Strategies for Building Children's Religious Character in Foster Homes and Modern Tahfiz Institutions

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Abstract
Religious character is essential for children to navigate the challenges of rapid societal changes and moral degradation. This study aims to analyze the strategies employed in fostering religious character development in children at educational institutions, such as foster homes and modern Tahfiz institutions. The research utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis involves data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the strategies implemented by the Yakesma Modern Tahfiz and Foster Home in Medan include religious mentoring, character education, motivational guidance, fostering independence and discipline, and promoting social interactions. Supporting factors, such as adequate facilities and skilled caregivers, play a crucial role, while challenges arise from children's unstable emotional development. These strategies effectively shape the religious character of children, equipping them to face future societal challenges with resilience and moral integrity.
Keywords: Foster Homes, Character Development, Religious Character, Modern Tahfiz, Children Education

Introduction

The character of children in today's era of globalization is increasingly concerning. The rapid advancement of technology has made it easy to access digital information. While this convenience provides knowledge, it also undermines character values. Data collected by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the Indonesian Federation of Teachers' Unions (FSGI) shows that bullying cases in Indonesia reached 226 incidents in 2022. This marks a significant increase from 119 cases in 2020 and 53 cases in 2021. Instilling religious character from an early age is crucial to address the growing moral degradation among children in Indonesia.

Ki Hadjar Dewantara states that character or personality is the totality of the human spirit, grounded in spiritual discipline. This character is reflected in manners, demeanor, and nature, which are a fusion of thoughts, feelings, will, and desires, creating energy within individuals. "Budi" represents thought, feeling, and will, while "character" is the force driving human traits from aspirations to real actions (Ningsih, 2021). This indicates that individuals possess varying characters, both positive and negative, which become ingrained within them. As described in the book by Trilisiana (2023), character is defined as consistent behavior, whether visible or invisible, which expresses mental traits and environmental structures, whether observed by others or not. Therefore, individual character must be nurtured from an early age to develop positive traits.

Building quality character during childhood is essential, as this is a critical period in personality formation (Rahmah, 2018). Implanting character values from a young age lays the foundation for human personality (Tanto et al., 2019). According to Hakam (Ansori, 2021), failure to internalize moral values during childhood can have adverse effects on moral life in the future. One approach to address this is by fostering

religious character in children.

Religious character is vital for students to navigate the challenges of a shifting era and moral decline. Students are expected to possess and act in accordance with religious standards of good and bad (Sukatin, 2021). Additionally, this character serves as a foundation for actions and a guide to avoid negative behaviors (Hutami, 2020). Previous research by Haidir (2022) revealed that cultivating positive attitudes helps children become better individuals capable of adapting to technological advancements while preserving core values. Religious character values pertain to a person's relationship with God, encompassing thoughts, speech, and actions guided by spiritual values and/or religious teachings. Thus, children are required to act and behave according to moral and religious norms (Waldi, 2022).

The formation of character begins with family upbringing, which serves as the first and foremost environment for character development, particularly religious character. However, not all children receive adequate affection and guidance from their families or parents, especially in terms of character development. Many challenges persist, such as abandoned children, orphans, and children from economically disadvantaged families. The government and society have attempted to address these issues by establishing foster homes (Kurniawati, 2019).

Foster homes serve as a social care facility for orphans, abandoned children, and children from underprivileged families, providing them with affection and education. Children raised in foster homes not only receive care and attention but also develop religious character through the application of religious values. This habituation includes religious mentoring, such as Quran recitation, congregational prayers, dhikr, and more. In essence, fostering religious character is achieved through comprehensive services that include spiritual, physical, mental, and social development, similar to the care provided by Islamic boarding schools. The goal is to prepare these children for a meaningful future and to benefit the communities they will join (Cikka & Hamid, 2020).

The Yakesma foster home program in North Sumatra aims to empower orphans and underprivileged children, with the hope of producing a generation that is not only equipped with worldly knowledge but also with spiritual wisdom for eternal happiness. Children living in foster homes are expected to face life challenges after leaving the foster environment with the religious character they have developed. However, this character development does not come without challenges.

Challenges identified in this study include children often experiencing emotional trauma due to losing their parents, lack of attention and affection during early development, and economic constraints. The children in foster homes come from various backgrounds, such as orphans abandoned by their parents, lack of parental affection, or economic difficulties. To address these psychological and social challenges, they often require individualized training methods. This is where caregivers play a crucial role in nurturing, guiding, and educating the children in accordance with Islamic principles (Wahyuni, 2018).

Previous studies have explored efforts to develop religious character in foster homes. For instance, research by Gunawan & Syamsudin (2023) showed that the strategies for developing religious character at Muhammadiyah Tuksono Children's Welfare Institution were well-implemented. Using appropriate approaches, activities such as congregational prayers, Islamic education, and religious schools were

conducted regularly and systematically. Another study by Yudowati & Lumajang (2021) found that foster homes are responsible for instilling religious values in their wards through curative and rehabilitative services. Research by Cikka & Hamid (2020) also demonstrated that the efforts of caregivers to build children's religious character are greatly supported by the facilities and conditions of the foster homes. By living in dormitories, religious character formation can be carried out optimally.

However, these studies have not fully examined the specific challenges faced in nurturing children with complex social backgrounds, especially in foster homes and modern Tahfiz institutions. Moreover, the lack of character education at home, which should be the primary environment for character formation, exacerbates the situation due to the pervasive influence of technology. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring effective strategies and obstacles in shaping the religious character of children in foster homes and modern Tahfiz institutions.

The research aims to understand and describe effective strategies for fostering children's religious character in various educational institutions, including foster homes and modern Tahfiz institutions. The findings are expected to serve as a reference to improve the quality of religious character development in similar institutions.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, aiming to explore and describe phenomena based on collected data and analyze them descriptively. Qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of the strategies used to shape children's religious character. The descriptive approach was chosen to provide a detailed depiction of the research subjects and their context.

The study was conducted at Yakesma Modern Tahfiz and Foster Home in North Sumatra, located on Marelan V Street, Gang Tono, Rengas Pulau, Medan Marelan District, Medan City, North Sumatra. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they met criteria relevant to the research objectives.

Tabel 1. Lists the informants involved in this study

Initials	Role
AI	Ustadzah
KI	Caregiver
EL	Program Coordinator
SR	Head of Yakesma Institution
HS	Foster Child
YI	Foster Child

Data collection involved 30–45-minute interview sessions using semi-structured guidelines to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility to explore relevant issues. Observations were carried out over two weeks, focusing on the daily activities of the children, such as Quran recitation, congregational prayers, and social interactions.

Additional information was gathered from activity logs, annual reports, and religious development programs implemented in the foster home.

The collected data were analyzed using a systematic process of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation was employed to ensure data validity, incorporating various sources for verification and comparison, including observations, interviews, and documentation. Triangulation techniques were tailored to the research methods used, ensuring the credibility of the findings.

This methodology enabled the researchers to comprehensively explore the strategies and challenges involved in fostering religious character among children in the foster home and modern Tahfiz institution.

Results and Discussion

Based on the findings of the research conducted in the field, it was observed that activities at the Yakesma SUMUT foster home focused on teaching various aspects, particularly the application of religious teachings, as a priority. This ensures that foster children can live meaningful lives upon leaving the foster home. Religion serves as a guideline for human life to attain meaningful happiness, influencing human behavior to distinguish between good and bad actions.

Interviews with the head of the Yakesma SUMUT institution revealed strategies for fostering the religious character of children in the foster home and Modern Tahfiz Yakesma of North Sumatra. The head explained:

"The educational segment at Yakesma prioritizes character education for children. Since a child's character reflects their future self, potential is futile without good character. If children have good character alongside their potential, their abilities will reflect the morals they possess." (Interview with the Head of Yakesma Institution, May 16, 2024)

This statement highlights that without good character, one's potential holds little value. Hence, character becomes a critical element to be instilled in foster children, enabling them to discern between right and wrong actions. The program head similarly emphasized that a child's character is influenced by their surroundings:

"Character education begins from an early age, even from within the womb. The character of parents reflects on their children. At the foster home, character education is a primary target. Due to parents' diverse responsibilities, foster children often lack basic moral education from their parents. The foster home addresses this by creating a system to improve children's negative traits gradually, turning them into better individuals through structured processes."(Interview with the Program Head, March 27, 2024)

This highlights that a child's character is shaped by their environment. At Yakesma SUMUT, religious education strategies align with teachings from the Qur'an. These strategies include:

Religious Guidance:

Religious guidance is a priority for foster children, implemented directly by the foster home staff. This includes encouraging and guiding them to perform the five daily prayers in congregation, read, memorize, and comprehend the Qur'an. The Qur'an serves as a basis for teaching children to differentiate between good and bad deeds.

"Children are accustomed to performing congregational prayers, memorizing, improving Qur'anic recitation, and learning religious studies such as aqidah, fiqh, sharia, and morals."(Interview with the Program Head, March 27, 2024)

Religious practices teach children to get closer to Allah while acquiring religious knowledge.

Formal and Informal Education:

Children receive formal education by enrolling in nearby schools and receive tutoring to help with school assignments. Additional weekly programs include cooking, business, and public speaking activities to equip children with survival skills for their future.

"Foster children are enrolled in nearby schools. Private tutors are also provided to assist with schoolwork." (Interview with the Program Head, March 27, 2024)

Advice and Motivation:

Advice and motivation are regularly provided to children. Foster mothers or caregivers offer guidance every morning before the day's activities begin.

"Advice and motivation are given every morning for about 15–20 minutes to inspire children to start their day with enthusiasm." (Interview with the Program Head, March 27, 2024)

Motivation is delivered softly and serves as a means of fostering affection.

Care and Affection:

Foster mothers and caregivers serve as parental figures, ensuring every child feels cared for.

"I act as a replacement parent for the children, asking about their conditions, challenges, and needs daily." (Interview with Foster Mother KI, May 14, 2024)

The children also shared their experiences of being cared for lovingly.

"The guidance provided by caregivers and ustazahs is full of love and gentleness."(Interview with Foster Child HS, May 14, 2024)

Independence and Discipline Training:

Foster children are trained in daily activities such as cleaning rooms and washing clothes, fostering independence and discipline.

"Rules are agreed upon with the children to instill a sense of responsibility. For instance, if memorization tasks are not completed, they may face agreed-upon consequences, like standing as a penalty."(Interview with Ustazah, May 14, 2024)

Socialization:

Social values are instilled by encouraging good relationships and teaching children to seek forgiveness when conflicts arise.

"Most issues stem from teasing among children. Caregivers remind them regularly that such behavior is unacceptable." (Interview with Ustazah, May 14, 2024)

Foster home management ensures children develop social skills, understanding of religious values, and resilience through consistent guidance.

As stated in the book by Trilisiana et al. (2023), character is defined as a stable behavior, either visible or invisible, that represents the expression of mental traits and environmental structures, whether observed by others or not. Therefore, individual character needs to be nurtured from an early age to foster positive traits. According to Lickona, character education is a process designed to help children understand,

respect, and act based on fundamental ethical values intentionally developed to enhance their character (Wahyuni, 2021).

The research findings indicate that character education involves building a system as a foundation for shaping a child's future as they grow into adulthood, progressing gradually through their surrounding environment. Character values are associated with one's relationship with God Almighty, encompassing thoughts, words, and actions that are intentionally realized and always rooted in spiritual values and/or religious teachings. This religiosity is essential for foster children in facing societal changes and moral decline. In this context, students are expected to possess and exhibit behavior aligned with standards of right and wrong based on religious principles and guidelines (Waldi, 2022).

According to Puspitasari (2019), religious behavior in students focuses on responsibility, discipline, and cooperation. In this research, data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the data was filtered to extract relevant information from observations, documentation, and interviews. The data was then grouped into categories based on themes of fostering strategies, such as advice, independence training, and religious guidance. To illustrate the impact, the final results were analyzed descriptively and presented in narrative form and tables. Below are some of the strategies employed:

Table 2. Strategies for Foster Care at Yakesma Sumut

No	Strategy	Description	Impact
1	Religious Guidance	Familiarizing foster children with Islamic activities such as reading the Qur'an, religious studies, tahlil, congregational prayers, and instilling good habits.	Enhances understanding and practice of religious values, builds religious character, and strengthens spiritual connection with Allah SWT.
2	Education and Training	Providing formal and informal education, implementing exemplary methods, habituation, and advice. Caregivers set examples, create structured activity schedules, and provide adequate educational facilities.	Children become accustomed to performing activities in the future.
3	Advice and Motivation	Providing motivation through wise advice, inspirational stories, and motivational films, using a gentle approach in line with wisdom principles so children can receive the advice well.	Children feel motivated and start their day with enthusiasm.
4	Care and Affection	Creating a loving and caring environment for children who	Children feel loved and appreciated, reducing

No	Strategy	Description	Impact
		lack it at home. Caregivers and teachers show empathy and educate with gentleness.	negative behavior caused by a lack of attention.
5	Independence and Discipline Training	Training children to independently manage daily tasks, such as washing clothes, cleaning rooms, and cooking during skill-based activities, while prioritizing time for learning and memorizing the Qur'an.	Children become more independent, disciplined, and responsible for their tasks.
6	Socialization	Teaching children to live in a community, interact politely, and maintain good relationships with others. Caregivers provide advice to apologize in cases of conflict and instill social values aligned with Islamic teachings.	Children develop good social skills.

1. Religious Development

Religious development is described by Bahri (2021) as an effort to guide, maintain, develop, or perfect human life in all its aspects. It aims to shape individuals who are moral, virtuous, and dynamic in adhering to Islamic teachings. The purpose of religious development is to enhance individuals' devotion to God Almighty, enabling them to overcome spiritual challenges and life difficulties by surrendering to Allah SWT (Anggranti, 2022).

This aspect of development is vital for foster children to enrich their knowledge and prepare for their future lives. A strong religious character serves as a foundation for cultivating other positive traits. At Yakesma SUMUT foster home, religious activities include reading the Qur'an, attending religious studies, *tahlil* recitations, and performing congregational prayers (Jemimut, 2021). Children are also encouraged to practice small, positive habits, such as speaking kindly and performing daily prayers in congregation.

As conveyed in a *hadith*, "Congregational prayer is more virtuous than praying alone by twenty-seven degrees." (*HR. Muslim*). Congregational prayers foster a deeper spiritual connection and strengthen bonds between individuals (Ilyas, 2021).

In addition to congregational prayers, Yakesma SUMUT incorporates activities such as *tahlil* recitations, religious lessons, and Qur'anic reading to inspire children to memorize and apply the teachings of the Qur'an in their lives.

2. Development and Education

Education, as cited by Lukman in Mohtar (2017), is the process of transforming the behavior of an individual or group to achieve maturity through teaching and training. Education is a cornerstone of human development, with the power to

transform lives. A nation with highly educated human resources is poised for undeniable progress (Makkawaru, 2019). Thus, education is a critical process for fostering personal growth and improvement.

In Islam, character development is also a key component, aimed at shaping children to behave according to Islamic norms and rules, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. A *hadith* from Ibn Majah emphasizes this: "Honor your children and improve their manners" (Kumalasari, 2022).

The methods used at Yakesma SUMUT align with principles identified by Abdullah Nasih Ulwan in *Tarbiyah al-Awlad fi Al-Islam*: exemplary behavior, habituation, and providing advice. Caregivers at the foster home lead by example, both in words and actions. They establish structured schedules and routines, helping children internalize positive habits and prepare for future responsibilities.

Foster homes can serve as family alternatives, offering non-formal education to support children's independence in society. Non-formal education significantly impacts a child's personality and character, as it is drawn from daily interactions and experiences (Siswanto, 2018). Yakesma SUMUT provides quality education, both formal and non-formal, to meet the needs of its foster children.

3. Advice and Motivation

Advice and motivation are interconnected components of learning. Motivation can channel energy within a person, influencing emotions, behavior, and decision-making. It drives individuals to take action to achieve specific goals (Hukul et al., 2019; Muhfizar, 2020). Advice, when delivered effectively, can inspire motivation in the recipient.

As stated in the Qur'an (16:125):
"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction and argue with them in the best manner. Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way, and He knows best who is rightly guided."

This verse highlights three principles for giving advice: delivering it with gentleness, using language that is easy to understand, and avoiding conflict when presenting arguments. The approach taken by caregivers and teachers at Yakesma SUMUT plays a critical role in ensuring advice is well-received and effective (Handayani et al., 2023; Muzakkir et al., 2022).

At Yakesma SUMUT, caregivers provide regular advice and motivation to foster children each morning. This is done through storytelling, verbal encouragement, and motivational media, ensuring children are guided effectively toward achieving their goals.

4. Care and Affection

Every child needs care and affection from their parents, who bear significant responsibility for their upbringing (Na'immatussholilah et al., 2021). Parental attention is essential for guiding, directing, and educating children, as it lays the foundation for a better future generation (Alam, 2020).

Imbalanced or insufficient parental attention can negatively affect a child's character development. Excessive control may lead to rebellious behavior, while lack of attention can drive children to seek validation in unhealthy ways (Saputri et al., 2019; Kusuma et al., 2021).

At Yakesma SUMUT, caregivers assume the role of substitute parents, providing the care and affection that children may lack at home. As stated in the Qur'an (90:17):
"And they encourage one another to patience and compassion."

This verse underscores the importance of patience and kindness. Even when children make mistakes, caregivers address these with understanding and affection. This prevents children from seeking attention through negative behavior and fosters a nurturing environment where they feel loved and valued.

5. Training Independence and Discipline

Independence involves the ability to complete tasks without relying on others, which includes learning activities (Sobri, 2020). Teaching independence from an early age prepares children for self-sufficiency in adulthood. Independence instills responsibility, decision-making abilities, and adaptability (Damayanti et al., 2019).

Discipline reinforces these qualities by encouraging orderly behavior, effective time management, accountability, and respectful interactions (Muh, 2022). Caregivers at Yakesma SUMUT motivate children to consistently follow established rules, promoting discipline and independence. Daily responsibilities, such as cleaning rooms and washing clothes, are integral to their routine. Additionally, skill-based activities like cooking teach children to manage tasks without relying on others.

6. Socialization

Socialization is a lifelong process where individuals learn behaviors, values, and norms to integrate into society (Elyas et al., 2020). According to Mayang et al. (2022), it is a crucial link within social systems, fostering individual and group participation. The ability to socialize reflects an individual's adaptability and their capacity to live harmoniously within a group (Wahyuni et al., 2016).

As social beings, humans thrive in environments that are friendly, respectful, and cooperative. Such environments allow individuals to carry out activities calmly, without disruption. The Qur'an (49:11) advises against mockery and insults, emphasizing the importance of maintaining respect and harmony within communities.

At Yakesma SUMUT, caregivers regularly guide children to resolve conflicts peacefully and seek forgiveness when necessary. This approach helps foster positive relationships and strengthens emotional and social skills. As Mozolev et al. (2021) observed, psychological traits alone do not determine a child's development; the social environment is equally vital. Yakesma SUMUT demonstrates how a supportive social setting can contribute to positive character building.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the character development strategies implemented at the Yakesma SUMUT foster home, particularly in fostering religious character, have proven effective despite certain challenges. The institution employs various methods, including religious guidance, education, advice, care, independence training, and socialization. These strategies have shown significant improvements in the children's character, especially in terms of honesty, discipline, and politeness.

Although there are obstacles, such as the unstable emotions and behavioral habits of foster children, the caregivers and staff consistently work to address these

challenges through guidance, support, and affection. Over time, these efforts result in positive changes, with foster children becoming more compliant, motivated, and independent. This gradual transformation demonstrates that character development is a process requiring patience and consistency but ultimately yields meaningful outcomes. The approach used by Yakesma SUMUT can serve as a valuable model for other foster homes seeking to enhance children's character development.

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