

Chapter 14:

## ***Early Religious Value: A Foundation for Resilient Student Mental Health***

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

We are at an important phase in human history. Despite extraordinary progress in technology, medicine, and global interconnectedness, we confront a quiet and widespread epidemic: a mental health crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health not merely as the absence of disorder, but as "a state of mental health that helps people deal with stress, know what they can do, learn and work well, and help their community" (WHO, 2024). This state of well-being is fundamental, yet it appears to be increasingly fragile. According to WHO (2025), mental illnesses cause one in every six years of incapacity. Depression and anxiety are two examples of these illnesses that can severely lower quality of life and, sadly, lead to early death.

This problem affects everyone in society, no matter their social class. While often framed as an adult problem, research confirms its prevalence across all age groups. The WHO (2025b) estimates that globally, one in seven adolescents (aged 10-19) experiences a mental health condition. In adults, these challenges are often visibly linked to external pressures: The regular demands of a very competitive job market, unstable economies, and the complicated and often tense nature of social relationships (Silva, Resurrección, Antunes,

Frasquilho, & Cardoso, 2018). However, the roots of this vulnerability are often planted much earlier.

The dangers are different for children, however they are just as bad. A significant body of research points to two primary accelerators of childhood mental distress: poor parenting patterns and the pervasive trauma of bullying. Studies demonstrate an "overwhelming" association between bullying and adverse family environments, including parental neglect and abuse (Machimbarrena & Garaigordobil, 2018). The effects are not temporary; they cause serious and long-lasting harm to a child's growth. This trauma directly impairs cognitive functions, manifesting as "trouble focusing and falling grades," and disables affective development, leading to anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders (Armitage, 2021).

Along with this decline in mental health, educators are noticing a worrying surge in moral deviance among school-aged kids. This chapter argues that these two crises—the decline in mental well-being and the erosion of moral character—are not separate phenomena but are deeply intertwined. The solution, therefore, must also be integrated. The author argues that instilling values and character traits in children at a young age is the most effective and realistic strategy. This period, often called the "golden age" (ages 0-6), is when a child's capacity to absorb and internalize values is at its peak (Annabila et al., 2025). This chapter will explore this connection, focusing on the unique role of educators, particularly those trained in Islamic pedagogical traditions, in building this moral fortress.

## **B. DISCUSSION**

### **The Golden Age and the Dual Roles of the Educator**

The argument for character education is not new, but its urgency has never been greater. The assertion that early childhood is the golden age for development is well-supported, it is the foundational period when a child's brain is most plastic and their core identity is being

formed (Tussubha, 2020). What is learned during these formative years—compassion, honesty, responsibility, and empathy—does not merely become a learned behavior; it becomes an integral part of the self. Conversely, a vacuum in character education during this stage creates a void that is easily filled by negative external influences, leaving the child vulnerable to the psychological stressors discussed earlier.

This places an immense responsibility on the shoulders of educators. This responsibility is particularly pronounced within the context of state Islamic universities (UIN) in Indonesia, such as those under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag). The mandate for a graduate of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training (FTK) extends far beyond the simple transmission of academic knowledge (the role of *pengajar*). They are explicitly tasked with being *pendidik* (educators of character), *pembimbing* (guides), and even *da'i* (preachers of good values) (Sya'bani, 2015). Their function is not just instruction but a "transfer of value." They are trained to see the child holistically, understanding that intellectual development is inseparable from spiritual and moral development.

### **Religious Values as a Psychological Fortress**

While secular ethics provide crucial frameworks, religious values offer a unique and powerful combination of transcendent meaning, community reinforcement, and deeply embedded coping mechanisms. When we speak of religious values in this context, we refer to the universal virtues championed by all major faiths: compassion, forgiveness, honesty, humility, and a sense of accountability to a higher purpose.

This framework acts as a practical solution and a long-term psychological fortress. Firstly, it offers a practical guide for preventing deviant behavior. Research has shown that educational models focused on strengthening religious knowledge lead to "positive

changes in attitudes, such as increased discipline, honesty, and participation in religious activities" (Pertiw, Saut, Hutahae, Muminin, & Reza, 2025). By providing a clear "why" for moral behavior, religious values move beyond mere compliance (fear of punishment) to internal conviction (desire to do good).

Secondly, and perhaps more critically for mental health, these values serve as a "fortress." They function as a powerful moderator against life's adversities. Research from Mannion et al., (2025) highlights that religious education can enhance a child's "ability to withstand pressure" from negative environments, such as family conflict. Furthermore, the internalization of religious morality helps individuals "develop healthier reactions to stimuli" and reinforces "religious coping mechanisms which reduce the impact of stresses" (Estrada et al., 2019). In short, a child who grows up with these values develops an internal sense of power and a source of strength that doesn't depend on changing approval from others.

### **Lickona's Framework: From Knowing to Action**

The most comprehensive framework for this integration is provided by the developmental psychologist Thomas Lickona. Lickona (2004) posits that good character consists of three interrelated components: *Moral Knowing*, *Moral Feeling*, and *Moral Action*. The cultivation of religious values fits seamlessly into this model.

#### *1. Moral Knowing (The Cognitive Component)*

This is the intellectual side of character. In our context, this involves teaching children the what and why of religious values. It is knowing what honesty, compassion, and respect mean. It includes moral awareness, knowing the values, and understanding perspective-taking (e.g., "How would your friend feel if you did that?"). In the UIN context, a teacher imparts this knowledge not just as abstract rules, but as divine principles and stories of moral exemplars (e.g., the prophets).

2. *Moral Feeling (The Affective Component)*

This is the bridge between thinking and doing. It is not enough for a child to know what is right; they must love what is right. This domain includes conscience (the emotional sense of obligation), empathy (feeling with others), self-control (the ability to manage impulse), and humility (a sense of one's place in the larger order). A teacher cultivates this by creating an emotionally supportive classroom, modeling empathy, and encouraging reflection that connects religious principles to personal feelings.

3. *Moral Action (The Behavioral Component)*

This is the final, visible outcome. It is the "will" to act, which requires competence (skills to turn feeling into action) and habit. When a student has been taught to know that sharing is a religious value (Moral Knowing) and has been guided to feel empathy for a friend who has no snack (Moral Feeling), they are then empowered to perform the act of sharing (Moral Action). This action, when repeated and reinforced, becomes a habit, and habit solidifies into character.

By applying Lickona's framework, the abstract goal of "instilling religious values" becomes a tangible, three-dimensional pedagogical strategy. The child learns to think morally, feel morally, and act morally, creating a coherent character structure that is resilient, pro-social, and protective of their own mental well-being.

### **The English Classroom as a Vehicle for Moral Cultivation**

This dual mandate finds a unique and powerful application within the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. On the surface, ELT is a skills-based subject focused on linguistic competence—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, language is never a sterile or neutral medium; it is the primary carrier of culture, ideas, and, most critically, values (Hasbi et al., 2025; Hoshi

& Firmansyah, 2023). For the educator trained in a Tarbiyah faculty, the English Language major becomes a strategic and fertile ground for character education, precisely because it is often perceived as neutral.

This integration moves far beyond simply teaching a language about religion, such as translating religious texts. Instead, it involves the subtle and intentional embedding of religious values within the language learning process itself (Hasibuan, Sakinah, Arieanti, & Meilisa, 2025). For example, reading comprehension materials can be selected not only for their linguistic complexity but for their intrinsic moral content—narratives that model compassion, integrity, or perseverance. Speaking and writing prompts can be designed to encourage moral reasoning (Lickona's Moral Knowing), asking students to debate ethical dilemmas ("What would you do if...") or reflect on the importance of gratitude (Moral Feeling) (Andajani, Pratiwi, Susanto, Prastio, & Hayeeteh, 2024). Group projects and pair work, essential components of modern ELT, become practical exercises in patience, cooperation, and mutual respect, translating abstract values into tangible classroom practice (Moral Action) (Hasbi et al., 2024).

In this model, the ELT classroom transforms from a place of mere linguistic acquisition into a laboratory for character. As students learn to articulate complex ideas in a new language, they are simultaneously internalizing a framework of values (Hasibuan et al., 2025). This process provides them with the pro-social skills and the inner resilience necessary to navigate the complexities of a globalized world, reinforcing the very psychological fortress this chapter seeks to build.

### **C. REFLECTION**

The job educators have to do is very important. We are not merely addressing a gap in the curriculum; we are responding to a fundamental need in the human condition. The increasing number of

mental health concerns, from child anxiety to adult depression, is a sign of a deeper broken relationship. It shows that the world has gotten good at developing intelligence and ambition but not so good at developing the soul. We have built sophisticated economies and technologies, but we have failed to build a corresponding fortress of inner character for our children.

The ideas presented in this chapter are not a call for brainwashing, but for integration. It is a call to recognize that religious values such as compassion, empathy, justice, and purpose—are not ancillary to education, but essential to it. They are the very foundation of the mental well-being that the WHO defines as the ability to "cope with the stresses of life."

For educators, especially those emerging from institutions with a dual mandate for academic and moral excellence, the challenge is clear. We must move beyond a curriculum of competence to a pedagogy of character. We must have the courage to address the affective and spiritual dimensions of our students, not just their cognitive abilities. By integrating the "why" of religious values with the "how" of Lickona's framework, we can equip children with more than just knowledge. We can equip them with a moral compass, a resilient spirit, and a psychological fortress that will protect them and allow them to flourish long after they have left our classrooms.

## AUTHOR



**Annisa Khairir Rizki** completed her bachelor in English Language Education Department at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin and master's level of English Department Education at Yogyakarta State University (UNY). Her experience in teaching English by becoming a lecturer at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin (2023-present). Her academic passion includes Teaching English for Young Learner (TEYL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Apart from teaching, she also a part of Himpunan Penerjemah Indonesia as Translator. The author can be contacted via email: annisarizki@uin-antasari.ac.id and on Instagram: @icakhairir.

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