

Factors Forming Moral Emotions in Children and Adolescents : A Systematic Literature Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Moral Emotions,
Adolescents, Children

Received : 09, May

Revised : 18, June

Accepted: 16, July

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ABSTRACT

Moral emotions constitute a crucial component of moral development in children and adolescents, as they play a significant role in guiding moral and social behavior. This study aims to systematically examine the factors that shape moral emotions in children and adolescents based on relevant empirical research findings. The method employed was a systematic literature review, analyzing a selection of peer-reviewed journals that address the development of moral emotions in children and adolescents. The results indicate that the formation of moral emotions is influenced by multiple factors, including age-related development and cognitive maturity, empathy, emotion regulation, justice sensitivity, personality characteristics, as well as social and educational environmental contexts. In addition to these general factors, several studies also identify specific factors that account for individual differences in moral emotion development. The conclusions of this review emphasize that moral emotions develop through a multidimensional process involving dynamic interactions between internal and external factors of the individual.

INTRODUCTION

Moral development is one of the central aspects of developmental psychology that determines how individuals understand, evaluate, and respond to issues of right and wrong throughout their lifespan. In recent decades, attention to moral development has no longer been focused solely on cognitive aspects such as moral reasoning, but also on the role of emotions in moral processes. Moral emotions are considered an important bridge between moral standards and actual behavior, as these emotions provide the affective motivation to act in accordance with one's moral values (Haidt, 2003). Conceptually, moral emotions refer to emotions that arise when individuals evaluate their own actions or the actions of others based on prevailing moral standards. Emotions such as empathy, sympathy, guilt, shame, and moral pride function as regulatory mechanisms that encourage prosocial behavior and inhibit deviant behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2014). Unlike basic emotions, moral emotions are social and normative in nature because they are highly dependent on interpersonal relationships, cultural norms, and the internalization of moral values learned from an early age.

Childhood and adolescence are critical developmental periods in the formation of moral emotions. During early childhood, the capacity for empathy begins to develop alongside increasing cognitive abilities and perspective-taking skills. Children learn to associate uncomfortable feelings, such as guilt, with violations of social norms, primarily through interactions with parents and other significant figures (Eisenberg et al., 2006). As individuals grow older, moral emotions become increasingly complex and integrated with self-identity and broader social evaluations. During adolescence, the development of moral emotions undergoes significant changes due to simultaneous biological, cognitive, and social transformations. Adolescents begin to internalize moral values in a more reflective and abstract manner and demonstrate greater sensitivity to social evaluations and the moral consequences of their actions (Blasi, 2004). Research has shown that anticipated moral emotions, such as guilt or pride related to a moral choice, play an important role in moral decision-making and in the regulation of risk-taking behavior among adolescents (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013).

Nevertheless, the development of moral emotions does not occur universally or homogeneously. A number of studies indicate that the formation of moral emotions is influenced by complex interactions between internal and external factors. Internal factors include temperament, emotional regulation abilities, dispositional empathy, and the development of moral identity. External factors, on the other hand, include the quality of parent-child relationships (e.g., attachment), parenting styles, peer influence, school environments, as well as prevailing cultural values and norms (Malti & Ongley, 2014). Cultural context also plays an important role in shaping the expression and meaning of moral emotions. Collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize moral emotions oriented toward social harmony and group responsibility, such as shame and empathy, whereas individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on guilt associated with personal responsibility (Mesquita & Walker, 2003). This indicates that the

development of moral emotions cannot be separated from the social and cultural value systems in which individuals grow and develop.

Although research on moral emotions in children and adolescents has grown rapidly, the existing literature remains fragmented across various disciplines and methodological approaches, ranging from experimental and longitudinal studies to cross-cultural qualitative research. Furthermore, there is still a lack of systematic mapping that comprehensively integrates empirical findings regarding the factors shaping moral emotions during these two major developmental stages. Therefore, a systematic literature review is needed to identify, synthesize, and evaluate existing scientific evidence in a structured and transparent manner.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Moral emotions are emotions that arise from individuals' evaluations of their own or others' behaviors based on moral standards and social norms. These emotions, including empathy, guilt, shame, gratitude, and moral pride, serve as motivational mechanisms that encourage prosocial behavior and inhibit actions that violate moral principles (Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007). Unlike basic emotions, moral emotions are socially constructed and develop through interactions between cognitive maturation, emotional development, and social experiences. During childhood and adolescence, the capacity to experience and regulate moral emotions gradually increases as individuals acquire a better understanding of moral norms, perspective-taking abilities, and self-regulation. Developmental theories suggest that age and cognitive maturity provide the foundation for the emergence of moral emotions, while individual characteristics and environmental influences shape their development over time. Internal factors such as empathy, emotion regulation, justice sensitivity, personality, and moral identity interact with external factors, including parenting, peer relationships, school environments, and cultural contexts, to influence moral emotional development. Therefore, moral emotions should be understood as the product of a multidimensional developmental process involving continuous interactions between individual and environmental factors.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this literature review is a Systematic Review, which aims to map the literature and identify research gaps within the area of study. The framework applied in conducting the systematic review follows the PRISMA for Systematic Reviews guidelines, which serve as a method to improve the quality assurance of the completeness of the structure and process of a systematic review. PRISMA for Systematic Reviews is selected because it provides detailed guidance in the preparation of a systematic review. The research question in this review is: what factors shape moral emotions in children and adolescents? Subsequently, the researchers determine the search terms and design the search protocol. The search terms are derived from the research question and expanded into related terms to create a comprehensive list of keywords. The keywords used in this review are "moral emotions," "factors of moral emotions," "adolescence," and "childhood."

These keywords are used to search for articles in the Google Scholar database. In the next stage, all identified articles are checked for duplication using Rayyan. The researchers then screen all articles that pass the duplication check based on their titles and abstracts. Articles that pass the title and abstract screening are further analyzed through a full-text review. After the selection process, 13 articles discussing factors that shape moral emotions in children are identified from the initial 200 articles retrieved. The journal selection process is illustrated in the flowchart presented in the figure below. The inclusion criteria in this review are as follows: (1) articles discuss factors that shape moral emotions in children and adolescents; (2) participants are children and adolescents aged 4–20 years; (3) the studies employ quantitative or qualitative research methods; (4) the articles are published in English or Indonesian; and (5) the studies are conducted between 2020 and 2025.

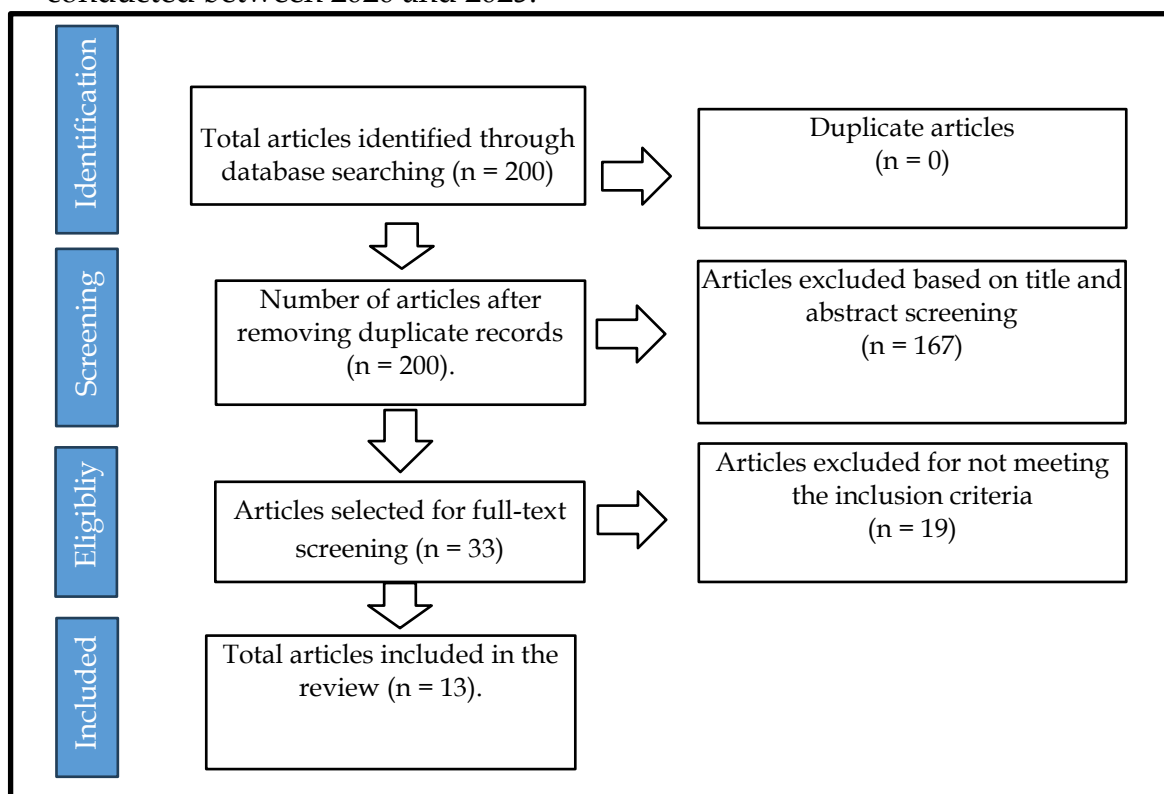


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Selection Process

RESULTS

The results of this systematic literature review indicate that moral emotions in children and adolescents develop through a complex, gradual, and multidimensional process involving interactions between internal and external factors. Moral emotions such as empathy, guilt, and shame function as internal systems that connect moral standards with actual behavior, thereby playing an important role in directing social behavior and supporting individuals' psychological well-being (Wang, 2026). This finding is consistent with the perspective of Tangney et al. (2007), which emphasizes that moral emotions serve as a primary mechanism in regulating social behavior. In addition, the social

intuitionist approach explains that moral responses are often driven by rapid emotional reactions before more rational cognitive processes occur (Haidt, 2003).

Table 1. Brief information table of studies included in the systematic review

No	Author/Year	Population	Factors Shaping Moral Emotions
1	Appalanaidu et al. (2023)	Children aged 7–11 years; adolescents aged 12–18 years	Age Empathy Family socialization social interaction
2	Ashfaq et al, (2025)	Adolescents aged 12–19 years (N = 300)	Parental care and parental control gender
3	Bajovic & Rizzo (2021)	Adolescents aged 14–20 years	Cognitive moral development emotional regulation social experiences
4	Dos Santos et al. (2020)	Children aged 8–10 years	Parenting practices child temperament
5	Hasegawa et al. (2021)	Children aged 5–6 years and 8–9 years	Age causal understanding emotions emotional causal understanding social perspective-taking
6	swinarti & Laily (2024)	Junior high school students aged 12–15 years (N = 30)	Play experiences peer interactions moral reflection
7	Kingsford et al. (2021)	Children aged 7 and 9 years	Moral identity Age type of transgression
8	Marici et al. (2023)	Adolescents aged 14–20 years (N = 230)	Violence Neglect environment
9	Nunner & Sodian (2020)	Children aged 4–10 years	Age moral norms social experiences
10	Ricon & Katz (2024)	Adolescents aged 12–18 years (N = 180)	Attachment Empathy cognition
11	Strauß & Bondü (2021)	Children aged 5–12 years (N = 1,329)	Justice sensitivity Mpathy age
12	Sun Caiping & Ge Dandan	Children and adolescents aged 9–18 years	Age Gender amily, and school
13	Wilke & Goagoses (2023)	Children and adolescents	Empathy perspective-taking social context

DISCUSSION

At the most fundamental level, age development and cognitive maturity become the primary foundations in the formation of moral emotions. As children grow older, they become more capable of understanding cause-and-effect relationships in social situations and develop perspective-taking abilities, namely the ability to view situations from another person's perspective. This ability

enables the emergence of moral emotions such as guilt when social norms are violated (Nunner & Sodian, 2020). This finding is also supported by Hasegawa et al. (2021), who demonstrate that causal understanding and social perspective-taking are directly associated with the emergence of moral emotions in children. Furthermore, cognitive moral development theory explains that cognitive maturity enables individuals to internalize moral norms in a more abstract manner (Kohlberg, 1984).

At the affective level, empathy becomes the primary emotional factor underlying the development of moral emotions. Empathy enables individuals to understand and share the emotional conditions of others, thereby encouraging moral responses such as guilt and prosocial behavior (Ashfaq et al., 2022). This relationship is reinforced by Malti and Krettenauer (2013), who show that moral emotion attributions are closely associated with prosocial behavior and the regulation of antisocial behavior. From a developmental perspective, empathy consists of affective and cognitive components that gradually develop from childhood onward (Eisenberg et al., 2006). In addition, the development of empathy is influenced by interactions among biological factors, social experiences, and family environments (Sultan & Khan, 2025). Family conditions, including parental mental health, also play a role in shaping the quality of children's empathy (Luczejko et al., 2024). This finding indicates that empathy is not merely an individual ability, but also the result of an ongoing relational process.

In addition to empathy, emotional regulation becomes an important component in the formation of moral emotions. Emotional regulation enables individuals to manage emotional responses adaptively in moral situations, such as transforming feelings of guilt into motivation to correct mistakes. Individuals with effective emotional regulation tend to demonstrate more constructive moral responses (Appalanaidu, 2023). Conversely, difficulties in emotional regulation may hinder empathy and increase maladaptive emotional responses (Israeli-Ran et al., 2025). Other studies also show that emotional regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal are associated with improved psychological well-being, whereas rumination worsens emotional conditions (Gross, 2015). These findings strengthen the argument that the quality of moral emotions is determined not only by the type of emotion experienced, but also by the way individuals manage those emotions.

At the dispositional level, individual characteristics such as personality, self-regulation, and justice sensitivity also influence variations in moral emotions. Individuals with high justice sensitivity tend to be more aware of norm violations and demonstrate stronger emotional responses (Strauß & Bondü, 2021). In addition, self-regulation abilities play an important role in directing individuals to act in accordance with moral values despite conflicting personal impulses (Ritgens et al., 2025). The concept of moral identity also becomes increasingly important, particularly during adolescence, because individuals begin to integrate moral values into their self-concept (Blasi, 2004). Thus, moral emotions are not only reactive in nature, but also become part of an individual's identity.

Family environment factors also play a highly significant role in shaping moral emotions. Warm, responsive, and supportive relationships between parents

and children increase empathy and adaptive guilt (Ricon & Katz, 2024). In contrast, parenting styles characterized by pressure or low responsiveness may hinder the development of moral emotions (Thomson et al., 2025). Attachment theory further explains that secure attachment relationships provide the emotional foundation for children to understand and respond to the emotions of others in a healthy manner (Bowlby, 1988). Moreover, inductive parenting approaches, which involve explaining the moral consequences of children's behavior, are proven to effectively enhance the internalization of moral values (Hoffman, 2000).

Social environments such as peer groups and schools also play an important role in the formation of moral emotions. Social interactions, moral discussions, and shared reflections help children understand the emotional consequences of their actions (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). Play experiences, particularly games involving cooperation and social rules, also contribute to the development of empathy and moral sensitivity (Iswinarti & Laily, 2024). In addition, social-emotional learning programs implemented in schools are proven to effectively improve empathy, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior (Sultan & Khan, 2025). These findings indicate that social environments provide real contexts in which children practice and internalize moral emotions.

In a broader context, culture also influences how moral emotions are formed and expressed. Collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize emotions such as shame and empathy that are oriented toward social harmony (Mesquita & Walker, 2003). In contrast, individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on guilt associated with personal responsibility (Mesquita & Walker, 2003). Furthermore, cross-cultural studies demonstrate that social norms and cultural values influence how individuals interpret moral situations and the emotional responses that emerge (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This finding confirms that moral emotions are not entirely universal, but are influenced by socio-cultural contexts.

In addition to these general factors, the review also identifies more specific and unique factors. Negative experiences such as violence and neglect may hinder the development of moral emotions and increase the risk of maladaptive emotional responses (Marici et al., 2023). During adolescence, moral identity becomes increasingly important because moral emotions begin to integrate into individuals' self-concepts (Kingsford et al., 2021). Furthermore, moral reflection abilities and repeated social experiences strengthen the internalization of moral values (Sun & Ge, 2025). Recent studies also show that moral emotions such as gratitude and forgiveness contribute to improving psychological well-being and social relationships (Toiu-Ruiu & Stănculescu, 2026). These findings indicate that moral emotions function not only within the context of morality, but also have broader implications for mental health.

Overall, these findings indicate that moral emotions develop through a dynamic and continuous process involving interactions among cognitive development, empathy, emotional regulation, dispositional factors, family environment, social interactions, and cultural context. Therefore, the formation of moral emotions does not depend on a single factor, but rather represents the integration of various interconnected aspects throughout child and adolescent development. A holistic approach that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social

aspects becomes essential for understanding and optimally developing moral emotions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this systematic literature review, it can be concluded that moral emotions in children and adolescents do not emerge instantly, but develop through a gradual developmental process. Age development and cognitive maturity become the initial foundations in the formation of moral emotions, in which moral understanding precedes emotional internalization. In addition, empathy and emotional regulation play important roles in determining the quality of moral emotional responses that emerge in morally charged situations.

The findings also indicate the presence of dispositional factors that influence individual variations in moral emotions, such as justice sensitivity and personality characteristics. These factors may strengthen or hinder the emergence of adaptive moral emotions. On the other hand, social and educational environments provide important contexts for children and adolescents to experience, reflect upon, and emotionally internalize moral values.

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to implement warm, responsive, and consistent parenting practices, as well as inductive approaches, to support children's empathy, emotional regulation, and internalization of moral values. Harsh and inconsistent parenting practices should be avoided. Furthermore, maintaining secure attachment, open communication, and emotional support, as well as strengthening collaboration between families and educational environments, becomes important in optimizing the development of moral emotions in children and adolescents.

FURTHER STUDY

This systematic literature review highlights the importance of age and cognitive development as the primary foundations of moral emotions in children and adolescents. Future reviews are encouraged to include a broader range of international databases and publication periods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of developmental factors influencing moral emotions. In addition, future empirical studies should further examine how age-related developmental changes interact with other factors, such as empathy, emotion regulation, and family and social environments, in shaping moral emotions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, for providing academic support throughout the completion of this study. The authors also appreciate all researchers whose published works contributed to this systematic literature review. Their valuable findings have provided the foundation for synthesizing current evidence regarding the factors shaping moral emotions in children and adolescents. Finally, the authors extend their gratitude to the reviewers and

editors for their constructive comments and suggestions, which have helped improve the quality of this manuscript.

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