
PARENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR INDONESIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

This study examines how Indonesian Muslim parents conceptualize Islamic religious education for young children. Although early childhood Islamic education is widely valued in Indonesia, less is known about how parents themselves define its aims, appropriate starting age, core content, and pedagogical form. The study draws on 35 written interview responses from parents living in six Indonesian provinces: Banten, Jakarta Special Capital Region (DKI Jakarta), East Java, South Sumatra, West Kalimantan, and West Java. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the responses were read in Indonesian, coded inductively, and organized into themes that connect parental language with educational interpretation. The findings show that parents do not imagine Islamic religious education as a narrow subject or a set of isolated religious facts. They describe it as an early foundation for moral life, faith orientation, ritual familiarity, and everyday character formation. Parents believe religious education should begin early, often from infancy or the preschool years, because young children imitate adults, absorb routines, and learn through repeated practice. The parent-imagined curriculum includes knowing God, daily prayers, basic ritual practices, Qur'anic literacy, prophetic stories, and everyday moral etiquette. The preferred pedagogy is relational and gentle: modeling, practice, storytelling, singing, play, visual media, and patient repetition. The study contributes to Islamic education and early childhood education by conceptualizing parents' views as an integrated model of faith formation, moral habituation, ritual practice, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Keywords: early childhood education, Islamic religious education, Muslim parents, moral formation, habituation, Indonesia

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana orang tua Muslim Indonesia mengonseptualisasikan pendidikan agama Islam bagi anak usia dini. Meskipun pendidikan Islam pada anak usia dini sangat dihargai di Indonesia, masih belum banyak diketahui bagaimana orang tua sendiri mendefinisikan tujuan, usia awal yang tepat, materi inti, dan bentuk pedagogis pendidikan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan 35 respons wawancara tertulis dari orang tua yang tinggal di enam provinsi di Indonesia, yaitu Banten, Daerah Khusus Ibu Kota Jakarta (DKI Jakarta), Jawa Timur, Sumatra Selatan, Kalimantan Barat, dan Jawa Barat. Dengan menggunakan analisis tematik reflektif, respons dibaca dalam bahasa Indonesia, dikodekan secara induktif, dan diorganisasikan ke dalam tema-tema yang menghubungkan bahasa orang tua dengan interpretasi pendidikan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa orang tua tidak memandang pendidikan agama Islam sebagai mata pelajaran yang sempit atau sekumpulan fakta keagamaan yang terpisah. Mereka menggambarkannya sebagai fondasi awal bagi kehidupan moral, orientasi keimanan, pengenalan praktik ibadah, dan pembentukan karakter sehari-hari. Orang tua meyakini bahwa pendidikan agama sebaiknya dimulai sejak dini, sering kali sejak masa bayi atau usia prasekolah, karena anak usia dini meniru orang dewasa, menyerap rutinitas, dan belajar melalui praktik yang berulang. Kurikulum yang dibayangkan oleh orang tua mencakup pengenalan kepada Tuhan, doa sehari-hari, praktik ibadah dasar, literasi Al-Qur'an, kisah-kisah nabi, dan adab moral dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Pendekatan pedagogis yang lebih disukai bersifat relasional dan lembut, meliputi keteladanan, praktik, bercerita, bernyanyi, bermain, penggunaan media visual, dan pengulangan yang sabar. Studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian pendidikan Islam dan pendidikan anak usia dini dengan mengonseptualisasikan pandangan orang tua sebagai model terpadu pembentukan iman, pembiasaan moral, praktik ibadah, dan pedagogi yang sesuai dengan tahap perkembangan anak.

Kata kunci: pendidikan anak usia dini, pendidikan agama Islam, orang tua Muslim, pembentukan moral, pembiasaan, Indonesia

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Introduction

Early childhood is a period in which children learn not only words, numbers, and routines, but also ways of seeing the world. In Muslim families and schools, this world-making process often includes learning to recognize God, to speak and act respectfully, to participate in religious practices, and to distinguish between what is considered good and harmful. In Indonesian Islamic educational vocabulary, this formation is often discussed through terms such as *akhlak* and *adab*. Islamic religious education in early childhood therefore cannot be understood only as the transmission of religious knowledge. For many families, it is part of the everyday formation of the child as a moral, social, and spiritual person. It is learned through language, affection, imitation, repeated actions, family expectations, and the ordinary rhythm of home and school life.

In Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, religious education has a visible place in public discourse and educational practice. Early childhood education institutions, Islamic kindergartens, Qur'anic learning spaces, and families all contribute to the ways young children encounter Islam. Yet the meaning of Islamic religious education for young children is not always identical across these spaces. Policy documents may describe curriculum domains, teachers may translate curriculum into classroom practice, and parents may hold hopes that are deeply connected to family life, moral anxieties, and imagined futures for their children. For this reason, listening to parents is important. Parents are not merely recipients of school programs; they are the first interpreters of what religious education should do for a child. This wider context is shaped by debates on Islamic education policy, holistic-integrative schooling, educational ideology, and transnational religious education in Indonesia and beyond (Hamami & Nuryana, 2022; Kosim et al., 2023; Sahin, 2018; Suharto, 2018).

The literature on Islamic education in early childhood has shown that collaboration between family and school is important for building character and religious orientation in a time of social and technological change (Nudin, 2020). Studies in Indonesian early childhood settings also show that Islamic religious learning has continued during difficult periods, including the COVID-19 pandemic, through parental modeling, home learning, and everyday religious practice (Wahyuni & Madjid, 2022). Other studies highlight the increasing relevance of digital media in Islamic early childhood education, even while teachers and institutions continue to face challenges in making digital resources pedagogically suitable for young children (Ramadani et al., 2025). These works point to an important reality: Islamic religious education for young children is distributed across families, schools, religious communities, and media environments. Curriculum-oriented and family-based studies similarly show that early Islamic education is often organized through technology, curricular content, digital storytelling, and patterns of habituation in family life (Purnama, 2018; Purnama et al., 2022; Rahayu et al., 2025; Sobah et al., 2025).

Indonesian scholarship has also linked Islamic education with children's lived vulnerability, moral development, creativity, and family relationships. Research on disaster preparedness and resilience shows that faith, prayer, and meaning can become educational resources for children when religious learning is connected to real life (Rahiem, 2018). Work on arts, neuroscience, and Islam in early childhood learning similarly suggests that Islamic learning can be creative, embodied,

and emotionally engaging (Suyadi, 2018). Research on family quality time and children's interpersonal intelligence also reminds us that children's development is shaped through everyday relational life, not only through formal instruction (Shodiq, 2023). These studies help position early Islamic education as a lived process that involves emotion, moral formation, creativity, resilience, and family relationships. Related studies of learning during crisis and school closures further show that educational continuity is sustained through motivation, home-school adaptation, and relational support, not only through formal instruction (Rahiem, 2021, 2024).

International scholarship on children's spirituality and early childhood education offers another lens. Early childhood educators often understand children's spirituality in terms of connection, virtues, meaning-making, wonder, and relation to the divine (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020, 2025). Research also suggests that spiritually nurturing environments often overlap with developmentally appropriate practice: children need relationships, play, stories, beauty, time, and opportunities to ask questions (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Mata-McMahon et al., 2019). In religiously framed contexts, the challenge is not whether children should be introduced to religious language, but how such introduction can respect children's developmental capacities, affective needs, and emerging agency. Young children learn powerfully through imitation and participation, but they also need gentle explanation, emotional safety, and opportunities to make meaning. Studies of children's spirituality and teachers' spiritual practices also show that spirituality may appear through connection, wonder, cultural meaning, and educational relationships rather than through doctrine alone (Adams et al., 2016; Greenfield, 2018; Haugen, 2018; Mata-McMahon et al., 2023).

A problem remains, however. Much research on Islamic early childhood education foregrounds teachers, curriculum, institutions, or program implementation. Fewer studies begin from parents' own definitions of Islamic religious education: what they think it is, when it should begin, why it matters, what should be taught, and how young children should be approached. This gap matters because parents' expectations shape children's earliest religious environment. They influence whether religion is experienced as fear, affection, habit, meaning, joy, discipline, or a mixture of these. Parents' ideas also affect how schools communicate religious programs and how teachers negotiate between curriculum goals and family aspirations.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing written interview responses from 35 parents from six Indonesian provinces. It asks: (1) How do Indonesian Muslim parents conceptualize Islamic religious education for early childhood? (2) At what age do parents think Islamic religious education should begin, and what reasons do they give? (3) What content do parents consider important for young children? (4) What pedagogical approaches do parents consider suitable? Rather than treating parents' responses as a list of preferences, the study reads them as a window into a parent-imagined curriculum: a set of moral, spiritual, ritual, and pedagogical expectations that shape how Islamic education for young children is understood in everyday family life.

Accordingly, this article examines how Indonesian Muslim parents conceptualize Islamic religious education for young children. It positions parental accounts as an important source for understanding the moral, spiritual, ritual, and pedagogical expectations that surround early Islamic learning. By focusing on parents' own language, the study seeks to clarify how early religious

education is imagined in everyday family life and to contribute to conversations on Islamic education, early childhood pedagogy, and home-school relations in Muslim societies.

Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive design supported by reflexive thematic analysis. This design was suitable because the study sought to understand how parents articulated the meaning, timing, aims, content, and pedagogy of Islamic religious education for young children in their own language. The purpose was not to measure parental attitudes statistically or to claim national representation, but to describe and interpret patterned meanings within parents' written accounts. Reflexive thematic analysis was therefore used to move carefully from parents' repeated words, examples, and practical explanations toward broader educational themes while acknowledging the interpretive role of the researcher (Braun et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were parents or guardians who had children aged 4-7 years and whose children were enrolled in kindergarten (Taman Kanak-kanak/TK). This criterion was used because parents of children in this age range were considered likely to have direct experience with early childhood schooling and with decisions about how religious learning is introduced at home and in school. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the research required information-rich participants who could speak from relevant parental experience rather than a statistically representative sample (Campbell et al., 2020). The final dataset consisted of 35 written interview responses from parents in six provinces: Banten, DKI Jakarta, East Java, South Sumatra, West Kalimantan, and West Java. There were 22 female and 13 male respondents. Respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 40 years, with a mean age of approximately 30.5 years. The dataset included short demographic information and answers to five open-ended questions about Islamic religious education for early childhood. The questions asked parents to define religious education, identify when children should begin learning religion and why, explain the purpose of teaching Islamic religious education to young children, name important content, and describe suitable teaching methods. This demographic profile is used only to situate the qualitative sample, not to claim statistical representativeness (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n
Province	Banten	14
Province	DKI Jakarta	7
Province	East Java	4
Province	South Sumatra	4
Province	West Kalimantan	3
Province	West Java	3
Gender	Female	22
Gender	Male	13
Age	Range	22-40 years
Age	Mean	30.5 years
Total	Parents	35

Data were collected through written open-ended questions. This method was chosen for two reasons. First, it made participation more accessible for parents who had different schedules, work responsibilities, and family routines. Parents could respond without needing to attend a scheduled interview session. Second, written responses gave parents time to think about their answers without being watched, rushed, or directly influenced by the presence of an interviewer. This was important because the questions touched on faith, parenting, and expectations for young children, which are personal topics that may benefit from reflective time. The written format also reduced the pressure to produce an immediate spoken answer and allowed parents to use everyday language to describe their views. Before participating, respondents received information about the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form indicating that they agreed to take part in the research. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing identities and removing personally identifying information from the dataset. Respondents were assigned codes from P01 to P35. One full name that appeared in the raw dataset was replaced with an anonymized participant code, as were all other respondent identifiers.

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic process. First, all responses were read several times in Indonesian to build familiarity with the dataset and to avoid separating short answers from their wider meaning. Because parents used Indonesian and Arabic-derived Islamic vocabulary, several terms are retained in italics after a brief explanation: *akhlak* and *akhlakul karimah* refer to moral and noble character; *adab* to ethical and religious etiquette; *salat* to obligatory prayer; *wudhu* to ablution; *doa* to personal supplication or daily prayer; *huruf hijaiyah* to Arabic letters used in Qur'anic learning; *Iqra* to a beginner Qur'anic reading primer; *Juz Amma* to a section often used for memorization; *taqwa* to God-consciousness; *bekal* to moral provision; and *sedini mungkin* to as early as possible. Second, initial codes were assigned to recurring ideas related to life guidance, moral character, knowing God, prayer and ablution, Qur'anic literacy, prophetic stories, early age, imitation, modeling, habituation, play, songs, storytelling, gradual guidance, and non-coercion. Third, related codes were compared and organized into broader analytic categories concerning purpose, timing, content, and pedagogy. Fourth, these categories were reviewed against the full dataset and developed into themes that explained how parents connected faith, morality, ritual practice, and child-friendly teaching. The final themes were not treated as mutually exclusive because one parental response could contribute to several themes. For example, a parent could describe prayer as religious content, moral training, and a daily family practice in the same answer. The coding was primarily inductive, but interpretation was informed by scholarship on early childhood education, Islamic education, parental involvement, children's spirituality, and qualitative methodology. Counts were not used as evidence of generalizability. They were used only to describe participant characteristics and to check the salience of patterns during analysis. Findings are therefore presented as qualitative themes supported by translated excerpts. Excerpts were translated from Indonesian into English by retaining the meaning and tone of parents' statements rather than producing overly literal translations. Because the study followed reflexive thematic analysis, analytic quality was strengthened through repeated engagement with the data, reflexive interpretation, and theme checking rather than through intercoder reliability alone (Dodgson, 2019; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Several steps were taken to strengthen trustworthiness. The analysis remained close to parents' original wording and to recurring terms such as *akhlak*, *pembiasaan*, *contoh*, *doa*, *salat*, and *mengenal Allah*. Analytic categories were checked repeatedly against the full dataset so that the themes did not rely on isolated quotations. Demographic counts and provincial distribution were used to contextualize the sample, while thematic interpretation remained qualitative. The study also has limitations. The sample is modest and was not designed to represent all Indonesian parents. The responses are written and relatively brief, so the analysis cannot explore tone, interaction, or follow-up questions in the way that in-depth oral interviews could. The provincial distribution is also uneven, with Banten and DKI Jakarta more strongly represented than other provinces. Nevertheless, the dataset is valuable because it captures parents' direct language about early Islamic religious education across several regions. It provides an empirically grounded starting point for understanding parental expectations and for developing future studies with deeper interviews, regional comparison, and school-family dialogue. The five written prompts were aligned with these analytic concerns so that each question contributed to a particular dimension of the analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Written Interview Prompts and Analytic Focus

No.	Prompt translated from Indonesian	Analytic focus
1	What is religious education?	Definition and purpose
2	At what age should children be given religious lessons? State the reason.	Timing and developmental reasoning
3	Why do we teach Islamic religious education to young children?	Justification and expected outcomes
4	What content should be taught in Islamic religious education for young children?	Parent-imagined curriculum
5	How should Islamic religious education materials be taught to young children?	Pedagogical approach

Results and Discussion

The analysis generated four interrelated themes. First, parents understood Islamic religious education as a foundation for moral life and future orientation. Second, they believed that religious learning should begin early because young children imitate, absorb, and become accustomed to repeated practices. Third, they imagined a curriculum that integrates faith, ritual, Qur'anic literacy, prophetic stories, *adab*, and everyday morality. Fourth, they preferred a pedagogy that is relational, practical, joyful, and gentle. These themes do not stand apart from one another. In parents' responses, knowing God, learning to pray, speaking politely, listening to stories, and imitating adults all belong to the same educational ecology. The provincial distribution is presented only as descriptive context for the regional spread and uneven response concentration (see Figure 1). The data structure then makes the analytic movement from parents' first-order language to interpretive themes and the overall claim visible (see Figure 2).

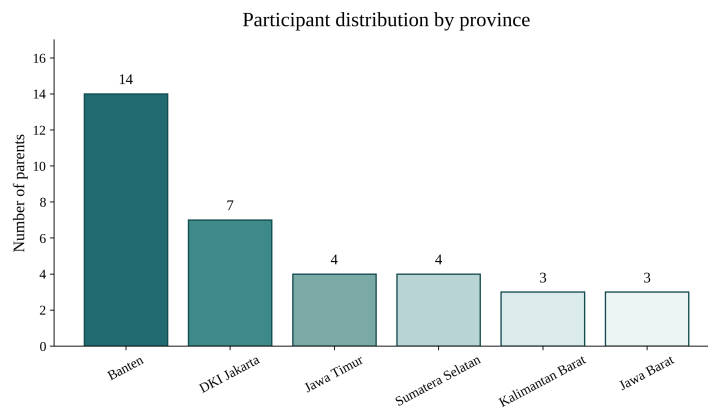


Figure 1. Participant Distribution by Province (Descriptive Profile Only).

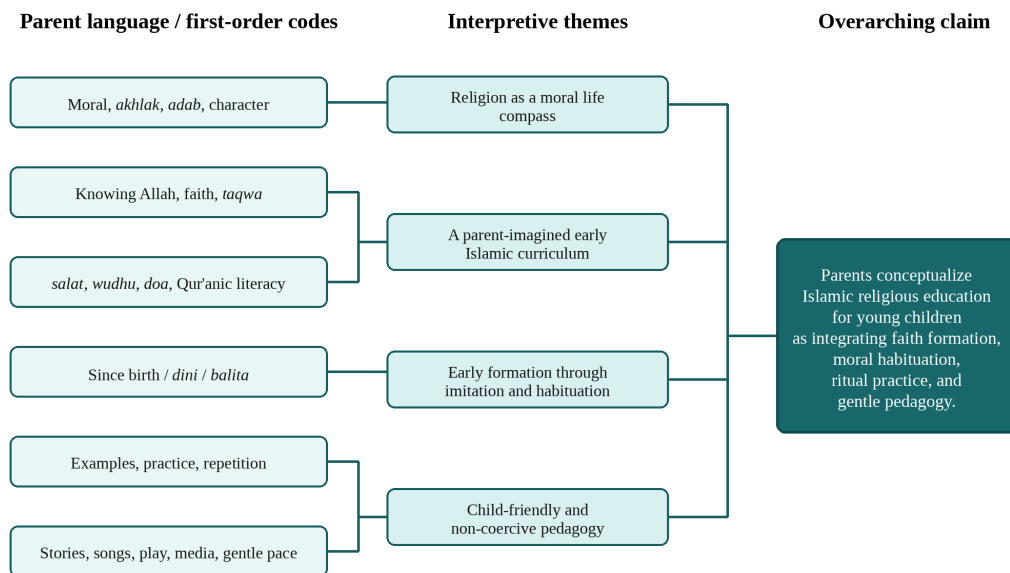


Figure 2. Data Structure Linking Parent Language, Themes, and the Overall Analytic Claim

Theme 1: Islamic Religious Education as Moral and Life Guidance

Many parents defined religious education not as a school subject but as a guide for life. P01 described it as education that prepares learners to practice religious teachings. P07 called it the basic education that every human being needs as *bekal* for future life. P14 described it as guidance about religious teachings so that the child can develop a religious foundation for adulthood. Other parents used words such as foundation, obligation, direction, morality, character, and provision. These terms show that parents see Islamic religious education as forward-looking. It is expected to prepare the child for a morally accountable future, not merely to help the child pass a lesson.

The moral dimension was especially strong. Parents repeatedly linked Islamic religious education with *akhlak, adab*, character, manners, and the ability to distinguish good from bad. P30 explained that through religion, children can learn different forms of goodness from the smallest things. P32 wrote that when children learn religion, they can know which actions are good and

which are bad. P33 emphasized *akhlakul karimah* because it is basic and important for children. These statements suggest that, in parents' understanding, Islamic religious education is a moral language through which children learn how to live with others.

This finding resonates with Islamic educational thought that places *adab* and *akhlak* at the center of formation. It also aligns with scholarship that views children's spirituality as connected to virtues, relationships, and meaning-making rather than only to doctrinal knowledge (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020, 2025). The parents' responses are not abstract philosophical statements, yet they contain a clear educational philosophy: a young child's religious learning should lead to everyday goodness. Religion becomes visible in speech, care for parents, cleanliness, prayer, respect, and the ability to act well.

At the same time, the emphasis on moral formation carries an important pedagogical responsibility. If Islamic religious education is framed only as correcting behavior, it may become moral pressure rather than moral growth. The data, however, show that many parents did not call for harsh correction. They connected morality with gradual habituation, example, stories, and affection. This distinction matters. Moral education in early childhood should not rely on fear or adult domination. It should help children internalize values through secure relationships and meaningful participation. This is consistent with developmentally appropriate practice, which emphasizes nurturing relationships, child participation, and learning through active experience (Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

Theme 2: Early Start as Imitation, Habituation, and Atmosphere

Across the responses, parents tended to view early childhood as an appropriate time to begin Islamic religious education. Their answers varied in the exact age: some mentioned the womb, birth, infancy, crawling age, two years, three years, four years, five to six years, or simply *sedini mungkin*. Analytically, the most important point is not the precise age named by each parent, but the developmental reasoning behind it. Parents associated early childhood with listening, imitation, memory, and the gradual internalization of repeated routines. P03 wrote that when children begin to speak, they can understand, absorb, and imitate their parents. P11 explained that at an early age the brain easily digests what is seen and children often follow what adults do. P21 stated that around three years old children begin to imitate and pay attention to what parents teach.

This view corresponds with the idea that early religious learning is embodied and relational. Children do not first learn religion as formal theory. They hear the *adhan*, watch adults pray, repeat short prayers, follow movements, touch prayer mats, listen to stories, sing, and observe how adults speak. P18 described religious introduction from birth through a good environment, including listening to Qur'anic recitation. P23 and P28 even mentioned the womb, suggesting that religious formation is imagined as beginning before formal cognition. Such responses may not be developmental claims in a scientific sense, but they are important cultural claims. They show that parents think of Islamic education as atmosphere, presence, and orientation before it becomes explicit instruction.

The language of imitation also reveals why parents place strong responsibility on adults. If young children learn by watching, then the parent, teacher, and wider environment become the curriculum. This has implications for Islamic early childhood education. Schools cannot simply provide content and expect children to internalize it. The child's religious learning is shaped by whether adults' behavior is coherent with what they teach. Several parents stated this directly. P17 wrote that children should be taught by example because they often imitate what they see. P26 wrote that adults should provide examples so children can follow. P30 wrote that good examples are easier for children to obey than verbal advice alone.

This finding strengthens previous Indonesian studies that emphasize collaboration between parents and schools in early Islamic education (Nudin, 2020) and the role of parents as models during home-based religious learning (Wahyuni & Madjid, 2022). It also connects with broader evidence that parental involvement and home learning environments matter for children's development and educational trajectories (Boonk et al., 2018). In the present data, parental involvement is not described as helping with homework. It is more intimate: it is the adult's daily religious and moral life being made visible to the child.

The challenge is to translate this insight into educational practice without romanticizing family life. Not all parents have the same time, knowledge, confidence, or emotional resources. Some may feel that they must teach religion but do not know how to do so gently. Others may depend heavily on schools or Qur'anic teachers. Therefore, an implication of this study is that early childhood institutions should not assume parental capacity; they should support it. Parent-teacher communication can include simple guidance on modeling prayer, using stories, answering children's questions about God, introducing *adab* through routines, and avoiding coercive practices that may produce fear rather than love of religion.

Theme 3: A Parent-Imagined Curriculum of Faith, Ritual, Qur'anic Literacy, Stories, and Adab

When parents were asked what materials should be taught, their answers formed a clear parent-imagined curriculum. The first domain is faith orientation: knowing God, recognizing God's creation, learning about prophets and angels, and understanding basic pillars of faith. P10 suggested that children begin with basic materials such as knowing their God, prophets, angels, and the difference between good and bad. P27 proposed teaching about divinity and God's creation in the universe, including animals and plants. P35 emphasized that children need to know their Lord and can be introduced to God's greatness through stories of prophets and everyday activities. These domains are summarized to keep the link between parental examples and educational interpretation visible (see Table 3).

Table 3. Parent-imagined curriculum domains from the written responses

Domain	Examples from parental responses	Educational interpretation	Illustrative excerpt
Faith orientation	Knowing God, <i>iman</i> , <i>taqwa</i> , prophets, angels, God's creation	Children are introduced to a religious worldview through familiar language and everyday signs.	Children should be introduced to God and to God's creation in the universe, such as animals and plants. (P27)
Ritual practice	Daily prayers, <i>salat</i> , <i>wudhu</i> , going to the mosque, prayer movements	Ritual is learned as bodily participation, not only verbal knowledge.	Materials include daily prayers, practice of <i>salat</i> , practice of <i>wudhu</i> , and intentions for prayer. (P06)

Domain	Examples from parental responses	Educational interpretation	Illustrative excerpt
Qur'anic literacy	Huruf <i>hijaiyah</i> , <i>Iqra</i> , Qur'an, <i>Juz Amma</i> , short surahs	Early literacy is connected to worship, belonging, and later Qur'anic reading.	Children can learn <i>hijaiyah</i> letters, daily prayers, short surahs, and prayer movements. (P09)
Prophetic stories	Stories of prophets and messengers, exemplary figures	Narrative mediates religious meaning through imagination and moral example.	Tell exemplary stories of prophets through storytelling. (P13)
<i>Adab</i> and morality	Good character, polite speech, respect, cleanliness, helping, <i>akhlak</i>	Religion becomes visible through everyday social conduct.	<i>Akhlakul karimah</i> is basic and important for children. (P33)

The second domain is ritual practice. Parents repeatedly mentioned daily prayers, *salat*, *wudhu*, intentions for prayer, going to the mosque, and performing religious actions in daily life. P06 named daily prayers, prayer practice, *wudhu* practice, and prayer intentions. P29 suggested beginning with practices often done in daily life, such as *salat* and the procedure for *wudhu*. P31 mentioned memorizing prayers, short surahs, and prayer movements. These materials are not only cognitive content; they are bodily routines. Children learn where to place their hands, how to move, when to say a prayer, and how to prepare themselves.

The third domain is Qur'anic literacy. Parents referred to *huruf hijaiyah*, *Iqra*, the Qur'an, *Juz Amma*, and short surahs. P09 suggested introducing *hijaiyah* letters, daily prayers, short surahs, and practice of prayer movements. P22 stated that children should pray before doing activities and learn *hijaiyah* so that they can later read the Qur'an. P25 proposed beginning with *Iqra* and continuing to short surahs. This domain is often treated in practice as an early literacy task, but in parents' responses it also functions as religious belonging. To know letters and short verses is to enter a language of worship and community.

The fourth domain is prophetic stories and Islamic narratives. Many parents named stories of prophets and messengers as appropriate material. P13 suggested stories of prophetic models. P21 proposed telling stories of exemplary figures through storytelling. P28 believed that Islamic stories are suitable because children tend to enjoy stories. Storytelling is particularly important because it links religious content with imagination, emotion, and moral reasoning. In early childhood disaster education, stories and folklore have been shown to connect children's imagination with meaningful learning (Rahiem & Rahim, 2020). In Islamic early childhood education, stories of prophets may serve a similar function when presented with sensitivity and age-appropriate language.

The fifth domain is *adab* and everyday morality. Parents named speaking politely, greeting, respecting parents and teachers, cleanliness, sharing, and doing good. P11 mentioned polite speech, greetings, and short prayers. P33 proposed practicing values in the surrounding environment, such as cleanliness, because Islam loves cleanliness. This domain is crucial because it shows that parents do not separate religious content from social behavior. The child who prays but speaks harshly would not represent the educational outcome parents' desire. Islamic religious education, in their view, should be visible in ordinary conduct.

These domains together suggest that parents imagine an integrated curriculum rather than a fragmented one. Faith relates to ritual, ritual with Qur'anic literacy, literacy with stories, and stories with moral behavior. The risk is that early childhood programs may turn this rich ecology into a checklist: memorize this prayer, recognize these letters, perform these movements. The data suggest a better approach. Curriculum should remain connected to meaning, relationship, and daily life. A

child can learn *wudhu* not only as a sequence of movements, but as care for cleanliness and readiness. A child can learn stories of prophets not only as names and events, but as invitations to kindness, patience, courage, and gratitude. This relationship is represented in a curriculum-pedagogy model before the discussion turns to child-friendly methods (see Figure 3).

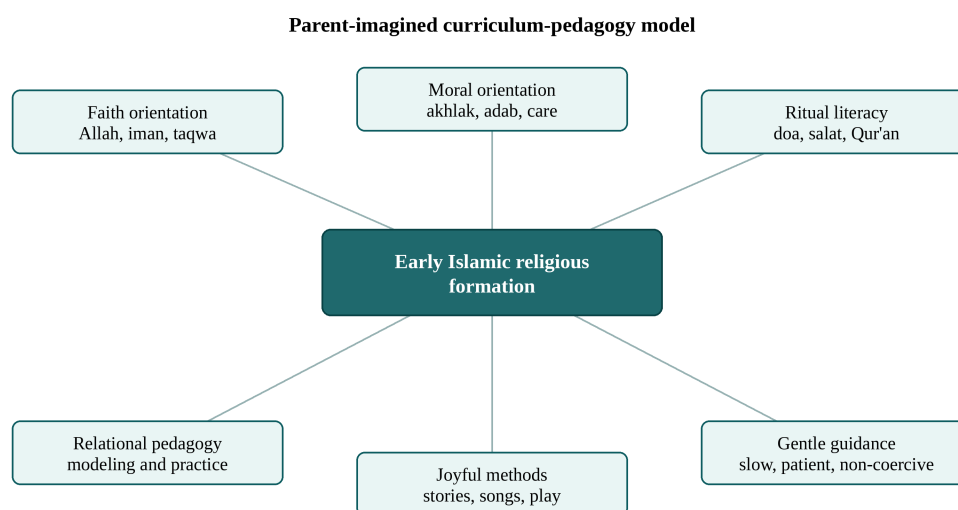


Figure 3. Parent-Imagined Curriculum-Pedagogy Model for Islamic Religious Formation.

Theme 4: Child-friendly Islamic pedagogy: Modeling, Practice, Stories, Play, and Gentleness

Parents' pedagogical preferences were strikingly consistent with early childhood principles. They recommended example, practice, repetition, storytelling, singing, playing, pictures, videos, and gradual explanation. P01 wrote that children should be taught repeatedly every day. P04 suggested using learning videos, for example when introducing the Prophet. P05 proposed outdoor play with Islamic content. P06 suggested practicing and memorizing with movements so children can easily follow. P15 recommended singing and stories because children understand more quickly when they are happy. P20 wrote that adults should give a short explanation and then practice it, without needing to be angry if the child does not yet understand.

The emphasis on modeling and practice shows that parents see Islamic religious education as embodied. Children learn by doing with adults. They repeat prayers, follow movements, join family routines, and observe how adults behave. This supports the idea that early religious education should be woven into lived practice rather than delivered only through verbal instruction. It also implies that teachers need pedagogical skill, not only religious knowledge. A teacher who knows the content but cannot translate it into play, story, movement, and relational guidance may not meet children's developmental needs.

Storytelling and singing appear as especially important methods. These forms allow adults to introduce religious meaning without turning learning into pressure. They also allow rhythm, emotion, memory, and imagination to support learning. This connects with Suyadi's (2018) argument that arts can enrich Islamic early childhood learning and with broader early childhood scholarship that sees play and creative expression as central to young children's learning. The

parents in this study did not use academic terms such as developmentally appropriate practice, but many of their suggestions were developmentally appropriate in substance. This interpretation is also supported by studies showing that affective learning experiences, local wisdom, music, and games can carry moral, emotional, and cultural meaning for young learners (Kuo et al., 2024; Sakti et al., 2024; Sauri et al., 2022; Suwastini et al., 2023).

Several parents explicitly warned against pressure. P11 stated that learning does not need to be too forced and can be done through play. P12 wrote that children should be taught slowly, without pressure, and in a pleasant way. P24 suggested teaching slowly so that children can understand. P25 wrote that adults should do it gradually and provide good examples from everyday life. This language of gentleness is an important finding. It challenges the assumption that parents who value religious education necessarily prefer rigid or coercive methods. On the contrary, many parents want religious learning to be enjoyable and patient.

This has implications for the emotional climate of Islamic religious education. Young children are not only learning content; they are also forming feelings about religion. If prayer is introduced through anger, the child may associate prayer with fear. If Qur'anic letters are introduced through humiliation, the child may associate religious literacy with anxiety. If religious stories are introduced with warmth and wonder, children may associate religion with meaning and closeness. The data therefore invite teachers and parents to ask not only what children learn, but what emotional relationship to religion is being formed through the learning process.

Digital and visual media also appeared in the responses, though less centrally than modeling and practice. Parents mentioned videos, pictures, posters, and other media. This is consistent with recent Indonesian research showing that digital media is increasingly seen as relevant for Islamic early childhood education, even when implementation remains uneven (Ramadani et al., 2025). Digital media can help children visualize stories, letters, songs, and practices, but it should not replace adult presence. For young children, media is most useful when it is mediated by caring adults who explain, accompany, and connect what is seen on screen with daily practice. This point is consistent with work on digital storytelling in Indonesian early childhood education, which shows that digital resources can support narrative and literacy experiences when carefully mediated by adults (Purnama et al., 2022).

From parental expectation to educational implication

The findings raise a broader discussion about the relationship between religious instruction and children's agency. Parents strongly emphasized guidance, habituation, and adult modeling. This is understandable because young children depend on adults and learn through routines. Yet the data contain relatively few explicit references to children's questions, curiosity, interpretation, or voice. Parents spoke often about what adults should teach and how children should be guided, but less often about how children make sense of religious ideas in their own ways.

This absence should not be read as parental neglect. Rather, it reflects a common feature of early religious education: adults often focus on transmission because they feel responsible for protecting children and giving them a strong foundation. Nevertheless, early childhood education

can benefit from balancing transmission with listening. Children may ask why people pray, where Allah is, why some people worship differently, why certain actions are good, or why adults sometimes fail to practice what they teach. Such questions are not threats to faith. They are opportunities for meaning making. Children's spirituality scholarship suggests that wonder, questioning, and relational exploration are central to spiritual development (Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2020; Mata-McMahon et al., 2020).

For Islamic early childhood education, this means that parents' desire for foundation and habituation should be honored, but not reduced to mechanical routine. Children need practices, but they also need language that makes practices meaningful. They need to imitate, but they also need adults who are willing to listen. They need moral boundaries, but they also need compassion when they are still learning. A child-friendly Islamic pedagogy is therefore neither permissive nor coercive. It is structured, affectionate, meaningful, and responsive. The main data patterns, possible risks, and pedagogical implications are synthesized below (see Table 4).

Table 4. From Data Patterns to Pedagogical Implications

Data pattern	Interpretive meaning	Possible risk	Pedagogical implication
Parents want early formation	Religious learning is seen as atmosphere, routine, and identity	Starting early may become pressure if adults expect adult-like understanding	Use short, warm, repeated practices that fit children's attention and emotion
Parents stress <i>akhlak</i> and <i>adab</i>	Faith is expected to appear in everyday behavior	Moral education may become correction-oriented	Teach <i>adab</i> through stories, routines, modeling, and praise for emerging effort
Parents name ritual materials	Worship is learned bodily and relationally	Ritual may become mechanical memorization	Connect movement and words with meaning, cleanliness, gratitude, and family practice
Parents prefer examples and practice	Adults are understood as the visible curriculum	Inconsistency between adult speech and behavior can weaken learning	Strengthen parent-teacher communication about modeling
Parents mention joyful and gentle methods	Many parents value non-coercive pedagogy	Digital media or songs may become entertainment without meaning	Use stories, songs, and media with adult mediation and reflection

The parent-imagined curriculum found in this study can be translated into practical home-school partnership. Teachers can share weekly religious routines with parents in simple language, not as homework but as family invitations. Parents can be encouraged to model short prayers before meals, use stories before bedtime, invite children to observe or join prayer without pressure, talk about God's creation during walks, and link *adab* with daily relationships. Schools can also ask parents what religious values they practice at home, so that religious education becomes dialogue rather than one-way instruction.

The findings also speak to curriculum design. Early Islamic religious education should avoid separating faith, ritual, and morality into disconnected lessons. A more integrated design might begin from children's everyday experiences: eating, washing, greeting, playing, helping, visiting, seeing animals, hearing the *adhan*, asking about the sky, or joining family prayer. From these

experiences, teachers can introduce short prayers, vocabulary about God's creation, stories of prophets, caring behavior, and simple ritual practice. This kind of curriculum is closer to the way parents already describe religious education: as everyday formation.

These points are central to the article's contribution. The parents' responses may be brief, but they reveal a coherent educational imagination: children should come to know God, practice Islam, develop *akhlak*, and learn through methods that are suited to childhood. Parents are concerned with the child's future, yet they also recognize the present child who needs play, stories, songs, patience, and affection. Interpreted carefully, parental expectations can therefore support Islamic religious education that is both theologically meaningful and developmentally humane.

Implications For Curriculum, Parents, and Teacher Education

The findings are also useful for thinking about curriculum at a practical level. Parents' responses suggest that Islamic religious education for young children should be organized around lived situations rather than only around abstract topics. A curriculum map may still include *aqidah*, worship, Qur'anic literacy, prophetic stories, and *akhlak*, but these domains should enter children's lives through familiar experiences: waking up, eating, washing, greeting, helping, playing, listening to the *adhan*, seeing rain, noticing animals, or thanking parents and teachers. Such an approach keeps religious learning close to children's sensory and relational world. It also prevents early Islamic education from becoming an adult syllabus forced into a young child's day.

For parents, the study offers a gentle but important reminder that religious education begins with adult presence. Many respondents themselves said that children imitate adults. This means that the most persuasive religious lesson may be the adult's manner of speaking, apologizing, praying, caring for cleanliness, showing patience, and treating others with respect. Parent education programs can therefore move beyond telling parents to teach more religion at home. They can help parents create small, realistic routines: saying short prayers together, telling one story a week, inviting children to help prepare for prayer, discussing Allah's creation during daily activities, and praising children when they show honesty, kindness, or care.

For teachers, the findings indicate the need for pedagogical translation. Teachers in Islamic early childhood settings often know the religious content, but young children need that content to be translated into experience, movement, image, sound, story, and relationship. A lesson on *wudhu* can include water play, sequencing pictures, modeling, and a conversation about cleanliness. A lesson on gratitude can include thanking friends, caring for plants, and naming blessings in children's own words. A story of a prophet can be followed by drawing, role play, or a simple act of kindness. Such translation does not weaken religious substance; it makes religious meaning reachable for children.

The study also has implications for teacher education. Prospective early childhood Islamic education teachers need to study child development and pedagogy alongside Islamic content. They need preparation in storytelling, music and movement, classroom routines, family communication, children's questions about God and difference, and ethical ways to guide behavior. They also need to learn how to avoid practices that shame, frighten, or pressure children in the name of religion.

If parents hope for gentle and meaningful religious education, teacher education must help future teachers turn that hope into skilled practice.

Finally, the findings point to a distinctive contribution for education in Muslim societies. The data show that parents do not necessarily separate modern early childhood pedagogy from Islamic formation. They want faith, worship, and *akhlak*, but they also want play, stories, songs, pictures, patience, and gradual guidance. This combination is important because it refuses a false choice between religious seriousness and child-centered pedagogy. Islamic religious education for young children can be serious in purpose while remaining tender in method. It can form children morally and spiritually without making childhood heavy.

Conclusion

This study examined how Indonesian Muslim parents define Islamic religious education for young children, when they believe it should begin, what content they consider important, and what forms of pedagogy they regard as suitable. The central conclusion is that parents' accounts are best understood as a relational theory of early religious formation. Parents do not imagine Islamic religious education as a discrete subject alone; they understand it as a process in which faith orientation, moral character, ritual familiarity, and child-friendly practice are formed together through the ordinary life of home and school.

The study advances current knowledge by shifting attention from formal curriculum and institutional practice to parents as conceptual actors in early Islamic education. Rather than treating family expectations as background context, the article shows that parental language carries an implicit pedagogical logic. Terms such as *akhlak*, *adab*, *doa*, *salat*, *wudhu*, and early habituation reveal how parents connect belief, behavior, bodily practice, and affection in their expectations for young children.

The scholarly contribution of this article lies in bringing Islamic education, early childhood pedagogy, and children's spirituality into one analytic conversation. The findings challenge a narrow view of religious education as instruction, memorization, or ritual training alone. They also show that parents' aspiration for religious seriousness can coexist with developmentally appropriate approaches such as modeling, storytelling, play, repetition, visual media, and gentle guidance. This integrated understanding offers a stronger basis for theorizing Islamic religious education in early childhood as lived, embodied, relational, and ethically sensitive formation.

The practical application of the study is especially relevant for curriculum design, parent education, and teacher preparation. Early childhood institutions can organize Islamic religious learning around lived situations such as eating, washing, greeting, helping, playing, listening to the *adhan*, caring for living things, and joining family routines. Teacher education can use these findings to strengthen pedagogical translation: future teachers need to know not only what to teach, but how to make religious meaning reachable without shaming, frightening, or pressuring children.

Future research should extend this work through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and comparative studies across regions, school types, and family backgrounds. It should also include

fathers, teachers, and children themselves, especially to understand how young children interpret God-talk, prayer, *adab*, stories, and religious routines in their own language. Such studies would deepen the field's understanding of Islamic religious education as a lived process shaped by adults' intentions and children's active meaning-making.

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