

DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN CREATING CHILD-FRIENDLY MASJID: PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The masjid should be an inclusive and welcoming space for all, including children as integral members of the jamā'ah (congregation). In Malaysia, while acceptance of children in masjids has improved, many parents still face challenges related to design inadequacies, management gaps, and social attitudes. This study aims to explore parental experiences and identify the key design and management challenges in creating child-friendly masjids. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve parents who regularly bring their children to the masjid. The interviews were transcribed, translated, and analysed using NVivo 12 through a deductive thematic approach to categorise emerging challenges. Findings indicate that parents' struggles cluster into three interconnected domains: physical – inadequate spatial layout, lack of child zones, and poor safety features; social – negative perceptions and intolerance among some congregants; and management – inconsistent policies, weak supervision, and insufficient facilities. Despite these obstacles, parents remain dedicated to introducing their children to religious life, underscoring a strong commitment to nurturing faith and communal belonging. The study concludes that effective masjid design must integrate child-friendly features such as designated yet visually connected zones, safe circulation, and acoustic treatments, complemented by responsive management and community engagement. These strategies can enhance the masjid's function as a nurturing space for families, reinforcing its role as both a spiritual and social hub. These findings contribute to developing inclusive design and management guidelines that promote holistic community participation.

Keywords: parental challenges, spatial planning, user experience, facility management, semi-structured interview

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child-friendly masjid is a recurring topic of public interest that often arises during the month of Ramadhan. Many blogs and social media posts highlight this issue because the number of children attending the masjid is particularly high at this time. In response, several masjids in Malaysia have begun preparing dedicated areas or rooms and organising activities for children while their parents perform the night prayer (*tarāwīḥ*). Thirteen masjids in the Klang Valley are recognised as child-friendly, encouraging parents to bring their children. These masjids even provide special nurseries during *tarāwīḥ*. Various writers acknowledge such proactive efforts by masjids' management (Musleh, 2019).

However, beyond Ramadhan, most masjids discontinue these facilities. Nurseries and play activities for children

are no longer available when parents participate in congregational prayer and other programs. Other *jamā'ah* may also expect children to remain silent and disciplined, which can lead to tension. Consequently, many parents continue to face challenges when bringing their children to the masjid. Social media is filled with parents' accounts of unfortunate experiences, such as receiving unwelcome gestures from other congregants, having their children scolded, or even being asked to leave the main prayer hall altogether (Shameem, 2012; Ghafar, 2018; Azmi, 2019). These experiences highlight how social attitudes intersect with physical and managerial aspects of the masjid environment. Such incidents indicate that the issue is not merely behavioral but reflects deeper design and management shortcomings within masjid environments.

Despite growing public discourse, there remains a lack of systematic, empirical research that examines these design and management challenges through structured investigations in the Malaysian context. Masjid design plays a crucial role in shaping user comfort, safety, and inclusivity, and thoughtful space planning is essential to ensure that children and families can participate without causing disruption. Therefore, this study aims to explore the design and management challenges experienced by parents when bringing their children to the masjid, focusing on how spatial, social, and managerial factors influence the inclusivity and functionality of these sacred community spaces.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Khalifah can be described in two ways. *Khalifah* means deputy or steward, and it is also translated as vicegerent (Oxford Islamic Studies Online). This general description indicates that everyone is a *Khalifah* commanded by Allah SWT in verse 30, Surah Al Baqarah. "And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?' Allah said, 'Indeed, I know that which you do not know'". Therefore, every person is to hold the responsibility to care for humankind and the environment. Secondly, *Khalifah* is also used to address the head of state in a Caliphate era (www.vocabulary.com). After the passing of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Muslim community leaders were called *Khalifah*. They carried specific duties - political, administrative, and military. In Islam, shaping a child is the responsibility of the parents first, and then the society. How to shape a child is clearly outlined in the Al Quran, in Surah Luqman. Ten pieces of advice from Luqman (Quran for Kids) to his son can be excerpted from this surah, as shown in the following Figure 1.



Fig. 1: Ten gems of advice from Luqman to his son
(Source: <https://quranforkids.com/ten-advice-of-luqman/>)

They are the fundamentals in shaping the faith (*'aqīdah*) and behaviour (*akhlāq*) of a child. *'Aqīdah* is very important to be established for a child to understand his/her purpose in life. Good *akhlāq* would help to achieve the mission of a *Khalīfah*.

Parents must educate their children to know Allah SWT's greatness, and nothing can be associated with Allah. Cultivating the right *'aqīdah* (creed), building and strengthening the children's faith and belief in the Oneness of Allah SWT should be done. Hence, parents must prepare their children with the proper knowledge that will allow them to know the commands of Allah SWT and the Prophet (SAW). Such knowledge is known as *farḍ al-'ayn* knowledge (knowledge obligatory upon every Muslim). The *farḍ al-'ayn* knowledge is not limited to only reading Al-Quran, but it also encompasses knowledge of *'aqīdah* and all the aspects of *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) in the *farḍ al-'ayn* category.

With the basics of *'aqīdah*, children then need to be taught and trained to practice good *akhlāq*. One of these obligatory deeds is the establishment of prayers. Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam. Prayer is the act that connects the young *Khalīfah* to his God and is also a form of protection against disobedience (Hassan, 2007). One of the perfect ways to foster these values is by exposing the children to the masjid. Congregational prayer at the masjid will help the children familiarise themselves with the routine. Thus, child-friendly masjids allow children to participate in religious activities and provide a space for learning etiquette and religious values (Dahlan, 2024).

In conclusion, the most critical aspects of children's education as future *Khalīfah* are installing the right *'aqīdah* and *akhlāq*. Children should be taught how to be religious and to encourage religiosity and goodness within others. Being religious, doing good to others, and encouraging others to do so is in line with the concept in Islam known as *ṣāliḥ wa muṣliḥ*. A *Khalīfah* that embraces this concept will be successful in this mortal world and the hereafter.

Dr Abdullah Nasih Ulwan – the leading Muslim scholar on children's early education-mentioned three physical places for children's education: home, masjid, and school (Nasih Ulwan, 2015). As mentioned earlier, the responsibility for shaping a child is first the task of the parents and then the society. A home is the parents' domain, while the masjid and school are the domain of society. These three places must be well coordinated in support of the development of young *Khalīfah* as envisioned by Islam. Thus, there is a need to integrate child-friendly designs into the masjid as it is one of the public facilities to make the masjid more inclusive (Sudirman et al., 2024).

There are several studies found concerning the masjid and its practices in Malaysia. However, these researchers are not relevant because the focus is not on the practices or policies for accommodating families with children. They were on financial management (Mohamed Adil et al., 2013; Said et al., 2013), facilities management in supporting mosque function and propose the key drivers for an effective FM practice for mosque (Sapri et al., 2016), innovative management strategies for income generation effectiveness in organizing community engagement activities towards poverty alleviation and inclusion in their *qaryah* or locality (Ismail et al., 2024), and digitalization in mosque tourism management (Sutrisno et al., 2022). There is a study in Indonesia about maximizing mosques' contributions to the development of Muslim households, helping the government achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those that relate to a healthy, prosperous living and high-quality education (Muchtar and Billah, 2022). It may seem similar to the nature of child-friendly masjid research, however it is not. Thus, it can be established that there is a gap in the literature that requires child-friendly masjid research to be conducted.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

To explore the challenges faced by parents when bringing their children to the masjid, a set of semi-structured interviews often employs a mix of closed and open-ended questions with follow-up probes such as *why* or *how* (Adams, 2015). With the right questions, the interview can develop naturally, enabling respondents to share deeper insights in a conversational yet focused manner. The relatively informal nature of this approach helped respondents feel comfortable and encouraged open sharing of experiences.

Respondents were identified through a criterion-based purposive sampling approach, focusing on parents who regularly attend the masjid with their children. Two complementary strategies were employed. First, the

researchers contacted the management of selected masjids to identify congregation members known to frequently bring their children to prayer and community activities. Second, on-site observations were carried out to identify parents who attended the masjid with their children. These parents were approached and briefly asked about their attendance patterns and willingness to participate. They expressed strong motivation to be involved, eager to share the challenges they faced when bringing their children to the masjid and driven by a desire to contribute towards improving the masjid environment for families. Through this combined approach, a total of twelve parents who met the selection criteria consented to take part in the study. The total of twelve respondents was considered sufficient in capturing thematic depth in a focused and small-scale study of this kind due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the semi-structured interview method, which lies in obtaining rich, detailed, and contextual data. Data saturation – the point at which no new themes emerge – was observed within the twelve interviews.



Fig. 2 Sony IC Recorder

The interview was conducted in the Malay language and recorded using a Sony IC Recorder (ICD-PX440) - figure 2. The recorded interview was transcribed using online software (otranscribe.com) – *otranscribe*. The translation from Malay to the English language was done verbatim, along with the analysis process.

The questions prepared are based on the literature review conducted. They cover the reasons for bringing children to the masjid; the frequency of attending masjid with their children; masjid's facilities; the behaviour of children; *jamā'ah's* perception on the children; their consciousness on the importance of children going to the masjid in their young ages; children's safety; the roles of the parents concerning children at the masjid; and others which are related to children and masjid. Respondents are allowed to communicate more freely and to provide more detailed descriptions. Through the in-depth and semi-structured interview, additional questions were asked based on the answers and responses. The NVivo software is used to analyse the data, as the interview data is qualitative (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

4.0 RESULTS

NVivo version 12 is used to analyse the interview data, which is qualitative. The objective of the analysis is to identify the challenges faced by parents while bringing their children to the masjid.

4.1 Analysis approach

In analysing semi-structured interview data, the deductive analysis approach is considered the most appropriate (Hyde, 2000). Deductive analysis analyzes some general ideas into specific terms or themes (Pellissier, 2008). All data collected will be organised into the particular codes, and usually, codes or themes are prepared in advance. The summary of the deductive analysis process involved in the study is shown in Figure 3.

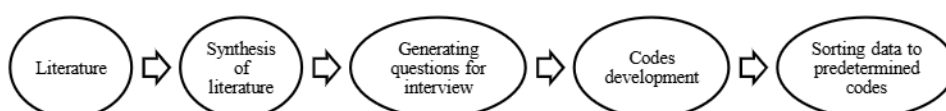


Fig. 3 The process of deductive analysis

There are three stages involved in this research. The first stage includes transcribing and translating the interview data. The second stage is inserting the transcription into the NVivo software, and this stage is where all the free codes develop into main themes. The third stage is managing and organising the codes to cross-reference all the codes created before. Figure 4 shows the details of the process.

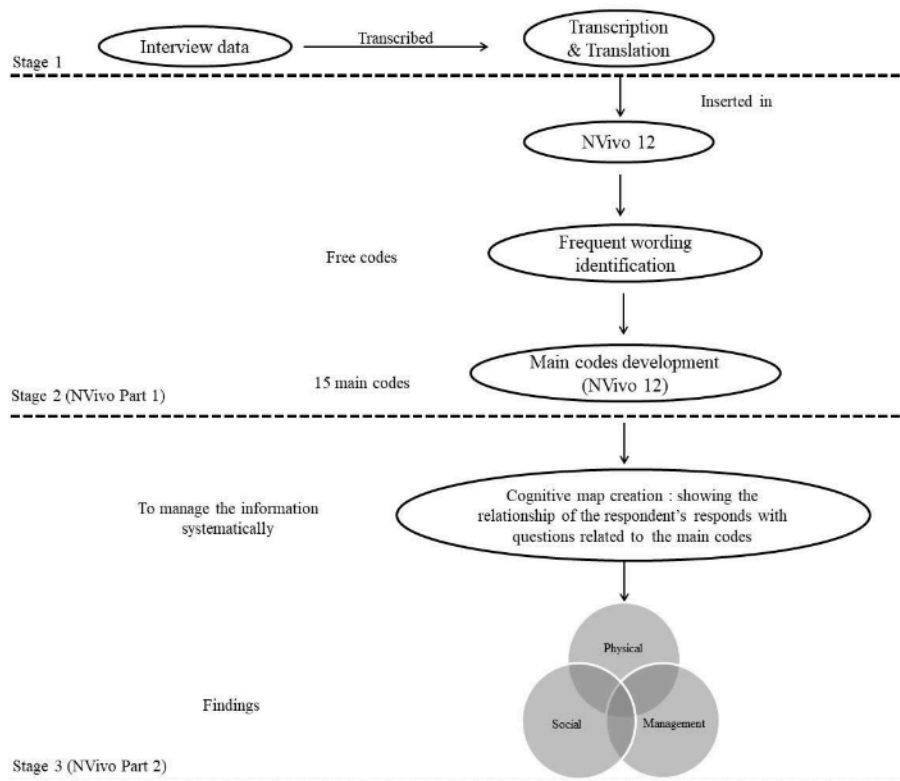


Fig. 4 Analysis process

The interview transcripts were inserted into the NVivo 12 (Figure 4 - stage 1). Free codes were listed before the codes before the related child codes (sub-nodes) were clustered to the main codes (main themes) in stage 2. Stage 3 involves the result of the analysis. It is presented using cognitive mapping and diagrams that served to identify the challenges faced by parents while bringing their children to the masjid.

The example of the coding development used in the analysis process is shown in Figure 5. The transcripts were filtered to analyse the content of the interview. Significant statements were captured and coded to represent the idea or information derived from the interviews (the deductive process).

Codes	
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Name
<input type="radio"/>	Awareness of children's issues at Masjid
<input type="radio"/>	CCTV as safety tools
<input type="radio"/>	Children
<input type="radio"/>	Comments on special space needed for children in masjid
<input type="radio"/>	Condition of existing space
<input type="radio"/>	Danger occurrence
<input type="radio"/>	Desired space for children
<input type="radio"/>	Efforts of masjid's management
<input type="radio"/>	Jemaah point of views
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Management's shortcomings
<input type="radio"/>	Masjid's space organisation flaws
<input type="radio"/>	Masjid's volunteer
<input type="radio"/>	Parents
<input type="radio"/>	Play area
<input type="radio"/>	Special room for mother and young children

Fig. 5: Summary of code development

There are **15 main codes** identified in the study, which are:

1. Awareness of children's issues at the masjid
2. CCTV as a safety tool
3. Children
4. Comments on the particular space needed for children in the masjid
5. Condition of existing space in the masjid
6. Danger occurrence in the masjid
7. Desired space for children
8. Efforts of the masjid's management
9. *Jamā'ah* 's point of view
10. Management's shortcomings
11. Masjid's spatial organisation and flaws
12. Masjid's volunteer
- 13. Parents**
14. Play area
15. Special room for mother and young children

The main code no.13 (parents) is taken as a sample to explain the analysis process since the process is repeated. The part of the analysis process for code 13: Parents is shown in Figure 6. This process takes place in stage 2.

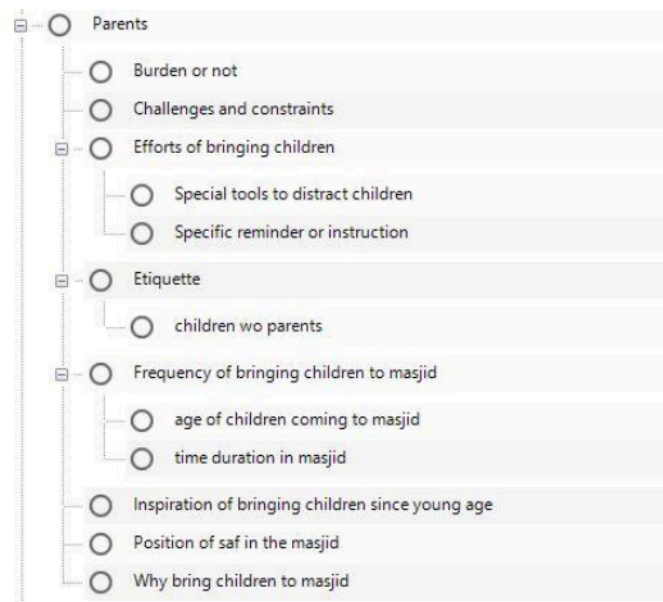


Fig. 6 Subcodes (child codes) for the Main code: Parents

There are eight sub-codes under this main code: Parents. These codes were developed throughout the screening process of each interview transcript. They show the most frequent topic being raised by the parents in the masjid. In order to summarise the data concisely, a framework matrix is created. Table 1 shows part of each respondent's detailed responses under Subcode: Efforts of parents, under child code: Specific reminder or instruction to children.

Each respondent's perceptions are outlined in the framework matrix to compare and contrast further. Table 1 shows some of the respondents' efforts in reminding their children to behave at the masjid. This study shows that parents are not ignoring their children at the masjid. They have prepared their children with advice and instructions. It can be seen that parents admit their children can cause disturbance to other *jamā'ah*. Therefore, they always remind their children how to behave at the masjid. Nevertheless, other *jamā'ah* and masjid management also need to help the parents with children at the masjid by welcoming and tolerating each other.

Table 1: Example of framework-matrix for Subcode: Efforts of parents, under child code: Specific reminder or instruction to children

Respondents	Comments
1	<i>Dalam kereta lagi dah briefing. Contohnya, kita nak pergi masjid, jangan buat bising dimasjid. Kalau nak apa-apa, datang bisik jangan menjerit. Kalau bosan, datang mama bagi gadget duduk dibelakang. Jangan suka-suka nak lintas ke ruang solat lelaki, jangan main pintu. Ambil wudhu', baca Quran.</i>
2	<i>Selalu masa atas motor memang saya akan pesan saya bawa kamu ke masjid ni jangan bising jangan main-main Okey Kamu baca buku ke kamu duduk di belakang kalau nak main diam-diam sahaja</i>
3	<i>Saya pesan jangan kacau orang solat jangan lalu depan orang tengah solat kalau tengah solat duduk diam</i>
4	<i>Kakak kena jaga kelakuan sebab semua orang nak solat, kita pun kena solat jgk sama2. Masjid bkn tmpt berlari, nanti petang kita main di taman.</i>
5	<i>1. jangan jauh dari umi atau walid.</i> <i>2. jangan berlari dan menjerit ketika orang solat</i> <i>3. jangan langgar jemaah lain</i> <i>4. salam apabila orang tegur.</i> <i>5. solat apabila orang solat</i>

4.2 Thematic visualization using cognitive mapping

A cognitive map can structure unsystematic or complex data. It is also used to arrange ideas and identify a relationship. The study's cognitive map is an outcome of a detailed analysis of the interview data in NVivo 12. Each code identified from this study produced one cognitive map. Figure 7 shows one of the fifteen examples of a cognitive map: PARENTS.

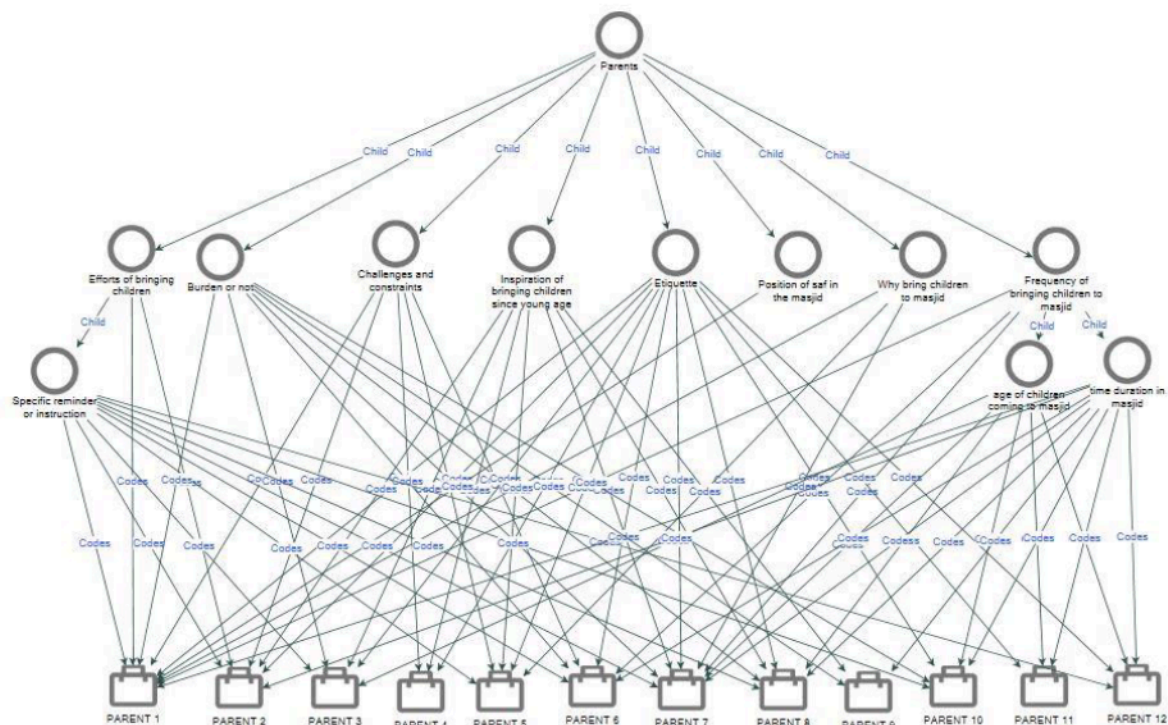


Fig. 7 Cognitive map of main code: Parents.

The cognitive map for *Parents* (Figure 7) reveals that parental experiences at the masjid are shaped by interconnected relationships between motivation, preparation, social perception, and spatial context. The relationships among the subcodes reveal a complex yet coherent picture of parents' adaptive behaviour and their aspirations to raise their children as part of the *jjamā'ah*. Parents' intrinsic religious commitment serves as the central driver, motivating them to bring their children despite various challenges. This motivation translates

into proactive behaviours such as briefing children beforehand, setting clear behavioural expectations, and providing distractions to maintain calmness during prayer. However, these efforts are constrained by the lack of suitable child-friendly spaces, inconsistent management support, and varying levels of tolerance among the *jamā'ah*. Parents must constantly balance between fulfilling their own worship and supervising their children, reflecting the dual burden they carry. Social acceptance from other congregants plays a decisive role in sustaining their confidence, while inadequate facilities often intensify emotional strain. Nevertheless, parents demonstrate resilience and perseverance rooted in faith, illustrating that their commitment to nurturing their children's religiosity persists despite structural limitations. Overall, the cognitive map highlights the interdependence of spiritual motivation, social understanding, and environmental design in shaping inclusive parental experiences within the masjid.

This interconnected network highlights that effective child-friendly masjid design must not isolate parental agency from spatial and managerial systems, but rather integrate them through supportive environments that acknowledge parents as both worshippers and educators.

5.0 FINDINGS

The results are summarised based on the fifteen cognitive maps generated from the interview analysis. Challenges and struggles of parents at the masjid are identified. The fifteen codes developed when results are categorized in three main categories: physical features (e.g, spatial layout, safety features, accessibility), social attributes, and the masjid's management (policies and operational planning) (Figure 8). Figure 8 shows the result of the overlaying codes within the three categories.

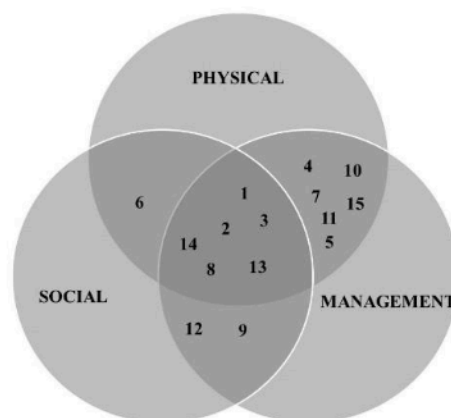


Fig. 8: Summary of the 15 main codes categorization

None of the codes falls under only one category. It implies that the challenges faced by parents are interrelated between categories. The number of codes that fall under each category is as follows. Social: 9, physical: 13, and management: 14. It can be said that more challenges are related to the physical and management categories. When the categories are combined, it is fascinating to see that only code 6 intertwines between social and physical. Twelve codes are intertwined between physical and management categories. When the three categories overlap, six codes are intertwined. Hence, it can be suggested that the challenges faced by parents when bringing their children to the masjid are more related to physical and management issues than social issues.

6.0 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study support the initial proposition that the challenges faced by parents when bringing children to the masjid are multidimensional, spanning physical design, management practices, and social concerns. These three domains are closely intertwined, and together they shape parental experiences. Parents remain committed to nurturing their children as future *Khalifah*, a motivation deeply rooted in religious teachings and the advice of Luqman (Quran for Kids, n.d.; Hassan, 2007), yet they encounter barriers arising from spatial inadequacies, inconsistent management, and unsupportive community attitudes. This confirms earlier assertions that parental struggles cannot be reduced to individual discipline or behaviour issues alone.

The results further highlight how physical and managerial aspects dominate the parental challenges compared to social attitudes. This finding is consistent with prior studies that emphasised the absence of child-friendly facilities such as nurseries, play corners, or safe circulation spaces (Musleh, 2019; Yahya, 2016). It also extends the discussion by showing how inadequate policies, weak enforcement, and a lack of systematic management exacerbate parental stress. Unlike earlier accounts that framed child-related disruptions primarily as a matter of tolerance among congregants (Shameem, 2012; Ghafar, 2018; Azmi, 2019), this study demonstrates that architecture design and operational management play equally significant roles in shaping inclusivity within the masjid.

In contrast with idealised portrayals of the masjid as a centre of children's education and moral formation (Nasih Ulwan, 2015), the parents interviewed revealed that current design and management shortcomings often undermine the masjid's potential to nurture young worshippers. For example, while parents consistently reminded their children to behave and prepared them with instructions before prayer (Table 1), their efforts were frequently insufficient in environments lacking safe spaces, effective supervision, or noise-mitigation measures. This gap between parental intentions and institutional support underscores the urgent need for masjid authorities to adopt holistic approaches that integrate spatial planning with facility management.

This study also contributes new insights by framing the issue of child-friendly masjids within the discourse of the built environment. While much of the existing discussion has focused on social acceptance or religious obligations (Shameem, 2012; Ghafar, 2018), this research positions spatial planning, acoustics, and circulation design as critical mediators of social harmony within communal worship spaces. In doing so, the findings bridge religious, social, and environmental perspectives, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding inclusivity in the masjid context.

Practically, the results suggest that masjid committees and designers should prioritise integrated strategies to accommodate families. This includes providing designated child-friendly spaces without isolating children from the main prayer hall, ensuring visual connectivity for parents, applying acoustic treatments to reduce noise, and establishing clear circulation routes to minimise disruptions (Musleh, 2019; Yahya, 2016). From a management perspective, consistent policies, volunteer training, and communications with parents are essential for reinforcing these physical interventions. Theoretically, the study contributes to expanding the discourse on religious space design by emphasizing how built environment considerations can advance inclusivity, resilience, and community well-being.

Finally, it is important to recognise the limitations of this study. The sample size of twelve parents provides in-depth but context-specific insights, which may not reflect the full diversity of experiences across Malaysia. Future research could adopt comparative studies across regions or examine the perspectives of masjid managers, volunteers, and the wider congregation to build a more holistic understanding. Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable foundation for advancing the discourse on child-friendly masjids, moving it beyond ad hoc or temporary solutions towards systematic and sustainable strategies for the future.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study underscores that the challenges faced by parents bringing their children to the masjid are closely intertwined across physical, social, and managerial dimensions. From a built environment perspective, the findings, derived from twelve in-depth interviews, are considered sufficiently robust, as the semi-structured format allowed for rich, detailed narratives that reached thematic saturation. These insights provide a comprehensive understanding of parental experiences within the masjid context. The study highlights practical recommendations for architects, designers, masjid managers, etc. Architects should prioritise child-friendly and inclusive spatial layouts, incorporating visually connected zones, safe circulation paths, and acoustic treatments that preserve the sanctity of worship while supporting family participation. Masjid committees and administrators must strengthen management practices through clear policies, volunteer training, and family-oriented programmes to foster mutual understanding among congregants. Meanwhile, religious authorities and local councils can translate these insights into planning standards and design guidelines that promote inclusivity and consistency in future masjid development and refurbishment projects. By embedding child and family-oriented considerations in both design and management, masjids can better fulfil their holistic role as spaces for worship, learning, and community cohesion that nurture future generations spiritually, socially, and emotionally.

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