

# Child Education and Care in Japan: Past, Present, and Future

**Itsuko Fukui**

Faculty of Human Sciences, Department of Child Study  
Kanazawa Seiryō University, Ishikawa, Japan  
Tel: +81-76-253-3924 Ext. 3979, Email: [itsukof@seiryō-u.ac.jp](mailto:itsukof@seiryō-u.ac.jp)

**Abstract.** In an effort to improve Japan's child education and care system, the government will introduce a new system during the 2017 fiscal year, wherein three types of organisations will support child education and care among children aged up to six years. These organisations include kindergartens, day-care centres, and *kodomoen* (hybrid early childhood education and care centres). In this transition, it is imperative that the welfare of individual children is guaranteed, and that benefit is obtained. This new system addresses many problems, including developmental disabilities, poverty, and abuse among children. *Kodomoen* fill a gap at a time when many children of working mothers in urban areas are on waiting lists to enter traditional day-care centres. This paper surveys the history of child education and care in Japan, and identifies contemporary challenges in the field.

**Keywords:** Japanese children, kindergartens, day-care centres, *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. These measures defined the school system that remains in effect today, which consists of six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of high school, and two to four years of university. Elementary and lower-secondary education is compulsory, with most students progressing to the upper-secondary grades. Presently, education prior to elementary school is provided at kindergartens, day-care centres, and *kodomoen*. (**Table 1**)

Initially, kindergartens were intended to be educational facilities for young children, while day-care centres aimed to provide home-like care to infants who lacked parental supervision. In post-war Japan, day-care centres (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]). On the other hand, day-care centres 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 progressed following the two-Yuan structure for a significant period of time. However, in 2015 the children's park system was introduced, integrating education and childcare facilities and combining the advantages of both kindergartens and day-care centres. Additionally, the programme allows parents to utilise the park system regardless of their employment status. Likewise, children who cannot attend the park can be provided with childcare support in their homes through programmes such as counselling for childrearing and parent-child interactions. (**Table 2**)

## 2. METHOD

This paper explores the distinctive nature of Japanese kindergartens and day-care centres by examining the history of their establishment.

## 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 16 November 1867. Fujimaro Tanaka of the Ministry of Education and Masanao

Nakamura, the kindergarten's first director, were key to its establishment. Tanaka realised the importance of this undertaking after inspecting similar implementations in Europe and America. Indeed, because Nakamura studied in Britain, his approach to educational thought was rather progressive. Similarly, Clara Matsuno, the kindergarten's chief teacher, received childcare training in Germany while studying under Froebel. The second director, Sinpachi Konishi, would later introduce Froebel's playground equipment. Thus, the first Japanese kindergarten was rooted in occidental early childhood education against the backdrop of westernisation during the Meiji period. It should be noted, however, that kindergartens during this time were restricted to certain elite children, 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 simple kindergartens were gradually introduced. The Tokyo Women's Normal School founded the Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School in March 1890, to which a kindergarten was attached. In September 1892, a model simple kindergarten for lower-class children was introduced; in this configuration, a portion of the childcare curriculum was deleted, and a primary teacher executed childcare by proxy alongside another qualified woman. Despite these efforts, the concept did not gain widespread acceptance.

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 Sakurai Girls' School established its own kindergarten. Likewise, the Hokuriku Eiwa Kindergarten was founded in Kanazawa in 1886 at the Hokuriku Institute by Francina Porter an American missionary; the Hokuriku Eiwa Kindergarten is the oldest Christian-based kindergarten in Japan. 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 these efforts, numerous children from the general population were afforded opportunities to enrol in kindergartens. Indeed, these religious-based institutions were driven by the power of faith among foreign missionaries.

As education reforms transpired in America and Europe, similar changes were occurring in Japan between later stages of the Meiji period and the Taisho period. The free education movement prospered, with a tendency to extol the values embedded in Taisho democracy. It is under these conditions that the notion of educating childcare providers flourished. Kurahashi Souzou, director of the

Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School Kindergarten, laid the foundations for Japanese kindergarten education. A lecture wherein he disassembled Froebel's blocks and used them as teaching materials is famous. Despite the aforementioned initiatives, the prototypical Japanese kindergarten was not established until April 1926. Nationalism became increasingly strong in Japanese society upon entering the Showa period, and kindergartens were no exception to this trend. For example, songs were propagated that emphasised war and strengthening of the state, along with cultural characteristics such as the visitation of shrines and certain foods (e.g. rice and pickled plums). The Japanese flag was also given greater prominence.

The Pacific War, which began in 1941, had a significant impact on childcare in kindergartens. Rather than promoting spontaneous activities, teachers started to assume greater leadership, and focus on group activities. Likewise, indoor childcare became the norm during later stages of the war. Following the war's conclusion in 1947, 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. This marked the beginning of a new form of early childhood education, which was initiated in the first term following the war.

Specifically, in 1956, the Childcare Goals were revised and the Kindergarten Instructional Procedures were enacted. The former provided guidance for early childhood education in kindergartens, nursery schools, and homes, whereas the latter set a national standard for kindergarten curricula.

In 1956, a 'revision of the kindergarten instruction procedure' was performed, but it did not include changes to childcare programmes. Then, in 1989, the kindergarten instruction procedure was again revised for the first time in a quarter of a century by a cause reason in which instruction subject type based on teacher initiative.

Here, while taking the characteristic of infantile development into consideration, it is advocated that it is important for education and play to be carried out through environment. Currently, the kindergarten instruction procedure is finished 5th revision. I think future, with changing times and earlier revisions.

#### **4. HISTORY OF JAPANESE DAY-CARE CENTRES**

According to 'the history of Japanese child' in Japan day-care centres were opened to lessen the burdens placed on mothers, and to protect babies who were abandoned or

orphaned because of poverty. The first day-care centre was established in 1890 (the twenty-third year of the Meiji period) at Atsutomi and Naka Akazawa's Niigata Seishu Private School.

The Japanese industrial revolution transpired 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 centres were consequently created within those factories. During the Russo-Japanese War, childcare centres were set up to assist bereaved families and the children of soldiers on the frontline; these centres continued to operate as childcare facilities even after the war had ended.

Thereafter Yuka Noguchi and Mine Morishima from the nursery school teacher's training programme at the Tokyo Women's Normal School opened Futaba Kindergarten for deprived orphans in Yotsuya, Tokyo, which was renamed the Futaba Day-Care Centre in 1915. This is said to be the oldest existing day-care centre. Given a growing need to protect young children, additional day-care centres were formed by private citizens; to assist in this endeavour, the Home Ministry began to provide subsidies to day-care centres through the Reformative Relief Work Project.

In due course, several public day-care centres were established in locations such as Osaka (1919), Kyoto (1920), and Tokyo (1921). By 1926, there were 65 public day-care centres, and by 1929 more than 100. Seasonal day-care centres opened in rural areas during the busy farming season through support provided under the government's agricultural policies; by 1940, the number of such facilities increased to 22,758. In the post-war period, day-care centres 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).

Originally, the purpose of day-care centres was to assist infants and children that lacked 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 centres, like kindergartens, were incorporated into official education schemes. Furthermore, the government's guidelines for day-care centres were in line with the teaching guidelines for kindergartens. However, in the 2008 revision of the guidelines for day-care centres the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare for the first time required day-care centres to achieve social responsibility. In addition, childcare workers were tasked with supporting children as protectors; the guidelines specify that 'the childcare person must consider the best profit of the child'.

Like in many other advanced industrialised 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, and by 2006 birth rates had dropped 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 centres has grown, a shift driven by the increased presence of women in the workforce and 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 labour in families. Indeed, the demand for day-care centres is significant among young nuclear households in large and medium-sized cities, where many children are on waiting lists to enter day-care centres.

## **5. KODOMOEN (HYBRID EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE CENTRES)**

In responding to the shortage of day-care centres and a dwindling number of kindergarten enrollees, 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 Centre Facilities, which were issued by both ministries in 1998. The aforementioned situation led to a joint review conference between the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. Consequently, 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 centre manage operations jointly); (2) a kindergarten type (i.e. a kindergarten with day-care centre functions, such as ensuring that childcare is provided to children without family care.); (3) a day-care centre type (i.e. a day-care centre with kindergarten functions, such as accepting children other than those who lack family care); and (4) a local discretion type (i.e. an unauthorised 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 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 'New childrearing support system naruhodo book,' Kodomoen differ in three respects when compared to 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 interactions; likewise, pregnant women can receive necessary support. Complaints from parents regarding day-care centres are common; nevertheless, kodomoen place greater emphasis on children's perspectives when compared to traditional alternatives.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Based on the above overview, we can say that kindergartens and day-care centres in Japan emerged from the devoted wishes of the people with the spirit of serving children and they continue to evolve. I myself have worked in the frontline of childcare for 15 years with a service mind. However, I feel it is very difficult to convey such a spirit to today's youth.

The main reasons are a childcare worker is short chronically in all areas, particularly with regard to salaries. Although the central government may have raised childcare workers' salaries by 6,000 yen, their salaries are still low when compared to other professions. This is further complicated by the presence of early retirees.

Various issues affect the situation in kindergartens and nursery schools today. For example, the child poverty rate is 16.3% according to the 2012 data by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), indicating that one in six children are from needy families (with a particularly large number of single-mother households). A study by the Japan Network for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect also indicates that the number of abuse consultations at child consultation centres has increased 80-fold in 24 years. Furthermore, the 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 something similar per class at elementary schools. Similarly, the number of children with development disabilities has increased in the kindergartens and day-care centres. The childcare workers must deal with all these problems.

Childcare workers should constantly strive to improve their skills and knowledge. As the future of Japan lies in its children, childcare and education between the ages of 0–6 are critical. Indeed, society should aim to improve the quality of children's surrounding environments. The most important environmental element is the human environment: the childcare worker. I hope that the treatment of these critical workers improves in the future.

## 7. REFERENCES

- Japan Society of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education, ed. *Hoiku-gaku no Shinpo (Advancement of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education)* Early Childhood Care and Education, Society in JAPAN 1977
- Nihon Kirisutokyō Hoiku Hyakunen-shi Kirisutokyō Hoiku Renmei Hyakunen-shi Henshū Iinkai. *(100-Year History of Japan Christian Childcare)*. 1986
- “Nintei Kodomo-en” no Jidai *(The Era of Certified Daycare Centre)* The Comprehensive Support System for Children and Child-rearing Information Booklet 2014
- Nihon Kodomo-shi *(History of Children in Japan)*, Heibonsha 2002

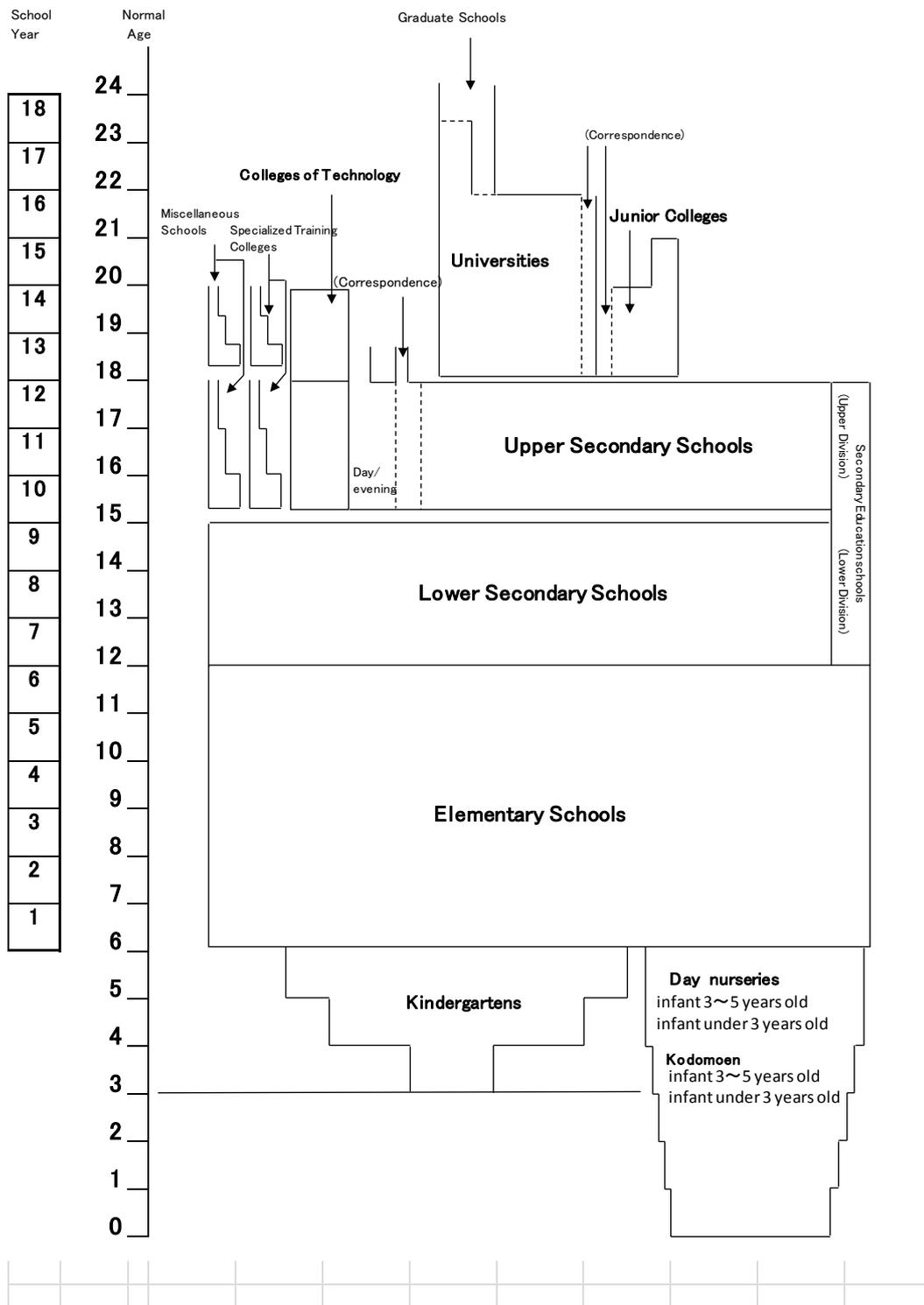


Figure 1: ORGANIZATION OF THE PRESENT SCHOOL SYSTEM IN JAPAN

A source: It's made based on school distribution diagram of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

**Table1 : THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KINDERGARTEN AND DAY NURSERY**

	Kindergarten	Day Nursery
Jurisdiction	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science Technology	Ministry of Health, Labour and Wealfare
age	3 years old - before Elementary school entrance	0 year -old - before Elementary School entrance
Application	Direct contract between Kindergarten and parents	Apply for a city office
Installation agency	Municipal corporation Educational foundation (Article 2 of School Education Law) All-prefectures board of education	Municipal corporation Social welfare corporation (Child Welfare Law 35th Article) All prefectures (governor's permission is required)
The standard of installation management	The 36th article - 39 articles of Regulations of School Education Law	Child welfare institution minimum standard (Article 45 of Child Welfare Law)
Childcare time	It is standard about 4 hours per day.	It is standard about 8 hours per day.
The standard of the contents of childcare	It shall be based on the kindergarten instruction procedure. (Guideline) Five domains of "health", "human relations", "environment", "language", and "expression" are shown from the viewpoint of infantile development.	The inspection about the existence of abnormalities, such as observation of health condition and a dress, free play, the nap, and the medical examination are defined. Unification of protective care and education is considered.
Qualification of a Childcare worker and kindergarten teacher	Kindergarten teacher common license Specialization (graduate school completion) First class (University completion) The 2nd class (junior college completion)	Childcare worker training school completion, or successful childcare worker test ,certificate registration for a childcare worker is acquired.
The personnel's arrangement standard	A director, Vice-principal, Teacher, Assistant teacher, Teacher in charge of health education They are 35 or less children per class.	A childcare worker, Nurse, a Commissioned doctor, Cooking member Suckling . . . 3:1 1-2 year-old child . . . 6:1 3 year-old child . . . 20:1 More than 4 year-old child 30:1
The standard of institutional equipment	Staff room, Classroom, Playroom, The nurse's office, Toilet, and restroom place, Leg washing place, Equipment for drinking water	A suckling -less than 2 years old A suckling room, Room for creeping dispensary, Cooking room, Toilet Aged 2 and over The nurse's office, Quality of play, Outdoor recreation hall Cooking room
Public expenditure	An installation agency pays operational expenses. Income provides a subsidy to the home below a standard. (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 Institution (2016/4/1)	25464	11674

A source: It's made based on school distribution diagram of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.