



## CULTIVATING ETHICS FROM NATURE: PARENTS' VIEWS ON 21ST-CENTURY VALUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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### Abstract

*The formation of 21st-century values and ethics in early childhood is becoming increasingly important amid ever-changing social and environmental dynamics. However, educational practices at this level often focus on cognitive achievement, so that the process of internalizing values is not yet significant for children. This study aims to describe parents' views on the process of internalizing 21st-century values and ethics through nature-based learning at Putra Bumi Siliwangi 2 Kindergarten. The study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, while analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that nature-based activities, such as planting, caring for plants, and participating in social activities, fostered empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and a love for the environment. Parents see that nature-based learning not only enriches children's ecological experiences but also strengthens character building and moral awareness from an early age. Thus, nature-based learning serves as an effective and meaningful medium for the internalization of 21st-century values and ethics in early childhood.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood, Nature-Based Learning, Parents' Perspectives, 21st-Century Values*

### INTRODUCTION

Mandatory 21st-century education demands the development of character and life values balanced with mastery of cognitive and technological skills. Values such as responsibility, empathy, collaboration, communication, and environmental awareness need to be instilled in children from an early age to enable them to adapt to global social and ecological changes. However, early childhood learning in many institutions still focuses on academic activities and basic literacy skills, while the moral, social, and ecological dimensions receive less space for exploration. In this context, nature-based learning is a relevant alternative approach, as it allows children to build a direct connection with the environment and internalize humanitarian values, sustainability, and ecological ethics (Meinerz1, 2021).

In Indonesia, national policy provides strong support for strengthening character and values in early childhood education. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* for PAUD emphasizes play-



based learning, meaningful experiences, and contextual exploration, enabling teachers to integrate moral, social, and environmental values into everyday learning activities. *Permendikdasmen Nomor 13 Tahun* further authorizes PAUD institutions to design learning approaches that align with children's developmental needs and local environmental contexts, including the implementation of nature-based learning 2025 (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah, 2025; Meinerz1, 2021).

These policies demonstrate that character building, ecological awareness, and value internalization are not only relevant but also actively encouraged within Indonesia's national curriculum framework (Meinerz, 2021). In this regard, nature-based learning emerges as an appropriate and timely pedagogical approach, enabling children to develop direct connections with the environment and to internalize humanitarian values, sustainability principles, and ecological ethics through firsthand experiences (Meinerz, 2021; Speldewinde, 2025). Research further supports this approach, with Trina et al. (2025) showing that natural landscapes can enhance children's multidisciplinary learning experiences, while Li et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of family, community, and environmental contexts in shaping children's attitudes and behaviors. Combined, these findings reinforce the idea that nature-based learning aligns closely with national educational goals and provides a practical foundation for values education in early childhood.

Learning practices that involve direct experiences in nature, such as exploring natural environments, engaging in reflective journaling, and sharing personal stories, can strengthen relationships among individuals, others, and the natural world Meinerz1 (2021) These activities support the development of place-responsive pedagogy, a pedagogical approach that fosters learners' awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and their environment. A similar perspective is offered by Meinerz1 (2021) who found that collaborative efforts between educators and environmental designers can create natural learning areas such as small forests, meadows, and water sources that align with children's needs while also prioritizing environmental conservation. Thus, nature-based learning not only enriches children's learning experiences but also simultaneously cultivates ecological and social awareness. Furthermore, Prins et al. (2025) emphasized that nature can act as a co-teacher in early childhood language education. Through natural interactions with the environment, children can enrich their vocabulary, stimulate expressive abilities, and cultivate curiosity about natural phenomena. Multisensory experiences in nature such as hearing the sounds of water, animals, and wind encourage children to experiment with language while building confidence and intrinsic curiosity.

Li et al. (2025) explain that parental involvement significantly influences the internalization of children's values, noting that the quality of the parent child relationship, parental educational expectations, and the broader social environment contribute positively to children's behavior and motivation. This argument is further supported by Guo et al. (2025), who found that maintaining a balance between family and work roles increases satisfaction and harmony in parenting. In the context of nature-based learning, such parental support not only facilitates children's participation in various activities but also reinforces the meaning of life values gained through direct experiences in nature. Consistent with this perspective, Voetmann et al. (2025) highlight the emotional and existential dimensions of parents' roles in accompanying children's development as an integral part of holistic life learning.

Environmental representations and ecological moral messages in educational media need to be expanded to help children better understand environmental issues in a more contextualized way, as highlighted by Morgan and Smith (2024). Integrating natural landscapes into playground design has also been shown to enhance science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) learning experiences in natural and engaging ways, according to findings by Trina et al. (2025). Together, these studies demonstrate that

nature can function as a multidisciplinary learning platform that fosters critical and creative thinking while simultaneously strengthening children's collaborative values.

Through their study of Sámi educational practices, Krempig and Enoksen (2024) highlight the importance of integrating traditional values and local culture into nature-based activities as a form of intergenerational education. Their findings show that nature functions as a spiritual and moral space where children can explore cultural identity and shared values. In line with this perspective, Falzon and Conrad, 2024; Speldewinde, 2025 emphasize the importance of designing school environments that support structured, nature-based learning programs particularly in early childhood to enhance children's engagement and enrich the overall learning experience.

The shifting paradigm of 21st-century education calls for an approach that addresses not only cognitive outcomes but also the development of children's values, ethics, and character from an early age. Within this framework, nature-based learning offers contextual and meaningful experiences grounded in children's direct interaction with their surroundings. Previous studies including those by Brindal, 2023; Falzon and Conrad, 2024; and Mårtensson et al., 2025) underscore the essential role of nature-based activities in nurturing children's empathy, responsibility, and ecological awareness.

However, studies specifically examining parents' perspectives on the internalization of 21st-century values through nature-based learning remain limited. This gap is noteworthy given the strategic role parents play in ensuring value continuity between home and school. In response to this limitation, the present study aims to explore how 21st-century values are internalized in early childhood through nature-based learning from a parental perspective. This research is expected to make a conceptual contribution to the development of a nature-based character education model and deepen understanding of the synergy among schools, families, and the environment in shaping a generation with strong character and ecological awareness.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design (Moustakas, 2011). The aim is to understand the meaning of parents' experiences in the process of internalizing 21st-century values for early childhood through nature-based learning at Putra Bumi Siliwangi 2 Kindergarten, as shown in the following diagram:

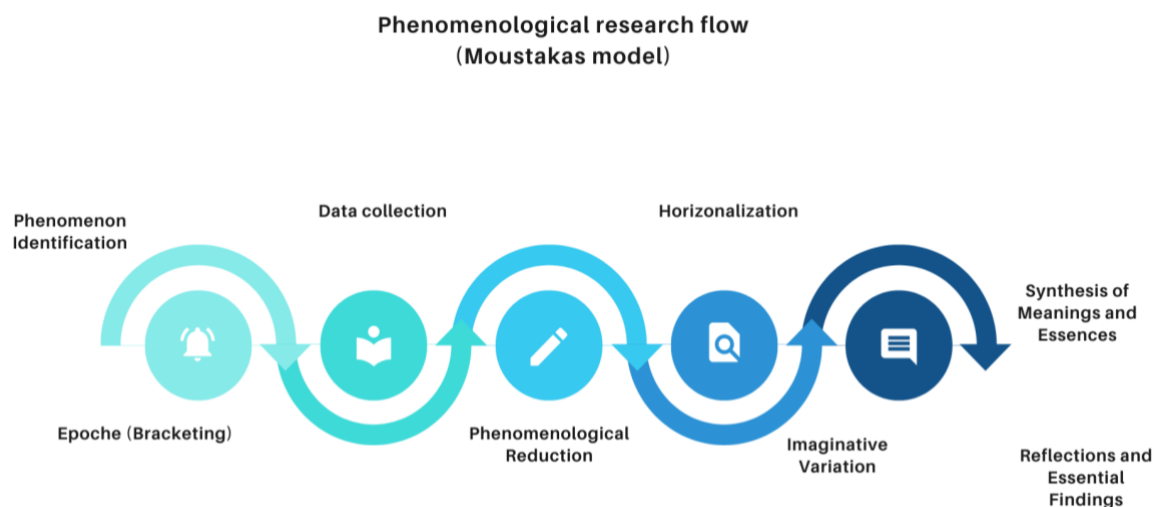


Figure 1. *Phenomenological research flow* (Moustakas, 2011)

The researcher acted as the primary instrument, applying the principle of epoche to suspend personal bias and objectively understand participants' experiences. Participants consisted of six parents of students directly involved in nature learning activities during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with criteria

for active involvement, willingness to provide information, and experience accompanying children for at least one semester. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to elicit parents' reflections, and observations were conducted during the activities. Documentation, in the form of photographs and teacher notes, served as supporting data. The instruments used were an interview guide and observation sheets compiled based on phenomenological principles (Moustakas, 2011).

Data analysis was conducted following the following phenomenological stages: (1) Epoche, suspending the researcher's assumptions; (2) Phenomenological reduction, selecting important statements; (3) Horizontalization, giving equal weight to meaning; (4) Imaginative variation, interpreting the context of experience; and (5) Synthesis of meanings and essences, discovering the essence of the participant's experience. Validity was maintained through the triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking with participants, to ensure that the meanings corresponded to their actual experiences. (Moustakas, 2011).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the views and experiences of parents regarding the process of internalizing 21st-century values in early childhood through nature-based learning at Putra Bumi Siliwangi 2 Kindergarten. A phenomenological approach is employed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of parents and reflect on them in a thoughtful manner (Moustakas, 2011). Based on the results of data analysis obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, five essential themes were found that describe the nature of parental experiences: (1) nature as a space for learning values; (2) the growth of empathy and social concern; (3) ecological responsibility; (4) natural collaboration and communication; and (5) parental reflections on the development of children's character. As in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Thematic Recapitulation Synthesis of Parents' Perspectives (R1–R6)**

21st-Century Value Indicator	Main Theme	Essential Meaning	Respondents (R1–R6)
Responsibility	Nature fosters discipline and awareness of duty	Children develop responsibility through real experiences, such as caring for plants and maintaining environmental cleanliness.	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6
Empathy and Social Caring	Interaction with nature cultivates social sensitivity	Children become more empathetic and caring toward friends and living beings around them.	R1, R2, R4, R5
Collaboration and Cooperation	Nature-based activities build teamwork and togetherness	Children become more empathetic and caring toward friends and living beings around them.	R2, R3, R4, R5
Communication	Nature as a space for expression and confidence	Children become more confident in expressing opinions and narrating their experiences in nature.	R2, R3, R6
Environmental Awareness	Direct experiences strengthen ecological responsibility	Children show awareness of protecting and preserving the environment.	R1, R3, R4, R6

Independence and Self-Reflection	Nature routines encourage self-regulation and reflection	Children learn to manage time, complete tasks independently, and reflect on their experiences	R1, R3, R5, R6
Ethical and Spiritual Values	Nature nurtures gratitude and moral understanding	Children develop gratitude and respect for life and God's creations through their natural experiences.	R4, R5, R6

source: processed by researchers

### Nature as a Space for Learning Values

Research results indicate that learning activities in nature have a profound impact on both children and parents. Parents view nature as a learning space that teaches concrete life values. Activities such as planting, tending a garden, and observing plant growth foster patience, responsibility, and respect for life. Children's direct engagement with nature creates a natural, contextual, and sustainable learning environment. One parent stated that her child is now more patient and meticulous when caring for plants at home. This aligns with Brindal (2023) idea that children's connection to place and nature through reflective activities can strengthen the relationship between humans and the environment, creating ecologically meaningful learning experiences. Parents view nature as a contemplative space that fosters a sense of awe, gratitude, and respect for God's creation. Children spontaneously connect natural phenomena with spiritual meaning for example, expressing gratitude to God for the rain, the air, and the living plants. These ethical and spiritual values develop not through doctrine, but through lived inner experiences.

### Empathy and Social Awareness

The second finding shows that children's social interactions in nature-based activities foster empathy and social awareness. Parents observed that their children became more sensitive to the needs of their peers and the environment. For example, they helped friends who had difficulty carrying tools or reminded them to be careful while playing in the park. These activities serve as a means of character development that emphasizes the values of collaboration and caring. This aligns with research Speldewinde (2025) which shows that children's involvement in nature play fosters social and moral understanding through real-life experiences. In this context, nature activities serve as a social vehicle that fosters children's ability to interact, empathize, and understand social relationships more deeply.



Figure 1 Empathy and Social Awareness activitied



Activities in nature provide a tangible space for children to develop a sense of caring for others and living things. Parents observe that children become more sensitive to their friends' feelings and more gentle with animals and plants. For example, some children comfort a friend who is upset because their plant has wilted, or refuse to step on insects because they feel they are also God's creatures. This experience aligns with the learning with place approach (Brindal, 2023) which emphasizes an emotional and reflective connection with nature.

### Ecological Responsibility

Nature-based learning activities also contribute to the development of ecological responsibility. Children demonstrate significant behavioral changes in maintaining cleanliness and respecting nature. They become accustomed to disposing of trash properly, avoiding damage to plants, and admonishing friends who behave carelessly towards the environment. Parents view these changes as a result of their children's direct experiences interacting with nature. These findings are consistent with research findings Mårtensson et al. (2025), which showed that nature-based play spaces can foster children's ecological awareness and encourage conservation behavior from an early age.

This process suggests that learning experiences involving nature have a direct impact on the development of values, including responsibility and concern for the environment. Regarding environmental awareness, children demonstrate increased concern for their surroundings, such as reprimanding adults for littering, conserving water, and maintaining a clean garden. They understand that every human action impacts the balance of nature. This ecological awareness is formed through direct involvement, not just verbal instruction. Responsibility grows from direct experiences with nature. All parents assessed that planting, caring for, and maintaining a clean environment provides children with a concrete understanding of responsibility. Children learn through natural causes and effects, such as realizing that unwatered plants will wither, or that uncleaned trash can make the garden dirty. This learning strengthens children's discipline and awareness of the impact of their actions.

Related to environmental awareness. Children demonstrate increased concern for their surroundings, such as reprimanding adults for littering, conserving water, and helping to keep parks clean. They understand that every human action impacts the balance of nature. This ecological awareness is formed through direct involvement, not just verbal instruction. Responsibility grows from direct experience with nature. All parents assessed that planting, caring for, and maintaining a clean environment provides children with a concrete understanding of responsibility. Children learn through natural causes and effects, such as realizing that unwatered plants will wither, or that uncleaned trash can dirty a park. This learning strengthens children's discipline and awareness of the impact of their actions.

### Collaboration and Natural Communication

The fourth element relates to the collaboration and natural communication that occurs during natural learning activities. Children learn to work together in small groups, share tasks, and express their ideas and feelings openly. Parents report that these activities improve their children's communication skills and self-confidence. This is reinforced by research findings Prins et al. (2025) which state that nature can function as a co-teacher, facilitating the development of language and communication in early childhood through natural interactions. Furthermore, research Trina et al. (2025) also confirms that designing play spaces that integrate natural elements can enrich collaborative learning experiences and encourage children's creativity. Thus, nature-based learning plays a crucial role in naturally developing children's social and communication skills, without the formal academic pressures that often accompany traditional learning methods. Parents observed that social activities, such as garden cleanups, creating mini gardens, and participating in school community service programs, were effective

ways to foster a sense of togetherness. Children learned to share roles, work together, and complete group assignments with a sense of responsibility and accountability. Through these experiences, they learned the value of togetherness, not only socially but also ethically. Expressive behaviors that encourage children to think critically and communicate naturally.

#### Parental Reflections on Children's Character

Parental reflections were a significant part of the study's findings. Parents recognized that nature-based learning activities helped their children develop moral and social values naturally. They felt that these activities not only impacted their children but also strengthened emotional bonds between parents and children. Parents stated that they became more sensitive to the importance of character education based on direct experience. This view aligns with the findings of research Guo et al. (2025), which demonstrate that active parental involvement in children's activities can enhance family life satisfaction and foster stronger emotional bonds. In this context, parents play a role as educational partners who help shape children's character through reflective guidance.



Figure 2. Observing the Surrounding Nature

The research findings indicate that nature-based learning has a significant impact on the development of 21st-century values in early childhood, particularly in ethics, empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and environmental awareness. As shown in Figure 2, children's direct experiences observing the surrounding natural environment provide authentic opportunities to explore, question, and interpret natural phenomena. These hands-on activities not only enrich their cognitive understanding but also nurture moral and social awareness. Parents reported that through nature-based activities such as planting, caring for plants, and recording observations of environmental changes, children became more independent, organized, and reflective, demonstrating meaningful growth in both character and ecological sensitivity.

Within a phenomenological framework, Moustakas (2011) asserts that the meaning of human experience is acquired through deep reflection on conscious interactions with the environment. This study demonstrates how children naturally internalize the values of responsibility, empathy, and cooperation without direct instruction, in line with the principles of contextual learning. These findings confirm Brindal's (2023) view that place-based educational practices foster connections between people and the environment, supporting moral development rooted in everyday life experiences.

In line with, Moustakas (2011) learning experiences rooted in direct interaction with nature foster children's reflective awareness and moral responsibility for the environment. Nature learning also serves as a space for developing social empathy, as Speldewinde (2025)

points out, explaining that play activities in nature foster children's understanding of risk, solidarity, and social responsibility. The findings regarding ecological responsibility support Moustakas (2011) who assert that children's interactions with natural elements such as soil, water, and plants foster a deep ecological awareness. This principle strengthens sustainability education as part of 21st-century ecological literacy. Furthermore Prins et al. (2025) view nature as a co-teacher, enriching children's communication skills, while as Speldewinde (2025) emphasize that playscape design can expand interdisciplinary learning, such as STEAM.

The role of parents is a crucial factor in strengthening the internalization of values. In line with Guo et al. (2025), active parental involvement enhances family emotional well-being and fosters a stronger home-school relationship, thereby creating a sustainable learning ecosystem. These findings also support with Guo et al. (2025) who highlight the importance of nature-friendly school design for fostering moral values, and Guo et al. (2025) who emphasize the cultural and spiritual dimensions of nature learning.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that nature-based learning plays a significant role in the internalization of 21st-century values in early childhood through direct, contextual and reflective experiences. Nature becomes a learning space for ethics, empathy, responsibility, and collaboration, which collectively shape children's character. These findings emphasize the importance of parental and school involvement in creating an educational ecosystem rooted in the human relationship with nature as a source of values and sustainable learning.

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