



Cultivating Environmental Care among Children Aged 5-6 Years: The Role of Habituation and Role Modeling in Early Childhood Education

Finkan Novella^{1*},  Lidia Oktamarina¹, Aida Imtihana¹

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author Email: novellafinkan@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. The study was motivated by the importance of fostering environmental awareness from an early age through consistent habituation and role modeling in children's daily lives. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. The participants were children aged 5–6 years, while the principal and classroom teachers served as key informants. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation and were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicated that environmental care was reflected in children's everyday behaviors, including disposing of waste properly, maintaining classroom cleanliness, organizing play equipment after use, conserving water, and caring for plants in the school environment. The findings also demonstrated that teachers played an important role in fostering children's environmental care through consistent habituation, role modeling, the integration of environmental care values into learning activities, and positive reinforcement. Repeated environmental practices provided children with direct experiences that supported their understanding and application of responsible behaviors toward their surroundings. Thus, the continuous development of environmental care through habituation and role modeling can support the development of caring, responsible, and environmentally aware behaviors in early childhood.

[Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis karakter peduli lingkungan pada anak usia 5–6 tahun di RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh pentingnya pengembangan kepedulian terhadap lingkungan sejak usia dini melalui pembiasaan dan keteladanan yang dilakukan secara konsisten dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Partisipan penelitian adalah anak usia 5–6 tahun, sedangkan kepala sekolah dan guru kelas berperan sebagai informan kunci. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa karakter peduli lingkungan pada anak tercermin dalam berbagai perilaku sehari-hari, antara lain membuang sampah pada tempatnya, menjaga kebersihan kelas, merapikan alat bermain setelah digunakan,

menghemat penggunaan air, dan merawat tanaman di lingkungan sekolah. Temuan penelitian juga menunjukkan bahwa guru berperan penting dalam membentuk kepedulian lingkungan anak melalui pembiasaan yang konsisten, keteladanan, integrasi nilai-nilai kepedulian lingkungan dalam kegiatan pembelajaran, dan pemberian penguatan positif. Praktik yang dilakukan secara berulang memberikan pengalaman langsung kepada anak dalam memahami dan menerapkan perilaku bertanggung jawab terhadap lingkungan. Dengan demikian, pengembangan karakter peduli lingkungan melalui pembiasaan dan keteladanan yang dilakukan secara berkelanjutan dapat mendukung terbentuknya perilaku peduli, bertanggung jawab, dan sadar lingkungan pada anak usia dini.]

Keywords: Environmental Care, Early Childhood, Habituation, Role Modeling.

Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic country with abundant natural resources and rich biodiversity. These resources include forests, seas, rivers, mountains, and various ecosystems that support the livelihoods of local communities (Aminuddin & Agussalim Burhanuddin, 2023). However, various environmental problems, including pollution, waste accumulation, ecosystem degradation, flooding, and other forms of environmental damage, remain issues that require serious attention. These conditions indicate that environmental concerns require not only technical solutions but also the development of individual character and habits from an early age. Environmental education is an important approach because it can foster environmental awareness and appreciation during the early stages of children's development (Azis et al., 2022; Kumariyah et al., 2026; Suharti et al., 2021).

Children aged 5–6 years are in an important period for the development of habits and character. At this stage, children learn primarily through concrete experiences, repetition, observation, and imitation of the behaviors of people around them. Therefore, fostering environmental care in early childhood is strategically important because behaviors that are consistently practiced have the potential to become part of children's everyday habits (Suri et al., 2022). Environmental education in early childhood should not be limited to providing information about the environment but should be realized through direct experiences, such as disposing of waste properly, maintaining classroom cleanliness, caring for plants, using water efficiently, and organizing equipment after use. Environmental education from an early age is important for developing children's attitudes of care and appreciation toward the environment, particularly through habituation that can influence children's behavior in later life (Feriana et al., 2025).

Environmental care can be understood as attitudes and actions that demonstrate awareness of the need to protect, maintain, preserve, and prevent damage to the environment (Yulianti et al., 2023). In the context of early childhood education, such character is more readily observed through actual behavior than through children's conceptual understanding. Children who demonstrate environmental care may engage in simple behaviors, such as disposing of waste properly, maintaining the cleanliness of learning spaces, organizing play equipment, conserving water, and caring for plants (Hashipah et al., 2026). Therefore, the success of environmental care education in early childhood needs to be examined through how these values are applied in children's everyday activities.

Previous studies have shown that environmental education in early childhood can be implemented through various approaches. Yusuf et al. (2026) through a literature review on early childhood education and environmental care character, demonstrated that early childhood education plays an important role in fostering environmental care as part of efforts to achieve sustainable development. The strength of this study lies in its provision of a conceptual foundation concerning the relationship between early childhood education, environmental character, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, because the study employed a literature review approach, it

did not provide empirical insights into how environmental care is demonstrated by children in their everyday activities within a particular educational institution (Gusmawanti et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Sari et al. (2022) examined environmental care among children in early childhood through a project-based method. The findings showed that the implementation of a project-based method could improve children's environmental care. The strength of this study lies in its provision of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of learning activities in developing environmental care. Siti Aisyah et al. (2023), also demonstrated that the implementation of Project Based Learning could develop environmental care among children in Group B. The children demonstrated increased environmental awareness, particularly in maintaining and caring for their surroundings. The strength of this study lies in its use of project activities as direct experiences that are appropriate to the characteristics of learning in early childhood. However, the study focused primarily on the implementation of Project Based Learning and therefore did not specifically describe the various forms of habituation and role modeling provided by teachers in developing environmental care through children's routine activities at school.

Another study examining teachers' efforts to foster environmental care education employed a qualitative approach with a case study design and used observation, interviews, and documentation as data collection techniques (Sari et al., 2022). The study demonstrated that teacher strategies constitute an important component in developing environmental care among children in early childhood. These findings reinforce the importance of teachers as both guides and role models for children. Nevertheless, further research is needed to provide a more specific description of children's environmental care based on indicators of everyday behavior, such as maintaining cleanliness, disposing of waste properly, conserving water, caring for plants, and organizing the learning environment within a particular early childhood education institution (Ajijah, 2025).

Based on the review of previous studies, research on environmental care in early childhood has developed across various areas of focus, including environmental education, project-based methods, learning media, and teacher strategies (Haura et al., 2026). These studies have made important contributions by demonstrating that environmental care can be developed through direct experiences, habituation, learning activities, and teacher involvement. However, there remains a research gap concerning how environmental care is actually manifested in children's everyday behaviors and how teachers' habituation and role modeling support the development of such behaviors within a particular school context. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

Environmental care also has a strong foundation in Islamic values. Islam teaches human beings to maintain the balance of nature and refrain from causing destruction on earth. This principle is reflected, among others, in Qur'an 7:56, which prohibits human beings from causing corruption on earth after Allah has established it in a proper condition. This value is relevant to early childhood education because environmental care can be introduced through simple behaviors that are closely connected to children's everyday lives, such as maintaining cleanliness, avoiding littering, using water appropriately, and caring for plants. Thus, the development of environmental care in Islamic educational institutions has not only a character education dimension but can also serve as part of the cultivation of religious values in everyday life (Rakhman et al., 2023).

This condition was also identified through preliminary observations at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. The observations indicated that children aged 5–6 years had demonstrated various behaviors reflecting environmental care. Children had begun to develop the habit of disposing of waste properly after eating, playing, and participating in learning activities. They also demonstrated habits of maintaining classroom cleanliness, organizing play equipment and learning materials after use, and keeping their seating areas orderly. In addition, during activities involving water, children

began to demonstrate water conservation behaviors by turning off the faucet after washing their hands.

The development of these habits cannot be separated from the role of teachers. Based on preliminary interviews with school representatives, environmental care is fostered through habituation, role modeling, positive reinforcement, and learning activities integrated with environmental care values (Damayanti et al., 2023). Teachers guide children in cleaning the classroom environment, organizing play equipment, disposing of waste properly, watering plants, and using water responsibly. Teachers also provide direct examples, enabling children to gain concrete experiences of environmentally caring behavior.

These conditions indicate that RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang has established practices for developing environmental care that warrant further investigation. Although children have demonstrated various positive behaviors, character development in early childhood still requires consistent habituation and guidance to ensure that such behaviors do not occur only when directed by teachers but gradually develop into children's own awareness and habits. Therefore, it is important to examine how environmental care is demonstrated by children and how teachers and the school environment support its development.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study focuses on examining how environmental care is demonstrated by children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang and how habituation, role modeling, and various teacher-led activities contribute to the development of such care. This study aims to analyze environmental care among children, identify various forms of environmental care demonstrated in their everyday activities, and describe the role of teachers in fostering such care through habituation activities. The findings are expected to provide an empirical description of the process of developing environmental care in early childhood and serve as a consideration for teachers and Early Childhood Education institutions in developing character education through habituation and direct experiences.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. The study was conducted at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang, located at Jalan Perindustrian II No. 36, RT 69 RW 14, Sukarami District, Palembang. The research participants consisted of the principal, classroom teachers, and children aged 5–6 years. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in and understanding of the process of developing environmental care. The data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations and interviews with the principal and teachers, as well as observations of children's activities, while secondary data were obtained through documentation and relevant institutional documents.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted directly to examine children's behaviors and teachers' activities during learning activities and routine activities at school. The observed aspects included the habit of disposing of waste properly, maintaining environmental cleanliness, conserving water, caring for plants, and organizing play equipment and learning materials (Purnama et al., 2025). Unstructured interviews were conducted with the principal and classroom teachers to obtain information regarding habituation activities, role modeling, teacher strategies, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the development of environmental care. Documentation was used as supporting data, including the institutional profile, activity programs, sanitation and cleanliness facilities, and documentation of teacher and child activities related to environmental care. The focus of the study included children's environmental care,

habituation activities, the role of teachers, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the development of environmental care.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The collected data were selected and categorized according to the research focus and then presented in narrative form to identify patterns and relationships among the findings. Conclusions were subsequently drawn based on findings that had been verified throughout the research process. Data credibility was established through source, technique, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the principal and teachers with observations of children. Technique triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, while time triangulation was conducted by collecting data at different times to ensure the consistency of the information. Through these procedures, the study was expected to produce credible findings regarding environmental care and its development among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang.

Result and Discussion

Environmental Care Behaviors among Children at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang

Based on the findings obtained through observations, interviews, and documentation, environmental care behaviors as part of the development of environmental care among children at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang were fostered through various habituation activities routinely implemented in children's daily school life. Teachers guided children to maintain cleanliness and environmental sustainability through simple activities, such as disposing of waste properly, caring for plants, cleaning the classroom, organizing play equipment after use, and conserving water. These activities were carried out repeatedly so that positive behaviors were not merely understood as rules but gradually developed into habits that became part of children's everyday behavior. An interview with the principal, Nurhanita Daulay, S.Pd.I., indicated that environmental care was fostered through habituation beginning when children arrived at school. She explained that the school encouraged children to dispose of waste properly, maintain classroom cleanliness, care for plants, conserve water, and participate in *Jumat Bersih* (Friday Clean-Up) activities so that children would become accustomed to caring for and protecting their surroundings (CW.02.19). This finding indicates that the school provides opportunities for children to learn through direct experiences, enabling environmental care values to be applied in everyday activities.

Teacher role modeling was also an important component of this habituation process. The classroom teacher, Nella Mavica Sari, S.Pd., AUD., explained that teachers did not merely provide verbal instructions but also demonstrated appropriate behaviors directly to children. When there was litter scattered around the environment, for example, the teacher encouraged children to pick it up and dispose of it properly so that they could observe and imitate the behavior (CW.01.2). Teacher role modeling provided children with concrete examples of how to treat and care for the environment appropriately. Observations showed that most children had begun to develop habits of maintaining the cleanliness of the school environment. Children were observed disposing of waste in designated bins, participating in classroom cleaning before learning activities, and taking part in cleaning activities with teachers and peers. Children had also begun to demonstrate awareness by organizing play equipment after use. These conditions indicate that consistent habituation contributed to the emergence of environmental care behaviors among children.

Habituation and direct experiences in environmental care activities also served as means for children to develop a sense of responsibility toward their surroundings. Activities such as *Jumat Bersih*, classroom cleaning, waste disposal, plant care, and water conservation provided children with

opportunities to practice environmental care values directly. Thus, children not only acquired knowledge about the importance of protecting the environment but also experienced firsthand the process of maintaining and caring for their school environment. Based on the overall findings from interviews and observations, environmental care among children at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang developed through habituation, teacher role modeling, guidance, and children's direct involvement in environmental activities. Children began to demonstrate behaviors such as maintaining cleanliness, disposing of waste properly, caring for plants, conserving water, and participating in school cleaning activities.

The Role of Teachers in Developing Environmental Care

Based on the findings obtained through observations, interviews, and documentation, teachers served as guides, role models, and facilitators in developing environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. These roles were manifested through providing guidance, habituation, assistance, and reinforcement of children's positive behaviors in maintaining the school environment. Teachers did not merely communicate the importance of maintaining cleanliness verbally but also became directly involved in various activities, allowing children to observe concrete examples that they could imitate in their daily lives.

Teachers provided guidance and reinforcement to children in maintaining environmental cleanliness. An interview with the classroom teacher, Nella Mavica Sari, S.Pd., AUD., revealed that children were reminded every day to maintain the cleanliness of the classroom and schoolyard. When a child disposed of waste improperly, the teacher immediately provided corrective guidance and directed the child to dispose of the waste in the designated place (CW.01.4). Such guidance was provided consistently so that children could understand appropriate behaviors and gradually apply them without always depending on teachers' instructions. Thus, corrective guidance functioned not only as a response to inappropriate behavior but also as part of the character development process.

Teachers also involved children in collective activities to foster environmental responsibility and cooperation. One of the activities implemented was *Jumat Bersih*, a school-wide cleaning activity conducted collectively. The principal explained that during this activity, children were encouraged to clean the school environment, dispose of waste properly, care for plants, and use water responsibly. The activity was also intended to teach children to care for their surroundings while cooperating with their peers (CW.02.19). Through direct involvement in such activities, children gained concrete experiences that maintaining cleanliness and environmental sustainability is a shared responsibility that can be carried out collectively.

Teachers also provided role modeling and positive reinforcement in developing environmental care. Observations showed that teachers actively accompanied children during cleaning activities. Teachers demonstrated appropriate behaviors, assisted children when they experienced difficulties, and praised children who demonstrated environmental care. Such positive reinforcement made children feel appreciated and encouraged them to repeat the same behaviors. Thus, the role of teachers in developing environmental care was not limited to providing instructions but also included demonstrating appropriate behaviors, guiding and monitoring children, and appreciating their behavioral development.

Based on the interview and observation findings, the role of teachers was one of the important factors in the development of environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang. Teachers performed their roles through habituation in maintaining cleanliness, providing guidance and advice, serving as role models, assisting children in environmental activities, and providing positive reinforcement. These strategies provided children with opportunities to learn through direct experiences, allowing behaviors such as disposing of waste properly, maintaining

cleanliness, caring for plants, conserving water, and cooperating with others to gradually develop into positive everyday habits.

Forms of Activities for Developing Environmental Care

Based on the findings at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang, activities for developing environmental care were implemented through habituation integrated into children's everyday activities. These activities included disposing of waste properly, cleaning classrooms and schoolyards, organizing learning materials and play equipment, watering and caring for plants, participating in collective cleaning activities, and conserving water. An interview with the principal, Nurhanita Daulay, S.Pd.I., indicated that these activities were implemented consistently, with teachers serving as role models and the activities being supported by facilities such as waste bins and green areas. She explained that habituation activities were implemented to provide children with direct experiences in practicing environmental care behaviors (CW.02.19). This was reinforced by the classroom teacher, Nella Mavica Sari, S.Pd., AUD., who explained that environmental care activities were incorporated into children's daily routines, such as cleaning learning areas after activities, disposing of waste properly, and watering and caring for plants. According to her, direct involvement made it easier for children to understand the importance of caring for the environment and gradually perform these behaviors without constant reminders (CW.01.03).

Observations showed that activities for developing environmental care were evident when children disposed of waste properly, organized their learning areas, and watered and cared for plants within the school environment. Teachers also provided examples and accompanied children throughout these activities, allowing them to gain concrete experiences of how to maintain cleanliness and environmental sustainability (CO.02). These activities also provided opportunities for children to develop responsibility, cooperation, and an understanding that the school environment is a shared space that needs to be cared for collectively. Thus, the activities were not solely oriented toward environmental cleanliness but also served as a means of developing habits and character values in children.

Based on the findings from interviews and observations, activities for developing environmental care at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang were implemented through consistent habituation, teacher role modeling, and children's direct involvement in various environmental activities. Activities such as disposing of waste, cleaning the environment, organizing learning areas, conserving water, and caring for plants demonstrate that environmental care values have been integrated into children's everyday lives at school. These habituation practices gradually helped children develop a sense of responsibility and care for their surroundings. This finding is consistent that character in early childhood can develop through concrete experiences and consistent habituation in everyday life. Thus, concrete activities carried out repeatedly constitute an effective means of fostering environmental care among children aged 5–6 years (Faradila & Khasanah, 2026; Pusparini et al., 2026).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Development of Environmental Care

The findings indicate that supporting factors in the development of environmental care among children at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang included support from the school, teacher involvement, and the availability of facilities that supported environmental cleanliness activities. The principal, Nurhanita Daulay, S.Pd.I., explained that the school provided waste bins in several areas and encouraged all members of the school community to maintain cleanliness collectively (CW.02.7). The classroom teacher, Nella Mavica Sari, S.Pd., AUD., also explained that a clean school environment made it easier for children to understand and apply cleanliness habits because they could observe and imitate positive behaviors demonstrated by teachers on a daily basis (CW.01.8). Observations showed

that the school environment was clean and well organized, creating a supportive setting for developing environmental care habits. Thus, support from the school environment, teacher role modeling, and available facilities constituted important factors that helped children develop environmental care behaviors. This finding is consistent with Fadlillah's view that a conducive environment can support and strengthen character development in children.

Meanwhile, inhibiting factors in the development of environmental care included differences in children's habits and individual characteristics, as well as the lack of consistency in environmental care habituation within the family environment. An interview with the classroom teacher revealed that some children still required repeated guidance to dispose of waste properly because children had different existing habits (CW.01.10). The teacher also explained that some children had developed cleanliness habits at school but did not consistently apply the same habits at home (CW.01.9). Observations further showed that after play activities, some children still left waste behind, although teachers immediately provided guidance and encouraged them to clean the area. This condition indicates that the development of environmental care does not occur instantly but requires continuous habituation, guidance, and reinforcement.

Based on the overall findings from interviews and observations, supporting and inhibiting factors in the development of environmental care are interconnected in shaping children's behavioral development. A clean school environment, adequate facilities, teacher role modeling, and the involvement of the entire school community constitute strengths in developing positive habits. Conversely, differences in children's individual characteristics and the lack of continuity between school- and home-based habituation present challenges that require attention. Therefore, the development of environmental care can be strengthened when the habituation implemented at school is supported by families at home. This finding is consistent that character development requires consistent habituation and support from the various environments in which children grow and develop (Kasmir et al., 2026; Samsinar et al., 2023; Utami & Wafi, 2020).

Overall, the findings indicate that environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang developed through habituation routinely implemented in everyday activities. These behaviors were reflected in children's habits of disposing of waste properly, maintaining classroom and schoolyard cleanliness, organizing play equipment, conserving water, and watering and caring for plants. Children also demonstrated the ability to cooperate in environmental cleaning activities such as *Jumat Bersih*. These findings indicate that direct involvement in environmental activities helped children understand and apply environmental care behaviors in their everyday lives (Nursyahada, 2025; Rizqina, 2019).

The development of environmental care was supported by the role of teachers as role models, guides, and facilitators. Teachers provided direct examples, reminded children when they demonstrated inappropriate behaviors, and provided praise and encouragement when children successfully maintained the environment. In addition, the school provided facilities such as waste bins and planting areas that supported environmental care activities. These conditions strengthened the habituation process and made it easier for children to consistently apply positive behaviors. This finding is consistent with the view that children's character can develop through role modeling, direct experiences, and continuous habituation.

Nevertheless, several inhibiting factors were identified, particularly differences in children's existing habits and the lack of consistency in environmental care practices at home. Some children still required repeated guidance to dispose of waste properly and maintain cleanliness. Therefore, the development of environmental care requires not only habituation at school but also support and consistency from families. Overall, the findings demonstrate that habituation, teacher role modeling, environmental activities, and supportive school facilities play important roles in developing

environmental care among children in early childhood (Irhamna & Purnama, 2022; Mundir et al., 2022; Nurma & Purnama, 2022).

Conclusion

The development of environmental care among children aged 5–6 years at RA Plus Fatahul Wardah Palembang was supported by the active role of teachers in providing role modeling, habituation, guidance, and positive reinforcement on a continuous basis. These efforts were implemented through everyday activities, including disposing of waste properly, maintaining classroom and school cleanliness, organizing play equipment after use, conserving water, and watering and caring for plants. The findings indicate that consistent habituation and direct involvement in environmental activities enabled children to gradually develop environmentally responsible behaviors as part of their daily routines. The development of environmental care was further supported by school facilities, teacher collaboration, and a clean and conducive school environment. However, differences in children's existing habits and the lack of consistent environmental care practices within the family environment remained challenges in sustaining these behaviors. Overall, the findings demonstrate that environmental care in early childhood can be fostered through continuous habituation, teacher role modeling, and direct environmental experiences. Such practices can support the development of children's awareness, responsibility, and care for their surroundings from an early age.

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