

Cultivating Religious Values in Early Childhood Through Play-Based Activities

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Abstract

Islam views that every human being is born as a seeker of truth. Therefore, Islamic education begins by guiding children from an early age to recognize God so that they develop a religious disposition. Children are the future generation who must be prepared to grow and develop into healthy, intelligent, and well-mannered individuals, thereby becoming outstanding human beings in the future. The most optimal and strategic period for this preparation is early childhood, often referred to as the golden period of human life. During this stage, education serves as the foundation for personality development in later life. Character formation in early childhood can be carried out through various approaches or strategies, one of the most enjoyable for children being play-based activities. Character education can be realized through daily habituation embedded in play. Based on the findings of study that examined four types of play commonly used in early childhood learning activities—namely train play, block play, role play, and storytelling—all were intentionally directed toward character formation. From these four play activities, at least five characters were identified as being fostered in early childhood: religiosity (belief in God), honesty, tolerance, discipline, and creativity. These five values can be integrated from the beginning to the end of play activities. Teachers play a crucial role in instilling these character values so that children can understand them cognitively and apply them in their behaviour through consistent daily practice. The main goal of religious character education for children is to demonstrate good conduct and character in their everyday lives.

Keywords: behaviour, character, childhood, education, play, religiosity

A. Introduction

Human beings possess both outward and inward dimensions, namely physical and spiritual one. These two dimensions should develop in a balanced and harmonious manner. Instinctively, people tend to give greater attention and priority to the physical aspect than to the spiritual one, as the physical is observable and more easily understood empirically. In contrast, the spiritual aspect is non-empirical and not readily comprehended by everyone. For this reason, spiritual values need to be introduced to children from an early age so that they become deeply rooted in their inner lives, enabling them to grow into individuals with a strong religious disposition.

The cultivation of religiosity in early childhood can be carried out through activities that are appropriate to the children's world. The delivery of religious messages to young children must differ from the methods used for adolescents or adults. Doctrinal approaches that rely on rigid and explicit religious arguments are not yet suitable for early childhood. One effective approach for conveying such messages to young

children is through play-based activities. Religiosity can be fostered in early childhood by cultivating values such as honesty, discipline, politeness, helpfulness, humility, and patience.¹

Furthermore, early childhood education should also be provided in the form of affection, attention, and guidance, enabling children to develop social skills and cooperation, concentration, and perseverance.² These aspects are essential, as children will eventually live in society and encounter real-life situations in the future. Therefore, they need to be introduced to social life through simplified and meaningful experiences.

Early childhood is a valuable asset for families, communities, and even the nation and its future. As the next generation, young children must be prepared to become outstanding individuals who grow and develop in a healthy, intelligent manner and demonstrate good behaviour. Children who develop healthily, possess intelligence, and display positive behaviour in their daily lives will later become resilient and competent individuals capable of facing various future challenges. The instillation of values in children is the responsibility of parents or families through care, nurturing, guidance, and education.³

Early childhood education is a formative effort aimed at supporting both physical and spiritual growth and development so that children are adequately prepared to enter higher levels of education. Educational development begins at birth; therefore, children are introduced to people around them, sounds, and objects, and are engaged in interaction and conversation to support normal and healthy development. Appropriate learning methods in early childhood can shape children's character and personality in later stages of life. In early childhood education, educators are required to develop children's potential so that they are eventually able to address problems creatively.⁴

In Islamic teachings, parents are obliged to prepare their children's future so that they become a strong generation in a holistic sense: physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually, capable of facing future challenges. They should not be allowed to experience hardship, either in this world or in the hereafter. To this end, parents are encouraged to provide instruction and guidance.⁵

In order to prepare a capable generation to face future challenges, parents and families must undertake deliberate efforts from early childhood to nurture children who are superior in both cognitive and affective domains. Character education is a systematically designed and implemented effort to cultivate values related to God, themselves, other people, and the environment. These values are manifested in thoughts, attitudes, feelings, speech, and actions, and are grounded in religious norms, law, etiquette, culture, and tradition.⁶

¹Nurfaidah, Nurfaidah, et al. 2021. "Upaya Guru dalam Mengenalkan Nilai-Nilai Agama Melalui Metode Cerita Bergambar pada Anak Usia 4-5 Tahun di TK Delima Desa Kole" (Teachers' Efforts in Introducing Religious Values Through the Pictured Story Method to 4-5 Year Old Children at Delima Kindergarten, Kole Village), *Jurnal Pelangi Jurnal pemikiran dan penelitian pendidikan Islam anak Usia Dini*. Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2021. doi.org/10.52266/pelangi.v3i1.648

²Boli, Mukdar. 2020. "Mendidik Anak Usia Dini dalam Islam" (Educating Early Childhood in Islam). *Jurnal An Nisa*, Vol. 13, No. 1, June 2020. <https://doi.org/10.30863/an.v13i1.3984>

³Abdurrahman. 2018. "Upaya Meningkatkan Perkembangan Nilai Agama dan Moral Melalui Metode Keteladanan pada Anak Usia Dini" (Efforts to Improve the Development of Religious and Moral Values Through Role Modeling Methods in Early Childhood). *Jurnal Penelitian Keislaman*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.20414/jpk.v14i2.698>

⁴Saputra. 2018. "Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini" (Early Childhood Education). *Ta'dib: Jurnal Ilmiah Prodi Pendidikan Agama Islam*. Vol. 10, No. 2 (December 2018).

⁵Zuhaili. 2018. *Al-Tafsir al-Munir Fi al-Aqidah wa al-Shari'ah wa al-Manhaj* (The Illuminating Interpretation in Creed, Sharia, and Methodology). Kairo: Dar al-Fikr. Volume 14, p. 704.

⁶Gunawan. 2012. *Pendidikan Karakter* (Character Education). Bandung: Alfabeta, p. 28.

Character formation is mandated by Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Among the objectives of national education is the development of learners' potential so that they possess intelligence, strong personality, and noble character.

Moral education serves as a means of guiding individuals toward becoming well-rounded persons with noble character. Moral education, or the cultivation of religious character, is crucial to be instilled from early childhood. From the perspective of Islamic psychology, character education is most appropriate and effective when initiated during the golden age of early childhood, as children naturally tend to absorb various stimuli from their environment.⁷

To achieve these aspirations, families and parents must pay attention to and address aspects inherent in children, namely physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical aspect includes health, nutrition, housing, and related needs, while the spiritual aspect encompasses religion, morality, intellectual development, and education.

Habituation in education is essential because, psychologically, children often imitate the behaviour of figures they admire, including their teachers. Habituation within learning activities is also highly beneficial for training children. Moral development through habituation involves repeatedly and continuously applying the fundamental principles of Islamic teachings to children's behaviour and moral attitudes. Teachers and parents play a vital role in ensuring that children become accustomed to Islamic values that are taught and practiced both at school and at home.⁸

Children's world is a world of play; therefore, educators are expected to integrate play as a learning strategy for early childhood education. Play is an engaging and enjoyable activity for children, making it an effective medium for encouraging enthusiastic participation. Through play activities, educators can cultivate religious character values in children's life.

Play can be regarded as the primary and most enjoyable "work" of children.⁹ Through play-based activities, character values can be identified, taught, and habituated, enabling young children to develop good character in accordance with religious teachings and the goals of national education.

When character education is implemented systematically and continuously, children will develop emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a vital asset in preparing children for their future, as it enables them to face life's challenges more effectively, including achieving success in learning.

Character development is a continuous process that must last throughout one's lifetime. Children will grow into individuals of strong character when they are raised in an environment that also embodies strong character. In this way, the innate purity (*fitra*) with which every child is born can develop optimally. High-quality character must be shaped and nurtured from early childhood, which is a critical period for character formation. Failure in cultivating character values during early childhood may result in problematic personalities in adulthood.¹⁰

⁷Khairunnisa. 2024. "Urgensi Pendidikan Akhlak pada Anak Usia Dini Menurut Perpektif Psikologi Islam" (Moral Education Urgency in Early Childhood According to the Perspective of Islamic Psychology). *Dayah: Journal of Religious Education*. Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 91-101

⁸Nareswari. 2024. "Pembinaan Akhlak Anak Usia Dini Melalui Metode Pembiasaan Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam" (Developing Early Childhood Morals Through Habituation Method of the Islamic Religious Education). *Dinamika Sosial: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat dan Transformasi Kesejahteraan*. Vol. 1, No. 1. March 2024.

⁹Istadi, 2007. *Istimewakan Setiap Anak* (Make Every Child Special). Bekasi: Pustaka Inti, p. 211.

¹⁰Megawangi. 2009. *Pendidikan Karakter, Solusi yang tepat untuk membangun bangsa* (Character Education, the Right Solution for Building the Nation). Cimanggis: Indonesia Heritage Foundation, p. 21.

Character awareness manifests in both social and individual spheres of life. In this context, culture plays a significant role in determining whether moral values are considered important. Moral awareness in individuals reflects cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components, a condition that also applies to children.¹¹

The objectives of national education, as outlined in the Guidelines for Character Education in Early Childhood Education,¹² define the qualities that every Indonesian citizen is expected to achieve and possess. The development of character education is inseparable from fundamental values regarded as virtuous. In early childhood education, values considered essential to be introduced and internalized into children's behavior include: (1) love for God Almighty; (2) honesty; (3) discipline; (4) tolerance and peace-loving attitudes; (5) self-confidence; (6) independence; (7) helpfulness, cooperation, and mutual assistance; (8) respect and politeness; (9) responsibility; (10) hard work; (11) leadership and justice; (12) creativity; (13) humility; (14) environmental awareness; and (15) love for the nation and homeland.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at describing the development of religious character in early childhood through play-based activities, based on an understanding of the conditions and characteristics of young children. The research was conducted at the Integrated Early Childhood Education, it is the Laboratory School "Yasmin" of University of Muhammadiyah Jember.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, note-taking, and audio-visual recording. The collected data were analyzed to describe the process of religious character development in early childhood through play activities. The findings of this study are based on original and naturalistic data that reflect actual conditions, in accordance with the factual data obtained from the institution where the research was conducted. A qualitative approach was applied as a research procedure that generated descriptive data in the form of observed behaviours of early children at the research site.

C. Results and Discussion

The research findings presented below are based on data collected through observation, interviews, note-taking, and audio-visual recording conducted at the research site, namely the Integrated Early Childhood Education, the Laboratory School "Yasmin" of University of Muhammadiyah Jember.

In relation to child development, educators must first understand the average potential possessed by children in each developmental domain before designing a program. This understanding is intended to ensure that the program is appropriately targeted and aligned with children's needs. In this study, educators designed sensory play activities, including train play, block-center play, storytelling, and role play. The following sections describe several religious character values identified within these play activities.

1. Love for God

Love for God refers to an attitudinal value grounded in behaviours that demonstrate obedience to God's commands and prohibitions as practiced in daily life. These behaviours include habituation to praying before and after activities, enjoyment in performing daily acts of worship, attentively listening to and retelling stories imbued with faith and piety, seeking to know and understand God's attributes through His

¹¹Keenan & Evans. 2009. *An Introduction to Child Development*. London: Sage Publications, p. 297.

¹²Direktorat Pembinaan Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini. 2012. *Pedoman Karakter Pada Anak Usia Dini* (Character Guidelines for Early Childhood). Jakarta: Direktorat Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Kementerian Pendidikan Nasional.

names, enjoying reciting verses or chants with themes of faith and devotion, and becoming accustomed to using polite and respectful language.

Character formation in early childhood is carried out through habituation. The objective is for children to directly practice these values and become accustomed to engaging in good behaviour, with the expectation that such values will be internalized in their daily lives.

Habituation implemented by teachers in daily activities is memorized by children and gradually becomes part of their character. In cultivating love for God, teachers habituate children to pray before and after activities, memorize the names of Islamic months, angels, and prophets through songs, and learn the pillars of faith (*rukun iman*) and the pillars of Islam (*rukun Islam*) through rhythmic clapping activities, all conducted collectively. In addition, congregational *Dhuha* prayer is performed daily.

Examples of cultivating this value include demonstrating affection and compassion toward God's creation through gentle touch and embraces, helping friends, and showing respect for others. Tolerance and love of peace are interpreted as the cultivation of patience, empathy, emotional restraint, and self-control. Observable behaviours that can be nurtured include patiently waiting for one's turn, sharing with others, cooperating, and expressing emotions appropriately when feeling angry, sad, or happy.

In train play activities, which essentially require children to queue before proceeding to the next stage, the cultivation of love for God is reflected in the habituation of orderly behaviour during transitions between activities. Children obey turn-taking rules and refrain from cutting in line. When a child arrives late, they automatically take a position at the end of the line without being instructed by the teacher. This behaviour demonstrates that children have become accustomed to discipline without reminders from teachers or peers.

In block play, children are habituated to being patient and meticulous in arranging blocks to construct their desired structures. They are encouraged to engage in discussion to decide collectively what type of building they will construct. Through deliberation, children learn to respect differing opinions and appreciate their peers. They also cooperate and help one another by lending blocks or equipment needed by their friends.

Through storytelling activities, children tend to imitate the characters portrayed in the stories. Stories about the patience of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, are emulated by children when they willingly queue or wait their turn to retrieve their bags from lockers. Stories emphasizing the beauty of sharing and helping others remain in children's memories and are reflected during mealtime, when children share food with friends who desire it. Similarly, when a child carries a bag or moves a chair, peers often assist spontaneously without being asked.

In role play, such as playing the role of a doctor, children internalize and enact the roles they assume. Playing the role of a doctor fosters empathy and compassion, motivating children to help those in need. This was observed when a child from the playgroup ran, fell, and began to cry; another child immediately asked the teacher for tissue to wipe away tears and clean the injured foot.

2. Honesty

Honesty refers to attitudes and behaviours grounded in efforts to make oneself trustworthy in both words and actions. It involves sincerity and moral integrity in doing what is right. Indicators of honesty include children's understanding of personal versus shared property, caring for and maintaining shared belongings, becoming accustomed to telling the truth, returning items that do not belong to them, respecting others' property, acknowledging mistakes, apologizing when at fault, forgiving peers who make mistakes, and appreciating the strengths of others.

In train play activities, where children are required to queue, honesty is reflected in the habituation of not taking what belongs to others. Children who arrive later position themselves at the back of the line and refrain from cutting in front of peers, even in the absence of teachers or reprimands.

In block play, children are habituated to honesty when they need blocks they do not possess. They ask permission from peers to use the blocks to complete their constructions. By asking permission, children demonstrate an understanding of others' ownership rights, which in turn fosters respect for others' belongings.

During storytelling activities, children emulate the behaviour of characters presented in the stories. Stories about the honesty practiced by prophets are reflected when children truthfully recount their own experiences. Children honestly explain the reasons for being late, even when doing so causes discomfort or embarrassment. They also speak truthfully about items they may have taken.

Through role play, children practice real-life roles, learn to negotiate personal interests, and develop concepts of living together with others. Playing the role of a doctor trains children to understand others' feelings. This was evident when a "doctor" asked a "patient" to sit down, but the patient refused and cried. The doctor explained the steps of the examination process and honestly stated the cost of the service. After the explanation, the patient understood, and an agreement was reached to proceed with the examination. From the honest dialogue between the doctor and the patient, it was revealed that the patient cried due to fear of injections.

3. Tolerance

Tolerance refers to the cultivation of habits of patience, empathy, emotional restraint, and respect for others. Attitudes of tolerance are reflected in behaviours such as willingness to share food or toys with peers, greeting others when meeting them, demonstrating empathy, enjoying friendships with anyone, respecting peers' opinions without imposing one's own will, mediating conflicts among friends, avoiding disruptive behaviour, refraining from self-centeredness, engaging in discussion with peers, and being willing to help both peers and adults.

Tolerance is particularly evident during train play activities. In this game, children must place their hands on their peers' shoulders and move in unison. If they fail to coordinate their movements, the "train" may break apart and children may fall. Through this activity, children learn to respect differences in opinions, attitudes, and actions, and to cooperate with others despite such differences.

In block play activities, children are habituated to working collaboratively with others. Discussing what kind of structure to build instills respect for others' opinions. Children learn to offer ideas, express suggestions, and negotiate tasks while playing with blocks. After the activity, they share responsibility for tidying up and returning the materials used.

During storytelling activities, children's tolerance is evident in their attentiveness while listening to the teacher. The teacher tells stories highlighting the benefits and consequences of sharing with others, often using animal characters to attract children's interest. Two contrasting characters are presented: Character A, who enjoys sharing favourite food with others in need, and Character B, who is selfish and unwilling to share. The teacher vividly demonstrates the expressions and behaviours of both characters. At the end of the story, the outcomes for the two characters differ: Character A is always happy and has many friends who help when needed, whereas Character B, being selfish, is left unsupported when experiencing hunger. Through such stories, children learn that every character trait has consequences. The tolerance emphasized in storytelling includes empathy and willingness to share. Children are invited to recount their own experiences of sharing or not sharing. Since many young children still exhibit egocentric thinking, they

often find it difficult to share, particularly items they favour. Based on children's responses, the teacher provides appropriate stimulation and feedback to support their understanding.

In addition to storytelling, teachers may conduct question-and-answer sessions to reinforce the narrative. Teachers ask children about their feelings toward empathetic versus selfish behaviour and may pose choice-based questions, such as whether they would prefer to be a sharing or selfish individual. Almost all children respond that they wish to be generous, indicating that an indicator of tolerance has been achieved through storytelling activities.

In family role-play activities, children assume roles such as father, mother, older sibling, and younger sibling. The cultivation of mutual respect is evident during a family mealtime scenario. Before eating, the father reminds everyone to maintain cleanliness, prompting the younger sibling to admit shyly that they forgot to wash their hands and then do so. When the older sibling hurriedly takes vegetables and spills them, the mother reminds them to be patient and careful, while the father promptly cleans the table. When it is the younger sibling's turn to take food, they initially refuse vegetables because they dislike them. The older sibling then explains the benefits of vegetables for growth and health, persuading the younger sibling to try them.

4. Discipline

Discipline refers to attitudes and actions that demonstrate orderly behavior and obedience to established rules and regulations. Basic disciplinary behaviors include arriving on time before the first activity (*circle time*), organizing personal belongings such as shoes and bags in designated lockers, and disposing of waste properly after meals.

In train play activities, children develop orderly behaviour and adherence to rules. By holding their peers' shoulders, children form a line that cannot be entered by latecomers, thereby encouraging punctuality and reinforcing the habit of arriving on time.

In block play activities, discipline is cultivated through rules requiring children to tidy up and return blocks and materials to their proper places after use. This habituation fosters a character trait of maintaining order and responsibility for shared resources.

Through storytelling activities depicting family life, discipline is instilled by illustrating the consequences of rule violations. For example, a story may describe a child who arrives late at school due to staying up late watching television, despite rules requiring bedtime at an earlier hour. As a result, the child rushes through morning routines and arrives at school late, feeling uncomfortable and missing the opportunity to play with friends. This narrative helps children understand the negative consequences of indiscipline.

In family role-play activities, children discuss and agree upon their respective roles. In one scenario, the younger sibling fails to put shoes in their proper place after returning from school. The following morning, the sibling struggles to find the shoes, requiring assistance from the older sibling and resulting in lateness to school. Through this role play, children learn the importance of discipline in organizing belongings and adhering to routines.

5. Creativity

Creativity is the ability to generate something new, whether in the form of ideas or tangible products, either as original creations or as combinations of existing elements, to solve problems or produce novel outcomes. It involves thought processes, attitudes, and actions aimed at discovering new ways to improve upon existing conditions.

Creative character traits can be developed through block play. Through this activity, young children imagine, design, and construct forms based on their imagination. Indirectly, block play sharpens children's

abilities to plan and design various structures while encouraging experimentation with new forms. Children may create new designs when previous attempts fail or refine designs once they achieve the intended outcome.

Decisions to design new forms are influenced by children's psychological characteristics and individual differences. Some children demonstrate persistence in designing until their imagined structure is realized, while others may quickly lose interest and choose to create different forms within a single play session. These differences should not be forced, as they align with each child's psychological disposition and basic character.

Under these conditions, block play remains effective and enjoyable because it aligns with children's interests and developmental needs. As illustrated, creative character development varies among children according to their individual traits. Consequently, block play serves as an effective medium for enhancing skills and creativity in early childhood in ways that respect each child's unique characteristics.

D. Conclusion

There are various ways to implement character education for early childhood through play-based learning activities in schools. A wide range of character values can be instilled in young children, depending on the processes and strategies employed by teachers in facilitating play. Character cultivation begins with understanding and habituation, enabling children to grow into individuals with strong character.

All play activities can serve as effective means for forming and instilling religious character in early childhood. Examples of such activities include train play, block construction, role play, and storytelling. Through play-based activities, a religious disposition can be fostered in young children through the development of character values such as love for God, honesty, tolerance, discipline, and creativity. These five characters signify the successful internalization of religious values in early childhood.

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