



MEND's Easy Read Guide to
Prayer space
in Schools

**IRU**
ISLAMOPHOBIA
RESPONSE UNIT

www.mend.org.uk
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A group of people, likely Muslims, are shown from the waist down, sitting on a patterned rug. They are wearing white prayer attire (thobe and ghutra). Their hands are positioned in a prayer gesture, with fingers pointing towards the ground. The rug has a colorful geometric pattern in shades of blue, green, and orange. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

How is Prayer Space Beneficial?

Facilitating multi-faith prayer spaces in schools is simple to achieve and has wide-reaching benefits for students and the school environment.

Prayer is an integral part of Islamic faith, and supporting this practice allows Muslim students to develop their religious identities with confidence and feel secure in their positions as members of society.

However, the benefits of a multi-faith prayer space are not restricted to Muslim children, but also contribute towards nurturing healthy religious identities for students of all faiths.

Moreover, studies have demonstrated the value of meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative practice for young people in combatting stress, improving social and academic skills, and generally promoting mental wellbeing. The University of Surrey found that participants who engaged in mindfulness showed a **58% reduction in anxiety and a 40% reduction in stress.**

What Does The Law Say?

The Equality Act 2010 is designed to protect the rights of individuals and ensure equality of opportunity for everyone, thus promoting a fair and equal society.

The Act covers nine protected characteristics, one of which is 'religion or belief'.

The Public Sector Equality Duty, created by Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, demands that public bodies (such as schools) must give due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and any other unlawful conduct in the Equality Act 2010.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected

characteristic and those who do not.

At the same time, Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (freedom of thought, belief and religion) protects the right to put your thoughts and beliefs into action, including:

- The right to wear religious clothing,
- And the right to take part in religious worship.

As public bodies, schools must respect and protect these human rights.

What Does This Mean For Schools?

In other words, schools must always consider how their policies or decisions impact people who are protected under the Equality Act.

The Department for Education released advice for school leaders, school staff, governing bodies and local authorities on how best to fulfil the Public Sector Equality Duty. Specifically, they state that one of the ways to advance 'equality of opportunity' is to meet the needs of people who have a particular characteristic, for example:

"enabling Muslim pupils to pray at prescribed times"



Simple accommodations, such as providing prayer space, are therefore important steps in fulfilling this Public Sector Equality Duty as they support students to fully engage with public life through encouraging confidence in their identity and sense of belonging.



The Equality Act 2010 and schools

Departmental advice for school leaders,
school staff, governing bodies and local
authorities

May 2014



Schools must also be aware of avoiding any direct or indirect discrimination against people with protected characteristics protected by the Equality Act.

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission;

“The way in which school facilities are provided can lead to discrimination.”

The commission gives the example of a school that does not provide Halal food in its canteen for its Muslim students, which means that they are unable to eat school lunches. “This is likely to be indirect religion or belief discrimination, because the school is unlikely to be able to justify this action.”

“Technical Guidance for Schools in England,” Technical Guidance for Schools in England | Equality and Human Rights Commission, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/technical-guidance-schools-england>

“A school’s obligation to pupils covers everything that a school provides for pupils and goes beyond just the formal education it provides. It covers all school activities such as extracurricular and leisure activities, afterschool and homework clubs, sports activities and school trips, as well as school facilities such as libraries and IT facilities.”

Technical Guidance for Schools in England (The Equality and Human Rights Commission)





How Do We Put This Into Practice?

The provision of a multi-faith prayer space is relatively simple to facilitate and should ideally provide space and equipment for daily prayers, Friday congregational prayers, and washroom facilities.

Atkinson Road Primary Academy, a non-faith school in Newcastle opened its first multi-faith prayer room in 2016. The inspiration for the room came from a young Muslim pupil who needed to pray on the first day of school but noticed that the direction of Mecca (the direction in which Muslims are required to pray) was unclear. The room is now equipped with bibles, rosary beads, skullcaps, hijabs, and prayer mats and is available for use during break and lunchtimes. Pupils at the school stated that “it’s a very nice thing for everybody”.

Similarly, Leytonstone School, a secondary school in East London, welcomes all students to use their prayer facilities for quiet reflection and operates a ‘prayer club’ for Muslim students to pray with a sermon delivered on Fridays by a member of staff.

Such accommodations are simple but have a lasting impact on the self-development of students.

A hand sanitizer bottle and a surgical mask are shown against a dark background. The hand sanitizer bottle is clear with a white pump dispenser and a blue label that reads "INSTANT HAND SANITIZER" and "KILLS 99.99% OF GERMS". The surgical mask is light blue with white elastic straps.

What About if a School has Closed its Prayer Space Because of COVID-19?

While Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 protects the right to practice one's religion, this right is not absolute.

If a public body (such as a school) wishes to interfere with this right, they must show that its policy is lawful, necessary, and proportionate in order to protect public safety, public order, public health, or the rights and freedoms of other people.

In light of COVID-19, a school may be able to argue that it is necessary and proportionate to close its prayer space in order to protect the health and safety of its staff and students.

However, a school would first have to be able to prove that it is unable to facilitate adjustments, such as socially distanced prayer, as is currently being practised by other religious institutions.

A person wearing a white thobe and a grey ghutra is performing a prayer (sujood) on a patterned rug. The person's head is touching the floor, and their hands are resting on the rug. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in similar attire.

My School Doesn't provide a Prayer Space. What Can I Do?

Read the school's policies, procedures, and guidelines which are usually published on the governance section of their website.

Speak to the Headteacher

Discuss with them:

- The benefits of a prayer space,
- Why it is important to you/ your child,
- What the law says,
- What their current policies and procedures state,
- How they can create a prayer space.



I Have Spoken to My School But They Haven't Agreed to Create a Prayer Space. What Can I Do?

At any time during the process you can contact the **Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU)**.

The Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU), is a charity dedicated to supporting victims of Islamophobia. It was founded in response to rising anti-Muslim attacks, and the growing tide of anti-Muslim sentiment, across the United Kingdom. This service is for anyone who suffers or has suffered, an incident of hate crime or discrimination as a result of their Muslim faith (or perceived Muslim faith). The IRU offers a platform for victims of Islamophobic hate crime and discrimination to confidentially report and share their experiences and serves as a source for free legal assistance.

The IRU serves three main functions:

- Data collection and monitoring,
- The provision of free legal support and police liaison,
- Provision of basic emotional support, and signposting to further professional sources of emotional support if required.



Find out more and contact the IRU
at www.theiru.org.uk

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Muslim engagement
& development

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