

Abraham's Children

A High School Study Guide

Grades 9 - 12



Developed by Ann Hawley and Nina Froriep

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Technical Specs:

Director's Cut: 78 min.
Widescreen format, color, stereo
Available on DVD (NTSC and Pal)

Where to find us:

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IMDB

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1. Introduction

In addition to providing an opportunity for individual reflection, *Abraham's Children* can serve as a springboard to increase and deepen your classroom's awareness of people of different religious and cultural backgrounds. By prompting dialogue, the film can also inspire action.

The questions offered here can help with preparation, act as sparks to get dialogue started, or help to deepen student thinking. As a teacher you know your students best so skip over any that are inappropriate for your use and feel free to reorder the sequencing to your liking. Let the interests and concerns of your classroom dictate the flow of the discussion.

2. Summary

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and in America. Every 10th child in the New York School system is Muslim. *Abraham's Children* tells the stories of some of these children through their own voices.

In light of recent events, *Abraham's Children* gives the viewer a real sense of the living experience of being an American Muslim. Scenes in this documentary— warm and humorous, engaging and uplifting— lie in stark contrast to the constant and inaccurate drumbeat of angry and threatening Muslims portrayed in mainstream media.

Abraham's Children looks into the lives of six Muslim American families. You will find many similarities between 'typical' American families and Muslim American families— both identify as American, and are indeed, American. The film allows the viewer to see into the lives of these adolescents and families and observe that there is nothing too inherently difficult in maintaining both a Muslim and an American identity at the same time.

Abraham's Children is a film about Islam's positive influence on shaping the character of young Muslim Americans and their families.

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3. Who's Who? Review of Characters

Abraham's Children profiles 10 children within six families. All but one are first generation Muslim Americans. The exception is a so-called 'quarter generation' boy from Yemen who came to America four years ago. In addition to this boy, there are five children in three Pakistani families for whom cultural integration plays as much a role as Islam and fitting in with their American peers; two daughters of an American convert to Islam whose focus is a pure Islamic lifestyle for her daughters and herself and two daughters of an African American father who found order and a direction through Islam.

Yasmine (12) and **Dareen** (11) attend a private Muslim School in Yonkers called Andalusia, where their mother Susan is the principal. Susan was raised in a conservative Episcopal household in Connecticut and converted to Islam before meeting the girl's father, a Palestinian. The father left shortly after Dareen was born and the girls have not seen him since. Susan and the girls commute a 3.5 hour roundtrip to Andalusia from their upstate home so the kids have a chance to grow up in nature.

Kasem (17) immigrated to the States four years ago from Yemen as a US citizen with little knowledge of English and American culture to join two of his older brothers in the Bronx. He is graduating from an ESL High School the following spring and is hoping to attend Columbia University in the fall. He wants to become an engineer and tutors peers in math after hours to give back to the community and to help support his brothers and himself.

Saleem (16) & **Haleema** (12), **Imran** (17) and **Anam** (14) & **Ahmad** (10): these are the children in three Pakistani families in Long Island who are a part of a close-knit community of family and friends. They are first-generation Americans who thrive as young leaders and role models and hold dreams for the future like any other American teen with the sky being the limit. Their parents are all working doctors. Behind the scenes these young Pakistani-Muslim-Americans are very rooted in their religion and their parent's culture. All five kids, ages 10 to 17, are quite successful in maintaining a balance between the 'old and new' world while embodying a very "American" lifestyle.

Naeemah (17) and **Saedah** (16) are sisters from the Bronx. Their father, Tariq, a Sheik, preaches Juma (Friday prayer) in mosques around the Tri-State area and in Philadelphia. Tariq works as a security guard at night and converted to Islam in SingSing Prison in upstate New York. He talks about his past and why he keeps the girls 'close'. Naeemah has been engaged to Mohammed since she was 14 and eagerly anticipates their marriage in the summer of 2010. Both girls are home schooled. Their younger brother Siraj goes to private school.

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4. Prepare Students

a. Assessing Identity

One of the main themes in *Abraham's Children* is identity. Before viewing the film, take a few moments to define "identity" and discuss what the concept means to the students in the classroom.

1. Explore the meaning of identity by creating a Word web. Write the word "identity" on the board and circle it. Ask students: What is identity? What do we mean by identity? As students respond, write those words, phrases, or ideas outside of the circle, and then draw a line from the words to the circle, thus creating a "web". A web is a quick tool for assessing a group's knowledge and attitudes about a subject. Note any questions that arise off to the side so that you may address them later as a group.
2. Any definition the group finds appropriate will work. It can be multiple and simultaneous, inclusive or exclusive, all at the same time (i.e. woman, mother, daughter, wife, student, Asian, pilot, Christian, blonde, or man, firefighter, husband, son, grandfather, Haitian, vegetarian, surfer, etc). The concept of identity is fluid and may be difficult for the group to define. Do not get bogged down by this activity, but rather come to a general consensus of how the group defines the term.
3. Another way to facilitate learning about identity is for students to break up into groups based on similar qualities or interests. For example, you may have one group that consists of all girls and the other of only boys, or the classroom could divide by creating groups based on the various eye colors in the room. Next, make it a bit more complicated. For example group students by if they play a certain sport, such as basketball. Likely there will be both girls and boys in this group. Then divide this group further by classifying students as either right- or left-handed. You may continue with such examples until you have perhaps three or four common identities occurring all at once. Students will likely observe that their identities fluctuate in regards to the specific identifying qualifier being used at the time. For example, a student who is left-handed and plays basketball may leave this group if an added layer of identification is tacked on such as "plays a musical instrument". Each additional classification increases the likelihood that groups will eventually dissolve into individuals. They will better understand how multiple identities can be established in one individual.

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5. View

Introduce the film by showing the DVD cover to your students and reading the short synopsis on the back cover, "*Abraham's Children* tells the stories of children from six diverse Muslim families in the greater New York area through their voices and experiences."

If possible, view the film in its entirety in one sitting. If your time does not permit this, the film may be split into three segments where you may even select individual chapters for viewing. Once the film is in progress, it will continue to play until the end unless stopped.

a. DVD Segments and Chapters

Segment 1 – approximately 27 minutes

- Chapter 1: "Why am I a Muslim?"
- Chapter 2: Yasmine and Dareen
- Chapter 3: The Mosque & the 5 Pillars
- Chapter 4: Kasem

Segment 2 – approximately 25 minutes

- Chapter 5: Saleem & Haleema
- Chapter 6: Imran
- Chapter 7: Anam & Ahmad

Segment 3 – approximately 24 minutes

- Chapter 8: Naeemah & Saeedah
- Chapter 9: Hijab & Ramadan
- Chapter 10: Interfaith & US Teens
- Chapter 11: Credit Roll

6. Respond

a. General Questions

These questions are for immediate discussion after viewing *Abraham's Children*.

1. What did you think of the film? Think of one or two words that describe what you feel and explain your choices.
2. Did anything in the film surprise you?
3. Do you feel the kids in the film are very different from you and your friends? How so? In what ways are you similar?
4. Did you identify with anyone in particular in the film? Who? Discuss why or why not.

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6. Respond Cont'd.

a. General Questions Cont'd.

5. What differences do you see between your family and the ones portrayed in the documentary? What similarities do you see between your family and the ones portrayed in the documentary?
6. After viewing the film, do you feel you have a better understanding of Muslims?

b. Dig Deeper

These questions allow students to explore in greater depth issues presented in the film. You do not need to tackle all the questions in this section—select those that will stimulate discussion and relate to any current issues that your class faces. You may want to assign some as essays or journal entries.

1. Do you find more commonalities or differences when you compare your life to those in the film? Explain.
2. What are some of the outlets used by the characters? Do you feel these activities play an important role in their lives? Do you have any extracurricular activities or outlets for yourself? Explain.
3. How much does what your parents think affect you? How do you think they would respond to the film? Would you agree or disagree with their thoughts and why?
4. How important do you believe your upbringing is in determining your religion? What significance, if any, does this bring to your perspective on religion and how you relate to others?
5. Take a look around the classroom. Are there American Muslims amongst you? Examine yourself and how you define yourself. How are you different from other students in the room? How are you similar? (This question is not intended to single out Muslim American students in your classroom and may remain rhetorical. The purpose is for your students to become aware of their peers and how their actions or words may affect one another).
6. Do you see any gender differences in the film? How are boys treated in comparison to girls? In your life do you see any differences in how boys and girls are treated? Explain.
7. Do you think Muslim Americans are treated fairly in the United States? Why or why not?
8. What insights or new knowledge did you gain from this film? What messages or lessons would you hope that others learn through viewing it?

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6. Respond Cont'd.

c. Reassessing Identity

Now that students have seen the film, return to your previous discussion of identity (see above Assessing Identity, p. 4). In order to solidify students understanding of identity, pose some of the following questions for reflection. Have students discuss them in small groups or assign some of the questions as homework.

1. Who are we and how do we see ourselves and how does the outside world see us? How far apart are those two identities? Do we want them to be similar to one another or not? Explain.
2. What about your 'private' identity vs. your 'public' identity - are they one and the same or different? Explain.
3. Do you feel you belong in a group and fit in there? State which one you identify with most and why. Do you think it is more important to be included in a specific community and conform to their rules or do you think it is better to remain an individual? Discuss the pros and cons of each position.
4. Where do you see a difference between religion and cultural traditions? Are there examples in your family where the two meld together? Give examples.

d. Questions by Segment Segment 1

1. How would you feel if one of your parents was your principal or teacher?
2. Think about your circle of friends. Are they similar to you or different? Do you think if they were a different race or religion that you would still be friends?
3. Were you surprised by the reaction of Susan's parents to her conversion? How would your parents react if you were to become drastically different from them?
4. If you were a teacher and a student asked you to be placed only with boys or girls would you accommodate the request? Why or why not?
5. Kasem finds refuge in the mosque. Is there any place you feel you can go to and be safe? If so, explain.

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6. Respond Cont'd.

d. Questions by Segment Cont'd.

Segment 2

1. What do you think Saleem means when he says he'll be completely different in college? Do you think you'll become completely different as you grow older or do you feel like you'll stay relatively the same person that you are today?
2. How do you feel about Saleem's statement, "In America you can do anything"? Do you believe it to be true or false? Explain.
3. Can you relate to the idea of someone simply being made to be your friend as Saleem describes his friend, Sam when he says, "Him and I—we were just made to be friends"? Do you have anyone like that in your life? If so, what connects you?
4. How do you feel when the kids and the parents talk about dating in Muslim culture?
5. Would you ever consider having an arranged marriage? Why or why not?
6. How do you feel about Imran's statement about his religion trumping his culture? Do you feel like some things in your life take priority over others? Explain.
7. What do you think of the general Islamic "dress code" described in the film? Do you agree or disagree?

Segment 3

1. Do you have any friends who are home-schooled? How are they different from you? How are they similar?
2. Do you think it is important to have social interactions outside of your family or that it's really not that necessary? Explain.
3. What event changed Tariq's life? Do you think a single event can have a massive impact on your future?
4. Have you ever fasted? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel like you know more about Islam and Muslims after 9/11 or that you have basically the same amount of knowledge?
6. How do you think 9/11 has affected the lives of Muslim Americans? Has 9/11 changed your perception of Muslims? Has this film changed your perception of Muslims? How so?
7. Have you had the opportunity to participate in an Interfaith dialogue? If so, how was it? If not, if there was the opportunity, would you or not?

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7. Glossary of Terms in Islam

Five Pillars of Islam

1. **Shahadah:** The confession of faith is the fundamental expression of Islamic faith: "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God". In order to convert, one must say the *shahadah* three times to become a Muslim.
2. **Salat:** prayer. Muslims pray five times a day, which must be performed in the direction of Mecca.
3. **Sawm Ramadan:** the fast of the month of Ramadan. During the month of Ramadan, all believers must refrain from food, drink, and sexual relationships from dawn until dusk. The month of Ramadan occurs at different times of the year (the Muslim calendar is a lunar rather than a solar calendar). The fast is intended to purify the believer as a renunciation of the world.
4. **Zakat:** alms-giving. Islam understands the material world as created by God for the enjoyment of humanity. However, one's duties to God involve distributing one's wealth to the less fortunate. *Zakat* purifies the believer by encouraging a charitable disposition and a lack of attachment to worldly belongings.
5. **Hajj:** the pilgrimage to Mecca that occurs annually. Every believer, if financially and physically able, must make a pilgrimage to the *Ka'bah*, the sacred shrine of Islam, during his or her lifetime.

Halal vs. Haram means right vs. wrong. *Halal* means lawful or legal, and is an Arabic term designating any object or action that is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law. *Haram* is an Arabic term meaning "forbidden". In Islam it is used to refer to anything that is prohibited by the faith.

Hijab: the Arabic word holds a variety of similar meanings: cover, conceal, hide, screen, and shelter. Among Muslims, *hijab* commonly refers to a woman's headscarf. In broader terms, *hijab* refers to her full modest dress.

Masjid is the Arabic word for Mosque, the house of prayer and center for Islamic learning.

8. Topic List for Abraham's Children

Adolescence	Family dynamics	Muslim youth
Aspirations	Gender differences	Peer pressure
Community	Homeschooling	Prejudice
Conversion	Identity	Private schools
Dating	Immigrants	Public schools
Desi	Interfaith dialogue	Religion
Diversity	Marriage	9/11
Education	Minorities in the US	
Extracurricular activities	Muslim Americans	

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9. Resources

[Assignment: American and Muslim](#)

BBC iPlayer

http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p009sisv/Assignment_American_and_Muslim/

[Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers Across the U.S.](#)

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

<http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/assets/mosque-map-all-text-9-24.pdf>

[Islam: Not in My Backyard?](#)

By Laurie Goodstein. New York Times Upfront

http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f092010_mosques

[Muslim American: A new identity](#)

By Ruhi Hamid. BBC

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/4347061.stm

[Muslims part of US social fabric](#)

By John Esposito. Aljazeera

<http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/12/2009121784234277996.html>

[Muslim Students Association](#)

<http://www.msanational.org/>

[Muslim West Facts Project](#)

<http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/MWFHOMEPAGE/home.aspx>

[New College Teaches Young American Muslims](#)

By Barbara Bradley Hagerty. NPR

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129607436>

[Religiosity, Education and Civic Belonging: Muslim Youth in New York City Public Schools](#)

Preliminary findings of a citywide opinion survey of Muslim high school students

By Dr. Louis Cristillo

http://www.tc.columbia.edu/i/media/6581_MUSNYCReport.pdf

[Stopping US Muslim backlash](#)

By John Terrett. Aljazeera

<http://blogs.aljazeera.net/americas/2010/09/08/stopping-us-muslim-backlash>

[Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. Religion and Diversity Education](#)

<https://www.tanenbaum.org/programs/education>

[TE'A Project](#)

<http://www.teaproject.com/>

[Teaching Fear, Teaching Faith](#)

By Rev. Meg Riley. Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-meg-riley/teaching-fear-teaching-fa_1_b_711526.html

[This is Where I Need to Be Oral history book written by and about Muslim teenage youth in NY City](#)

<http://www.thisiswhereineedtobe.com/>

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