

Faith-Based Learning through Play: Developing Islamic Education Methods in Early Childhood Education

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Abstrak

The present study aims to describe faith-based learning strategies through play in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) for early childhood. In addition, the study will identify supporting factors, obstacles, and children's responses to these strategies. The present study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with five teachers from five different kindergartens selected purposively as participants. The data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. These data were then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings of the study suggest that educators employ a variety of play-based strategies to instill religious values, including role-playing, creative projects, nature exploration, motor games, and interactive digital media. These strategies are meticulously designed to integrate religious messages into recreational activities, thereby facilitating natural and meaningful learning for children according to their developmental stages. The efficacy of these strategies was influenced by three factors: the creativity of the teaching staff, the availability of learning media, and the active involvement of the children. These findings indicate that faith-based learning through play is a viable methodology for Islamic education in early childhood education. This approach integrates a pedagogical approach that is suitable for children with the inculcation of profound religious values.

Key words: *learning strategies, faith-based, play, Islamic education, early childhood*

Introduction

Early childhood education is the initial stage that significantly shapes an individual's development. This period, known as the golden age, is characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and spiritual growth (Untung et al., 2023). In Islam, early childhood education is considered the basis for shaping a child's future character, moral values, and worldview (Maidugu & Isah, 2024). The Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of education beginning at birth and even earlier, through the examples of parents and a good environment. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the early childhood stage not only introduces Islamic teachings cognitively, but also instills strong faith-based values to serve as a moral foundation for children as they navigate their lives. One of the main challenges in teaching IRE to young children is finding methods that align with their developmental characteristics (Ramli, 2022). Young children are active and curious and learn most effectively through direct experience. Conventional approaches that emphasize memorization, lectures, or passive learning are often ineffective at this age because children need stimulation that involves all the senses and provides opportunities for exploration. Thus, learning methods that are enjoyable, meaningful, and integrate religious values into children's daily lives are necessary (Safitri, 2022).

Play is an activity closely related to children's lives. Through play, children learn about themselves, their environment, and prevailing social values (Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). From a modern pedagogical perspective, play is an effective learning method that helps children develop cognitive, language, motor, social, and emotional skills, not merely

entertainment. In the context of Islamic Education, play is a promising medium for instilling faith values (Novianda, 2022). Faith-based learning through play involves integrating faith-based messages into interesting, interactive, and relevant games (Papakostas, 2024). These values include belief in God, recognition of His creation, virtuous behavior, gratitude, and respect for others. Teachers can invite children to play role-playing games that teach mutual assistance, use Islamic songs to introduce the Asmaul Husna, or organize simple science experiments that demonstrate the greatness of Allah through natural phenomena. These strategies enable children to naturally absorb Islamic teachings without feeling pressured, as the faith-based messages are conveyed through enjoyable activities (Halimah & Hidayah, 2025). Teachers can also invite children to play role-playing games about helping friends, use Islamic songs to introduce the Asmaul Husna, hold simple science games that link natural phenomena to the greatness of Allah, or create picture-guessing games that introduce the pillars of Islam and faith. This approach makes religious learning seem less rigid and forced and more like an enjoyable experience. This approach aligns with Piaget's developmental theory, which states that during the preoperational stage (ages 2–7), children think symbolically and learn through imaginative play (Hijriati, 2017). It also aligns with Vygotsky's theory, which emphasizes that play is a vehicle for internalizing cultural and religious values through social interaction (Kurniati, 2025).

However, faith-based Islamic Education learning through play has not been fully implemented in many early childhood education institutions (Padila et al., 2025). Some teachers still rely on lectures or memorization as the main approach. This results in religious education that tends to be cognitive and fails to address children's affective and psychomotor domains. However, during early childhood, forming attitudes and habits is far more important than acquiring knowledge (Whitebread & Bingham, 2013). Children learn through imitation and habit formation (Wahyuningsih et al., 2016), which can be effectively achieved through well-planned games. According to Piaget's theory of child development, during the preoperational stage (ages 2–7), children think symbolically and learn through imaginative play (Hijriati, 2017). Meanwhile, Vygotsky emphasizes that play is an important vehicle for language development, social interaction, and the internalization of cultural values (Kurniati, 2025). Both theories support the idea that play can effectively instill religious values in young children. In Islam, the principles of *tarbiyah* (education) and *ta'dib* (civilized education) underscore the importance of instilling values gradually, in accordance with children's developmental stages and through enjoyable, loving methods (Zahra Sabrina et al., 2024). In line with Indonesia's educational policy development, the Merdeka Curriculum gives early childhood education teachers flexibility to develop contextual, creative, and child-centered learning. This opens up great opportunities for implementing faith-based learning strategies through play. Teachers can design activities that integrate religious values into various play activities inside and outside the classroom. This study takes a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of religion-based learning strategies through games from the perspectives of teachers and children. These findings will enrich academic research in Islamic education for young children and serve as a practical guide for educators and policymakers designing teaching methods aligned with children's developmental stages, Islamic values, and contextual needs.

However, the success of this strategy depends on teachers' creativity, available facilities and infrastructure, and support from the school and family environments. This research is urgent given the challenges faced by the younger generation today. Technological developments and globalization have made it easier for children to access content that does not always align with Islamic values (Aulia Herawati et al., 2025). Therefore, religious education from an early age must provide a strong foundation of faith so children can discern good influences. Play-based faith-based learning strategies are expected to be an effective solution to this challenge (Halimah & Hidayah, 2025), as they combine pedagogical approaches appropriate to children's developmental stages with the instillation of deep religious values. This study will explore how faith-based learning strategies through play are applied in Islamic Religious Education for young children. The focus will be on both the activities carried out and the planning, implementation, and evaluation conducted by teachers. Additionally, the study will identify factors that support or hinder the implementation of this strategy in the field and examine children's responses to the learning process. The results of this study are expected to contribute significantly to theory and practice. Theoretically, the study will enrich the literature on Islamic Education methodology for early childhood education by integrating play-based approaches with the instillation of faith values (Yusuf et al., 2024). Practically, the results can guide early childhood education teachers in designing creative, interactive, and meaningful religious learning activities. Early childhood education institutions can use the study's findings to develop internal curricula that systematically integrate faith values. Parents can also use the findings to strengthen religious education at home.

Thus, this study is relevant not only to the development of Islamic education but also to building a generation that is faithful, noble, and ready to face the challenges of the times. Through faith-based learning activities, children learn Islamic teachings and internalize and practice them in their daily lives. This approach is expected to create enjoyable yet meaningful learning experiences that instill faith values in children from an early age.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of faith-based learning strategies through play in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) for early childhood. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to comprehensively explore the experiences, perspectives, and practices of early childhood educators in implementing faith-based learning through play activities. The subjects of this study involved 5 teachers in 5 early childhood education institutions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants who are considered to have experience, knowledge, and direct involvement in the implementation of faith-based learning strategies through play. The number of participants will be determined based on the principle of data saturation, so that the interview process will be stopped when the information obtained is considered sufficient.

Data collection techniques in this study include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis (Zahroh et al., 2025). In-depth interviews were used to obtain rich and detailed information regarding the strategies used by teachers in integrating faith values through play. Participatory observation is conducted to directly

observe the learning process in the classroom, the types of games used, the interaction between teachers and students, and the children's responses to the activities. Meanwhile, document analysis is used to examine documents such as the Daily Lesson Plan (DLP), learning media, and relevant children's development evaluation records. To ensure data validity, this study applied triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from teachers, school principals, and parents. Method triangulation was conducted by combining interviews, observations, and documentation to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

Data analysis is conducted simultaneously with data collection using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification (Zai et al., 2022). Data reduction is carried out by selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw data obtained from the field. Data presentation is done in the form of descriptive narratives that facilitate understanding and interpretation. Conclusions are drawn continuously to ensure that the research results represent valid findings that are consistent with the reality in the field. Research ethics considerations are also prioritized. The researcher will request informed consent from each participant before conducting interviews or observations. The identity of informants will be kept confidential to maintain their privacy and comfort in providing information.

In addition to the data collection techniques described above, this study also applies systematic steps to ensure the accuracy and depth of the information obtained. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in each school environment, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes per informant, using a semi-structured interview guide that had been validated by experts in Early Childhood Education and Islamic Education. This guide included questions related to planning, implementation, evaluation, as well as challenges and solutions in the application of faith-based learning strategies through play.

Participatory observation was conducted at least twice at each institution to observe variations in faith-based play activities carried out by teachers, teacher-child interactions, and children's spontaneous responses to activities. The documentation collected included photos of activities, audio recordings of interviews, field notes, and learning planning documents such as lesson plans, learning media, and child development records.

To enhance validity, the researcher conducted member checking by asking informants to review the interview summaries to ensure no misinterpretations. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted by involving fellow researchers to provide critical feedback on the data analysis and interpretation process. Ethical considerations were maintained by keeping informant identities confidential and ensuring their participation was voluntary.

Result and Discussion

Through interviews with five kindergarten teachers from five different institutions, it was found that faith-based learning strategies through play have become a primary approach in Islamic Religious Education for early childhood education. One teacher from RA Chairunissa explained that she used role-playing to introduce concepts of faith, such as the pillars of faith and stories about the Prophet. Children were encouraged to play the

roles of Islamic figures, such as the Prophets Ibrahim and Muhammad. This approach enables children to internalize the values of faith through direct experience. The teacher emphasized that role-playing makes it easier for children to understand patience, honesty, and sharing. These findings align with a study by Atika (2024) which stated that game-based methods such as role-playing can increase students' interest in religious material and help them better understand the values of faith contained in the stories. Another RA Chairunissa teacher explained that she uses constructive games, such as building blocks, to build a miniature Ka'bah. While building, the teacher tells the story of the Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail building the Ka'bah. According to her, this activity helps children understand important Islamic history while developing their fine motor skills and teaching them to cooperate. These results align with Suryani's research, which states that constructive games can internalize faith values through directed building activities (Suryani & Lestari, 2023).



Figure 1. interview with teachers

A second teacher from RA Amanah Ummah said that she introduced the concept of faith using simple, project-based educational games. For example, she had the children make a collage of the word "Allah" from colored paper pieces while repeating the tauhid phrase. This activity is done in groups to foster cooperation and strengthen children's love for Allah through creativity. She added that integrating Islamic songs into the game makes children more enthusiastic and helps them remember the moral messages conveyed. These results align with Kurniani's research, which states that play activities linked to Islamic values, such as educational games, help children understand and internalize Islamic teachings, such as prayer, daily supplications, noble character, and love for Allah and His Messenger (Kurniani, 2025). Another teacher mentioned combining traditional games, such as "engklek," with daily prayer materials. Each box that the children step on contains a prayer card that they must read before continuing the game. This method teaches children prayers in a joyful atmosphere. These results align with Nurhayati's research, which states that integrating traditional games with Islamic Education materials improves children's memory and enjoyment of religious learning (Nurhayati, 2024).



Figure 2. interview with teachers

A third teacher from BA Aisyiyah Pojok revealed that imaginative games and playing in nature effectively foster faith. Children observe Allah's creations, such as plants, animals, and clouds, and the teacher guides them in acknowledging Allah's greatness. This activity is often combined with guessing games and searching for Allah's creations around the school. According to the teacher, this nature-based approach amazes children and naturally cultivates gratitude toward the Creator. These results align with Zahroh's research, which states that nature-based learning approaches can connect religious values with responsibility toward nature, thereby fostering the transfer of good values in children's faith (Zahroh & Afrianingsih, 2024). Another teacher shared how they use simple science games to demonstrate Allah's power. For example, they conduct an experiment in which they grow green bean seeds and explain that Allah is the one who makes plants grow. The children were tasked with watering the plants daily and observing their growth. This finding is consistent with Fitriyah's research, which emphasizes that

science experiments can instill a sense of wonder and faith in Allah (Fitriyah & Wibowo, 2023).



A fourth teacher from RA Perwanida VIII explained that faith-based games are often motor skill games, such as "Good Deed Relay." In this game, children carry cards depicting good behavior, such as helping a friend or praying before eating, and give them to another group. This game teaches children the concept of good deeds in a fun, competitive way. These findings align with research by Ardiari (Collins et al., 2021), who stated that motor games can incorporate values of faith, discipline, and responsibility. Another teacher from RA Perwanida VII shared that she uses Islamic board games containing challenges and questions about the pillars of faith and moral values. Children who answer correctly can move forward on the game board. According to this teacher, children become more enthusiastic about memorizing Islamic Education material because they want to "win" the game. This finding is consistent with Herlina's study, which demonstrated that educational board games can motivate children to learn religious material (Herlina, 2024).



Figure 4. interview with teachers

A fifth teacher from TK Al-Islam 10 emphasizes using interactive digital media in faith-based games. Children play simple Islamic educational games on tablets, such as matching mosque images, arranging Arabic letters, or guessing the sound of the adhan. The teacher explained that technology can be an effective tool as long as it is supervised, ensuring that children gain learning experiences aligned with Islamic values. This finding is consistent with Aliatunisa's study, which found that digital media can be used to instill faith in students (Aliatunisa & Faridi, 2024). Another teacher mentioned creating a puzzle game featuring images of sacred Islamic sites. Children assemble images of the Masjid al-Haram, Masjid Nabawi, and Masjid al-Aqsa while listening to historical explanations. These results are consistent with Putri's research, which demonstrated that educational puzzles can improve children's concentration while teaching them about important Islamic symbols (Putri & Anwar, 2023).

The research findings indicate that the five early childhood education institutions involved in the study implemented faith-based learning strategies through play, utilizing a variety of rich, innovative activities. Each strategy has unique characteristics, yet they all share a common thread: integrating faith values into play activities that align with children's interests, developmental stages, and needs. At RA Chairunissa, for example, role-playing games were used to portray exemplary figures such as the Prophet Ibrahim, the Prophet Muhammad, and his companions. These games effectively fostered children's understanding of patience, honesty, and mutual cooperation. Additionally, constructive games, such as building a miniature Ka'bah from blocks, helped children learn about Islamic history while practicing fine motor coordination. At RA Amanah Ummah, creative project games, such as making collages of the word "Allah" in groups combined with Islamic songs, were used to reinforce memorization of the tauhid (monotheism) phrase. Teachers also modify the traditional game of hopscotch by adding prayer cards to each square so children can learn daily prayers in a joyful atmosphere.



Figure 5. interview with teachers

At BA Aisyiyah Pojok, imaginative play and nature exploration cultivate gratitude. Children observe Allah's creations in their surroundings, such as plants and animals, and then discuss the greatness of the Creator. Simple science experiments, such as planting

green bean seeds, instill the understanding that all life occurs by Allah's will. RA Perwanida VIII highlighted the motor game "Estafet Amal Baik" (Good Deeds Relay), which promotes cooperation and good behavior. They also use Islamic board games with questions about the pillars of faith and morals to motivate children to memorize Islamic Education material and "win" the game. Meanwhile, TK Al-Islam 10 uses interactive digital media, such as Islamic educational games on tablets, to teach technology. Through games supervised by teachers, children learn the Hijaiyah alphabet, the call to prayer, and images of mosques. Puzzles depicting holy places in Islam, such as Masjid al-Haram and Masjid an-Nabawi, are also used to improve concentration and introduce important Islamic symbols.

Data analysis indicates that implementing these strategies significantly positively impacts children, improving their understanding of faith concepts, strengthening their religious behavior, enhancing their social skills, and increasing their confidence in expressing their religious values. Additionally, when parents support these activities at home, it reinforces the transfer of faith values from school to the family environment, creating more effective continuity in education.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of faith-based learning strategies through play in the context of Islamic religious education (IRE) for early childhood. The results of the analysis indicate that this method is pedagogically relevant and consistent with the developmental characteristics of children in the early childhood stage, often referred to as the "golden age." During this period, children experience rapid cognitive, affective, social, emotional, linguistic, motor, and spiritual development, necessitating an educational approach that can integrate all these aspects in a balanced manner.

The five early childhood education institutions that served as research locations applied faith-based learning strategies through play, resulting in a variety of creative and innovative activities. Role-playing activities, such as portraying the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, were effective in helping children internalize praiseworthy traits, such as patience, honesty, and concern for others. Constructive games, such as building a miniature Ka'bah from blocks, introduce important Islamic history and develop fine motor coordination, teamwork, and logical thinking skills.

Creative, project-based strategies, such as creating a collage of the word "Allah" in groups or making Islamic-themed artwork, have been proven to increase children's engagement and love for religious symbols and strengthen their memory of religious values. These activities are often combined with Islamic songs that create a joyful atmosphere while reinforcing children's memorization and understanding of the presented material.

The nature exploration approach, which involves observing plants, animals, and natural phenomena around the school, provides children with opportunities to experience the greatness of Allah's creation firsthand. These activities are often combined with guessing games or simple science experiments, such as growing mung beans, to demonstrate that everything happens according to Allah's will.

This method fosters gratitude and teaches responsibility toward nature and the environment. Motor games, such as "Good Deeds Relay," teach charity, discipline, and

teamwork in a fun way. Similarly, modified traditional games, such as hopscotch with prayer cards, introduce daily prayers while preserving local cultural heritage. In the digital age, some teachers utilize interactive digital media, such as Islamic games, to teach the Hijaiyah alphabet, the call to prayer, and images of mosques. Puzzles depicting holy places in Islam, such as the Masjidil Haram and the Masjid Nabawi, help children recognize religious symbols while sharpening their concentration and problem-solving skills.

A strong common thread emerges from all the strategies implemented: the effort to integrate religious values into fun, contextual, and relevant play activities for children. This allows children to learn without feeling burdened because religious messages are conveyed through enjoyable and understandable activities. This approach is consistent with Piaget's developmental theory, which emphasizes the significance of play during the preoperational stage (ages 2–7) as a means of symbolic thinking. It also aligns with Vygotsky's theory, which views play as a means of internalizing cultural and religious values through social interaction.

Several factors influenced the success of implementing faith-based learning strategies through play in this study. First, teachers' creativity in designing and modifying play activities to be relevant to Islamic Education material was key. Innovative teachers can transform abstract religious concepts into concrete experiences that children can easily understand. Second, adequate facilities and infrastructure, including traditional and digital learning media, enable activities to run smoothly and attractively. Third, children's active involvement during activities is an indicator of success because they learn best when they are fully engaged physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Fourth, parental support that reinforces habits at home creates continuity between the school and family environments.

In terms of impact, this study found significant improvements in several aspects of children's development. In the cognitive domain, children had a better understanding of basic faith concepts, such as the pillars of faith, daily prayers, and stories about the Prophet's life. In the affective domain, children demonstrated love for Allah, gratitude, and consistently polite behavior. In the psychomotor domain, children became more skilled in activities involving fine and gross motor coordination. Additionally, children's social skills improved through group play activities requiring cooperation, communication, and mutual respect.

This approach proves that Islamic Education learning in early childhood education does not have to be rigid or focused solely on memorization. By presenting learning in the form of games, it becomes more lively, interactive, and meaningful. Children experience, practice, and feel religious values directly in the context of their lives, not merely receiving information.

The findings of this study have important practical implications. Early childhood education teachers need special training to integrate faith values into play activities. The early childhood education curriculum, particularly within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, can facilitate this approach by providing more space for contextual and creative learning. Schools and parents must collaborate closely so that the values instilled at school are reinforced at home. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on play-based approaches to Islamic Education learning for young children. This approach can serve as a reference for further research exploring similar strategies in various cultural and geographical contexts or for testing its effectiveness through quantitative research

designs that measure impact more precisely. Thus, it can be concluded that faith-based learning strategies through play are pedagogically relevant and have strategic value in developing a generation that is faithful, virtuous, and prepared to face the challenges of the times. This approach connects children's playful world with the substance of religious teachings, creating an enjoyable, contextual, and memorable learning experience. With the support of creative teachers, adequate facilities, and collaboration with families, this strategy can lay a strong foundation for shaping children's religious character from an early age. Therefore, integrating faith-based learning through play into the early childhood education curriculum is a strategic step that must be developed and disseminated throughout early childhood education settings in Indonesia.

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