

Training Early Childhood Moral Education from Imam Al-Ghazali's Perspective

Siti Muhibah

Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: In the treasury of ideas offered by Imam Al-Ghazali regarding the formation of good morals in the early stages of child development, moral education is a conscious effort made to instill good behavior in every child. As a characteristic of Islamic education put forward by Imam Al-Ghazali, which emphasizes the importance of instilling moral values built from the basics of Islamic moral education. Considering the importance of moral education instilled in children from an early age, the formulation of the problem in this study is: how to train moral education for children according to Imam Al-Ghazali, and how to educate morals in children from Imam Al-Ghazali's perspective. This research is a library research. The approach used in this study is a historical pedagogical approach, while data sources consist of primary data and secondary data, and data analysis is carried out using content analysis techniques. The results of the study stated that Imam Al-Ghazali's thoughts on education place more emphasis on moral education by fostering good character and instilling commendable qualities in children from an early age, a method that can be used in educating children by implementing habits and telling stories of noble morals.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood, Moral Education, Imam Al-Ghazali perspectives, Training, religion education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The educational world today is experiencing a profound “anxiety.” The shift from face-to-face instruction to fully online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has created multilayered social, economic, technological, and moral challenges. Declining moral conduct among students reflects a serious crisis in character education—an issue that the education system has struggled to contain (Safri, 2012). Therefore, strengthening moral education within families has become increasingly urgent.

Education is fundamentally a process of nurturing maturity—a conscious effort to humanize humans. Through education, individuals are expected to discover their identity, understand their origin and purpose, and develop humane ways of thinking, behaving, and acting. Children are born with innate potential (fitrah), including capacities for learning and moral growth, as referenced in the Qur’anic verse Ar-Rum 30:30, which affirms that humans are created in a naturally righteous state. According to Ulum (2007), this potential becomes meaningful only when developed through education. As human beings who require guidance (homo educandum) yet possess weaknesses, children must be nurtured through moral education to elevate their dignity.

Imam Al-Ghazali demonstrates immense concern for education, emphasizing moral formation through character building and the cultivation of noble traits. For Al-Ghazali, the ultimate goal of education is the development of the insan kamil—a complete human being who draws near to God, acquires professional competence for worldly responsibilities, embodies noble character, and purifies the soul from debased qualities. Al-Ghazali (1967) states that a child is “a divine trust for parents; his heart is pure, like an uncarved jewel, ready to absorb any form given to it”. If nurtured toward goodness, the child will flourish; if neglected, the child may develop immoral tendencies, and responsibility falls upon parents and educators.

II. DISCUSSION

A Brief Biography of Imam Al-Ghazali

Imam Al-Ghazali, whose full name is Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Tusi al-Ghazali, was born in 450 H/1058 CE in Tus, Khurasan (Gibb & Kramers, 1974). Known as a prolific thinker, he mastered jurisprudence, philosophy, logic, theology, and Sufism. After early studies in Tus and Jurjan, he traveled to Nishapur to study under Imam al-Haramain al-Juwaini, later gaining prominence under the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk, who appointed him to the prestigious Nizamiyyah Madrasah (Syaefuddin, 2005).

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Despite his success, Al-Ghazali experienced a spiritual crisis, questioning the certainty of knowledge gained through philosophy and theology. His doubts led him to Sufism, where he found spiritual certainty. After years of seclusion, he returned to teaching before retiring to Tus, where he established a school and a Sufi lodge until his death in 505 H/1111 CE (Syaefuddin, 2005).

Moral Education for Children According to Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali defines *akhlaq* as a deeply rooted disposition from which actions spontaneously emerge without deliberate thought (Wahyuddin et al., 2009). Moral education aims to develop individuals who are virtuous, wise, courteous, sincere, honest, and pure (Al-Abrasyi, 2003). He refutes both nativist views—which argue that character is fixed from birth—and rigid empiricist views such as those of John Locke, which claim character is wholly formed by environment. Instead, Al-Ghazali asserts that character can be transformed through education (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

Teachers, he argues, must understand each child's character, similar to how a physician diagnoses and treats each patient differently (Suryabrata, 1987). Therefore, effective moral education requires appropriate methods adapted to the child's psychological development.

In *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* (Al-Ghazali, 2009), Al-Ghazali emphasizes that children are divine trusts whose pure hearts are like blank canvases. Parents must shape them toward righteousness through:

1. Habituation: Training children in good manners, discipline, and virtues.
2. Supervision: Protecting them from immoral peers and harmful influences.
3. Moderation: Avoiding excessive comfort, luxury, or indulgence.
4. Moral instruction: Teaching modesty, patience, gratitude, and humility.

He stresses developing manners in eating, dressing, speaking, and interacting with others. Children must be trained to avoid wastefulness, arrogance, deception, and foul language. They should also be encouraged to participate in learning activities—reciting the Qur'an, studying, and engaging in healthy play under supervision.

As children grow older, they must be taught ritual practices such as purification, prayer, fasting, and moral obligations like honesty, avoiding theft, and respecting others.

Training Moral Education For Children According To Imam Al-Ghazali

Moral education is often referred to as *akhlaq* education. According to Imam al-Ghazali, *akhlaq* is a disposition rooted in the soul from which actions arise easily and effortlessly, without the need for logical deliberation (Wahyuddin et al., 2009). *Akhlaq* is a body of knowledge that determines the boundaries between good and bad behavior, encompassing human words, thoughts, and actions both inwardly and outwardly. The primary goal of moral education in Islam is “to shape individuals who are virtuous, strong-willed, polite in speech, noble in conduct and character, wise, refined, courteous, sincere, honest, and pure” (Al-Abrasyi, 2003).

Thus, *akhlaq* represents a deeply ingrained disposition from which various actions are produced with ease. If the disposition produces good and commendable behavior—both rationally and according to Islamic law—then it is considered good character; however, if it produces reprehensible behavior, then it is considered bad character (Al-Ghazali, 2003). Al-Ghazali believes that moral character can be corrected through ethical education. He strongly criticizes the nativist view that human nature cannot be changed because it is believed to be innate from birth (Suryabrata, 1987). Likewise, he rejects the empiricist view attributed to John Locke that character is entirely shaped by the environment and that human nature plays no inherent role. Al-Ghazali argues instead that “if character were not subject to change, then advice, counsel, and education would be futile” (Al-Ghazali, 2003). Therefore, children's education must prioritize the development of noble character and virtuous behavior.

However, forming good moral character is not easy. In cultivating moral values, Al-Ghazali likens teachers and educators to physicians who treat patients according to the specific illness they suffer from. It would be foolish, he argues, to treat various illnesses with only a single type of medicine, for such an approach would be dangerous and even fatal. Likewise, educators must be wise in selecting appropriate methods suited to the needs and capacities of each child (Wahyuddin et al., 2009). Effective educational methods must consider the nature of the method itself, the competence of the teacher, and the psychological readiness of the child. Children, who are still growing and developing, cannot yet think logically or grasp abstract concepts; therefore, the most suitable methods for them are habituation, repeated practice, and exemplary role-modelling.

In *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin*, Al-Ghazali explains that training children is a matter of great importance. Children are a trust from God to their parents. Their hearts are pure, like precious pearls, empty of any form, ready to receive any impression that is imprinted on them. Their hearts incline toward whatever direction they are guided. If children are habituated to goodness and taught virtuous actions, they will grow into goodness and attain happiness in this world and the hereafter. Parents, teachers, and all educators who contribute to this process will share in its reward. But if children are habituated to wrongdoing and neglected like abandoned animals, they will be corrupted and destroyed—and the sin falls on those responsible for their upbringing (Al-Ghazali, 2009). The Qur'an also commands: “O you who believe, protect yourselves and your families from the Fire” (Qur'an, At-Tahrim 66:6).

Al-Ghazali further states that if a father protects his child from the fire of this world, he must all the more protect him from the fire of the hereafter. This protection is achieved by educating, nurturing, and teaching children good moral conduct, and safeguarding

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them from peers with corrupt character. Children should not be raised in luxury, nor taught to love adornment and worldly pleasures, for such habits will cause them to waste their lives pursuing material comforts and ultimately lead to ruin. Parents must carefully choose righteous caregivers and wet nurses, ensuring that the food provided is lawful. Unlawful sustenance, he warns, produces spiritual impurity within the child.

The earliest sign of developing morality in a child is the emergence of modesty and the fear of doing wrong. Yet children often display excessive appetite in food, so they must be trained in proper eating manners: using the right hand, saying “Bismillah,” eating what is near them, not rushing, and avoiding excessive consumption. They should also be taught that overeating resembles the behavior of animals. Children must learn to prioritize others over themselves, be content with what they have, and cultivate simplicity in dress—such as preferring plain white clothing over colorful garments or silk. Boys, in particular, should be taught to avoid luxurious clothing, as it can lead to arrogance and vanity. Such lessons must be repeated continually so they become deeply embedded.

Children must also be trained in proper sitting etiquette and discouraged from excessive speech, as talkativeness reflects a lack of modesty. They should not initiate conversations unnecessarily and should answer questions succinctly. They must be prohibited from swearing entirely—whether truthfully or falsely—to prevent the development of dishonest habits. Daily routines should consist of attending school or religious classes, reciting the Qur’an, and engaging in supervised play. Good behavior should be rewarded and praised, while misconduct should be corrected privately, without humiliating the child publicly. Parents must maintain dignity and authority in their speech.

As children grow, they must be taught to maintain ritual purity, pray, fast during part of Ramadan, avoid prohibited clothing, and internalize moral obligations such as honesty, respect, and avoidance of sinful behavior. If a child develops positively, moral instruction will leave a lasting imprint. However, if the child becomes accustomed to indulgence, play, immodesty, greed, and arrogance, their heart may become resistant to moral truth. Parents must therefore protect children from harmful influences, as every child is born in a pure state, and it is the parents who shape their moral direction (Prophet Muhammad, as cited in Al-Ghazali, 2009).

Methods of Moral Instruction for Children

According to Rahman (2019), Al-Ghazali proposes two primary methods of moral education:

1. Direct Instruction

This includes teaching moral principles using Qur’anic verses and hadith, following the example of Prophet Muhammad as the best educator (mu’allim al-nas al-khair).

2. Indirect Instruction

Indirect methods include:

- a. Storytelling: Narrating moral stories that convey lessons and inspire imitation.
- b. Habituation and Practice: Training children through repeated good actions until they become part of their character.
- c. Avoiding Harmful Influences: Preventing exposure to immoral companions, inappropriate poetry, or entertainment that fosters vices.

Examples include discouraging children from swearing, begging, boasting, or engaging in secretive wrongdoing. Parents must instill generosity, humility, discipline, self-control, and awareness of religious duties.

The goal of these methods is ultimately to purify the child from harmful traits and cultivate virtues.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Children are divine trusts given to parents, who are therefore responsible for providing proper moral education to ensure their well-being in this world and the hereafter. Effective moral development involves:

1. Avoiding excessive luxury or pampering
2. Preventing negative peer influences
3. Choosing righteous caregivers and providing halal nourishment
4. Consistently teaching manners and respect
5. Keeping children engaged in beneficial learning activities
6. Encouraging simplicity, empathy, and humility
7. Training them not to speak excessively or immorally
8. Teaching worship practices such as prayer and fasting
9. Offering praise for good behavior while preserving their dignity
10. Upholding parental authority with wisdom

Al-Ghazali identifies habituation, storytelling, and modeling as the core methods of cultivating moral character in children.

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