



# CHILDREN VI. CHILD REARING AMONG ZOROASTRIANS IN MODERN PERSIA

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## CHILDREN

### vi. Child Rearing Among Zoroastrians in Modern Persia

In the first half of the 13th/20th century most children were born at home with the assistance of the midwife. Immediately after birth the infant was bathed to cleanse it of polluting substances and wrapped in pieces of cloth called *landog*. If an infant in the family had died previously, clothes of healthy children were put on the new baby to bring good luck. Well-wishers rarely complimented a mother on her new baby in order not to provoke the jealousy of others or the evil eye (see [čāšm-zakm](#)). The new infant slept with its mother at night. During the day, when it was not being breastfed, it was usually placed in a cradle. This cradle could be tied to the mother's arm so that she could rock the cradle and soothe the child while she worked. Siblings, grandmothers, or, in wealthier homes, child servants also helped with child care. Discipline became strict by the age of five or six. Respect for all adults was strongly engendered in the children. It was the father, however, who most often administered corporal punishments. Although fathers were sometimes openly affectionate with infants and toddlers, they usually became formal and more emotionally distant with their older children. In contrast, the same dictatorial father might



tease and play informally with children who were not his own. Relationships between children and mothers tended to become more intimate and informal as the child matured. Children also received affection from members of the extended family, especially the maternal grandmother or a favorite uncle.

As in most cultures, boys were preferred over girls. Boys were the main heirs (see iii, above) and were given precedence in choicest foods, schooling, and work load. Zoroastrian girls and women had a very limited range of movement, especially in the villages, although in practice women were not formally in seclusion and, except when in a religiously impure state (See [cleansing i. in zoroastrianism](#)), occupied an integral role in the socioreligious activities of the community. Even in the earlier Zoroastrian ideology of the late Sasanian period, one can find evidence of the religious worth of the female. For example, in the *Persian Rivayats* (tr. Dhabhar, p. 181), it is noted that it is better if one has a male offspring, but having a female offspring will permit passage of the soul across the [Činwad](#) bridge, which leads to Heaven.

In the *Nīrangastān* (ed. Sanjana, p. 124; tr. Darmesteter, *Avesta* III, p. 103; tr. Bulsara, p. 135) it is stated that anybody among the pious can become a *zaotar*, or priest, even a woman or a child. The nonseclusion of women had two important consequences for children. First, it contributed to the willingness of many families to send their daughters to school, at least for a few years. One of the first girls schools in Persia, was the Zoroastrian girls' school, Īraj, built in 1316/1898 (Kestenberg-Amighi, p. 175). Second, the involvement of women in socioreligious events reinforced the involvement of children as well. Although Zoroastrian social and ritual life was not specifically child-oriented, children participated in almost all family and community activities, such as the feasts and commemoration festivals of the Zoroastrian community, in which they sometimes played specific roles. At the Jašn-e Sada, the bonfire ceremony, children gathered wood (Boyce, 1977, p. 180), and in Kermān children from Avesta classes chanted prayers at the fire. At Tīragān, the rain festival, children played special games and splashed each other with water (Boyce, 1977, p. 206). On Nowrūz, the Zoroastrian New Year, each child received a new suit of clothing and visited homes of relatives to receive gifts. In some communities, girls, using sweet dough, and boys, using clay, modeled figurines to be placed in the *pesgam-e mas* (lit. great portico) "to bear witness to the triumphant conclusion of all works of creation" (Boyce, 1977, p. 49; see *ibid.*, p. 41 on the *pesgam-e mas*). Certain rituals were specifically child-oriented such as celebration of the first birthday, the beginning of school attendance, and



coming of age ritual, *sedra-pušun* (lit. “putting on the sacred shirt,” see Boyce, 1977, p. 238).

Up until the age of nine or ten children had a considerable degree of freedom. Most children had few, if any, specific chores, though girls often helped with family work along with their mothers. Respect for elders and social responsibilities were stressed more than work per se. Children sometimes attended younger siblings. They also often helped take care of elderly and childless relatives, sleeping over at their houses or giving aid when needed. In some cases, a child from a large family might be given to a childless relative.

In many families, children over the age of nine or ten, were sent as apprentices (*ustā*) to the homes or businesses of relatives and acquaintances. Children who attended schools would often spend their summers apprenticing. Girls learned knitting and domestic skills boys farmed or helped at shops. At the home or shop of a relative, children were usually treated not as servants, but as helpers. As school attendance became more common and was given higher priority, apprenticeships declined or were postponed to later ages.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the larger Zoroastrian communities had their own schools, and in many families school attendance and homework requirements gained precedence over work. The schools, however, were strict, with frequent corporal punishment, and school attendance increased the exposure of children to harassment from a few Muslim children who would beat the Zoroastrian children as sport. Going to and from school, Zoroastrian children were often subjected to stone throwing and name calling. Cases of rape of boys have also been alleged. In the earlier part of the twentieth century girls were still occasionally stolen and forcibly married to Muslims. As a result, though relations with most Muslims were amicable, both girls and boys were carefully watched by parents. Even within the Zoroastrian schools a few Muslim classmates treated Zoroastrian children as *najes*, unclean (Kestenberg-Amighi, p. 86), or accused them of being fire worshipers (*ibid.*, p. 89).

The Zoroastrian schools offered both religious and secular programs. Instruction in the Avesta was given at school, by *mobeds* (priests) at home, by lay preachers (*dahmobed*, cf. Boyce, 1977, p. 28), or by learned relatives. Some time between the ages of ten and fifteen, most children underwent the Zoroastrian coming of age or rebirth ritual, *sedra-pušun*. This involved



recitation of passages from the Avesta and putting on a ritually pure white shirt and belt, the *sedra* and *košti*. This was a joyous affair, sweets and gifts being distributed to the new initiates. The initiation of girls was sometimes omitted or abbreviated because of limited means. When the children of wealthy Zoroastrians underwent this ceremony, they often donated a sum to be used to help the poorer families hold a *sedra-pušun*. Often groups of children were initiated together (Choksy, p. 55). The majority of Zoroastrian families did not, however, stress liturgical learning. Zoroastrian children were more thoroughly inculcated in the ethical aspects of the Zoroastrian religion, in particular honesty and cleanliness.

By the second half of the 13th/20th century, longer years of schooling, occupational mobility, economic prosperity, and smaller family size all combined to create a more child-oriented and more egalitarian family structure, particularly in the capital city of Tehran. As many men changed their occupation from farmer or merchant to white-collar professions, they spent more time in the home and became more involved in child rearing. On the other hand, formal education and modern urban living tended to segregate adult and child activities. Children participated less often in Zoroastrian community rituals. By the 1350s Š./1970s, the coming-of-age ritual was no longer celebrated by the majority of the urban population. Only among villagers did most Zoroastrian children still attend the Zoroastrian schools (Fischer, 1973).

After the revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79, many of the earlier conditions were reinstated, with the result that earlier patterns, such as attendance at Zoroastrian schools, interdependence of the extended family, and marriage within the Zoroastrian population, were combined with the more recent developments such as child-oriented egalitarian families, greater paternal involvement in child care, and the precedence of social aspects of Zoroastrianism over religious ones in the upbringing of children.



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Much of the material in this article was collected by the author during her research in Persia, 1971-78.