



# Family-Based Moral Character Development through Parental *Uswatun Hasanah* among Elementary School Children

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## Abstract

Moral character development among elementary school students has become an important concern in contemporary education, particularly in the context of increasing challenges to children's moral and social behavior. Although character education has been widely discussed, limited studies have examined the role of parental *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary role modeling) as a family-based approach to strengthening children's moral character. This study aims to explore the implementation of family-based moral character strengthening through parental *uswatun hasanah*, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and examine its impact on students' moral character development. A qualitative case study design was employed at a public elementary school in Indonesia. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving 28 participants, including parents, teachers, the school principal, and students in grades IV–VI selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed thematically using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña framework. The findings reveal that the consistent practice of parental *uswatun hasanah* contributes significantly to the development of children's moral character, particularly in honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect for others. Three major themes emerged from the analysis; i) parental role modeling in religious practices, ii) moral communication and value transmission within the family, and iii) consistency in Islamic value-based parenting. The study proposes a family-based moral character framework that highlights the central role of parental exemplarity in fostering positive moral behavior among elementary school students. These findings contribute to the literature on character education by emphasizing the integration of family engagement, moral communication, and Islamic values in children's character formation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of children's moral character has become a growing concern in contemporary education, particularly in the context of rapid technological advancement and the increasing influence of digital media on children's behavior.

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Recent studies indicate that elementary school students face various moral challenges, including dishonesty, declining respect for authority figures, and exposure to inappropriate online content that may affect their social and ethical development (Lickona, 2022; Berkowitz & Bier, 2021). These challenges have reinforced the view that character education cannot be solely entrusted to schools but requires active involvement from families as the primary environment in which children acquire values, attitudes, and behavioral norms.

Family plays a crucial role in shaping children's moral character through daily interactions and value transmission processes. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that parental involvement significantly contributes to children's social, emotional, and moral development. Parents serve not only as caregivers but also as educators and role models whose behaviors are continuously observed and imitated by children (Hasan et al., 2022). Within this context, parental role modeling is often considered one of the most effective approaches to character formation because it enables children to internalize values through direct observation and repeated practice rather than through verbal instruction alone (Berkowitz & Bier, 2021).

From the perspective of Islamic education, parental role modeling is closely associated with the concept of *uswatun hasanah*, which refers to exemplary conduct that serves as a moral reference for others. The concept is rooted in Islamic teachings and emphasizes the importance of demonstrating ethical values through concrete actions. In educational settings, *uswatun hasanah* is regarded as an effective pedagogical approach because it simultaneously engages cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning (Marzuki, 2021; Halim & Ahmad, 2020). The implementation of *uswatun hasanah* within family life allows parents to become living examples of the moral values they seek to cultivate in their children. Supporting this perspective, Elfira et al. (2023) identified several parenting strategies in Muslim families, including role modeling, moral communication, equitable affection, fulfillment of children's rights, habituation of positive behaviors, and the cultivation of virtuous character. These practices reflect the centrality of exemplary conduct in the educational process within the family environment.

Previous empirical studies have reported positive relationships between parental role modeling and children's character development. Hasan et al. (2022) found that exemplary parenting practices contributed to the enhancement of religious and social character among elementary school students. Similarly, Nurhayati and Wahyudin (2023) reported that children raised in families where parents consistently demonstrated positive moral and religious behaviors tended to exhibit stronger character traits. Internationally, Berkowitz and Bier (2021) argued that effective character development emerges from the interaction of explicit moral instruction, behavioral modeling, and supportive social environments, with families occupying a central position in all three dimensions (Alouzi et al., 2026; Engkizar Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Febriani, et al., 2026).

Despite these findings, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, previous studies predominantly focus on general parenting styles or religious character education without specifically examining *uswatun hasanah* as a distinct framework for family-based moral character development. Second, much of the existing research employs quantitative approaches that measure outcomes but provide limited understanding of how exemplary behaviors are enacted, interpreted, and internalized within everyday family interactions. Third, few studies have explored the interplay between parental role modeling, moral communication, and Islamic value-based parenting as an integrated process of moral character formation. Consequently, there remains a need for qualitative investigations that capture the lived experiences and educational practices through which *uswatun hasanah* contributes to children's moral development.

While parental role modeling has been widely recognized as an important determinant of children's character development, the mechanisms through which moral values are internalized within Muslim family settings remain underexplored. In particular, the concept of *uswatun hasanah* has received limited empirical attention despite its central position in Islamic educational thought. Most existing studies emphasize the outcomes of parenting practices rather than examining the processes through which exemplary conduct is translated into children's moral understanding and behavior. This study addresses this gap by investigating parental *uswatun hasanah* as a relational and value-based educational process within family life. Through a qualitative case study, the research examines how parents

embody moral values, how these values are communicated and negotiated in everyday interactions, and how children interpret and internalize such experiences. The study contributes to the literature by advancing a process-oriented understanding of family-based moral character development and by proposing an analytical framework that links parental exemplarity, moral communication, and Islamic value transmission in shaping children's moral character.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of parental *uswatun hasanah* in strengthening children's moral character within a family-based educational context. A case study approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting and facilitates a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and social practices (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The case was purposively selected based on its relevance to the study's theoretical focus on parental *uswatun hasanah* as a family-based mechanism of moral character development. Rather than representing the school as the primary unit of analysis, the study focused on the interactions between parents and children within family settings associated with the school community (Engkizar Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Febriani, et al., 2026; Rahawarin et al., 2025). This context enabled an in-depth investigation of how Islamic values are embodied through parental exemplarity, communicated in everyday interactions, and subsequently internalized by children as part of their moral development process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Engkizar et al., 2026; Fossey et al., 2002).

Twenty-eight participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included direct involvement in children's educational and family environments, willingness to participate, and the ability to provide relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The participants consisted of 10 parents, 8 students from grades IV–VI, 9 teachers, and 1 school principal.

Data were collected through observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted over a four-month period to capture students' moral behaviors and family-related educational practices. The interview protocol was reviewed by experts in Islamic education and educational psychology to ensure the relevance and clarity of the questions. Document analysis included school records, student character development reports, and other documents relevant to family-based character education practices.

Data were analyzed thematically using the interactive framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Data management and coding were facilitated using ATLAS.ti version 9 to support systematic theme development and interpretation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed three interconnected themes that explain how parental *uswatun hasanah* contributes to the strengthening of children's moral character within a family-based educational context: i) parental role modeling in religious practices, ii) moral communication within the family, and iii) consistency of Islamic value-based parenting. These themes illustrate that moral character development is not shaped by a single educational practice but emerges through continuous interactions between parental behavior, communication patterns, and value-oriented parenting within everyday family life.

### Parental Role Modeling in Religious Practices

The first theme identified from the interviews and observations was parental role modeling in religious practices. Participants consistently emphasized that children's moral development was strongly influenced by parents who demonstrated commitment to religious obligations through their daily actions. Religious activities such as congregational prayer, Quranic recitation, and remembrance of God were not merely conveyed through verbal instruction but were consistently practiced within family routines (Engkizar Engkizar et al., 2025).

One parent explained that regular congregational prayers at home gradually encouraged children to participate voluntarily: *"We regularly perform congregational prayers at home. The children observe us directly, and over time they begin to join without being asked"* (Informant 3). Similarly, Informant 7 described how weekly family Quranic recitation fostered children's engagement with religious learning: *"Every Thursday evening, we recite the Quran together as a family. Even our youngest child initially only listened, but gradually began to read along with us"* (Informant 7). Another participant highlighted the importance of consistency in worship practices, stating, *"I always try to perform the five daily prayers in front of my children because I believe they imitate what we do rather than what we say"* (Informant 11). Interestingly, Informant 15 noted that continuous exposure to parental religious behavior eventually motivated the child to become an active participant in maintaining family religious routines: *"Now my child is the one who reminds me to pray. Previously, I was always the one reminding him, but I think he has become accustomed to seeing our daily practices"* (Informant 15).

These findings indicate that religious practices function not only as spiritual obligations but also as mechanisms through which moral values are demonstrated and internalized. Through repeated observation, children gradually adopt behaviors and attitudes that reflect the values embodied by their parents. This finding supports Marzuki (2021), who argues that exemplary religious conduct constitutes one of the most effective forms of *uswatun hasanah* in character education. The findings are also consistent with Bandura's (2021) theory of observational learning, which suggests that children acquire behaviors through observing significant role models within their social environment. Furthermore, Halim and Ahmad (2020) reported that children raised in families with consistent religious practices tend to exhibit stronger moral internalization than those from families where religious activities are less consistently practiced.

### Moral Communication within the Family

The second theme emerging from the data was the habituation of moral communication within family interactions. Participants described how parents regularly integrated moral messages, ethical values, and Islamic teachings into everyday conversations. Rather than relying on formal lectures or authoritative instruction, parents conveyed moral lessons through dialogue, storytelling, and reflective discussions embedded within daily activities.

Informant 2 explained that stories of the Prophets frequently served as a medium for character education: *"During dinner, I often tell stories about the Prophets. Through these stories, my children learn about honesty, responsibility, and other moral values"* (Informant 2). Likewise, Informant 9 emphasized the importance of dialogue when addressing children's mistakes: *"When my child makes a mistake, I do not immediately scold him. Instead, I invite him to talk, ask why he acted that way, and discuss the issue together"* (Informant 9). Similar experiences were described by Informant 13, who stated, *"I encourage my children to be honest with me about anything. I explain that dishonesty damages trust, and I try to demonstrate honesty in my own behavior as well"* (Informant 13). Meanwhile, Informant 22 described a daily reflective practice aimed at cultivating moral awareness: *"Every night before bedtime, I ask my child whether there was anything wrong that*

*happened during the day or whether there is anyone who should be forgiven. This helps build moral awareness gradually*” (Informant 22).

The findings suggest that moral communication functions as an important mechanism through which values are interpreted, negotiated, and internalized. Open dialogue enables children to understand the reasons behind moral expectations rather than merely complying with external rules. These results reinforce the findings of Nurhayati and Wahyudin (2023), who identified warm and dialogical communication as a significant predictor of positive character development. Within the framework of Islamic education, this practice reflects the concept of *man'izhab hasanah*, which emphasizes moral guidance delivered through wisdom, compassion, and constructive advice (Marzuki, 2021). Consistent with Lickona (2022) and Berkowitz and Bier (2021), the findings suggest that sustainable character formation occurs when children develop an understanding of the moral meaning behind their actions.

### **Consistency of Islamic Value-Based Parenting**

The third theme concerned the consistency of Islamic value-based parenting. Participants repeatedly emphasized that moral character development depended not only on parental advice but also on the consistency with which values were practiced within everyday family life. Parents who consistently demonstrated honesty, discipline, fairness, responsibility, and religious commitment were perceived as more successful in cultivating similar qualities among their children.

Informant 5 explained, *“We try to apply the same rules every day. If we teach discipline today, we must remain disciplined tomorrow so that our children do not become confused”* (Informant 5). Similarly, Informant 12 observed that *“Children find it easier to follow values when they see us practicing what we teach”* (Informant 12). Another participant stressed the consequences of inconsistency in parenting, stating, *“When parents frequently change their attitudes and expectations, children often struggle to understand what is right and what is wrong”* (Informant 18). Likewise, Informant 24 emphasized the importance of consistency in teaching honesty: *“We always try to be consistent in demonstrating honesty because children imitate our daily behavior”* (Informant 24).

These findings indicate that consistency serves as a reinforcing mechanism that strengthens the effectiveness of parental role modeling and moral communication. When children observe alignment between parental words and actions, they are more likely to perceive moral values as credible and meaningful. This finding supports Hasan et al. (2022), who identified parenting consistency as a critical mediator between parental exemplarity and children's character development. Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier (2021) argue that stable and predictable moral environments contribute significantly to the development of children's moral agency. Within Muslim families, such consistency is reflected in the continuous habituation of virtuous behaviors and the avoidance of morally undesirable actions, both of which have been identified by Elfira et al. (2023) as essential elements of effective Islamic parenting.

Across the three themes, the findings suggest that parental *uswatun hasanah* operates as an interconnected educational process rather than as a single parenting strategy. Religious role modeling provides observable examples of moral conduct, moral communication facilitates the transmission and interpretation of values, and consistent parenting reinforces the internalization of those values through repeated experiences. Together, these elements form a family-based mechanism through which children gradually develop honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect for others (Bali & Fadilah, 2019; Engkizar et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2026). This finding extends previous studies that have tended to examine parental role modeling, communication, or parenting styles separately by demonstrating the dynamic interaction among these dimensions in shaping children's moral character.

### Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Parental *Uswatun Hasanah*

The findings further revealed that the implementation of parental *uswatun hasanah* was influenced by various contextual factors that either strengthened or constrained family-based moral character development. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of a supportive social environment in reinforcing moral values promoted within the family. One parent explained, “*The environment here is very supportive because children regularly see their friends attending Quranic study sessions and participating in congregational prayers. This makes it easier for us to cultivate similar habits at home*” (Informant 8). Another participant highlighted the contribution of school-based parenting programs, stating, “*The parenting activities organized by the school help us better understand how to guide our children and become good role models in everyday life*” (Informant 20). Teachers also emphasized that regular communication between schools and parents facilitated the consistent monitoring of children's character development and strengthened the alignment of moral values across educational settings (Informant 21).

In addition, religious gatherings such as *majelis taklim* and parental study groups were perceived as important platforms for strengthening parents' capacities as moral educators. Through these activities, parents exchanged experiences, discussed educational challenges, and reinforced shared commitments to Islamic values. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of parental *uswatun hasanah* extends beyond family interactions and is reinforced by broader social and educational networks. Consistent with Berkowitz and Bier (2021), supportive environments provide complementary moral references that strengthen children's moral development.

Despite these supportive conditions, participants also identified several challenges. The most frequently mentioned obstacle was children's increasing exposure to digital media and social networking platforms. One parent explained, “*Sometimes the values children encounter on social media are very different from the values we teach at home. We have to spend extra time explaining which behaviors are appropriate and which are not*” (Informant 14). Another participant noted, “*Children are now exposed to many different sources of information, and not all of them support the moral values we try to instill*” (Informant 16).

Parental occupational demands also emerged as a significant challenge. Several participants reported difficulties in maintaining consistent communication and supervision because of work responsibilities. As one parent stated, “*Because of work, there are days when we have very limited time to talk with our children or accompany them in their daily activities*” (Informant 17). Teachers similarly observed that some parents found it difficult to participate actively in school programs due to economic obligations and time constraints (Informant 23).

Furthermore, differences in parental understanding of effective character education practices and the absence of systematic school-family coordination were identified as barriers to sustaining moral development efforts. Some participants acknowledged that parents occasionally relied on verbal advice without consistently demonstrating the behaviors they expected from their children. Such inconsistencies weakened opportunities for children to internalize moral values through observation and daily practice.

Overall, the findings indicate that parental *uswatun hasanah* operates within a dynamic social context where multiple environmental factors may either facilitate or constrain the transmission of moral values. While supportive communities, parenting programs, religious learning forums, and school-family collaboration strengthen family-based character education, digital influences, limited parental availability, and inconsistencies in educational practices may undermine these efforts. Consistent with Lickona (2022) and Hasan et al. (2022), these findings underscore the importance of strengthening partnerships among families, schools, and community institutions to

ensure the continuity and effectiveness of moral character development in the contemporary digital era.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on family-based character education by demonstrating that parental *uswatun hasanah* functions as a multidimensional process through which moral values are transmitted, interpreted, and internalized within everyday family life. Rather than operating solely through exemplary behavior, *uswatun hasanah* involves the interaction of parental role modeling, moral communication, and value-consistent parenting practices that collectively support children's moral character development. These findings extend previous studies that have often examined parental exemplarity, communication, or parenting styles as separate dimensions by highlighting their interconnected role in shaping children's moral dispositions.

The study also underscores the importance of viewing moral character development as a collaborative process that is influenced not only by family practices but also by broader social and educational environments. Supportive community networks, school-family partnerships, and religious learning activities were found to reinforce the transmission of moral values, whereas digital influences, limited parental engagement, and inconsistencies in educational practices may constrain these efforts.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for schools to strengthen sustainable family engagement initiatives that support parents in their role as moral educators. Educational stakeholders may also consider integrating family-based character education into broader educational policies and community programs. Future research could explore the applicability of the conceptual framework identified in this study across different cultural, social, and educational contexts, as well as employ comparative or mixed-methods approaches to further examine the relationship between parental *uswatun hasanah* and children's moral character development.

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