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Social Relations and the Internalization of Moral Values in the Formation of Adolescent Character

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Abstract

The moral and behavioral crisis among Indonesian adolescents shows that character education cannot rely on schools alone, because the social environment also shapes how moral values are internalized. This study examines the role of social relations in shaping the character of junior high school students in Semarang City and identifies the factors that support and inhibit this role. The study used a qualitative approach. Data were collected through observation, interviews, documentation, and literature review, then analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with source triangulation to ensure their validity. The findings show that peers, families, and schools each contribute to character formation and reinforce one another: peers act as agents of socialization, families remain the primary foundation of moral values, and schools instill values through instruction, school culture, and teacher role modeling. This role is supported by adolescents' openness in friendships, encouragement from family and school, the openness of parents and teachers, and the adaptation of values to contemporary developments. It is hindered by adolescents' disregard for established values, peer-oriented conformity, and intergenerational language barriers. The study contributes to character education by showing that the internalization of moral values depends on synergy among families, schools, and peer groups.

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INTRODUCTION

The multidimensional crisis faced by the Indonesian nation has become increasingly alarming, particularly the moral and behavioral crisis among the younger generation, which has yet to find effective solutions (Irawan, 2024; Irawan et al., 2023; Irawan, Istianah, et al., 2025; Istianah et al., 2025; Wijayanti et al., 2025). The phenomenon of social inequality, frequently reported in both print and electronic media, often involves adolescents as either perpetrators or victims. Cases such as murder, sexual assault, bullying, robbery, and other acts of violence vividly illustrate that the moral issues confronting the nation's youth are reaching a critical stage (Irawan, Masyitoh, et al., 2025; Irawan & Masyitoh, 2023; Suhardiyanto et al., 2025). This condition underscores the increasing urgency of character education, which has been widely acknowledged by society as one of the most relevant strategies to address the moral crisis that has become a global concern (Izma & Kesuma, 2019; Kesuma et al., 2012).

In this regard, Lickona (2013), Muslich (2011), and Yaumi (2014) assert that character education competence is an essential component in achieving educational goals. This is further reinforced by the findings of Irawan and Bayu Firdaus (2021) which state that character strength defined as a set of individual qualities with moral value directed toward virtue plays a crucial role in encouraging youth participation in society as well as in achieving their success. Although character education is considered a strategic solution to the behavioral crisis, another equally significant dimension lies in the environment, which is often overlooked, even by parents who should serve as the closest figures to their children. The social environment plays a fundamental role in shaping character, as children learn not only through instruction but also through interaction with their surroundings. Moreover, a mother's psychological condition during pregnancy can significantly influence a child's development, both physically and psychologically (Islam, 2017; Wibowo, 2012). As social beings or zoon politicon in Socratic terms children constantly interact with their environment as part of the life-learning process. From an early age, children naturally tend to observe and imitate behaviors they see (Suryadin, 2020).

At certain stages of development, children also experience sensitive periods, as described by Suryadin (2020) when their curiosity is heightened and they show great interest in everything they see and hear. These periods vary from one child to another, depending on innate factors and the stimuli they receive (Atika et al., 2019; Kosim, 2012; Philips, 2008; Ramli, 2003). Therefore, families, particularly parents, play a vital role in providing positive stimulation that strengthens children's early development (Dalyono & Lestariningsih, 2017; Rosad, 2019). Every child is essentially born with innate potential that may develop into goodness or badness, depending on environmental influences. This aligns with a hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim from Abu Hurairah, which states that every child is born in a state of fitrah, and it is the parents who determine their subsequent development (Ramli, 2003). When children grow up with positive stimuli, such as good role models, they are more likely to develop into individuals with strong character. Conversely, if exposed to negative stimuli, such as poor examples or overly harsh parenting, children are at risk of internalizing deviant behaviors (Haste & Hogan, 2006; Islam, 2017; Mirajiani et al., 2014; Sabiq, 2022; Safitri et al., 2024). Thus, the role of the environment in providing positive examples and stimulation becomes a determining factor in the moral development of children.

Furthermore, every child has the same right to develop their potential, although their developmental pace may vary. Some children grow very quickly, others at an average pace, and some more slowly (Downey & Kelly, 1978; Hasyim & Farid, 2012; Masrukhi, 2019). The transition from childhood to adolescence is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, curiosity, and the drive to seek answers to various questions (Djahiri, 1985; Fajri et al., 2021; Irayanti & Sundawa, 2023). Meanwhile, external factors relate to the social environment, such as family, peers, and the community in which the child grows up. An environment rich in positive energy fosters good character formation, whereas an environment filled with negative energy increases

the likelihood of adolescents engaging in deviant behavior (Irawan, 2023; Pradanna & Irawan, 2024).

Based on this background, this study focuses on the role of social relations including family, peers, and school in shaping adolescent character, particularly at the junior high school level in Semarang City. This study also seeks to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of these social relations. Thus, it is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of adolescent character formation amid the increasingly complex challenges of the moral crisis.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach. According to Sugiyono (2013, p. 1), qualitative research is a method used to examine objects in their natural setting, where the researcher acts as the key instrument throughout the entire research process. The selection of data sources was conducted purposively, determined based on the research needs, and complemented with the snowball technique, which allowed the researcher to expand the network of informants according to the information obtained in the field. Data collection was carried out using multiple complementary techniques, commonly known as triangulation, so that the data obtained would be richer, more in-depth, and have a higher level of validity. Data analysis in qualitative research is inductive, meaning that patterns, themes, and conclusions are constructed based on field findings rather than being determined a priori. Therefore, the research results place greater emphasis on meaning rather than mere generalization (Sugiyono, 2013, 2014, 2018).

This research was conducted in the form of a mini study in Semarang City. The focus of the study was directed toward exploring social phenomena contextually by utilizing three main sources of data: (1) informants as research subjects who provided information through interviews, (2) realities directly observed by the researcher through field observations, and (3) documents relevant to the research theme. The combination of these three data sources was expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the object under study (Creswell, 2016; Moleong, 2010; Sukmadinata, 2009).

In the process of data collection, several techniques were used: observation to capture social realities directly, interviews to explore the experiences and perspectives of informants, documentation as supporting evidence, and literature review to strengthen the conceptual framework of the study (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Miles et al., 2014). All the data obtained were then analyzed using source triangulation. This triangulation aimed to ensure that the data were collected from various perspectives, thereby guaranteeing the validity and reliability of the research findings. Referring to the qualitative analysis model, there are three main steps in data processing. First, data reduction, namely the process of selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw data into information relevant to the research focus. Second, data presentation, which involves arranging the reduced information into narrative descriptions, tables, or diagrams to make it easier to understand. Third, drawing conclusions or verification, namely the process of interpreting the meaning of the data and conducting re-examinations to ensure that the conclusions truly reflect the conditions in the field. Through these steps, this research seeks to present findings that are valid, meaningful, and scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Peer Relationships in Shaping the Character of Junior High School Adolescents in Semarang City

Peers are individuals who share similar positions, ages, statuses, and ways of thinking (Anisah & Didik Himmawan, 2024; Kusumawati et al., 2024). Blazevic (2016) defines peers as social groups consisting of individuals with comparable age, education, or social status. Similarly, Minnett et al. (1983) argue that peers are children of the same age or maturity level. These similarities influence patterns of interaction, particularly group interactions. Such similarities subsequently give rise to various peer groups that influence the behavior of their members according to the characteristics of each group. Kusumawati et al. (2024) emphasize that

the closest social environments, such as family and peers, play a significant role in adolescent development. This aligns with Calvo's (2009) findings, which state that individual behavior is shaped by their peers, making peers a reference group in the development of adolescent behavior (Mufidha, 2021; Nurul Asyia et al., 2023).

The peer environment influences the character development of junior high school (JHS) students wherever they are. This environment helps them formulate and express opinions, respect peer perspectives, negotiate solutions to conflicts cooperatively, and modify behavioral standards that are accepted by the group. JHS students learn to seek the best solutions to problems they face through discussion and joint problem-solving. These problems vary, including academic challenges, discipline issues, and personal concerns. At times, students also seek advice from teachers to resolve issues related both to learning and to personal matters (Kusumawati et al., 2024; Rahman & Dewi safitri. Elshap, 2016; Yusuf, 2017).

A notable influence at this stage is that JHS adolescents tend to be more open within peer groups. They often show a tendency to behave less guardedly in the context of maintaining comfort in friendships. Based on field findings, at least three roles of peers in shaping the character of JHS students in Semarang City were identified:

First, peers provide social, moral, and emotional support to students. Minnett et al. (1983) note that peers play a role in offering physical support, ego support, social comparison, and attention. These forms of support are reflected in behaviors such as mutual care among students, giving advice when facing problems, sharing stories, complaining, and confiding in one another. In fact, students often prefer to share their problems with peers rather than parents or teachers, as they feel more comfortable doing so. The sense of comfort provided by peers in their respective groups is related to socio-cultural comfort, which refers to interpersonal comfort in storytelling, exchanging ideas, and engaging in activities together. Most students stated that they feel comfortable with their peer groups, comfortable sharing personal stories, confiding, or discussing various life problems.

Second, peers contribute to teaching various social skills to students. Mufidha (2021) and Yusuf (2017) highlight that one role of peers is enhancing social skills. These skills vary, and one of the most prominent is cooperation. Cooperation is evident when students complete assignments or homework together. JHS adolescents often ask each other about schoolwork and study together at one student's home.

Third, peers act as agents of socialization for other JHS students. Socialization is the process by which individuals adapt to their environment, interact, build relationships, and learn to behave according to norms recognized by society. Peers serve as one of the most influential agents of socialization for students, becoming a reference group in shaping their behavior. Students learn new abilities distinct from those acquired within the family. They acquire values, norms, cultural practices, roles, and other skills needed to participate effectively in broader contexts, particularly in school environments. The role of peers as agents of socialization is reflected in their habit of reminding one another about school rules (Irawan et al., 2021; Pradanna et al., 2024; Suhardiyanto et al., 2025).

The Role of Family and Parents in Shaping the Character of Junior High School Adolescents in Semarang City

The family plays a crucial role in shaping the character and personality of adolescents, as it is the first and foremost educational institution for children. The developmental stage and the transition from childhood to adolescence are largely determined by this phase. Parenting patterns highlight the importance of parents paying attention to their children's growth and guiding them into adolescence to prevent undesirable outcomes (Mufidha, 2021; Nurul Asyia et al., 2023; Yusuf, 2017).

The family can be described as an official social institution consisting of a father, mother, and children, where the bond is founded on marital love that leads to the birth of children. Parents are responsible for nurturing, caring for, and protecting their children so that they can grow and develop properly. Family life serves as the foundation for a child's journey toward adulthood. In traditional societies, the family

played a central role in preparing younger generations to become independent individuals. Parents and other adults in the family nurtured and guided children in various aspects of life, teaching them essential skills and traditions. In modern societies, however, families have delegated many educational functions to institutions specifically designed to address them. Parents tend to limit their roles to basic caregiving, cooperating with schools to encourage and monitor their children's education. Due to intense competition, parents in "modern families" often pressure their children to achieve high academic performance, sometimes neglecting the process and causing children to feel pressured to attain good grades by any means. Parents are more likely to rely on schoolteachers and private tutors to educate their children (Irwan et al., 2023; Mokodompit et al., 2023).

Today, family-based education is under threat of degradation due to the strong influence of external factors. Increasing socioeconomic demands compel parents to work hard for their children's future. While this effort deserves recognition, as it aims to secure a better life for the next generation, it often results in children receiving less affection and emotional care. Material success has become the primary indicator of a family's achievement. Such portrayals are often seen in television dramas, where ambitious parents focus solely on material and social recognition, shaping public perceptions of family values (Fajariah et al., 2024; Irawan et al., 2024; Irawan, Wijayanti, et al., 2025; Istianah et al., 2025; Masrukhi et al., 2024).

Parents' role in character development can be carried out through several efforts:

1) Both parents must love and care for their children.
2) They must maintain a peaceful home environment and ensure the children's emotional well-being.
3) Mutual respect between parents and children should be established.
4) Parents should foster trust within the family.
5) Families should hold regular gatherings or meetings to exchange views.

In addition, parents also play an important role in introducing children to issues of faith, morality, religious laws, and human life. Most importantly, fathers and mothers serve as the very first role models for their children. Consciously or unconsciously, children are influenced by their parents' examples, both in theory and in practice. As such, the home environment and family setting hold significant influence in shaping children's behavior, making parents directly responsible for instilling values.

A determining factor in a child's physical and mental development is the role of parents, particularly mothers, as they serve as the first and foremost educators from birth to adulthood. Parenting styles, especially those provided by mothers, are essential in shaping knowledge, character, personality, cultural values, religious and moral values, as well as basic life skills (Muhaimin, 2017). This process of socialization and enculturation continues throughout childhood and adolescence. According to Permono (2017), the goal is to guide children into becoming faithful, pious, morally upright, resilient, independent, innovative, creative, hardworking, cooperative, environmentally conscious individuals, and ultimately valuable members of society and the nation.

Consistent with this view, Thomas Lickona emphasizes that the family is generally regarded as the most important source of moral education for children. Parents are the first moral teachers, and the relationship between parents and children, shaped by emotional dynamics, determines whether children feel loved and appreciated or otherwise (Lickona, 2013, 2019; Loloagin et al., 2023).

Thus, the conditions and atmosphere within the family significantly affect a child's character education. A non-violent, peaceful family environment is an effective solution to ensure that children feel safe, calm, and comfortable at home, which in turn helps them develop stable emotions and good character. However, in today's context, various parenting styles emerge, and many parents spend most of their time outside the home for work, organizations, or other activities. Consequently, children may be raised with harsh emotions or neglected and left

with sophisticated gadgets as companions (Fauzi, 2017).

In educating their children, families and parents influence children's mindset and behavior through several roles, including:

1) Explaining right and wrong to children in simple, understandable language.
2) Avoiding excessively harsh parenting, as it may create disciplined but emotionally distressed children.
3) Providing positive examples in words and actions, as children tend to imitate their parents.
4) Protecting children from negative social environments while monitoring their social interactions.
5) Providing love, encouragement, and appreciation, regardless of whether children succeed or fail, as long as they have made sincere efforts.

The Role of Schools and Teachers in Shaping the Character of Junior High School Adolescents in Semarang City

The formation of adolescents' character cannot be separated from the role of formal education. Schools constitute the most dominant sector within Indonesia's educational system. They represent the second social environment for children after the family, where students learn to interact with educators who serve as agents of change and with their peers. Both have a significant influence on students' behavior. While peers act as valuable partners for adolescents, teachers serve as role models and mediators (Rachman et al., 2021), facilitating relationships both among students and between students and their parents.

Wellaman and Husen have demonstrated through their research that schools play a highly dominant role in children's growth and development, particularly in the enhancement of intelligence. Beyond intellectual growth, however, schools also foster other aspects of development, such as the cultivation of attitudes, the formation of habits, group learning, self-control, and other social behaviors (Lickona, 2019; Loloagin et al., 2023). Furthermore, factors such as teacher attention, class size, and the instructional methods or models employed (Gerungan, 2004) have also been shown based on research by Jackson and Hetzer to significantly influence children's development.

In the home environment, children tend to "accept things as they are" in the application of certain behaviors. By contrast, in the school environment, expectations are regarded as "absolute." This explains why children often tell their parents, "Mom, Dad, my teacher said it should be done this way, not that way." At this stage, children also demonstrate differing roles depending on whether they are at home or at school, which vary according to the situations they encounter. This dynamic illustrates the profound influence of schools in shaping students' mindset and character, though such influence cannot be realized without deliberate and consistent effort. Becoming a "fatherly" or "motherly" figure in the teaching profession requires exemplary conduct and behavioral consistency worthy of emulation.

Examples of practices that can be implemented in schools to foster the character development of junior high school students include: (1) instilling the habit of greeting others with courtesy, smiles, and warmth; (2) arriving at school with respectful gestures such as greetings, handshakes, and kissing the teacher's hand; (3) greeting peers, security personnel, canteen vendors, and cleaning staff politely; (4) welcoming school visitors with respect; (5) encouraging students to use proper and polite language; (6) teaching students to sit appropriately in the classroom; and (7) promoting the habit of eating while seated in designated areas rather than walking around.

Driving Factors of the Role of Social Relations in Shaping the Character of Junior High School Adolescents in Semarang City

The factors that encourage the implementation of social relations in shaping the character of junior high school adolescents in Semarang City include:

1) Openness in Building Friendships. Junior high school adolescents are characterized as learning-oriented individuals who tend to be more open toward their peers. This openness enables them to provide feedback, suggestions, and constructive criticism to one another. Such patterns of communication

significantly contribute to the formation of their character.

2) Encouragement of Good Character from Families and Schools. This encouragement takes the form of motivation and rewards provided by families and schools, inspiring adolescents to continuously improve. They interpret this encouragement as a sign of openness and recognition, where they feel valued as independent and responsible individuals. As a result, it fosters self-esteem and self-confidence within them.
3) Parental and Teacher Openness in Providing Opportunities for Growth. Open-mindedness becomes a key factor in the success of character formation. The willingness of parents and teachers to listen and engage openly creates a strong foundation for the enculturation of values. This openness allows adolescents to express themselves honestly and authentically, while also seeking guidance from parents and teachers.
4) Adaptation of Values to Contemporary Developments. The ability of parents and teachers to adopt modern models and approaches makes it easier for adolescents to accept them. In this way, adolescents view parents and teachers as friends rather than adversaries or threats. Such approaches capture adolescents' attention, making them more willing to share problems and challenges, thereby fostering resilience and stronger character development.

Inhibiting Factors of the Role of Social Relations in Shaping the Character of Junior High School Adolescents in Semarang City

1) A Belief that Systems and Values Are Irrelevant. Some adolescents hold the belief that they need not pay attention to established systems and values. This mindset fosters egocentrism and indifference toward their social environment.
2) Peer-Oriented Growth and Development. Adolescents often believe it is preferable to grow and develop by following the flow of friendships. It is undeniable that peers and close friends play a crucial role during the transitional stage from childhood to adolescence.
3) Language Barriers Across Generations. Generational differences often create communication barriers between adolescents and their parents or teachers. Yet, communication is essential in transferring knowledge and values, making this gap a significant challenge in character education.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the character formation of junior high school adolescents in Semarang City is a complex process influenced by the interactions between peers, families, and schools. Peers play a significant role as agents of socialization, encouraging the development of positive character traits such as solidarity, responsibility, and cooperation, while also carrying the potential risk of leading adolescents toward negative behaviors if the prevailing values within the group are deviant. Families remain the primary foundation of character formation, where parenting styles, communication, and parental role modeling serve as key determinants of the successful internalization of moral values. Schools, as formal institutions, not only provide cognitive education but also hold a strategic role in instilling character values through classroom instruction, school culture, and teacher role modeling. The process of character formation is driven by factors such as adolescent openness, family and school support, and effective communication, yet it is also hindered by challenges including adolescent egocentrism, negative conformity, intergenerational communication gaps, and the influence of digital media. Therefore, the success of character formation among adolescents largely depends on the synergy between families, schools, and peer groups. These three components must work in harmony and complement one another so that adolescents can consistently internalize moral values. Without strong collaboration, adolescents may experience moral confusion and be more susceptible to deviant behaviors. Consequently, a joint and continuous strategy is necessary to foster a young generation with strong character, noble morals, and the ability to face the challenges of the modern era.

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