

NATURE AND NURTURE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received: 22 Mar 2025 Revised: 8 April 2025 Accepted: 12 May 2025 Published: 1 June 2025 Keywords: Child Development, Nature vs Nurture, Islamic Psychology, Fitrah, Tarbiyah, Early Intervention, Developmental Theory  OPEN ACCESS	The interplay between nature and nurture has long been debated in developmental psychology. While Western theories often treat the two as distinct or competing forces, Islamic teachings offer a harmonised view incorporating intrinsic disposition (<i>fitrah</i>) and external influences (<i>tarbiyah</i>). This conceptual paper aims to critically review the literature on nature versus nurture theories in child development, juxtaposing Western perspectives with insights from Islamic epistemology. Foundational theories from Rousseau, Locke, Piaget, and Vygotsky are explored alongside Islamic concepts of child-rearing, innate disposition, and environmental shaping. The paper argues that an integrated model, informed by Islamic teachings, provides a holistic framework for early intervention practices. This synthesis contributes to culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks in Muslim-majority contexts. Implications for early childhood professionals are discussed, particularly in aligning interventions with scientific evidence and Islamic ethical values. The review concludes that a balanced approach, recognising biological predispositions and contextual factors, is essential for nurturing optimal child development in culturally grounded ways.

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INTRODUCTION

The nature versus nurture debate is foundational to understanding child development. Originating from philosophical inquiries and evolving into scientific discourse, this debate examines whether a child's development is primarily shaped by genetic inheritance or environmental exposure. Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize the interplay between these elements, advocating for an integrative, interactionist view. Western developmental psychology often presents these elements in contrast, yet Islamic teachings reflect a more integrated model. In Muslim societies, early intervention must align with empirical evidence and adhere to ethical, spiritual, and cultural paradigms.

This review paper explores key theoretical perspectives from both Western and Islamic traditions to highlight convergences and distinctions in their treatment of innate disposition (nature) and environmental shaping (nurture) in the development of children, as well as a discussion of the implications for culturally sensitive early childhood interventions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON NATURE VS NURTURE

Classical Western Theories

The conceptual contrast between nature and nurture emerged prominently in Enlightenment-era thought. Historically, philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke shaped early conceptions of development. Rousseau (1762) posited that children are born inherently good and naturally develop if left unhindered, suggesting a nature-dominant view. Conversely, John Locke (1690) conceptualized the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, arguing that knowledge is derived solely through sensory experience and environmental input. These early views laid the groundwork for later psychological theories.

Jean Piaget (1952) advanced a constructivist theory of cognitive development, proposing that children actively construct knowledge through biological maturation and interaction with their environment. Piaget's work implicitly integrates both nature and nurture by acknowledging the child's internal readiness and external stimulus. Lev Vygotsky (1978) further nuanced this perspective by emphasizing sociocultural influences. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) demonstrated how cognitive advancement occurs through guided participation, foregrounding the role of language, tools, and cultural context in shaping mental development.

Contemporary Perspectives

Modern developmental science embraces an interactionist model where both genetic endowment and environmental influence are viewed as mutually constitutive. Bjorklund (2015) argues that biological and contextual factors form a dynamic system that co-regulates developmental outcomes. Epigenetic research has further enriched this view. Meaney (2010) demonstrates how environmental stressors and stimuli can influence gene expression, supporting the idea that inherited traits are not fixed but modifiable through experience.

This evolving understanding underscores that neither nature nor nurture operates in isolation. Instead, development results from continuous feedback between the individual and their surroundings. While these insights are foundational in global pedagogical theory, engaging with non-Western paradigms, such as Islamic views on child development, provides a more culturally contextualized framework.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON NATURE AND NURTURE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Islamic thought offers a holistic understanding of child development through the interrelated concepts of *fitrah* (innate disposition) and *tarbiyah* (nurture/education).

The Concept of Fitrah: Innate Nature in Islam

In Islamic theology, *fitrah* refers to the innate disposition towards faith and righteousness present in every human being. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated, "Every child is born upon *fitrah*, but his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Magian" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 1358). The concept of *fitrah* embodies the "nature" aspect of development. It includes biological instincts and moral, spiritual, and cognitive predispositions gifted by Allah (Yusof & Muhamad, 2020).

Classical Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun also acknowledged that while every child possesses intrinsic potential, its realization depends on the environment. These corresponds to the nurture component in modern theories. The Islamic concept of *tarbiyah* refers to holistic upbringing and education that emphasizes parental guidance, moral training, and intellectual development. Fathani (2014) and Al-Attas (1991) contend that proper education must nurture the full spectrum of human faculties: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical.

The Role of Tarbiyah: Nurture and Development

The Islamic principle of *tarbiyah* (holistic education and nurturing) represents the "nurture" side. These includes parental responsibility, socialisation, and exposure to moral and educational influences. *Tarbiyah* encompasses a child's holistic nurturing and education, aiming to develop their intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual faculties (Fathani, 2014).

Islam places significant responsibility on parents and educators to guide children under Islamic principles, ensuring the cultivation of virtues and ethical conduct. The Quran emphasises this responsibility: "O my son, indeed if wrong should be the weight of a mustard seed and should be within a rock or [anywhere] in the heavens or the earth, Allah will bring it forth...." (Quran 31:16-19). Al-Attas (1991) emphasises that education must aim at the balanced growth of the total personality, including intellectual, spiritual, and physical domains. Parental guidance is thus seen as a divine mandate, shaping the child through environment, values, and experience.

Balance Between Divine Will and Self Determination in Child Development

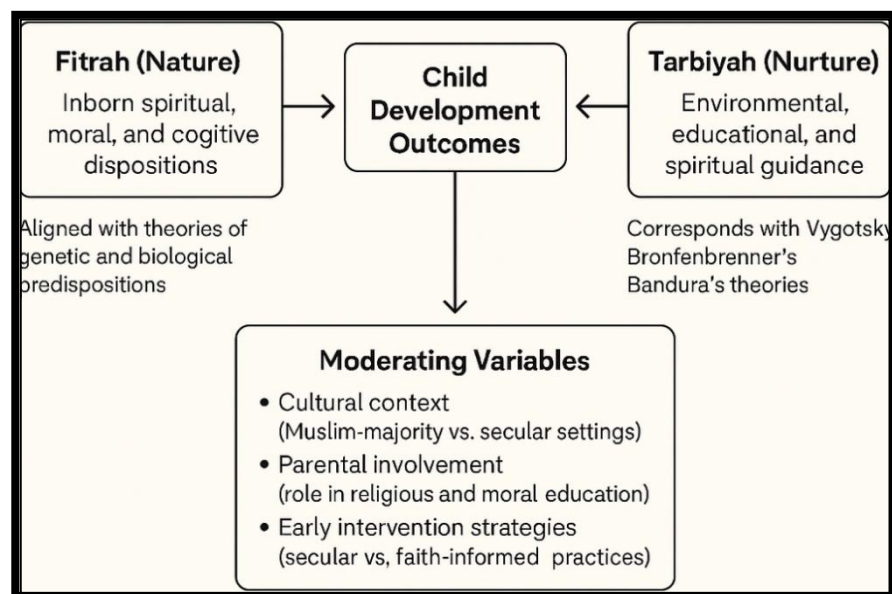
Islamic theology emphasizes a harmonious balance between *qadar* (divine will) and human self-determination, acknowledging predestined aspects of life and individual moral responsibility. This duality is reflected in the concept of *fitrah*, the innate disposition towards faith and righteousness present in every human being. While *fitrah* provides the foundational framework, the nurturing process (*tarbiyah*) is pivotal in guiding individuals to actualize their inherent potential.

Recent scholarly works underscore the significance of this balance in educational contexts. For instance, a study published by Murjani et al. (2022) highlights the role of *tarbiyah* in fostering holistic development, integrating spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions to nurture well-rounded individuals. This approach aligns with developmental psychology's emphasis on the interplay between innate predispositions and environmental influences in shaping behavior and cognition.

Furthermore, Abdalla (2025) explores the implications of integrating Islamic principles into psychological practices, advocating for models that address mental and emotional well-being through a spiritual lens. Such models emphasize the importance of acknowledging divine will while empowering individuals to make conscious, value-driven choices, promoting resilience and adaptability. This balance can be operationalized in educational settings by incorporating moral narratives and reflective practices that encourage children to internalize values and exercise volitional control within ethical boundaries. By doing so, educators can cultivate a sense of agency in learners, enabling them to navigate life's challenges with confidence and faith.

While certain aspects of a child's life are predestined, Islam encourages proactive nurturing and education to guide the child toward righteousness. This perspective aligns with contemporary views that recognise the dynamic interplay between innate predispositions and environmental influences. Based on Islamic theology, Figure 1 below translated a conceptual framework of nature and nurture in children's development.

Figure 1: Nature And Nurture in Children's Development from an Islamic Perspective



Four core constructs emerge in conceptualising child development from an Islamic and developmental psychology perspective. The first is nature, understood in Islamic theology as *fitrah*, the inborn spiritual, moral, and cognitive dispositions endowed by Allah (Ghalib et al., 2022). This inherent nature, which is shared by all children regardless of background, is affirmed in the Qur'an and Hadith and aligns with contemporary developmental theories on genetic and biological predispositions.

Complementing this is nurture, or *tarbiyah*, which refers to the child's environmental, educational, and spiritual shaping (Murjani et al., 2022). *Tarbiyah* encompasses influences from the family, community, cultural norms, and formal education systems, paralleling the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky, the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner, and Bandura's Observational Learning Framework. These two dimensions, *fitrah* and *tarbiyah*, jointly shape child development outcomes, including cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and moral growth.

From an Islamic standpoint, the ultimate aim is to cultivate righteous character and *taqwa* (God-consciousness), while Western developmental goals often emphasize personal autonomy, competence, and psychological well-being. Moderating variables further influence the relationship between nature and nurture in determining developmental trajectories (Figure 1). These include the cultural context in which a child is raised, whether in a Muslim-majority or secular society, levels of parental involvement in religious and moral upbringing, and the nature of early intervention strategies, which may be secular or faith-informed. Together, these constructs provide a holistic framework for understanding child development that is both spiritually grounded and empirically informed.

Having established the foundational constructs of nature (*fitrah*), nurture (*tarbiyah*), developmental outcomes, and moderating variables, it is pertinent to examine how these elements are conceptualised across different epistemological frameworks. The following section offers a comparative analysis of Islamic and Western perspectives on child development.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ISLAMIC AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

There is a significant convergence between Islamic and Western interactionist views of child development. Both frameworks acknowledge the dynamic interplay between innate qualities and environmental influences. From a Western standpoint, this is evidenced in theories such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which stress the importance of social and contextual factors in shaping development.

Similarly, Islamic thought posits that children are born with *fitrah*, a pure and innate disposition and that their environment (*tarbiyah*) plays a crucial role in shaping their moral and cognitive development (Fatimah et al., 2022). However, the divergence lies in foundational assumptions, while Western science often approaches development from a secular, biological, or cognitive lens, Islamic perspectives frame development as a moral, spiritual, and divine journey governed by the higher objectives of Shariah (*maqasid*) and individual accountability (*taklif*) (Muda et al., 2023).

Recent studies further reveal a growing alignment in practical goals. Both paradigms emphasize holistic child development encompassing cognitive, emotional, and moral domains. For instance, Saepudin (2024) asserts that holistic Islamic education, which integrates spiritual and moral learning within academic curricula, enhances students' moral reasoning and spiritual awareness. This approach parallels Western models that advocate for socio-emotional learning and whole-child frameworks.

Likewise, Sholehuddin et al. (2023) highlight that family-based Islamic parenting practices in Indonesia have effectively nurtured children's spiritual intelligence, mirroring Western emphases on emotional intelligence and well-being. While Western frameworks emphasize personal autonomy and self-actualization, Islamic thought stresses divine purpose and communal responsibility. Islam does not reject empirical science; instead, it embeds it within a metaphysical worldview, viewing child development as an entrusted process (*amanah*) to cultivate the *fitrah* under divine guidance.

While Vygotsky underscores the influence of sociocultural contexts on cognition, Islam views these influences as part of a divine trust to mold the child's moral and spiritual compass. These broadens the epistemological lens of development to include observable outcomes and unseen spiritual objectives. Islamic psychology continues to advocate for educational models that balance intellectual and spiritual growth (Saepudin, 2024), reinforcing a unique yet complementary perspective to Western theories. Therefore, although differences in epistemology remain, both traditions offer

valuable insights for culturally responsive, ethically grounded early intervention strategies, especially in Muslim-majority contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION PRACTICES

Integrating Islamic values into developmental frameworks can enhance efficacy and cultural relevance for early interventionists working in Muslim contexts. Integrating Islamic principles into early intervention strategies can enhance their effectiveness, particularly in Muslim communities. Recognising the role of *fitrah* and *tarbiyah* can inform culturally sensitive approaches that align with families' beliefs and values. For instance, incorporating moral and spiritual education alongside cognitive and behavioural interventions can foster comprehensive development.

Interventions should respect the belief in *fitrah* while employing evidence-based strategies to support developmental milestones. For instance, recognising a child's spiritual disposition may encourage educators to include moral storytelling, prayer routines, and character education as part of psychosocial support (Purnama et al., 2020; Sulaimawan & Nurhayati, 2023).

Additionally, Sulaimawan and Nurhayati (2023) found that engaging parents and communities in the intervention process, as emphasised in Islamic teachings, can reinforce positive outcomes and ensure sustainability. Furthermore, parent training models should be aligned with Islamic parenting ethics, emphasising compassion, accountability, and educational responsibility. Community-based interventions may also benefit from incorporating mosque-based learning or the involvement of religious scholars in programme design (Mahariah et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This review underscores the importance of a holistic approach to child development that integrates innate dispositions (*fitrah*) and environmental influences (*tarbiyah*). This conceptual review reveals that Western and Islamic perspectives value the interaction between intrinsic potential (nature) and environmental (nurture) shaping in child development. However, the Islamic framework provides a more comprehensive lens that integrates moral, spiritual, and cognitive dimensions (Muda et al., 2023).

By recognising the divine *fitrah* of each child and the duty of *tarbiyah*, Islamic perspectives offers a robust model for early childhood intervention. Islamic teachings, emphasising *fitrah* and *tarbiyah*, offer valuable insights that complement and enrich Western theories. In synthesizing Islamic and Western perspectives, this paper proposes a culturally sensitive framework incorporating *fitrah* and *tarbiyah* as central developmental constructs. This model offers early childhood practitioners an ethically grounded and empirically supported lens.

Future interdisciplinary studies are encouraged to validate this framework through empirical testing and to refine culturally aligned interventions for Muslim communities globally, aiming to develop culturally responsive models that cater to diverse populations. Furthermore, collaborations between developmental scientists and Islamic scholars may enrich the field with contextually appropriate frameworks that respect faith and evidence.

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