

Islamic Storytime- Wellness Through Connection

Gulhan Yoldas presented on the topic of Islamic Storytime - Wellness Through Connection at the 6th Annual Australian Islamic Schooling Conference in August 2023.

Wellness is a holistic concept encompassing physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. Human connections play an important role in achieving this balance. In rapidly changing and growing regions like Melbourne's outer north, establishing platforms that facilitate local networks and connections, particularly amongst young families from new and emerging communities, has become increasingly important. One exemplary initiative successfully nurturing these connections is Islamic Storytime, hosted on campus at Al Siraat College, open to all mums with small children in the region.

Countless studies have consistently shown that strong social connections contribute significantly to overall wellness. To name a few, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, spanning over 80 years, highlights that individuals with close relationships tend to live longer, healthier lives. The Alameda County Study reinforces this, revealing lower mortality rates in those with stronger social ties.

At Al Siraat College, the community engagement strategy has three main components which are centred around connection and wellness both at a family level and as a growing community: connecting students and the school community with one another in meaningful ways, connecting the College community with the broader community, and developing our students as ambassadors of our values.

The City of Whittlesea is known for its remarkable diversity, comprising 130 different cultural backgrounds. With a significant population of young families, it's a growing community, expected to increase by 55.60% from 2021 to 2041. Notably, almost 10% of its residents currently identify as Muslim.

The Islamic Storytime program, beginning in 2017, was pioneered as a grassroots initiative that connects the youngest members of the Muslim community to the masjid, and to one another. This program offers numerous wellness benefits, for children and parents, particularly mothers, as well as offering cascading benefits stemming from feelings of belonging and contribution towards the broader community.

Islamic Storytime provides a platform for young children aged 0 to 4 to have a smooth transition to *big school*, fostering an environment reflective of Islamic tradition and values. Children who participate often go on to become students at Al Siraat College, ensuring a continuity of narrative for families.

The benefits of Islamic Storytime are extensive. It promotes social connections, allowing mothers to connect with each other and build a strong sense of community. Friendships formed amongst children and mothers during Islamic Storytime continue for years to follow. Additionally local support networks can reduce feelings of isolation and enhance overall mental health, particularly for families from new and emerging communities.

Islamic Storytime strengthens the bond between mothers and children through shared activities like singing nasheeds and reading stories together that promote Islamic values. These activities play a significant role in enhancing the parent-child relationship and fostering positive emotional development in children.

Participation in Islamic Storytime also aids in stress reduction, providing a space for mothers to engage in enjoyable, low-pressure activities that promote relaxation. This reduction in stress has a positive ripple effect, benefiting the entire family.

Over the years, Islamic Storytime has evolved into a flagship program, paving the way for several other initiatives that provide women in the community with meaningful connections, including Peaceful Parenting programs and women's sports and recreation initiatives, including Women's Golf and Badminton. Its immense popularity means there is a constant need for more funding, resources and space. Registration is required each term, with efforts made to ensure everyone in the community has a chance to attend.

As an advocate for the Islamic Storytime program Al Siraat College is prepared to support other schools, including government and independent schools, in establishing their own on-campus Islamic Storytime programs for mums with small children.

Islamic Storytime at Al Siraat College is a demonstration of how fostering social connections within the Muslim community can lead to improved wellness for individuals and families. This initiative not only prepares children for school but also supports mothers. Through programs like Islamic Storytime, the bonds of community, faith, and family are strengthened, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being of all involved.

<https://www.alsiraat.vic.edu.au/page/islamic-storytime>