

## Child Development from the Perspective of Syed Shakh Ahmad Alhady

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**Abstract:** This study examines Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady's thoughts on the development of children. The purposes of the article are to identify the concept of child development from Syed Shaykh's perspective and to analyze his ideas on appropriate education for the children. The methods used to complete the writing are library and archive research, which involve the collection of data and its analysis in order to deduce Syed Shaykh's ideas on child development. The process of developing a child must be coupled with equipping him or her with sound knowledge and this has to be through a proper education. It is found that Syed Shaykh's ideas on education for children are very much similar to Ibn al-Hajj's (d.1336) theory of education. The article implies that thoughts on child development and their education is very much useful in parenting. This study needs a comparative analysis research on the similarity between Syed Shaykh's ideas on education for children and Ibn al-Hajj's (d.1336) theory of education.

**Key words:** Syed Shaykh • Child development • Child upbringing • Education • Parents

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### INTRODUCTION

Study on child development from the perspectives of Syed Shaykh b. Ahmad Alhady (1867-1934) is regarded useful as Malaya in the late 19th and early 20th century saw that its inhabitants cared less for their child physical, intellectual, language and social growth. Being one of the reformists-cum-modernists in Malaya, he insisted his contemporaries to give proper education for the children. As a grandson who was adopted by Syed Shaykh since he was small, Syed Mohamed Alwi had his own story on how Syed Shaykh perceived the importance of child development. According to Syed Mohamed Alwi, his grandfather "was most of the time serious and a strict disciplinarian as far as my upbringing was concerned" [1]. Although Syed Shaykh was described as a strict disciplinarian, he was also tolerant. This is evident from the narration of his adopted son when he says [1]:

...he [Syed Shaykh] said, "you [Syed Mohamed Alwi] should know 'Arabic, so I want you to go to the 'Arabic school' [*madrasah*]... So I went there every weekend to learn 'Arabic. I went, but I couldn't cope and also the teacher was no good and mean... So, I cried to Syed Shaykh, "please don't make me go there any more." He didn't say 'yes' or 'no', but I just didn't go any more.

It follows from here that parents are to take care of and educate the children with a strict discipline. The parents however need to be tolerant and moderate sparingly in bringing up their children. Their upbringing and education are indispensably important as these may produce and bring into being useful citizens for the nation. In this respect, it is important to fulfil the objectives of the article, i.e. to identify the concept of child development from Syed Shaykh's perspective and to analyze his ideas on appropriate education for the children.

**The Concept of Child Development:** In the process of nurturing a child, Syed Shaykh maintained that the child has the rights to have the parents' love and compassion, care and encouragement and prayer and he, in turn, is to respect and love his parents, to place full trust in them and obey their advice and command. He is also to enjoy his rightful needs and desire in this life, to receive proper guidance and advice and to learn useful lessons from the elderly. To Syed Shaykh, the fulfilment of the child's rights is not the responsibility of the parents alone but is also applied to other individuals who are related to the child such as teachers [1, 2]. He believed that all of them have a responsibility in adding 'colours' to the child's development, as a child by nature is an 'absolute white cloth'. If they play their roles effectively, the child could then achieve spiritual and material success [3].

In his discussion on the importance of child's upbringing, one finds that Syed Shaykh strongly believed in providing utmost care and attention to newborn babies. The mother, in this respect, is responsible to hold, nourish and nurture the baby while the father is to shape his character, action, behaviour and mind. He maintained that the parents are to give him much attention at the age of one to two because this would stimulate his growth and development. For Syed Shaykh, caring for a child would be easier when he reaches two years of age as his interest for milk feeding tends to occupy his mind and attention before that while the milk's nutritional value to the toddler's development and health cannot be denied [1, 4]. It follows from here that the significance of milk feeding in Syed Shaykh's thought is significantly in line with the Qur'anic verse, which encourages a mother to nurse her offspring for two whole years, as Allah says, "the mother shall give suck to their offspring for two whole years, if the father desires to complete the term" [5].

Upon completing the age of two, Syed Shaykh maintained that a three-year-old child is to be taught the most crucial religious requirement, i.e. the five daily prayers. According to him, the child could simply stand by the side of the father and pray with him according to the respective steps. This way of upbringing had an influence on Syed Mohamed Alwi when he himself expressed the statement that, "every child, every grandchild of mine from the age of three will be standing by my side to pray" [1]. The opinion of Syed Shaykh that a child was to be taught the five daily prayers at an early age, in accordance to one of the sayings of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) which considered a child as clean and pure like an absolute white cloth that requires extreme care and attention to maintain its original nature. The parents thus

have the responsibility to shape and influence, to some degree, the child's views, opinions, habits, behaviour and doings. The execution of that duty could be done at home since birth. Since home education may not equip the child with a truly sound knowledge, Syed Shaykh thought that as early as five years old or even at an earlier age, the child is ready to start his first education under an organised system as, according to his grandson, "schooling and education were to him [Syed Shaykh] the sacred task of every child; no matter in what circumstances, attending school is absolutely essential." Syed Shaykh, as mentioned by Syed Mohamed Alwi, believed that a child should be brought up, developed and educated to achieve two-fold goals; firstly, to improve himself and secondly, to bring enlightenment to his own community [1].

Furthermore, Syed Shaykh himself maintained that development process of a child needs parents to nurture and instil knowledge in him. This involves several elements such as the teaching of sound knowledge that could mould his ethical behaviour. According to Syed Shaykh, it would enable a child to think and to distinguish between what is good and bad behaviour. It renders the child's mind, sayings, behaviour, endeavour and customs to be congruent with Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*) as this would be advantageous for him and his nation [6]. In fact, this is in line with Syed Shaykh's emphasis on giving sound religious knowledge to children at home. To him, upon completing its understanding, they are to be sent to an organised school to learn other disciplines of knowledge [7].

The emphasis of imparting religious knowledge onto a child is possibly for the purpose of protecting him from any immoral act and negative behaviour. This could be achieved successfully if the parents were actually aware of the importance of giving due attention to their child's upbringing; intellectually, mentally and physically. Such an intellectual and mental upbringing of the children could only be achieved through giving a proper and sound education for children. In *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade), it says, "Education. Education. Knowledge. Knowledge. Immerse yourself in the realm of knowledge, expend your energy in gaining employment and nurture your children to love both education and knowledge from their very young age" [8]. The repetitive usage of the terms education and knowledge shows that knowledge and education were indispensably useful and advantageous in order to place any particular community at par with other well-developed communities.

**Education for Children:** According to Syed Shaykh, the process of giving sound education should begin when young. Education for children is thus to begin at home and then at school. A child is to be instilled with the love for knowledge, good conduct and religious education, which will leave a mark as he grows up. He, as Syed Shaykh maintained, should also be taught the branches of science that may be useful to himself and the nation [7, 9]. Having acknowledged the significance of true knowledge and sound education to be tools to achieve success in life, Syed Shaykh maintained that the process of educating a child should start immediately from the day he was born. Parents are regarded as the first home educators, who would then shape and mould their children according to their own desire. This is due to children's tendency to blindly imitate their parents and be easily influenced by their surroundings, "thus, if these children are familiarised with such things beneficial for them and are taught subjects advantageous for them, surely they will hold fast to them as they grow up thus obtaining their happiness in this contemporary world and the world to come" [3].

However, when a child is left without the care and guidance of his parents especially during the early stages of his childhood, this would lead them to negative conduct and would instil immoral wrong behaviour in them. Their development indeed needs the attention and instruction of their parents as children are prone to positive and negative influences that they had experienced as a child. At the stage of infancy, a newborn baby needs utmost care and attention from his parents, particularly mothers. At that time, breast feeding is regarded as the most important part of educating children as it may stimulate their physical and mental development and its nourishment has an influence on their ethical behaviour. As such, the daily conduct of a child is heavily influenced by the character and behaviour of his mother who breastfeeds him. She, therefore, needs to be morally upright and religious as her milk would be supplied to every part of her child's body and it may influence the child's inclination to good or bad conduct [3]. It follows from here that a mother's ability in influencing young children simply through breastfeeding them may be linked to the Islamic emphasis that man should marry a true religious woman, who understands the proper role of a Muslim mother.

Syed Shaykh called upon mothers to take good care and look after their children as required by Islam. However, many women at that time left the duties to their servants or helpers and this, according to him, breaches

the trust of Allah upon women. They failed to uphold their responsibilities towards their children and as such, are ignoring their rights. The failure of a mother to observe her duties contradicts the true nature of a woman who is biologically disposed to bring up her own children. To Syed Shaykh, a female helper may not succeed in educating children according to the desired objectives of Islamic education that is to produce good men who love to do good deeds for their nation [7]. This view illustrates that a mother is to be the first educator for a child since she is bestowed innate characteristics to nurture her own children.

The responsibility of developing and looking after children is not restricted to the mother alone; the father is also obliged to play his part in this task. The father is to care for the hygienic aspects of his toddler and this includes the physical body, clothes, house and food. Syed Shaykh maintained that once the child reaches age of discernment (*tamyiz*), the father is to give more attention to him. The most fundamental sign of *tamyiz* is when the child begins to express their sense of self-consciousness and shyness. Syed Shaykh believed that these inclinations are good for a child as they may check his habits and behaviour as he grows up [3]. At this age, religious training is especially important and as such, a child must not be allowed to leave the five daily prayers as this would train them to observe the pillars of Islam. A sound understanding of prayers, its recitations, pillars and rules would lead them to adhere to religion and would make them useful to the religion and to the nation. On the other hand, those who fail to observe and uphold religion are regarded as worthless since they would not be able to perform beneficial deeds towards the country [3].

As regards religious knowledge, Syed Shaykh insisted that special emphasis must be given to Islamic theology as it may instil a sound conviction in God in children. They are then to be taught their mother tongue, followed by Arabic and its components and other critical knowledge such as English [10]. Apart from that, Syed Shaykh asserted that children must also be imparted with the spirit of nationalism as it is classified as something related to religion. The concept, according to him, is based on the teaching of Islam [11], thus, a man of faith is one who will manifest his love towards his nation as stated by the Prophet, "*hubb al-watan min al-iman*," (the love of homeland is part of iman). The Prophetic saying was regarded as the foundational aim of *Saudara* [12].

Upon reaching the age of puberty (*baligh*), Syed Shaykh impressed upon parents on the necessity of teaching their children several pertinent issues as follows:

first, the true purpose of eating and drinking is to strengthen the body as to facilitate the execution of religious commandments and duties. Secondly, executing religious instructions would lead one to enjoy rewards in this world and the next since upholding religion is one's greatest happiness and honour. Most importantly, it should be understood that the true meaning of glory and honour is to love the government, homeland and to perform good deeds to others [13]. In other words, a proper understanding of the above would lead children towards religion, honour and sound ethics. These are most important elements that may shape the expression, behaviour and conduct of a man and which may bring him happiness in life.

Having been convinced that one's upbringing would normally have an influence on his mind, expression, character and behaviour and these elements would be affected by one's parents, friends and surroundings, Syed Shaykh suggested three crucial aspects in educating children: to teach them about good conduct and ethics, to prevent them from associating with immoral friends and to block them from inheriting fortunes from their parents. The process of nurturing and developing the children should thus be based on the generic parenting guidelines and the most appropriate approach and methods of education [3]. This is extremely crucial for parents as they are the first teachers and educators of their own children. Parents are thus to show sound examples of conduct and to teach them good deeds in this life and the next.

The teaching of Islamic ethics and etiquette, as maintained by Syed Shaykh, is aimed at instilling sound conduct in Muslims. As such, the teaching of ethics should be given the topmost priority in education for children, especially on the etiquette of eating and drinking. According to him, parents are to teach them not to be gluttonous in eating and drinking and not to focus only on the food they like most. Parents are also to explain the disadvantages of having excessive desire for food. They are to teach children to take food and drink with the right hand only, to recite prayer when taking food and drink, to give the seniors the priority to begin consuming food and drink earlier than the rest and for them to take food that is nearest to them [3]. To my mind, table manners is regarded as an important aspect of education for children as it teaches them the importance of obeying rules and regulations, respecting the elderly and reciting prayers before every task. Children would also learn that acts such as greediness and excessiveness are not good for the well being of a man and his nation.

With regard to the second aspect of education for children, *al-Imam* (The Leader) mentioned that there are several ways to avoid children from being influenced by negative friends and surroundings. Parents are to occupy their children with study programmes at home, to teach them about religion and its advantages, to tell them stories of great people and of those who had contributed towards the nation, to praise those who observe good behaviour and to criticise those who are inclined to negative conduct. Syed Shaykh insisted that children should also be prevented from reading fictitious and romantic novels [3], as they may encourage them to hold fast to fantasy and immoral conduct. The children should thus be soundly guided in ensuring their conduct is compatible with Islam. They would then be able to differentiate between the good and negative acts.

According to Syed Shaykh, there are several conditions that children must satisfy in order to inculcate good habits and behaviour within them and to avoid being lazy and listless. They are to avoid from sleeping during daytime and too late at night. In order to strengthen their limb, children are encouraged to sleep on non-padding and non-springy beds, which may prevent them from lying on them for too long. In the daytime, children are to do several recreational activities such as walking as it may develop their physical strength. Parents are also to encourage them to play games upon finishing the revision of lessons as this may release their fatigue and stress of learning. If prohibited from playing, this may cause their body, soul and intellect to be stagnant and to be lazy. To Syed Shaykh, recreation is needed to rejuvenate the body and mind [3].

Children are prohibited to associate with immoral friends to avoid their negative influences, instead they are encouraged to interact with morally upright friends who may lead them to sound conduct. Parents, as maintained by Syed Shaykh, are to impress upon their children to be humble and gentle with friends. The children should be discouraged from proudly showing off their wealth and high status as to block them from inheriting fortunes from their parents. It may also be the case that at times, the wealth enjoyed by a child could not even deter him from stealing someone else's belongings. Syed Shaykh insisted that such actions must be prevented by his parents as it is an act of encroaching on someone else's property. The children should be taught that taking things belonging to someone else is a dishonourable act and that the act of giving is a generous and an honourable act [3].

Furthermore, a child should also be forbidden from committing acts that he keeps hidden from his parents. It is assumed that if a child feels compelled to hide his acts from his parents, they most probably are immoral. Parents, who realise that their child's indiscretion is his first, may decide to turn a blind eye to it. However, if he repeats the act, the parents must scold the child. The punishment if needed to be done should be executed away from others and no further investigation should be done on the matter as this may cause the child to lose the fear of repeating his mistakes. Syed Shaykh maintained that in scolding the child, a father must be very careful with the words and tone used. A mother should then play her role in instilling noble character in her children. At times, she may even need to instil a child's fear towards his father, although this must be done at the most appropriate time and sparingly. At the same time, a child must be praised and even presented with gifts for doing good deeds and conduct [3].

Syed Shaykh believed that the success of parents in bringing up, nurturing and educating their children is reflected in their inclination to become intellectual Muslims with noble character. Parents of this calibre would be ones who would equip themselves with various disciplines of critical knowledge, particularly related to parenting skills. As such, Syed Shaykh encouraged parents, particularly the mothers, to study basic psychology as they would then be exposed to the different approaches in bringing up their children. According to the study of psychology, as mentioned by Syed Shaykh, a child would shed tears to elicit sympathy from his parents. Studying psychology may assist the parents and mothers in particular to deal with their children's 'deception'. The science would then show parents several ways in dealing with the tricks [14]. It is important to mention that much of what Syed Shaykh says about the methods of educating children were similar to that of Muhammad b. Muhammad al-'Abdari's, known as Ibn al-Hajj, (d.1336) theory of education [15, 16], to whom no single acknowledgement was given. Syed Shaykh either did not know that the theory belonged to Ibn al-Hajj or the former purposely neglected to acknowledge him [17].

### CONCLUSION

A child is like a pure 'white cloth' that needs special care and attention of its guardian. With proper attention given by the parents, a child would be shaped and moulded according to the desired goals of the parents. The parents are a child's first teachers and their

influence is indisputable. As such, a sound and proper education is critical for a child, but if the parents neglected their child's upbringing, this would not lead to the child's happiness in this world and the next. In this respect, it is incumbent upon all parents to equip themselves with various disciplines of the relevant knowledge so as to nurture and instil sound knowledge in their child based on a sound educational model. It emphasises on the teaching of both traditional and modern sciences, obtained through a proper understanding of the knowledge. Therefore, a sound education must be available for both man and woman since they each would become parents, who are to play their role in bringing up their children and to equip them with proper education. It is significant to reiterate that Syed Shaykh's ideas on education for children are found to be similar to Ibn al-Hajj's (d.1336) theory of education. Hence, a further research on the similarity between Syed Shaykh's ideas on education for children and Ibn al-Hajj's (d.1336) theory of education will be useful to verify the result of this study.

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