

## Psychological Approach to Prevent Religious Radical Behavior in Children

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### **Abstract:**

*This study aims to analyze the prevention of religious radicalism behavior in children through a psychological perspective. This qualitative research method relies on data collection instruments; interviews, observations, and in-depth literature studies on psychological factors that contribute to the process of children's radicalization, as well as prevention strategies practiced at Green School Early Childhood Education, Pekalongan, Central Java. The research results show that the educational process at Green School Early Childhood Education plays a role in preventing children's radical behavior. However, individual identity, the influence of the social environment, and family dynamics also play a key role in forming radical attitudes and behavior. The prevention of religious radicalism behavior at Green School Early Childhood Education is carried out by promoting religious pluralism education, which is tolerance, by involving various parties. The theoretical implication of this research is the importance of a psychology-based approach in designing effective prevention programs. Education that emphasizes empathetic understanding, openness and critical understanding of religion can reduce the risk of radicalization. This study also reveals that recognizing the signs and seeds of potential radicalism in children as well as suitable, fast, and appropriate intervention is an important part of the strategy to prevent radicalism in children. The contribution of this study encourages the understanding that psychological approaches can be used as an urgent tool to prevent religious radicalism in children, in order to create a more inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful society.*

**Keywords:** *psychological approach, religious radicalism, multicultural, tolerance*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of religious radicalism behavior in children is a serious challenge faced by global society today (Fanani, 2013; Widyaningsih, Sumiyem, & Kuntarto, 2017). A BIN survey in 2021 showed that 85% of millennials were exposed to radicalism (CCN Indonesia, 15 June 2021). The Coordination Forum for the Implementation of Policies for the Protection of Children Victims of Terrorist Networks in Kupang revealed that 1,800 children were exposed to radicalism (Ama, 2020). The children in question are aged 3 to 24 years (Kompas, 22 October 2020). The emergence of various religious extremist groups has

grown along with the development of the digital era. Many parties pay special attention to the issue of religious radicalism in children. One of the most worrying aspects is when children, who are still in the process of searching for identity (Febriani, 2018), are involved in radical ideologies that have the potential to damage social, religious, and state stability, both at the local, national, and international levels. This fact shows that there is a gap in children's understanding of religion. Religion should present and encourage polite, friendly, and tolerant behavior, in fact, it is the opposite. The phenomenon of religious radicalism that develops at the individual child level certainly requires more in-depth psychological study.

The emergence of religious radicalism in children has become a concern for researchers, however scientific studies that investigate the theme of preventing religious radicalism in children using a psychological approach are still very minimal. Previous studies on this issue were mostly carried out through a religious education approach (Thohir, 2015; Boiliu, Widjaja, & Sidabutar, 2020; Weda, & Ihsan, 2020); building the character of diversity (Yani & Jazariyah, 2020), religious moderation campaign (Anwar, 2021), family and social organization approach (Sumbulah, 2019; Riany, Haslam, Musyafak, Farida, Ma'arif, & Sanders, 2019); and the doctrine of Sufism (Ahmad, Aziz, Afad, Muniroh, & Qodim, 2021). The majority of these studies focus more on the educational, religious, Sufism, political, and social aspects of radicalism. Studies on psychological aspects are still limited. As was done by (Widyaningsih, Kuntarto, & Chamadi, 2019), who conducted a community-based study of the psychology of radicalism. Scientists leave a blank space for psychological studies that can trigger the emergence of radical behavior in children. To fill the research gap, this study focuses on the role of psychology in preventing religious radicalism behavior in children. This study will integrate theories of developmental psychology, individual identity, and social influence processes to contribute comprehensively to the factors that shape children's radical views and behavior, and actions that can prevent them.

This research has an important position in the context of knowledge development regarding preventing religious radicalism behavior in children. From a psychological perspective, researchers are trying to understand more intensely regarding how to prevent children from religious radicalism, stem the process of radicalization, and, more importantly, programs to prevent religious radicalism in children run effectively. This study on preventing religious radicalism was carried out at Green School Early Childhood Education Pekalongan, an early childhood education institution oriented towards character growth for environmental conservation. It is hoped that this article can provide a conceptual basis and make a real contribution to the design of more effective prevention strategies so that it can help create a safer, more peaceful, and inclusive society.

This study aims to analyze the psychological factors that influence religious radicalism behavior in children, identify prevention strategies that can be implemented based on a psychological approach, and provide an in-depth understanding of the role of psychology in the context of children's religious radicalism. The benefits of this study are

that it provides practical analysis and guidance for parties in understanding and preventing religious radicalism in children, contributes valuable contributions to the scientific understanding of this phenomenon, and encourages the development of policies and practices that are more effective in overcoming the challenge of religious radicalism in future generations. The novelty of this article lies in its comprehensive approach that integrates psychological factors in understanding and preventing religious radicalism in children, as well as its relevance in facing increasingly complex contemporary phenomena in the connected digital era.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Emergence of Religious Radicalism Behavior in Children**

Religious radicalism can be prevented by considering the factors that cause radical behavior to emerge. Preventing religious radicalism can be done in various ways, depending on the causes and context of the emergence of radicalism. According to Kallen, in "Radicalism," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (1872), radicalism is a response made by a person or community to a problem in the form of in-depth evaluation, rejection of the problem, or opposition to the ideas or values that someone adheres to (Kallen, 1972). Theologically, radicalism is not born in a vacuum without a purpose. Radicalism is ideological thoughts and movements that aim to make fundamental, radical, root-based, and profound changes to conditions that are rejected or evaluated. This action is carried out so that these conditions are in accordance with the desired situation and conditions.

Radicalism is an ideology whose mission is to change systems and situations fundamentally and frontally. Biasedly, this radical group rejects other people's thoughts, ideas, views, and beliefs. This group criticizes the existing system, order, and beliefs, it also ignores rules, laws, and regulations as well as uses violent methods to achieve its goals. The desired change is a drastic and frontal change to the social, political, religious, and societal order.

Religious radicalism behavior in children is a complex phenomenon and is influenced by various factors, including psychological factors which have been researched by psychologists. The behaviorist school of psychology states that behavior can be shaped, either by stimulants, intervention, environment, or education (Tolman, 1922; Schneider & Morris, 1987; Smith & Woodward, 1996; Rutherford, 2000). A person's behavior is the result of learning, education, and formation. Religious radicalism behavior among children is the result of children's process of interacting with various factors. Many factors shape children's religious radicalism behavior. First, individual identity is an important factor that influences religious radicalism behavior in children. Psychologists believe that children are in the process of searching for their identity (Febriani, 2018), trying to understand who they are and how they relate to the world around them (Bamualim, 2018). At this stage, children can become vulnerable to radical influences if they feel alienated or seek meaning in extreme teachings that offer a strong and simple identity.

Second, the influence of the social environment also plays an important role in the development of religious radicalism behavior in children. They tend to imitate and adopt the values of their social environment, including peers, family, and community. If they are exposed to extreme views in the environment or face incomprehension and disapproval in the household, this can lead to a search for an extreme identity as a form of reaction. Third, family dynamics are also a significant factor in understanding religious radicalism behavior in children. Family conflict, lack of open communication, or even the abuse of religion as a means of control can affect children's development and make them more vulnerable to radicalism. The family has an important influence in shaping children's behavior (Botma, 2020; Hamdani, 2021). Psychological factors such as insecurity or feeling unappreciated in the family environment can trigger a search for identity outside the family which can end in radicalism.

In the context of this study, psychologists realize the importance of understanding psychological factors to design effective prevention strategies in dealing with religious radicalism behavior in children. Prevention efforts need to understand the development of children's identities, the influence of the social environment, and family dynamics (Zidni, 2018), to provide a more appropriate approach to protect children from the ways and practices of religious radicalism.

### **Psychological Approach**

A psychological approach is an important alternative to unravel the problem of religious radicalism. Psychology is a science that studies human behavior and mental processes. The study of psychology includes an understanding of how individuals think, feel, learn, and interact with their environment. Psychology seeks to explain various aspects of human life, starting from individual development from birth to social, cultural, and environmental influences on human behavior. The main goal of psychology is to understand, predict, explain, and in some cases, modify human behavior. The psychological concept of preventing religious radicalism behavior involves an in-depth understanding of the psychological factors that influence individuals in adopting radical views or behavior (Mashuri, et.al, 2022).

Urgent psychological approach as an instrument for preventing religious radicalism. Understanding individual identity is a key element in the psychology of religious radicalism. To prevent radicalism, it is important to assist individuals, especially children and adolescents, in understanding and developing their identity in a positive way. This can be done by providing opportunities to reflect on personal values, recognize their interests and talents, and feel accepted in their social environment without feeling alienated. In addition, social aspects influence a person's religious behavior. In the context of social psychology, the surrounding environment, relationships, communities, and educational settings have an important role in the spread of radical views. People tend to influence and be influenced by their social environment. To prevent radicalism, efforts need to be made to understand and

overcome the influences that encourage individuals to join radical groups. This can include promoting tolerance and intercultural dialogue in school and community settings.

In the context of preventing radicalism, psychology is an approach to providing education that develops critical thinking skills, information analysis, and argument evaluation. This helps individuals not only passively receive information but also become critical thinkers against radical propaganda. Likewise in terms of emotions and mental well-being, psychology has a big impact on individual behavior. In preventing radicalism, it is important to support the mental well-being of children and adolescents, as well as provide healthy channels for their emotional expression. Preventing feelings of isolation and insecurity can help reduce vulnerability to radicalism.

Through psychology, preventing radicalism in children emphasizes the importance of inclusive education and open communication between parents, teachers, and children. Creating a space where children can ask questions, talk about religion, and seek a deeper understanding of their beliefs is a powerful prevention strategy. Integrating these psychological concepts in an approach to preventing religious radicalism helps create strategies that are more holistic and focused on individual development. This allows prevention efforts to be more effective in building individuals who are more tolerant, critical, and avoid religious radicalism.

### **Preventing Religious Radicalism Behavior in Green School Early Childhood Education**

Based on the data, there are several steps taken by Green School to prevent religious radicalism in children. Prevention needs to consider three main factors, namely psychological, social, and educational aspects. As an educational institution, education from a psychological perspective to prevent radical behavior is the most important. Inclusive education and a balanced understanding of religion can be the basis of effective prevention strategies. Schools and educational institutions should promote a deep understanding of different religions and beliefs, and teach children to respect differences.

In relation to the psychological aspects of education for children to ward off radicalism, Green School Early Childhood Education takes three main steps, namely the introduction of religious diversity education, tolerance education, and creating an inclusive environment and family.

#### ***Introducing Religious Diversity***

Religious radicalism is always related to issues of pluralism (Rosadi, 2014), tolerance, and also maturity, and religious pluralism (Marzuki, Miftahuddin, & Murdiono, 2020). For children, introduction to various religions is important. Awareness of living together, side by side and in harmony, without religious-based violence, must cognitively be built from correct understanding. Indonesia is very diverse, has many religions, beliefs as well as religious ideologies. To prevent religious radicalism in children, they need complete knowledge and understanding of religions. Religious pluralism education has an important

role in preventing religious radicalism in children. Umi, the principal of Green School, explained the urgency of religious plurality literacy:

“We introduce religions to students. Sometimes a central approach, sometimes thematic. We introduce all religions that exist and are recognized by the state. The goal is for all children to know and be aware that we are diverse but still one. Each has different doctrines, teachings, rituals, and places of worship. We teach religious differences, we recognize them so that later when we are in society we won't be surprised.” (Umi, 2022).

Based on Umi's explanation, introducing different religions is a necessity. This introduction is a basic part of religious pluralism education. According to Ahmad, the founder of the school, through religious pluralism education, children can understand and respect various religions and beliefs of other parties (Ahmad, 2022). This education can help children develop a more intense, in-depth, and comprehensive understanding of the diversity of religions that exist in Indonesia. Armed with this capital, Green School Early Childhood Education children do not only have narrow, limited views, or are exposed to extreme thoughts, ideologies, and behavior.

Preventing religious radicalism, Green School children are taught the importance of differences and tolerance. Religious pluralism education teaches children to respect, appreciate, and respond appropriately to every difference. Children are equipped to respect differences with the principle of tolerance. They learn to respect each individual's right to have their own religious beliefs, even if they differ from other people's beliefs. Lina, an early childhood education teacher, explained:

“Children need to be shown that our country, the environment surrounding us, and the people around us have different religions. This awareness needs to be instilled. Awareness of the reality that there are various religions. Each religion has different teachings, doctrines, traditions, rituals, holy books, and prophets. Everything is different. Awareness of differences is important so that children have knowledge capital. Children can respect and appreciate these differences.” (Lina, 2022).

Introduction and dialogue about multi-religions can open up treasures of knowledge, share experiences, and open up space for children's future imagination. Understanding the reality of religion can help foster an attitude of living together openly and reduce radical behavior (Tangirerung, 2018). Understanding plural cultures and religions can reduce the birth and emergence of the danger of radicalism (Firdaus, Rosidin, Fatimah, & Hidayat, 2021; Hale, 2022). According to Lina, understanding the reality of diverse religions can encourage open-mindedness and inclusive attitudes for children. Through a better understanding of various religions and their underlying values, children become more resistant to extreme thinking. They tend to choose a more moderate and tolerant path in their lives, rather than falling into radical thinking or being exposed to extreme views.

The introduction of religions can reduce fanaticism in living together. Children, through their thinking abilities, are educated to have critical reasoning abilities. Cultivating

critical thinking skills in children is very important so that they act according to common sense. Religious pluralism education encourages children to think critically about their own religious beliefs and values, as well as about the beliefs of others. This helps them develop strong critical thinking skills, which can help them fight back against damaging propaganda and radical views.

Religious pluralism education can emphasize shared human values shared by many religions, such as compassion, peace, and justice. This helps shape positive attitudes towards these values and motivates children to contribute to a peaceful and inclusive society. By including religious pluralism education in the curriculum, Green School Early Childhood Education can help children grow into individuals who are more open, tolerant, and resistant to religious radicalism. This step is very important for Green School Early Childhood Education in preventing the spread of radical ideology and creating a more harmonious and safe society.

### ***Providing an Example of Religious Tolerance***

Teaching religious tolerance to children is an important step in preventing the emergence of religious radicalism. However, before that, children need to be introduced to various religions and beliefs, as explained above. Through stories, reading books about various religions, watching films or documentaries that depict religious diversity, or visiting places of worship. Green School Early Childhood Education's teachers invite children to discuss religious differences in a positive way. Providing space for discussion and abandoning indoctrination can reduce the emergence of radicalism (Qodir, 2016). Being aware of religious diversity is the beginning of understanding the social reality of Indonesians. Only after that, children are introduced to the experience of living together, living side by side, living in harmony even though each has different religious beliefs and traditions. Understanding religious pluralism as a basis for strengthening religious tolerance (Rustandi, et. Al., 2022).

From the perspective of educational psychology, the best way to educate children is by example. Role models are successful educators and teachers (Schunk, 1987). Give a real role model. Daily life experiences, which can be seen, practiced, and imitated, are easily adopted by children. Likewise in terms of transforming the values and spirit of religious tolerance. Through modeling, values, behavior, or culture are easily adapted (Syamsul, 2018). Religious tolerance is taught at Greens School Early Childhood Education as a way to prevent radical religious behavior. Mega, one of the teachers gave an explanation:

“We introduce children from an early age to a diversity of cultures, values, and religions. In the villages around here, the majority are Muslim, but there are also non-Muslim families. One house is Christian. We teach children about various religions. Through the story of plural Indonesia, also about the various religions in Indonesian society. Islam also teaches respect for other people, including their beliefs and religion.” (Mega, 2022).

Instilling the values of tolerance in children can become a religious foundation in the future. However, according to Mega, the most effective way to teach tolerance is through practice and example. The Prophet said; “*ibda’ bi nafsik*,” which means “start with you”. This recommendation also applies to teaching children the principles of religious tolerance. An attitude of tolerance can grow well if the religion that is developed is moderate, inclusive, and tolerant (Zaduqisti, et. al., 2020).

According to Schunk (1987), modeling is an appropriate teaching strategy for children. One of the best ways to teach tolerance is to be a good role model. Children need visualization. Children find it easier to digest all real things. Therefore, visible examples and actions can be imitated by children. Children need operational guidance, models, and examples of how to act, interact, and relate socially with people of various religions with a respectful, friendly, enthusiastic, and positive attitude. Umi, explain how to teach religious tolerance:

“In order to have an attitude of tolerance, children are introduced to the basics of existing religion and culture. Give an understanding of the differences and similarities between these religions. Most importantly, children are taught and set an example, to respect and treat all different religions or cultures well. Giving an example, a positive example, model, in real action, will leave an impression on the child. They understand and are easily tolerant.” (Umi, 2022).

Teaching tolerance starts from a shared awareness of diversity. Give examples of real actions in everyday interactions. To foster an attitude of tolerance, it cannot be built instantly but takes a long time. Green School Early Childhood Education understands this. Teachers integrate values, knowledge, and tolerant behavior in direct educational activities. Education is a strategic instrument in transforming the values of tolerance (Wijaya & Aditomo 2019). Teaching religious tolerance is an ongoing process and requires patience. More importantly, it is necessary to create a more inclusive, safe, and peaceful environment for living together.

### **Psychological Perspective to Prevent Religious Radicalism**

Preventing religious radicalism behavior in children is important as a preventive measure to prevent aggressive and destructive behavior, which could threaten social stability. This scientific study provides an initial understanding of the problems faced in preventing religious radicalism in children. This issue is important because children are vulnerable to the influence of religious extremism, which can harm children's development and social stability (Guiora, 2010; Morris, 2016). Emphasis on psychological aspects is an important approach to understanding the factors that influence children's development in this context.

The role of psychology in preventing children's radical behavior is very significant. Data in the field shows that the role of psychology provides in-depth insight into individual development processes, driving factors, as well as effective intervention strategies. In Erikson's perspective, religious radicalism behavior in children is influenced by their



psychological development (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The choice of moral action also determines the activity chosen, as per Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Likewise in the context of preventing child radicalism at Green School Early Childhood Education. There are many aspects that are psychological factors that influence religious radicalism behavior in children. The findings at Green School can detail the psychological factors that can influence children towards radical behavior. The psychological influence in question is; the influence of the environment, family, peers, and social media. Psychologists identify the importance of these factors in the formation of children's identities and values which may influence whether they are susceptible to religious radicalism.

Understanding the psychological factors of religious radicalism behavior in children, and implementing appropriate prevention strategies, can encourage the creation of a generation that grows into individuals who are more open, tolerant, and resistant to religious extremism. It requires cooperation from all parties, and close support between parents, schools, communities, and the government in creating an environment that supports the realization of the values of tolerance, empathy, and humanity. This prevention is not only to protect children from the dangers of radicalism but also to create a more peaceful and inclusive society.

This study can reveal several psychology-based prevention strategies. Important steps include educational programs, especially religious pluralism education, teaching and modeling religious tolerance, and family intervention, as well as efforts to increase media literacy and children's critical thinking in dealing with radical information. For children who have been exposed, the role of psychotherapy or counseling in helping children who have been affected by religious radicalism becomes urgent.

## **CONCLUSION**

The emergence of religious radicalism has been thought to be due to exclusive religious beliefs and the result of an unfair political-economic system, but this is not entirely true. This study found other factors, both related to the child's individual identity, social influences, school, and relationships. Psychological aspects are the cause of radical behavior. This article has analyzed the importance of preventing religious radicalism behavior in children from a psychological perspective. An intense understanding of the psychological factors that influence children is very important to prevent children from falling into radical ideologies. Religious radicalism behavior in children arises as a result of environmental influences, dissatisfaction, disappointment, and an exclusive, textual, and narrow understanding of religion. Apart from that, prevention strategies include education, open communication, the role of the family, and community support. At Green School Early Childhood Education, to ward off religious radicalism, education about religious diversity literacy is needed, as well as exemplary attitudes of tolerance, and partnerships between parties, schools, families, parents, and the surrounding environment. Religious pluralism education is urgent in helping children understand and appreciate the diversity of

religious beliefs and is a central point in prevention efforts. Awareness of various religions is an important asset for the emergence of a tolerant attitude towards different beliefs, understandings, and religions. This study presents theoretical implications in the form of psychological aspects as a way to prevent religious radicalism behavior. This thesis is different from previous studies which believe more in the efficacy of political, legal, economic, and religious aspects to untangle the tangled threads of religious radicalism. This study recommends future research on the topic of religious radicalism in children. Further research concerns the impact of technology and social media on children's development and the specific role that educational institutions and families can play in preventing religious radicalism. This study provides important insight into efforts to prevent religious radicalism in children through a psychological approach. With a better understanding of the psychological factors that influence children's development and effective prevention strategies, governments, educational institutions, and parents can hope to reduce the risk of radical behavior among the younger generation.

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