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Adaptive Religious Guidance for Children with Special Needs in Islamic Boarding School: Individual Approach, Religious Habits and Behavioral Strengthening

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Abstract

Pendidikan keagamaan bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus tidak cukup dilakukan melalui transfer pengetahuan yang bersifat doktrinal, tetapi memerlukan adaptasi pedagogis sesuai keragaman kemampuan komunikasi, perilaku, dan fungsi adaptif. Penelitian ini mengkaji pelaksanaan bimbingan individual keagamaan bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus di Pondok Pesantren Al Achsaniyah Kudus, Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan data yang diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Analisis dilakukan secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola penerapan nilai keagamaan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Temuan menunjukkan lima pola utama, yaitu pengelompokan berdasarkan tingkat dukungan, penyederhanaan materi keagamaan, pembiasaan ibadah dan perawatan diri, penguatan perilaku berbasis prinsip Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), serta pengelolaan tantangan komunikasi dan perilaku. Bimbingan individual dipersepsikan berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan kemandirian, kepatuhan terhadap rutinitas, dan kemampuan menerapkan nilai keagamaan. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka bimbingan individual keagamaan adaptif yang mengintegrasikan asesmen kebutuhan, target individual, pembiasaan, penguatan perilaku, dan kolaborasi keluarga.

Kata kunci: Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus; Bimbingan Keagamaan; Pembiasaan; Pendidikan Inklusif; Pendidikan Islam; Penguatan Perilaku; Pesantren

Abstract

Religious education for children with special needs requires more than doctrinal knowledge transfer; it demands pedagogical adaptation to diverse communication, behavioral , and adaptive functioning profiles. This study examines the implementation of individualized religious guidance for children with special needs at Al Achsaniyah Islamic Boarding School, Kudus, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through interviews with caregivers, educators, mentors, and other personnel involved in students' development, complemented by observation and documentation. Thematic analysis identified five interconnected patterns: grouping students according to levels of support, simplifying religious materials, habituating religious practices and self-care routines, reinforcing behavior informed by Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) principles, and managing communication and behavioral challenges, including tantrums. Participants perceived changes in students' independence, adherence to routines, and ability to recognize and practice behaviors consistent with religious values. The study proposes an adaptive individualized religious guidance framework integrating support-needs assessment, individual targets, religious habituation, behavioral reinforcement, and family collaboration as an interconnected educational ecosystem.

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Keywords: *Children With Special Needs; Islamic Education; Individualized Religious Guidance; Islamic Boarding School; Religious Habituation; Behavioral Reinforcement; Inclusive Education*

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful equality of access to education for children with disabilities is understood not only as a matter of physical access, but also as a matter of participation, pedagogical responsiveness, and a sense of belonging to their environmental ecosystem. Studies on disability and education continue to show that children with disabilities tend to experience barriers related to resources, educator readiness, communication, social attitudes, and the availability of appropriately adapted learning (Bani Odeh and Lach 2024) . In Islamic education, these challenges are even more complex given that the learning process is not only directed at transferring knowledge but also shaping daily religious practices, moral behavior, self-regulation, and participation in worship rituals. Therefore, a system of individual guidance services needs to address religious aspects that are responsive to disabilities so that they can translate abstract religious values into routines and learning experiences, making them accessible to children with disabilities who have widely varying cognitive, communicative, sensory, and behavioral profiles.

A systematic review of Islamic Religious Education for children with special needs found that the literature generally focuses on the planning process, implementation, evaluation, teacher roles, and instructional challenges (Arif et al. 2025) . Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are a crucial context for examining service delivery processes because religious learning is never separated from everyday communal life. Recent studies have shown that Islamic boarding schools can play a strategic role in disability-inclusive Islamic education through curriculum adaptation, learning strategies, planning of religious practices, and institutional support for the diverse needs of students. Evidence from other Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia also shows that community-based and individualized spiritual services can be integrated into services for children with special needs (Moordiningsih et al. 2024) . In Islamic boarding schools, religious learning can take place through formal lessons, self-directed activities, interpersonal routines, and repetitive religious practices, thus forming an educational ecosystem distinct from conventional classrooms.

Partono explained that the Achsaniyah Islamic Boarding School in Kudus, which had previously been studied in research on autistic students, uses individual educational planning, ability-based grouping, an adapted curriculum, the habituation of worship and moral behavior, and intervention practices based on *Applied Behavior Analysis* (ABA). This study is important for understanding the institutional education model, but it also produces clear demands for further research in the same location. Further research is not sufficient to simply describe the Islamic boarding school, the grouping system, or the existence of *Applied Behavior Analysis* (ABA)-based services. The unanswered question is how individual guidance services for religious aspects are operationalized for children with different support needs and how religious values can be translated into daily practices that can be observed and repeated. This distinction is important conceptually, where *Applied Behavior Analysis* (ABA) is not identical to habitus or habituation. Contemporary studies describe *Applied Behavior Analysis* (ABA)-based interventions as a broader behavioral analysis approach encompassing individualized targeting, systematic reinforcement, and strategies to strengthen adaptive behavior. Evidence for intervention outcomes varies by domain, quality, intensity, and intervention design (Gitimoghaddam et al. 2022; Eckes et al. 2023; Collins et al. 2025) . Therefore, in the context of religious education that uses repetition, reinforcement, and gradual routines without comprehensive ABA protocol documentation, a more precise term is behavioral reinforcement informed by ABA principles, rather than equating all forms of conditioning with ABA. This distinction increases conceptual precision while preventing exaggerated therapeutic claims.

Based on these gaps, this study focuses on the micro-process of adaptive religious guidance. This study asks three questions: (1) How are religious guidance services differentiated

based on children's support needs at Al-Achsaniyyah? (2) What learning and behavioral strategies are used to translate religious values into daily routines and practices? and (3) What developmental changes and implementation challenges are perceived by adults involved in the guidance process? This study offers a framework for adaptive religious guidance that links assessment of support levels, individual targets, simplification of religious material, habituation, behavioral reinforcement, and continuity between the Islamic boarding school and the family. This study does not claim causal effectiveness, but rather interprets how participants describe the perceived function and contribution of these practices in the real context of Islamic boarding school education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to examine the implementation of religious guidance for children with special needs at the Al-Achsaniyyah Islamic Boarding School in Kudus, Indonesia. This approach was chosen because the study focused on understanding how religious guidance is implemented, adapted, and experienced by those directly involved in the guidance process, rather than on testing the effectiveness of a standardized intervention. Al-Achsaniyyah Islamic Boarding School was chosen as the research location because it provides boarding education and guidance for children with special needs with varying levels of support needs and integrates religious education with daily routines. Research participants included caregivers, educators, mentors, and other personnel directly involved in the guidance and development of students. The selection of participants was based on their involvement and experience in providing guidance, mentoring, familiarizing themselves with religious activities, and managing the communication and behavioral needs of students. Research data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were used as the primary data source to obtain information on religious guidance practices, worship activities, adaptation of materials and methods, the diversity of students' needs, communication and behavioral challenges, and developmental changes perceived by educators and mentors. Observations were used to supplement the information from interviews through observations of religious guidance and habituation practices in daily life, while documentation served as supporting data in the form of notes and photographs relevant to the guidance activities. Data were analyzed thematically through a process of organizing, grouping, interpreting, and deriving meaning from interview data, observations, and documentation. The analysis aimed to identify patterns in the implementation of religious guidance, including grouping based on the level of support needs, adapting and simplifying individual religious guidance, habituating religious activities and self-care, strengthening behaviors informed by *Applied Behavior Analysis* (ABA) principles, managing communication and behavioral challenges, and perceived developmental changes and continuity of support. The analysis process was conducted by distinguishing between information conveyed directly by participants, the results of the researcher's observations, and interpretations of the patterns found so as not to create new empirical data. The validity of the findings was strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques by comparing information from various participants and matching it with the results of observations and documentation. Interpretations of the findings were also cross-checked against research notes to ensure traceability between empirical data and interpretations. Research reporting adheres to the principles of transparency in qualitative research as recommended in *the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative* Research (COREQ) and Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (Tong et al. 2007) . In reporting, the identities of children and participants are kept confidential, while the use of documentation is in accordance with the principles of privacy protection and research ethics provisions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study indicate that religious guidance at Al-Achsaniyyah is not organized as a uniform subject taught identically to all children, but rather as a set of adaptive practices embedded in daily routines. Five interrelated themes illustrate this process as follows.

Table 1. Thematic Structure of Findings

Theme	Data	Analytical interpretation
Grouping by level of support	Children are classified as independent, pre-independent, or level of care based on functional abilities and support needs.	Religious guidance is differentiated based on support needs, not provided through uniform standards.
Religious guidance through an individual approach	The level of difficulty, format, and method of delivering religious material are adjusted; simpler routines are used for children who need greater support.	Religious material is translated into achievable functional targets.
Habituation and reinforcement of behavior	Repetitive routines include prayers before meals, prayers when entering the bathroom, washing hands, use of cutlery, worship procedures, prompting, and positive reinforcement.	Religious values are operationalized as repetitive behaviors embedded in everyday life.
Communication and behavioral challenges	Tantrums, aggression, self-biting, communication difficulties, and discomfort can interfere with learning; children are sometimes temporarily moved to a quieter location.	Behavioral regulation is treated as a prerequisite for meaningful participation in guidance.
Perceived development and continuity	Adults reported improvements in independence, following routines, simple prayers, and compliance with instructions; parents also reported changes after the child returned home.	Sustainability depends on consistency between the pesantren and home environments.

1. Grouping by Support Level as a Starting Point for Guidance

Participants described a gradual process of service delivery, grouping children into independent, pre-independent, and care categories. The primary reason for this grouping was the wide variation in communication abilities and daily functioning. Some children could speak clearly; others could speak but struggled to express feelings or needs; while others were unable to communicate verbally and required more intensive support. This grouping system served as an initial mechanism for establishing realistic educational expectations for each child. Religious content was still provided to the entire group, but the complexity of the material, the delivery method, and the expected forms of practice were differentiated based on functional capacity. This grouping practice aligns with a core principle of *the evidence-based practice movement* : identifying scientifically tested practices is only the first step; their implementation remains dependent on the caregiver's

ability to select appropriate practices for each individual and implement them consistently (fidelity) (Hume et al. 2021) .

For children in the self-directed group, guidance can include more complex material and higher demands for independent practice. For children in the pre-independent and maintenance groups, learning objectives are simplified into more concrete and immediately applicable routines. Examples include reciting a short prayer before meals, practicing prayer while going to the bathroom, or following a basic prayer sequence through live demonstration. The key finding of this study is not simply the existence of these three groups, as this has been reported in previous research at the same location, but rather how the grouping system structures the religious guidance process by determining the expected levels of abstraction, independence, prompting, and repetition for each student. Prompting is the systematic provision of cues or assistance to help students initiate or perform the behavior or skill targeted for learning. In the evidence-based intervention literature for children with autism spectrum disorder, *prompting* is defined as verbal, gestural, or physical assistance provided to students to support the acquisition or implementation of the target behavior or skill (Hume et al. 2021) . This practice is one of the 28 *evidence-based practices* with the most empirical support, namely 140 of the 972 articles synthesized in the systematic review (Hume et al. 2021) , which confirms its position as a core strategy in individual learning for children with special needs.

Some prompts that are commonly used by counselors in the religious guidance process through an individual approach are as shown in the table.

Table 2. Types of Prompting and Their Interventions

Type of Prompting	Information
Verbal prompt	The companion said, “Let's do ablution.”
Gestural prompts	The companion points to the place of ablution or shows the movements that must be done
Visual prompts	Using images/visual sequences of prayer steps
Physical prompt	The companion helps direct the child's hand movements when performing ablution or performing prayer movements
Modeling	The companion demonstrates first, then the child follows.

Within the ABA framework, prompting is not simply "telling" a child, but rather a temporary assistance (cue) provided to elicit the correct response, then gradually reduced (prompt fading) to allow the child to become more independent. This principle of gradually reducing assistance is consistent with the practice of *time delay.* within an evidence-based intervention framework, namely providing a short pause between initial instruction and additional instruction or assistance, which is systematically used to fade *the* use of prompts as student independence increases (Hume et al. 2021) .

2. Individual Religious Guidance as Functional Learning

Religious education in Islamic boarding schools is closely linked to individual developmental goals. Participants described goals that extend beyond memorizing religious information to functional behaviors such as asking permission before leaving an area, speaking more clearly for children with speech delays, using a spoon while eating, washing hands, and following simple routines. Thus, religious learning is intertwined with the development of adaptive functioning.

This pattern suggests that religious values are taught through behaviorally meaningful situations. For children with significant communication or cognitive difficulties, concepts of cleanliness, discipline, gratitude, and appropriate behavior become more accessible through repeated concrete actions rather than through purely abstract explanations. Learning units often take the form of small, observable actions. This

approach aligns with the principles of individualized education because targets are tailored to the child's current abilities and are expected to develop gradually, rather than being uniform across the entire group.

3. Religious Habits and Behavioral Reinforcement Based on ABA Principles

Repetition and reinforcement are prominent elements of the guidance process. Children are repeatedly trained to wash their hands before and after meals, use eating utensils, recite short prayers, and follow steps related to religious practices. Teachers and mentors demonstrate actions, provide direct prompts, repeat instructions, and reinforce expected responses. The source text refers to these practices as ABA and habituation. However, conceptually, the observed practices are more accurately described as habituation combined with reinforcement of behavior based on ABA principles, unless the institution can demonstrate documented behavior analysis assessments and formal intervention protocols.

The educational significance of these practices lies in transforming values into routines. For children who have difficulty processing abstract verbal instructions, repetitive behaviors provide an alternative pathway to religious learning. Cleanliness, discipline, prayer, and appropriate social behavior are experienced as structured sequences of actions that can be practiced in the same context every day. Reinforcement then helps maintain the stability of expected responses. In this context, repetition is not simply mechanical memorization, but a mechanism for creating predictability and connecting religious meaning to everyday actions.

4. Behavioral and Communication Challenges as Conditions for Learning

Participants also described significant barriers to the guidance process. Tantrums, aggression toward teachers or peers, self-biting, inability to communicate needs, and discomfort can interfere with participation. When a child experiences significant dysregulation, staff sometimes temporarily separates the child from the group and moves them to a quieter environment to reduce stimulation and stabilize the learning environment.

This explanation demonstrates that religious guidance cannot be understood separately from emotional and behavioral regulation. Children who are unable to communicate pain, frustration, sensory discomfort, or the need for rest may express these feelings through behavior. Therefore, the most pressing educational task may shift from delivering content to restoring regulatory conditions to enable communication and participation. The practices described by participants are pragmatic, yet they also emphasize the need for staff competency in functional communication, positive behavioral support, and individual de-escalation, rather than relying solely on repetition or compliance.

5. Perceived Development, Diverse Trajectories, and Continuity with Family

Adults involved in the program perceived positive changes in several domains, particularly self-care, adherence to routines, simple prayer practices, and the ability to follow instructions. Examples include using a spoon, washing hands, reciting a short prayer, and distinguishing basic expectations about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Parents also reported seeing the emergence of new routines when their children returned home for the holidays. This information suggests that some practices learned at the Islamic boarding school have the potential to generalize beyond the immediate learning environment.

At the same time, participants emphasized that progress varied widely. Some children seemed to acquire new routines relatively quickly, while others required repeated support over weeks, months, or even longer. This variation is a key element in

the interpretation of the research. The data do not provide a basis for claiming that the program is uniformly effective or that a single method produces the same results for all children. Instead, the findings suggest that adaptive religious guidance occurs along an individual developmental trajectory and depends on consistency, emotional well-being, health, communication capacity, and the quality of adult support. The reported role of parents also suggests that continuity between the pesantren and home is necessary for established routines to be maintained outside the institution.

Discussion

This research reconceptualizes religious guidance for children with special needs as a system of adaptive practices, rather than merely conventional lessons. Its primary contribution is identifying a sequence of processes that make religious values pedagogically accessible: children's support needs are first identified; learning targets are individualized; religious material is simplified into functional actions; actions are practiced through repetition, prompting, and reinforcement; behavioral and communication aspects are managed as conditions for participation; and continuity with the family is necessary to support behavioral maintenance. This interpretation expands the literature, which has tended to discuss methods or curriculum components separately, by demonstrating how these various elements can work as a connected guidance process in Islamic boarding school education.

These findings are consistent with the broader disability-inclusive education literature on the importance of differentiated learning and accommodations. Bani Odeh and Lach (2024) identified various structural and pedagogical barriers that limit the educational participation of children with disabilities. Rofiah et al. (2025) also argue that Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) can contribute to disability inclusion if educational and religious practices are adapted to the diversity of students. This research finding adds a micro-level perspective: adaptation involves not only accessible facilities or modified curricula, but also the process of breaking down religious learning into achievable steps and repeating them in everyday contexts. In this sense, the Islamic boarding school environment has pedagogical significance because shared routines can be reinforced during mealtimes, hygiene, prayer, dormitory life, and interactions with others.

This research aligns with Hasanah et al. (2024) , who found that Muslim families with children with special needs use role models, habituation, prompting, direct instruction, task analysis, motivation, and communication-oriented methods. This research suggests that similar strategies can be systematized at the institutional level. However, the boarding context presents a unique characteristic, namely the availability of repeated practice opportunities embedded in a highly structured daily schedule. The practical implication is that religious learning can be designed based on ecological consistency, namely repeating the same behavior in the natural context where it is actually used.

The second contribution relates conceptually to the use of the term ABA. ABA-based interventions are individualized and rooted in behavior analysis, while their effects vary by outcome; meta-analytic findings demonstrate benefits across adaptive and cognitive domains while also noting methodological limitations and the need for cautious interpretation (Eckes et al. 2023; Collins et al. 2025) . Scoping reviews also indicate that ABA encompasses a broad range of target behaviors and intervention procedures (Gitimoghaddam et al. 2022) . Findings at Al-Achsaniyyah indicate that teachers used behavioral strategies that included prompting, repetition, task-breaking, and positive reinforcement, consistent with some ABA principles. Claims that the entire religious guidance program constitutes ABA require documentation of assessment procedures, operationalized targets, data-driven decision-making, and intervention fidelity.

This distinction also helps prevent exaggerated claims of effectiveness. This study was qualitative and relied on adult accounts; it lacked standardized pre-test–post-test measures, a comparison group, or longitudinal behavioral data. Therefore, participant reports of increased independence or improved routines should be interpreted as perceived developmental changes,

not as statistically significant effects. This is important because contemporary evidence on intensive ABA programs remains heterogeneous, and even meta-analyses emphasize variations in intervention response and the quality of primary studies (Eckes et al. 2023) . The novelty of this study lies in its description of how adults organize and adapt guidance in real-world practice.

A third contribution is the placement of behavioral regulation as part of religious pedagogy. Tantrums and aggressive or self-injurious behavior are not simply additional difficulties but directly determine whether children can participate in learning. Participants' use of quieter spaces and reduced stimulation demonstrate an intuitive recognition that regulation can precede instruction. International research on inclusive education also emphasizes that participation depends on an environment that responds to individual needs, rather than requiring students to unilaterally adapt to a rigid environment. Therefore, the success of educational programs depends on the institution's ability to transform the learning system, in this case the environment, to respond to diversity, rather than requiring students to unilaterally adapt to a uniform environmental system (Lubis 2025) . For Al-Achsaniyyah, human resource development needs to encompass functional communication, positive behavioral support, sensory-sensitive de-escalation, and ethical reinforcement practices, in addition to competence in mastering Islamic Religious Education material.

Finally, the importance of parents in demonstrating the need for home-boarding school partnerships is highlighted. Research on children with special needs describes home-school collaboration as a dynamic process that can support consistent learning and development (Çelik and Tomris 2024) , while special education teachers value parental involvement as a crucial component of inclusive practices (Hyassat et al. 2024) . In this study, parents' reports of the emergence of routines at home suggest that continuity can facilitate generalization. More formal mechanisms, such as shared individual targets, brief progress notes, home practice guides, and periodic reviews, could make this continuity more systematic and less reliant on informal communication.

Adaptive Religious Guidance Framework

Based on thematic synthesis, this study proposes an Adaptive Religious Guidance Framework for children with special needs in Islamic boarding schools. This framework is not presented as a validated clinical model, but rather as an analytical representation of practices identified in the research. The framework consists of six interconnected components: (1) assessment of communication needs and functional support; (2) classification of the level of assistance required; (3) individual selection of religious and adaptive targets; (4) translation of targets into simple routines and task sequences; (5) repeated practice with prompting and positive reinforcement while addressing behavioral regulation; and (6) review and continuity between the boarding school and home. Progress within the framework is iterative: as a target stabilizes, the level of prompting or assistance can be adjusted and new targets introduced.

Below, the author presents the flow of the adaptive religious guidance framework for children with special needs as shown in Figure 1 below:



Gambar 1. Kerangka Bimbingan Keagamaan Adaptif

In practice, findings suggest that religious guidance for children with special needs should be documented through individual targets, not just through general curriculum statements. Each target should describe the religious behavior or routine being taught, the level of prompting required, reinforcement strategies, the context in which the skill is expected to emerge, and indicators used to assess progress. This type of documentation will increase consistency across educators and help distinguish educational habituation from formal therapeutic interventions.

In teacher development, this study demonstrates that Islamic Religious Education competencies need to be integrated with disability-responsive pedagogy, augmentative or functional communication strategies, behavioral support, and collaboration with families. This aligns with contemporary inclusive education literature that emphasizes professional capacity and individual support (Bani Odeh and Lach 2024) . Theoretically, this study positions the internalization of religious values for children with special needs as a situational and behavioral process. Religious values are not only understood cognitively but can also be experienced through structured actions repeated in meaningful daily contexts. This interpretation offers a bridge between Islamic character education, individualized special education, and behavioral support principles without reducing spirituality to mere behavioral compliance.

CONCLUSION

Religious guidance for children with special needs at Al-Achsaniyyah is characterized by adaptation to functional support needs, individualized learning targets, simplified religious routines, repetitive practice, prompting, behavioral reinforcement, and management of communication and behavioral challenges. A three-tiered grouping system serves as the starting point for organizing services, but a more important contribution lies in how this classification translates into differentiated expectations for participation and independence. Religious values are made more accessible through concrete, everyday practices, such as prayer routines, hygiene, mealtime behavior, and meeting simple social expectations.

This study does not establish causal effectiveness. It demonstrates how adults involved in Islamic boarding schools perceive the contribution of the integrated guidance process to independence, ability to follow routines, and practical religious behavior, while recognizing that each child's developmental trajectory varies significantly. The proposed Adaptive Religious Guidance Framework depicts the process as a cycle linking supportive assessment, individualized targets, contextualized routines, reinforcement, regulatory support, and home-institution continuity. With more robust methodological reporting and verification of original field notes, this framework has the potential to contribute to disability-responsive Islamic education and to broader discussions about how faith-based boarding institutions can provide meaningful and individualized participation for children with special needs.

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