

# Childcare support at nursery schools in Japan: current services and future needs

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## Abstract

This study aimed to survey childcare support being undertaken by nursery school teachers in Japan and to identify the theories and skills necessary for nursery school teachers to carry out childcare support in the future. In 2007, a postal questionnaire was sent to 1200 teachers at 850 nursery schools, with responses from 712 teachers from 456 nursery schools.

In terms of knowledge and skills considered necessary by nursery school teachers in local childcare support centers, 'knowledge and skills of giving advice' was the most common response, followed by 'understanding of children's growth and development'. Nursery school teachers need to receive sufficient education before and after graduation to gain these skills. It is also clear that there is a need for nursery school teachers to make use of their expertise by co-ordinating collaboration among professionals and in the community.

## Key words

Nursery school teacher, knowledge and skills, childcare support in community, collaboration

*Community Practitioner*, 2011; 84(10): 25-8.

No potential competing interests declared.

## Introduction

In Japan, the number of mothers who take care of a child and experience stress symptoms such as anxiety, tension, anger, and depression has been increasing. The primary reason for this increase in stress is that the typical family structure in Japan changed from a three-generation family living together to a single nuclear family after World War II. Currently, more mothers are responsible for providing child care on their own rather than sharing this with grandparents. The second reason is that the number of working mothers has increased during the last two decades.

The Japanese birthrate has declined rapidly since 1989, and the Japanese total fertility rate dropped to 1.25 children born per woman of childbearing age in 2005 (SRTI, 2011) (see Figure 1). After a slight economic recovery and implementation of childcare support policies by the government, the total fertility rate recovered to 1.39 in 2010, though childcare issues continue to face a harsh environment (SRTI, 2011).

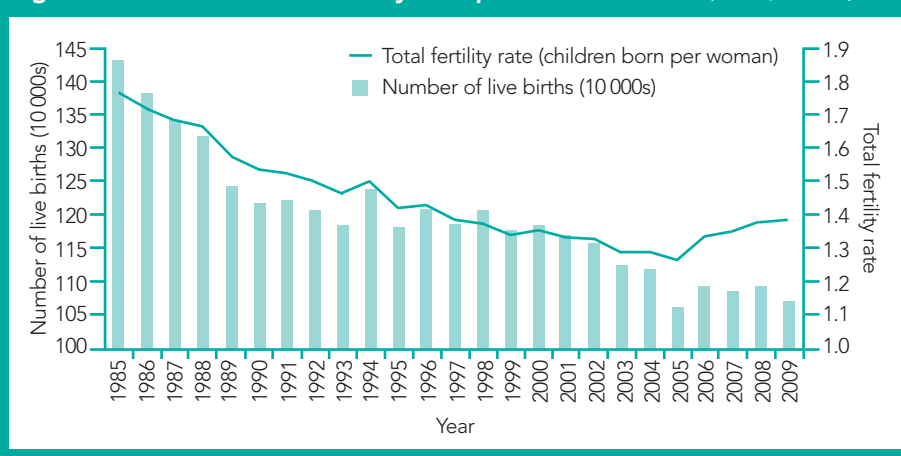
An increase in the number of child abuse cases in conjunction with the stress associated with child care has become a problem in Japan. In 1990, there were 1101 child abuse consultations in Japan; this number increased to 37 323 cases in 2008 (Children's Rainbow Center, 2011).

Most child care for children of working mothers takes place in a nursery school. After the government requested that nursery schools should provide 'childcare support', nursery schools throughout Japan added this service. However, most nursery school teachers in Japan do not receive education about the theories and skills that relate to mother-child relationships and mental health problems of mothers. In addition, each nursery school follows its own methods for providing childcare support.

Published articles about childcare support from nursery schools in Japan only cover the introduction of these services (Imai and Ban, 2000; Sugiyama et al, 2006) or report on small-scale investigations (Kaneko, 2007). No large-scale investigations have been reported.

This paper reports on a survey that was designed to assess the current situation of childcare support provided at nursery schools. By surveying problems in nursery school childcare support programmes, determining the knowledge and skills required to provide these support programmes, studying the expertise needed by nursery school teachers to provide childcare support, and examining childcare support that is currently being provided, we may be able to identify theories and skills that can help nursery schools provide better and more consistent childcare support in the future.

Figure 1. Live births and fertility in Japan 1985 to 2009 (SRTI, 2011)



**Table 1. Childcare support activities being implemented (n=1702)**

Category	Number*
Advice (face-to-face at nursery school, telephone, visits)	363 (21.3%)
Provision of facilities (nursery school grounds, books)	327 (19.2%)
Extension of child care (temporary child care, extended hours child care etc)	262 (15.4%)
Support for parent-child interactions	163 (9.5%)
Support for friendship building	150 (8.8%)
Lectures, seminars, study meetings	143 (8.3%)
Trial days at nursery school, nursery school experience	82 (4.3%)
Special support (disabled children, infants etc)	82 (4.3%)
Public relations activities, provision of information	56 (3.2%)
General child care	34 (1.9%)
Other	40 (2.3%)

**Table 2. Difficulties and problems experienced (n=623)**

Category	Number*
Skills lack or difficulty	161 (24.9%)
Parent problems (language, attitudes, behavior)	116 (17.8%)
Communication with parents and families	59 (9.1%)
Lack of staffing	56 (8.6%)
Problems with special support	56 (8.6%)
Problems with location	29 (4.4%)
Balance with other work	28 (4.3%)
Relations between parents	18 (2.7%)
Relations with the community	15 (2.3%)
Lack of budget	6 (0.9%)
Other	79 (12.2%)

\* Many of the respondents provided multiple responses

Most articles on this subject from outside of Japan indicate that childcare support is often enabled by the government through the taxation system and economic support (McIntosh and Phillips, 2002; Center for Policy Research, 2007).

This study is based on information regarding childcare support in Japan. Despite this fact, the authors believe that the findings of this research could also inform childcare support in the UK.

### Aims

The survey aimed to identify:

- The state of local childcare support centres established at nursery schools
- Ways in which nursery school teachers who engage in childcare support deal with children and families
- Ways in which nursery school teachers who engage in childcare support address issues arising in practice.

### Methods

Survey items were finalised after conducting a pilot questionnaire study with 25 nursery school teachers from five nursery schools near the university in Gunma Prefecture. The opinions of and feedback from pilot questionnaire respondents were used to formulate the final version.

The university ethical review board approved this research. Ethical considerations and a letter indicating that all personal information provided would be protected were mailed out with the pilot survey.

The study was conducted between August and November 2007, with a sample of 850 randomly selected nursery schools (systematic sampling) from a nationwide list of nursery schools providing childcare support (total=8492). A written questionnaire comprising items related to age, sex, professional experience, experience of childcare support activities, and six open-ended

**Table 3. Desired support (n=540)**

Category	Number*
Lectures or seminars	45 (8.2%)
Childcare advice	45 (8.2%)
Knowledgeable, skillful support	43 (7.8%)
Continue present activities	40 (7.3%)
Support for parent-child relationship	32 (5.8%)
Promoting friendship among parents	31 (5.6%)
Community engagement	29 (5.3%)
Parent support	29 (5.3%)
Open to a wider range of children	22 (4.0%)
Provision of facilities	22 (4.0%)
Temporary childcare	22 (4.0%)
Promotion of participation in events	18 (3.2%)
Home visit support	18 (3.2%)
Expand present activities	14 (2.5%)
Interact with other institutions	12 (2.1%)
Nutrition guidance	11 (2.0%)
Support pregnant women	10 (1.8%)
Support childcare circles	9 (1.6%)
Training sessions	9 (1.6%)
Collaboration with other institutions	9 (1.6%)
Support for good communication	6 (1.1%)
Extended childcare hours	5 (0.9%)
Other	59 (10.8%)

questions was sent out by post to 1200 teachers working at these 850 nursery schools. Return of the questionnaire was considered consent to take part in the study.

The four open-ended questions reported in this paper considered the following:

- Childcare support activities currently being implemented
- Difficulties and problems experienced in the process of providing childcare support
- Childcare support that nursery school teachers wanted to offer in the future
- Knowledge and skills needed to provide childcare support at nursery schools.

Open-ended questions were used because it was thought that multiple-choice questions would have been susceptible to the researcher's own subjectivity, and may have made it difficult to capture the full picture of the current situation.

Content analysis was used to classify categories from the open-ended responses, which were then analysed. Content analysis consisted of classifying the written responses into categories according to meaning, and assigning category names that accurately reflected the classification. For example, opening nursery school grounds to the public, letting people play on the nursery school grounds, and lending out books were classified into the category 'opening up facilities', whereas providing telephone advice, home visit advice and advisory services at the nursery school were classified into the category 'advice'.

Reliability of the categories was confirmed by cross-checking judgments of two evaluators. Inter-rater agreement (Cohen's kappa co-efficient) for the two evaluators was 0.8, showing little discrepancy.

## Results

### *Response rate, respondent characteristics*

Responses were received from 712 nursery school teachers (response rate=59.3%) at 456 nursery schools (response rate=53.6%). Most responses (n=706) were from women, four were from men and the sex of two was not reported. Ages varied widely – 123 (17.2%) were in their 20s, 153 (21.4%) in their 30s, 237 (33.1%) in their 40s, 185 (25.9%) in their 50s and 11 (1.5%) were aged over 60 (0.4% did not respond, n=3).

Mean length of experience as a nursery school teacher was 18 years and one month (range=four months to 52 years and four months). Mean length of experience in childcare support was five years and seven months (range=four months to 40 years and one month).

### *Questionnaire responses*

#### Current childcare support activities

Categories of childcare support that were currently being implemented were identified from the nursery teachers' descriptive responses (see Table 1). The three most reported categories – advice, provision of facilities and extension of child care – accounted for 55.9% of the activities that were reported in total.

#### Difficulties and problems experienced

Categories of difficulties and problems experienced in the process of providing childcare support services were identified (see Table 2). The three most common categories – skills lack or difficulty, parent problems and communication with parents and families – comprised 46.9% of the total that were reported.

## KEY POINTS

- Changes in family structures and working patterns since World War II have had an impact on the stresses experienced by mothers relating to child care
- Services to support child care have been encouraged in nursery schools, but there is little comprehensive information about their provision and the needs of nursery teachers
- A survey of nursery school teachers was conducted to identify services provided, how they deal with children and families, and how they address issues that arise in practice
- Many demands were placed on teachers, such as in providing advice and facilities, and many needs were identified in order for them to develop relevant knowledge and skills

### Desired future childcare support

A large variety of types of childcare support that the nursery teachers wanted to offer in the future were identified (see Table 3).

### Knowledge and skills needed

Categories of the types of knowledge and skills needed to provide local childcare support at nursery schools were identified (see Table 4). The three most reported categories – knowledge and skills about giving advice, knowledge about child development and specialist knowledge as a nursery teacher – comprised 49.1% of the total.

## Discussion

A large proportion of nursery school teachers working in local childcare support centres established at nursery schools in Japan are women aged in their 40s and 50s, with 422 respondents (59%) falling into this age group. The mean length of respondents' experience as a nursery school teacher was 18 years and one month, and the mean length of

experience in childcare support was five years and seven months. These data indicate that relatively experienced nursery school teachers are playing a central role in providing childcare support.

The most common current childcare support activities that were reported as being provided were advice (face-to-face at the nursery school, on the telephone, during visits), provision of facilities (opening nursery school grounds to the public, book rentals), and extension of child care (temporary child care, extended hours of child care). Advice, the most frequently reported activity, involves the provision of direct support to parents. This suggests that nursery school teachers need to be able to respond to the anxieties and problems parents face as they raise their children. Compared with Europe and the US, there are few counsellors and therapists for mothers with childcare problems in Japan. As nursery school teachers are the support workers parents see most frequently on a day-to-day

**Table 4. Knowledge and skills needed (n=884)**

Category	Number*
Knowledge and skills about giving advice	271 (30.6%)
Knowledge about child development	100 (11.3%)
Specialist knowledge as a nursery school teacher	64 (7.2%)
Know-how concerning community engagements	51 (5.7%)
Medical knowledge	43 (4.8%)
Communication skills	34 (3.8%)
Personal growth	33 (3.7%)
Childcare knowledge	32 (3.6%)
Parent psychology	29 (3.2%)
Methods of providing help	28 (3.1%)
Knowledge about the family	23 (2.6%)
Know-how concerning friendship among parents	22 (2.4%)
Methods for knowing parent needs	14 (1.5%)
Manners	13 (1.4%)
Other	127 (14.3%)

\* Many of the respondents provided multiple responses

basis, it is inevitable that parents ask these workers for advice. Topics broached by parents span a wide range, from an exchange of information concerning the child at nursery school and at home to problems that the parents face themselves (marital or family relationship problems) (Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Kamoka, 2008).

The second most frequent category, provision of facilities, can be seen as a move by the nursery school to fulfill the role of providing a place for play and learning. This involves the use of the nursery school's property and can be construed as an expansion of the direct support provided by the school. In contemporary society, where local community relations have weakened, the nursery school takes on a central role in creating local networks. In other words, the provision of physical space is an important role for local childcare support.

The extension of child care category reflects the growing range of opportunities to provide child care that are required as an increasing number of parents work.

The most prominent difficulties and problems reported in providing childcare support were 161 responses regarding lack of and difficulties with support skills, and 116 related to parent problems (language, attitudes, behavior). These results indicate that nursery school teachers involved in childcare support lack the skills needed to provide support. Education in the theories and skills associated with childcare support are necessary so that teachers can learn these skills. In addition, many teachers have experienced difficulties relating to parents' attitudes toward their children. The term 'monster parents' has emerged, and the fact that nursery school teachers are unsure how to deal with difficult parents is a real issue that needs to be addressed.

Teachers' needs for specific support can be seen in their desire to be able to cope with difficult situations. In particular, specific needs emerging from the data included methods of support to stabilise parent-child emotions, play-based support and support for creating relationships and friendships among parents.

Although the present survey revealed a desire on the part of teachers for knowledge and skills related to local childcare support, it also noted that a lack of personnel meant it was impossible to do anything more than maintain the current situation. This is a reflection of the overall environment in nursery schools, as more children are being enrolled because of the increase in the number of working parents.

Knowledge and skills in giving advice and knowledge about children's development

were cited as necessary in order to implement childcare support. These responses raise questions about personnel and expertise, though all nursery schools appeared to be willing to participate in local childcare support. In order to implement childcare support that responds to parents' and community needs, an education curriculum that includes content related to childcare support is required. Institutions responsible for the training of nursery school teachers will be asked to incorporate and structure content that facilitates further implementation of current practices. As providers of education, training schools for nursery school teachers need to have a thorough grasp of their role. A future issue will be how to design a curriculum to provide the necessary education.

As far as methods for providing parental support are concerned, theories and skills related to parent psychology and understanding family dynamics are urgently needed, as is the creation of an environment in which these skills can be learned in practice. One way to accomplish this goal may be to set up local systems of seminars, supervision and case study discussions for nursery schools and nursery school teachers. Recurrent education provided by training schools should also be considered. It is also important to learn methods for promoting collaboration between specialists within the community (eg paediatricians, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and social workers) to help cope with difficult cases (Wynne et al, 1986; McDaniel et al, 2005).

Counselling skills necessary to support children and families on an individual basis, together with understanding of children's growth and development, are the areas of expertise that seem to be primarily required of childcare support centre staff. In addition, the ability to co-ordinate and promote collaboration among different professionals is necessary (Itoh and Watanabe, 2008). Being able to empower parents is also important. The ability to create relationships among parents and to deal with parents and guardians who are not aware of their problems are necessary for nursery school teachers.

In terms of knowledge and skills considered necessary by Japanese nursery school teachers in local childcare support centres, the category of skills in giving advice was listed first, and understanding children's growth and development was listed second. The educational background of most Japanese nursery school teachers is a junior college or an academy. Sufficient education before and after graduation seems to be necessary in this respect. It was also clear that

there was a need for nursery school teachers to make use of their existing expertise by playing a role in co-ordinating collaboration among professionals and in the community.

## Conclusion

This study was a nationwide investigation regarding the childcare support provided by Japanese nursery school teachers. Counsellors and therapists who can easily advise and support mothers with anxiety about child care are not available at a local level in Japan. Therefore, many mothers rely on nursery school teachers, who they see nearly every day, to get advice and emotional support. It is important that the teachers who provide supportive child care collaborate with local specialists to improve their knowledge and skills and share this information with parents.

Japan needs to focus on raising the education level of nursery school teachers. It is therefore important to promote collaboration with local medical doctors, community health nurses and university teachers. The authors believe this investigation could also inform the developing role of nursery school teachers in the UK.

## Acknowledgment

This work was supported by an Open Research Center Project for Private Universities: matching fund subsidy from MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology).

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