

Methods of Religious Education for Early Childhood from Imam Al-Ghazali's Perspective and Their Relevance to Generation Alpha

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze methods of religious education for early childhood from Imam Al-Ghazali's perspective and to identify their relevance to the educational needs of Generation Alpha. This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method. The primary sources include Imam Al-Ghazali's thoughts in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and *Ayyuha al-Walad*. Secondary sources consist of scientific articles, books, and educational reports that discuss Islamic education, early childhood development, Generation Alpha, and digital education. The data were analyzed through data reduction, concept categorization, content analysis, and contextual synthesis. The findings show that religious education for early childhood according to Imam Al-Ghazali focuses on purification of the soul, formation of morality, habituation of worship, and control of self impulses. The methods include exemplary conduct, habituation, advice, storytelling, supervision, play, rewards, gradual correction, and environmental conditioning. These methods remain relevant to Generation Alpha when applied adaptively through digital role modeling, controlled technology habits, multimodal religious stories, parental assistance, direct activities, and adab-based digital literacy. This study concludes that Imam Al-Ghazali's thought remains relevant because it views education as a process of shaping the inner structure of the child, not merely as the delivery of religious knowledge. Its implementation, however, requires integration with developmental psychology, child protection, play pedagogy, and digital literacy.

Keywords: *religious education, early childhood, Generation Alpha, digital literacy*

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3rd International Conference Epicentrum of Economic Global Framework (ICEEGLOF)

Theme: Cross-Sector and Cross-Disciplinary Strategies for Achieving the SDGS

<https://proceeding.pancabudi.ac.id/index.php/ICEEGLOF>

Introduction

Early childhood is a crucial phase in the formation of human personality. Developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky have long emphasized that the golden age in the 0-6 year age range is a period in which children's cognitive, affective, and spiritual foundations develop intensively. In the Islamic perspective, this phase represents a trust granted by Allah SWT to parents and educators to instill faith-based values from an early age.

Imam Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE), a major Muslim scholar known as Hujjatul Islam, made an extraordinary contribution to Islamic educational thought. Through his monumental works, he not only discussed the spiritual life of adults but also gave serious attention to children's education. Al-Ghazali believed that a child's heart is like a blank page ready to receive every impression. For this reason, the early cultivation of religious values is a necessity.

At the same time, the world is witnessing the emergence of a new generation known as Generation Alpha. Unlike previous generations, Generation Alpha grows up in a fully digitalized environment, where smart devices, artificial intelligence, and social media have become inseparable parts of daily life. (McCrindle Research Center, 2014) defines Generation Alpha as individuals born between 2010 and 2025. This cohort is considered the most technologically connected generation in human history.

The challenges of religious education for Generation Alpha are highly complex. Research data show that children aged 2-5 spend more than 32 hours per week in front of screens on average (Rideout, 2017). This condition can disrupt the formation of religious character, weaken emotional closeness with parents, and create a crisis of religious identity from an early age. Religious education therefore requires an approach that is not only normative but also contextual and adaptive to the challenges of the era.

In this context, Al-Ghazali's educational thought becomes relevant for deeper study. The methods offered by Al-Ghazali combine intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. These methods are believed to help address the challenges of religious education in the modern era. However, academic studies that specifically connect Al-Ghazali's pedagogical thought with the context of Generation Alpha remain limited.

Relevant previous studies include (Fathurrohman, 2019), who examined character education methods from Al-Ghazali's perspective, and (Nurhayati, 2021), who discussed the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought to early childhood education in general. However, these studies did not specifically link Al-Ghazali's thought to the characteristics and challenges of Generation Alpha. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap.

Based on this background, this study formulates two main questions: (1) What are the methods of religious education for early childhood according to Imam Al-Ghazali's perspective? (2) How are Al-Ghazali's methods of religious education relevant to the education of Generation Alpha? By answering these questions, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to the development of Islamic early childhood education curricula and practices that are relevant and sustainable.

Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Religious Education for Early Childhood in Islam

Religious education for early childhood in the Islamic perspective has a strong theological foundation. Qur'an Surah Luqman verses 13-19 explicitly describes an educational dialogue between Luqman al-Hakim and his son. The dialogue covers education in creed or tawhid, worship, and morality. These verses are among the main references in the comprehensive Islamic educational concept that centers on the formation of the soul.

Terminologically, early childhood education refers to educational guidance for children from birth to six years of age through educational stimulation to support children's physical and spiritual growth and development (M. Fadlillah, 2016; Rostriana & Harahap, 2023). In the

Islamic context, this spiritual dimension cannot be separated from the cultivation of faith and piety.

Classical Muslim scholars, including Ibn Sina, Ibn Khaldun, and Al-Ghazali, agreed that childhood is the most important phase in the formation of human character. Ibn Khaldun stated in the *Muqaddimah* that habits formed in childhood become permanent traits in adulthood (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2018). This view is consistent with the modern neuroscientific concept of brain neuroplasticity, which explains that children's brains are highly plastic and responsive to environmental stimulation in early life.

2.2. Biography and Educational Thought of Imam Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali was born in 450 H/1058 CE in Tus, Khurasan, now part of Iran. He was a Muslim polymath who mastered various disciplines, including fiqh, theology or kalam, Sufism, philosophy, and psychology. Al-Ghazali studied under Al-Juwayni, a leading scholar in Nishapur, before becoming a professor at the Nizamiyah Madrasah in Baghdad at the age of 34, a highly prestigious academic position at that time (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

Al-Ghazali's works that serve as references in Islamic education studies include *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, *Ayyuhal Walad*, *Mizanul Amal*, and *Al-Risalah Al-Laduniyyah*. In *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, especially in the third volume that discusses destructive matters or *rub' al-muhlikat*, Al-Ghazali explains at length the importance of children's education and the appropriate methods for educating them (Al-Ghazali, 2018).

Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy rests on the view that humans are born in a pure state of *fitrah* and have the potential to know Allah. However, this potential requires actualization through a structured and continuous educational process. Al-Ghazali compares the child's heart to fertile land. If it is planted with the seeds of goodness and faith, it will grow into a fruitful tree. If it is neglected, it will be overgrown with the weeds of evil (Abuzar et al., 2024).

2.3. Methods of Religious Education from Imam Al-Ghazali's Perspective

Al-Ghazali identified several main methods in children's religious education. Epistemologically, these methods derive from a synthesis of Qur'anic texts, Hadith, and his thought in Islamic psychology or *ilm al-nafs*. In (Rahman, 2019), these methods include the following:

First, the habituation method or *ta'wid*. Al-Ghazali emphasized that good habits must be instilled from an early age, long before children can understand the rationality behind the actions. Habituation in prayer, Qur'an recitation, honesty, and polite speech forms the foundation of character development that will become strong in adulthood. This method rests on the concept that humans are creatures of habit.

Second, the exemplary method or *uswah hasanah*. Al-Ghazali strongly emphasized the role of parents and educators as living models for children. He argued that children learn more easily through what they see and experience than through verbal instruction alone. Exemplary behavior in worship, noble conduct, and social interaction becomes the most effective and irreplaceable educational medium.

Third, the advice method or *mau'izhah hasanah*. Al-Ghazali taught that advice should be delivered with affection, at the right time, and in language that children can understand. Advice given harshly or repeatedly without the right context can weaken children's moral sensitivity. Al-Ghazali referred to the communication style of Prophet Muhammad SAW, which was gentle yet dignified, as the ideal model.

Fourth, the reward and punishment method or *targhib wa tarhib*. Al-Ghazali recognized the need to appreciate children's good behavior and provide consequences for inappropriate behavior. However, he noted that physical punishment should only be used as a last resort and in a very mild form. He prioritized a psychological approach that builds children's intrinsic motivation to do good.

2.4. Characteristics and Challenges of Generation Alpha Education

Generation Alpha is the first demographic cohort born entirely in the era of smartphones and artificial intelligence. (McCrindle & Fell, 2020), in *Generation Alpha: Understanding Our Children and Helping Them Thrive*, describe Generation Alpha as the most formally educated, most technological, and most materially supplied generation in history. They grow up in a digital ecosystem that creates patterns of learning, socializing, and even worship that differ fundamentally from previous generations.

From a neuroscience perspective, excessive screen exposure in early childhood has been shown to negatively affect empathy development, attention span, and emotional intelligence (Twenge, 2017). In the context of religious education, this condition creates a serious challenge: how to instill spiritual values that require calmness, contemplation, and direct interaction in a generation accustomed to fast and continuous visual stimulation. On the other hand, Generation Alpha also has unique strengths that can be used in religious education. These strengths include high technological adaptability, strong visual creativity, and openness to information from various sources. The challenge for educators is how to integrate these strengths with the need for deep and authentic religious character formation.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with the library research method. This method was selected because the object of the study is a scholar's thought and its relevance to a contemporary phenomenon. Such an object requires an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary texts rather than empirical field data collection. Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research is an appropriate approach for exploring and understanding the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or human problem.

The data sources in this study are divided into two categories. First, the primary data sources are Imam Al-Ghazali's major works that are relevant to the research topic. These include: (1) *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, especially volume III, which discusses children's education in the chapter "*Kitab Riadhah al-Nafs wa Tahdzib al-Akhlaq wa Mu'alajah Amradh al-Qalb*"; and (2) *Ayyuhal Walad*, a concise but substantial treatise on education and learning ethics.

Second, the secondary data sources include scientific books, national and international journal articles, dissertations, and research reports related to the theme of this study. These secondary sources were obtained from scientific databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, DOAJ or the Directory of Open Access Journals, and repositories of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. The inclusion criteria for secondary sources included thematic relevance, author credibility, and publication recency, with priority given to sources published within the last ten years.

Data were collected through documentation and literature study. This process included: (1) identifying and inventorying relevant sources; (2) conducting critical reading of Al-Ghazali's primary texts; (3) tracing and collecting secondary literature related to Generation Alpha, early childhood education, and contemporary Islamic education; and (4) recording, coding, and organizing data based on analytical themes and categories. Data analysis used content analysis and comparative analysis. Content analysis was used to identify, classify, and interpret educational concepts contained in Al-Ghazali's texts. Comparative analysis was used

to connect and analyze the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought to the context and characteristics of Generation Alpha based on contemporary research findings.

Results

4.1. The Nature of Religious Education for Early Childhood According to Imam Al-Ghazali

The analysis shows that Imam Al-Ghazali views children's education as a process of guarding and shaping the soul from the beginning of life. Children are not only viewed as individuals who need knowledge. They are trusts who are ready to receive influence from family, teachers, peers, and the surrounding environment. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali explains that a child's heart is still pure and easily receives the form of education given to it. If children are accustomed to goodness, their good tendencies will develop into character. Conversely, if they are allowed to receive bad habits, those behaviors may become fixed within them. This thought shows that education in early childhood has a strategic position in shaping children's morality and life orientation (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

Religious education according to Al-Ghazali does not stop at the ability to memorize prayers, recognize religious symbols, or mention halal and haram rules. Religious education aims to direct children's potential so that they can know Allah, love goodness, control desires, and form commendable behavior. Education must touch knowledge, feelings, habits, and actions.

This concept is related to the idea of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, namely the process of cleansing the soul from negative tendencies and cultivating noble traits. Islamic education in Al-Ghazali's perspective places learning, self-training, worship, and moral formation as an integrated whole. Studies on Al-Ghazali's educational psychology also show that education is directed toward soul purification through continuous learning and moral training (Siregar, 2020).

Based on the categorization of findings, the objectives of children's religious education according to Al-Ghazali cover five aspects. First, it instills faith and recognition of Allah. Second, it habituates worship according to children's developmental stages. Third, it forms noble character. Fourth, it controls negative tendencies. Fifth, it prepares children to live in balance as individuals and members of society.

4.2. Principles of Children's Education in Imam Al-Ghazali's Perspective

a. Education Begins in Early Childhood

Al-Ghazali places childhood as the initial stage of personality formation. Children do not yet have the ability to judge all experiences independently. Therefore, parents and teachers must regulate the experiences children receive. This principle shows that religious education does not need to wait until children can understand theological concepts abstractly. Religious values can be introduced through concrete activities, simple language, routines, and positive emotional experiences.

b. Education Prioritizes Moral Formation

Al-Ghazali places morality at the center of education. Religious knowledge is considered incomplete if it does not produce good behavior. Children should not only be taught the definition of honesty. They need to see the practice of honesty, receive opportunities to act honestly, and obtain reinforcement when they do so. Morality in Al-Ghazali's thought is not a momentary behavior. It is a trait embedded in the soul so that a person performs certain actions with ease and without lengthy deliberation. Moral education therefore requires consistent practice.

c. Education Is Conducted Gradually

Educational materials and demands must be adjusted to children's abilities. Early childhood learners have limitations in abstract thinking, emotional control, and sustained attention. Religious education must be delivered through simple experiences that children can observe and perform. The gradual principle is also evident in correction. Al-Ghazali does not place punishment as the first step. Educators need to use signals, guidance, advice, and correction in sequence. A gradual approach protects children's dignity and prevents excessive fear.

d. Education Requires Balance

Al-Ghazali does not support education that continuously pressures children. Children need time to play, move, rest, and interact. Play has an important function in reducing boredom and restoring children's readiness to learn. This balance shows that religious education is not identical with sitting, memorizing, and listening to long explanations. Religious education can be carried out through social games, nature activities, sharing projects, movement and songs, and daily routines.

e. Environment is Part of Education

Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of choosing a good environment, social circle, and peers. Children learn behavior through observation and imitation. Therefore, education does not depend only on lesson content. It also depends on adult behavior, family culture, school atmosphere, and children's play groups.

4.3. Methods of Religious Education for Early Childhood According to Imam Al-Ghazali

a. Exemplary Method

Exemplary conduct is the main method in children's education. Early childhood learners understand actions more easily than abstract explanations. The behavior of parents and teachers becomes a continuous source of learning that children observe. When parents ask children to be honest, parents must also show honesty. When teachers teach patience, teachers need to respond calmly to children's mistakes. When children are asked to maintain polite speech, adults must not use harsh language in front of them.

In religious education, exemplary conduct includes worship practices, polite speech, attitudes toward others, habits of gratitude, cleanliness, discipline, and technology use. Exemplary conduct makes religious values present as real behavior, not only verbal material.

b. Habituation Method

Habituation aims to instill good behavior through regular repetition. Al-Ghazali argues that actions that are continuously trained can develop into relatively stable traits. In early childhood, habituation can include greeting others, praying before activities, tidying up toys, sharing food, asking permission, saying thank you, praying together, and maintaining cleanliness. Educators need to create clear routines so that children know the expected actions.

Habituation must not become mechanical action without meaning. Teachers need to explain the simple reasons behind each habit. For example, teachers should not only ask children to share. Teachers should also explain that sharing makes friends feel cared for and is an action loved by Allah.

c. Advice Method

Advice functions to provide moral direction to children. However, advice must be given in language that is gentle, simple, brief, and appropriate to the situation. Advice that is too long is difficult for early childhood learners to understand. Advice also needs to be delivered at the right time. When children are angry, a long explanation will not be effective. Educators need to help children calm down first. After that, teachers can explain the correct behavior and the reason for choosing it. Al-Ghazali's educational concept requires advice that touches awareness, not merely commands. Advice must help children understand the relationship between action, consequence, and responsibility.

d. Storytelling Method

Stories help children understand religious values through characters, events, conflicts, and the consequences of actions. Stories may include the stories of prophets, pious people, families, animals, or daily experiences. Educators need to choose stories that are appropriate for children's age. Stories for early childhood should have simple plots, a limited number of characters, conflicts that are easy to understand, and messages that are not excessive. After the story ends, teachers can invite children to recognize the characters' feelings, choices of action, and the consequences of those actions. Stories not only convey moral messages. They also develop language, imagination, empathy, listening ability, and children's moral reasoning.

e. Supervision and Assistance Method

Al-Ghazali emphasizes adults' responsibility to protect the child's developmental environment. Supervision is not an attempt to control every child's movement. Supervision means knowing children's activities, habits, friends, and sources of influence. In the context of Generation Alpha, supervision includes smartphone use, online videos, digital games, artificial intelligence, and social media. Parents need to know the content children access, the duration of device use, and behavioral changes after children interact with digital media.

Effective supervision is dialogical. Parents need to use devices together with children, discuss content, and help children distinguish good and bad behavior. Children should not only be prohibited. They also need attractive alternative activities.

f. Reward Method

Al-Ghazali recognizes the importance of giving rewards when children show good behavior. Rewards help children understand that their actions have positive value. Rewards do not have to be material objects. Specific praise, hugs, the opportunity to lead a prayer, appreciation marks, or time to play together can become reinforcement. Praise should be directed at children's behavior and effort. For example, "You returned the toys to their place. That shows responsibility."

Educators need to avoid excessive gift giving. Rewards that are given too often can shift children's motivation. Children may do good only to receive rewards. Rewards need to be directed gradually so that children can feel moral satisfaction when doing good.

g. Gradual Correction and Reprimand Method

Al-Ghazali recommends correction that is carried out wisely. Children's mistakes do not always need to be announced in front of others. Open reprimands can embarrass children and damage their relationship with educators. The stages of correction can begin with redirecting attention, giving signals, reminders, brief dialogue, logical consequences, and behavioral evaluation. Physical punishment cannot be used as the main method in early childhood education. This practice does not align with child protection principles and risks causing fear, aggression, and emotional distance.

Al-Ghazali's thought on rewards and reprimands needs to be read based on the principles of affection, improvement, and children's developmental capacity. Parenting studies based on Al-Ghazali's thought also identify exemplary conduct, habituation, advice, affectionate approaches, and rewards and correction as important methods in childrearing (Mumtaza Zamhariroh et al., 2024).

h. Play and Physical Activity Method

Al-Ghazali gives children space to play after learning. Play can maintain physical fitness, reduce boredom, and support children's development. If children are excessively prohibited from playing, they may experience pressure and lose enthusiasm for learning. In religious education, play can be used to instill cooperation, honesty, patience, responsibility, and care. Teachers can apply role play, group games, sharing simulations, plant care activities, and activities that encourage children to help friends.

4.4. Characteristics of Generation Alpha in the Educational Context

Generation Alpha generally refers to children born from the early 2010s onward. However, the birth year boundaries may differ among authors. Therefore, the term Generation Alpha is more appropriate as a social category to explain children's experiences of growing up in a digital environment, not as a label that assumes all children share the same characteristics.

A systematic review by (Höfrová et al., 2024) found that Generation Alpha is the first group to grow up from the beginning of life in a digital technology ecosystem. However, the review also warns that empirical evidence regarding generational differences remains limited. Some characteristics of Generation Alpha still come from social assumptions, not established scientific conclusions (Mohsen, W. A., Al-Rashaida, M., & Alkaabi, 2025).

Based on the literature synthesis, several tendencies are relevant to religious education for early childhood. First, children are accustomed to visual, audio, animated, and screen-based interactive stimulation. This condition can increase interest in multimodal learning. However, rapid and constantly changing exposure can make children less patient in activities that require sustained attention.

Second, children can obtain information quickly. This access is not always accompanied by the ability to assess the truth, appropriateness, and purpose of information. Religious education needs to build basic digital literacy, such as asking permission before opening applications, maintaining privacy, choosing appropriate videos, and reporting content that makes children uncomfortable. Third, some children experience fewer opportunities for direct interaction because of excessive device use. In fact, the development of empathy, waiting skills, cooperation, and conflict management requires real social experience.

Fourth, children grow up in an environment influenced by algorithms and content personalization. Content that children often view can continue to be displayed by platforms. This condition increases the risk of repeated exposure to consumerist content, violence, harsh language, or age-inappropriate behavior. Fifth, technology provides opportunities for creativity. Children can draw, record voices, create stories, join interactive learning, and communicate with family. Therefore, technology should not be positioned as the enemy of education. Technology needs to be managed as a tool that serves developmental goals and moral values.

UNESCO emphasizes the importance of a human-centered approach to the use of artificial intelligence in education. Data protection, age appropriateness, pedagogical validation, and human supervision are important principles in the use of technology for children's learning (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

This study reconstructs Al-Ghazali's methods of religious education in the digital ecology of Generation Alpha. Previous studies generally discussed Al-Ghazali's moral education normatively or discussed Generation Alpha from the perspective of technology use. This study connects both areas through the concepts of digital role modeling, digital self-regulation, dialogical assistance, and adab-based digital literacy.

This study also rejects two extreme views. The first view accepts technology without limits because it is considered suitable for the characteristics of a new generation. The second view completely rejects technology because it is considered damaging to morality. Al-Ghazali's educational thought supports the use of means as long as those means are directed toward moral and spiritual goals.

Conclusion

Religious education for early childhood from Imam Al-Ghazali's perspective is a process of shaping the soul, morality, habits, and the ability to control oneself. The goal of education is not only to produce children who know religious teachings. Education aims to form children who love goodness and can realize it in everyday behavior. The educational methods identified in this study include exemplary conduct, habituation, advice, storytelling,

supervision, rewards, gradual correction, play, and environmental conditioning. All these methods must be carried out gradually, with affection, according to children's abilities, and oriented toward moral formation.

Al-Ghazali's thought is relevant to the education of Generation Alpha because this generation needs a moral foundation when facing the digital environment. Exemplary conduct can be developed into digital role modeling. Habituation can be directed toward regulation of device use. Stories can be presented through multimodal media. Supervision can be implemented through dialogical digital assistance. Play can serve as a balance against the dominance of screen-based activities.

The relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought does not mean applying all his ideas textually. Educators need to adapt them based on developmental psychology, early childhood pedagogy, child protection, positive discipline, and digital literacy. Technology must be positioned as an educational tool, not as the controller of children's attention and behavior.

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