matters, as is the case with one who has more than one wife: he is not forbidden to love one of his wives more than another, but at the same time he is enjoined to treat them fairly with regard to that which he has control over, namely being fair with regard to outward matters such as maintenance, spending the night with them, and clothing.

We ask Allah to enable you to do that which pleases Him, and to help you to achieve fairness among your children.

For more details, please see the following answers: 10016 , 279342 , 215167 , 20064 , and 162787 .

And Allah knows best.