

The Implementation of Empathy Regulation in Children at Islamic Early Childhood Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is a crucial aspect that should be nurtured from an early age as a foundation for character development and children's socialization skills. **This study aims** to identify the implementation of empathy regulation in children aged 2–4 years at Islamic educational institutions, specifically at KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta. The research focuses on four forms of empathy: emotional, cognitive, reflective, and pro-social, as demonstrated by the children toward their peers and teaching staff (ustadzah). **This study employs** a qualitative descriptive method, involving 7 participants teachers (ustadzah) from KBIT RA Alif Smart with an age range of 20 – 49 years. **The findings** indicate that most children have developed strong empathetic abilities across all four aspects. Children's empathetic behaviors are reflected in their ability to imitate the empathetic actions of peers, learn through the exemplary conduct of their teachers, and take personal initiative in showing care for others. The study concludes that empathy regulation at KBIT RA Alif Smart has been effectively implemented through approaches that align with the developmental stages of early childhood.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood empathy, empathy regulation, islamic education, social-emotional learning

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in shaping children's personality, character, and foundational social skills. According to Piaget's theory, kindergarten-level children (ages 2–7) operate in the preoperational stage, during which they begin developing symbolic understanding and imitation abilities (Piaget, 2007). During this critical period, children experience rapid growth across physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral domains. Among these, empathy stands out as a crucial component of social-emotional development. Empathy supports the formation of healthy relationships, enhances communication skills, and promotes pro-social behaviors essential for societal participation.

Empathy can be defined as the ability to understand and feel the emotions of others and respond appropriately. Hoffman (1982) described empathy as evolving through successive stages: from reflexive global empathy in infancy to cognitive and reflective empathy in later childhood. This developmental

trajectory indicates that empathy is not innate but rather cultivated through complex processes influenced by social interaction, emotional experiences, and adult guidance.

Recent research from the past decade supports this developmental perspective. For example, studies on language ability, emotional regulation, and caregiver socialization show the interplay between emotional and cognitive factors in toddler empathy (Ornaghi et al., 2020; Empathy in Toddlers, 2021). Other studies have demonstrated that structured social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in preschool settings significantly enhance children's empathy and emotion recognition (Soliman et al., 2021). Furthermore, a systematic review by Aldrup, Carstensen, and Klusmann (2022) found that empathetic teacher student interactions positively influence student outcomes across cultures.

In the context of Islamic early childhood education, emerging literature explores how religious values and teaching methodologies can support empathy development. For instance, Zainal Abiddin et al. (2024) proposed integrating the Islamic principle of *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* with empathy and environmental stewardship to foster moral development and social cohesion. Additionally, Yust (2019) emphasized the reframing of religious nurture in young children, asserting that early religious education can be developmentally aligned with care ethics and empathetic character growth.

Despite this growing body of knowledge, there remains a scarcity of empirical studies focusing on empathy regulation (i.e., children's ability to manage, adjust, and express empathy appropriately) within Islamic early childhood education settings. Empathy regulation refers to how children consciously moderate and express empathetic responses across different social contexts. This regulatory aspect is critical to ensuring that empathy develops in a developmentally appropriate, context-sensitive manner.

KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta is an exemplar of such educational settings. This institution integrates social-emotional learning activities with Islamic character education, implementing programs such as sharing routines, helping behaviors, emotional awareness through storytelling, and guided play. These integrated approaches highlight the need for research into how empathy can be regulated and nurtured within religiously informed early educational contexts.

Considering the theoretical importance of empathy in character and moral development, this study aims to address gaps in empirical research by investigating empathy regulation among children aged 2–4 years in this Islamic learning environment. The research explores the forms of empathy exhibited, strategies adopted by educators to foster empathy, and the contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of empathy regulation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the implementation of empathy regulation in early childhood, specifically among children aged 2–4 years at KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta, an Islamic early childhood education institution. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate due to its suitability in exploring complex social phenomena that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods. Early childhood empathy development is a nuanced and context-bound behavior that requires detailed, contextually rich data to be properly understood.

Qualitative research, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2009), seeks to explore the meaning behind human actions and social interactions within their specific contexts. Rather than relying on numerical data

or statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes interpretation, subjectivity, and the lived experiences of participants. In this study, the researcher acted as the main instrument, engaging directly in data collection and interpretation to ensure depth and contextual accuracy in capturing the dynamics of empathetic behavior in young children.

Research Design

A descriptive design was adopted to document and present empirical realities as they naturally occur, without manipulation or control over variables. This design was chosen because the study did not aim to test specific hypotheses, but rather to explore and describe the process through which empathy regulation is nurtured, guided, and expressed by children in an Islamic educational setting. Through this design, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms, conditions, and contextual factors that shape empathetic behavior in young learners.

Descriptive qualitative research enables the researcher to generate comprehensive narratives that illustrate how empathy emerges and is regulated in everyday interactions. This includes understanding how empathy is modeled by teachers, reinforced through school routines, and expressed by children in spontaneous or structured contexts.

Research Site

The study was conducted at KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta, an Islamic early childhood education institution located in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. This school integrates religious, character-based, and social-emotional values into its curriculum and daily learning practices. It is recognized for its commitment to the holistic development of children, not only emphasizing cognitive and religious instruction but also promoting values such as empathy, kindness, and cooperation.

The selection of this site was made through purposive sampling, based on the institution's explicit mission and ongoing efforts to instill character education through empathy-oriented programs. The school provides an ideal setting for this study, as it offers various opportunities to observe and analyze how empathy is cultivated among young children in a structured, values-driven educational environment.

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of seven female teachers (referred to as *ustadzah*) who were actively involved in teaching and guiding children aged 2 to 4 years at the institution. These individuals were selected purposively because of their direct and sustained interactions with the children, as well as their role in shaping children's socio-emotional and religious character. The teachers are responsible not only for instructional delivery but also for modeling behaviors, managing classroom interactions, and providing emotional support—all of which are critical to empathy development.

The selection criteria for participants included: (1) at least one year of teaching experience at the institution, (2) active involvement in both academic and non-academic activities with the children, and (3) willingness to participate in interviews and allow classroom observations.

Data Collection Techniques

Multiple methods were employed for data collection to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility and richness of the data (1) In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected teachers to obtain detailed insights into their perspectives, experiences, and strategies in fostering empathy regulation among young children. The interviews were guided by a structured interview protocol developed based on Hoffman's (1982) four dimensions of empathy: emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, reflective empathy, and pro-social empathy.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting within the school premises. Questions were open-ended to allow participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences, and follow-up probes were used to gain clarity and depth. Interview transcripts were later analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, strategies, and conceptualizations related to empathy regulation, (2) Participant observation was used to capture the natural expression of empathetic behaviors in the classroom and during routine school activities. The researcher observed interactions between children and their peers, as well as between children and teachers, during both structured lessons and informal playtime. Observations were conducted in a non-interventionist manner, meaning the researcher did not interfere with the classroom dynamics or behavior of the participants. The aim was to document spontaneous empathetic actions, such as comforting a crying friend, offering help to peers, or responding to emotional cues from teachers or classmates. Field notes were taken during and immediately after the observations, focusing on verbal and non-verbal indicators of empathy. Particular attention was paid to the context in which empathetic behaviors emerged, the reactions of others, and how teachers responded or reinforced such behaviors.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analysis involved several stages, (1) Familiarization reading and re-reading interview transcripts and field notes to gain a general sense of the data, (2) Coding generating initial codes based on repeated ideas, behaviors, and statements related to empathy regulation, (3) theme development: Grouping codes into broader themes that represent meaningful categories (e.g., modeling empathy, peer imitation, spiritual values reinforcement), (4) Interpretation: Contextualizing the themes within the theoretical framework of empathy development and the unique setting of Islamic early childhood education.

The use of multiple data sources (interviews and observations) provided triangulation, enhancing the reliability of the findings. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with some of the participants to ensure that the findings accurately represented their experiences and perspectives

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta is an Islamic early childhood education institution that emphasizes character-based learning, particularly the development of children's social-emotional competencies. The school adopts an integrative thematic approach, aligning daily activities with values such as empathy, kindness, and emotional awareness. Its vision, "Shaping righteous, intelligent, and empathetic children from

an early age,” is embodied in everyday routines such as sharing, helping others, and recognizing both personal and others’ emotions.

The research involved seven female teachers (ustadzah), all actively teaching children aged 2 to 4 years. Most of them hold a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Islamic Education (Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, PIAUD) and have at least two years of teaching experience. These educators also participate in regular professional development sessions focusing on Islamic value-based social-emotional learning.

Empathy at KBIT RA Alif Smart is not taught as a separate subject, but is integrated across the curriculum and daily activities. For instance, during play sessions, children are encouraged to greet late-arriving friends or help clean up toys after use.

“Kita setiap hari banyak belajar dari anak-anak, terutama psikologisnya anak, soalnya anak di usia KB itu yang kita kembangkan karakter dan perasaannya dan empatinya kepada teman dan lain sebagainya.”

(We learn a lot from the children every day, especially about their psychology, because at the KB (early childhood) age, what we focus on is their character, feelings, and empathy toward friends and others.)

(Interview with Ustadzah Chomsky, 16 May 2025)

“Ada anak yang memiliki empati langsung lapor ke Ust-nya, ‘Ust ini tadi dipukul sama ini’, atau ada juga yang ikut nangis karena rasa takut sama temannya... Kalau di kelas saya selalu bilang, ‘Kalau ada temannya yang pukul teman-teman silakan lapor ustadzah, tidak boleh dibalas duluan, nanti ustadzah yang kasih tahu temannya dilarang memukul.’ Seperti itu.”

(Some children report incidents out of empathy, like ‘Ustadzah, he hit me’ or they cry out of fear for their friend... In my class, I always say, ‘If someone hits your friend, please tell the teacher; don’t hit back. Let the teacher explain that hitting is not allowed.’)

(Interview with Ustadzah Nurul, 9 May 2025)

Empathy regulation is developed through habit formation, modeling, and positive reinforcement. Children demonstrating empathetic behavior are often praised, hugged, or encouraged, providing them with affective feedback that reinforces prosocial behavior.

Forms of Children’s Empathy

a. Emotional Empathy

Children demonstrated spontaneous emotional responses to others’ feelings. For instance, when a peer cried due to falling, several children would instinctively approach to comfort or hug them without being prompted.

“Namanya anak-anak, dia kalau sedih kadang sendirian, jadi kadang kita kasih tahu, ‘Mbak itu temennya sedih, tolong dihibur’, atau ‘Mbak itu temennya sedih, tolong disayang-sayang dong, dihibur atau diajak main’ gitu.”

(Children sometimes isolate themselves when sad, so we say things like, ‘Look, your friend is sad please comfort her or play with her.’)

(Interview with Ustadzah Chomsky, 16 May 2025)

“Misal ada anak yang nangis, itu pasti ada anak yang perhatian, ditanyain ‘Kamu kenapa?’ Ada beberapa anak, tapi ada juga yang cuek.”



(If a child cries, some others will ask 'Why are you crying?'—though not all; some children remain indifferent.)

(Interview with Ustadzah Ais, 8 May 2025)

b. Cognitive Empathy

By the ages of 3–4, some children showed understanding of others' emotional states through verbal cues or appropriate actions.

"Misal, Mas Al tanya ke Rasya pas Rasya duduk sendiri, 'Rasya kenapa kamu diem? Ayo mainan.' Padahal belum nangis Rasya."

(For example, Mas Al asked Rasya, who was sitting alone, 'Why are you quiet? Let's play.' Even though Rasya wasn't crying yet.)

(Interview with Ustadzah Luluk, 14 May 2025)

This indicates that the child had already developed the ability to recognize emotional shifts and offer support proactively.

c. Reflective Empathy

At age four, some children began to show self-awareness and remorse over their actions. For instance, a child who had pushed another might apologize without adult prompting.

"Kalau di sini itu cowok yang lebih dominan itu Habibi, meski anaknya suka plak plek juga, tapi kalau temennya nangis itu selalu 'Kenapa-kenapa? Minta maaf ya, minta maaf.' Begitu juga kalau temannya menangis itu ditanyain, 'Mbak kenapa, kenapa mbak? Iya nanti tak bilangin Ust ya.'"

(One of the more active boys, Habibi, even though he's sometimes rough, always asks 'What happened? I'm sorry' when a friend cries. He often tells me too.)

(Interview with Ustadzah Haidar, 31 May 2025)

d. Pro-Social Empathy

Examples of pro-social empathy included helping peers wear shoes, sharing food, or offering personal belongings. Children around age four displayed these behaviors more frequently and voluntarily.

"Kaya Elo sama Habibi itu suka bantu. Kadang ambilin tempat minum, kadang ambilin tasnya. Ada yang pernah ambilin tasnya Kai tapi saya lupa siapa."

"Like Elo and Habibi, they like helping sometimes they bring water bottles or someone else's bag."

(Interview with Ustadzah Mash, 21 May 2025)

Strategies for Cultivating and Regulating Empathy

Teachers at KBIT RA Alif Smart apply a range of strategies rooted in Islamic pedagogy and child-centered practices (1) Modeling Behavior: Teachers consistently speak gently, resolve conflict peacefully, and demonstrate concern for children's emotional well-being, (2) Islamic Storytelling: Prophetic stories are used to highlight examples of compassion and empathy such as Prophet Muhammad's kindness to animals and children, (3) Routine Practice: Daily activities include sharing snacks, helping peers, greeting friends, and participating in group rituals, (4) Emotion-based Games: Games like Guess the Emotion support emotional literacy by helping children recognize and label others' feelings.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Empathy Regulation

- a. Supporting Factors** (1) Role Modeling by Teachers and Parents: Children imitate empathetic behavior modeled by trusted adults, (2) Routine Islamic Activities: Practices such as Friday charity (sedekah),



shared prayers, and storytelling nurture compassion, (3) Supportive Classroom Environment: Small class sizes (max. 10 children) foster intimate, emotion-rich interactions.

- b. Inhibiting Factors** (1) Age and Language Gaps: Two-year-olds often lack the verbal skills to articulate empathetic feelings clearly. (2) Impulsive Aggression: Emotional regulation is still developing, leading to unintentional harm or misunderstanding. (3) Limited Home Reinforcement: Some children regress when empathy is not reinforced by caregivers at home.

Findings from interviews and observations revealed a high level of consistency between teachers' narratives and actual child behavior. Most empathetic actions occurred organically in response to the school's nurturing, emotionally responsive environment. These results align with Hoffman's (1982) theory of empathy development, which emphasizes the central role of emotional experience and social context in shaping children's empathetic capacity.

Two primary strategies identified in this study are role modeling and habituation. The *ustadzahs* not only verbally convey empathy-related values but also consistently demonstrate them in their daily behaviors. This reinforces Albert Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, which states that children primarily learn by observing and imitating significant social models here, the *ustadzahs* and peers.

Habituation through small social activities—such as greeting one another, helping peers, and sharing provides an effective medium for cultivating prosocial empathy. These findings resonate with Rofi'ah et al. (2021), who reported that early childhood socioemotional stimulation through routine activities positively influences children's ability to understand and respond to others' emotions.

Additionally, the use of Islamic storytelling such as narratives of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions rich in humanitarian values serves as an effective medium. Stories of the Prophet's kindness to children and living creatures inspire children to grasp the concepts of care and empathy within a religious framework that is accessible and meaningful to them.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Empathy Development

The most significant facilitating factors identified in this study include a warm and Islamic learning environment, responsive teaching approaches, and a curriculum that emphasizes character development. The presence of regular Islamic activities such as Friday charity (*sedekah Jumat*) and communal prayers instills spiritual values that reinforce children's emotional and social dimensions.

Nonetheless, challenges remain, particularly in empathy regulation among two-year-old children, whose communication skills are still limited. This highlights the close relationship between emotional regulation, empathy, language development, and self-control, as discussed by Eisenberg and Fabes (1998). Furthermore, the lack of reinforcement for empathetic behavior within the home environment acts as a barrier, underscoring the importance of parental involvement in shaping children's character.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that early childhood students at KBIT RA Alif Smart Surakarta demonstrate empathetic behaviors that develop in accordance with their age stages. These findings align with Hoffman's (1982) theory of empathy development, which posits that empathy evolves progressively—from emotional empathy (spontaneous reactions to others' feelings), to cognitive empathy (the ability to understand others' emotions), and finally to reflective and prosocial empathy (self-awareness and active helping behaviors). In this context, empathy regulation is understood as the process by which children manage, adjust, and express their empathy with support from their environment. The inculcation of empathy values is not instantaneous but rather achieved through repetition, habituation, and guidance by adults. At KBIT RA Alif Smart, this is implemented through role modeling, daily routines, and the integration of Islamic values within teaching and

learning activities. This approach corresponds with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the vital role of social environment and adult-child interactions in psychological development. The role of the *ustadzah* (female teacher) is crucial in stimulating children's empathy through warm and compassionate engagement. Children learn by imitating empathetic behaviors demonstrated by educators in real situations. When *ustadzahs* patiently soothe a crying child or encourage peers to care for one another, children internalize these messages emotionally and cognitively.

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