



## Causes of Bullying and Strategies for Prevention in Pesantren: A Holistic Approach to Creating an Inclusive Environment

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### Abstrak

This study examines the factors contributing to bullying in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and proposes solutions to address the issue. Using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document studies involving pesantren administrators, teachers, senior and junior students, and parents of Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah 2, Jombang. Findings reveal that despite pesantren promoting high moral values, bullying persists in verbal, physical, and emotional forms. Key contributing factors include (1) rigid social hierarchy, (2) inadequate supervision, (3) masculinity-driven culture fostering aggression, (4) lack of education on diversity and empathy, (5) power imbalances between teachers and students, and (6) limited awareness of bullying's long-term impact. To address this, the study recommends adopting a child-friendly boarding school model that prioritizes students' psychological and social well-being. Proposed solutions include holistic education on justice, empathy, and diversity, along with clear, consistent anti-bullying policies. Strengthening communication among teachers, administrators, students, and parents is also essential. This study contributes to developing more inclusive and empathetic educational policies to create a bullying-free pesantren environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a social phenomenon that has garnered global attention, including in Indonesia. According to data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), there has been a significant increase in bullying cases, both in general schools and Islamic boarding schools

(pesantren). KPAI data (2023) indicates that more than 50% of reported bullying cases occur in educational environments, encompassing various forms such as verbal intimidation, physical violence, and emotional harassment. This statistic suggests that bullying is not merely an individual issue, but also a systemic

challenge within the educational sector as a whole (Olweus, 1994).

In pesantren, bullying manifests in various forms, including verbal intimidation, physical violence, and emotional or social harassment. Previous studies have identified factors contributing to the high prevalence of bullying in pesantren, including the existence of a rigid social hierarchy among students, the dominance of masculinity culture that often triggers aggressive behavior, inadequate supervision by administrators, and a lack of education on diversity and empathy (Finiswati & Matulesy, 2018; Hafidzi, Nurdin, & Lutfi, 2024). Furthermore, the power imbalance between senior and junior students, as well as between teachers (ustaz) and students, exacerbates the situation (Yusuf, 2019; Hamid, 2022). The hierarchical structure in pesantren, while often viewed as a part of discipline learning, in some cases may lead to exploitation and intimidation of younger or weaker students (Marthunis & Authar, 2017).

A unique aspect of bullying in pesantren lies in its intersection with educational philosophy and cultural dynamics. For example, Al-Zarnuji (2015), in his classical work *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, emphasizes the importance of respect and discipline in learning. However, when misapplied or misunderstood, such principles may inadvertently justify harmful hierarchical practices, leading to exploitation and bullying. This indicates a need to reframe traditional values within a modern, child-friendly framework to ensure discipline

aligns with the protection of students' rights.

The impact of bullying in pesantren is not only directly experienced by the victims, such as mental health disturbances, long-term trauma, and decreased self-esteem, but also affects the learning environment itself. A pesantren environment tainted by bullying behaviors has the potential to undermine core values such as justice, empathy, and respect for others—values that should serve as the foundation for the development of student character (Nugroho et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Ali, 2021).

Additionally, Lam and Liu (2007) underscore the importance of understanding bullying as a dynamic process influenced by the internal and external environments of educational institutions. Although conducted in a different cultural context, their findings highlight the significance of addressing the root causes of bullying, such as rigid power dynamics and the absence of open communication, which are also applicable to pesantren. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2004) found that exposure to media violence and peer influence play a role in fostering bullying behaviors, suggesting the need for comprehensive education that fosters empathy and self-control in pesantren settings.

However, research on bullying in pesantren remains relatively limited. Most existing studies focus on bullying in general education settings, with only a few examining the specific social, cultural, and religious dynamics unique to pesantren. This study is relevant because pesantren, as one of the largest religious-based

educational institutions in Indonesia, plays a crucial role in shaping the character of the nation's youth. Given the rising number of bullying cases in pesantren and their impact on the educational system, there is a need for a more systematic and empathy-based approach to address this issue.

Several studies have previously addressed aspects of bullying in pesantren. Distina and Primalita (2019) highlight the importance of anti-bullying programs involving caretakers and teachers to create a safer pesantren culture, though they did not specifically integrate the concept of child-friendly pesantren as part of a preventive strategy. Ernawati (2022), Fitri & Haryanto (2020) explored the psychological effects of bullying on students, noting mental health issues such as stress and anxiety, yet this study did not discuss holistic intervention measures. Fadilah, Ariantini, and Ningsih (2023) examined the causes of bullying and prevention measures, but they did not incorporate the inclusive approach of child-friendly pesantren. Marthunis and Authar (2017) identified the causes of bullying from the cultural perspective of pesantren and religious education, but they did not systematically address the implementation of child-friendly pesantren policies. Meanwhile, Arif et al (2024) provided a comprehensive analysis of the causes of bullying, but did not link prevention strategies specifically to child-friendly pesantren policies.

This study aims to enrich existing literature by offering a new perspective that integrates the child-friendly pesantren concept as a holistic solution to prevent

and address bullying in pesantren. By combining educational, psychological, and policy approaches into a single framework, this study is expected to make a significant contribution to creating a safe, inclusive pesantren environment that supports the holistic development of student character (Hafidzi, Nurdin, & Lutfi, 2024; Rigby, 2002).

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to deeply explore the phenomenon of bullying in Islamic boarding school (pesantren) environments. The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' experiences and perceptions of bullying, which are difficult to uncover through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive method is used to depict the factors contributing to bullying, the forms of bullying that occur, and its impact on students at Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah 2, Jombang. This pesantren was selected due to its character and traditional curriculum, which emphasizes moral development and discipline.

The subjects of the study were selected using purposive sampling, a technique where participants are deliberately chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2002). The study participants included 10 students, evenly split between male and female students, selected based on their direct involvement in or witnessing of bullying incidents. In addition, five ustaz/ustazah (teachers) with experience in handling bullying-related cases, and two pesantren caregivers

responsible for managing the pesantren and fostering moral development, were also included. This selection aimed to gather relevant data on bullying in this particular pesantren context.

Data were collected using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with students, ustaz/ustazah, and caregivers to explore their perceptions of bullying at the pesantren, its contributing factors, and potential solutions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring pertinent topics. Direct observation was carried out to note social interactions among students, particularly in everyday situations such as during learning activities, play, and worship. This observation focused on understanding group dynamics and behavior patterns indicative of bullying. Document analysis was also conducted to examine internal pesantren policies on bullying prevention, as well as information from journals, social media, and news coverage regarding bullying incidents in pesantren (Merriam, 2009).

The data collected through these techniques were systematically processed. After transcribing the interviews and observations verbatim, the data were coded to identify key themes related to the phenomenon of bullying (Saldana, 2016). The resulting codes were grouped into categories according to the research focus, such as the causes of bullying, forms of bullying, and suggested preventive measures. Data analysis was conducted using the Group Dynamics Theory,

developed by Lewin (1947), which emphasizes the influence of group norms and peer pressure on individual behavior. This theory is particularly relevant for understanding how social pressures in pesantren environments, such as group norms and power relations, contribute to bullying (Forsyth, 2010).

Through data analysis, this study aims to uncover the relationships between group norms, peer pressure, and students' involvement in bullying. The findings will be interpreted to provide practical recommendations that pesantren can implement to create a safer environment conducive to the development of students' character. Thus, this research not only contributes theoretically to the study of bullying in pesantren but also offers practical solutions for addressing bullying in this specific educational context.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study identifies six main factors contributing to the occurrence of bullying in pesantren. These factors involve individual, systemic, and cultural aspects that are interrelated in shaping the dynamics of social interaction within the pesantren environment:

### **A Strong Hierarchy within the Pesantren**

The prominent hierarchical structure within pesantren creates an imbalance of power between senior and junior students. In practice, this power discrepancy is often exploited to intimidate or manipulate younger students. The traditional respect for seniority frequently masks behaviors that could be classified as bullying. However, the hierarchical structure itself

can contribute to bullying, especially when the inherent power imbalances are poorly managed. The question arises: does a strong hierarchy in pesantren lead to bullying? The answer is yes, a robust hierarchy can indeed be a contributing factor. A senior student typically enjoys more influence and authority than their junior counterparts. In certain situations, this authority can be used to exert pressure, coerce, or even exploit junior students. For example, actions such as assigning excessive tasks, intimidating others, or treating younger students harshly often occur under the guise of instilling discipline or showing respect to seniors (Alimi & Rahman, 2020).

In pesantren settings, respect for seniority is not just a norm, but also an integral part of the tradition that is highly regarded. This respect may foster an environment where behaviors that should be recognized as bullying are overlooked or even normalized (Bashir & Yusuf, 2023). Moreover, victims of bullying often hesitate to report incidents due to fears of social exclusion or retaliation from the institution, which tends to support the hierarchical system (Azizah & Habibi, 2022). The strong hierarchy may also fuel discriminatory behaviors toward students who are perceived as different, whether in terms of physical appearance, social background, or personality. Those who struggle to conform to the expectations of the dominant group often become targets of bullying. Power imbalance creates significant barriers for victims to resist or seek justice (Khalid & Noor, 2022; Rahim & Hasibuan, 2020).

It is crucial for pesantren to acknowledge the potential abuse of this hierarchical structure and take concrete preventive measures. Such measures include: character education and social awareness, which should integrate respect for diversity and equality in the pesantren curriculum; clear anti-bullying policies, including safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable (Abubakar et al., 2021; Kartini & Asnawi, 2019); training for caretakers and teachers to recognize signs of bullying and handle such situations effectively, without reinforcing problematic hierarchical norms (Ahmad & Sulaiman, 2023); and proactive supervision, focusing on interactions between students, especially in environments where seniority is often used to justify dominance, to minimize bullying (Munirah & Zainuddin, 2021).

By adopting these approaches, pesantren can harness the existing hierarchical structure as a tool for positive character and moral development, while preventing the misuse of power that could create an unsafe environment for all parties. This study underscores that while hierarchy is an integral part of pesantren tradition, wise management oriented towards social justice can transform it into an instrument that promotes inclusivity and character development (Bawani, 1993; Usman & Karim, 2021).

### **Lack of Supervision**

Inadequate supervision by teaching staff or management is one of the significant factors enabling bullying to occur within the pesantren environment. The absence of sufficient oversight creates

gaps that allow bullying behaviors to develop undetected or even be ignored. This factor presents a serious challenge, particularly in pesantren facing limited human resources and insufficient attention to the interpersonal dynamics among students. The question arises: can bullying in pesantren be attributed to insufficient supervision by management? The answer is yes; lack of supervision can indeed contribute to bullying. Weak oversight provides space for bullying to take place in various forms and situations, as explained below:

First, the lack of intervention from teachers or staff due to insufficient supervision may result in failure to recognize bullying incidents among students. This situation often leaves victims feeling unsafe, unprotected, and without the support they need. The absence of authority figures who can offer protection allows bullies to continue their behavior without fear of consequences (Sari & Wahyuni, 2019; Bashir & Yusuf, 2023).

Second, the minimal enforcement of anti-bullying policies is another outcome of weak supervision. Lack of consistency or the absence of sanctions against bullying behaviors creates the perception among students that such actions are acceptable or have no consequences. This, in turn, reinforces a bullying culture within the pesantren (Khalid & Noor, 2022).

Third, hidden spaces within the pesantren, such as quiet corridors, bathrooms, or areas far from direct supervision, become potential sites for bullying. These areas often go unmonitored by management, giving

perpetrators the opportunity to act undetected (Abubakar et al., 2021).

Finally, the discomfort in reporting bullying incidents is prevalent, as students may feel reluctant or fearful to report bullying, especially if they believe that teaching staff or management is indifferent or absent when needed. This discomfort exacerbates the situation, as bullying behaviors can persist without any preventative measures or intervention (Rahim & Hasibuan, 2020; Munirah & Zainuddin, 2021).

It is evident that proper supervision, including clear policies and active involvement from staff and management, is essential to prevent bullying. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, increasing awareness of bullying behaviors, and fostering a safe and supportive environment for students are necessary steps to mitigate these issues (Alimi & Rahman, 2020; Kartini & Asnawi, 2019).

### **Excessive Masculinity Culture**

In some pesantren, an overly masculine culture can foster behaviors that support physical dominance and intimidation, particularly towards students who are perceived as "weak" or different. An intriguing question related to excessive masculinity culture in pesantren in Indonesia is whether bullying in Indonesian pesantren is indeed caused by an excessive masculinity culture. While excessive masculinity may not always be the sole cause, it can be one of the contributing factors to bullying in pesantren in Indonesia. In some pesantren, a culture that emphasizes physical dominance and violence as signs of

masculinity can create an environment where intimidating or harassing behavior is perceived as normal or even acceptable. Several ways in which excessive masculinity culture can play a role in fostering bullying in pesantren include:

- a. Normalization of violence in pesantren by prioritizing achievement over aggression. A culture that glorifies violence or aggression as a hallmark of masculinity can influence how students interact with one another. This can make bullying behaviors, such as intimidation or harassment, more likely to occur, as they are seen as ways to display strength or dominance (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009).
- b. Stigma against emotional needs that need to be addressed. A culture that views the expression of emotions or emotional needs as a sign of weakness can make students who are victims of bullying feel ashamed or uncomfortable seeking help or reporting the bullying they experience. This stigma can perpetuate a cycle where bullying continues unchallenged (Rahim & Hasibuan, 2020; Usman & Karim, 2021).
- c. Reframing respect for physical strength as respect for achievement
- d. An excessive masculinity culture can place high value on physical strength and the ability to dominate others. This can lead to bullying behavior towards weaker or physically different students, as those who feel the need to prove their masculinity may do so by oppressing others (Bashir & Yusuf, 2023; Kartini & Asnawi, 2019).

Although excessive masculinity culture can contribute to bullying in pesantren, it is important to remember that each case of bullying is complex and may be caused by a variety of interrelated factors. Moreover, not all pesantren in Indonesia share the same culture, and there are many other factors that must be considered when understanding the causes of bullying in different pesantren contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a holistic approach to preventing and addressing bullying in pesantren, which includes teaching values of justice, empathy, and respect for diversity, as well as enforcing clear and consistent anti-bullying policies (Ahmad & Sulaiman, 2023; Sari & Wahyuni, 2019).

### **Lack of Education on Diversity and Empathy in Pesantren**

Education on diversity and empathy plays a crucial role in shaping behaviors that are respectful and supportive of others. In the context of pesantren, a lack of attention to these aspects can give rise to serious challenges, such as intolerance, discrimination, and even bullying. Pesantren environments that do not prioritize education on diversity and empathy are more likely to develop unhealthy social dynamics among students. Is this the case? This provocative question is worth exploring to uncover how the absence of education on diversity and empathy in pesantren can contribute to bullying. Indeed, pesantren that do not prioritize these areas can become environments where bullying thrives. Education on diversity and empathy plays a strategic role in fostering awareness of the importance of respecting differences

and developing harmonious interpersonal relationships. Below are some ways in which a lack of education on diversity and empathy can support the emergence of bullying in pesantren:

- a. Limited understanding of diversity. Pesantren that do not provide education on diversity often fail to help students understand and respect individual differences, which may include religion, culture, ethnicity, and social background. This inability to appreciate diversity creates a space for tension and prejudice among students who are different from one another. Ultimately, this may lead to bullying as a response to discomfort with those differences (Bashir & Yusuf, 2023).
- b. Indifference to others' feelings. A lack of education on empathy makes students less sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others. This insensitivity can make it difficult for them to recognize the negative impact of their actions on others. In such situations, bullying behaviors may emerge because the perpetrators are unaware of, or indifferent to, the emotional harm caused to the victims (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009; Usman & Karim, 2021).
- c. Lack of positive interactions among students. Pesantren that do not encourage positive interaction among students tend to have a cold and unsupportive social environment. The inability to create strong emotional bonds and a sense of social responsibility toward one another increases the risk of bullying. The absence of positive engagement

worsens the potential for conflicts and creates openings for aggressive and intimidating behaviors (Kartini & Asnawi, 2019).

- d. Unhealthy culture and norms. In environments where unhealthy norms prevail without explicit efforts to promote tolerance, respect for differences, and the rejection of discrimination, such norms can thrive. In such settings, bullying behavior is often considered normal, accepted, or even supported by certain groups. This permissive culture becomes a supporting factor for the persistence of bullying in pesantren (Khalid & Noor, 2022; Rahim & Hasibuan, 2020).

Thus, the lack of education on diversity and empathy in pesantren not only hinders the development of respectful relationships but also creates an environment where bullying is more likely to occur. Addressing these gaps in education can significantly contribute to reducing bullying and fostering a more inclusive and supportive community.

### **Power Imbalance**

The imbalance of power between ustaz (teachers) and santri (students), as well as between senior and junior students, can exacerbate the problem of bullying. When ustaz or administrators are aware of bullying behaviors but fail to take appropriate action, they send a message to the students that such behavior is acceptable or overlooked. Is it true that the imbalance of power between ustaz and santri, as well as between seniors and juniors, can lead to bullying? Yes, an imbalance of power can contribute to the occurrence of bullying in pesantren. The



unequal power dynamics create an environment where those in positions of greater authority are more likely to exploit or oppress those beneath them in the hierarchy

To prevent bullying arising from power imbalances in pesantren, it is crucial to strengthen monitoring and intervention systems that ensure no abuse of power occurs. This could include training for staff and ustaz on recognizing signs of bullying, enforcing clear and fair anti-bullying policies, and creating a supportive environment where santri feel safe and empowered to report bullying incidents without fear of repercussions. Additionally, promoting values such as respect for diversity, empathy, and fairness is essential in reducing the power gaps that may trigger bullying behaviors in pesantren.

### **Lack of Awareness about the Long-Term Impact of Bullying in Pesantren**

Bullying in pesantren environments has consequences that extend far beyond the immediate impact on victims. Without adequate awareness of the long-term implications, such behavior can take root and become part of the pesantren's culture, affecting the lives of santri, administrators, and the overall reputation of the pesantren. The lack of awareness among pesantren administrators regarding the long-term effects of bullying often leads to insufficient prevention efforts and inadequate responses to bullying incidents.

Long-Term Impacts of Bullying in Pesantren:

- a. Psychological Effects on Victims.  
Bullying has profound and lasting

psychological effects on victims. Research indicates that victims of bullying are vulnerable to anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. If pesantren administrators fail to recognize these serious consequences, they may underestimate the importance of taking preventive and corrective actions against bullying.

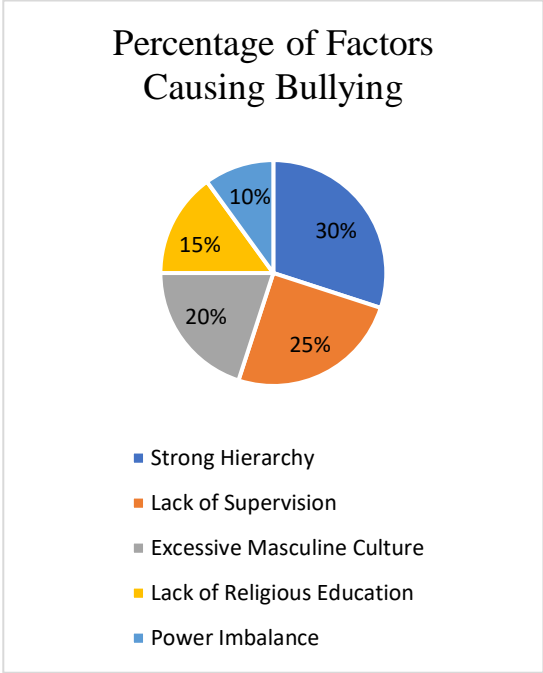
- b. Impact on Pesantren Culture. When administrators fail to address the social dynamics within the pesantren, a permissive culture toward bullying may develop. Norms that support or even allow intimidation to become a regular part of daily life in pesantren create an environment that is detrimental to the moral and personal development of santri.
- c. Difficulty Recognizing the Signs of Bullying. A lack of awareness about the signs of bullying often leads pesantren administrators to fail in identifying early indicators of this issue. This might include signs like social withdrawal, changes in study habits, or increased interpersonal conflicts. Failure to recognize these signs leads to delayed or non-existent responses to the problem.
- d. Legal Implications for Pesantren. In addition to the psychological and cultural impacts, bullying also has legal consequences. Child protection laws and education regulations mandate that administrators ensure the safety and well-being of santri. A lack of understanding of these legal responsibilities can make pesantren

vulnerable to lawsuits and damage their reputation.

**Percentage of Factors Causing Bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools**

The pie chart displays the proportion of each factor contributing to bullying in Islamic boarding schools based on the analysis results.

**Figure 1.** Factors Causing Bullying in Pesantren



**Case Example:** A junior student was ordered by a senior student to complete a strenuous task outside of study hours. When the junior student refused, they were verbally and physically intimidated. There was no supervision in the area, and when the incident was reported, the management regarded it as "part of the learning process".

**Tabel 1.** Types of Bullying in Pesantren

Types of Bullying	Examples of Behavior	Impact on the Victim
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Physical	Hitting, pushing, taking belongings	Physical injury, trauma, fear
Verbal	Mocking, insulting, spreading rumors	Shame, low self-esteem, depression
Social	Excluding, spreading gossip, damaging social relationships	Social isolation, loss of trust
Cyber	Insulting or spreading hate through social media	Mental distress, excessive stress
Systemic	Coercion of excessive tasks by seniors	Injustice, frustration

**Case Context:** At Pesantren X, a senior student frequently asked junior students to wash clothes and clean his room. When a junior student refused, he was threatened with being publicly humiliated in front of his peers. As a result, the junior student felt stressed and uncomfortable living at the pesantren.

- Resolution Steps:**
- Intervention by Ustaz/Ustazah: Provide mediation and education to both the perpetrator and the victim.
  - Prevention Program: Conduct workshops on bullying awareness.
  - Supervision: Enhance control over student activities.

## CONCLUSION

This study identifies six key factors contributing to bullying in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia: a strong hierarchical structure, lack of supervision by administrators, dominance of a masculinity culture, minimal education on diversity and empathy, power imbalance between administrators and students, and lack of awareness about the long-term effects of bullying. These factors were identified through in-depth interviews with pesantren administrators, teachers, and students at Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah 2, Jombang, as well as direct observation of the patterns of interaction and daily dynamics at the pesantren. Additionally, literature reviews from Islamic Education Values and Practices (2020), Studied such as Setiawan et al. (2023) discussing pesantren, and reports support the findings of this research.

The study's findings indicate that bullying has severe consequences for the victims, including psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. These effects also extend to the overall culture of the pesantren, threatening the values of justice, inclusivity, and harmony that should form the foundation of religious educational institutions. This is further corroborated by interview data from bullying victims at Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah 2, who reported long-term traumatic experiences, as well as direct observations documenting interaction patterns that support bullying practices. Additionally, the lack of awareness among administrators regarding their legal responsibilities

concerning bullying, as highlighted in Syukri's study (2021), exacerbates the situation and delays the adoption of preventive measures.

As a solution, this study recommends transforming pesantren into child-friendly boarding schools through a holistic approach that integrates the teaching of empathy, diversity, and justice into the curriculum and daily life at the pesantren. This approach is based on observational findings showing that students in supportive and nurturing educational environments have better psychological well-being. Clear and consistent policies and procedures must be implemented to address bullying, accompanied by training for administrators and staff to recognize the signs of bullying and understand its impact. Furthermore, strengthening religious values from the books taught at pesantren, such as the Kitab Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, when applied contextually, can serve as a foundation for building a supportive and bullying-free culture.

This finding makes a significant contribution to the literature on education in pesantren, particularly in creating a safe and inclusive environment for students. This study provides practical recommendations that can be implemented by pesantren, including improving open communication between all stakeholders, strengthening supervision, and encouraging the establishment of an effective early intervention system. By doing so, pesantren can play a role as an educational institution that not only emphasizes religious values but also serves as a learning space that supports the

psychological and social well-being of all students.

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