



Islamic Character Formation in Early Childhood: The Integration of Role Modeling, Habituation, and Reinforcement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the integration of role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement in forming Islamic character foundations in early childhood at TK Alifa Kids Bandung. A qualitative single-case study design was employed, with data collected through participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, an open-ended questionnaire for parents, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the three methods are implemented in an integrated manner within daily learning practices. Role modeling is consistently demonstrated through teachers' behavior, enabling the stages of observational learning to occur naturally. Habituation is structured across daily, weekly, and thematic routines, allowing values to be gradually internalized through repeated practice. Reinforcement is applied through verbal, gestural, token, and activity-based forms, with evidence suggesting that proportional and selective reinforcement better supports the development of intrinsic motivation than high-frequency reinforcement. The study also finds that core dimensions of Islamic character begin to emerge and extend beyond the classroom into the home environment. Conceptually, this study proposes that the integration of role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement functions as a coherent learning ecosystem, in which each method plays a complementary role in supporting the formation of sustainable character in early childhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) occupies a strategic position in Indonesia's national education system, designated as the foundational phase of the national curriculum, serving as the earliest stage that becomes the basis for child development prior to entering primary school (Kemendikbudristek, 2025). At this phase, education is directed toward the formation of religious values, personal identity, and basic competencies through meaningful and integrated learning experiences (Hikrawati, 2024; A. T. Putri et al., 2023). The urgency of this phase is further affirmed by developmental science: research by Keith Osborn, Burton L. White, and Benjamin S. Bloom in Iting (2019) demonstrates that approximately 50% of adult intellectual variability is

formed by age four, with an additional 30% developing by age eight. These two pillars, regulatory and developmental, together affirm that early childhood constitutes the most critical and most strategic period for character formation, including Islamic character.

The normative foundation for Islamic character formation in ECE is explicitly established across multiple national education policies. Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Article 3, mandates that education aims to develop learners who are faithful and devoted to God, noble in character, and responsible citizens. Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 institutionalizes character education strengthening based on religious values across all levels of education (Makarim et al., 2022), while Minister of Education Regulation No. 137 of 2014 establishes religious and moral values as one of the six primary developmental domains in the Standard of Early Childhood Development Achievement (Hidayat & Nurlatifah, 2023). Government Regulation No. 55 of 2007 further opens institutional space for religious education across various child service settings (Muhammad & Tobroni, 2024). Collectively, these regulatory frameworks affirm that Islamic character formation is not a supplementary concern but a central mandate of the national education system.

Within the ECE context, the cultivation of religious values is not organized as an Islamic Religious Education subject as it is at the primary and secondary levels. Instead, it is embedded within the domain of Religious Values and Moral Development (Pengembangan Nilai Agama dan Budi Pekerti), which constitutes one of the six primary developmental domains in the ECE curriculum (Kemendikbudristek, 2025). This characteristic demands pedagogical strategies that are specifically appropriate for the developmental stage of early childhood. Among the range of applicable approaches, role modeling (*keteladanan*) and habituation (*habitiasi*) are identified as the most relevant methods for value internalization and Islamic character formation in young children (Fajriati & Prastiani, 2022; Hernawati et al., 2025; Jumi Alia Tini et al., 2025). Their relevance is grounded in the reality that early childhood is developmentally characterized by learning through imitation and direct experience, a condition that theoretically explains why role models and behavioral repetition constitute the primary pathways of character formation during this period (Trismayanti et al., 2026; Wisudaningsih et al., 2025). From an Islamic perspective, this condition aligns with the concept of *fitrah*, as affirmed in the hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim: "Every child is born in a state of *fitrah*; it is their parents who make them Jewish, Christian, or Magian." This hadith establishes that character is not formed in isolation but is decisively shaped by the quality of the environment and role models encountered in early life (Auliarrahma et al., 2024).

Empirical studies confirm the positive contribution of role modeling and habituation to early childhood character formation. Teachers who consistently demonstrate religious behavior as a living example have been shown to effectively shape children's politeness, discipline, and prosocial behavior (Yustisiana & Wijayanti, 2026; Mufarrohah & Suyadi, 2025; Ruswandi et al., 2023). The synergy between both methods also produces more stable character outcomes compared to applying either method in isolation, particularly in strengthening the spiritual dimension of children's development through meaningful repetition (Dewi Rukmandari et al., 2025; Khofifah & Mufarochah, 2022). However, behind these positive findings, field practice reveals an unresolved problem: religious behavior formed through role modeling and habituation tends to be situational, as children do not sustain those habits when the role model is absent or when they are outside the learning context (Sholekah, 2024). Furthermore, monotonous repetition patterns risk inducing boredom and suppressing children's intrinsic motivation over

time (Firda Amalia et al., 2024). These conditions indicate that role modeling and habituation, while effective in eliciting religious behavior, are insufficient on their own to ensure the sustainability and consistency of that behavior independently.

It is this gap that establishes the strategic relevance of reinforcement (penguatan) as a complementary technique. Reinforcement functions to strengthen the likelihood of a positive behavior recurring through a response delivered promptly and proportionally following the behavior (Deltiara & Lestari, 2025; A. I. Putri & Nawangtoro, 2025). Studies indicate that consistent application of reinforcement effectively enhances the sustainability and consistency of children's religious and moral behavior, provided it is not applied excessively in ways that cultivate dependence on extrinsic motivation (Ulfa et al., 2025; Zabrina, 2023). Reinforcement thus does not stand as an independent method but as a mechanism that sustains the values instilled through role modeling and habituation, ensuring they persist consistently in children's behavior.

A review of prior research reveals that studies on Islamic character formation in ECE have largely remained partial in scope, examining role modeling, habituation, or family and teacher collaboration in isolation (Ghani, 2024; Harefa & Ridha, 2025; Toyibah et al., 2024; Wahyuni & Putra, 2020). Research that explicitly integrates all three strategies within a single applied framework, and examines their outcomes through repeated behavioral observation in naturalistic settings, remains limited. This study addresses that gap by investigating the implementation of the integration of role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement at TK Alifa Kids Bandung, a character-based ECE institution that has systematically developed its own Islamic character curriculum since its founding, and identifying the Islamic character foundations formed as a result. The study was conducted through participatory observation across repeated sessions, triangulated with in-depth interviews and documentation analysis. This research supports and extends the existing literature on Islamic character formation in ECE by proposing an integrated analytical framework that combines Bandura's social learning theory with Thorndike's reinforcement theory, a theoretical integration that has not been explicitly articulated in prior studies. Specifically, this study addresses four research questions: (1) How is role modeling applied in forming Islamic character foundations in early childhood? (2) How is habituation applied in forming Islamic character foundations in early childhood? (3) How is reinforcement applied in forming Islamic character foundations in early childhood? (4) What Islamic character foundations are formed through the integrated application of these three strategies?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach aimed at understanding in depth the processes, meanings, and dynamics of Islamic character formation strategies in early childhood through role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement (Imanina, 2020). The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture social reality naturalistically without variable manipulation, while enabling direct interaction between the researcher and the subjects and research setting (Safarudin et al., 2023).

The research design was a single case study, focusing on TK Alifa Kids Bandung as a bounded system that has systematically integrated Islamic values into its learning activities and daily life. Case study methodology was chosen to enable in-depth and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, without aiming for broad generalization (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Crowe et al., 2011; Rashid et al., 2019). The researcher served as a participant observer,

directly involved in the educational process while conducting systematic observation of practices in the field. This insider researcher position had been established over several months prior to the formal data collection period, through the researcher's role as a classroom teacher at TK Alifa Kids, which facilitated deeper understanding of institutional culture, routines, and patterns of interaction within the institution.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus. Key informants consisted of the Curriculum Coordinator and two classroom teachers, one from TK A (ages 4 to 5 years) and one from TK B (ages 5 to 6 years). Six parents of students from the observed classes were also involved as supporting informants through an open questionnaire, selected by random sampling with three parents per class.

Data were collected over a period of approximately two months through four techniques applied in a triangulated manner. First, participatory observation was conducted across ten sessions divided equally between TK A and TK B classes, each spanning one week with five sessions per week. Each session was focused on a different aspect, covering the application of role modeling, habituation, reinforcement, Islamic character formation, and weekly religious routines respectively. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Curriculum Coordinator and both classroom teachers, recorded and transcribed substantively to capture information directly relevant to the research questions. Third, an open questionnaire was distributed to six parents to gather information about the development of Islamic character in the home environment, including consistency of behavior, concrete examples, and degree of self-initiation. Fourth, documentation study was conducted by analyzing institutional documents including the school curriculum, Standard Operating Procedures, lesson plans, daily activity records, and photographic documentation of learning activities.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), comprising three stages. In the data reduction stage, all field data were selected, focused, and categorized into themes aligned with the four research questions. In the data display stage, reduced data were arranged into systematic narrative descriptions to identify patterns, relationships, and emerging tendencies. In the conclusion drawing and verification stage, findings were interpreted through iterative reflection and cross-validated through source and technique triangulation to ensure consistency and credibility of findings (Susanto et al., 2023). Data validity was further strengthened through member checking with key informants and intensive participatory observation over an extended period in the research setting (Luthfiyani & Murhayati, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Role Modeling in the Formation of Islamic Character Foundations in Early Childhood

The implementation of role modeling at TK Alifa Kids is not merely dependent on the individual capacity of teachers, but is supported by a structured and comprehensive institutional framework. This is noteworthy, as in many early childhood education settings, exemplariness is often treated as a personal matter that relies heavily on individual awareness and commitment, without sufficient systemic support (Waqfin, 2019). In contrast, TK Alifa Kids actively develops an infrastructure that sustains consistency in exemplariness through three complementary mechanisms. These include: (1) a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) regulating teachers' conduct and interaction styles, (2) a mandatory commitment letter signed by all teachers upon

entry, and (3) a daily monitoring system conducted by school leadership. This arrangement demonstrates that the sustainability of exemplariness is not left to individual disposition, but is reinforced through an institutional ecosystem (Agung Firmansyah et al., 2026). Such a finding is consistent with Bandura's view that the effectiveness of modeling depends on the consistency and credibility of the model (Mahtumah, 2023). Within social learning theory, observational learning occurs optimally when the model consistently demonstrates behaviors that are observable and meaningful to the learner (Zahro'atul Baroroh & Ani, 2026). Thus, the institutional system at TK Alifa Kids functions as an infrastructure that ensures the quality of the model is maintained regardless of fluctuations in individual teachers' conditions. In this regard, the institutional system functions as a stabilizing structure that maintains the quality of modeling regardless of variations in individual teacher conditions.

At the practical level, observations confirm that all four stages of Bandura's modeling process were present and actively manifested in both classrooms. The attention stage was deliberately constructed by teachers through different approaches that led to the same outcome—ensuring children's readiness before the modeling process began. Teacher 1 employed calm instructions combined with direct eye contact, while Teacher 2 utilized stories, songs, and brief games to engage children. This variation reinforces the idea that attention does not arise automatically, but must be intentionally facilitated (Hikmatuzzohrah & Wathoni, 2026; Rahimi et al., 2025). Evidence of the retention stage appeared during recalling sessions, where children were able to restate expected behaviors, such as preparing before learning activities, indicating that observed values had been cognitively stored (Ansani & Samsir, 2022). The reproduction stage was reflected in children's independent behaviors, including praying before activities, tidying learning materials, and helping peers without prompts. More importantly, the motivation stage emerged through children's initiative to remind and invite peers to act appropriately (Shabrina et al., 2025). In Bandura's framework, this stage represents a critical transition from imitation to sustained behavior driven by internal motivation (Tullah & Amiruddin, 2020). The presence of this stage suggests that learning at TK Alifa Kids extends beyond surface imitation toward the development of internalized behavioral tendencies.

From an Islamic educational perspective, these findings resonate with the thought of 'Athiyah al-Abrasyi, who emphasizes exemplariness as the primary method of character formation, given children's natural tendency to imitate significant figures such as teachers and parents (Azzahro Khoirunnisa et al., 2024). This perspective is further reinforced by Sya'rawi through QS. Al-Ahzab (33:21), which positions the Prophet Muhammad SAW as the ultimate model (*uswah hasanah*) for humanity (Darwin & Nasution, 2023). The use of prophetic exemplariness as a reference in teaching practice reflects the internalization of this concept within the institutional culture. In addition, Ibnu Miskawaih highlights that consistent exposure to good examples shapes the soul into a stable condition that drives spontaneous moral action (Salamah, 2025). The emergence of independent positive behaviors among children indicates the early formation of this internal condition, marking a shift from compliance to genuine value internalization.

Despite these strengths, teacher emotional consistency emerged as a notable challenge. Young children are highly sensitive to the emotional states of adults, responding to subtle cues such as tone, facial expression, and body language. When teachers experience emotional strain, children tend to withdraw or resist, reducing the effectiveness of value transmission (Ashar & Idamayanti, 2026; Mala et al., 2026). This highlights that exemplariness is not solely behavioral,

but also emotional in nature, requiring teachers to maintain stability and warmth in interaction (Farina et al., 2025; Nur Faudillah et al., 2024). In practice, such emotional readiness cannot rely solely on individual effort. Institutional support plays a crucial role in maintaining teacher readiness (Ayu, 2021). As expressed by Teacher 1: *“The teacher must first put herself in order. She needs to manage her emotions and maintain enthusiasm before interacting with children.”* At TK Alifa Kids, the daily monitoring system functions not only as supervision, but also as a support mechanism that ensures teachers are prepared both professionally and emotionally. Thus, the responsibility for sustaining exemplariness is shared collectively within the institutional system, rather than placed solely on individual teachers.

Implementation of Habituation in the Formation of Islamic Character Foundations in Early Childhood

The effectiveness of the habituation method at TK Alifa Kids can be comprehensively understood through Thorndike’s three laws of learning: the Law of Readiness, Law of Exercise, and Law of Effect. These principles are not only theoretically relevant, but also empirically reflected in the habituation practices observed in both classrooms. This understanding is further enriched by an Islamic educational perspective, particularly through the thought of Ibnu Miskawaih and Al-Ghazali, which positions habituation as a process of value internalization rather than mere behavioral repetition.

From the perspective of the Law of Readiness, habituation is not determined solely by repetition frequency, but by the extent to which children’s physical and psychological readiness is ensured prior to implementation. In many early childhood settings, habituation is often applied directly without considering children’s readiness. However, observations at TK Alifa Kids suggest that such an approach risks generating resistance rather than internalization, thereby weakening the formation of stable behavioral patterns. This aligns with Thorndike’s view that learning occurs effectively only when individuals are prepared to respond to stimuli (Amsari, 2018; Hermansyah, 2020). In practice, both teachers actively constructed readiness through different approaches. Teacher 1 allocated 15–20 minutes at the beginning of each session for children to settle and regulate themselves emotionally. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 employed the 3B technique, *bercerita* (storytelling), *bernyanyi* (singing), and *bermain* (playing), to build engagement and relational connection before habituation activities began. In both cases, readiness was treated as a deliberate prerequisite rather than an incidental condition.

In terms of the Law of Exercise, habituation at TK Alifa Kids was implemented through a structured and layered repetition system rather than a linear routine. Three complementary layers were identified: daily, weekly, and event-based. The daily layer consisted of a consistent sequence of activities, including opening prayers, classroom rule reinforcement, memorization of supplications and short Qur’anic verses, individualized Iqra sessions, habit training through video-assisted play-and-pause techniques, and closing reflections. At the weekly level, the *Lovely Morning* program introduced variation in value stimulation throughout the week, culminating in the communal *Dhuha* prayer every Friday. This activity integrated *wudu* guidance, movement correction, and recitation practice. At the event-based level, activities such as the *Maulid Nabi* program were designed across multiple sessions, incorporating immersive experiences like retracing the Prophet’s journey through Google Earth and the *Pohon Akhlak Rasulullah* project. This multi-layered structure allows Islamic values to be practiced across varied contexts and

intensities, thereby strengthening stimulus-response connections as described in Thorndike's Law of Exercise (Abduh et al., 2023).

The Law of Effect further explains variations in children's engagement during habituation. Observations show that children respond more positively when activities are meaningful, varied, and experientially engaging, whereas repetitive and less dynamic routines tend to reduce enthusiasm. For instance, the play-and-pause technique encouraged active participation and spontaneous responses, while the immersive Maulid Nabi activities generated significantly higher engagement compared to routine sessions. This supports the idea that responses followed by satisfying experiences are more likely to be maintained (Santoso & Dwi Pamungkas, 2021). It is important to distinguish that, within habituation, the Law of Effect refers to the quality of the experience embedded in the repetition process itself. This differs from reinforcement, which involves external responses designed to strengthen behaviors after they emerge, as discussed in the following section.

From an Islamic educational perspective, these findings align with Ibnu Miskawaih's concept of *riyadhah al-nafs*, which emphasizes disciplined and repeated training of the soul until virtuous behavior becomes an internalized and stable disposition (Ridwan & Aisyah, 2022). The emergence of independent behaviors among children, such as practicing routines without reminders, indicates an early stage of this internalization process. Al-Ghazali further emphasizes that habituation leads to genuine character formation only when supported by guidance, exemplariness, and meaningful understanding. Without these elements, repetition risks becoming mechanical and superficial (Apdifa et al., 2025; Kosim et al., 2025). This principle is reflected in Teacher 2's statement: "When a habit is continuously reminded, it can be stored in the child's subconscious." Although derived from different intellectual traditions, Thorndike, Ibnu Miskawaih, and Al-Ghazali converge on a similar conclusion: effective habituation requires readiness, structured repetition, meaningful experience, and guided support. All of these elements were found to be present in the practices at TK Alifa Kids.

Despite these strengths, two main challenges were identified. The first relates to teacher consistency in maintaining habituation routines. Inconsistency—whether due to emotional fluctuation or reduced professional awareness—can disrupt the formation of stable stimulus-response patterns in children. This suggests that the Law of Exercise depends not only on repetition frequency from the child's side, but also on the reliability of the teacher's actions. The second challenge relates to children's boredom, particularly in the context of increasing exposure to rapidly changing digital stimuli. This indicates that high repetition alone does not guarantee internalization if the quality of the experience declines. In this regard, collaboration with parents plays a crucial role in extending habituation beyond the school environment. At TK Alifa Kids, such collaboration helps sustain the habituation process across contexts, aligning with Al-Ghazali's view that character formation requires continuity between educational environments (Kosim et al., 2025).

Implementation of Reinforcement in the Formation of Islamic Character Foundations in Early Childhood

The implementation of reinforcement at TK Alifa Kids is guided by an institutional principle of proportionality. The school explicitly discourages excessive praise and instead directs teachers to provide reinforcement that is genuine, measured, and oriented toward nurturing intrinsic motivation rather than conditioning children to seek rewards. This approach reflects

Skinner's operant conditioning framework, where reinforcement functions as a consequence that increases the likelihood of behavior recurrence when delivered appropriately (Deltiara & Lestari, 2025; A. I. Putri & Nawangtoro, 2025). In line with this, reinforcement is positioned not merely as a tool for control, but as a means to support meaningful behavioral development (Zabrina et al., 2023).

Classroom observations reveal four forms of reinforcement embedded in daily learning practices. Verbal reinforcement appears through proportional expressions such as "thank you," "well done," or "you have tried your best," delivered selectively based on behavioral consistency rather than automatically after every positive act. Usman in Sholihah & Noer Laela (2021) such responses function as feedback that helps sustain positive behavior. Gestural reinforcement complements this through facial expressions, eye contact, smiles, nods, and other affirming body language. During one-on-one Iqra sessions, for example, Teacher 1 consistently used warm eye contact and genuine smiles to ensure each child felt individually acknowledged without comparison to peers. This combination strengthens the emotional impact of reinforcement, making it more enduring (Werdi, 2021). Symbolic reinforcement is implemented through a dual "board habit" system. The individual board involves children and parents in completing daily good habit checklists both at school and at home, while the class board provides visual indicators, smile, neutral, and sad stickers, to reflect collective behavioral patterns. This arrangement offers continuous and concrete feedback while extending the reinforcement process beyond the classroom into the home environment. In addition, activity-based reinforcement is provided through free play sessions at the end of each lesson, functioning as a shared acknowledgment of active participation. Together, these forms create a reinforcement ecosystem that connects individual, social, and experiential dimensions of learning.

A clearer pattern emerges when comparing reinforcement practices across the two classrooms. In TK A, reinforcement is applied selectively and tied to behavioral stability. Teacher 1 intentionally withholds reinforcement until positive behavior appears consistently, then gradually reduces its intensity as internalization develops. Consequently, children tend to act based on internal awareness without actively seeking validation. In contrast, TK B demonstrates a more frequent and expressive approach. Teacher 2 often provides spontaneous praise—even for simple behaviors—to build confidence, particularly among children who receive limited appreciation at home. However, this approach is associated with stronger tendencies toward extrinsic motivation, as reflected in children's frequent attempts to seek validation (e.g., "Miss, is this good?"). This contrast underscores that reinforcement is not primarily a matter of frequency, but of precision and proportion. As emphasized by Sanjaya (Dewi & Haryono, 2013), reinforcement must be delivered in ways that sustain rather than undermine intrinsic motivation. The institutional SOP at TK Alifa Kids, which regulates reinforcement practices, reflects a theoretically grounded stance in this regard.

A recurring challenge lies in the diminishing impact of reinforcement when a particular form is used repeatedly. Teachers observed that children's enthusiasm toward specific reward stimuli tends to decline over time, necessitating continuous variation. To address this, both teachers emphasize maintaining proportionality, prioritizing emotional connection over material rewards, and gradually reducing reinforcement intensity as behaviors become internalized. Such an approach aligns with Skinner's perspective that the strength of reinforcement lies not in its frequency, but in its alignment with children's developmental needs and behavioral progression (Ulfa et al., 2025).

Islamic Character Foundations Formed through the Implementation of Role Modeling, Habituation, and Reinforcement

TK Alifa Kids employs an institutional character assessment framework consisting of two main components. The first is the ALIFA character framework, an acronym derived from the institution's name, encompassing five dimensions: Loyal (spiritual commitment, resilience, and self-regulation), Amanah (responsibility and trustworthiness), Inisiatif (independence and initiative), Fatonah (intellectual curiosity and critical thinking), and Adil (fairness, courtesy, and empathy). The second component is the Habit Fundamentals, which includes Habit of Right Living, children's ability to perform daily routines, particularly religious practices, independently and with understanding, and Habit of Obedience, referring to children's consistency in following rules and modeling expected behavior. Each dimension is assessed through observable behavioral indicators arranged progressively, from prompted actions to spontaneous and independent behavior. This framework serves as the institutional lens for identifying character development outcomes in this study. Data triangulation from observations, interviews, and parent questionnaires indicates that Islamic character foundations have begun to develop across these dimensions. The development, however, was not uniform. Approximately 50% of children in TK A demonstrated independent good habits without reminders, while around 60% of children in TK B showed development across ALIFA dimensions, although many behaviors in TK B remained dependent on teacher validation due to more frequent reinforcement practices.

The Loyal character in its spiritual dimension emerged most clearly in classroom observations. Children showed increasing ability to perform wudu and Dhuha prayer sequences, recite daily supplications and short Qur'anic verses with improving accuracy, and participate with reduced dependence on teacher guidance. Observations during Friday sessions confirmed this pattern, although levels of independence varied among individuals. Teacher reflections and parent reports further strengthened this finding. Several parents noted that children had begun praying consistently at home, reading supplications, and even initiating religious practices independently, such as retrieving their Iqra books after Maghrib prayer without instruction. Loyal also appeared in the dimensions of resilience and self-regulation, primarily reflected in home contexts. Parents reported reduced tendencies to give up when facing challenges and improved emotional control. In one case, a child previously prone to anger demonstrated noticeable progress in managing emotions. The emergence of these behaviors outside the classroom suggests that values practiced at school had begun to extend into everyday life.

The Amanah dimension was reflected in children's growing sense of responsibility, particularly in managing personal belongings and completing entrusted tasks. Observations showed behavioral shifts from dependence to independence, such as consistently organizing personal items without reminders. This development was also confirmed by parent reports across both classrooms. Inisiatif, particularly in the dimension of independence, was evident through children's willingness to carry out daily routines, maintain classroom order, and assist peers without being prompted. This aligns with the Habit of Right Living indicator, which emphasizes independence in daily practices alongside an emerging understanding of their purpose. The Adil character, especially in the aspect of courtesy, was among the most consistently observed across classroom interactions. Children demonstrated polite communication, asked permission appropriately, and respected turn-taking in shared activities. In addition, empathy and care for others emerged as the most widely reported character dimension, confirmed by all parent respondents, making it the strongest indicator across data sources.

At the level of Habit Fundamentals, Habit of Right Living was reflected in children's increasing independence in performing routine worship, while Habit of Obedience appeared in their ability to follow rules consistently and, in some cases, serve as behavioral models for peers. The presence of these behaviors in both structured classroom settings and spontaneous situations, as well as their confirmation in home environments, indicates that the values being developed had begun to move beyond situational compliance toward early stages of internalization.

Integration of Role Modeling, Habituation, and Reinforcement as a Framework for the Formation of Islamic Character Foundations

Overall, the data demonstrate that role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement are not implemented as separate strategies at TK Alifa Kids. Instead, they operate simultaneously and complement one another throughout the learning process. This pattern resonates with Dewi Rukmandari (2025), who found that the synergy between exemplariness and habituation contributes to more stable character formation, particularly in strengthening children's spiritual dimension. Building on this, the present study extends the discussion by showing that the inclusion of reinforcement as a third mechanism supports more sustained character development that is less dependent on the constant presence of a role model.

From a mechanistic perspective, the integration of these three methods reflects both sequential and simultaneous relationships. Role modeling serves as the source of values, where teachers present concrete behaviors that children can observe and imitate, providing a credible reference for Islamic values. Without consistent exemplariness, habituation risks becoming mere behavioral repetition without meaningful value grounding, as emphasized by Al-Ghazali. Habituation then functions as a consolidation mechanism, in which observed values are reinforced through structured repetition across daily, weekly, and event-based layers, gradually forming automatic behavioral patterns. Reinforcement, in turn, acts as a stabilization mechanism by strengthening the recurrence of desired behaviors and sustaining children's motivation until internalization becomes firmly established.

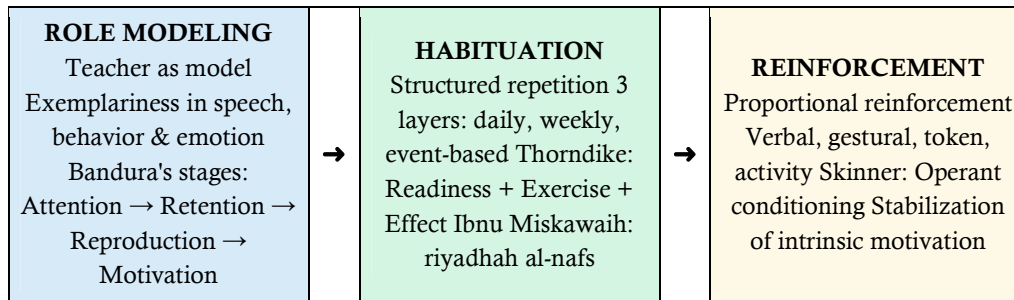
This integration is clearly observable in classroom practice. During the opening prayer session, for instance, the teacher demonstrates proper prayer etiquette (role modeling), children repeat the same recitations daily (habituation), and positive responses such as smiles or brief praise are given when children show focus (reinforcement). A similar pattern appears in the Dhuha prayer session: teachers guide wudu and prayer movements directly (role modeling), the activity is conducted regularly every Friday (habituation), and children receive warm acknowledgment such as eye contact and expressions like "Masya Allah" (reinforcement). Such patterns consistently appear across all learning stages, including classroom conditioning, rule-setting, religious practices, habit training, and recalling sessions. The three methods operate in tandem, each reinforcing the others, such that removing one would weaken the overall process.

Beyond classroom observation, this integrative approach also addresses limitations identified in prior studies. Sholekah (2024) noted that character formed solely through exemplariness and habituation often remains situational and diminishes in the absence of a role model. Firda Amalia et al. (2024) highlighted that repetitive routines, when lacking variation, may lead to boredom and reduced intrinsic motivation. The practices at TK Alifa Kids respond to both issues simultaneously: institutionalized exemplariness ensures consistent value references, layered and varied habituation maintains engagement, and proportional reinforcement sustains motivation even when direct modeling is not continuously present. While Khofifah &

Mufaroahah (2022) emphasize the importance of exemplariness and habituation, the present findings indicate that their impact becomes more optimal when supported by structured reinforcement.

The figure below illustrates the integration flow of the three methods and the resulting Islamic character internalization process.

Figure. Integration Flow of Role Modeling, Habituation, and Reinforcement toward the Internalization of Islamic Character



The figure highlights that Islamic character internalization emerges from the synergy of all three methods rather than from any single approach. Role modeling provides a concrete depiction of values, habituation consolidates those values into routine behavior, and reinforcement sustains motivation until children are able to act independently. The resulting character dimensions, Loyal, Amanah, Inisiatif, Adil, and Habit Fundamentals, reflect not merely compliance with institutional rules, but values that have begun to manifest in children's daily lives, both in school and at home.

Comparative insights between TK A and TK B further clarify this dynamic. Although both classrooms applied the same three methods, differences in their calibration produced distinct outcomes. In TK A, selective and proportional reinforcement supported the emergence of behavior driven by internal awareness. In contrast, the higher frequency of reinforcement in TK B led to a stronger tendency toward extrinsic motivation, with children more frequently seeking validation from teachers. This contrast underscores a critical point: the mere coexistence of the three methods is insufficient. What ultimately shapes the depth of internalization is how each method is proportionally balanced within the learning process.

From a theoretical standpoint, this integrative framework bridges multiple traditions that are often examined separately. Bandura's social learning theory explains how values are acquired through observation, Thorndike's laws of learning describe how those values are strengthened through repetition, and Skinner's operant conditioning clarifies how behavior is maintained over time. These perspectives are further reinforced by Islamic educational thought, including the concept of *uswah hasanah*, Ibnu Miskawaih's *riyadhah al-nafs*, and Al-Ghazali's emphasis on meaningful habituation. Together, they form a coherent foundation that supports the integration observed in this study. Taken together, these findings suggest that integrating role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement within a unified framework offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported approach to fostering deeper and more sustainable Islamic character formation in early childhood, compared to the partial application of individual methods.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the formation of Islamic character foundations in early childhood is best supported through the integrated and proportionally calibrated application of role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement, rather than through any single method in isolation. These three approaches function as an interconnected system in which values are introduced through consistent behavioral examples, strengthened through structured and repeated practice, and sustained through appropriate motivational support until they develop into independent behavior. The findings indicate that multiple dimensions of Islamic character were formed, including Loyal (in its spiritual and resilience aspects), Amanah, Inisiatif, and Adil (particularly in courtesy and empathy), alongside the development of key habitual behaviors reflected in the Habit Fundamentals. Importantly, these character indicators were not only observed in classroom settings but were also reported to emerge in children's daily lives at home, suggesting an early stage of value internalization beyond situational compliance. A critical insight from the comparative analysis between TK A and TK B highlights that the effectiveness of this integrative approach is strongly influenced by how reinforcement is calibrated. Selective and proportionate reinforcement was associated with the development of intrinsic motivation and more independent behavior, while high-frequency reinforcement tended to encourage reliance on external validation. This finding underscores that the quality and balance of implementation are more decisive than the mere presence of the methods themselves. As a contribution, this study offers an integrative framework that brings together three commonly used approaches into a coherent and practice-oriented system for early childhood Islamic character formation. Unlike prior studies that examine these methods separately, this research demonstrates how their interaction produces more sustained and meaningful outcomes. Practically, the findings suggest that educators and institutions should not treat role modeling, habituation, and reinforcement as isolated strategies. Instead, character education programs need to be designed as a consistent ecosystem, supported by clear institutional structures, varied and meaningful habituation practices, and carefully calibrated reinforcement that gradually shifts children toward intrinsic motivation..

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