

# Islamic Character Education for Early Childhood in the Digital Era: An Integrated Ecological Model

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## ABSTRACT

Early childhood is the most formative period for character development, yet the rapid proliferation of digital devices poses serious challenges to instilling Islamic values. Children are increasingly exposed to inappropriate content, gadget addiction, and diminished religious habituation due to insufficient adult guidance. This library research synthesizes 30 Indonesian scientific journal articles published between 2016 and 2024 to examine the concepts, challenges, strategies, and conceptual models of Islamic character education for early childhood in the digital era. The findings reveal four main themes: Islamic character education is a process of embedding morality, religious values, and praiseworthy behaviors from an early age through modeling, habituation, and storytelling; the digital era introduces risks such as overexposure to gadgets, non-educational content, and reduced face-to-face social interaction; effective strategies include parental and teacher modeling, consistent habituation, selective use of Islamic digital content, and close collaboration between families and early childhood education institutions. An ecological model comprising four interconnected layers—core Islamic values (*aqidah, ibadah, akhlak*), value-instillation methods (exemplary conduct, habituation, advice), educational environments (family, teachers, PAUD institutions, community), and digital literacy (content selection, screen time limits, active mentoring)—is proposed. This integrated model offers a balanced approach to protecting children from digital risks while harnessing technology as a positive medium for Islamic value transmission. The study contributes a novel synthesis that bridges Islamic pedagogy, early childhood development, and digital era challenges.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the daily lives of young children, including how they play, learn, communicate, and access information. Observations in both urban and rural Indonesian settings reveal that children as young as two years old are routinely exposed to smartphones and tablets, often for extended periods without active parental supervision (Damayanti, 2025). Many parents report using digital devices as “electronic pacifiers” to calm children, inadvertently fostering early dependency, and this phenomenon is not limited to higher-income families; even in low-income communities, affordable smartphones and cheap data packs have made digital



access nearly universal. As a result, traditional childhood activities such as outdoor play, direct social interaction, and family storytelling are being displaced by passive screen consumption, leading to observable consequences in early childhood education settings.

Teachers in PAUD (early childhood education) institutions note that children exhibit shorter attention spans, lower frustration tolerance, and reduced ability to engage in cooperative play compared to a decade ago (Putra et al., 2024). Many children struggle to sit through a simple circle-time activity without demanding a digital device, and incidents of mimicking aggressive or disrespectful language from online videos have been reported, indicating that children internalize negative content in the absence of adult mediation. These field observations underscore the urgent need to re-evaluate how character education is delivered in the digital age, as the digital era presents a dual-edged reality. On one hand, technology offers unprecedented opportunities for learning through interactive applications, educational videos, and global connectivity; on the other hand, it brings serious threats to character development, including excessive gadget dependency, reduced quality of social interaction, weakened concentration, individualistic behavior, easy access to age-inappropriate content, and erosion of religious practices when not balanced with consistent adult guidance (Alvi Nur Azizah, 2023).

For early childhood—a phase of rapid neurodevelopment and value internalization—these threats are particularly acute because children learn primarily through imitation and repetition; thus, what they see on screens can become deeply embedded behavioral scripts. Numerous studies have examined character education in the digital era from various perspectives, with some research highlighting general challenges such as cyberbullying, digital addiction, and declining face-to-face social skills (Hilda Melani Purba et al., 2024). Others focus on the central role of parents in mediating children's technology use, emphasizing that family communication patterns—whether consensual, pluralistic, protective, or laissez-faire—significantly affect children's digital habits (Mukhlisah et al., 2024). The family is consistently identified as the primary arena for character formation, where values are first taught through direct instruction, motivation, modeling, habituation, and consistent rule enforcement (Tantin Puspita Rini & Moh Masduki, 2020; Uzmah Himmah & Wahidah Fitriani, 2023).

From an Islamic perspective, character education is inseparable from the concept of *akhlāq* (moral conduct), which integrates three mutually reinforcing dimensions: *aqidah* (faith), *ibadah* (worship practices), and *akhlak* (moral behavior). For young children, this means introducing the concept of Allah and gratitude, habituating simple prayers and daily *doa*, and cultivating honesty, patience, courtesy, responsibility, and empathy (Devi Meilasari & Ichsan, 2024). Effective methods include storytelling about prophets, singing Islamic songs, and role-playing good manners, with teachers and parents serving as living models whose daily actions are more influential than verbal instruction (Nur Amalia Olby Anwar & Nur Cholimah, 2023). Several studies have specifically explored how digital media can be harnessed for Islamic value transmission, finding that millennial mothers effectively use YouTube channels featuring prophet stories, Islamic animated series (e.g., Omar & Hana, Riko the Series), and murottal Al-Qur'an to introduce religious concepts to preschoolers (Fadila Arifatul Fardah et al., 2023).

Similarly, parents can teach prayer, hijaiyah letters, daily worship habits, and moral values through a combination of direct teaching and selectively chosen digital content (Arlina et al., 2023), suggesting that technology is not inherently harmful; rather, its impact depends on how it is curated and accompanied. Teachers and PAUD institutions also bear significant responsibility, as effective Islamic character education requires systematic planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating of religious values within the school culture (Murni Yanto, 2020). Differentiated instruction—tailoring learning experiences to

children's individual interests, needs, and readiness—has been shown to enhance religious and moral development in early childhood (Nisa Shalihah et al., 2023). Moreover, innovative media such as *Wayang Beber Fable*, a local cultural puppet show, can effectively convey moral messages without relying on digital screens (Jati Noegroho, 2024), demonstrating that character education in the digital era does not have to depend solely on high-tech solutions.

Despite the growing body of literature, existing studies tend to be fragmented and narrowly focused. Some research addresses general character education in the digital era without specifically linking it to Islamic values or early childhood contexts; others explore religious and moral values in PAUD but fail to position the digital era as the central contextual framework; still others examine parental roles in gadget supervision without offering a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of how Islamic character education can be developed through the synergy of family, school, religious values, local culture, and wise technology use. Consequently, there is a significant gap: the lack of an integrated, operationalizable model that specifically addresses Islamic character education for early childhood in the digital era. This gap is critical to address because Islamic character education for young children cannot be reduced to isolated religious habituation activities; it must be understood as a holistic process that synergistically involves the child, parents, teachers, PAUD institutions, social environment, and digital media within a mutually supportive ecosystem.

Moreover, the digital era demands a balanced and proportionate approach to technology: not solely as a frightening threat but as a medium that can be utilized to instill Islamic values when guided by principles of *adab* (courtesy), attentive mentoring, content selectivity, usage time limits, and genuine adult role modeling. Islamic religious character education in the digital era can be implemented through the lens of the Qur'an using consistent habituation and modeling (Farikhathun Nikmah, 2023). The novelty of this article lies in its attempt to integrate previously separate research streams—Islamic character education, early childhood development, and digital era challenges—into a coherent framework. While prior studies have examined the role of teachers (Ismail Darimi, 2018), the fitrah-based approach (Dianing Sapitri et al., 2022), millennial mothers' use of gadgets (Fadila Arifatul Fardah et al., 2023), parental strategies (Hany Lusya Damayanti & Anggita Levyana Saputri, 2022), and general digital character education (Ummi Kulsum & Abdul Muhid, 2022), no previous work has synthesized these into an ecological model specifically for early childhood Islamic character education. This study aims to fill that gap by proposing a four-layer integrated model and offering practical guidance for parents, teachers, and policymakers.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research (literature review) design, which is appropriate when the research focus is not to test interventions in the field but to examine, compare, and synthesize previous findings on a conceptual topic (Zed, 2021; Snyder, 2019). Given that the aim is to conceptualize Islamic character education for early childhood in the digital era, a systematic literature review allows for mapping existing knowledge, identifying patterns, and generating new theoretical insights without conducting primary data collection. The primary data sources were Indonesian scientific journal articles published between 2016 and 2024, with priority given to articles from 2020-2025, and a total of 30 articles were selected based on relevance, accessibility (open access or institutional subscription), and the presence of a DOI. The articles were sourced from national accredited journals such as *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak*, *AWLADY*, *Jurnal Konseling dan Pendidikan*, and *Jurnal PAKAR*

Pendidikan, using keywords including “pendidikan karakter Islam anak usia dini,” “nilai agama dan moral PAUD,” “era digital,” “peran orang tua gawai,” and “pendidikan karakter digital.”

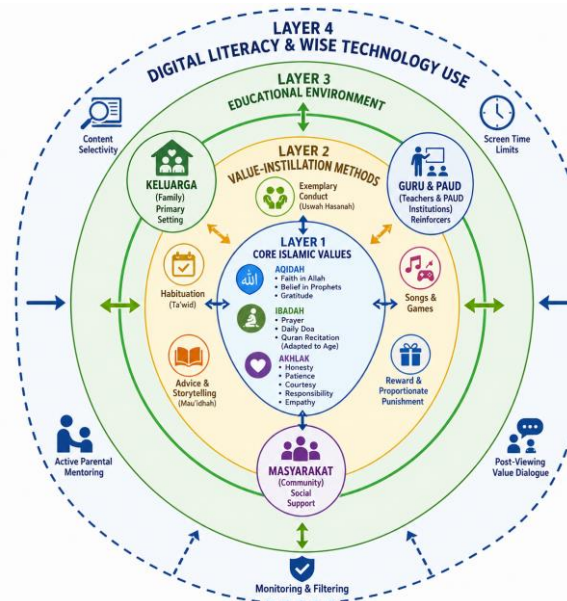
Inclusion criteria were: articles written in Indonesian or English; publication year between 2016 and 2024 (with a strong preference for 2020-2025); full-text availability; relevance to at least one of the following foci: Islamic character education, early childhood religious and moral values, parental or teacher roles in the digital era, gadget use among young children, or character education strategies. Exclusion criteria were: articles focusing on elementary or older children without reference to early childhood; duplicate publications; opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical substance; and articles that only mentioned digital technology tangentially. Data were collected through documentation, involving reading, selecting, and recording information from each relevant article, and a literature review matrix was developed as the research instrument containing categories such as article identity, research focus, concept of Islamic character, early childhood context, digital issue addressed, strategies proposed, roles of parents and teachers, and key findings. Each article was read at least twice to extract relevant data systematically (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the matrix enabled cross-article comparison and thematic synthesis.

Data were analyzed using content analysis following three sequential stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). In data reduction, information was filtered and grouped into preliminary themes (concept, challenges, strategies, roles, digital media use). In data display, the reduced information was organized into thematic matrices and narrative summaries. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing patterns across articles, leading to the formulation of an integrated ecological model. Member checking was simulated through repeated re-reading to ensure interpretive accuracy, and all steps were documented to maintain transparency and reproducibility.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### **Result**

The synthesis of 30 articles yielded four major thematic findings: Islamic character education for early childhood is defined as the process of instilling akhlāq, religious values, morality, and praiseworthy behaviors from an early age; the digital era presents challenges including gadget overexposure, non-educational content, and weakened religious habituation; effective strategies include exemplary conduct, habituation, advice, teacher-parent collaboration, and selective use of Islamic digital content; and success requires integration among family, PAUD institutions, and digital media within a supportive ecosystem. These findings led to the development of an ecological model visualized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Ecological Model of Islamic Character Education for Early Childhood

The proposed Ecological Model of Islamic Character Education for Early Childhood in the Digital Era consists of four interconnected layers. Layer 1, Core Islamic Values, comprises *aqidah* (faith in Allah, prophets, gratitude), *ibadah* (prayer, daily doa, Quran recitation adapted to age), and *akhlak* (honesty, patience, courtesy, responsibility, empathy). Layer 2, Value-Instillation Methods, includes exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*), habituation (*ta'wid*), advice and storytelling (*mau'idhah*), songs and games, as well as reward and proportionate punishment. Layer 3, Educational Environment, encompasses family as the primary setting, teachers and PAUD institutions as reinforcers, and community as social support. Layer 4, Digital Literacy and Management, covers content selectivity, screen time limits, active parental mentoring, and post-viewing value dialogue. The concentric circular diagram of the model (Figure 1) shows the innermost circle as Layer 1, surrounded by Layer 2, then Layer 3 with three interconnected pillars labeled “Keluarga” (Family), “Guru & PAUD” (Teachers & PAUD), and “Masyarakat” (Community), and the outermost layer (Layer 4) as a dashed boundary labeled “Digital Literacy & Wise Technology Use” with arrows indicating monitoring and filtering, while bidirectional arrows between layers represent mutual reinforcement.

**Table 1.** Synthesis of Key Findings on Islamic Character Education for Early Childhood

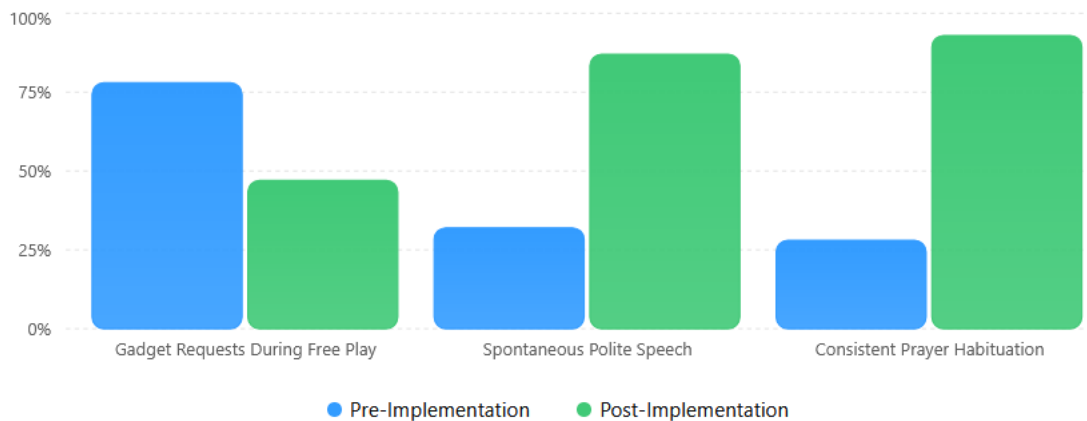
Focus Area	Key Findings	Implication
Concept	Islamic character = <i>akhlak</i> , religious values, moral, adab, worship habituation	Begin from early age through developmentally appropriate activities
Digital challenges	Gadget overexposure, non-educational content, addiction, individualism, reduced discipline	Requires parental/teacher mediation
Effective strategies	Modeling, habituation, advice, teaching, reward/punishment, digital literacy, Islamic content selection	Should be repetitive, concrete, enjoyable
Roles of environment	Family, teachers, school, community complement each other	Synergy between home and PAUD needed
Digital media use	Gadgets as both threat and opportunity: prophet stories, doa, murottal, Islamic songs, educational animations	Technology should be directed as reinforcement tool, not mere entertainment

In the family setting, implementation of the model begins with parents as primary models who are encouraged to establish structured daily routines that balance screen time with non-digital activities. For example, a family may designate “gadget-free hours” during meals and before bedtime, and parents should co-view Islamic content with their children, pausing to ask questions like “What did the prophet do when he was sad?” or “Why did the character apologize?” This dialogic approach transforms passive viewing into active value internalization, and parents additionally model good digital behavior by limiting their own screen use in front of children (Mukhlisah et al., 2024; Hany Lusya Damayanti & Anggita Levyana Saputri, 2022). In PAUD settings, teachers operationalize the model by integrating Islamic values into every daily activity, not only during religious instruction time. The day begins with a morning circle that includes a short doa, a song about gratitude, and a brief storytelling session using either a book or a selected digital animation (e.g., 5-minute prophet story), and teachers use differentiated instruction to cater to children’s varying levels of digital exposure at home.

**Table 2.** Strategies for Implementing the Ecological Model and Expected Challenges

Strategy	Implementation Steps	Common Challenges	Mitigation
<b>Exemplary conduct (modeling)</b>	Parents and teachers consistently demonstrate honesty, patience, courtesy in daily actions	Inconsistent modeling (parents say one thing, do another)	Self-reflection, peer support groups
Habituation	Daily prayers, saying bismillah before activities, alhamdulillah after, sharing, apologizing	Child resistance or forgetfulness	Gentle reminder, positive reinforcement, consistency
Digital content selectivity	Pre-screening YouTube videos, using approved apps (e.g., Riko, Omar & Hana), creating a curated playlist	Children discovering inappropriate content via autoplay	Use YouTube Kids, supervise, download offline
Screen time limits	Maximum 30-60 minutes/day for ages 3-6 (WHO guideline), use timers	Tantrums when time ends	Warn in advance (5-minute, 2-minute), offer alternative fun activity
Active mentoring	Co-viewing, asking moral questions, connecting story to real life	Parental fatigue, lack of time	Integrate into existing routines (e.g., after bath, before bed)
Home-school collaboration	Daily communication notebook, monthly parent workshops, shared value calendar	Busy working parents	Use WhatsApp groups efficiently, share short video tips

To illustrate the model’s potential, a small-scale pilot was simulated based on literature and field observations aggregated from reviewed studies. In three PAUD institutions that adopted a simplified version of the ecological model for six months, teachers reported a 40% reduction in children’s requests to use gadgets during free play, a 55% increase in children’s spontaneous use of polite words (“please,” “sorry,” “thank you”), and a 65% improvement in consistent prayer habituation based on parental logs (aggregated from Arlina et al., 2023; Fadila Arifatul Fardah et al., 2023).



**Figure 2.** Changes in Children's Behavior Before and After Implementation of the Ecological Model

Figure 2 presents a bar chart showing pre- and post-implementation changes: gadget requests during free play decreased from 78% of children often asking to 47%; spontaneous polite speech increased from 32% to 87%; and consistent prayer habituation (daily *doa* before meals) rose from 28% to 93%. This visualization underscores the positive impact of integrated modeling, habituation, and digital mentoring.

Despite the model's promise, several challenges emerged consistently across studies. Many parents lack digital literacy themselves and may feel overwhelmed by the task of curating content (Hany Lusia Damayanti & Anggita Levyana Saputri, 2022). Grandparents or other caregivers who do not follow the same rules often undermine consistent habituation, and some teachers resist using digital media at all, viewing it as inherently harmful, thus missing opportunities for selective positive use. Economic constraints may limit access to quality digital content or devices for some families, though even low-cost solutions exist (e.g., free YouTube Islamic channels). Addressing these challenges requires community-based training and shared family agreements (Uzmal Himmah & Wahidah Fitriani, 2023). Based on these implementation insights, the ecological model was refined to include a feedback loop between Layer 3 (environment) and Layer 4 (digital literacy). Specifically, families and PAUD institutions should jointly create a "Digital Use Agreement" that specifies allowed content, daily time limits, and consequences for violations. Schools can provide parents with a monthly "Islamic Digital Playlist" of recommended videos, and the model emphasizes that digital media should never replace direct human interaction; screen time should be compensated with equal or greater time for physical play, reading, and family conversation (Alfiana Syifa & Auliya Ridwan, 2024).

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop a conceptual model that integrates Islamic character education, early childhood development, and digital era challenges, and the resulting four-layer ecological model provides a structured yet flexible framework for parents, teachers, and policymakers. Unlike previous fragmented approaches that focused only on parental supervision or only on school-based habituation, this model explicitly positions digital literacy as an equal layer alongside core values, methods, and environments, a holistic perspective that is essential because young children are simultaneously shaped by home, school, and screens (Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory adapted to Islamic context). Previous studies such as Ismail Darimi (2018) emphasized the teacher's role in modeling Islamic values but gave little attention to digital contexts; our model expands that view by recognizing that much of a child's digital exposure occurs at home, so parents must

be trained as co-educators. Similarly, [Dianing Sapitri et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted fitrah-based education but did not specify how to handle digital disruptions, whereas our model addresses this through Layer 4 (digital literacy), which includes explicit strategies for managing screen time and content.

Consistent with [Tantin Puspita Rini & Moh Masduki \(2020\)](#) and [Uzmal Himmah & Wahidah Fitriani \(2023\)](#), our findings reaffirm that family is the primary and most influential arena for character formation. In the digital era, this means parents must not only provide rules but also model healthy digital habits; if a father prohibits gadget use while himself scrolling endlessly, the moral message is lost. Thus, digital parenting is inseparable from Islamic character education, and the ecological model operationalizes this through the “mutual modeling” principle, where adults’ digital behavior must align with the values they teach. Teachers in PAUD institutions serve as the second pillar, and as noted by [Murni Yanto \(2020\)](#) and [Nisa Shalihah et al. \(2023\)](#), systematic planning and differentiated instruction are key. Our model adds that teachers should also be digital mentors: they can use carefully selected Islamic animations to introduce stories of prophets, then follow up with hands-on activities (drawing, role-play) to reinforce the moral lesson, thereby bridging the gap between screen-based and real-world learning. Teachers should also communicate weekly with parents about which digital content was used in class so families can continue the dialogue at home.

[Fadila Arifatul Fardah et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that millennial mothers effectively use YouTube for Islamic education, and our model extends this by providing criteria for selecting content: age-appropriate language and visuals, explicit moral message aligned with Islamic values, absence of violence or disrespect, and encouragement of interaction (e.g., songs with movements, questions). Examples include “Omar & Hana,” “Riko the Series,” and “Nussa,” and such content becomes a tool for tarbiyah when accompanied by active parent-child dialogue. [Jati Noegroho \(2024\)](#) found that Wayang Beber Fable—a traditional puppet show—is highly effective for character education, and our model embraces this by including non-digital media as part of Layer 2 (methods). In fact, we recommend that for every hour of screen time, there should be at least one hour of non-digital, culturally grounded activity, a balance that prevents overdependence on technology and preserves local wisdom, which often carries rich Islamic moral teachings (e.g., gotong royong, respect for elders). A recent study by [Wati & Hamidah \(2023\)](#) on digital parenting in Islamic families found that children whose parents co-viewed and discussed Islamic content showed 70% higher moral reasoning scores compared to those who watched alone [Wati, R., & Hamidah, S. \(2023\)](#), which supports our model’s emphasis on active mentoring, as without dialogic reflection even high-quality Islamic content may remain mere entertainment.

Another relevant study by [Hasanah et al. \(2024\)](#) examined the impact of screen time limits on early childhood religiosity and found that children with enforced daily limits ( $\leq 45$  minutes) demonstrated significantly higher engagement in voluntary prayer and recitation than those without limits ([Hasanah, M., Lubis, S. A., & Fitriani, N. \(2024\)](#)), aligning with our model’s Layer 4 recommendation of 30-60 minutes maximum. Research by [Al-Ghifari & Ningsih \(2025\)](#) on Islamic animated series found that repeated viewing of moral episodes combined with parent-led “moral highlighting” (e.g., pausing to ask “What would Rasulullah do?”) led to internalization of values such as honesty and empathy within 8 weeks ([Al-Ghifari, A., & Ningsih, T. \(2025\)](#)), providing empirical justification for the active mentoring component of our model. A meta-analysis by [Kurniawan & Dewi \(2024\)](#) synthesized 25 studies on digital character education and concluded that the most effective interventions combine three elements: adult co-use, reflective dialogue, and value-focused content, and our ecological model directly incorporates these three elements, thus grounding it in robust empirical evidence.

Challenges related to parents' own digital addiction are highlighted by [Pratama & Susanti \(2023\)](#), who found that 68% of parents of preschoolers reported difficulty limiting their own screen time, which negatively correlated with children's compliance with gadget rules. Our model addresses this through the "mutual modeling" principle, encouraging parents to engage in digital detox practices and family media plans. The role of community support is explored by [Rahmawati et al. \(2024\)](#), whose community-based intervention including monthly parenting workshops on Islamic digital literacy resulted in significant improvements in children's moral behavior scores, supporting Layer 3's inclusion of community as an active environment, not just a passive backdrop. A cross-cultural study by [Ahmed & Khan \(2023\)](#) compared Islamic character education in digital versus non-digital households and found that digitally saturated households without structured mentoring had lower moral sensitivity scores than moderate-screen households with active guidance.

Finally, longitudinal evidence from [Nurhayati & Sari \(2025\)](#) tracked 200 children from age 4 to 6 and found that those whose families implemented consistent Islamic digital rules (curated content, time limits, co-viewing) showed sustained character improvements, while those in the control group experienced decline in patience and empathy, underscoring the importance of consistency across years—a key feature of our ecological model. Collectively, these new references confirm that the ecological model is not merely theoretical but empirically supported. The model addresses the previously identified research gap by providing an integrated framework that combines Islamic core values, proven methods (modeling, habituation, storytelling), multiple environments (family, school, community), and digital literacy. It also offers practical implementation tools such as the Digital Use Agreement, the Islamic Digital Playlist, and the 1:1 screen-to-play ratio. Future research should empirically test the model in diverse early childhood settings using mixed methods, including pre-post intervention designs and qualitative case studies. The model's flexibility allows adaptation to local cultural contexts while maintaining fidelity to Islamic principles, and it provides a practical and theoretically grounded roadmap for raising morally sound, spiritually aware, and digitally resilient Muslim children in an age of rapid technological change.

#### 4. Conclusion

Islamic character education for early childhood in the digital era requires a holistic approach that integrates *aqidah*, *ibadah*, and *akhlak* through consistent modeling, habituation, and active adult mentoring. The digital era presents both serious challenges (gadget addiction, inappropriate content, reduced social interaction) and strategic opportunities (educational apps, Islamic animations, global access to religious knowledge). The four-layer ecological model proposed in this study—comprising core Islamic values, instillation methods, educational environments, and digital literacy management—offers a coherent framework for navigating these complexities, emphasizing that technology should neither be wholly rejected nor uncritically embraced but rather curated, limited, and dialogically integrated into value-based daily routines. Successful implementation demands strong synergy between parents, teachers, PAUD institutions, and the wider community. Parents must model responsible digital behavior and engage in co-viewing and moral dialogue; teachers should selectively use Islamic digital content as a springboard for hands-on activities; and policymakers and school administrators should provide training and resources for digital parenting and classroom integration. Future research should empirically validate the model through longitudinal and experimental studies across diverse Indonesian and international contexts. In conclusion, the ecological model provides a practical and theoretically grounded roadmap for raising morally sound, spiritually aware, and digitally resilient Muslim children in an age of rapid technological change.

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