

Children's Social Exploration In Urban Islamic Early Childhood Education: A Comparative Case Study In Medan

✉¹Melvi Sari Anggraini, ²Ahmad Syukri Sitorus

✉^{1, 2} Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Jalan William Iskandar
Pasar V Medan Estate, Sumatera Utara, 20235, Indonesia

✉¹ melvisari0308223102@uinsu.ac.id, ² ahmadsyukrisitorus@uinsu.ac.id

orcid ID: ² 0009-0002-7062-2924

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Abstract

Social competence in early childhood is crucial, yet urban children in Medan face barriers to social exploration due to limited play spaces and high gadget use. This study compares social exploration in two urban Islamic kindergartens and identifies supporting and inhibiting factors. Using a qualitative comparative case study, data were collected from ABA 05 Kindergarten in Medan Timur and RA Islam An-Nur in Medan Johor. Participants included 12 children aged 4–6 years, 4 teachers, and 2 principals. Data were gathered through eight weeks of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's model. Findings indicate that ABA 05 facilitates exploration through structured role-play and learning centers, while RA An-Nur emphasizes congregational prayer and halaqah based on ukhuwah and ta'awun. Supporting factors include teacher guidance and Islamic values, whereas limited space and gadget use remain barriers. The study proposes an "Islamic Social Scaffolding Model" for strengthening children's social exploration in urban Islamic PAUD.

Keywords: social exploration; early childhood; islamic kindergarten; urban; ukhuwah; ta'awun

Abstrak

Kompetensi sosial pada anak usia dini sangat penting, namun anak-anak di wilayah perkotaan Medan menghadapi hambatan dalam eksplorasi sosial akibat keterbatasan ruang bermain dan tingginya penggunaan gawai. Penelitian ini bertujuan membandingkan eksplorasi sosial anak pada dua taman kanak-kanak Islam di wilayah perkotaan serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambatnya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus komparatif kualitatif yang dilaksanakan di TK ABA 05 Medan Timur dan RA Islam An-Nur Medan Johor. Partisipan terdiri atas 12 anak usia 4–6 tahun, 4 guru, dan 2 kepala sekolah. Data dikumpulkan selama delapan minggu melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara semiterstruktur, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa ABA 05 memfasilitasi eksplorasi melalui bermain peran terstruktur dan sentra, sedangkan RA An-Nur menekankan salat berjamaah dan halaqah berbasis ukhuwah dan ta'awun. Faktor pendukung meliputi bimbingan guru dan nilai-nilai Islam, sedangkan keterbatasan ruang dan penggunaan gawai menjadi hambatan. Penelitian ini mengusulkan "Model Islamic Social Scaffolding" untuk memperkuat eksplorasi sosial anak pada PAUD Islam di perkotaan.

Kata kunci: eksplorasi sosial; anak usia dini; TK Islam; perkotaan; ukhuwah; ta'awun

A. INTRODUCTION

Social competence in early childhood is fundamental for emotional regulation and peer relationships. In urban Medan, challenges such as population density, limited play space, busy parents, and high gadget use reduce children's opportunities for direct social interaction. Islamic PAUD institutions attempt to address this by integrating values such as ukhuwah and ta'awun into daily routines. Previous studies in Medan have focused on cognitive development or negative effects of gadgets. However, research on social exploration specifically within Islamic PAUD remains limited. Initial observations in 2025 revealed different pedagogical approaches: ABA 05 uses a structured, center-based curriculum, while RA An-Nur applies a more flexible, worship-integrated approach. Previous studies in Medan have focused on cognitive development or negative effects of gadgets. However, research on social exploration specifically within Islamic PAUD remains limited. Initial observations in 2025 revealed different pedagogical approaches: ABA 05 uses a structured, center-based curriculum, while RA An-Nur applies a more flexible, worship-integrated approach.

Social exploration in early childhood can be understood through Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, which emphasizes that children learn through interaction with more capable peers and adults. In Islamic PAUD, this is reinforced by the concept of tarbiyah ijtimaiyah or social education, where values like ukhuwah, ta'awun, and adab are practiced daily. Hurlock (2023) states that ages 4–6 are the "initiative vs guilt" stage, where children actively explore roles through play. Meanwhile, research by Hidayah & Aminah (2023) found that Islamic kindergartens that integrate worship routines have higher prosocial behavior scores compared to secular PAUD. However, the urban context of Medan presents unique barriers. Siregar & Harahap (2021) noted that limited public play spaces and parental gadget use are the top 2 inhibitors of social development in urban North Sumatra. This gap shows the need for context-specific strategies in Islamic PAUD.

According to Parten (2023), social play develops through 6 stages: unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play. Children aged 4-6 years are ideally in associative and cooperative stages. However, in urban areas, children are often stuck at the "onlooker" stage due to lack of playmates. In the Islamic context, social exploration is not

just psychological but also spiritual. The Prophet's hadith "Al-Muslimu akhul muslim" becomes the basis for ukhuwah education in PAUD. Zahra & Putri (2025) Found that children who pray in congregation 3x/week have 27% higher empathy scores.

Medan as the 3rd largest city in Indonesia faces "play desert" problems. Siregar & Harahap (2021) mapped that 68% of PAUD in Medan Timur have less than 15m² of open space. Furthermore, Mawarni et al. (2025) reported that 73% of urban parents use gadgets as a "digital babysitter", reducing children's face-to-face interaction time by 2.5 hours per day.

Islamic Early Childhood Education institutions attempt to address this gap by integrating Islamic values such as ukhuwah (brotherhood), ta'awun (mutual cooperation), and adab (manners) into daily routines. However, each institution implements this differently depending on resources and philosophy.

Previous studies in Medan have focused on cognitive development or the negative effects of gadgets. Nasution & Sari (2022) examined group play, while Pratama (2025) focused on gadget impact. However, no study has specifically compared how different Islamic PAUD models facilitate social exploration under urban constraints. This gap is urgent given and which targets quality early childhood development for all by 2030. Based on initial observations in 2025, two distinct models emerged: ABA 05 Kindergarten uses a structured, center-based curriculum with physical props, while RA Islam An-Nur applies a worship-integrated approach with limited facilities. This study aims to fill the gap.

Based on the background above, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How do children aged 4–6 years engage in social exploration in ABA 05 Kindergarten and RA Islam An-Nur?
2. What factors support and hinder children's social exploration in both institutions?

Vygotsky (2022) argues that cognitive and social development occurs through social interaction with More Knowledgeable Others. The Zone of Proximal Development explains how children learn through scaffolding. In PAUD, teachers and peers serve as MKO. This theory is highly relevant to social exploration as children learn social norms through guided participation.

(Husainah et al., 2026) identified 6 stages: unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play. Children aged 4-6 should ideally be in associative and cooperative stages. However, (Agus Mawarni, 2025) found that 42% of urban children are stuck at onlooker stage due to lack of playmates. In Islam, social education is called tarbiyah ijtimaiyah. The Prophet Muhammad said "Al-Muslimu akhul muslim". Key values include ukhuwah, ta'awun, ihsan, and adab. (Alfat & Harfiani, 2026) stated that Islamic PAUD integrates these values through daily worship and stories of prophets. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains that microsystem factors like home and school directly impact children. Urban challenges include: 1. Play desert, 2. Gadget addiction, 3. Time-poor parents. (Azzam & Leany, 2024) found urbanization reduces public play space access by 55%(Hidayat, 2025).

(Lubis et al., 2024) found teachers' emotional intelligence strategies improve social skills. (Lubis et al., 2024) showed storytelling increases empathy. However, comparative studies between different Islamic PAUD models in urban areas remain scarce. Social competence in early childhood refers to a child's ability to interact effectively with peers and adults. (Agustina, 2024) social competence is the capacity to form positive relationships, regulate emotions, and cooperate in group settings. It includes skills such as sharing, taking turns, empathy, and conflict resolution. Children who develop strong social competence at ages 4-6 are more likely to succeed academically and emotionally later in life.(Irsyad, 2026) defines social competence as the ability to understand social cues, respond appropriately, and maintain harmonious relationships. In the context of Islamic PAUD, this also includes demonstrating adab or good manners, respecting elders, and practicing ukhuwah or brotherhood with peers. Social competence is not innate but is developed through guided interaction and modeling. Furthermore, (This et al., 2025)emphasizes that social competence in AUD involves three domains: social cognition, social skills, and social awareness. Social cognition is understanding others' feelings. Social skills are verbal and non-verbal communication. Social awareness is adapting behavior to social norms. In urban Islamic PAUD, these domains are cultivated through both structured activities and religious routines such as congregational prayer and group worship.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design. This design was chosen to understand and compare social exploration in two different contexts. As a student of Islamic Early Childhood Education at UINSU, the researcher had prior familiarity with Islamic PAUD culture. To reduce bias, a reflexive journal was kept and peer debriefing was conducted. The research was conducted from May 2026 at ABA 05 Kindergarten, Jl. Mustafa No.3, Medan Timur and RA Islam An-Nur, Jl. Karya Jaya No.108E, Medan Johor. Both schools are located in dense urban areas.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The main data sources were twelve children aged 4–6 years. Key informants were two principals and two classroom teachers. The criteria: minimum 1 year at the school and direct involvement in children's social activities.

Data were collected through: Participant Observation: 8 meetings, 2 times/week, 2 hours each. Field notes taken. Semi-structured Interviews: 4 interviews, 45-60 minutes, recorded. Documentation: Lesson plans, photos, policy documents. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model: 1. Data Condensation: coding and thematic categorization, 2. Data Display: comparative matrix, 3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification. Data Validity: Source triangulation and member checking were conducted. The research instrument is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instrument Grid

No	Aspects	Indicators	Instrument
1	Forms of Social Exploration	Role play, group play, worship, eating together	Observation sheet, Interview guide
2	Supporting Factors	Teacher guidance, facilities, Islamic values	Interview guide
3	Inhibiting Factors	Limited space, gadget use, parent's work	Observation sheet

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. ABA 05 Kindergarten: Structured Model

Social exploration was teacher-facilitated through centers. Observation Scene 1 - May, 2026: At 09:00, 5 children entered "Market Center". Zihan took cashier role. When Aqil wanted the same role, conflict occurred. After 2 minutes, Zihan said "Giliran ya, 5 menit". Teacher only reminded "pakai jadwal giliran". This shows internalization of turn-taking. Teacher ABA 05 Quote: "We use centers to teach children how to negotiate. They learn to say 'boleh pinjam?' and 'terima kasih'."

2. RA Islam An-Nur: Worship-Based Model

Social exploration emerged from religious routines. Observation Scene 2 - May, 2026: Before Dhuhur, children lined up. The oldest, 6-year-old Fajar, became imam. After prayer, during halaqah, shy child Rani voluntarily shared about helping her mother. Teacher connected it to hadith about helping parents. Teacher RA An-Nur Quote: "Shalat berjamaah teaches discipline and togetherness. Halaqah is where they learn to listen and speak."

Table 2. Comparison Of Social Exploration Patterns

Aspect	ABA 05 Kindergarten	RA Islam An-Nur
Dominant Activity	Role-play, Group Games	Congregational Prayer, Halaqah
Teacher Role	Facilitator & Center Manager	Role Model & Religious Guide
Core Value	Ta'awun - Cooperation	Ukhuwah - Brotherhood

Table 3. Teacher Intervention Strategies

Situation	ABA 05 Strategy	RA An-Nur Strategy
Conflict over toy	Use turn-taking chart	Tell story of Prophet sharing
Shy child	Invite to center with friend	Ask to lead short prayer

Findings revealed that Islamic values were central to social exploration in both institutions. Observation Scene 3 - RA An-Nur, June 17, 2026: During wudhu time, older children voluntarily helped younger ones. Fajar, 6 years old, guided Rani, 4 years old. When asked why, Fajar answered: "Karena kita saudara, bu. Harus saling tolong." This

demonstrates internalization of ukhuwah. Teacher RA An-Nur Quote: "We always remind children that in Islam we are brothers. If one falls, we help. That is ta'awun. From prayer line to eating together, everything teaches cooperation." Teacher ABA 05 Quote: "In the market center, they must work together. If one doesn't cooperate, the game fails. We connect it to the hadith 'Believers are like one body'."

Supporting: Active teacher guidance, Islamic values, parental support. ABA 05 had better play tools. An-Nur had stronger community. Inhibiting: 1. Limited outdoor space. 2. Gadget exposure >2 hours/day. 3. Busy parents.

Table 4. Cross-Case Analysis Matrix

Theme	ABA 05 Kindergarten	Theme	RA Islam An-Nur
Dominant Activity	Teacher via center rotation	Child via prayer invitation	Agency is more adult-directed at ABA 05
Teacher Role	Rule chart and timer	Islamic story and hadith reminder	Different scaffolding media
Core Value	Physical centers and props	Prayer room and circle	Resource adaptation

DISCUSSION

The findings align with Vygotsky (2022) that social interaction is the primary vehicle for child development. The key difference between the two institutions lies in the mediation tool used to facilitate social exploration. This study found that ukhuwah and ta'awun serve as powerful social scaffolds. Unlike physical props at ABA 05, RA An-Nur uses spiritual bonds to create social cohesion. Children learn that helping friends is not only a social rule but also a religious obligation. This extends Nasution (2020) and shows that Islamic values can compensate for material limitations in urban settings.

ABA 05 relies on physical artifacts such as cashier sets, doctor kits, and turn-taking charts as scaffolding. RA An-Nur relies on spiritual routines such as shalat berjamaah, halaqah, and storytelling as the primary medium. This reflects institutional resources. ABA 05, under Aisyiyah organization, has better funding and facilities. RA An-Nur, with limited space, maximizes what it has: time for worship and religious values. The difference between

ABA 05 and RA An-Nur reflects institutional resources. ABA 05 with better facilities uses physical tools. RA An-Nur with limited space uses spiritual routines as a social medium. This finding extends Vygotsky by showing that ibadah berjamaah can function as "More Knowledgeable Other" in Islamic context.

This study proposes the "Islamic Social Scaffolding Model". In this model, Islamic rituals are not only for spiritual development but also serve as tools for social skill development. Congregational prayer teaches turn-taking, discipline, and cooperation. Halaqah teaches listening, speaking, and empathy. This extends Vygotsky's theory into the Islamic PAUD context.

This finding contradicts Pratama (2025) who claimed that urban PAUD cannot develop social skills without adequate outdoor space. Our study shows that even with limited space, social exploration can occur through alternative pathways. This supports Anggraini & Lubis (2024) and Ramadhani & Yusnita (2024) in Jurnal Raudhah that Islamic values can serve as effective scaffolding. For teachers in urban Islamic PAUD with limited facilities, integrating worship routines into daily social learning is a viable strategy. For schools with better resources, combining centers with worship will maximize outcomes.

D. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This comparative qualitative study concludes that children's social exploration in urban Islamic PAUD occurs through two distinct pathways: 1. Structured play at ABA 05 Kindergarten, and 2. Worship-based interaction at RA Islam An-Nur. The comparison shows distinct pathways. ABA 05, with better facilities, relies on structured centers to develop negotiation and turn-taking. RA An-Nur, with limited space, relies on worship routines and Islamic values of ukhuwah and ta'awun to foster cooperation and empathy. Both models are effective, but success depends on institutional resources and teacher commitment. Teacher facilitation, institutional resources, and internalization of Islamic values of ta'awun and ukhuwah are the primary supporting factors. The main inhibiting factors are urban space limitations, high gadget use, and time-poor parents.

1. For Teachers: Implement a hybrid model that combines structured centers with daily worship routines. Model Islamic social manners consistently.

2. For Parents: Establish "gadget-free hours" at home and participate in school social programs.
3. For School Principals: Maximize vertical space and multipurpose rooms. Create a "social corner" even in limited space.

This study is limited to 2 schools in Medan and 2 months of data collection. Future research should: 1. Expand to rural Islamic PAUD for comparison, 2. Use quantitative instruments such as SSRS to measure social skills, 3. Conduct longitudinal study to see long-term effects of the two models.

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