

# Child Education and Care in Japan

## —Past, Present, and Future—

日本における幼児教育と保育  
— 歴史, 現状と今後について —

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### 〈要旨〉

The Japanese government introduced a new child support system in 2015, whereby *kodomoen* (accredited multifunctional kindergarten day care centers) are newly designated to join existing kindergartens and day care centers in providing child education support and care for children up to six years old. In this transition, it is imperative that the welfare and benefit of individual children is guaranteed.

Currently, education and care sites for young children in Japan face various problems, such as an increased number of children with developmental disabilities, as well as problems involving poverty and/or abuse. This paper explores the history of childhood education and care in Japan, and identifies contemporary challenges and issues concerning young children.

### 〈キーワード〉

Japanese children, kindergartens, day care center, *kodomoen*, child education and care

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1947, under the direction of the occupation forces after World War II, Japan enacted the Fundamental Law of Education, and the School Education Law, establishing an educational system that contributed significantly to the nation's post-war recovery and rapid economic growth.

Initially, kindergartens were intended to be educational facilities for young children, while day care centers aimed to provide home-like care to infants who lacked parental supervision. In post-war Japan, day care centers (as facilities for child welfare) and kindergartens (as places for preschool education) assumed an important role in childcare and education. However, different governmental ministries supervise these two types of facilities. Kindergartens, established through the School Education Law, fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (currently the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [MEXT]); whereas, day care centers are child welfare facilities that were created through the Child Welfare Law (also enacted in 1947) under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and

Welfare (currently the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare).

As a result of these initiatives, early childhood education in Japan developed according to the structures of the two abovementioned ministries for a significant period of time. **(Table 1)**

However, in 2015, the Japanese government introduced a new tripartite system in which *kodomoen* (accredited multifunctional kindergarten-day care centers) are newly designated to join existing kindergartens and day care centers in providing childhood education support and care for children up to six years old.

Additionally, the program allows parents to utilize the new system regardless of their employment status. Likewise, children who cannot attend either a kindergarten or day care center can be provided with childcare support, even in the case of unemployed parents, through programs such as counselling for childrearing and parent-child interaction.

## 2. METHOD

This paper explores the history of childhood education and care in Japan, and identifies contemporary challenges and issues concerning young children.

## 3. HISTORY OF JAPANESE KINDERGARTENS

The Japan Nursing Association publication, 'Japan infant nursery history', provides the following overview of the history of kindergartens in Japan.

The first Japanese kindergarten was attached to the Tokyo Women's Model School (i.e., Ochanomizu University), and was founded on November 16, 1867.

Thus, the first Japanese kindergarten was rooted in occidental early childhood education, against the backdrop of westernization during the Meiji period. It should be noted, however, that kindergartens at this time were restricted to certain children of the elite, such as nobility and those from the Imperial Family.

In 1882, the Ministry of Education determined that kindergartens should be accessible to the general public, and common kindergartens were gradually introduced. The Christian Care Association publication, 'Japan Christian history', records the involvement of many missionaries in early childhood education in Japan. After a ban on Christianity was lifted in April 1880, the Hokuriku Eiwa Kindergarten was founded, in Kanazawa in 1886, by Francina Porter, an American missionary; the Hokuriku Eiwa Kindergarten is the oldest Christian-based kindergarten in Japan. And in 1889, Miss Howe founded the Shouei Kindergarten at the Shouei Junior College in Kobe. Also, Miss Gaines founded the Hiroshima Jogakuin Kindergarten at the Hiroshima Girls' School in 1891.

Christian kindergartens were established between 1886 and 1897 in Nagoya, Kyoto, Yokohama, Kobe, Yamaguchi, and Nagasaki. As a result of the efforts of numerous missionaries, many children from the general population were thus afforded the opportunity to enrol in kindergartens, which, as religious-based institutions, were driven by the power of faith shared by the foreign missionaries.

After this, the free education movement prospered, with a tendency to extol the values embedded in Taisho democracy. Under these conditions, the notion of educating childcare providers flourished. However, on entering the Showa period, nationalism became

increasingly strong in Japanese society, and kindergartens were no exception to this trend. In particular, the Pacific War, which began in 1941, had a significant impact on childcare in kindergartens. Rather than promoting spontaneous activities, teachers began to assume greater leadership and focus on group activities. Likewise, indoor childcare became the norm during the later stages of the war. Following the war's conclusion in 1945, the importance of early childhood education was given greater emphasis, particularly owing to the desolation and confusion of combat. It was also in this year that kindergartens were incorporated into the national education system by means of the School Education Law. A year later, 'Guidance for Early Childhood Education' was published, marking the beginning of a new form of early childhood education, which was initiated in the first term following the war. In 1956, a 'revision of the kindergarten instruction procedure' was conducted, but did not include changes to childcare programs. In 1989, the kindergarten instruction procedure was again revised, for the first time in a quarter century, with the focus shifting from a teacher-centered to a more child-centered approach.

Taking the characteristics of infantile development into consideration, the revised procedure advocated the importance of the overall environmental context to education and play. Currently, the kindergarten instruction procedure is in its 5th revision, with a sixth revision expected for 2018; however, I anticipate that the revision will be made earlier, to respond to the rapidly changing times.

## 4. HISTORY OF JAPANESE DAY CARE CENTERS

According to 'The History of the Japanese Child', day care centers were introduced in Japan to lessen the burden on mothers, and to protect babies who were abandoned or orphaned due to poverty. The first day care center was established in 1890 (the twenty-third year of the Meiji period) at Atsutomi and Naka Akazawa's Niigata Seishu Private School.

The industrial revolution in Japan occurred later than in Europe, and advanced substantially during the Sino-Japanese (1894) and Russo-Japanese (1904) Wars. Demand for female factory workers rose, and day care centers were consequently created within those factories. During the Russo-Japanese War, childcare centers were set up to assist

bereaved families and the children of soldiers on the frontline; and these centers continued to operate as childcare facilities even after the war ended.

In 1900, Yuka Noguchi and Mine Morishima opened Futaba Kindergarten for deprived orphans, in Yotsuya, Tokyo; and this was renamed the Futaba Day Care Center in 1915. Given the growing need to protect young children, additional day care centers were formed by private citizens; and to assist in this endeavor, the Home Ministry began to provide subsidies to day care centers through the Reformatory Relief Work Project.

In due course, several public day care centers were established in locations such as Osaka (1919), Kyoto (1920), and Tokyo (1921). By 1926, there were 65 public day care centers, and by 1929 more than 100. Seasonal day care centers opened in rural areas during the busy farming season, through support provided under the government's agricultural policies, and by 1940, the number of such facilities increased to 22,758. In the post-war period, day care centers transformed into child welfare facilities, owing to the 1947 Child Welfare Law, which was supervised by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (currently the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare).

The original purpose of the day care center was to assist infants and children lacking proper care from their own families, who were consequently entrusted to an outside entity. Nursery school teachers (initially called nurses or nannies) were trained at institutions designated by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. From the beginning, day care centers, like kindergartens, were incorporated into official education schemes. Furthermore, the government's guidelines for day care centers were in line with the teaching guidelines for kindergartens. However, in the 2008 revision of the guidelines for day care centers, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare for the first time required day care centers to foster social responsibility.

As in many other advanced industrialized nations, birth rates in Japan have declined rapidly in recent years. During the second baby boom, in 1973, the number of childbirths reached 2.09 million, the second largest peak in post-war population growth. A downward trend followed, however, and by 2006, the number of births had fallen to 1.09 million. As a matter of course, this trend has affected the number of children enrolled in kindergartens.

In contrast, the number of children enrolled in day

care centers has grown, a shift driven by the increased presence of women in the workforce, and in society in general. From a long-term perspective, significant changes will continue to occur in the life patterns of women. In addition, economic conditions have made it necessary for both husbands and wives to obtain employment, which has likely altered traditional gender roles and the division of labor in families. Indeed, the demand for day care centers is significant among young nuclear households in large and medium-sized cities, where many children are on waiting lists to enter them. **(Fig-1)**

## 5. KODOMOEN

In response to the shortage of day care centers and dwindling kindergarten enrolment, several measures have been taken, by mutual consultation between the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. These measures include the Guidelines for the Shared Use of Kindergarten and Day Care Center Facilities, which were issued by both ministries in 1998. The aforementioned situation also led to a joint review conference involving the two ministries, after which the Act for the Advancement of Comprehensive Services Related to Education and Childcare among Preschool Children was enacted, in June 2006. The purpose of this act was to establish certified *kodomoen*, which are hybrid day care/kindergarten facilities. Kodomoen can be divided into four categories: (1) a collaborative day care/kindergarten type (i.e., a kindergarten and day care center manage operations jointly); (2) a kindergarten type (i.e., a kindergarten with day care center functions, such as ensuring that childcare is provided to children without family care); (3) a day care center type (i.e., a day care center with kindergarten functions, such as accepting children other than those who lack family care); and (4) a local discretion type (i.e., an unauthorized local education/child care facility that functions as a certified kodomoen). By August 2007, 105 kodomoen with official certification had been opened.

The implementation of a certified children's park system was also considered; however, by April 2015, a new childrearing support system was agreed upon, and promoting a transition to certified kodomoen was prioritized. As of April 2016, 4,001 certified kodomoen had been established. According to the Cabinet Office publication, 'The Comprehensive Support System for

Children and Childrearing Information Booklet', kodomoen differ in three principal respects from traditional nurseries and kindergartens.

First, kodomoen are for all children, regardless of their parents' employment status. Second, children of unemployed parents can continue attending kodomoen. Third, kodomoen provide additional childcare support; for instance, guardians can participate in childrearing counselling and focus on parent-child interaction, and pregnant women can receive necessary support. Complaints from parents regarding day care centers are common; however, kodomoen place greater emphasis on children's perspectives, in comparison with traditional alternatives.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A review of the history of Japanese kindergartens and day care centers suggests that these institutions emerged as a result of the passionate commitment of those with a heartfelt desire to serve children, and they continue to evolve.

However, various problems are faced by the kindergartens and nursery schools of today. For example,

according to 2012 data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), the child poverty rate is 16.3%, meaning that one in six children is from a needy family (with a particularly large number of single-mother households). Further, a study by the Japan Network for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect reveals that the number of abuse consultations at child consultation centers has increased 80-fold in 24 years. In addition, a 2012 study by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revealed that there are two to three children with developmental disabilities or the like, per class, in Japan's elementary schools; and the number of children with such disabilities has also increased in the kindergartens and day care centers.

Child care workers must deal with all these problems.

As the future of Japan lies in its children, childcare and education between the ages of 0–6 are critical. Unquestionably, society should aim to improve the quality of children's surrounding environment; and the most important environmental element is the human one: the childcare worker. My hope is that the treatment of these critical workers will improve in the future.

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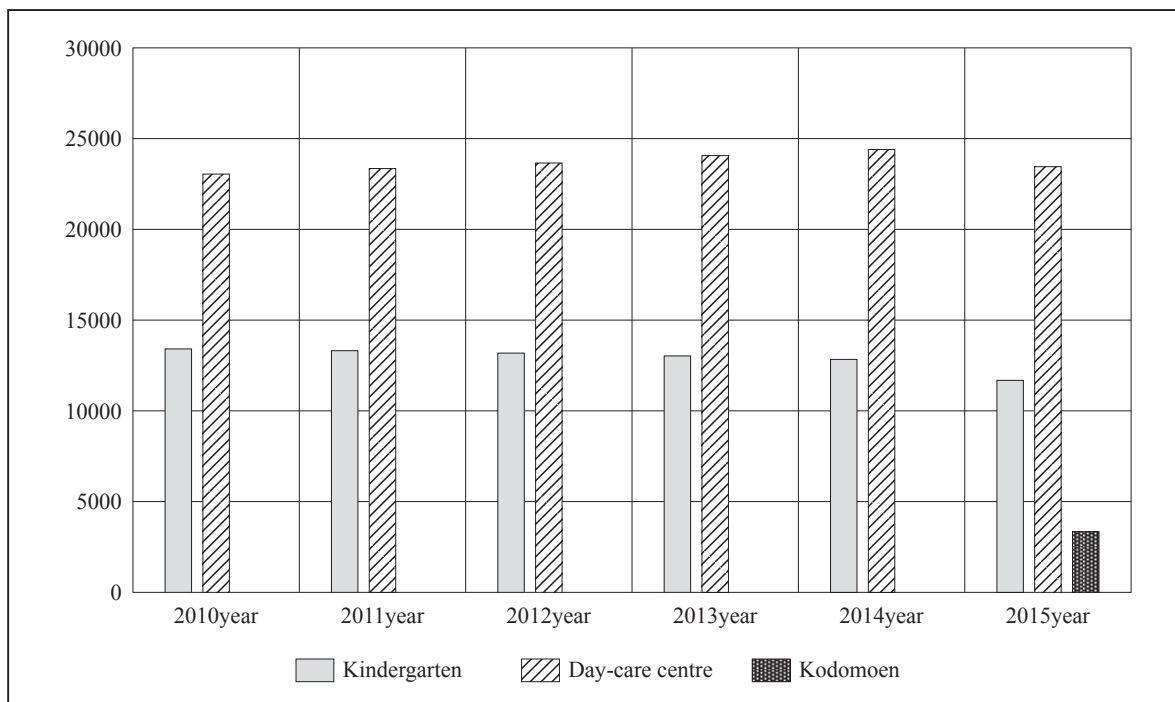
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**Table1-1 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JAPANESE KINDERGARTENS AND DAY CARE CENTERS**

	Kindergarten	Day care center
Jurisdiction	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
Age range	3 years old — Elementary school entrance	Birth - Elementary school entrance
Application	Direct contract between kindergarten and parents	Apply to municipal office
Institutional agency	Municipal corporation Educational foundation (School Education Law, Article 2) All-prefectures board of education	Municipal corporation Social welfare corporation (Child Welfare Law, Article 35) All prefectures (governor permission required)
Standards for institutional management	Regulations of the School Education Law, Articles 36-39	Child welfare institution minimum standards (Child Welfare Law, Article 45)
Childcare time	Standard: roughly 4 hours per day.	Standard: roughly 8 hours per day.
Standards for childcare content	Based on the kindergarten instruction procedure. (Guidelines) Five domains, of "health", "human relations", "environment", "language", and "expression", are approached from the viewpoint of infantile development.	Inspection for and definition of abnormalities, such as observation of health condition and dress, free play, nap, and medical examination. Unification of protective care and education is considered.
Qualifications (kindergarten teacher/childcare worker)	Kindergarten teacher Common license Specialization (graduate school completion) First class (University completion) Second class (Junior college completion)	Childcare worker training school completion or successful childcare worker test; certificate of registration for a childcare worker is required.
Standard personnel arrangement	Director, Vice-principal, Teacher, Assistant teacher, Teacher in charge of health education. They are 35 or less children per class.	Childcare worker, Nurse, Commissioned doctor, Cook Newborns 3:1 (children: worker) 1-2 year-olds 6:1 3 year-olds 20:1 4 year-olds (or more) 30:1
Standard institutional equipment	Staffroom, Classroom, Playroom, Nurse's office, Toilet, Rest area, Leg-washing area, Drinking-water equipment	For infants less than two years old: Nursing room, Room for learning to walk, Kitchen, Toilet For children aged two and over: Nurse's office, Play area, Outdoor recreation hall, Kitchen
Public expenditure	Institutional agency pays operational expenses. Subsidies are provided according to parental income. (A country is 2/3, such as 1/3 and cities, towns and villages)	After deducting a user's burden charge from the expense which cities, towns and villages It pays Countries are 1/2 and the all prefectures 1/4, Cities, towns and villages 1 / 4 burden
Number of institutions (as of April, 2016)	25,464	11,674

Source: School distribution diagram of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.



**Fig-1 CHANGE IN KINDERGARTEN AND DAY CARE CENTER ENROLMENT**  
 Source: School distribution diagram of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.