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"New children's book can provide insight for pediatricians"

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Asma Mobin-Uddin, MD, transformed her personal frustration at the lack of culturally meaningful reading material for her three young children into a book that is now being illustrated in preparation for publication within the next year.

The book depicts issues that Muslim-American children or any children who are different than the norm may face in their communities.

"Having grown up in the United States, I think I understand what kids go through," she said, noting that, except for her siblings, she was the only Muslim in her school in Marion where she grew up.

The main theme of her book is "coming to terms with your religious and ethnic identity," she said. "It's basically a story about acceptance, by your peers and yourself."

Her original goal was to provide interesting, culturally correct reading material that both Muslim-American children and non-Muslim children could relate to. The stories have Muslim characters, but the general problems that the characters experience, such as concerns about being accepted by peers and remaining true to one's values, are issues all children face.

The Dublin resident said she thinks the books could be a useful addition for the bookshelf in pediatricians' offices.

Dr. Mobin-Uddin, who is on leave from active pediatric practice to raise her children, said "all kids want to fit in and may go through great lengths to hide their differences," whether those differences are cultural or physical. She sees the theme in her books as being "about more than diversity and ethnicity; it's about kids wanting to fit in, and how far will they go to do that."

Her first book tells the story of a young boy who hides his Muslim identity, to the point of asking to be called Bill instead of his real name, Bilal, while his sister is teased for wearing traditional Muslim clothing. A caring teacher helps him understand the religious significance of his name Bilal was an Abyssinian slave who accepted and held onto the Islamic faith even though persecuted, and eventually was called upon to chant the first Muslim call to prayer. Bilal comes to see his namesake as a role model, and draws strength from that to acknowledge his cultural identity and stand up for his sister.

Dr. Mobin-Uddin said she hopes her books will help fill the void she found when seeking literature for her own children. "There were very few realistic books about Muslims in America," she said, "and nothing about Muslim-American kids." She

also hopes that the books do find their way into pediatric offices, as they can be used as a starting point for discussions between pediatricians, children and their parents when self esteem, diversity and other related issues surface. "It could be a good way to help kids and their parents open up," she said.

The books would also be a useful resource for pediatricians themselves, to help them better understand the Islamic faith and relate to their Muslim patients and families.

"These days, many people seem to associate Islam with terrorism," she said. "If the kids feel that the pediatrician is culturally sensitive and knows that the views of extremists do not reflect the values of the faith itself, that could help the kids feel better about the pediatrician."

http://www.ohioaap.org/new_children_book_winter_2003.htm