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Educational Play Tools for Fostering Islamic Character and Love for the Prophet Muhammad in Early Childhood: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the role of educational play equipment (APE) in play-based learning to cultivate Islamic character in early childhood, especially mahabbah to the Prophet Muhammad. This study also provides a practical framework for the application of APE in Islamic PAUD. **Theoretical framework:** This research is based on the theory of play-based learning and Islamic character education, which views directed play as a means of internalizing values. The conceptual framework used is the flow of "knowledge → affection → action" in the formation of children's religious character.

Literature review: Previous studies have shown that learning to play is effective for character development, but APE is generally still positioned as a supporting medium. Studies that specifically associate the type of APE with the growth of love for the Prophet are still limited. **Methods:** This study used a systematic literature review following the guidelines of PRISMA 2020. Of the 570 articles identified (2010–2025), 12 studies met the criteria and were analyzed through thematic narrative synthesis. **Results:** The results of the study identified four main mechanisms of APE, namely narrative-dialogical media, guided play, symbolic modeling, and multimodal reinforcement at home. This mechanism is related to the improvement of prosocial behavior, manners, religious attitudes, and children's love for the Prophet. **Implications:** These findings confirm the importance of APE as the main instrument in Islamic PAUD character education. Educators need to design and evaluate APE in a targeted manner to support the formation of children's Islamic attitudes and behaviors. **Novelty:** The novelty of this research lies in the placement of APE as the main pedagogical lever in fostering mahabbah to the Prophet. The study also offers a practical model of "knowledge → affection → action" that applies to educators.

Keywords: educational play equipment (ape), guided play, islamic character education, early childhood education, prophetic love (mahabbah).

INTRODUCTION

Globally, play-based learning is widely recognized as a powerful lever for cognitive and socio-emotional development in early childhood, positioning games and educational play equipment (APE) as core pedagogical vehicles rather than mere entertainment [1]. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis in *Frontiers in Psychology* reported moderate to large

effects of game-based learning on preschoolers' cognitive, socio-emotional, motivational, and engagement outcomes [2]. Causal evidence from a large randomized controlled trial of the Playful Learning Curriculum further showed that a structured play curriculum improves school readiness and children's self-regulation [3]. These findings indicate that well-designed APEs provide a theoretically and empirically grounded means to integrate moral and religious value formation into early learning through guided play.

In Indonesia, home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations, early childhood education commonly emphasizes character education anchored in religious values and therefore requires pedagogy that is responsive to children's religious identities [4]. International scholarship in public preschool settings highlights the importance of a co-constructed, religiously responsive pedagogy that involves educators and Muslim families, honoring identity while fostering empathy and cooperation [5]. This evidence substantiates the pedagogical case for Islamic-themed APEs, for example, "Prophetic exemplar" cards, narrative storyboards, or role-play kits as culturally congruent media for character formation [6].

Early childhood is a period of heightened plasticity during which meaningful play experiences scaffold moral schemas, self-regulation, and cooperation that predict later academic and life outcomes [7]. Experimental and review evidence shows that interactive and repeated play fosters emotion regulation, inhibitory control, empathy, and collaborative behaviors, the core of prosocial functioning in school and beyond. In Muslim classroom contexts, linking APEs with narratives of the Prophet Muhammad's virtues provides an affective-spiritual anchor that helps children internalize values in daily practice rather than merely "knowing" them abstractly [8]. Absent such intentional design, schools risk missing a critical window for internalizing value, with downstream consequences for classroom discipline, peer relations, and learning motivation [9].

Across many systems, forming Islamic character in early childhood is hindered by tensions between secularly oriented curriculum frameworks and Islamic pedagogical traditions, leading to a drift toward shallow ritualism or avoidance of religious dimensions altogether [10]. Preschool educators also report barriers when co-constructing religiously responsive pedagogy with Muslim families, including time constraints, policy limits, and concerns about exclusivity, which require close collaboration and sensitive communication [11]. Teacher-parent partnerships are viewed as pivotal for navigating these sensitivities, yet implementation often proves difficult in public schooling contexts [12]. In diverse classrooms, designing learning environments that are both culturally and religiously responsive and inclusive presents a distinctive challenge for early childhood educators [13]. Converting values into observable behaviors and assessing them fairly and reliably in young children also remains theoretically and methodologically problematic [14]. Accordingly, the selection and use of APEs that embed Prophetic narratives and modeling should rest on explicit design principles and clear assessment criteria to avoid mere symbolism, consistent with evidence that play-based learning is most effective when embedded in a structured curriculum [15].

Despite the breadth of evidence for play-based learning in ECE, there is no systematic synthesis that focuses specifically on APEs for Islamic character formation, particularly the affective dimension of love of the Prophet in preschool contexts [16]. Existing reviews typically emphasize cognitive or broad socio-emotional outcomes of play, whereas work on religion in preschool often overlooks the role of specific tools as pedagogical mechanisms of behavior change [17]. Studies of religiously responsive pedagogy underscore collaboration with Muslim families but rarely specify which APE types, implementation strategies, and indicators most effectively cultivate Islamic virtues, including love of the Prophet [18]. This gap calls for a rigorous mapping that links APE design → implementation strategies → measurable indicators of Islamic character (love of the Prophet) in ECE settings [19].

Addressing this gap is urgent because well-chosen APEs enable child-friendly, culturally grounded habit loops that embed values through structured play rather than didactic instruction [20]. Converging RCT and review evidence shows that when play is intentionally designed as curriculum, it yields robust gains in self-regulation and engagement, two preconditions for embodying religious values beyond rote recall. For Indonesian Islamic preschools, an evidence-based guide to selecting and adapting APEs is therefore strategic for cultivating love of the Prophet in developmentally appropriate and inclusive ways [21].

This article makes a thematic contribution by centering APEs as the principal pedagogical lever, rather than generic religious instruction, for Islamic character formation in ECE. It further elevates the affective-spiritual dimension of the love for the Prophet, a facet often under-specified in character-education reviews framed within playful pedagogy. Finally, it proposes a design–implementation–outcome framework that connects APE types (e.g., exemplar cards, role-play kits, storyboards, educational digital games), implementation strategies (modeling, guided play, family collaboration), and measurable indicators of Islamic virtues to support replication in classrooms.

Aligned with the title “Educational Play Tools for Islamic Character Formation (Love of the Prophet) in Early Childhood Education,” this article aims to (1) articulate the pedagogical rationale for why APEs are effective in cultivating Islamic virtues and love of the Prophet in early childhood, (2) it also seeks to map types of APEs and instructional mechanisms that enable value internalization through guided play, modeling, and narrative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Play Tools (APE) in Early Childhood Education

APE functions as a core medium of play-based learning, connecting curricular goals with children’s natural modes of learning, exploration, interaction, and symbolization, while supporting gains in cognition, language, and socio-emotional development. Recent international work links quality teacher–child interactions to better child outcomes, underscoring why play tools must be embedded in rich, guided interactions rather than used as stand-alone “toys” [22]. Complementary classroom research on play-based integration also reports that teachers leverage inquiry, exploration, and problem-solving through play to advance learning goals [23]. Authoritative practice guidance further specifies how educators design culturally responsive, equitable play contexts, typically involving guided play with APE, to realize developmentally appropriate practice [24].

Islamic Character Formation: “Love of the Prophet” in early childhood

In Islamic early-years settings, “love for the Prophet” is commonly operationalized across four mutually reinforcing domains: (a) *sīrah* knowledge, (b) attitudes of emulation (e.g., honesty, courtesy), (c) habituation of worship/etiquette (*salām*, *ṣalawāt*, *adab*), and (d) affect (admiration and closeness). Empirical studies in Indonesia have shown that joyful, contextual storytelling of prophetic narratives strengthens young children’s character formation, including prosocial behavior and moral reasoning [25]. Field observations of *sīrah*-based value planting in PAUD classrooms document systematic planning, engaging delivery, and follow-up habituation routines that move values from knowledge to daily practice [26]. Experimental and practice-oriented reports on Islamic role-play likewise indicate positive effects on core Islamic values (e.g., empathy, honesty) among preschoolers [27]. Additional national findings reinforce the impact of prophetic stories, while also highlighting the importance of school–home partnerships in sustaining *akhlāq* beyond the school environment.

Why does APE support “love of the Prophet”

Contemporary evidence suggests APE catalyze a knowledge → affect → action pathway when used in guided, interaction-rich play: children first grasp narrative content (sīrah), then experience positive emotions, and finally rehearse values as habits. International studies have found a connection between higher interaction quality and gains in language and cognitive development, particularly in conditions where sīrah content and etiquette practices (e.g., greetings, sharing) can be modeled and rehearsed through puppets, role-play, sequencing cards, and constructive play. In parallel, early-years research on digital storytelling shows that narrative media can engage young learners and scaffold value-laden conversations, provided pedagogy, not the device, drives design [28]. Professional guidance on developmentally appropriate practice then specifies the teacher moves (modeling, scaffolding, feedback) that make these play experiences meaningful and inclusive.

Design implications for APE to foster “love of the Prophet.”

An effective lesson flow is typically: brief sīrah storytelling → play/role-play/puppetry → reflection → a take-home etiquette mission for families. Classroom reports in PAUD indicate that role-play in Islamic Education can be structured with clear steps (preparation, modeling, enactment, reflection) to ensure that akhlāq are practiced, not merely discussed [29]. National evidence on storytelling for character formation recommends combining conventional and digital modes, depending on context and access. Throughout, teachers monitor three domains: sīrah knowledge, attitudes of emulation, and behavioral etiquette using brief observation rubrics and checklists, aligning practice with current DAP guidance.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Reporting Standards

The review was structured as a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and was reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, including the updated checklist, abstract items, and flow diagram. PRISMA 2020 enhanced transparency across identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis phases, and its Explanation & Elaboration article was consulted to ensure comprehensive reporting. To document the search strategy in a reproducible manner, the PRISMA-S extension was adopted, allowing for the archiving of full search strings, sources, limits/filters, and search dates.

Research Question and Scope

The research question was formulated using a PICo/PEO framework suitable for early childhood education. The population consists of young children aged approximately 3–7 years enrolled in pre-primary settings (kindergarten/RA/PAUD) or family/home contexts. The Intervention/Phenomenon included play-based approaches and/or educational play materials (EPM/APE), such as guided play, role-play/puppetry, storytelling/digital storytelling, game-based learning, and climate-of-care practices in the early-years setting. The Outcomes encompass indicators of character/social virtues (e.g., empathy, cooperation, self-discipline, responsibility), adab (courtesy/manners), sīrah knowledge, affective attachment (mahabbah), and living together in diversity (tolerance, acceptance of differences, and sense of belonging). This framing aligned the scope with subsequent eligibility criteria and thematic synthesis under PRISMA 2020.

Information Sources

Searches covered international and Indonesian/regional sources to maximize coverage. International databases included ERIC, PsycINFO, Education Source, APA PsycArticles,

Springer Nature, SAGE, Wiley, Taylor & Francis/Routledge, Frontiers, MDPI, DOAJ, and Google Scholar. Indonesian/regional sources included GARUDA, Neliti, and OneSearch. For each source, the date of search and the number of records retrieved were logged in line with PRISMA 2020 and PRISMA-S. Where relevant, gray literature (e.g., OSF, Zenodo) was additionally scanned and clearly labeled as non-peer-reviewed.

Search Strategy

The time span and languages were set a priori (e.g., 2010–2025; Indonesian and English). Controlled vocabulary and free-text terms were combined with Boolean operators and field tags. Illustrative strings (to be tailored per database) were as follows.

Indonesian (e.g., GARUDA/Scholar/DOAJ):

("early childhood" OR PAUD OR TK OR RA OR KB) AND ("educational play equipment" OR APE OR "guided play" OR "role-play" OR puppet OR storytelling) AND (character OR morals OR adab OR tolerance OR empathy OR "living in diversity" OR sirah OR mahabbah)*

English (e.g., ERIC/PsycINFO/Scopus/WoS):

("early childhood" OR preschool OR kindergarten) AND ("guided play" OR "play-based learning" OR "educational toy" OR manipulative* OR puppet* OR "dramatic play" OR storytelling) AND (character OR "moral development" OR prosocial OR empathy OR tolerance OR sirah OR "Prophet* love" OR Islamic) *

All final strings, field tags, filters/limits, interfaces, and yields per source were archived in a PRISMA-S-compliant search log.

Reference Management and Deduplication

All records were exported (RIS/BibTeX/CSV), merged into a citation manager, and deduplicated through automated procedures followed by manual verification using title, authorship, and DOI. Rayyan supported collaborative, blinded screening and maintained an auditable decision trail for subsequent stages.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility was specified before screening. Inclusion required: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles (or in-press) in Indonesian or English; (ii) a pre-primary population (≈ 3 –7 years; kindergarten/RA/PAUD/KB) or separately reported data for this group; (iii) intervention/phenomenon involving EPM/play-based approaches or climate-of-care practices in early-years settings; (iv) at least one outcome in the domains of character/adab/sirah/mahabbah/tolerance; and (v) an eligible design (RCT or quasi-experimental, pre-post, observational, mixed-methods, or qualitative with systematic procedures). Exclusion criteria covered editorials/opinions/narrative reviews without methods, records lacking full text, studies outside early childhood without separable data, and religious topics without behavioral/prosocial outcomes. Criteria and justifications followed PRISMA 2020 guidance on eligibility and reporting.

Study Selection

The identification stage recorded total records per source; duplicates were removed before screening. Two independent reviewers conducted title/abstract screening (include/unclear/exclude) and full-text eligibility assessment against the prespecified criteria. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were documented and later displayed in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. Inter-rater reliability was quantified using Cohen's kappa to adjust for chance agreement, with a target of moderate-to-substantial concordance.

Data Extraction

Data extraction was carried out independently by two reviewers using a pilot-tested form. Extracted fields encompassed study identifiers (authors, year, country), design/methods, setting (pre-primary/home), child age and sample size, type of EPM/play-based approach, implementation strategies (e.g., guided discovery, role-play/puppetry, storytelling, cooperative routines, reflective/adab practices, parent engagement), outcome domains and measurement instruments, timing of assessment, key findings (summary statistics and/or qualitative themes), risk-of-bias judgments, and funding/conflicts of interest. PRISMA 2020 recommendations on tabulating study characteristics and results were followed to facilitate reproducibility.

Quality Appraisal and Risk Of Bias

Quality appraisal was aligned with the study design. RoB 2 was applied to randomized trials across five domains (randomisation, deviations from intended interventions, missing outcome data, outcome measurement, and selection of the reported result) using signaling questions and domain-level judgments. ROBINS-I was applied to non-randomised studies by mapping biases against a “target trial” across seven domains. For cross-sectional, qualitative, and other designs, the JBI Critical Appraisal Tools were used in their study-specific forms. Judgments were reported by domain and overall, based on independent dual assessment with consensus resolution.

Synthesis Approach

The primary synthesis employed thematic narrative synthesis. Studies were grouped by type of EPM/play component, pedagogical mechanisms (modelling/role-play, guided play, cooperative activity, reflective/adab routines), and outcome domains (adab/character, empathy, tolerance, *sīrah/mahabbah*). Where data were sufficiently homogeneous, and effect sizes were available, a meta-analysis was planned. Continuous outcomes would use the standardized mean difference (Hedges' *g*) or the mean difference, while dichotomous outcomes would use the risk ratio or the odds ratio. Heterogeneity would be summarized using I^2 and τ^2 , and a random-effects model would be preferred in cases of substantive variability. Publication could be inspected via funnel plot and appropriate tests, with sensitivity analyses conducted against inclusion decisions and high-risk studies. Procedures followed the Cochrane Handbook.

Certainty of Evidence

For priority outcomes, the certainty of evidence can be summarized using the GRADE approach to support the interpretability and practical implications of the findings in early years education.

Ethics and data sharing

Because the SLR synthesised previously published studies, primary ethical approval was not required. The search log, screening decisions (including full-text exclusion reasons), extraction forms, and analysis scripts (if applicable) were intended for deposition in an open repository (e.g., OSF) to support replication and audit in accordance with PRISMA and open-science principles.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

To ensure transparent study selection, the search and screening stages were reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020. Database searches yielded 570 records; after deduplication (88 records), 482 articles remained for title–abstract screening. A total of 376 articles were excluded at this stage, leaving 106 reports sought for retrieval, all of which were

successfully obtained for full-text eligibility assessment. At the eligibility stage, 94 reports were excluded for primary reasons including non-target population/context, outside the prespecified year range, non-journal article type, or irrelevant outcomes. Consequently, 12 articles met the inclusion criteria and formed the basis of the synthesis for early childhood education. The document-screening flow diagram was presented in Figure 1.

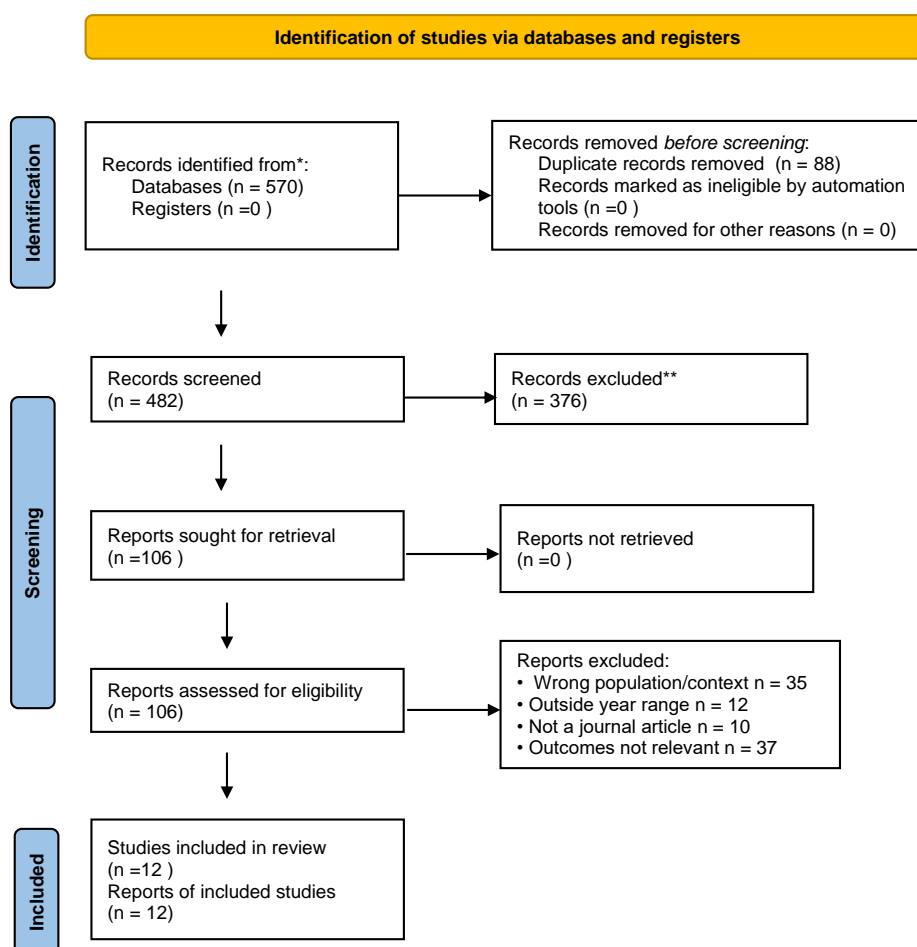


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart Research Design

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational Play Equipment and The Development of Islamic Character, Particularly Love for The Prophet, in Early Childhood

The results section presented the main findings of a systematic review of articles that met the inclusion criteria related to educational play equipment and the development of Islamic character, particularly love for the Prophet, in early childhood. The collected data were then presented concisely in tabular form to show variations in research contexts (country, level of early childhood education, and participant characteristics), methodological designs, types of educational play equipment employed, and findings that directly addressed the aim of the review, namely to formulate the pedagogical rationale and mechanisms by which such equipment fostered love for the Prophet through structured and meaningful play. The table also served as the basis for further analysis in the discussion subsection, particularly in linking the design of educational play equipment, implementation strategies (including storytelling, role-playing, digital storytelling, and school-family collaboration), and indicators of Islamic character as manifested in children's

behavior. The findings on educational play equipment and the development of Islamic character, particularly love for the Prophet, in early childhood, were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Educational Play Equipment and Development Love for the Prophet

Short Title & Year	Method	Location	Subjects	Findings that directly addressed the goals (pedagogical rationale & mechanisms)
Interactive Elaborative Storytelling (IES) – [30]	Small-group RCT	Germany	Preschoolers, 4–6 yrs	Narrative with guided prompts engaged children as co-tellers, which increased attention and moral understanding. Rationale: as children reconstructed exemplary stories, they practiced perspective-taking and moral talk, a mechanism that could be populated with sīrah of the Prophet to link meaning and affection to the Messenger.
IES vs. repeated reading [31]	Three-arm RCT (n≈293)	Europe	4–6 yrs	IES outperformed repeated reading on vocabulary and oral narrative. Rationale: story-based play with character/illustration cards (APEs) plus teacher dialogue activated emotional and value elaboration; the content could readily be replaced with Prophet stories to internalize adab.
Playful Learning Curriculum [3]	Large-scale RCT	Northern Europe	5 yrs	Structured guided play improved self-regulation and social readiness. Rationale: self-regulation served as a prerequisite for virtuous behavior (patience, self-control), so thematic APEs (blocks, play centers) provided practice of Islamic values through rules and reflection.
PT/ST (Peer-based social play) [32] – Frontiers in Education, 2022	Multiple-case intervention (28 activities)	Sweden	Inclusive preschoolers	Coached, guided play, trained six social skills (turn-taking, empathy, cooperation). Rationale: socio-dramatic APEs plus teacher modeling created safe contexts for helping and sharing—Islamic core virtues—so prosocial habits formed over time.
Prosocial behavior in free play [33] – Frontiers in Psychology, 2022	Quantitative observation (n=160)	Italy	4–6 yrs	Free play elicited prosocial acts and correlated with social-emotional competence. Rationale: social APEs offered practice-in-context (helping/sharing) that teachers framed with Prophetic exemplars via brief pre-briefs and debriefs.

Prosocial behavior in groups [34]– Frontiers in Psychology, 2025	Natural experiment (n=108)	Austria	Preschool	Whom children helped/shared with was influenced by popularity/relationships; teacher scaffolding balanced moral choices. Rationale: cooperative APEs plus guided norms enabled teachers to connect children’s decisions to Prophetic akhlaq (justice, ihsan).
Puppet-assisted religious character – Journal of Primary Education, 2021 [35]	Quasi-experiment (exp.–control)	Indonesia	5–6 yrs (n≈60)	Hand puppets with religious-value scenarios increased religious attitude and language scores. Rationale: puppets functioned as symbolic models; children imitated exemplary behaviors (greeting, honesty, compassion), a modeling pathway toward love of the Prophet through role figures.
Role-play Hadith in Islamic Education – Mudarrisuna, 2025 (SINTA) ([UIN Ar-Raniry Journal Portal] [27])	Two-group experiment	Indonesia	Preschool (n=20)	Hadith-based role-play raised understanding and application of values (honesty, discipline, helping). Rationale: guided enactment translated norms from story to action; teacher modeling plus reflection strengthened affective attachment to the Prophet’s teachings.
Hand vs. paper puppets for story listening – Jurnal Obsesi, 2022/2023 [36]	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	5–7 yrs	Both puppet APEs improved listening. Rationale: heightened attention and story comprehension opened a channel to absorb Prophet stories; guided Q&A linked moral messages to everyday actions.
Digital storytelling → prosocial – Psikologi UIN SGD, 2020 (empirical) [37]	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	5–7 yrs (n=11)	Digital storytelling outperformed conventional storytelling for prosocial gains. Rationale: multimodal narrative (audio-visual-character) plus teacher discussion triggered empathy and imitation of exemplary behavior—an ideal format for sirah.
Bedtime storytelling & prosocial – Nak-Kanak, 2023 (int’l OA) [38]	Qualitative case study	Indonesia	K1–K2	Repeated stories with brief discussion cultivated empathy and sharing; parents served as models at home. Rationale: the home–school loop reinforced value internalization and nurtured love for Prophet stories through routine narration.
Hand-puppet storytelling	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	Kindergarten (n=30)	Hand puppets raised participation and responsiveness during storytelling. Rationale:

(Kindergarten, 2021 [39])				high engagement created a gateway for value meaning-making; teacher prompts connected character actions with Prophetic akhlaq and daily adab practice.
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Guided narrative play positioned children as co-narrators and thereby anchored positive affect, sustained attention, vocabulary growth, and *moral talk* to exemplary figures; when narratives were populated with *sīrah* and hadith, meaning and affection were explicitly tied to the Prophet. The Interactive Elaborative Storytelling approach consistently elevated attention and moral comprehension by means of teacher prompts that fostered perspective-taking, and it outperformed repeated reading on vocabulary and oral narrative by leveraging character/illustration cards (APEs) and dialogic questioning that elicited value elaboration.

Structured guided play functioned as a curricular lever for dispositional development: it improved self-regulation and social readiness prerequisites for virtuous conduct, such as patience and self-control, through rule-governed practice and brief reflection embedded in thematic APEs (e.g., blocks, play centers). Peer-based social play further consolidated six core social skills (turn-taking, empathy, cooperation) through coached guidance and teacher modeling, such that prosocial habits aligned with Islamic virtues of helping and sharing accrued over time.

The social ecology of play operated as a miniature moral laboratory. Free play reliably elicited helping and sharing and correlated with social–emotional competence, while children’s prosocial choices were also shaped by peer relationships and popularity. Teacher scaffolding effectively balanced these tendencies by naming norms and explicitly linking decisions to Prophetic virtues justice (*‘adl*) and *ihsān*, so cooperative APEs channeled everyday choices toward Islamic moral reasoning rather than mere conformity.

Puppets and role-play served as salient symbolic models that rendered the imitation of greeting, honesty, and compassion both concrete and motivating. Hand-puppet interventions with explicit religious-value scenarios increased religious attitudes, participation, responsiveness, and language, creating an affective entry point through which teachers connected character actions to the Prophet’s akhlaq and daily adab. Hadith-based role-play translated norms from story into action and, together with teacher modeling and guided reflection, strengthened affective attachment to the Prophet’s teachings. Complementarily, both hand and paper puppets improved listening, and guided Q&A linked moral messages to everyday behavior; concomitant gains in listening and speaking equipped children to name and reason about Islamic values.

Multimodal narrative formats amplified these effects beyond the classroom. Digital storytelling surpassed conventional storytelling on prosocial outcomes because audio-visual character narratives accompanied by teacher discussion elicited empathy and imitation of exemplary behavior, an especially suitable vehicle for *sīrah*. Bedtime storytelling with brief discussion at home extended transfer across settings; parental modeling fostered empathy and sharing and cultivated a fondness for the Prophet’s stories through warm, repeated routines, thereby closing the home–school loop that reinforced value internalization.

Collectively, these findings articulated the pedagogical rationale for why APEs were effective in cultivating Islamic virtues and love of the Prophet in early childhood, namely, through the convergence of guided storytelling, rule-based and reflective practice, socially scaffolded cooperation, symbolic modeling and enactment, and multimodal/home reinforcement.

Map Types of Apes and Instructional Mechanisms

The findings from the various studies were summarized in a table, allowing for a clear visualization of the relationship between the intervention design and value outcomes. The table contains key information for each study, implementation context, participant characteristics, types of APEs used, and the ways teachers or parents manage these in activities with children, and concludes with a summary of the impacts that emerged in prosocial behavior, value understanding, religious attitudes, and the tendency to love the Prophet. This condensation in tabular form provided a concise “map” of the research findings, which was presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Map Types of Apes and Instructional Mechanisms

Short Title & Year	Method	Location	Subjects	Findings
Interactive Elaborative Storytelling (IES), 2019 [30]	Small-group RCT	Germany	Preschoolers 4–6	APEs used included big books and picture/character cards; mechanisms involved narrative with elaborative prompts, guided discussion, and child retelling.
IES vs. Repeated Reading, 2020 [31]	Multi-arm RCT	Europe	Preschoolers 4–6	APEs included storybooks plus vocabulary/scene cards; mechanisms involved narrative with guided questioning, dialogic talk around key moral terms.
Playful Learning Curriculum, 2023 [3]	Large-scale RCT	Northern Europe	Preschoolers ~5	APEs included thematic play centers (blocks, dramatic-play props); mechanisms involved guided play with explicit goals, clear rules, and brief reflection.
Peer-Based Social Play (PT/ST), 2022 [32]	Multiple-case intervention	Sweden	Inclusive preschools	APEs included cooperative game sets and turn-taking/rule cards; mechanisms involved guided play with teacher coaching and modeling of social skills.
Prosocial Behavior in Free Play, 2022 [33]	Quantitative observation	Italy	Preschoolers 4–6	APEs included open-ended cooperative toys (blocks, pretend-kitchen, vehicle sets); mechanisms involved peer free play scaffolded by brief norm priming (pre-brief/debrief).
Prosocial Choice in Groups, 2025 [34]	Natural experiment	Austria	Preschoolers	APEs included small-team cooperative games and moral-choice cards; mechanisms involved guided norms, discussion of consequences, and role-taking
Puppet-Assisted Religious Character, 2021 [35]	Quasi-experiment (exp.–control)	Indonesia	Kindergarten B (5–6)	APEs included hand puppets with religious/adab scenarios; mechanisms involved modeling via puppet figures, dialogic narrative, and guided practice of greetings/prayers.
Role-Play of Hadith (PAI), 2025 [27]	Two-group experiment	Indonesia	Preschoolers	APEs included role props (simple costumes/masks) and hadith cards; mechanisms involved guided play

				(enactment), teacher modeling, and post-activity reflection.
Hand vs. Paper Puppets, 2022/2023 [36]	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	Children 5–7	APEs included hand and paper-puppetry; mechanisms involved narrative with guided Q&A, child role enactment, and value dialogue.
Digital Storytelling to Prosocial, 2020 [37]	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	Children 5–7	APEs included interactive story videos and simple storyboards; mechanisms involved multimodal narrative plus guided discussion and moral choices.
Bedtime Storytelling & Prosocial, 2023 [38]	Qualitative case study	Indonesia	K1–K2	APEs included Islamic storybooks at home and prayer cards; mechanisms involved home–school narrative routines, parent modeling, and repeated stories.
Hand-Puppet Storytelling in Class, 2021 [39]	Quasi-experiment	Indonesia	Kindergarten (~30)	APEs included hand puppets with adab scenarios; mechanisms involved modeling of actions (greeting, orderliness), guided feedback, and child role-taking.

Narrative-centered APEs consistently relied on story artifacts such as big books, picture/character cards, scene/vocabulary cards, and dialogic techniques (elaborative prompts, guided questioning, child retelling). These tools and routines positioned children as co-narrators, increased attention and moral comprehension, and strengthened language, thereby creating a robust conduit for embedding *sīrah* and Prophet-centered values. Specifically, Interactive Elaborative Storytelling utilized big books and character cards with elaborative prompts and guided discussion, which elevated attention, moral understanding, and language. When contrasted with standard read-alouds, the same narrative APE set (storybooks plus vocabulary/scene cards) combined with dialogic talk around key moral terms outperformed repeated reading on vocabulary and oral narrative, indicating a stronger capacity to process and internalize values from Prophet-centered stories.

Guided-play APEs mapped onto thematic play centers and cooperative game sets paired with clear rules, explicit goals, coaching, and brief reflection. These configurations operationalized value practice as repeated, rule-governed action, thereby cultivating self-regulation and social readiness as prerequisites for virtues such as patience and turn-taking. In peer-based social play, cooperative game sets and rule/turn-taking cards were combined with teacher coaching and live modeling of social skills; children’s prosocial skills increased over time, demonstrating that structured APEs created safe practice contexts for helping and sharing. In less structured contexts, open-ended cooperative toys (blocks, pretend-kitchen, vehicle sets) supported peer free play that, when scaffolded by brief norm priming (pre-brief/debrief), still elicited helping and sharing; teacher cues linked these acts to fairness and empathy so that value internalization occurred within the flow of play. Where social dynamics risked bias, small-team cooperative games and moral-choice cards, paired with guided norms, consequence discussion, and role-taking, enabled teachers to balance popularity effects and support explicit moral reasoning transferable to choices framed through the Prophet’s example.

Modeling-focused APEs centered on puppetry and role-play props (hand or paper puppets; simple costumes/masks; hadith cards) and were driven by symbolic modeling, dialogic narrative, guided enactment, and feedback. Hand puppets with religious/adab scenarios served as safe symbolic models; with teacher-led dialogue and guided practice of

greetings and prayers, they improved religious attitude and language, demonstrating a modeling pathway toward virtuous conduct. Hadith-based role-play that used role props and hadith cards translated norms into action; teacher modeling plus post-activity reflection increased understanding and application of honesty, discipline, and helping. Across puppet formats, guided Q&A and child enactment improved listening and attention, opening channels for Prophet stories and moral messages to be absorbed and verbalized. In classroom implementations, hand-puppet storytelling with adab scenarios and guided feedback increased participation and engagement and provided a reliable window for consistent reinforcement of targeted values through child role-taking.

Multimodal and cross-setting APEs extended narrative and modeling effects beyond the classroom. Interactive story videos and simple storyboards, combined with guided discussion and moral choice prompts, increased prosocial behavior by fostering empathy through identification with exemplary characters—an especially suitable format for *sīrah* [39]. At home, Islamic storybooks and prayer cards embedded in bedtime routines, supported by parent modeling and repeated stories, strengthened empathy and sharing and deepened emotional bonding to exemplars (including the Prophet), thereby completing a home–school value loop.

In summary, the findings mapped a coherent design space: (a) narrative APEs (big books, story/scene cards) with elaborative prompts, guided questioning, and child retelling; (b) guided-play APEs (thematic centers, cooperative game sets, rule/turn-taking cards, moral-choice cards) with explicit rules/goals, coaching, norm priming, and reflection; (c) modeling APEs (hand/paper puppets, role props, hadith cards) with symbolic modeling, guided enactment, dialogic feedback; and (d) multimodal/home APEs (interactive story videos, storyboards, Islamic storybooks, prayer cards) with teacher discussion and parent modeling. Across these types and mechanisms, value internalization occurred as children enacted rules and roles, narrated and re-narrated exemplars, and received timely scaffolding that explicitly tied choices and language to Prophetic virtues.

Educational Play Equipment (EPE) and the Development of Islamic Character and Love for the Prophet in Early Childhood

Overall, the findings of this review indicated that educational play equipment (EPE) was not a neutral play medium; rather, it functioned as a moral and affective infrastructure that could be directed toward nurturing Islamic character and *mahabbah* (love) for the Prophet. Through guided narrative activities, such as Interactive Elaborative Storytelling (IES), children were positioned as co-narrators who reconstructed exemplary stories. When the content of these narratives was filled with *sīrah* and hadith, the attention, vocabulary, and moral talk that emerged were explicitly anchored to the figure of the Prophet. This pattern was consistent with findings from a pragmatic randomized trial of dialogic reading in preschool, which reported increased participation and language outcomes, particularly when teachers used prompting questions and actively involved children [40]. Similarly, a shared-reading intervention with social-themed picture books in parent–child dyads was found to enhance prosocial behavior through the mediation of empathy; in other words, emotionally engaging narratives served as a bridge to helping and sharing behaviors [41]. At an even earlier age, a multicenter trial of Dialogic Book-Sharing (DBS) highlighted the importance of labeling emotions, perspective-taking, and co-construction of meaning in parent–child interactions [42]. When such mechanisms were populated with the stories of the Prophet, one could see how knowledge of the Prophet, affective closeness, and everyday *adab* toward him were built in an integrated manner.

Based on the perspective of guided play, the findings on guided play that promoted self-regulation and social readiness showed that EPE operated as a “mini-laboratory” in which children practiced patience, rule-following, and cooperation, core prerequisites for Islamic character. These results were aligned with a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of game-based learning in early childhood education, which reported positive effects of

educational games on cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, and engagement outcomes, provided that game design and teacher roles were intentionally structured. More specifically, a parallel-group trial of the SAGA programme (shared story-book reading with a mentalizing focus) and Pikkuli (emotion pedagogy) in a European context demonstrated that a 10-week intervention improved preschoolers' socio-emotional development through a combination of simple rules and brief post-activity reflection [43]. Thus, readers could understand that thematic EPE blocks, role-play corners, and cooperative games became more effective when they were consistently followed by short reflective conversations that explicitly named patience, justice, and *ihsān* as part of the Prophet's guidance.

This review also highlighted that the social ecology of play shaped the direction of prosocial behavior. Data on helping and sharing in peer groups indicated that children tended to help or share more often with close friends or more popular peers [44], [45]. These patterns were in line with naturalistic research showing that dominance, popularity, and friendship networks influenced to whom prosocial acts were directed. At the same time, previous observational work has found that prosocial behavior in free play correlates with socio-emotional competence but remains shaped by socialization experiences and institutional context. In other words, these results were not fully consistent with the assumption that "leaving children to free play is sufficient for moral development." Without explicit guidance, children's moral decisions were easily swayed by peer-status dynamics. Here, the teacher's role as a moral scaffold became crucial [44]–[47]: teachers needed to name the norms of justice (*ʿadl*) and *ihsān*, intentionally group or pair children, and link their choices to examples of justice and compassion from the Prophet's *sīrah*.

The findings on the use of puppets and hadith-based role-play further strengthened the interpretation that EPE also operates through symbolic modeling. Hand puppets, paper puppets, and role-play scenarios based on hadith made greetings, honesty, and kindness concrete, repeatable, and enjoyable. These results were consistent with experimental research in Indonesia, which showed that integrating role play into Islamic education for preschoolers enhanced both understanding and practice of honesty, discipline, and helping behaviors when teachers combined demonstration, children's reenactment, and guided reflection. Simultaneously, storytelling with paper puppets was found to enrich vocabulary, sentence structure, and speaking confidence in children aged 5–6 years [48]. This combination of heightened attention and improved language ability opened up space for teachers to facilitate explicit moral talk [49], [50], for instance, by asking why the Prophet-figure in the story behaved honestly or gently, and how children might imitate such behavior in their daily lives.

The dimension of digital storytelling and the reinforcement of a home–school loop also appeared highly strategic for fostering love for the Prophet. In classrooms, digital storytelling that combined audio, visual, and animated elements proved more effective than conventional storytelling in enhancing prosocial indicators when followed by structured teacher-led discussion. These findings were consistent with research on bedtime storytelling in Indonesian families, which reported that repeated stories before sleep, accompanied by brief discussion and parental modeling, gradually shaped children's empathy and sharing behavior. In the broader digital sphere, studies of Islamic digital *daʿwah* content for young children emphasized that videos, animations, and Islamic apps, when carefully curated and accompanied by adult mediation, could serve as vehicles for internalizing Islamic values and strengthening children's Muslim identity amid globalization pressures [51]. Based on the standpoint of cultivating *mahabbah* for the Prophet, this suggested an important message to readers: digital content featuring stories of the Prophet could be a powerful tool, but it was effective only when educationally designed and accompanied by reflective guidance at home and in school.

Conceptually, these findings led to several practical implications for educators and policymakers. First, EPE that carried rich narratives (story cards, simple comics, Prophet-themed puppets, story apps) needed to be positioned at the core of activities, not as mere

accessories; teachers were encouraged to use empathic and reflective questions so that children did not merely “hear a story” but learned to feel and evaluate the Prophet’s attitudes. Second, cooperative and rule-based games could be intentionally used to train self-regulation and fairness, with explicit links between game rules and the Prophetic principles of justice (*‘adl*) and *ihsān*. This was consistent with evidence that well-designed game-based learning contributed significantly to children’s social behavior. Third, Islamic early childhood institutions needed to develop systematic partnerships with parents, for example, through take-home story packs, guiding questions for bedtime storytelling, and curated lists of safe and value-laden digital content, so that children’s experiences of the Prophet remained coherent across home and school [51].

At the same time, readers needed to remain critical regarding the limitations of the evidence. Several results in this review were not in line with the notion that passive repetition of stories or unguided free play would be sufficient for character formation. Pragmatic randomized trials have shown that dialogic reading yields stronger outcomes than simple repeated reading. Meta-analyses of game-based learning have also documented substantial variability in effects, depending on the quality of design and implementation. Furthermore, studies of prosocial behavior in peer groups have indicated that helping and sharing are often directed by popularity and friendship rather than by impartial need, suggesting that without teacher scaffolding, children’s choices would not necessarily align with Islamic moral ideals of justice for the vulnerable.

Based on this synthesis, it could be concluded that EPE effectively supported the development of Islamic character and love for the Prophet only when it was integrated into a holistic pedagogical cycle: guided narratives rich in meaning, reflective rule-based play, symbolic modeling through puppets and role-play, scaffolded cooperation, and reinforcement via digital media and family practices at home. In other words, what ultimately mattered was not merely the physical form of the EPE but how educators and parents animated it as a bridge for children to know, love, and emulate the Prophet in their everyday lives.

Map Types of APEs and Instructional Mechanisms

The twelve reviewed studies delineated a coherent pattern regarding how APEs were designed and enacted to support value internalisation in early childhood. Across diverse contexts, APEs functioned not as neutral props but as structured affordances that shaped how children listened, spoke, played, and assumed roles in relation to moral and religious content. The overall pattern was consistent with broader early-childhood evidence indicating that children’s moral understanding, prosocial behavior, and self-regulation were strengthened when adults embedded values within rich interactional routines rather than relying solely on transmission-only instruction [52].

Narrative-centred APEs and dialogic reading

The two IES studies showed that narrative-based APEs (big books; storybooks; picture/character and vocabulary/scene cards) became particularly powerful when adults used dialogic techniques. In both trials, elaborative prompts, guided questioning, and child retelling increased attention, moral comprehension, and language skills, while IES outperformed repeated reading in vocabulary and oral narrative. The pattern paralleled dialogic-reading research, in which interactive shared reading improved oral language and comprehension. Subsequent work also indicated gains in emotional understanding under dialogic conditions [53]. The IES results in the review, therefore, extended the evidence base into an Islamic moral domain by showing how APE-supported interactive storytelling enabled children to process Prophet-centred narratives and connect them to personal moral choices.

Guided-play APEs, self-regulation, and prosocial behaviour

The guided-play cluster indicated that values were rehearsed through rule-governed, goal-oriented activity in play centres and cooperative games. A large-scale randomized controlled trial of the Playful Learning Curriculum reported improvements in self-regulation and social readiness following thematic centers with explicit rules, clear goals, and brief reflection. Complementary theory and reviews positioned guided play as a pedagogy aligning curricular goals with playful exploration [54]. Peer-based social play with cooperative game sets and rule/turn-taking cards, supported by teacher coaching and live modelling, increased prosocial skills in inclusive preschools; convergent evidence from board-game studies associated cooperative formats with cooperative and prosocial behaviours. In more open, free-play contexts, cooperative toys elicited helping and sharing when teachers provided brief norm-priming and linked actions to fairness and empathy. Related Indonesian studies on collaborative learning likewise documented gains in prosocial behavior among 4–5-year-olds [55]. Moral-choice cards and structured norms further supported explicit moral reasoning while helping teachers manage social bias in group decisions.

Modelling-focused APEs and puppetry as symbolic mediation

Studies employing puppets, role props, and hadith cards underscored the salience of symbolic modelling and embodied enactment. Hand-puppet interventions featuring religious/adab scenarios, combined with dialogic narrative and guided practice (such as greetings and prayers), improved children’s religious attitudes and language. Classroom action research and systematic reviews similarly reported gains in language, participation, and confidence through hand-puppet storytelling [56]. Role-play of hadith using simple costumes/masks and hadith cards, together with teacher modelling and post-activity reflection, increased understanding and application of honesty, discipline, and helping. Comparative work on hand and paper puppets indicated enhanced listening and attention when guided Q&A, child role enactment, and value-focused dialogue were accompanied by the media. Additional survey-based evidence recorded broad teacher endorsement of puppets as effective tools for early language development [57]. The convergence across these findings indicated that puppets and role props served as culturally resonant mediators for Islamic character education, providing a symbolic buffer for practicing sensitive behaviors while maintaining clear moral standards grounded in Prophetic manners.

Multimodal and home-based APEs

Digital and home-based storytelling extended narrative and modelling beyond classroom walls. A quasi-experimental study on interactive story videos and simple storyboards, combined with guided discussion and moral-choice prompts, reported increases in prosocial behavior and empathy. Indonesian empirical work has likewise documented significant advantages of digital storytelling over traditional formats for empathy and prosocial outcomes. Bedtime storytelling with Islamic storybooks and prayer cards, embedded in nightly routines and supported by parent modelling and repeated stories, strengthened empathy and sharing and deepened emotional bonding to exemplars, including the Prophet. Related research on storytelling interventions in bilingual or Indonesian early childhood contexts has supported empathy development through warm, repeated interactions with close adults [58]. The combined pattern formed a home–school value loop in which similar virtues and narratives were encountered across modalities and relational contexts.

Integrated implications

Across narrative-centred, guided-play, modelling-focused, and multimodal/home-based clusters, the findings aligned with and extended prior literature on dialogic reading, play-based self-regulation programmes, puppetry, and digital storytelling. Dialogic reading

research has documented robust improvements in vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language. Guided-play scholarship and trials have identified self-regulation and socio-emotional gains. Puppetry studies have reported benefits for language and engagement. Digital storytelling studies have indicated enhanced empathy and prosocial behavior. Under coherent design families and intentional interactional mechanisms, elaborative prompting, guided questioning, coaching, symbolic modelling, reflection, and school–home routines, Education Play Equipment provided concrete pathways for children to enact, narrate, and form emotional bonds with Prophetic virtues in everyday practice. The accumulated evidence, therefore, confirmed general effectiveness and demonstrated particular relevance for early Islamic character education.

CONCLUSION

The synthesis of twelve studies indicated that APEs supported value internalization in early childhood when they were deliberately designed and were enacted through four interlocking mechanisms dialogic narrative, guided play, symbolic modeling (puppets/role-play), and multimodal/home reinforcement that positioned children as active agents who narrated, enacted, and reflected on Prophetic virtues in everyday practice; across settings, these configurations were associated with gains in attention, moral comprehension, prosocial behavior, self-regulation, religious attitudes, and an emerging love for the Prophet, while overall effectiveness depended on design quality (explicit rules and goals, elaborative prompting, coaching, brief reflection, and norm priming) and continuity between school and home; Consequently, practical implications favored curriculum-embedded APEs with clear evaluative indicators and sustained parent–teacher partnerships, and future research benefited from longitudinal designs, implementation-fidelity checks, multi-dimensional outcome measures (language–emotion–action), and more diverse contexts to strengthen causal inference and enhance generalisability.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization (MSS, K); Methodology (MSS, ESU); Search strategy & screening (ESU, RN); Data curation & extraction (ESU, RN); Formal analysis & synthesis (MSS, ESU); Visualization PRISMA flow and tables (ESU); Writing original draft (MSS, ESU); Writing review & editing (K, RN); Supervision (MSS, K); Project administration (ESU); Funding acquisition none declared. Abbreviations: MSS = Mahi Sultan Salama; ESU = Esty Setyo Utaminingsih; K = Kristiyuana; RN = Rida Nurlatifasari.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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