

The Conceptualization of God in Children Aged 4 to 6 During the Preschool Period

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Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the concept of God among preschool children aged 4 to 6. Based on the idea that religious knowledge, which is shaped by the education received and rooted in early childhood, forms the basis of an individual's personal belief system, the study focuses on how children in this age group perceive God. The research was conducted using a qualitative research method with a phenomenological design. The study group consisted of 24 children, 12 girls and 12 boys, attending preschools that do not provide religious education in the Yenimahalle district of Ankara. Participants were selected using a non-probability sampling method, and data were collected through a semi-structured interview form. The interviews were conducted around two main themes. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis techniques. The children's conceptions of God were shaped by how they imagined God, how they perceived God's actions, how they communicated with God, what God disapproves of and how God reacts, their emotional connection with God, and their thoughts on divine love. Furthermore, the children's imaginations of God were reflected in their sensory perspectives, their tendency to concretize abstract concepts, environmental factors, and the fact that children conceive God as both an observing and active being, and that they use a wide range of imagination in their conceptions. The children's idea of communicating with God was based on concrete needs, emotional attachments, moral considerations, and imagination. In their understanding of the relationship with God, children tended to perceive God as a loving and protective figure, associating divine love with human-like, visible behaviors. Additionally, they appeared to develop a personal sense of awe and reverence toward God's might. The findings show that children's perceptions of God are influenced by sensory perspectives, a tendency to concretize abstract concepts, environmental factors, and a broad imagination that views God as both observant and active. Their way of communicating with God is based on tangible needs, emotional bonds, moral values, and imagination. The study reveals how children's perception of God is shaped by developmental processes, environmental influences, moral values, social media, digital exposure, and cultural imagery. The outcomes of the research aim to provide guidance for parents and serve as a reference for similar future studies.

Keywords: Theology, Psychology of Religion, Concept of God, Preschool Education, Development.

4-6 Yaş Okul Öncesi Eğitim Dönemi Çocuklarda Tanrı Tasavvuru

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Öz

Bu araştırma, 4-6 yaş dönemindeki okul öncesi çocukların Tanrı tasavvurlarını incelemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Temelleri insanın çocukluk döneminde atılan ve aldığı eğitime göre şekillenen dini bilgi birikiminin, bireyin kişisel inanç sistemini oluşturduğu düşüncesinden hareketle, bu yaş dönemindeki çocukların Tanrı'yı nasıl algıladıkları araştırmanın temel sorusunu oluşturmaktadır. Araştırma, nitel araştırma yöntemine dayalı olarak olgubilimsel (fenomenolojik) desenle yürütülmüştür. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu, Ankara'nın Yenimahalle ilçesinde dini eğitim vermeyen okul öncesi kurumlarda öğrenim gören 12'si kız, 12'si erkek olmak üzere toplam 24 çocuk oluşturmaktadır. Katılımcı çocuklar olasılıksız örnekleme yöntemiyle belirlenmiş, veri toplama aracı olarak yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Görüşmeler iki ana tema çerçevesinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler betimsel analiz ve içerik analizi teknikleriyle değerlendirilmiştir. Çocukların Tanrı tasavvuru; Tanrı'yı nasıl hayal ettikleri, Tanrı'nın eylemlerini nasıl algıladıkları, O'nun ile nasıl iletişim kurdukları, Tanrı'nın nelere kızdığı ve kızınca nasıl davrandığı, Tanrı ile kurdukları duygusal bağ ve Tanrı sevgisine ilişkin düşünceleri doğrultusunda şekillenmektedir. Tanrı'ya ilişkin tasavvurları duygusal bakış açıları, soyut kavramları somutlaştırma eğilimleri, çevresel faktörler, çocukların Tanrı'yı hem gözlem yapan hem de etkin bir varlık olarak algıladıkları ve tasavvurlarında geniş bir hayal gücü kullandıkları şeklinde kendini göstermektedir. Çocukların Tanrı ile iletişim kurma fikri ise somut ihtiyaçlar, duygusal bağlar, ahlaki değerler ve hayale dayalı bir biçimdedir. Çocukların Tanrı ile ilgili kurdukları bağ temasında, Tanrı'yı sevgi dolu, koruyucu bir varlık olarak algıladıkları ve bu sevgiyi insani, görünür davranışlarla ilişkilendirdikleri ayrıca O'nun kudretine dair his geliştirdikleri değerlendirilmektedir. Araştırma sonucunda çocukların Tanrı'yı algılayış biçimlerinin gelişimsel süreçle, çevresel faktörlerle, ahlaki değerlerle, günümüz sosyal medyası, maruz kaldıkları ekranlar ve kültürel imgelerle nasıl bir forma dönüştüğü ortaya konulmuştur. Araştırma sonucunda ulaşılan değerlendirmelerin, ebeveynlere rehberlik edici bilgiler sunması ve ileride yapılacak benzer çalışmalara kaynaklık etmesi amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İlahiyat, Din Psikolojisi, Tanrı Tasavvuru, Okul Öncesi Eğitim, Gelişim.

1. Introduction

The preschool period of 4–6 years is when the child begins to explore both themselves and their social environment, make sense of the world, and develop the ability to establish relationships between phenomena. In this process, an abstract concept such as God becomes concrete in the child's mind and is shaped through various metaphors, images, and expressions. Religious concepts, and especially the concept of God, are acquired through the transmission and observations of adults around them. Parents, teachers, and the social environment play an important role in this process. Practices such as religious stories, prayers, and worship contribute to children's concretization of the concept of God in their minds.¹

In this study, the aim is to examine especially the conceptions of God in children who do not receive religious education in the institutions they attend. The study was conducted with children aged 4–6 who attend preschool education institutions located in the Yenimahalle district of Ankara. In the study, how children conceive of God, through which themes this conception is shaped, and the nature of their relationship with God were examined in depth. In this context, the subject of the research is to present through which realms of meaning the concept of God is constructed by preschool children.

Studies show that an individual's conception of God often begins to form during childhood.² It is stated that especially the experiences gained during early childhood shape the individual's mental representations of God and the emotional effects of these representations.³

Early childhood is the period from birth to the beginning of primary school, during which the child's cognitive, emotional, social, linguistic, and physical development takes place in the most rapid and sensitive manner.⁴

In light of all these contexts, the subject of the research is to reveal how children aged 4–6 in preschool education institutions who do not receive religious education conceive of God and through which realms of meaning this conception is constructed. The aim of the research is to reveal how children in the preschool period aged 4–6 conceive of God and on which foundations this conception is based. In addition, it is to examine not the children's conception of God in terms of a belief system, but rather to understand the main factors influencing their mental images and forms of this conception. As a result, this study is noteworthy in that it expresses that children's conceptions of God are shaped not only by the formal religious education they receive but also by various factors such as family, environment, cultural transmission, and social media. The findings obtained as a result of the study provide important data for educators, parents, and researchers of religious development; and contribute psychologically and socially to the quality of encountering religious phenomena during the preschool period.

2. Conceptual Framework

Children aged 4–6 go through one of the most important stages of their lives in terms of developmental characteristics. In this stage, defined by Piaget as the preoperational period, children develop the capacity for symbolic thinking, but their logical thinking skills are not yet fully established.⁵ Family, teachers, and peers play an important role in supporting social development.⁶ For this reason, during this process, children begin to learn social norms and societal rules by modeling the behaviors of adults.⁷

Moral development in preschool children aged 4–6 is a process in which children begin to learn to distinguish between right and wrong.⁸ The rules set by parents and teachers guide children in understanding moral values.⁹

Alongside all these developmental areas, the religious development of the child also begins to become evident between the ages of 4–6. Religious development takes shape at an early age as a process in which children become acquainted with abstract concepts.¹⁰ Children learn religious rituals by observing and imitating them, and in this process, they also internalize religious concepts within an emotional context.¹¹

¹ David Elkind, *The Child's Reality: Three Developmental Themes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978), 12–95.

² Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 246.

³ Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, *Benlik, Aile Ve İnsan Gelişimi Kültürel Psikoloji* (İstanbul: Koç Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2010), 290.

⁴ Kağıtçıbaşı, *Benlik, Aile Ve İnsan Gelişimi Kültürel Psikoloji*, 290.

⁵ Jean Piaget, *Çocukta Zihinsel Gelişim*, çev. Hüsen Portakal (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 2004), 16–25.

⁶ Lee E. Berk, *Child Development*, 5th ed. (Boston and London: Allyn & Bacon, 2000), 202.

⁷ John W. Santrock *Yaşam Boyu Gelişim*, çev. Galip Yüksel (Ankara: Nobel Akademik Yayıncılık, 2017), 123.

⁸ Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment Of The Child*. (New York: Free Press, 1932), 270–286.

⁹ Santrock, *Yaşam Boyu Gelişim*, 123.

¹⁰ Faruk Karaca, *Dini Gelişim Teorileri* (İstanbul: Değerler Eğitimi Merkezi Yayınları, 2007), 363.

¹¹ Santrock, *Yaşam Boyu Gelişim*, 123.

Another concept closely related to religious development is the concept of God. Often defined as the creator and regulator of the universe, God is considered a supernatural and transcendent being.¹² From a psychological perspective, belief in God is regarded as a supportive element in meeting individuals' spiritual needs, in their search for meaning, and in coping with difficulties.¹³

At this point, the concept of "imagination" comes into play. Conception means imagining or designing something or an object through a mental filter.¹⁴

The image of God indicates an internal psychological model of the individual process of imagining God. According to Rizzuto, the conception of God is a psychic formation created by the combination of the individual's experiential levels.¹⁵

According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children's way of perceiving God varies according to developmental stages. Children in the concrete operational stage usually associate God with physical and human characteristics; while with the transition to the formal operational stage, the conception of God becomes more abstract and complex.¹⁶

Children aged 4–6 are at the beginning of the concrete operational stage in terms of cognitive development. Therefore, children perceive God through concrete images, mostly as a father figure or a being living in the sky.¹⁷

Research shows that children's conceptions of God are largely influenced by the religious understanding of parents and surrounding adults.¹⁸ As children participate in religious practices, they begin to perceive God with both concrete and abstract features. In this process, religious rituals serve as valuable tools for children, offering experiences that concretize the existence of God. Moreover, while in the concrete operational stage, children tend to learn their ideas about the image of God not by hearing, but through their own observations and by imitation.¹⁹

The 4–6 age period, as the preschool education stage of childhood, is a multidimensional period in which the foundations of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development are laid. Preschool education is also the process during which children form their first impressions of social values and social norms.²⁰

This education provided at an early age also lays the groundwork for children's introduction to religious values. The childhood period is also the most critical stage in terms of religious education.²¹ Knowing well the developmental processes, needs, and interests of children in this age group is highly important for the effectiveness of religious education.²²

3. Method

In this study, a qualitative research method was preferred to understand the conceptions of God among preschool children aged 4–6. Qualitative research aims to examine the meanings related to individuals' experiences in depth, within their natural environments, and with a holistic approach. This approach aims to understand how children perceive God, how this perception is shaped by their experiences, and their feelings, thoughts, and images about God through their own expressions.

The study group of the research consists of 24 children (12 girls, 12 boys) enrolled in preschool education institutions located in the Yenimahalle district of Ankara province, which do not provide religious-based education. The participants were evenly distributed among the 4, 5, and 6 age groups, and their selection from different socio-cultural regions increases the representativeness of the study. In determining the study group, the quota sampling technique, which is one of the non-probability sampling methods, was used. Before starting the research, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, and the researcher's undergraduate diploma, transcript, and service documents were evaluated during the application process. Subsequently, the necessary permissions were obtained through the Ministry of National Education's research permit module, and official applications were submitted to the institutions where the research would be

¹² Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 208.

¹³ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 21–33, 163–197.

¹⁴ Mahmut Kaya, "Tasavvur," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2011), 40/126.

¹⁵ Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 246.

¹⁶ Jean Piaget, *The Origins Of Intelligence In Children* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1952), <https://doi.org/10.1037/11494-000>, 1-20.

¹⁷ Celal Çayır, "Çocuklarda Tanrı Tasavvuru Üzerine Bir Araştırma," *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 15/2 (2013), 25–60.

¹⁸ Murat Yıldız, *Çocuklarda Tanrı Tasavvurunun Gelişimi*, (İzmir: İzmir İlahiyat Vakfı Yay, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁹ Behlül Tokur, *Klasik Ve Güncel Konularıyla Din Psikolojisi*, (Ankara: Son Çağ Yayınları, 1.Basım, 2020), 122-125.

²⁰ Piaget, *The Origins Of Intelligence In Children*, 1-20.

²¹ Haluk Yavuzer, *Doğum Öncesinden Ergenlik Sonuna Çocuk Psikolojisi*, (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2011), 86-112.

²² Neda Armaner, *Din Psikolojisine Giriş I*, (Ankara, 1980), 117.

conducted, and approvals were obtained. Written informed consent forms based on voluntary participation were obtained from the parents of the participant children, and in order to protect the children's privacy, identity information was coded (e.g., C6-Girl-5Years). The data were evaluated exclusively for scientific purposes and were not shared with third parties.

During the data collection process, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with the children using a semi-structured interview form. The interview questions were prepared in an open-ended format appropriate to the developmental levels of the children, revised based on expert opinions in the field, and put into practice after the approval of the Ethics Committee. The interviews were conducted in classroom environments where the children would feel comfortable, and if necessary, were carried out in the presence of a teacher or parent. To prepare for the process, the researcher received various trainings in areas such as early childhood communication, interaction with preschool children, and communication with parents. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods, namely content analysis and descriptive analysis. In the analysis conducted with the MAXQDA software, the data were coded, and sub-themes and main themes were identified. The findings were structured and supported with direct quotations; the reliability of the interpretations was reinforced through the supervision and feedback of the academic advisor. However, the research also includes limitations such as the sample size, the abstract thinking levels of children, and the potential subjectivity in qualitative analysis.

4. The Language of Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings Related to Children's Image of God

The following questions were asked to children regarding the subject:

- How do you imagine Allah? What do you think Allah looks like?
- What is Allah doing right now?
- Do you talk to Allah? What do you say to Him? What do you ask from Him?
- What does Allah get angry at?
- What does Allah do when He is angry?

With these questions, it was aimed to understand the children's thoughts and feelings about their conception of God.

4.1.1. Findings Regarding How Children Imagine God

Firstly, children were asked how they imagine Allah and what they think Allah looks like. The answers given by the children were coded and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding and Frequencies Regarding How Children Imagine God

Coding System	Frequency
Very bright - luminous	17
Big/huge	15
In the sky	7
Sees everything	6
We cannot see	5
On the clouds	4
Always watching us	3
Very Powerful	3
With Big Eyes	2
With a dress made of rainbow	1
With angel-like wings	1
Resembling cotton candy	1
Like a robot	1
Total	66

Although the study was conducted with 24 children, the coding was carried out based on the answers given by the participant children to the same set of questions. Repeated codes in the responses were included in the table as frequency values. Although data were collected from 24 children, the frequency values increased due to recurring answers. The most frequently stated characteristic is that Allah is very bright and luminous (17). In this regard, the children imagined Allah as a being that is "bright like gold," "radiating white light," and "surrounded by stars." The second most commonly mentioned feature is the greatness of Allah (15). The children described Allah as "big" and "huge." Regarding the location of Allah, the expressions "in the sky" (7) and "on the clouds" (4) came to the forefront. Some children provided more detailed depictions and defined Allah as a being "living in a castle in the clouds." In addition, the belief that Allah sees everything (6) was frequently expressed by the children. However, some children stated that Allah is "too bright to be seen" or that they "cannot see" Him (5). Other notable descriptions included that Allah is "very powerful" (3), "always watching us" (3), and "has big eyes" (2). Although rare, Allah was also described with features such as "having a dress made of rainbow," "having angel-like wings," "resembling cotton candy," or "like a robot" (1 each).

"God is a huge light. Stars are flying around Him. He may have a dress made of rainbow. He can always see us. My mom said God doesn't have a face, but still He can see us. (C9, Girl, age 6) I think God is like a very big robot. Not made of metal, but a robot made of light. His arms are so long. Maybe there is a giant lightsaber on His head, but this sword only does good things." (C19, Boy, age 6)

These imaginative expressions of children reveal that their perception of God is shaped through visualized forms together with an abstract understanding. In addition, statements that liken God to a robot or a superhero show that their minds are shaped by the technological developments, animations, and cartoons of the age they live in. Especially the inclusion of technological images (such as a robot or a lightsaber) in the perception of God demonstrates the influence of contemporary culture.

Moreover, the fact that children describe God with expressions such as "very bright," "luminous," and "big" can be interpreted as a result of their attempt to concretize abstract concepts by forming strong mental images. For children, growing up with screens, LED lights, and bright animations may have inspired the visual elements of "brightness and light" in their mental images. Moreover, it becomes evident that these conceptions are further informed and shaped by the family environment, prevailing social values, cultural narratives, and religious symbols. In addition, children may perceive "light" as a symbol of magic, mystery, and perfection influenced by fairy tales, magical stories, or fantasy films. Natural elements such as the brightness of the sun, stars, and moonlight may also stimulate their imagination while describing God. At this point, their descriptions such as "bright and big" indicate that they perceive God as a beautiful, majestic, and unreachable being. Based on these findings, it can be said that children's descriptions of how they imagine God and His actions reflect a rich imagination. For instance, depictions of God as "traveling with flying dinosaurs through planets," "hugging like a giant pillow," or "making clothes with rainbows" show that children blend religious concepts with their personal imagination. This suggests that including imagination in religious education may support learning processes and shows that children, in the development of abstract thinking skills, need to make sense of such concepts through concrete depictions.

The expressions children use while imagining God largely consist of images shaped by sensory perceptions, the concretization of abstract concepts, and environmental influences. The most frequently observed descriptions are based on visual and tactile elements such as "brightness," "light," and "greatness."

- "God is very bright, He shines light" (17),
- "God is huge, bigger than everything" (15),
- "God is in the sky or above the clouds" (11)

These statements indicate that children tend to explain abstract concepts through nature, light, and spatial vastness.

In addition, fantastic and personal images are also observed:

- "Has a dress made of rainbow,"
- "Has wings like an angel,"
- "Constantly changes shape"

Such expressions show that children's conception of God is shaped by their imagination and the cultural images they are exposed to.

Especially the influence of technology, cartoons, and popular culture is more distinctly observed in some children:

"God is like a robot, but made of light,"

"There is a giant lightsaber on His head, but it only does good things"

These expressions show that children try to understand God through technological and heroic figures.

4.1.2. Findings on God's Actions from the Perspective of Children

Regarding this subject, children were asked the question: "What is God doing right now?" and their answers were coded and presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding and Frequencies Regarding What God Is Doing According to Children

Coding System	Frequency
Watching us / observing us	16
Sitting in the sky	5
Protecting us	2
Sitting on the clouds	2
Playing with the clouds	2
Standing next to me	2
Taking care of trees / flowers	1
Rotating the planets	1
Traveling to other planets with a dragon	1
Painting the mountains	1
Making it rain	1
Total	34

When children's views on what God does are examined, it is seen that their perceptions largely include both abstract and concrete elements. The majority of the children believe that God is in an observer position, as reflected in expressions such as "watching us" or "looking at what we are doing." These children stated that God especially watches whether people behave well or not (16). Some children imagined God in a spatial position, saying "He is sitting in the sky" (5) or "sitting on the clouds" (2). In other descriptions, God is portrayed as a protective and active figure. For example, expressions such as "He is protecting us" (2) or "He is standing next to me" (2) catch attention. There are also descriptions in which God is associated with nature and creativity, such as "playing with the clouds" (2), "taking care of trees and flowers" (1), and "painting the mountains" (1). Some children described God in fantastic and imaginative ways. For instance, it was stated that God is "traveling to other planets with a dragon" (1) or "rotating the planets" (1). God's actions directed toward people were also mentioned, such as "fixing bad people" (1).

"Maybe He is sitting on a flying dragon and going to space, looking at other planets. He has a lot of work. Maybe He is making it snow in other places. (C5, Girl, age 5) He is looking at other places in space, looking at the Earth. He is looking at other worlds. They are all very far away, but He looks at all of them. Sometimes He also fixes bad people." (C16, Boy, age 5)

These findings reveal that children perceive God both as an observer and as an active figure, and that they use a wide range of imagination in their descriptions. Moreover, the idea of God as "someone who never stops" reflects the perception that God's presence is constant — that He is always on duty and governs the world. However, in this context, the act of "working" does not stem from a transcendent sense of responsibility, but rather carries a meaning shaped by the child's observation of their parents. The child may have positioned God as someone who, like their mother or father, is always doing something and constantly in action. This suggests that children who witness their parents' diligence and sacrifices tend to reflect similar characteristics in their understanding of God. In addition, children tend to associate God's power and love with natural events. For instance, expressions such as "painting the mountains and seas" or "making it rain" show that natural events are associated with God's actions in children's minds. This reveals that children perceive the environment and nature as signs of God's presence.

Taken together, it can be stated that children's perceptions of God's actions fall into two main categories:

1.Observer and Protective God

“He is watching us” (16)

“He protects us” (2)

“He stands by me” (2)

2.God as an Agent of Action, Controlling Natural Events

“He makes it rain” (1)

“He makes it snow” (1)

“He plays with the clouds” (2)

In some children, God is imagined in active and fantastic actions:

“God is traveling to other planets with a dragon”

“He corrects bad people”

These expressions reveal that children understand God as an extraordinary figure influenced by visual media, mythological narratives, and fairy tales.

The association of God with nature shows that children combine their environmental observations with their conception of God. This situation may help children perceive nature as a sacred order and contribute to linking religious concepts with ecological awareness.

4.1.3. Findings on Children’s Communication with God from Their Perspective

Children were asked the question, “Do you talk to God?” and their responses were coded in Table 3.

Table 3. Coding and Frequencies Related to Children’s Communication with God

Coding System	Frequency
I want a toy	7
I want Him to protect me	5
I say thank you/Hello	4
I want Him to protect my family	2
I want superpowers	2
I want ice cream	1
I want a flying dinosaur	1
I want a unicorn	1
Total	23

In interviews with children and as seen in Table 3, when responses regarding the idea of talking to God were examined, it was observed that many children actively developed thoughts on this subject and formed diverse imaginations. A large portion of children expressed that they talk to God (22). These conversations were described as children conveying their own needs and desires to God. While talking, children most frequently stated that they wanted toys (7). Additionally, children made requests related to safety and affection such as protection from “naughty and bad children” (5) and protection of their family (2). The desire for protection from naughty and bad children indicates that the child sees God as a refuge in times when they cannot cope with challenging social relationships. When assessed in the context of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of cognitive development, this shows that the child internalizes God’s protective role under the influence of narratives from adults or society around them and simultaneously uses God as a tool to cope with difficulties.²³ The information obtained during the interview process with children who requested protection for their families is also quite remarkable. Despite being in two different institutions and age groups, it was learned that these children experienced the Maraş earthquake. When evaluated in this context, it shows that the common trauma experienced by the children shaped the conception of God as a “powerful” and “protective” figure. According to Bowlby, children attach to caregivers to feel safe.²⁴ However, this attachment is not limited to humans only;

²³ Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 19-30.

²⁴ John Bowlby, “Attachment and Loss: Retrospect and Prospect,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 52/4 (1982), 664–678, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1982.tb01456>.

children can also attach to abstract entities such as God. Furthermore, the request “protect my family” can also be considered from Fowler’s stages of faith development, indicating an intuitive perception of God as a positive and strong entity.²⁵ Simultaneously, these conceptions about God concretely illustrate how they intertwine with psychological defense mechanisms. Evaluated within Pargament’s religious coping strategies, God can be seen as a positive religious coping method.²⁶ Some children expressed a desire to establish a social bond with God, such as thanking or “saying hello” (4). Also, fantastic imaginations such as wishing for superpowers (e.g., flying) (2) and concrete requests like wanting their toys not to get lost or broken (1) were expressed. Some children’s statements reflected simple but meaningful daily-life related imaginations, such as wanting ice cream (1) and wishing “good night” (1), which have sincere and everyday content. Children also expressed childlike imaginations such as “flying dinosaur” (1) or wanting a “unicorn” (1). Children who stated that they do not talk to God (2) indicated that they did not request anything from Him.

“I speak. I say ‘Hello, what are you doing now?’ Then I ask for a unicorn (a horse with a horn). Sometimes my mother wakes me up early to go to school. I want her to make me sleep. (C5, Girl, age 5) Sometimes I speak while going to bed. I thank for a very beautiful day. Sometimes I want to have a big ice cream. Also, I want my mother, father, and older brother to always be with me. (C9, Girl, age 6) Yes, I speak. I ask, ‘Hello, which adventure are you going on today?’ I also say, ‘Give me lots of toys.’ Sometimes I want it to give me superpowers so that I can fly.” (C19, Boy, age 6)

These findings also show that children interpret the idea of communicating with God within the framework of their own vital needs and dreams. The expectations of children while communicating can be summarized as follows;

•**Concrete Requests:**

“Asking for toys” (7)

“Protect me” (5)

•**Emotional Bonds:**

“I thank God” (4)

“I say hello” (1)

•**Imagination-Based Communication:**

“I ask God for a unicorn” (1)

“Let Him give a flying dinosaur” (1)

“Let Him give magical powers” (1)

In this way, it can be interpreted. These findings show that children personalize the bond they establish with God in a way that is suitable to their own world. It can be said that the need for God is intertwined with the need for concrete and emotional security.

4.1.4. Findings Regarding What God Gets Angry About from the Perspective of Children

In relation to the topic, the children were asked the question “What does God get angry about?”, and the answers given by the children were coded and presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Coding and Frequencies Related to What Children Think God Gets Angry About

Coding System	Frequency
Behaving badly	11
Telling lies	11
Fighting	9
Being naughty	6
Not sharing toys	4
Making mother/someone upset	3
Damaging forests	2
Breaking toys	2

²⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 89.

²⁶ Pargament, *The Psychology Of Religion And Coping*, 163-197.

Treating cats/dogs badly	2
Not eating food	2
Bringing mud into the house	1
Scaring birds	1
Behaving badly	
Total	54

Children expressed their thoughts about the behaviors that make God angry with concrete examples. Among the most frequently mentioned situations are “behaving badly” (11), “telling lies” (11), and “fighting” (9). In addition, negative behaviors in social relationships such as “being naughty” (6), “not sharing toys” (4), and “making mother or someone upset” (3) were also emphasized. Harmful actions toward nature were also stated as reasons for God’s anger. For example, behaviors such as “damaging forests” (2) were described by children as negative. Moreover, expressions like “treating cats badly” (2) and “scaring birds” (1) reflect children’s empathy toward the environment and living beings. Small details related to home life were also taken into consideration. For instance, “bringing mud into the house” (1) and “not eating food” (2).

“If we are naughty, He gets angry. If we fight, He gets angry. If we make our mother upset, God gets angry at us. (C3, Girl, age 4) God gets angry if I throw my toys on the floor. Maybe He gets a little angry if I bring mud into the house on me. But I think He gets most angry when I don’t eat, because food is very important. (C22, Boy, age 4) Maybe He gets angry if I am naughty. If you upset someone or don’t share your toys, He may get angry. If I pick flowers or scare birds, He might be a little sad.” (C24, Boy, age 4)

These findings show that children associate the rules in their daily lives with actions that God does not approve of. In addition, the children’s responses regarding situations that make God angry reveal that moral values are directly connected with their perception of God. God is not only seen as a sacred and abstract being, but also as an authority figure who observes, evaluates, and “gets angry” at routine behaviors in daily life. In particular, actions such as throwing toys, getting dirty, or not eating are, in general, behaviors where parents set boundaries for their children. This situation shows that, in the child’s mind, the authority of God is shaped in parallel with parental authority. When the child’s perception of God as an authoritative figure is evaluated within the context of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, it can be interpreted especially through the concepts of superego development and the Oedipus complex. Freud states that children develop the superego by internalizing moral values and social rules. While this superego initially represents the authority of the parents, over time, this external authority turns into an “internal authority” in the child’s world. The child’s conception of God at this point can be a reflection of this internal authority figure. Furthermore, according to Freud’s Oedipus complex, the child sees the father both as a rival and an authority figure. While this conflict is being resolved, the child internalizes the father’s values and authority. Therefore, according to Freud’s theory, the child’s initial relationships with their parents and their experiences of authority in these relationships play a determining role in the formation of their concept of God, so we can evaluate the answers given by the children in this context.²⁷

Social interaction-based behaviors such as telling lies, fighting, not sharing, and harming the environment were identified by children as actions that God does not approve of. This shows that children learn social and environmental responsibilities through God’s expectations. It can be stated that, in moral education, the concept of God is used as a positive tool of discipline for children. In addition, perceptions of God’s anger are shaped by the ethical rules and social norms present in children’s daily lives. Their association of nature-friendly attitudes with God’s approval under the influence of environmental factors also shows how religious perceptions can play a role in the development of environmental awareness in children. At the same time, this is also a strong example that shows how closely the child’s concept of God is intertwined with their psychosocial development.

4.1.5. Findings Regarding What God Does When He Is Angry from the Perspective of Children

In relation to the topic, children were asked the question “What does God do when He is angry?”, and the answers given by the children were coded and presented in Table 5.

²⁷ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 5-50.

Table 5. Coding and Frequencies Related to What Children Think God Does When He Is Angry

Coding System	Frequency
Warns	10
Makes it rain	8
Gets sad	6
Makes wind/storm	4
Does nothing	3
Does not harm/upset	3
Punishes	2
Does not punish	2
Makes thunder	2
Makes the sky grey	1
Makes lightning strike	1
Total	42

Children's perceptions of what God might do when He is angry have been associated with various emotional and natural phenomena. The most frequently mentioned behavior is that God warns people not to do bad things (10). Children expressed this by saying, "He tells us not to do it" or "He says don't do bad things." In addition, it is noteworthy that some children believe God expresses His anger through natural events. For example, expressions such as "makes it rain" (8), "creates wind or storms" (4), and "makes thunder" (2) stand out. Children also stated that God might feel sad (6) when He is angry, emphasizing that this reaction is emotional rather than harmful. Some children believed that God would "do nothing" (3) in response to His anger, would forgive people, or would simply want them to "be good." Similarly, some children expressed that God would "not harm" or "not upset" people (3). Less frequently mentioned views included that God "might punish" (2) or "might not punish" (2). In addition, children imagined that God might influence nature to show His anger. For instance, expressions like "lightning strikes" (1) and "makes the sky grey" (1) are remarkable.

"When God is angry, maybe He gets a little sad. But He does not do anything to us. He forgives us. He wants us to be good. (C6, Girl, age 5) When God gets angry, He may darken the clouds and make it rain. It may be very windy. But He doesn't stay angry long. (C9, Girl, age 6) When God gets angry, maybe some lightning strikes, but those lightnings are magical and immediately fix something. If He really gets angry, maybe He makes colorful explosions in the sky, but those explosions warn everyone to stop doing bad things. (C19, Boy, age 6) When God gets angry, maybe He warns us silently. He makes the sky a bit grey, but then immediately fixes it. Even when He is very angry, He always wants to guide us back to the right path; He doesn't harm us, He only wants our goodness. (C20, Boy, age 6)"

These findings show that children associate God's anger with human emotions and natural events, but they generally believe that God adopts a forgiving and warning approach. Moreover, even while describing situations in which God is angry, children still define Him as a forgiving, patient, and protective figure. For example, expressions such as "He warns us when we do something bad," "He wants us to be good," and "He does not harm us" reflect that children perceive God as an understanding and loving being even in times of anger. This indicates that, in their concept of God, the emphasis is not on fear of punishment, but on guidance and forgiveness.

4.2. Findings Related to the Emotional Bond Children Establish with God

"Do you love God? Why? Does God love children? How do you think God loves children?"

"Are you afraid of God? Why?"

The aim was to understand children's feelings and thoughts related to the emotional bond they establish with God.

4.2.1. Findings on Loving God and God's Love from the Perspective of Children

Firstly, children were asked, "Do you love God? Why? Does God love children? How do you think God loves children?" The responses given by children were coded and are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Coding and Frequencies Regarding Loving God and God's Love from the Perspective of Children

Coding System	Frequency
Loves / Loves us	23
Protects	9
Plays	3
Hugs	3
Smiles	2
Kisses	2
Wants to make happy	2
Strong person	2
Gives nice things	2
Makes fly	1
Sits next to us while sleeping	1
Gives beautiful things	1
Makes warm	1
Gives my mom and dad	1
Total	53

When the expressions related to children's love for God are examined, while one child stated that they did not know whether they loved or not, it is seen that the vast majority expressed that they love God (23). Children generally associated the reasons for loving God with His protective, helpful, and forgiving qualities. God's "protection" (9) and "giving good things" (2) are among the important reasons expressed by children. Some children explained the reason for their love for God as Him being a strong one (2). It is seen that the love for God is also expressed with an emotional and grateful bond. For example, God's "giving them their mother and father" (1) is among the elements associated with gratitude and love by children. The children's perceptions that God loves them also generally include a positive and warm bond. The majority of children clearly expressed that God loves them (23). In addition, in the comments on the ways God shows His love, children mentioned human and sincere behaviors such as playing (3), hugging (3), smiling (2), and kissing (2). Some children imagined that God flies them (1) or sits beside them while they sleep (1). Furthermore, features such as God "giving good things" (1) and "making warm" (1) also reflect the ways children concretize love.

"Yes, I love God very much because He can fix everything, just like a superheron(C19, Boy, age 6) God also loves children. Children are very funny. I make Him laugh. If we are cold, He makes warm. (C5, Girl, age 5) He loves children very much because children are fun. Maybe God flies children like a big balloon." (C22, Boy, age 4)

These findings show that children's love toward God is based both on their personal experiences and on belief and value systems, and also includes emotional elements such as trust, happiness, and gratitude. Additionally, the findings show that children imagine God both as a loving and protective figure and associate this love with human and concrete behaviors. It is understood that God's love is shaped according to children's imagination and needs.

4.2.2. Findings on Children's Fear of God

In this context, children were asked the question, "Are you afraid of God? Why?" and their responses were coded in Table 7.

Table 7. Coding and Frequencies Regarding Children's Fear of God

Coding System	Frequency
I am not afraid	12
I am afraid	12
Total	24

The children's fear of God was expressed through different emotions and perceptions. Half of the participant children stated that they were not afraid of God (12). These children think that God is not someone to be feared unless they do something bad. For example, expressions such as "If a child doesn't do anything bad, they won't be afraid" (1) reflect this situation. Moreover, children who said that God is "a good one" (2), "makes us happy" (1), and "loves and protects everyone" (1), emphasized feelings of love and trust instead of fear.

"I'm not scared. I saw Him once in my dream, and He was very sweet. But if I do something bad, then maybe I can be scared. (C5, Girl, age 5) If we do good things, we won't be scared. Maybe He always makes us happy. So we don't get scared." (C12, Girl, age 6) No, I'm not scared of Allah because He always does nice things. Sometimes when there's a loud storm, maybe He is a bit angry, but still I don't get scared because He protects me." (C22, Boy, age 4)

Yet, the other half stated that they were afraid of God (12). The reasons for fearing God were mainly described with attributes such as "being very powerful" (6), "being very big" (3), and "knowing everything" (3). Additionally, children who said they were afraid "because He gets angry at those who are naughty" (2) and "because He sees everything" (2), emphasized the perception of God as a figure of justice and authority. Some children also gave more personal reasons, such as being "afraid because they cannot see Him" (1).

Table 8. Codes and Frequencies Regarding Why Children Are Afraid of God, from Their Perspective

Coding System	Frequency
I am afraid because God is very powerful	6
I am afraid because He knows everything / because He is very big	3
I am afraid because He gets angry at naughty ones / because He sees everything	2
I am afraid because I cannot see Him	1
Total	12

"Sometimes I'm scared. God gets very angry at naughty ones. Sometimes I'm naughty. My mom says I'm being naughty. (C3, Girl, age 4) Sometimes I'm scared. Because He is very strong, but sometimes when I'm scared, He hugs me. Then everything gets better. (C9, Girl, age 6) Sometimes I'm scared. He is very far away and very powerful. And He knows everything. But I also know that He protects me, so it goes away quickly. Maybe if I do something bad, He will warn me, but still, He is not scary." (C19, Boy, age 6)

Taking these findings into account, the fear expressed by children who are afraid of God is generally related to attributes such as God's power, greatness, and His ability to see everything. However, this fear is not punishment-oriented; rather, it is more closely associated with respect and admiration. It indicates that this fear develops more as a feeling towards God's might rather than as a fear of being punished. In the children's image of God, love and fear exist together. Therefore, it can be said that their concept of God is shaped both on the axis of love and on the axis of respect/fear, and that fear is softened by love.

5. Results and Suggestions

This research was carried out to understand the imaginations of God among preschool children aged 4–6. In this context, the question: "How is the perception of God formed in children aged 4 to 6 who attend preschool education institutions?" was accepted as the primary problem of the research. The data obtained within the framework of the sub-problems and the corresponding research questions were examined under two main themes: Children's Imaginations of God and Children's Emotional Bond with God.

The findings show that children's conceptions of God are largely shaped by concrete images such as brightness, light, greatness, and the sky. Regarding God's actions, it was observed that children developed depictions of God as both an observer and an active being, and that their relationship with God encompassed not only concrete requests but also emotional and spiritual expectations. It is remarkable that most children in the study perceived God not as punitive but as a forgiving, patient, and guiding figure. The coexistence of love and fear of God was also among the findings; however, the fear was more associated with respect and admiration.

In children's imaginations of God, concrete images dominate over abstract thinking. This aligns with Piaget's theory of the intuitive stage. The depiction of God as a robot or superhero demonstrates anthropomorphic and animistic patterns of thought influenced by contemporary culture and media content. Their perception of God as a helpful, protective, and benevolent figure is associated with

attachment theory and a love-based religious understanding. Besides, the fact that children talk to God and ask for both material and spiritual things indicates that they internalize God as a secure attachment figure.

It is also observed that moral values play a determining role in children's imaginations of God. Their expressions that behaviors such as lying, fighting, or being naughty are not approved by God reveal that the mechanism of moral control is internalized through an external figure. This tendency is in harmony with the early stages of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. However, the children's definition of God as forgiving suggests the development of a moral understanding based more on love and guidance than on punishment.

The research findings also show that children establish a connection between their environment and God. Their perception of rain, wind, and other natural events as actions of God indicates that their environmental awareness is developing within a religious context. This suggests that presenting environmental education together with religious education may be effective in helping children make sense of religious concepts. The creative and imagination-based descriptions used by children when expressing God reveal that religious education should also be structured using methods that support these characteristics.

Additionally, the research shows that children believe they can talk to God like a friend, and that these conversations are more related to their inner world of play and imagination than to traditional prayer forms. This shows that the children's relationship with religious concepts is nourished by their lived realities and emotional needs.

When the studies conducted in the Europe and in Türkiye on the concept of God are examined, it is observed that in the study conducted by Nye and Carlson among 120 children aged between 5 and 16 who attended private Protestant and Catholic day schools in the San Diego area, the development of children's conception of God did not vary significantly according to their level of religious affiliation. However, education, together with improvements in abstract thinking and increased social flexibility, may have an effect on the child's view of God.²⁸ In the study by Nyhof and Johnson, it is also seen that children raised in religious traditions that present God in varying forms—from abstract to concrete—are influenced by the intuitive, cognitive field and religion in the formation of their God imaginations.²⁹ In Türkiye, Çayır examined children's conception of God in relation to variables such as age, gender, parental religiosity, and parental images. He conducted the study with 203 children aged between 5 and 12. The findings at the end of his study demonstrated how children's perceptions of God are shaped by developmental processes and environmental factors.³⁰ Likewise, Öcal's study, which focused on children aged 4 to 10, explored their thoughts about God, highlighting the impact of the variables such as developmental characteristics, family structure, and gender on their perception of God.³¹ In Lee's study, to explore religious variations in children's associations of positive and negative traits with God, 254 preschool-aged children from Protestant Christian, Catholic, Muslim, and non-affiliated religious backgrounds indicated their certainty that God scares them, punishes them, is angry at them, loves them, comforts them, and helps people.³² In Penick's study, the God images of 24 evangelical Christian children enrolled in grades 3 to 6 were compared with their logical reasoning abilities. The findings indicated that the children perceived God as described in the Bible—comforting, creative, protective, possessing human-like qualities, residing in heaven, male, perfect, powerful, real, and similar to a parental figure. Moreover, children who exhibited predominantly concrete thinking skills tended to conceptualize God primarily as a "compassionate guide".³³ However, in Richert's study, Muslim children show a strong differentiation between what God's mind and human minds can do. Religiously non-affiliated children show almost no differentiation between God's and human minds. Parent anthropomorphism explains variance in children's God concepts, both within and across religious groups.³⁴

²⁸ J. S. Carlson vd., "The Development of the Concept of God in Children", *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 145/1 (1984), 137-142.

²⁹ Melanie A. Nyhof vd., "Is God Just a Big Person? Children's Conceptions of God Across Cultures and Religious Traditions", *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35/1 (2017), 60-75.

³⁰ Çayır, "Çocuklarda Tanrı Tasavvuru Üzerine Bir Araştırma", *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 15/2 (2013): 25-60.

³¹ Mustafa Öcal, "Okulöncesi ve İlköğretim Çağı Çocuklarının Allah Tasavvurları Üzerine Bir Araştırma", *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 13/2 (2004), 62-79.

³² Lee, H. J., Marin, A. B., Sun, J., & Richert, R. A. "Does God Comfort You When You Are Sad? Religious Diversity in Children's Attribution of Positive and Negative Traits to God." *Religions* 14/9, 2023

³³ Penick, Steven. A Comparison of Evangelical Christian Children's God Concepts and Logical Thinking Ability. University of North Texas, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2007.

³⁴ Richert, Rebekah A., Anna R. Saide, K. A. Lesage ve N. J. Shaman. "The Role of Religious Context in Children's Differentiation Between God's Mind and Human Minds." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35/1 (Mart 2017): 37-59.

Unlike studies conducted abroad, this research reveals that children shape their conception of God through imagination and are directly influenced by technological developments, media, and cultural images. The association of God with robots, luminous figures, or cartoon characters points to the role of visual culture in the perception of religious imagery for today's children. It is observed that in children's conception of God, a figure based on protection, kindness, and love is predominant, while fear-based perceptions are rare.

As a result, this study reveals that children's conception of God is shaped through imagination, cognitive development, social environment, and cultural interactions. In this dimension, the study offers an original and theoretical contribution to understanding how religious concepts are perceived during early childhood. Furthermore, by adopting a qualitative approach to understanding conceptions of God, it makes a unique contribution to the literature in this field. Especially by examining the imaginations of God among preschool children who do not receive religious education, and their expressions based on emotions and thoughts, it fills a rarely addressed gap in the existing literature.

In line with the findings of the study, several recommendations have been developed to guide relevant stakeholders and contribute to future studies. In this context:

1. Development of Religious Expression Models Suitable for the Level of Cognitive Development

The fact that children mostly describe God using visualized and concrete images indicates that abstract religious concepts gain meaning in their world only at certain developmental levels. Therefore, religious expressions should be simplified in accordance with the children's cognitive development levels and presented through interactive methods supported by stories, tales, dramatizations, and visuals to make them more meaningful in the world of children.

2. Encouraging a Love-Based Rather Than Fear-Based Perception of God

When the study findings are evaluated, it is seen that children generally define God as a being who "does good," "protects," and "loves." This reveals that introducing God with aspects of love, compassion, and trust during the preschool period will provide a healthier religious development. Presenting God as a punishing, constantly watching, and frightening figure can cause anxiety and feelings of guilt in children from a psychological perspective. Therefore, an approach based on love and trust rather than fear should be adopted in presentations.

3. Encouraging Parental Education and Family Involvement

It is crucial to raise parents' awareness about how to talk to their children on religious matters during early childhood. Seminars for families, guide booklets, or workshops conducted with expert support can serve as a guide in helping the child to develop a healthy conception of God. It should be emphasized that families must avoid directly transferring their own fear- or anger-centered perceptions of God to their children, and when this emphasis is not made, children tend to form a love-based conception of God.

4. Inclusion of Religious and Spiritual Development Elements in Preschool Education Programs

More supportive activities related to religious and moral development in the preschool education curriculum. These contents should not be structured as religious instruction but presented with an approach integrated with values education and appropriate to the child's existential questions. Activities based on themes such as "love," "helpfulness," "love of nature," and "gratitude" will also contribute to raising awareness regarding the conception of God.

5. Considering the Impact of Media and Digital Content on Religious Perception

Within the scope of the research, some children described God by likening Him to robots, cartoon characters, or superheroes, indicating that media content directly influences children's conception of God. Therefore, it is necessary to monitor religious-themed interactive content, ensure that content targeting children is pedagogically appropriate, and develop audiovisual materials that support a proper conceptualization of God. It would be appropriate to first encourage the production of digital content and increase the allocation of resources by relevant institutions.

6. Including Psychology of Religion-Based Training in Teacher Education Programs

Increasing the number of courses such as Psychology of Religion, Developmental Psychology, and Values Education in preschool teacher education programs in faculties of education, and making them practice-oriented, is regarded as highly important. Additionally, organizing specific sessions on these subjects and conducting workshops within in-service training programs would also provide valuable contributions.

7. Supporting the Relationship Between the Perception of God and Moral Development

The results of the study show that children list morally inappropriate behaviors such as lying and fighting among actions disapproved of by God. Therefore, values education activities should be structured in a way that nourishes both the perception of God and moral development. Presenting God as a being who “loves truth” and “appreciates those who help others” may support development in this direction.

8. Conducting More Comprehensive Research in Different Cultural Contexts

This study was carried out with a limited sample. Conducting similar studies with children from different socio-cultural environments, with different religious backgrounds, or who receive religious education, will reveal both the diversity and common aspects of the God image more clearly.

It is understood that a religious narrative approach that is appropriate to the developmental level of children, based on love, prioritizing family involvement, and pedagogically structured should be adopted. In order to support religious development during early childhood, educational programs, teacher training processes, and digital content should be handled in parallel with this approach. Additionally, conceptions of God associated with moral development should be supported through a holistic approach integrated with values education. Further studies to be conducted in different socio-cultural contexts will deepen the knowledge in this field.

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